Prey and a Lamb

Written by Lambs Prey

- My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic
- Princess Luna
- Original Character
- Shining Armor
- Dark
- Gore
- Bat Pony
- Royal Guard
- Slice of Life
- Tragedy
- Alternate Universe
- Death

Description

'*Little lamb, little lamb, run away home~ The houses are empty and the village is gone~*'

---[][][]---

Pony prison. Obviously not somewhere a sane individual wishes to spend any length of time. But freedom can come from the sources only the insane could predict.

Everything has a price though, so what will it cost? And more importantly, will it be possible to haggle?

---[][][]---

This is a story involving detective work, hard work, thankless work, *more* work, and a veritable termite infestation of questionable moral loopholes bored through the whole heaped mound of it.

So, before we get to any of that, a word from the author/delusional

scribbler. Forewarning, this won't focus on the mane 6, and is about OC's, and the Luna Night Guard. Now, onto the rest:
1st, This will be a long, *loooong* story, with slow plot building and character development. If that is the kind of thing you like, please go ahead. (Might end up making it into multiple stories)
2nd, First story, please tell me what the heck I am doing wrong and point out grammar and stuff.
3rd, I'm writing this story for fun. That's important. "I do as I please!"
And finally **4th,** at the urgings of people, I have moved this up to M rating for violence.

Have fun hopefully!

(And I own nothing, MLP and all associated products and agencies are not my property)

Helpful link: TwoBit is making an audio series out of these 'sheep words' Here

Editors over the course of this story vary between the following helpers:
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1.0 A lamb in prison

Author's Notes:

Hello to anyone who is reading this!

So, my first story, don't really know what I'm doing...Pointing out mistakes would be great thanks.

Also, as a sort of warning (maybe?), the first few chapters have Flash Back scenes. Quite long ones.... I tried to make them work, but you have been warned.

(Disclaimer: I. Own. Nothing. Of. MLP FIM. Or. Associated. Products!)

P.S. This is going to be a long, slow arching story. Mainly whatever I feel like writing. Enjoy. 👍

---Arc 0---

Once there was a little lamb. Then he grew old, but not up. The end? No, just the ordinary beginning to a hideous life.

------**The Beginning**------

Locked away within the towering prison fortress of Dreverton, down in a cell on the second deepest level of Equestria's most secure dungeon, aside from the pits of Tartarus itself, slept a sheep.

Knock Knock

"Sir, a letter. Arrived in the post vault just ten minutes ago."

"Can it wait? I'm in the middle of reviewing recommendations."

"Sir, I don't think so. It's a red ribbon one."

A pause. "Alright, bring it in."

"Let's see... Oh, you may go private."

"Sir, yes sir."

"Ah, lets see... No wait! Private, go find warden String right away. Have him meet me in my office at his earliest convenience, this is important."

"Sir, yes sir."

"And when you're done, go find Faded Archive and have her pull the files from section one, level two, on the inmate of cell nine."

"Sir, yes sir."

"Well don't dawdle stallion, snap to it!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

Clop-clop-clop *Swish *click**

"Hmm...."

Rustle **Crinkle**

"Captain Valour, hmm? Well, this certainly will be an honour... Hmm. Wonder what's got you coming all the way out to Dreverton with the Princess's permission... Wait..."

"Horseapples! Pine Jingle didn't polish my helmet properly, useless slacker! *Just* as the Solar Guard is coming too, of course, why not? I'm going to rip you a new one Pine, just as soon as I get my hooves on your slacking, sorry, moth-eaten, blank-flank."

---<O>---

Roaring waves. Crashing against dark slicked rock. White sea-foam sucked back into the deeps. Miles and miles of endless, heaving grey waves.

Dreverton.

Dreverton was an extinct volcano isolated in the middle of the sea. Storms were common and colossal waves beat against the base of the massive volcanic structure year in, year out. There were no landing docks. Approach was only possible from the air via sky ship or chariot. Inside, cells lined the ever downwardly spiralling walkway into of the crater.

Despite it's monolithic, ancient, craggy appearance, the insides of Dreverton were actually quite modern and up to date.

Running water, magically powered furnaces, bright crystal lamps, tiled floors, potted flowers, and excellent plumbing. In fact, if you never saw the outside, a pony could be forgiven for mistakenly thinking they stood inside an average apartment block. Provided they didn't step out from the guards quarters, that is.

The inmates cells were a bit less grand.

Oh, they weren't crummy, dank, rat infested rooms, certainly not, Equestria wasn't *that* backwards. But neither was there much else that could be said about them. An iron bunk firmly bolted to the floor exactly in the middle of the room, a similarly secured toilet in the corner, and a reinforced crystal light in the ceiling made up the entirety of each prison cell. And every cell had the strongest barrier enchantments inlaid into the walls, making them impervious to almost every kind of physical and/or magical assault.

And of course the doors. Each was a triple locked, reinforced, steel and lead construct over eight inches thick with a metal grate and flap, designed with one purpose in mind; Keeping whatever was in the cell from ever getting out.

Featureless grey doors, a long line of identical featureless grey doors. Raised too, like a vault or ship's cabin door to better form a perfect seal. Only a number above each served to identify each in the unbroken line; 'No.26'... 'No.27'... 'No.28'... and on.

There was never more than one inmate to any cell. More than that, and you got 'problems'.

Problems like there only being one inmate left by the end of the shift.

Mercifully for all involved, especially the Guards, most of Dreverton's cells sat unoccupied. Silencing charms kept inmates from trying to yell out to their fellows regardless, but one could never be too careful.

The guards took their job very seriously, they were guarding some of the most dangerous individuals in Equestria after all. The only place where worse inmates were stored was in Tartarus.

The pony guards, all unicorns, pegasi or earth ponies, guarded a unique mix of criminal filth, from trolls and diamond dogs, to Griffins and ponies. Few of the prisoners were ever released, deemed too much of a threat to Equestria to ever see the light of day again.

On occasion, a few inmates were, when their extensive prison time was up, but that was a rare occurrence. Usually if you were sentenced to Dreverton, it was for life. And those were only the inmates from the upper levels.

If you were stored on the deeper levels, you hadn't a chance in hell of ever getting out. The lower levels were reserved for the worst of the worst.

Murderers, cannibals, dark magic users and the like. Many a newly recruited guard lost their lunch over the course of their first few weeks on the job. Hearing about some of the prisoners' life stories from the older guards, they were finally able to figure out what they'd let themselves in for.

The maximum allowed service time for any guard serving at Dreverton was two and a half years. After that, there was a mandatory transfer for their own good. Never the less, the guards took great pride in the unsung service that they gave to Equestria and their Solar Princess. They sacrificed years of their lives to keep this filth locked away, and it was a sacrifice they were proud to make.

They kept the prison running like clockwork, exactly as it was supposed to. They made sure that no one, pony or otherwise, *ever* escaped.

Inside his cell, on the level only one above the lowest tier, the small sheep, little bigger than a lamb really, yawned and opened sky blue eyes, rolled off the bunk with a clink of chains, and scowled.

'Another day in hell.'

The sheep shuffled his front hooves, re-adjusting the utterly familiar weight of the crystal-lined manacles. They'd been magically sealed shut over his cloven hooves when he was thrown in here to rot all those years ago.

'Fifty seven years, two months, three weeks, and five days.' He noted, updating the count.

He pushed himself up from the bare bunk, lead encased hooves hitting the null stone floor with another familiar thud. Familiar. Everything was familiar. Utterly, maddingly, unchangingly, familiar. Because it never, ever, ever changed. Not in fifty seven years, two months, three weeks, and five days.

The sheep had been in here longer than most normal sheep lived for. He shifted, getting the inhibitor collar and shackles into a marginally more comfortable position. He'd perfected the art of doing so a long time ago. 'Infuriating contraptions.' He thought with venom.

If not for these enchanted locks keeping the runes he'd carved into his flesh dormant, then even the stone of Deverton wouldn't be able to keep hold of him. He'd slip away like a ghost in the night. Or in the day. Or any time at all. He'd have taken anything on offer.

'I miss listening to them,' He wistfully reminisced for the hundred-thousandth time, 'All those thoughts and open minds, the petty but comfortingly mundane worries of people I pass on the road. The silent bubble and streams of consciousness nobody else can hear.'

He scowled down at the hoof locks, 'I miss taking them for my own with a mere touch.'

The sheep hadn't always been like this, hadn't always been the highly skilled mind mage that he was now.

'Or *was*.' He thought bitterly, 'But no one else to blame but myself for getting caught.'

He should have seen that trap coming from a mile away, but no, the temptation of forbidden knowledge had seemed far too enticing at the time, and he'd had nothing but time ever since to bitter regret.

He was shaken from his thoughts, soft drooping ears flicking towards the door as the one-way hatch at the bottom was kicked open and a worn metal tray was pushed inside. If he didn't replace tray by the hatch after he was finished, he simply wouldn't be fed again until he returned it. He'd learnt that long ago. The Guards didn't care if he was stupid enough to try and starve himself out in a misguided attempt to outlast them. You couldn't beat hunger, it always won in the end.

On the blunt-edged tray, rested a solid square of something grey and sticky. Dinner time.

'Or what passes for food down here.'

With practised movements to keep the slack from the chains from tripping him up, the sheep shuffled over. He lowered his muzzle and took a bite of the tasteless mass, uninterestedly analysing it as he chewed; 'Five parts oats, one part hay, two parts assorted seeds, one part barley, other trace minerals and vitamins, and one part water.

Still no components in any fashion which might help him in any way to escape. 'Same as the last forty-one thousand five hundred and eighty four meals before it.'

He finished the dull fare quickly, not noticing the lack of taste. He'd gotten used to it over fifty seven years, two months, three weeks

and five days. Besides, he'd eaten far worse, or sometimes hadn't been lucky enough to even have that option. You never complained about a free meal. He'd known what it was like to have a cold and hungry winter after a lean harvest.

He'd learnt never to say the words; "Mother I'm hungry." Not after he saw the trembling tears in her eyes that first time, and he'd never said those words to her face again.

'For all the good it ever did.'

Finished, the sheep kicked the tray back over to the hatch, and sat himself down awkwardly in the center of his bunk to do the only thing that you could do around here; sit, remember, and meditate on the past.

He'd done this more times than he cared to remember, but if there's one skill he excelled at, it was an excellent memory. He could recall old memories at will with almost perfect clarity. He could remember everything if he fully concentrated, even down to the little insignificant details. He was almost able to enter these memories and re-live his part in the events, so vivid and accurate was his recall when he fell into deep meditation.

His brother had always joked about how one day he'd make it into a famous unicorn academy, once he finally got round to learning how to read. Before the Resistance and his brother's death, that is. It'd been their own little silly joke when they were lambs, as if unicorns would ever let a sheep in to their academy, never mind they'd never actually seen a unicorn. Their village had been on the wrong side of the mountain range, and the only ponies around there were the earth ponies who owned the land they all lived on.

'What memories to review today I wonder?' The sheep pondered closing his eyes, 'Perhaps getting cursed? Or perhaps losing my brother? How about the war? Oh, I know, home, where life begins.'

---The Past---

"Come on Goss, catch me if you can!"

"Just you wait Fleece, you're mine!" He shouted back gleefully, short legs racing after his brother who laughed and easily skipped away.

Fleece was older and bigger, and easily outpaced his younger brother Gossamer as they dodged round scrubby trees and bushes on the outskirts of their family's fields.

"Can't catch me, can't catch me!" Fleece taunted before darting through a gap in the bushes.

Gossamer paused for a second, a sly grin flashing. He may not be as big or quick as his older brother, but he could out think him! And he knew that gap led to only two possible exits, 'And if I know Fleece, he went left.' He turned and raced off as fast as his little legs would carry him, following the line of bushes left.

Fleece was just emerging from a bush when he heard the galloping of tiny hooves over hard packed earth. He glanced up to see his younger brother in mid air above him, a grin plastered all over his snout, "Ha!"

Gossamer's shout of triumph quickly turned into a squeal of dismay as he over shot and smacked into the stony ground hard.

Immediately Fleece was at his side, "Goss, are you alright?" He asked, anxiously rolling his dazed younger brother over and wincing at the dirty scrapes and drops of blood he saw.

Gossamer, or Goss as everyone called him, sat up with a whimper. He wasn't the toughest lamb nor the biggest, and frequently his mind out-thought his body and he got himself hurt, but he didn't want to cry embarrassingly in front of his older Brother.

"Don't worry, 'S fine." He lied, trying not to sniffle.

Fleece raised an eyebrow, "Really? You don't look so good."

"I'm fine. It's just two cuts, one bruise and three, wait, no, four scrapes. And some dirt. I'll be fine." Gossamer repeated, trying to get up without any further whimpering.

Fleece narrowed his eyes, then before Gossamer could react, he flipped his younger brother onto his back and set off for home.

"Hey! What're you doing? Put me down."

"Nope. You just make yourself comfy, I've got this." Fleece replied cheerily.

"I can walk myself." Gossamer retorted.

"Sorry, I can't hear you over the sound of me carrying you~!" Fleece sang out.

"Carrying me has *nothing* to do with your hearing."

Fleece grinned, "Yeah you got me. But does it look like I care? Now stop complaining and enjoy the ride. Besides, you don't weigh anything Goss. You really need to put on some fat." He joked.

Gossamer "Humph'd". He was undersized and he knew it. He was, in fact, the lamb in the village for his age, smaller even than Clover, and she was a whole year younger than him.

"Size doesn't mean everything." He groused, idly picking a leaf out of his brother's brown wool as he lay across his back.

"Hey don't worry about it, you're a thinker, much smarter than me. I'm the brawns, you're the brains. And one day you're going to get into a horned ponies academy and show them all that sheep are the smartest." Fleece added with a chuckle.

Gossamer smiled along with him, his scrapes quite forgotten as he listened to his older brother chatter away.

They emerged from scattering of coarse trees and bushes which made up the couple of square miles of uninhabited land before you got to the *actual* forest, and headed for the small log cabin on the other side of the beleaguered carrot field.

"Almost home." Fleece said, rather unnecessarily in Gossamer's

opinion, as he could see that clearly, but he didn't actually mind. Soon they were at the front porch and Fleece let Gossamer off his back onto the step:

"Hey mom?" He called, "You in there?"

"Yes dear, what's the matter?" Came the gentle voice of their mother from inside their one room cabin.

"Goss hurt himself- I mean he got hurt while we were playing." Fleece called back.

Gossamer appreciated his brother taking half the blame. Their mother didn't like it when they played rough or got hurt. She never yelled or anything, but her quiet look of disappointment said it all. Even when it was really small injuries, it got the same look.

She was wearing that look right now as she emerged from the cabins gloomy interior, dusting brown flour from her cloven hooves, "Is it anything serious?"

Fleece pointed at Gossamer who looked away embarrassed, "Sorry mom." Gossamer muttered.

"Sorry for what sweetie?" She asked gently, leaning down to get a better look at his minor cuts.

"For getting hurt and wasting your time." Gossamer mumbled. He knew his mother was always busy. Managing the crops and house by herself left their mother very little free time. He and his brother helped out with lots of chores, but his mother tried to keep their work load to a minimum. She said that they were still nothing but lambs and should be out playing, not slaving away in the fields.

"Don't worry about it sweetie, but please be more careful next time." She murmured, wiping some of the dirt from his white coat.

"Dear," she said turning to Fleece, "Please go pull some water from the well."

Gossamer was always 'sweetie' and his brother was always 'dear'. His father used to be 'honey' before that raider strike two years ago.

There was a small cross out back for him under the old cherry tree. He'd had barely been four years old, but Gossamer still remembered the ram, or some things about him at least.

"You okay?" His mother asked, stroking his head and scratching behind his drooping ears, which were so large they flopped past his jaw line, so similar to her own pair. Gossamer took after her in that respect, his own white coat more similar to her cream coloured wool too. Fleece took after their father with his brown coat instead.

"I'm fine mom, I'm only slightly hurt, but thanks." He said.

She '*Hmmm'd*', "I'll be the judge of that once we get you cleaned up."

Fleece returned just then, lugging a wooden pail full of fresh water, "Here ya' go."

Dipping a worn cloth in the pail, his mother cleaned out the grit and dirt from his scrapes and cuts in a quick and practical manner, while Fleece kicked his hooves sitting on the wooden step next to his younger brother.

Gossamer tried not to wince, patiently waiting until his mother was finished. "Mom..." He started while she wrung the cloth out, "When you went to the village meet, did Green Fields announce whether any pegasi are coming with rain for the fields?"

Green Fields was the earth pony who owned the land they lived and farmed on, and the same went for many of the sheep and goat families around here. None of the tenants liked Green Fields, his tariffs were steep.

'But who ever liked the tax pony?' Gossamer thought.

His mother hung the cloth over the porch railing to dry before she answered, "He did say sweetie."

Her tone said it all, but still Fleece asked, "And?"

"And nothing. Nothing's been organised unfortunately. Looks like we're going to have to water the carrots again by hoof I'm afraid." She replied with a tired smile.

Fleece scowled, "Useless, greedy ponies." He muttered.

"None of that dear." His mother chastised absentmindedly.

"It's true though." Fleece mumbled.

"I was thinking," Gossamer broke in, "We barely managed it last year, and this year's even drier. We're going to need either help, or a different approach."

"I know sweetie." His mother sighed, rubbing his head again, "But don't worry about it, I'll think of something." She added with another tired smile. Gossamer saw straight through it.

"Why should you have to think of something, why shouldn't I think of something? We're all in this together." He asked.

Their mother blinked in surprise, as ever surprised by how grown up for his age her son was. It always caught her off guard whenever her youngest son would unbalance her with some observation or some fact that she hadn't ever considered before.

She smiled uncertainly, but not because of any lack of trust, "Did you have an idea, sweetie?"

Gossamer shot a quick glance at Fleece who was also looking at him expectantly, "Well I have a few. Do you remember when we were playing by old mother Kubboard's hut, and saw the old barrel cart she has out back?" He asked.

Fleece shook his head, "Um, no, I must'a missed it."

"It was half buried in the weeds, but that's beside the point. She won't be using it, we could just borrow it. It would be a lost easier than carrying buckets by hoof from the well every day, and the metal sides even have a tap on the back so we could just walk down the rows of carrots with the tap open. We could easily water the whole field once a day in a couple of hours." Gossamer explained.

Fleece's eyes lit up, but their mother wore a pained expression, "It's a wonderful idea, but, well, Mother Kubboard isn't the most amicable ewe around, sweetie."

"We could just take them anyways." Gossamer suggested bluntly, "We'd return them after we're done. And because of how old she is and how little her daughter Esther gets out, I doubt she'd even notice." He hastily added.

"You know that's not okay to do, sweetie." His mother said with a disapproving frown.

"Yes, but why should we have to risk our crop because she's old and stubborn?" Gossamer asked, greatly daring. He could see Fleece nodding along enthusiastically.

"Sweetie, that's enough. Mother Kubboard's had a hard life, and even if she's old, that's no excuse to steal." She fixed him with a stern look.

Gossamer considered the, 'It's not stealing if you return it' argument, but knew it wouldn't get them anywhere. His mothers stern look deepened, she seemed to have read his thoughts and he flinched guiltily.

"But, what are we going to do then mom?" Fleece asked, looking up at their mother.

"I have another plan," Gossamer quickly interjected, anxious to move on. "Although it's slower. We currently have only three pails to carry water in. If we could get three more, then we could carry two each back and forth from the well. It would make things go twice as fast. We'll create some yokes from carved planks to make carrying them easier too. How about that?"

"Sweetie, I don't think you and Fleece could manage carrying two buckets at the same time, even with a yoke. It's hard work, and... you're too small for something like this. Especially you sweetie." She winced.

Gossamer hated how his mother sounded hurt, like she thought his diminutive size was somehow her fault.

"No we're not, we can do it mom!" Fleece said jumping up, "We have to. The carrots aren't going to water themselves." He added,

with a wave out at their field.

"I, I'm not sure we have the bits to spare my darlings, even for three buckets. Those bags of flour took almost all of last years earnings. We barely have enough to pay Green Fields next tariff until we sell the next harvest." She said, shoulders slumping.

Gossamer coughed, "Um, actually we do. If we get them from Clover's dad. She said he's got some buckets left over from last year, apparently. I'm sure he'd sell them cheaply second hoof if you asked, mom. I can't imagine more than four bits a pail."

"And me and Goss can carve out the three yokes." Fleece spoke up, "I don't need some useless flank mark to figure out how to do that. How hard can it be?"

Their mother knelt down and enveloped both of them in a tight, woolly hug, "You're both wonderful. Just lambs, but so kind and caring. What did I ever do to deserve both of you?" She cooed with a wobbly smile.

Fleece hugged their mother back just as tightly, and Gossamer tried not to do something stupid and ruin the moment by over thinking it. He knew their mother tried to show a brave face to the world, barely ever allowing her very real worry and uncertainty to surface when anyone was watching.

Deep down Gossamer knew she was still reeling from the violent loss of their father. Even if it had been two years ago, she'd never really been the same ewe since. But still she tried. He knew about their mother waking up crying in the night. He'd heard the words she whispered to the cross out the back when she thought she was alone, even if he didn't think the deceased ram deserved them.

He loved and admired his mother fiercely, and realising she wasn't perfect but was still the best mother in the world left him in awe.

He hugged her back, smiling into her cream wool. His mother was so strong, stronger than any other mother in the world, because she was *his* mother. She tried so hard all the time to make him and Fleece happy.

'No mom, the question is, what did we ever do to deserve you?' He thought with a smile.

The three of them stayed like that in the shade of the porch, sharing their love for a long time.

He had happier memories, of stronger emotion and love, but this particular recollection, (no matter how plain and mundane) was what the word 'family' meant to him.

That was just over a half year before the resistance came to the village.

The three of them were in the village quite by chance at the time. They had come in to sell their sweet-potato crop, having changed from the carrots they'd grown last year on Gossamer's suggestion, because although sweet potatoes sold for less, they grew easier and more abundantly, plus survived better under the hot sun. He had worked out that the family would actually make slightly more bits than last harvest. Fleece and his mother readily took his word for it.

They had taken the long walk into the village to sell half their crop this week, as it was market day. The various farmers and merchants had all gathered in the village square, and were busy hawking their various goods and produce.

"Funny how you never see a pony selling crops, only expensive tools and stuff." Fleece pointed out.

Gossamer noted that Fleece was right. The majority of the market were sheep, goats and cows, and they were always selling their meagre produce, while the few earth ponies were the ones that sold the more expensive but highly prized stock, such as spades, ploughs, hammers and the like.

'So much for earth ponies working the land. But why would they,

when they know where the real money is?' He thought sourly.

He helped set out the rough woven baskets of sample sweet-potatoes they'd brought, the rest of the crop back at the farm to be collected by whomever bought them, and then went off to wander among the rest of the villages inhabitants. This is what Gossamer always did, he went looking for ideas.

He would watch unobserved from the background as the villagers talked, haggled, argued and insulted each other, gaining insights into the hidden lives of those around him. Gossamer revelled in being able to figure out what made someone tick.

But it wasn't to be today. He'd barely gone ten paces when there was a hush. A bad feeling crawled over his wool. Slinking behind a line of barrels on instinct, Gossamer looked back to see why.

A small group had entered the far end of the village square, an area quickly clearing around them. Two zebras, one earth pony and a griffin, all with light chest plates, swords on the equines, and a nasty looking axe on the griffin's back. It was the first time Gossamer had seen weapons and armour in his short life, and it scared him.

The four individuals continued into the square as the quiet spread, not a dead silence, but a hushed quiet of nervous whispers. The armed zebras glanced at the stalls as they passed, faces calm and collected, while the grey earth pony and griffin walked with something of a swagger.

"Hey, no need to stop on our account." The latter called out loudly into the quiet with a grin.

"Indeed, we bring no harm to any who wish us none." The zebra on the left agreed.

"We are just here to check up on how all of you are doing." The other striped equine added.

When none of the villagers moved, the griffin scowled, "I said, no need to stop on our accounts. Get my drift?" He asked

threateningly.

Everyone drew back, then as one, tried to look like they were busy, a nervous chatter starting back up while all tried to avoid eye contact. From where he hid, Gossamer could see how strained the act of normality was.

'Who are they and what are they doing here? They're not raiders, and definitely not guards. Are they mercenaries?' He wondered anxiously. He'd overheard about such groups from passing gossip, but never actually seen any. Never the less, Gossamer was certain he was right.

Gossamer observed how the armed group wove between the stores, picking up items and examining them. It was quite a surprise when they didn't steal anything, just critically examined whatever it was they'd taken an interest in before placing it back, murmuring observations to each other.

'They must be scouts of some kind. If they're not here to steal from us, then they must be here to observe and report back to, um, someone?' He tried getting a closer look, and noticed with a start that they were heading right for his mother where she stood frozen, still half way through setting up the stall. He clenched his teeth.

'No, please go to some other, *any* other stall.' He begged silently.

His plea went unanswered, as the griffin came to a halt directly in front of his mother, smirking down at her. "What've you got here then love?" The griffin asked.

"Sw-sweet potatoes." His mother answered, trying to look unafraid. The zebras didn't seem to care, already they were moving on, but the Earth Pony and griffin weren't done yet.

"That's nice," The grey stallion said without even looking at the baskets of potatoes, "But how about you answer a question I have. See, I'm new in town, and perhaps a good sheep such as yourself can provide me with the answers I seek."

He leaned back casually against a nearby stall, prominently

displaying his sheathed sword.

Gossamer gulped, and on the other side of the square, his mother did the same, "What questions?" She asked timidly.

The griffin grinned, turning in a slow circle to take a look at all the villagers who, despite trying to look busy, were obviously all listening in, "Go on Boulder. Let's not keep them in suspense." He said to the earth pony.

The grey earth pony slowly drew himself up, casting a lingering glance around at the crowd, drawing them in with the pause as they all waited anxiously with held breath.

In a surprisingly smooth voice, much different to the one he'd just been using, the pony asked, "Ladies, gentlecolts, we have a question. It's an important question. But doesn't everyone have a question deep down? A question that defines them? Perhaps a question that they don't even realise they're asking?" He paused again to give a slow smile, seeing that he had everyone's attention now.

'What's he trying to do? Why've they come into the market to give this speech? It's obviously pre-prepared, so they must have something they aim to gain, but what?' Gossamer asked himself. He couldn't think of an answer that fit, but so long as they didn't hurt Fleece or his mother, it didn't matter.

"My question, our question, the *Resistances* question, is..." A look of condescending pity slid onto the ponies grey face, "...Why are you all so *blind*?" He spat.

The crowd looked around at each other in confusion and murmurs sprang up. What did the grey pony mean blind? They weren't blind, they could see perfectly well, and who was this Resistance anyway?

"Quiet!" The griffin yelled, making everyone flinch, especially his mother who was the closest to the griffin when he yelled.

"Boulder's still taking, so show some manners and keep your jaws from flapping!" He growled around.

While the griffin was shouting at the crowd, Gossamer saw Fleece dart out from between the crush of legs and rush over to their mother, who grabbed him and tried to hide him behind herself. Gossamer's mouth went dry, but no one noticed Fleece. In fact everyone seemed to have forgotten about the ewe and her lamb who had been the start of all this.

Everyone except the zebras that is.

Gossamer saw one of the black and white fighter's heads turn to track Fleece's dash. With a cold shock, Gossamer realised he didn't know where the other zebra had gone. A scared glance around the square didn't reveal them either.

"Ehem, yes, quite." The grey pony said with a cough, "I realise that you aren't actually blind, at least not physically. But I was talking about in the *political* and *social* sense. Because in this, you are indeed blind." He informed them, his tone confident.

"Most of you don't realise it, but you serve a tyrant. The sun tyrant. Princess Celestia." Immediately muttering broke out, but the Earth pony spoke over them.

"Think about it. What has Princess Celestia ever done for any of you? Has anyone ever even *seen* her?" He asked. None of the crowd responded. Boulder obviously took this as a sign of encouragement.

"You've never seen her, she's never been here, in fact I doubt she even knows *here* exists. Do any pegasi or unicorns ever come out here to either provide you with weather control or magical assistance when you are so sorely in need? Do any of them care? NO!" He roared, making the crowd jump.

"To them, you're nothing but a number that can be *taxed*!" He spat the last word like it was poison, "They care nothing for you!"

"That's not true-", someone in the crowd started but Boulder plowed right on as if he hadn't heard.

"And let's not forget the guard, do you see any of them here? Where are they when the manticores and timberwolves come to your

farms!?"

Gossamer noticed some uneasy glances going round as a few in the crowd found themselves silently agreeing with some of Boulder's words.

"Where are the guards? The Royal *or* Border Guards? Where are those who are supposed to keep everypony safe. Keyword being every*pony* here."

Gossamer didn't know where he was going with this, because Boulder too was a pony. His argument was counter intuitive, but Gossamer quickly saw his plan when the grey earth pony, who was somehow proving to be more intimidating than the griffin, continued:

"I realise I'm also a pony. I realise that I might look like one of *them*, the Sun Tyrant worshippers, but I'm not. I know that I'm no better than you," He placed a hoof to his chest and his voice rung with sincerity, "No one is better than anyone else just because of how they were born."

"Zebras, Griffins, cows, sheep, goats, deer, yaks, bison, ponies, we were all created equal. But Princess Celestia and her nobles don't agree, do they? They think they're so much better than you just because they have wings or horns. Even the earth ponies around here rule over you, don't they? They're the ones who bleed you dry each month on top of the tax pony. And who was it that put them in power?"

Boulder paused, slowly dragging his intense gaze over the crowd, making them wait on his words.

"Well, *you* know already the answer to that question." He said matter-of-factly.

"*You* know whose fault all of your hardships are. But whether *you* choose to acknowledge the answer or not? That's up to *you*."

Boulder's smooth voice rose once again, "That's all we're here to do, to try and find an answer to our question. To try and make you

think for yourselves. That's what the Resistance is, a group who thinks for themselves. If any of you are interested in thinking for yourselves for once, then come and find us. We'll be back, make yourselves known to us then." Boulder told the crowd.

With that, the armed pony turned and walked away without another word, and the crowds breath seeming to return with a great rush as everyone started to whisper at once.

Gossamer heard a grunt behind him. He turned and his heart nearly jumped out of his chest when he saw the other zebra not four paces away. He'd been there the whole time! The zebra spared the runt lamb a lingering glance, before stepping out from behind the barrels and heading after the retreating figure of Boulder.

The other zebra left too, but the griffin wasn't done. Gossamer saw him lean in close and say something to their mother which Gossamer couldn't catch from his position. Whatever it was, it made Fleece rush in front of their mother who had blanched and gone white.

"Don't you dare touch my mother!" The brown lamb shouted up at the armed griffin.

Gossamer's eyes went wide in horror, terrible scenarios flashing through his mind of what was about to happen to Fleece and his mother, 'Nono nono*nono*nono-!'

The griffins' claw shot out before anyone could stop him-

"No!" Their mother cried-

-And patted Fleece on the head, "Cute lamb. He's got some guts, I'll give him that. Might want to teach him some self preservation though. Oh well, till next time then." The griffin said with a leer and a cheery wave as he turned and followed after the rest of the Resistance members, leaving a shocked village square in their wake.

The village was in a quiet turmoil for a long time after the resistance fighters had gone. Weeks passed with a new air of

uncertainty hanging over everything.

Most were simply afraid of what would happen if the Border Guard or somepony of importance caught wind of what had happened here.

A few found themselves thinking more about how tough life was, and how much easier they could live without the taxes and tariffs, but grumbling slightly more often was about as far as their discontent went.

A smaller number still took to actively contradicting everything those from the resistance had said, going out of their way to comment on what a lovely day it was and how thankful they were that there was a Goddess who raised the sun for them.

And the smallest group of all found themselves agreeing with what the earth pony Boulder had said.

"You know, we wouldn't be having to do this again this year if that lazy rotter Green Fields had gotten round to hiring some good for nothing pegasus to bring in any rain." Fleece muttered as he and Gossamer lugged a pair of buckets each, hung from yokes over their shoulders.

"Pegasi." Gossamer tiredly mumbled.

It had been five months since those four from the resistance had come, and his brother Fleece was still thinking about them, or rather what they'd said. Gossamer could tell some of what Boulder had said had settled in Fleece, even if his brother didn't start actively denouncing Celestia and all ponies.

That's because Fleece's concerns were much closer to home, namely the hard life they lived, compared to the perceived comfort of pony kind.

Gossamer didn't like it, he knew no good would come of Fleece's sympathies towards the Resistance, even if his brother denied that he held any. Although sometimes it was easy to see why. Like right

now, with a rough wooden yoke digging into his shoulders, carrying two heavy buckets of sloshing water from the well, while the sun beat down mercilessly on his sticky wool.

Gossamer glanced up at his brother, who in the last four months had hit a growth spurt. Now, despite only being a year younger, Gossamer was only half his older brother's size. It was not the only thing that had changed.

Things were different now. Something hung in the air between the family which none of them could quite put a hoof on or were willing to voice. Gossamer hated it, but his mother and Fleece seemed perfectly happy to pretend it wasn't there.

"Come on, after we're done this row, there's only another sixteen to go." Gossamer said, trying to encourage his brother.
Fleece grunted tiredly, but still shouldered his yoke and picked up the pace.

They passed their mother coming back the other way with her own two empty pails. They passed without a word, but Gossamer saw his brother's face twitch. Anyone else would have missed it, but despite his youth, Gossamer was excellent at picking up on hints and tells.

'There it is again.' He thought with frustration.

They were down to the last two rows before Gossamer finally gathered up the courage to speak, "Fleece?" He asked, easing the yoke from his aching shoulders. Even with his smaller water pails and half sized yoke, it still left his small frame sweating and sore.

"Yeah Goss?" Fleece replied, pouring out a measure of water onto one of the young potato plants.

Gossamer took a deep breath, "What's the anger between you and mom?" He asked.

"I'm not angry at mom!" Fleece protested hotly, jerking upright.

"Really? Because it sure seems that way. Ever since those resistance

guys came round, things haven't been the same. It's affected both you and mom. I just, I just..." Gossamer trailed off.

"I just want things to go back to how they were." He finished lamely.

Fleece put down his yoke and straightened up with a sigh, taking a moment to rub at his horns which were now half grown in. "Yeah, me too Goss. Me too."

"Then why not let it?" Gossamer asked, "Why are you angry at mom?"

"I'm not angry at mom. I, it's just..." He gestured wildly, "-I feel- I mean, - *Gha*! Every time I look at mom, I think about how tough life is on her. I never really thought about it till I heard Boulder speak, but mom tries so hard, and yet we're so poor. None of us deserve this, especially when there are those who do far less and have a lot more than us."

Gossamer was silent for a minute, trying to figure out what to say.

"But, what's changed? You didn't complain before this. And it's not like we can do anything about being poor." He eventually said uncertainly.

"I know, I know, I'm not clever like you, I don't have all the words I want to say to.. to.. just... I know nothing's changed, but *I've* changed Goss, and I don't like how nothing else has, like we should be doing something to make our lives better. I just feel like things are different. Or maybe it's just us who're different now. Does that make any sense?" Fleece asked.

Gossamer rubbed at his own head, feels the soft buds under his wool where the horns would eventually grow in, "Um, maybe?" He offered cautiously.

"Didn't think so." Fleece said with a tired smile, "But I'm sorry that you feel this way. Sometimes I forget how young you still are, Goss."

"What's that supposed to mean? You're not much older than me

yourself." Gossamer retorted.

Fleece frowned. "So? I'm still older, and I'm supposed to be the responsible one. I'm just trying to do what dad would have wanted."

Gossamer opened his mouth to say that he very much doubted that Fleece had any idea what their father would have wanted, but immediately swallowed the words. His older brother didn't need to have his memory of their father tarnished. Much kinder to let Fleece think their dad had been a good ram instead.

Gossamer scuffed his hoof in the dirt, "So, does that mean you are going to join this resistance then Fleece? I mean, you did just say you hated things as they are right now, didn't you?"

Fleeces eyes went wide, as he spluttered "What? No, that's not- You mean you actually thought-? I would *never* leave-!"

"Oh thank Celestia!" Gossamer heaved a sigh of relief, very glad that he had been right. It seemed Fleece was just talk, like so many others in the village. Actually making drastic and life altering decisions was beyond him, the drudgery of known life much preferable to the uncertainty of the unknown.

Fleece grabbed Gossamer's shoulder, turning him till he could look down at him, "You know I wouldn't leave you or mom. *Ever*! Especially after what that griffin said."

Gossamer managed a weak grin, and leaned in to give his older brother an awkward hug, "That's good to hear. Perhaps you should tell mom that, I think she worries that you might leave one day."

"Okay, I'll do that right-"

Fleece never got to finish that sentence, as just then they heard their mothers voice calling for them from behind the cabin where the well sat.

"Boys!" She didn't sound happy. She sounded scared.

Fleece and Gossamer exchanged a glance, then both dropped their yokes and set off at a run.

The resistance had attacked a small pony expedition in the forest up north, past the river, and only a weeks travel away. But that wasn't all, at the same time it seemed that the resistance had launched a series of raids on two of the three pony frontier towns, Shoeoof and Halterton, leaving only the better defended Straperdale untouched. No one had died, but many were hurt.

The frontier towns were, by nature, small and roughly built. They'd sprung up quickly, and didn't have much in the way of any Guard force outside of a few local militia to deal with wandering monsters. The inhabitants were generally poor and humble. Easy pickings but of very little impact as a strategic target. However Gossamer didn't learn about things like 'strategic value' and 'military importance' until much later.

For now, all Gossamer knew as he stood in the crowded market square, as everyone listened to the red Earth pony from Straperdale in front of them relate the attacks to the horrified audience, was that he felt very small and lost.

The unthinkable had happened, and the future was suddenly thrown into uncertainty.

'What's going to happen? Is the resistance going to attack here too?' Gossamer wondered, feeling numb. He wasn't the only one with such questions.

"What's going to happen to us?"
"Are we in danger?"
"Where's the Border Guard?"
"What use are they if they can't protect anyone?"
"Are we going to have to leave?"
"Where will we go?"

No one had any answers. The red earth pony on the stand wasn't any kind of official, just a black smith who'd come to tell them the news.

The air was heavy with fear. In a detached sort of manner,

Gossamer thought it odd that Green Fields and his fellow land lords hadn't tried to stop the red earth pony from spreading the bad news. Usually they tried to hush up bad news.

But then again, this was on a completely different scale now, and it was unlikely they'd accomplish anything more than delaying the news even if they tried. Gossamer became aware that his mother was gently rubbing his head. He glanced up, looking for reassurance. He found it in her warm smile. He was so thankful for that smile, even if it was probably nothing more than another mask. If it was, he didn't want her to ever take it off.

He hugged her fore leg, shutting out the rest of the crowd, on the other side his brother doing the same.

'It doesn't matter, as long as we three are fine. Nothing else matters.' Gossamer thought to himself.

---**The Present**---

The sheep that had formerly been known as Gossamer all those years ago blinked. He was back in the prison cell, with the crystal studded shackles restraining him. Not that he'd ever left, except in memory.

'A relapse to the past can offer the sweetest distractions from reality.' In this case, the reality of an eight by eight cell.

Flipping his large soft ears back and forth, the sheep concentrated, trying to catch what it was that had snapped him from his meditation. The enchantments on the cells stopped sound from getting out, but not from coming in. How else were the wardens supposed to yell at their inmates?

There were definitely more guards passing outside the cell, three sets of them in the last ten minutes alone. A normal inmate wouldn't even have been able to hear the muffled hoof steps through the thick, lead lined walls, but the small sheep could just about manage it.

'Something's different today. But I'm not sure what, and form a

theory with so little information is pointless. Whatever it is, it certainly has nothing to do with me.'

The sheep took a moment to stretch as far as his chains would allow, before resettling himself on the cot and focusing on slipping away again.

'Where was I in my recollection this time? This must make the fourth time re-living my life through. Ah yes, the resistance attacks.'

---**The Past**---

The next five months in the village ground down into a grim slog. A somber gloom crept into every aspect of the villagers lives as what had started as a small rebellion quickly grew in size and severity. The villagers never saw or experienced any of the fighting themselves, but they heard all about it.

Another ambush on the road. Another midnight pillaging of a grain barn. Another hapless bystander in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The first fatality was an old donkey by the name of Jim. Gossamer had never met him, and neither had Fleece, but apparently their mother and Jim had grown up in the same hamlet. The story was that Jim had been accidentally mistaken for a resistance raider trying to sneak into town by one of the town's militia. They'd issued a challenge, aiming their spears to throw, and, well... Jim had been old and hard of hearing, and in the dark one thing lead to another, and a silent and stunned funeral was the final result.

Mother took the day off from the farm to walk the fifteen miles to attend. She didn't let Fleece or Gossamer go with her. The farm was very quiet with just the two of them there. Gossamer didn't know what to say, and apparently neither did his older brother. In fact that wasn't quite true, Fleece actually did say one thing.

"Why can't everyone see what's right and wrong?"

Gossamer just gave him a hug.

It was a full month into the raids before the Border Guard even

bothered to turn up, and even then, it was just a few patrols.

Many in the border towns were livid to learn that, in the grand scheme of things, the Resistance and these attacks barely even registered as more than a vague interest for their pony betters who gave the orders from over on the other side of the mountain range.

Taxes and tariffs had also increased, apparently to help fund the increase in militia and presence of the Border Guards. It certainly didn't make any of the various villages or frontier towns any happier about their Earth Pony land lords.

Then, more people started to die.

A pegasus was found dead in a muddy puddle, an arrow in his back. A week later, a griffin and a grey ram were killed in a scuffle by the Border Guard. The Guard claimed the dead had been Resistance fighters. No one was sure about the griffin, but the ram's family all angrily swore that their son had been no such thing, and that the Border Guard were just trying to cover up their mistake.

Although no one knew the actual truth of the matter, relationships between the Border Guard and those they were supposed to be protecting slipped even further.

A donkey was found hanged within his own barn and his house ransacked. Rumour was that he'd been seen collaborating with the Border Guard.

A barn was burned down, and it wasn't until later that it was discovered a baby lamb had been inside. Mother hugged them both very tightly that night, and made them promise to never leave her. They promised.

Three Resistance fighters were captured by a mixture of Straperdale militia and Border Guard, who paraded them through the street and boasted of their success. But that very night, the Resistance snuck in and broke the three out, leaving a dead jail keeper in their previously occupied cell. When the Border Guard got there in the morning, a trap on the cell door almost cost the Border Guard who opened it his life. As it was, he'd survive a cripple.

More Border Guards started to trickle in, and this time, their numbers included unicorns too.

Around this time came the rumour that the Resistance fighters had taken to wearing horrifying masks, carved into the snarling heads of predators, and painted in the blood of their victims to terrify their enemies.

The Resistance preferred to strike from the shadows before retreating to their hideouts in the forest. The Border Guard's increased presence did go some way in lowering the number of targets that the resistance could strike at, and the patrols did do some good. It forced the resistance to pick their targets with care. However, to the third group of this conflict, those who lived here and who had no hoof or claw in the matter either way, they just wanted both groups gone.

Gossamer felt helpless all the time. It kept him awake at night, the constant feeling of the world being out of control, and all of the dangers so close and so real. He didn't know if Fleece also wrestled with these feelings of fear and helplessness, but he didn't want to appear weak by bringing it up. Every sheep in the family needed to be strong right now.

More raids, more patrols, more skirmishes, more innocents caught in the cross fire, more villagers taken away for questioning, sometimes the same individual by both sides. A few never came back. The Border Guard always answered, "Detained until further notice" to the desperate inquiries of relatives pleading to see their loved ones again or to at least be told *something*.

No one dared ask the Resistance the same question for fear of what the answer would be.

Everyone was afraid to talk, both those who knew something, and those who were afraid that someone thought they might know something.

Paranoia grew, as did distrust, fear and hate. Although for the civilians caught in the middle of this small war, the root cause of all these bad feelings changed depending on who you asked. Some

blamed the Resistance, others the Border Guard, and some blamed the Princess herself.

Finally, after five months of this back and forth fighting, and with the Border Guard not having made any headway in putting down the resistance, the pony Lords on the other side of the mountains finally lost their patience. They decided to send in some real power.

Up until then, the Border Guard had seemed quite content to simply react to anything the Resistance did, rather than taking the initiative. Perhaps this was because the Resistance hadn't done anything big yet, apparently too cautious to commit to any real fight. The Border Guard seemed to feel the same way, reluctant to venture into the forest in anything other than large groups.

That all changed with the arrival of Captain Fire Strike.

---**The Present**---

The sheep in the cell's eyes snapped open. He barely had time to rise from the cot as he realised that there were guards on the other side of the magically sealed door before it banged open.

'What-?'

That thought was cut off as four prison guards in bulky grey armoured vests and helmets rushed into the room. They were taking no chances, "Get on the floor now!" One of them yelled, the earth pony and Pegasus brandishing night sticks while the two unicorns' horns crackled with charged stun spells.

'Standard electric shock based stun spell, taught in basic induction for Dreverton prison guards.' *Normal* prison guards would have been taught harmless binding spells instead, but not here. This was Dreverton.

All this and more the sheep took in at a glance, from the placement of where the guards were standing, to their colouring, to the fact that the earth pony favoured his left hind leg, to the further two guards waiting as backup just outside the door.
Without a word the sheep dropped to the floor, lying belly down

with his shackled and muffled front hooves on the back of his head.

He didn't know why the guards had burst in here, but there was nothing to be gained by offering resistance. All he would get was a beating. Even without all these magical restraints and suppressants, close combat had never been his strong point.

The Pegasus shuffled forwards, pressing his night stick into the back of the sheep's neck while he checked the shackles were still working. 'As if I'd just be lying here if I'd broken free.' He thought with a smirk. 'Really though, six guards for one small lamb? I wonder if I should be flattered?'

"He's clean sir, cuffs still working." The Pegasus barked.

"Good. You two, get in here and get him hooked up." One of the unicorns, the yellow one ordered. 'So he's the one in charge.' The sheep noted automatically. It was habit, to look for any piece of information that could give him an edge.

Not that it would help him the slightest bit. Even if he broke out of these bindings; '-Impossible', and somehow won a fight six on one; '-Even more impossible', and somehow got all the way to the top of the mountain unseen; '-Completely impossible', he'd still have to escape the island fortress that was Dreverton. And unless he sprouted gills or wings, there was no way that was happening.

These thoughts occupied his mind while the two earth ponies came in carrying lengths of chain. One length was quickly clipped to his front leg shackles and the other to the rear ones. Once done they all backed off to the end of the chains, one guard in front of him and the other behind, keeping him firmly locked in the middle of them and five hoof lengths out of reach.

"Up." The yellow unicorn growled.

Wordlessly he complied. The guards never took their eyes off him as he was led out of the cell, half of them in front of him and the other bringing up the rear. He hesitated at the doors threshold. He hadn't stepped out of the cell in: 'Fifty seven years, two months, three weeks and five days.' A jerk of the chain got him moving

again.

Why was he being let out now? What was going on? He'd been sentenced to life in prison. 'Let's not get ahead of yourself. Who's to say they aren't taking you to a worse cell? Or perhaps execution.' Maybe Celestia had finally gotten up the nerve to reinstate that act from centuries ago. How he wished he could still read the surface thoughts of those around him.

The sheep pondered on his fate as the guards lead him along the spiraling path, slowly heading up towards the old volcano's peak. He was very careful to note how many guards they passed, the check stations, any spells on display and the like. Just because he couldn't escape was no reason not to look for opportunities.

Numerous scenarios cycled though his head as the guards wordlessly lead him upwards, and he weighed each one carefully. The best explanation he could come up with for why after all these years he was being let out, was that someone wanted something from him. No, not someone, some*pony*.

He noticed lots of blank stares from the guards they passed, not a flicker of recognition in their eyes. It was nothing like when he had first been thrown in here. What had happened to all that self righteous hate and anger? 'Then again, it's been over fifty seven years. Sheep never live that long, and generations have already grown up and moved on in that space of time. They've forgotten.'

That made him angry, not that they'd forgotten who he was, but because it also meant they'd forgotten the war and those who died.

They reached the top, emerging out onto the peek, and he squinted and shivered in the brisk air. Even though it was overcast, it had been many years since he'd seen the brightness of day. He felt unsure all of a sudden as he looked around at the squat military buildings that encircled the whole of the volcano's rim. Guards were moving to and fro between the buildings, the grey of the stone walls and the Guards' armour matching the grey of the volcano's surface.

A harsh yank of the chains got him stumbling again towards one of the closest buildings, his heavily encased hooves clacking loudly on the stone path. A guard at the door nodded at the yellow unicorn and opened it.

The sheep was dragged in with a helpful prod from a night stick. Only the yellow unicorn and one of the chain leash holding ponies followed him in, the rest all filing back out the door with a crisp salute to somepony at the back of the room.

The sheep glanced over and bit back a growl, 'Someponies.' He corrected himself.

Five someponies to be exact, five Solar Guard ponies. Celestias' personal elite guard.

The obvious leader of the Solar Guard squad stepped out into the light. The Solar Guard captain was a massive white unicorn, muscles rippled under his heavy golden armour. He wore a look of angry disgust on his muzzle as he looked down at the sheep.

'I really hate unicorns.' The sheep thought, matching the look with one of his own.

The captain stalked forwards, towering over the sheep runt, golden war shoes making the floor boards creak and bend with each step.

"Inmate 452, you are hereby transferred from the custody of Dreverton to my own, Captain Valour of the Solar Guard of Princess Celestia, effective as of right now. You now belong to me, inmate 452." The guard rumbled, even his voice sounded too large for his body. Prisoner 452 didn't think he'd ever seen a bigger unicorn, usually even earth ponies didn't get this big.

"You two, we will take it from here, dismissed." Captain Valor barked at the two prison guards still in the room.

Without a word, they snapped off a crisp salute, wheeled around and marched out. The fact that they didn't offer any kind of resistance to the captains abrupt order spoke volumes of their respect for captain Valor. No doubt he'd brought them many

prisoners over the years.

The door clicked shut behind them, leaving the sheep in the room alone with five Solar Guards, who had already spread out to expertly cover all angles and sides of the room without a word.

'Highly trained, no need for verbal commands. Armoured. All unicorns. Just my luck.' 452 thought sourly, glaring right back at Valour. He hated all ponies, but he especially hated unicorns.

He felt very small and vulnerable standing the in the middle of the room.

'What's it going to be? Magical torture? They could kill me and no one would ever raise an eyebrow. Not because of who I am but because they're Solar Guards.'

He fixed a smirk on his normally gentle features, beautiful sky blue eyes and soft floppy ears not matching the expression of hate on his muzzle at all. How he wished he wasn't bound so he could read these fools fore thoughts.

Captain Valor seemed to grow bored of their staring contest as he couldn't get the sheep to be the first to break. He snorted and stomped forwards again, "Inmate 452, do you know why you're here?" The captain asked.

"Because you need something from me of course. The only question is, what?" He answered smugly.

"Let's get something straight gutter trash, I don't need anything from you, I only want, and what I want, I will take! Got that?" Valor growled.

The sheep pretended to be offended, although in reality it was all just a mask to hide the shrewd calculations going on inside his head, "Ah, I see, a unicorn supremacist. I guess it comes naturally, what with being one of *her* guards."

Captain Valour's gaze turned as hot as his Sun mistress, "I'm going to do you a favour and forget just this once that disrespectful tone you used for addressing your rightful Princess and ruler, *sheep*." He

growled dangerously.

All the guards in the room wore matching expressions of barely constrained fury as they glared at their prisoner.

He frowned. Something about Captain Valor's words didn't fit.

'Wait, the way he said 'sheep', not my name, not even inmate 452. Is it possible that even they don't know who I am?' He wondered. If they didn't, it suddenly opened a whole range of possibilities.

'But how to find out for sure?'

Before he could change his mind, the sheep tilted his head and laughed, "Ha. As if she's ever done anything for me. What makes you think I'd ever submit to the likes of something like her-?"

He didn't even see Captain Valour move, the war shoe catching him right in the gut. He collapsed and tried to wheeze for breath, retching up a pool of vomit.

Even through the nausea his mind kept analysing, 'Carefully controlled strike. He easily has enough strength to kill me in one blow even without those war shoes, and he's not even an earth pony! But he still didn't break a single rib, he must have even compensated for me being a runt.'

The sheep fought to lift his head from where he lay clutching his belly and sneered up at the Captain. He'd just learned two important things.

The first was that they wanted him alive and in reasonably good condition. That meant he held something of value to them, although after fifty seven years, he didn't know what it might be. Especially in light of the second thing he'd learned.
Which was that they didn't know who he was. Or at least they didn't know what he was capable of. If Captain Valour *had* known, there was no way a guard with his training would have risked coming into contact with him for even for a second.

Despite having all his powers sealed away by these magical shackles, he'd remembered how every guard had shied away from

touching him when he was thrown in here, and rightly so. He'd driven ponies mad with just a passing touch before. That none of them knew that he could only do that with contact from his front, rune inscribed hooves was besides the point.

He just wished he could have thought up a less painful way to get that information.

"I will explain this once, and once only," Valour said glaring down at him, "You are being transferred temporarily from Dreverton to my custody because I am giving you the chance to perform an act of service for your Princess and country. That you're nothing but a child doesn't matter. This is an honour which you aren't deserving of, but there's very little choice left."

"You will do what we say, when we say, and if you try to escape we won't hesitate to beat you within an inch of your life before throwing you back in this hell hole to rot. Is that clear?" The captain asked. He didn't say it as a threat, just a statement of fact.

The sheep spat out the taste of vomit and pushed himself into a sitting position with a clink of chains:

"And what exactly could an inmate like me possibly have to offer the captain of the Solar guard?" He asked, plastering a leer across his features. He tapped his chin thoughtfully, "A punching bag? Wool? A lamb sized model? Home furnishing advice? Bait?"

He was fishing for answers, trying to provoke the captain into letting something slip.

"All you need to know is that there has been a string of attacks in Vanhoover. They all happened under 'special' circumstances. All the victims have no memory of the event, and some are, aggressive, in their denial. Princess Celestia has tasked me to clear this matter up, and has given me access to any assets I deem necessary."

The sheep noted the particular emphasis on 'aggressive.'

Valour continued, "My lieutenant found reference in an old file to an inmate who was a mind leech. After a lot of digging, he found a

sheep by the name of Gossamer. The dates were all wrong and there were no further details on the report, but the paper trail lead me here."

The captain lowered his voice and stepped forwards threateningly, forcing the bound prisoner to shuffle backwards;

"I don't care who you are or what you've done. The only two things that matter are that you might know something, and that you're expendable. I will not risk any more doctors or civilians on this case, but you're just a criminal. I know you're not really a child even if you look it. Mind leeches aren't children. We can do whatever we want with you. So don't give me any reason to exercise my privileges if you know what's good for you, Gossamer." He spat.

The sheep kept his face blank even while he mind raced, 'So in other words the captain has hit a dead end with no leads. Celestia has specially tasked him with this case, and he's getting desperate. She probably doesn't know about him coming to retrieve me either. Something dangerous is going on, and he's unwilling to risk his own people. Which is where I come in. Something to do with mind magic, most likely. Although where his lieutenant dug up a fifty-seven year old report on me, I'll never know.'

Out loud he said, "That's not my name. Gossamer is dead."

It wasn't even a lie. Who he was had died a long time ago.

"You're darn right you aren't Gossamer anymore. You're a number, not a name. Number 452." Valour retorted. He wheeled round and pointed a hoof at two of his Solar Guards:

"Bright, Sunshine, get 452 into one of the chariots. I want two guards on him at all times, night and day. I'll draw up a rota when we get back. For now, don't let him out of your sight." The captain ordered.

"Yes sir." Both unicorns barked, and the one called Sunshine grasped the trailing chain in his magic to begin dragging 452 out the door.

"Wait, you never said what it was that you wanted me to be doing for you. It'll be a lot easier to simply-" He didn't get any further before a band of yellow magic snapped closed around his jaw, tightening painfully.

"No talking. Make this difficult and I'll put you under for the rest of the flight. Understood?" Bright growled at the sheep.

He nodded back though watering eyes. There was nothing further to be gained by resisting at this time. And he could tell the Solar Guard Bright would enjoy making good on his threat.

He was dumped rather unceremoniously into the back of one of two golden chariots waiting outside, each drawn by two pegasi in matching brilliant gold armour. The guards Bright and Sunshine smartly clambered up into the back with him in tow, keeping a baleful eye on his every move.

He carefully kept his own eyes downcast, masking his emotions.

He hated unicorns. Really truly hated them.

He hated how superior they all felt they were, and he especially hated how many of them actually were. They had magic, they could do almost anything. If at this very second Captain Valour decided to turn him inside out with magic, there was absolutely nothing he could do to defend himself.

Unicorns had it the best of all races. Even among ponies, where everypony was taught that all were equal and had a part to play, that every*pony* was equally worthy, unicorns always came out on top. Why? Simple. Because they had magic.

Of all pony races, he disliked earth ponies the least. He pitied them in a way. They were born without wings or horns, which rendered them almost useless compared to their luckier brothers.

Earth ponies were told by those gifted individuals that their lack of extra appendages was nothing to be ashamed of, that they were meant to work the earth and make use of their small amount of

natural magic that way. It was a pitiful joke. What was earth magic compared to the power of flight, or bending the rules of reality? And what applied to earth ponies applied to every other common race only more so.

At least earth ponies got a half way decent life span. Eighty to a hundred years, with pegasi on a similar time frame. Unicorns, because of the sheer amount of magic running through them, lasted far longer. The particularly powerful ones could exceed two hundred years in some historic cases.

It was like unicorns were first in line when all the privileges were being handed out in life, and then they'd gone back and cut into line again ahead of the earth ponies, while behind them, everybody else fought for space. Sheep featured somewhere at the back, just in front of caterpillars.

How he hated and feared unicorns. He feared what they could do to him at the drop of a hat. He'd been in the Resistance war, he knew what a true mage was capable of.

So he kept his head down as they took off, making himself as small as possible in the bottom of the chariot, which wasn't hard. As they pulled away with a lurch up into the sky, he tried not to look over the lip of the chariot as the huge grey peek of Dreverton slowly fell away. The beat of wings and the whistle of wind were the only sounds as he huddled down further by Bright and Sunshine's hooves.

He tried to focus his mind on other things than the dark choppy sea so very far below.

'They're taking me by chariot without a blindfold. Why not just teleport? They certainly have enough powerful unicorns here, the Solar guard is supposed to be the best of the best. Unless their standards have been slipping.' And he highly doubted that.

Which means one of three things. Possibility one, they didn't care if he saw their route because he'd never be coming back. Or two, because they believed he had no chance of escape so didn't care even if saw. Or possibility three, Dreverton was enchanted against

teleportation, even the Guard barracks up at the very top.

'That last one would make the most sense. Dreverton is a very high risk prison after all, and not leaving even one spot to teleport out from is an intelligent move in the event of a breakout, but leaves them no other option but air chariot.'

'Or another, a fourth option; they simply plan to throw me over the side during the flight.'

He shivered at the thought. Then again, there were worse ways to go. Much worse ways.

Inmate 452 shifted on the cold chariot floor, and tried to get comfortable. As he was currently a prisoner with no control over his situation, he might as well do something productive and get some sleep.

If they did intend to toss him to his death, he hoped they'd have the decency not to wake him first.

"~He could never get used to the cage~"

Picture link: https://imgur.com/UkWPEos

2.0 Forced assistance and the Resistance

---The past---

Everything changed with the arrival of Captain Fire Strike.

The first thing the new Captain did after taking over command of the Border Guard was to step up patrols and counter attacks. He had bunkers and dugouts built. He was aggressive in all his commands, favouring action over caution.

Fire Strike was quoted for having said on the very day he took command; "If we can't burn out the Resistance by Hearths Warming, I'm going to turn this land into Tartarus myself."

Gossamer was scared of this new captain, although he'd only heard of the unicorn through second-hoof sources. But they all seemed to say the same thing; 'The war is about to get much worse.' And that meant a harsh knock-on effect for the inhabitants of the land. Sometimes he couldn't sleep at night for fear of what the future might hold.

It scared his mother too, she took to leaving the cabin as little as possible. Fleece in contrast became more outspoken and angry against both the Resistance and the Border Guard. Gossamer didn't know what to do to help either of them.

Three weeks into Fire Strike's command and with very little progress on finishing the war, the Captain made a decision. A decision that would have enormous consequences.

"What do you think they want to tell us?" Gossamer whispered nervously, shuffling closer to Fleece.

"I don't know, but it'll be bad news either way." His brother

muttered back.

"Hush," Their mother shushed them, "Don't let anyone hear you."

The three of them were in the market square, along with the whole village. It was packed, and everyone was on edge. Tension lay heavy on every neck. The villagers had received the summons yesterday from Green Fields saying; "Tomorrow, a messenger is coming from Captain Fire Strike which will affect us all. Be at the market square in the morning, or else."

Well here they were, and there was no sign of the Border Guard. Not yet anyways.

Green Fields stood above the crowd, shifting nervously on a wooden speaking platform which'd been hastily constructed the night before.

'He doesn't look happy,' Gossamer noted. 'Either he already knows what the messenger will say and it's bad, or he's upset about being left in the dark like the rest of us. Or perhaps he's worried if this Border Guard messenger doesn't turn up the crowd will lynch him.'

It wasn't an impossibility. Two weeks ago, the land owner Oak Tree over in the village of Hard Tack had been hanged. Although the verdict was still out as to whether it had been the villagers, the Border Guard, or the Resistance who'd done the deed.

Much to Gossamer's relief, the Border Guards arrived just then. He didn't want to see anyone or anypony hurt, even Green Fields.

The Border Guard was a grey unicorn, flanked by four accompanying guards in matching brown armour and uniforms. Everyone went silent as the stallion stepped up onto the prepared stage, exchanging a quiet word with Green Fields.

The land lord didn't look happy at whatever he was told, but still quickly got off the stage and disappeared. The grey unicorn looked around at the assembled village and cleared his throat noisily. There was dead silence in the square. All eyes were on him.

"By direct order from Captain Fire Strike, appointed by her Royal

Majesty, Princess Celestia, over the Border Guard on this side of the Long Ridge and tasked with putting down this foul rebellion, I bring a message."

"All the inhabitants this side of Long Ridge are to leave their areas of dwelling and travel to Canterlot for relocation. Any who stay will no longer have the protection of the Border Guard extended to them. All who comply will be treated fairly."

The unicorn stopped speaking and stood there.

It took a minute of stunned silence for them all to realise that was the end of the Guard's message, and hadn't stopped just to catch his breath.

Gossamer could scarcely believe what the Border Guard had just said, 'They want to kick *us* out? After all the death *they've* caused?! Surely I must have misheard?' He glanced quickly over at his mother and Fleece. Their dumbfounded expressions said he hadn't.

"Treated fairly? How is this 'treated fairly'?" A lone voice in the frozen crowd called out.

As if that had been the signal, more of the crowd started to shout out as well, "You're abandoning us?" An angry cow shouted.

"Leave our home? Never!" A donkey next to her yelled.

"Why should we leave? It's *you* who's the problem!"

"Yeah, if it wasn't for you and the Resistance we'd be fine!"

The unicorn on the stand looked around in confusion, bafflement clear on his features. He tried to say something, but it was lost over the rising din of the crowd. He tried again, and when that too failed he took a different approach.

His horn started to glow blue, and the closest members of the crowd who had been pressing forwards abruptly backed of with startled yelps, but it wasn't an attack spell.

"**Be quiet**!" The unicorn shouted, his voice magically amplified. At

the sudden volume, the crowd was shocked into becoming just that.

"I repeat, this is a command from Captain Fire Strike. It's for your own good. Can't you see that?"

"In what way is this 'for our own good'?" Someone called out.

"We're moving you out of harms way, far away from the rebel threat in this land. The Border Guard is having to spend unnecessary resources on patrolling these villages and fields, rather than focusing on the true threat. The sooner you leave, the sooner we can finish this little war and then we can all go home." The unicorn explained as if it were obvious.

A long silence met his words. Eventually, an elderly sheep hobbled forwards, her wool grey and muzzle wrinkled. The ewe's voice shook with age, "You want us all to leave our homes?"

The Guard nodded confidently, "Correct, if you do, you will be treated fairly-"

"Who will tend to our farms while we are gone?" The old sheep asked, her raspy voice somehow cutting through the unicorn's magically enhanced one.

The unicorn blinked, his ear cocked to the side, "No one, I guess." He replied.

"And if we left, what would await us on the other side of the border? Would your Princess provide new farms for us?" The ewe asked.

The grey unicorns eyes had narrowed noticeably at the phrase '*your* Princess', rather than 'the' or 'our' Princess, but he still answered, "I was not tasked with the details, but rest assured, those who comply with us will be treated fairly. Trust me, it'll all work out fine for you."

The old sheep squinted up at him, "And pray tell, how would we get over the mountains? We have no supplies, and the harvest isn't for another two months. We have no magic or wings to speed any journey we might take. The route is hard and dangerous, especially

at this time of year. Would you provide for us and act as our guards?"

The unicorn tilted his head in puzzlement, as if he didn't understand what the problem was, "No, of course not. That's not our job. Our job is to stop the rebels as quickly as possible. We can't do that if we're wasting our time trekking over the mountains now, can we?"

Were they serious? They were serious. They really saw nothing wrong with this. The crowd stared at him, and the other Border Guards who stood behind the spokes-unicorn, all just as completely confidently oblivious. An ugly feeling started to build.

A murmur rippled through the crowd, one of disbelief and anger, twisting and growing as it went. Even the Border Guards couldn't miss such an obvious sign, and they began to shift nervously on the stage.

The old sheep who had asked the questions looked stonily up at the unicorn in his Border Guard uniform, "Well then young stallion, here's my answer." She said, and with that spat on the ground and turned away back into the crowd, who closed ranks behind her.

"Come," Gossamer's mother murmured to him and his brother, "We don't need to be here any longer. Quickly now."

She pushed them towards the back of the crowd, her gaze never leaving the stage as the crowd started to press forwards again, a dark look in their eyes.

Gossamer shook his head furiously, and with a shiver turned to leave. It didn't take a genius to figure out that something bad was going to happen.

"Fleece." His mother called, "Fleece come on."

Gossamer shot a look back. Fleece was still glaring at the stage.

"Fleece, we need to go." Their mother pleaded. The muttering of the crowd had grown into outright shouting by now.

"Fleece!"

Whatever spell it was that'd held Fleece frozen, broke. His brother gasped as if coming up for air and finally turned away, rushing headlong past their mother and Gossamer as he raced for home. Gossamer looked up into his brother's confused and angry face as he passed.

"Fleece-"

But his brother was already past and running for home. He stole a glance up at his mother's face.

She looked scared. He was scared too.

"Come along Sweetie." She said in a strained voice, chivvying him along further away from the shouting as the Border Guard drew up into a defensive formation on the stage. He didn't see who threw the first stone.

Gossamer hung his head and started plodding after Fleece.

---**The Present**---

"Wake up, 452." An armoured hoof prodded him into wakefulness none too gently.

He opened his eyes to see one of the pegasi grumpily standing over him. He glanced out from where he lay on the now still chariot floor to see they'd landed in some rocky barren field, no sign of any settlement, and one of the unicorns had started a magical fire. It was late in the day, and in the sky Celestia's sun was slowly sinking. 'We must have stopped for the night.'

"I said get up, inmate 452." The Pegasus barked, his nostrils flaring. 'A hot head it seems. Might make him easier to bait.'

"You said wake up, not get up." The sheep corrected the Solar guard smoothly, but rose to his hooves anyway. Even standing, he barely came to the bottom of the Pegasus's golden chest plate.

"Well, I'm up. What do you want?" He asked with an innocent smile.

The guard scowled at him and unhooked the chain attached to his

shackles, "It's dinner time. Get over to the fire. Annoy me and you can go without, and don't even think of trying to run. You'll just be wasting both of ours time. You wouldn't get two paces before we caught you."

He blinked, he hadn't honestly expected to get fed. He knew *he* wouldn't have fed a prisoner, he'd want them weak and hungry to ensure obedience. 'Right, I keep forgetting, this is the pony guard, not the Resistance. They're soft.' He thought. A good thing for him, though.

They made their way over to the fire, the pegasus breathing down his neck the entire way as he shuffled along in the heavy chains.

The Solar Guard were all gathered around the fire, apart from two who stood watch, ceaselessly scanning the barren rocks surrounding them. None of the unicorns or pegasi said a word to him, but he got quite a number of glares as he plopped himself down, looking very small between two of the armoured unicorns. He made sure to sit on the opposite side of the fire from Captain Valour. The huge unicorn reminded him too much of Captain Fire Strike.

Sunshine levitated a mess tin over to him, and he took it clumsily between his metal encased hooves, and a flask of water followed. Sunshine looked at him, as if waiting for thanks, but when it became obvious none was coming, the unicorn simply shrugged and picked up his own mess tin.

The guards were alert, but not on edge, so it was likely they hadn't landed in hostile territory. Or the Solar Guards were confident they could handle any threat dumb enough to come their way.

He personally had no idea where they were, he didn't remember any of this, either from his own memory or memories belonging to others. Who knew how far away they were from Vanhoover right now? He hadn't exactly been conscious when he'd been transported to Dreverton, which was why he hadn't known if teleportation from the volcano prison was possible or not.

The mess tin was full of some kind of hard biscuit and gruel. It was almost as tasteless as the meals he'd gotten in Dreverton. Observing

the faces of the Solar Guards while hiding that he was doing so, he noted quite a few of them were picking at their own food half-heartedly. It was something of a surprise to see that their mess tins held the same fare his own did.

'It seems their morals really are as shiny as their armour if they won't even think of eating better than the prisoner. What a foolish notion.' He thought, dipping his head for another mouthful.

As he ate, he studied the ponies intently, but much to his disappointment, he couldn't see any drop in their guard despite the late hour and long day of travel. 'Tonight is likely the best chance at escape I'm going to get.'

He looked at the unicorns and pegasi surrounding him on all sides, all highly trained and all there for one reason and one reason only. To make sure he didn't escape. He sighed in disappointment, 'So no chance whatsoever.'

---The Past---

In the end, none of the village aside from Green Fields and his family left for Canterlot. No one was sad to see the the land lord go.

The Border Guards who had delivered Fire Strike's ultimatum had been run out of town, retreating under a magical shield as they were pelted with rocks and whatever came to hoof. Not a single Border Guard in their distinctive brown uniforms and steel armour had been seen since. All patrols had ceased, all inspections had stopped. It was shocking in its abruptness.

To the villagers, it was the first step towards peace, for them at least. The Border Guard and the Resistance could fight each other to their hearts' content, so long as they left the villagers out of it.

That peace lasted for all of a week. Gossamer wished that he could remember something happy about that week, wished he could say that for at least that last little bit before everything went to Tartarus, that they were a family again. But he couldn't. It was just another week still spent in worry and fear of the Resistance

returning, their mother withdrawn, and Fleece angry.

---**One week later**---

Gossamer sat numbly amidst the smoking ruins that had been the village. Everything stank of smoke and his eyes were red from it. The fire had blazed all night and lit the sky blood red as he and Fleece had cowered under a bush, helpless to do anything but watch.

Fleece was somewhere nearby, frantically running back and forth between the rubble and still smouldering beams, yelling for their mother. Gossamer wanted to join him, but his legs refused to support his weight and he couldn't get his mind to work properly, 'They burned it all. They burned it all.' Was the only thing in his head. His eyes stung.

Their mother had told them to run and hide till the night was over. "Don't come out till it's all over!"

That was the last thing they'd heard from her. And they'd done just that.

'Why? Why didn't we stay and help? Why did we run like cowards?'

Fleece and Gossamer hadn't moved a muscle the whole night under their bush, hardly even blinking as they stared at the distant blazing firelighting up the night. They couldn't. They didn't know what to do, only that their mother had told them to stay and hide here until tomorrow.

Well now tomorrow was here in all its awful glory. The bright sun overhead a mockery to the ruin that lay below. The village that he'd grown up knowing was gone. All of it. Not even the old maypole which no one had used in living memory was left standing.

'The Border Guard didn't come. They could've seen the fire all the way in the mountains, yet they didn't come to help. They still haven't come. They're not coming are they? Not even to help the survivors...'

A broken sound, half way between a laugh and a sob escaped him,

"What survivors?" He asked hollowly to the remains of the inn lying before him.

It had been called the Seven Horseshoes, and Mr. Barley the mule had run it. Now it was nothing but still glowing embers. He wondered sickly if Mr. Barley was somewhere under all that, now nothing but a burnt crisp as well.

'Burnt up just like all those others-No! Don't think about them. Forget the blistered flesh of Miss Half trapped under-NoNo! Stop it! Leave me alone!' He was whimpering now, and shivering.

Why was he shivering? It wasn't cold. It wasn't cold at all. The heat from the burnt village still radiated around him, along with the horrible, cloying stench of burnt flesh.

"Mother!" Fleece's shriek cut through his shock. Its pitch sent horrible chills through Gossamer's blood. The despairing shriek was different from his previous calls for their mother. It could only mean-

"No." He whimpered, "NonoNo No no NoNo!"

He sobbed as he stumbled as fast as his shaking legs would carry him towards Fleece, his brother half obscured by drifting smoke and piles of debris.

Gossamer rounded the pile just as the smoke shifted, revealing Fleece kneeling in the dirt by the still form of an adult sheep, his forelegs wrapped round their neck as he cried into her cream wool-

"...no..."

His brother sobbed into their mother's ash speckled wool, hugging her neck tightly.

'No.'

Her body was strangely untouched by the fire that had ravaged the village, in fact it almost looked like she could have been asleep. 'No, this isn't allowed to happen.'

Gossamer couldn't move. He could only stand there shivering wide-eyed at the still body that lay before them. "How could this happen?" He asked numbly.

His mouth answered his own question without any input from his brain, "S-smoke inhalation. M-Mother always said smoke w-was the real killer. J-just a f-few breaths... Just a f-few breaths, a-and, and-"

His legs gave out. The hot dirt caught him.

He couldn't breathe, heart pounding as he started gasping. 'Is this what happened to mother? Did she try to breathe and nothing came? Was it painful-?' He turned his head and retched, everything compounding and bearing down on him, blackness trying to squash him like a fly.

"I don't want to be here any more." He said in a small voice, "I don't want to be alive."

"No!" Fleece roared, shaking his hoof at the blue sky, "This is all your fault! I hate you!" He screamed at the top of his lungs.

Gossamer stared at his brother, the rage twisted his features into something unrecognizable. Gossamer jerked back as Fleece whirled to face him, "You!" He yelled and lunged.

Gossamer sucked in a breath to, to, to, he didn't know but-

Fleece wrapped Gossamer in a desperate hug, his brother's much larger frame enveloping his own.

"Don't you ever say that, don't you dare leave me too!" Fleece growled into Gossamer's wool, "Don't you dare! If you do, I'll, I'll kill you." Fleece's voice had become a choked sob by that point.

Gossamer couldn't get enough air in his lungs, his chest hurt as he clung to Fleece, "F-Fleece, mom is.... What do we do?"

He didn't want to have to think, he just wanted someone else to tell him that none of this was real, that it was all going to be okay. He felt so small. He just wanted his mother back.

Fleece didn't ever get to answer. It was at that moment that a masked figure stepped through the smoke, head flicking this way and that as they looked around. Another figure followed, and another. The first one noticed the two sheep brothers hugging each other and paused mid-step, eagle talon in the air.

"Well if it isn't the kid." The griffin drawled.

Even through his tears, Gossamer recognised that voice. It was the same griffin from the market square, the one who had said something horrible to mother. He hadn't realised till he'd heard the voice, the snarling masks and speckled cloaks worn by the griffin and his three companions had thrown him off. 'The... Resistance...' He figured out far too slowly as his mind eventually caught up.

Gossamer whimpered as he saw other masked figures moving about, half-seen through the smoke and ruins. Fleece was glaring at the griffin, teeth gritted into a feral snarl which the griffin paid absolutely no mind as he strolled up.

"Well, I'll be honest here, didn't expect to ever see you again kid, 'specially not after this." He said with a broad wave of a wing, taking in the smouldering devastation around them.

Gossamer began shaking even worse as the griffin strolled unhurriedly over.

'Why are they here? Why now? Why didn't they come last night during the fire? They could have helped. Were they afraid of a trap? But, if so, why now? Unless...' Unless they were the cause of the fire in the first place.

Fleece muttered something strained, too low to catch. "What was that?" The griffin asked, pushing up his mask and leaning in closer.

Fleece's hoof caught him right in the beak, snapping the bird lion's head to the side; "I hate you! This is all your fault. Yours! They're all dead because of you." Fleece screamed into the griffin's face. Gossamer's world contracted and he almost fainted, 'That's it, it's over. We're about to be murdered too.'

Fleece went for a second swipe, but the griffin caught it with ease. Fleece struggled to free himself, but it was hopeless against the strength of the griffin, "Kid, you're upset. I get that. I understand you, and I know what you're going through-"

"You know nothing! Let me go!" Fleece shouted. The griffin tightened his grip instead.

"I know believe me. No one should have to go through losing their mother-"

Fleece let out a keening sound, "Don't speak about our mother, don't you dare! Its all your fault"

The griffin yanked Fleece onto the tips of his hooves and then drove a fist almost casually into his gut.

"F-Fleece!" Gossamer squeaked t as his brother coughed for air. The griffin barely spared Gossamer a glance as he turned Fleece's head to face his own with his free claw, the other dangling the brown sheep by his fore leg.

"It's not my fault, and it's not yours either. It's hers. Understand?" The griffin asked Fleece.

"W-what?" Fleece coughed.

The griffin lowered Fleece back down, "Celestia's. It's all her fault. After all, who was it that left you helpless? Whose job was it to protect you? Who let you down? Who let this happen?"

Fleece stared at him, "But-"

"-But nothing. You know whose fault this is. You know who you're *really* angry at." The griffin cooed, lowering his feathered head to Fleeces level, "Hold onto that anger. Keep it fresh and strong, let it give you strength. Never forget this feeling of being helpless. Rage against it, and never let it happen again."

He stared deep into Fleece's eyes, forcing the sheep to hold his yellow gaze, "Now, who is it that you're angry at really?" The griffin challenged softly.

"*Celestia*...." Fleece mumbled in shock. His voice gained strength, "Celestia. This is her fault." He said, voice full of realisation.

"This is all her fault."

The griffin smiled grimly down at Fleece, all signs of caring about the recently orphaned sheep gone, "In that case it's settled. Welcome to the resistance kid. That is, if you want to get your revenge, yes?"

Fleece didn't even hesitate, "I want revenge." He replied, eyes fixed on the griffin filled with something like desperate hunger.

Gossamer grabbed Fleece from behind and whispered frantically into his brother's ear, "Fleece, Fleece listen to me! We mustn't go with them, they're the ones that burned the village-"

Fleece shook his brother off, "No! It's Celestias fault, her and all her ponies. If it wasn't for them... f-for them..."

Fleece's voice cracked. He swallowed thickly, "If it wasn't for them, none of this would have happened. We have to go with the resistance. It's the only way."

Gossamer stared at his brother, almost blind with panic at his brother's sudden fit of madness, "No! Fleece, you're not thinking. Listen to me-"

"No you listen! We have to! I don't care if you're scared Goss, I have to do this. It's my duty to mother. This is what father would have wanted!"

Gossamer's throat worked, but nothing came out. He wanted to say: 'The only thing father wanted was that young ewe down the hill' but he couldn't. He couldn't take his father from Fleece right after they'd just lost their mother.

'Mother'. The realisation was like a hooked knife in his gut, 'I'll never see her again.'

"Enough talk. We need to leave before anyone comes to investigate. Come if you want to live. Or stay and die." The griffin broke in. He put a claw on Fleece's shoulder, "Come along kid. You know this is

the right choice. Tell you what, because I like your spirit, I'll even take you under my wing and train you up." He offered.

Fleece nodded eagerly, then froze and looked at Gossamer, "What about my brother?"

The griffin glanced over at the much smaller sheep, still no bigger than a lamb. Gossamer saw nothing but disdain in those bright yellow eyes. "Humph, well, a recruit's a recruit, even if they're only good for latrine duty. I guess I could stand to put you both in the same camp. But not the same unit, there's a limit to my generosity. Take it or leave it."

With that the griffin turned, slipping the snarling manticore mask back over his beak. Once firmly on, he tilted his head back and let out a piercing shriek that cut the air, "Regroup and return to camp, there's nothing of value left. We're done here." The griffin called.

Straight away all the other masked figures who had been scavenging through the debris left what they were doing and started trickling after the Griffin in frightening silence. Gossamer counted over twelve of them, he hadn't even seen where they all came from. But right now he couldn't care less.

"Fleece-" He began, but that's as far as he got.

"Goss, we have to go with them. Don't you see? It's the only way to right this wrong." Fleece said.

"B-but they're the ones who burned-"

"Don't lie to me! Now come on, or we'll be left behind." His brother cut across.

Gossamer looked into his brother's face, and saw the same things crushing his own heart reflected there. Fear, anger, hate, doubt, and desperation. But the difference was, Fleece had found the reason for his suffering. He was so desperate for someone to blame that he'd fixed his anger on the first target presented to him.

'He doesn't want to see the truth. He isn't able to.' Gossamer thought miserably.

"Come on, Goss." Fleece said, starting after the masked figures.

"Goss? Goss are you coming?" He asked when Gossamer made no move to follow. "Goss? Come on!"

Gossamer looked at his hooves, stained with ash, 'How can this be happening? They killed the whole village, they killed our mother! And he wants to join them? Am I the only sane being left in this mad world? I-no we-can't go with them. I refuse!' He thought.

"Goss, please! Please don't leave me!" Fleece begged in desperation.

In the end, that was what did it. Even as the logical part of his mind in the background kept churning out a list of all the reasons he should turn and run, it was this simple thing which made Gossamer cave in.

When it came down to it, standing there under the blazing sun and surrounded by the wreckage of his life, he realised there was only one thing left for him in the whole world.

Fleece was his brother. He couldn't leave his brother. It didn't matter what happened, or who they had to go with, Gossamer could not leave his brother. Even if it was suicide.

Gossamer squeezed his eyes shut, tears dripping from the corners. With lowered head and drooping ears, he stumbled after Fleece.

---**The Present**---

His eyes shot open and he gasped. Above him in the firelight, Sunshine stood, hoof raised to prod him again. "What was that all about?" The unicorn asked, a slight frown furrowing his brow.

"Nothing that concerns you." He replied, struggling to keep the venom from his tone. That set of memories were not ones he regularly chose to relive. Even being able to mute the intensity of a memory couldn't remove the sting when it was so personal. It was worse though when the memories crept into his dreams. It sometimes happened when he too tired and slept too deeply to wake.

"That's not the answer to the question I asked." Sunshine told the lamb sternly.

He scowled, this time making no effort to hide his discontentment, "It was nothing but a nightmare. Now if you're quite finished, I was trying to sleep."

He said rolled over so he didn't have to look at the Solar Guard, and waited for Sunshine to leave.

It took longer than he would have liked, but finally the unicorn sighed and walked away with a soft clop of hooves. Once he was sure the Guard was far enough away, he cracked open his eyes and surveyed the camp in the low firelight. The Solar Guards were sleeping in a defensive ring, not even having removed their armour so as to be ready for anything. The two sentries were still wide awake and alert, Sunshine being one of them, and were scanning the darkness for any danger.

Silently, he tested the chain, pulling it up link by link until it went taut.

Looking down its length, he saw the other end locked to Captain Valour's chest plate. 'So much for that idea.'

He rested his head back down and closed his eyes. It seemed he was headed for Vanhoover no matter what.

'They want me to solve some crime involving mind magic for them, but afterwards they plan to throw me back in Dreverton. This is going to be the only chance I ever get at either escape or earning my freedom. I best be ready.' With that in mind, he spent the rest of the night forming plots and schemes in his head until morning came.

With the rise of their mistress's sun, so too did the Solar Guard. At first light, they were up and hitching the pegasi to the sky chariots, not even stopping to break their fast.

'Must mean we're close then.' Prisoner 452 thought. Although

looking around, he still couldn't see anything but barren, rocky land.

A yank on the chain brought him back to the present, "Get in the chariot 452." Valour growled.

With a beaming smile that somehow still managed to perfectly convey his utter contempt for the captain, he complied and climbed into the nearest sky chariot.

Within two minutes they were airborne, and then there was nothing to do but wait and listen to the beat of wings in the windy silence.

452 decided he wasn't going to miss anything important, so he closed his eyes, and let himself drift back down into meditation.

---**The past**---

"Prey."

Gossamer flinched and tried not to cower.

"From now on, your name is Prey. You're weak, slow, small and useless. You'll never make a soldier. So, you're *Prey*." The griffin spat, and moved on to the next recruit in the line.

It wasn't the same griffin, this one had black feathers and a mask studded with iron nails instead of a snarling manticore. The griffin had told them her name was Torment, and that she would show them the meaning of her name if they ever stepped out of line.

"Hmm," Torment hummed as she considered the tall grey donkey which stood in line next to Gossamer, "Well built, decent coat, strong legs, generally okay. Hmm, from now on your resistance name is Lance, because that's the weapon we're going to give you."

The newly named Lance gave a slightly mad grin at his new name, a nasty glint in his eye, "Lance, I like it." The donkey said. Torment ignored him, and moved on to the next in the line.

Gossamer looked at 'Lance' out of the corner of his eye and tried to stiffen his trembling legs. He couldn't believe any of this was

happening, that he was right now standing in the middle of a resistance camp, hidden deep within the forest, and even worse, they thought he was now one of them.

'But I joined of my own free will, didn't I?' He asked himself miserably. 'Too late to back out now. As Torment was very clear on what she would do to any deserters she got her claws on.'

Gossamer was currently standing in line with five other individuals who had either volunteered or been forced to join the Resistance. They were right in the middle of the camp, and around them the rest of the camp got on with its day. All the rough shelters were well hidden amidst the tall trees and vines, the dense undergrowth helping to break up any outlines from the view of any air or ground units that might be on patrol in the area.

Gossamer wasn't even sure where 'here' was exactly. The resistance fighters hadn't travelled any sort of path once they'd left the village, instead they'd seemed to rely solely on a map in their heads that only they knew. They had moved swiftly all day, not stopping to rest once, and Gossamer had almost been left behind.

He was weak with exhaustion by the time they'd finally stopped in the evening, and he'd immediately collapsed onto the ground. It wasn't till masked figures started emerging from all around that Gossamer realised they were in the middle of the camp.

That had been four days ago. On the first day, a zebra wearing a snarling bear mask had kicked him and Fleece awake and told them to get up. Blearily they'd done so, and before Gossamer could ask what was happening or even had a chance to speak to Fleece, they were split up.

Fleece had been taken away by the griffin, whose Resistance name was Razor, and Gossamer was given a bucket and told to fill up the water barrel.

When he'd timidly whispered that he didn't know where the water barrel or the river were, the zebra had grabbed him by one soft ear and dragged him through the undergrowth to a hidden stream, and then back to camp where he was shown the large water barrel

hidden under a cloth drape. It looked almost identical to a bush.

Then the Zebra had swatted him roughly on the back of his head and left with a parting threat; "Those who don't work don't eat." Gossamer had picked himself off the dirt and miserably gotten to work.

It took all morning. The bucket was heavy and it didn't even have a handle. The route to and from the stream was heavily overgrown, and twice he dropped the bucket and had to start again. There were thorn patches along the way, and what with still being little more than a lamb, Gossamer struggled.

Every time he stood straining on the tips of his hooves just so he could reach the edge of the water barrel, struggling to lift the ungainly bucket high enough, his limbs would tremble and he'd almost fall over as all the blood rushed to his head, but he kept going.

When he'd finally poured the last bucket into the water barrel, he'd collapsed and sat there in the dirt and fallen leaves, panting. Out of nowhere a dark blue earth pony wearing a fanged mask had appeared and started yelling at him for slacking off.

When Gossamer had tried to protest, the earth pony had practically squealed with delight, "We've got a recruit disobeying orders here!" The stallion shouted to the camp. Faces had started to appear from the shelters, and the five or so individuals who had been practising with wooden swords and spears stopped to watch.

The knowing looks on their faces and the leers made Gossamer realise that he'd made a big mistake.

"You all know the punishment for disobeying orders, but for those slackers in need of a reminder..." The blue pony pulled a long black whip from under his cloak, a sadistic smile creasing his face as he pushed the mask up so he could glare at Gossamer properly:

"I'm happy to provide!"

Gossamer turned to run, even though he knew he had nowhere to

go. There was a vicious hiss and then a blinding crack of pain. Gossamer hit the soft dirt with a shrill scream as his legs turned to sponge. His back felt like it had been set on fire it burned so bad. He could hardly breathe.

"Let this be a lesson to you, lamb. Never question orders." The blue earth pony said from somewhere behind him, but Gossamer hardly heard the words.

Whimpering, he curled himself into a ball as everyone returned to what they had been doing after the brief show.

Gossamer had later learnt the blue stallion was called Stinger, a rather appropriate name in his bitter opinion, and that Stinger was one of the three captains in charge of this camp. The other two being the griffin Razor, and the zebra with the snake mask, Snake.

Gossamer had lain in the dirt shivering for over an hour until he was able to finally rise again. No one came to help him, they just stepped around him and continued on with their jobs with annoyed looks. Gossamer silently cried to himself, not even noticing the mocking jeers he got from those who saw. It wasn't just the slashing pain, it was everything.

The Border Guard, the Resistance, Fleece's anger, their hard life, the unfairness of it, the war, being alone, his own wretchedness and most of all, his mother's death.

He mourned for all of it.

It didn't help, no matter how much he cried, he knew it would never get better.

When he had finally gotten enough strength back to stand, he'd hobbled off to the stream and very gingerly washed the long stripe of blood from his back. He'd whimpered and berated himself for his own weakness even as he flinched and cringed, but he just couldn't help it, the whip cut hurt too much.

He stared at his reflection in the dark water, the red swollen eyes,

fresh tear tracks streaking the soot and dirt, along with the big drooping ears. He looked hopeless. He felt hopeless.

He sat there for a very long time. He might have sat there much longer, if the same zebra with the bear mask from earlier hadn't found him and ordered him to; "Get off his flank and help dig the new latrines", Or else he'd go get Stinger to; "Have another go at that soft wool of yours. Lamb or not, you work or you suffer."

Head hanging so low his ears almost dragged in the dirt, Gossamer had pushed himself to his hooves with willpower alone and shuffled off to do as he'd been ordered.

That had been four days ago, and Gossamer had already learnt many things about how the Resistance was run on a day-to-day basis. Not because anyone had taken the time to explain or teach him, that wasn't how things worked around here, but rather he'd learnt because he had to. Failure to comply with an order or performing it too slowly meant punishment.

The camp held about fifty members of the Resistance here alone, but he'd caught enough passing conversation to know of the existence of at least three other camps, possibly four. He couldn't be certain though, as it wasn't like anyone ever told him anything.

Gossamer was the lowest of the low in the camp. If anyone wanted something done, they could order him to do it. The camp was broken up into an unofficial hierarchy, the rankings determined either by strength, experience, or cruelty. Everyone seemed to instinctively know where they stood in the pecking order.

That said, fights, threats and bullying were very common and perfectly acceptable, so Gossamer had to try hard to keep out of sight and out of mind. He was miserable, sore, tired and hungry all the time. He'd thought back on the farm that they'd been hard pressed for food, but that wasn't anything like out here in the forest.

Any food brought in from raids didn't last long among fifty-odd hungry mouths, and while there was food to be had amongst the

trees, only the zebras were any good at either finding or correctly identifying it. Giving into temptation and eating a harmless looking fruit was a quick way to an early grave in the mud, but not before you'd vomited your guts out.

Gossamer wasn't making that up either, on the second day he'd seen just that. He'd only caught a glimpse of the donkey heaving up blood and chunks before he'd run away from the grisly scene, but it had been enough to convince Gossamer to never eat anything he didn't see someone else eat first.

No one ever spoke to him except to either give him an order or to yell at him, usually both, and for the most part, the Resistance seemed happy to ignore his existence, aside from the two aforementioned cases.

Standing in line after just receiving his Resistance name had been one of those exceptions. The other five in line were fresh recruits who had been brought in by Stinger earlier that day, and Torment had lined them all up to give them their new names. Apparently, she'd also recalled he hadn't been renamed yet, and decided that she may as well get it over and done with.

Although with the mockery of the name 'Prey', it wasn't any better than remaining nameless.

"Prey!" Torment suddenly barked, making him flinch, "Yes ma'am?" He answered in a shaky voice.

Torment sneered down at him, "Stop shivering you worthless piece of cloud fluff, I'm not going to skin you alive. Yet." She added with a horrible grin as everyone else in line smirked.

Gossamer gave it his best effort, but still couldn't quite manage to eliminate all the trembling, "What do y-you want m-me to do?"

Torment's cruel grin affixed to her beak only widened, "I thought a demonstration was in order, one that I'd like you to help me out with. Think you can manage that, Prey?"

Gossamer swallowed and bobbed his head up and down, mouth having gone too dry to speak.

"Excellent! Step forwards." Torment ordered. When Gossamer did so, Torment turned around to face the other five new recruits.

"Right, I'll make this brief. You're in the Resistance now, and we are fighters. It's that simple. Understand?" Torment paused until all of the new recruits in front of her had nodded their agreement.

"And how do we fight?" She asked them. A lone zebra raised a hoof, "With weapons? Poisoned ones perhaps?" He suggested.

"I asked *how*, not with *what*," Torment snapped, "We fight by *winning*. And the best way to win a fight is to pick them with care, and to attack where the Border Guard least expect it. Ambushes, trip wires, poisoned water sources, night raids, that is how we fight and that is why we are going to win this war. One of the best ways to do this is by using surprise and attacking from behind."

All the recruits in front of the griffin nodded at her logic. Torment's grin stretched to all new levels of cruel, "Here, let me demonstrate."

The griffin whirled, and before Gossamer could even scream, he was bodily grabbed by the throat and lifted choking into the air. Her talons dug into his neck under his wool, not deep enough to draw blood but already he was gasping for air, weak forehooves trying to pry Torment's iron grip free.

"For example," Torment addressed the recruits, some of who were grinning openly at Gossamer's plight, "The throat is one of the biggest weak spots, and everyone, pony or otherwise, has one. It's soft, it's weak, it's easy to stab, slit or crush. Or simply choke, like right now."

Gossamer's attempts to free himself were growing ever more frantic as his vision started to grow fuzzy.

"See this point here?" Torment continued, not paying the struggling lamb any attention, "This is the jugular vein, and this here's an artery."

A sharp claw poked the places on Gossamer's throat as they were named, this time actually pressing hard enough to draw pinpricks of blood. Gossamer struggled all the harder, a buzzing was building in his ears and the edges of his vision were starting to fade to black.

Abruptly Gossamer was dumped onto the ground, and immediately he began gasping for air, sucking in heaving lungfuls as Torment continued as if nothing had happened:

"Cutting a throat isn't as easy as it sounds, you actually have to go quite deep to get it right, and unfortunately..." She shot the huddled form of Gossamer nursing his throat a filthy leer, "...Despite Prey's worthlessness, I'm still not allowed to use him as a test dummy."

This got a few nervous chuckles from the recruits, aside from the one from Lance. That laugh sounded wholehearted in its amusement.

Gossamer shivered at the words and tried to crawl away unnoticed through the dirt, but a heavy claw came down on his back leg, making him cry out shrilly.

"Right, moving onto hamstringing an opponent." Torment said, dragging him back. Gossamer went limp and hoped it would just all be over soon.

It wasn't. Torment had gone into great detail using Gossamer as a display dummy, twisting his legs this way and that in their sockets, pulling his head back, digging talons into joints. Everything hurt, and all that movement had also re-opened the long, thick scab across his back from Stinger's whip.

He felt completely miserable as he sat under a tree and ate the midday meal. He was off to the side out of everybody's way, hopefully that would be enough to get them all to ignore him. Painfully Gossamer lifted his fore leg and brought up the shrivelled Dapple Fruit for another bite.

'What do I do?' He asked himself. He knew if things continued on

the way they were, he would soon either be crippled or dead.

Gossamer was just wondering if death wasn't the preferable option when he heard a voice that made him forget all about his problems and pain.

Bolting upright, Gossamer yelled out, "Fleece!"

And there his brother was, amongst a group of four others who were just returning to camp. Gossamer hadn't seen his brother since they'd been separated that first morning, and he'd been having terrible nightmares of what might have happened to Fleece in that time.

Fleece stopped talking to the deer next to him and looked around. When he spotted Gossamer he quickly said a last few words to the young buck before trotting over to Gossamer, a large grin plastered over his muzzle.

Gossamer almost threw himself at Fleece, but at the last second all his pains reasserted themselves and he had to settle for raising a hoof instead in hello. But the grin on his face as he looked up at his older brother and sole reason for living was anything but second best. And if the grin was desperate around the edges, so what?

"Fleece-" Gossamer started happily.

"-Breaker. It's Breaker now." Fleece cut in.

Gossamer paused, "Breaker?" He asked in confusion.

"Yeah, that's my new name. My Resistance name. Breaker. And what's yours, little brother?" He asked with a tired smile.

Gossamer hesitated for a second, "They called me Prey. But that doesn't mean my real name's not still Goss-"

"No. Your name is now Prey and mine is Breaker. We're now part of the resistance, so there's no use for old names." Fleece told him firmly.

Gossamer blinked, then shrugged. Fleece was still his brother, even

if he was called by a different name.

"Flee- I mean Breaker, are you okay? Where did they take you? I've been so worried." Gossamer asked in a low voice, glancing around to check if anyone was listening in, which they weren't.

"Come Prey, let's sit down first, I'm quite tired." Fleece said, moving over to a tree and taking a seat under it. Gossamer looked Fleece over as he sat down next to him. His brother did indeed look tired and dirty, much like himself. His hooves were chipped and cracked, and...

"What happened to your horn?" Gossamer gasped in surprise.

"Oh this?" Fleece casually asked, reaching up to touch his right horn which was cracked and missing its tip, "Razor did it. He hit me at full swing with a spear shaft."

"What?" Gossamer squeaked.

"Yeah, he was training me. Said I had to know how to take a hit. On the other hoof, I broke the spear shaft. That's how Razor decided I should be called Breaker." Fleece explained, leaning back and putting a foreleg around Gossamer's thin shoulders.

"B-but, how could he do that? Fle- Breaker, we can't stay here, just look at you. It's only so long before we get killed!" Gossamer hissed in a low whisper, ears swivelling this way and that for eves-droppers.

Fleece frowned in annoyance at Gossamer, "I already told you, we're not leaving. You need to stop talking about that, no one's interested, Prey."

Gossamer flinched as his brother said his Resistance name, "But, Razor-" He began.

"Razor's a great guy, he's been in the Resistance since they began, can you believe that? Imagine what he's seen, imagine what I can learn from someone like that? And he's promised to teach me, so long as I can keep up. And with his help, I will get my revenge." Fleece said.

Gossamer was taken aback by the gleam of awe in his brother's eyes as he spoke about the griffin.

"By beating you with a spear? What's that going to achieve? Can't you see, Fleece? He's just using you-" Gossamer said, trying to break through to his brother.

Fleece shoved Gossamer angrily away, "Stoppit! I will not let you say anything against him. He's harsh yes, but it's all for my own good. Besides, I deserved the two times I got whipped, it taught me to do better next time." Fleece said with a careless shrug.

"Whipped? Why did-?"

"That's in the past now Prey, you need to move on. That's the way things work around here, and you're just going to have to get used to it. There's only one law out here; those who are weak, suffer. So I'm not going to be weak, Razor is going to make me strong, you'll see." Fleece said, with an all too familiar mad glint in his eye.

Gossamer stared up at his brother and felt what was left of his world crumble. 'How has everything gone wrong so completely?' He thought. Gossamer saw now that his brother really had gone mad. All those months of fear, uncertainty and helplessness had finally taken their toll. Their mother's death had been the last straw that had broken the camel's back.

The Fleece in front of him was no longer the brother he knew. He just hadn't seen it until now.

"Fleece-" He tried one last time in a bid to appeal to his brother, but he didn't get any further as the hoof around his shoulders roughly pushed him off the tree root to sprawl in the dirt. He stared up in shock at his brother who was scowling furiously down at him.

"I told you to stop calling me that, Prey. You don't get it do you? Fleece doesn't exist any more, there's only me. I don't want to see you again till you are prepared to face reality." Fleece spat, no, not Fleece, *Breaker*.

Gossamer could only stare as his brother walked away. The whip

mark on his back stung viciously from where he'd hit the ground, but it was nothing compared to how badly his heart hurt. Gossamer didn't even notice that he was crying, sobbing actually. Silent, hopeless, wracking sobs that shook his small body as he watched his brother leave him.

'I don't want to be here anymore.' He thought. 'I don't want to have to experience this.'

He pressed a hoof into his chest, trying to make the pain stop, 'I don't want to be living in this anymore. I don't want to be Gossamer.'

---Present---

Prey stood up only once the sky chariot had landed and completely stopped moving, and stumbled out with a rattle of chains. Both of the chariots were parked in a deserted grass training yard in what looked like the Guard station of Vanhoover.

Prey was a bit stunned as he craned his neck back to stare at the tall buildings of the city all around in the mid-morning light. Prey had stolen memories of what cities were like, but those were over fifty-seven years old. He had never actually been in a city himself before, and was honestly shocked by just how much larger than life everything was.

Prey was snapped from his silent awe as the sun was blocked out by Captain Valour, although by the way his golden armour glittered, the captain might just have replaced it instead.

"Right, get inmate 452 into the building and secure in the Office room. Gold Bit, has the office been prepared to my specifications?" Captain Valour barked to one of the unicorns.

"Yes sir. The windows and doors are barred and reinforced, with all the barriers and enchantments you requested in place. Only those with a key are getting in or out." Gold Bit answered with a salute.

"Well done. Get the prisoner inside before anypony sees. Remember, two guards in the room at all times. Right, let's move!"

Prey found himself being led, (or almost dragged, if you were as small as he was and also hindered by chains) in through the Guard station's rather plain lobby and down a deserted corridor.

'Strange. There are definitely other regular Guard ponies on duty, I saw their lockers in use behind the front desk, but I don't see or hear any of them.' He thought.

That led to one conclusion, that Captain Valour wanted as few ponies as possible to know of his presence here, and had purposefully ordered no one to be around this part of the building. 'Typical unicorn, doesn't want to be seen dirtying his hooves but is perfectly happy to take all the credit at the end.' Prey thought with scorn.

Gold Bit walked up to a door and placed his hoof against it, closing his eyes to concentrate. There was a shimmer of blue that rippled over the door like the surface of a pond, and then it opened. Obviously those magical barriers they'd been talking about.

'It also seems that mentioned key to them isn't a physical one.' He noted with disappointment, as one of the pegasus guards pushed him inside after Gold Bit.

Prey found himself in a large office with a large wooden desk in the middle of it piled high with papers and files. He glanced at the right hoof wall which was covered with a floor to ceiling map of Vanhoover, and then across at the other wall which was backed up with filing cabinets. Behind the desk was a closed door, and could only speculate as to what lay behind that.

There was also a large window, which would have been a point of great interest to Prey, if it wasn't covered in enough bars to stop even a rabbit slipping through, and the view beyond the panes showed nothing but the grey wall of another guard building anyway.

Prey couldn't see any visible sign of the other enchantments which Gold Bit had spoken of, but he knew they were there. Without any way to determine which enchantments they were either, he couldn't even begin to start formulating a plan of escape.

'Just wonderful. *Competent* Guards.'

There was a bang behind him as Captain Valour forcefully shut the door, and Prey saw that along with Valour, Gold Bit, Sunshine and Bright, two other pegasus Solar Guards had followed them in. Prey felt a flash of nerves as Captain Valour stepped up and towered over him. He pushed the feeling down, determined not to let it show.

'I've experienced much worse than what ever they have planned. They're nothing compared to the Resistance.' Prey told himself, meeting Valour's glare with one of his own.

"Right, let's get this investigation started." Valour said.

Prey stared at the huge pile of papers that had been roughly dumped on the desk in front of him.

'What?'

He was currently sitting behind the desk, with the chain from his back legs trailing over the desk and locking into a steel bracket in the floor, the cement around the ends of the bracket still looking wet. Prey looked up at Captain Valour who stood on the other side of the desk with a raised eyebrow.

"What do you expect me to do with this?" He asked in confusion.

"To get to work." Valour answered bluntly.

"Doing what exactly?"

Valour snorted and narrowed his eyes, growling, "Don't play dumb. I told you why I brought you here, so stop stalling and start work on solving this crime 452."

Prey awkwardly shuffled the top page off the pile with his shackled front hooves onto an uncluttered bit of he desk, so he could get a better look at it. He bent over it while at the same time both trying to keep an eye on the captain, and not fall out off the precarious stack of cushions they'd piled on the chair so he'd be high enough to

even look over the edge of the desk. He read the first line:

'*Incident report 322B - Sargent Door Lock 1154 - Reason: Unspecified report of Breaking and Entering - Location: West Nook Street - Time: 08:54 - Date-*'

Prey broke off and looked up at Captain Valour incredulously, "An incident report?"

He looked over the desk piled high with papers, scrolls and files, "Wait, is that what all this is? Reports? *Paperwork*?"

Behind him where the Solar Guards stood at attention against the office wall, he heard Sunshine stifle a chuckle, turning it into an awkward cough.

Captain Valour's expression didn't change in the slightest, "Yes. Everything you need is in front of you. All the reports, maps, times and dates. Your job is to find this criminal and then we'll bring him in."

Prey gestured at the desk piled high with papers, "I thought you wanted me to help you with some mind magic victims or something that you'd found, not organise, run and solve the whole mess for you. I'm not a Guard, I don't even know what half of this stuff is! I thought you were the Solar Guard for goodness sake, yet you want me to head up this whole investigation for you?"

Valour pawed the floor boards, "Inmate 452, do not try my patience. I've offered you this chance to serve your Country and Princess to help atoned for your sins even if only in the smallest part. You're here because of your experience in mind and memory crimes." Here Captain Valour's face was twisted in disgust.

"But if you think that fact or just because you're still a lamb means I'm going to cut you any slack, you'd best think again and soon. Mind leeches are never young or innocent, so stop stalling and Get To WORK!" Valour roared.

Prey just stared at the Captain open mouthed, the analytical part of his mind shocked into inaction.

'What-? I don't even- Is he insane? Nothing he says is logical in any way what so ever. Did he really just pull a random criminal from the highest security prison in Equestria on the sole basis that some incomplete report mentioned something about mind magic?'

That wasn't even the end of it. The captain further expected this criminal to somehow solve a crime with the sole motivation being serving the Princess and Country which imprisoned him in the first place.

'Despite the excellent opportunities this gives me, I surely can't be the only one who sees the insanity of this.' Prey thought in shock.

He looked at the other Guards in the room, trying to see anything that hinted at a hidden agenda or concern for their captain's mental condition. All of them wore matching expressions of professional confidence. Evidently they saw nothing at all out of the ordinary with this course of action.

'Apparently, madness is catching.' Prey thought. He stifled a giggle, 'Ha! I'd know that better than anyone.'

"Alright," He said out loud, "But I'm going to need some things. Nothing big or illegal." He hastened to add when it looked like Captain Valour was just moments say from ripping the table right out of the floor and using it to beat him to death.

"Name them, and make it quick. The more time we waste, the longer this criminal has to escape." Valour growled through clenched teeth.

Prey took a deep breath. It was time to find out just how much that report the Captain had read on him had actually said.

"I need someone who can give me a run down of what exactly is going on, preferably someone who knows about this crime and all the evidence. I need free access to any maps or sensitive evidence I might request, and..." He hesitated despite himself, then pressed ahead, "...and I need my hooves free."

The captain didn't even blink, "Yes, yes, and no. Now if that is all-"

"Oh come on! How do you expect me to read and write wearing these?" Prey asked holding up his manacled hooves, trying to play innocent.

"I said no. Criminals wear chains as a punishment and a reminder of their shame. Let this be a lesson to you." The captain said angrily, turning to leave.

"Captain, I think maybe you should reconsider." Sunshine said unexpectedly.

Captain Valour frowned at Sunshine, but without the anger that he had displayed when Prey had spoken, "Sunshine, I assume you have a reason for speaking up?"

"Yes sir. I think that there is very little harm that could be done by freeing the prisoner's hooves. With all the magical suppression enchantments and us here on guard 24/7, there's no chance of escape. For the good of this investigation, I think you should at least consider it sir." Sunshine stated, then added with a light shrug, "What's she realistically going to do sir?"

Prey was confused, 'She? *Really*?'

He didn't get to think any further on that misconception as Valour abruptly nodded, "I concede the point, Sunshine. Practicality over punishment in this case, we can free inmate 452's hooves."

Prey noticed that the captain didn't even go as far as to grace him with an incorrect gender like Sunshine had done, just referred to him as if he were an 'it'.

Valour nodded at Golden Bit and Sunshine, "See to it, but keep the manacles to hoof, after that you're on first Guard rotation. In addition, I want you two-"

He pointed an armoured hoof at the two Pegasi, "-Outside the door. Make sure nopony tries to wander in. If anypony asks, there is a sensitive investigation of national importance going on in here that cannot be disturbed. Twelve hour shifts for all. Anything suspicious, act on it immediately. I have to go and deal with the City Guard

now, only report in if there's any new developments. I will be back tomorrow at o'eight hundred. Understood?"

"Yes sir!" Came the combined response as all of five of the guards saluted.

"Good. Bright, with me." Valour said and marched out the door, closely followed by the unicorn Bright, another shimmer of blue magic rippled over the door and across the walls as it shut.

Prey blinked at that, he didn't recognize the magic the second time around either.

'Just wonderful. An enchantment I've never heard of keeping me trapped here.' Prey thought glumly.

He glanced at Gold Bit and Sunshine, 'And them.' He raised his front hooves with a clink of chains, 'And these, but not for much longer.'

"Well, who's going to let me out of these?" He asked with a bright smile.

Sunshine glanced at Gold Bit, "You're better at lock magic." Gold Bit nodded and stepped forwards, grasping Prey's forelegs in his magic and turning them this way and that as he looked the suppression shackles over, ignoring the way Prey stiffened up.

"Hmm, these aren't standard nullification and binding crystal locks. I wonder why that is." Gold Bit mused.

He looked up and gave Prey a hard stare, "Care to explain?"

Prey faked surprise, though in reality he could hardly believe his luck that Gold Bit hadn't recognised the sealing enchantments for what they actually were, "I don't know. They just put them on me the moment I was thrown in Dreverton. I assumed that it was just a standard procedure for all inmates."

Gold Bit narrowed his glare, not taking his eyes off of Prey as he instructed his partner, "I'm not buying it. Sunshine, stand ready. When I crack these open, I want you charged and to stun him if he tries anything while I examine his magic."

"I've got him covered." Sunshine said, lowering his horn and pointing it at Prey's head, although it didn't start to glow as a normal Unicorns horn would have when holding a spell.

'Is he not taking this seriously?' Prey wondered, trying to look as small and innocent as possible.

The fact that Gold Bit moved onto unlocking the shackles without pause gave rise to a nasty revelation on Prey's part, 'Gold Bit wouldn't proceed without his fellow Guard being at the ready, which means that Sunshine is either capable of quick casting, or can hold a charged spell without his horn glowing.' Both of these skills were very useful to any unicorn soldier, as it allowed them the element of surprise, but both possibilities were only available to a very powerful or prolific spell caster.

Once again Prey was forced to re-evaluate his guard's strength, and it wasn't a pleasant conclusion that he came to; 'I am *Olom Dee'd*.' He thought, the Zebraican curse jumping naturally to mind.

Gold Bit finished manipulating the delicate magical lock holding the mufflers and shackles to Prey's hooves, and with a clank they slipped off.

Fresh air flowed welcomingly over his hooves as he took a look at them for the first time in fifty seven years. He winced.

His hooves were pale and worn, and felt almost malleable from their long isolation encased in steel. The fur on his ankles was thinning and matted, but there were no pressure sores that would normally have formed after being locked in chains for any length of time, the magic on the shackles having taken care of that.

Gold Bit's magical aura wrapped firmly around his cloven hooves and dragged them up to the light, making Prey bite back a yelp of pain as his now unprotected tender hooves were squeezed. Gold Bit leaned in close and squinted, then his eyes narrowed. Sunshine tensed.

"There's nothing there." Gold Bit said suspiciously, "Why isn't there? Surely they wouldn't have wasted time with magic inhibitors if

there was nothing to suppress."

Prey hid a smirk. Of course there wasn't anything there, at least not to the naked eye. The various runes carved into his hooves were exactly the same colour and texture as the hoof, and the indents from painfully carving them in had long since regrown. The runes were still there though, lying dormant within the hoof. A simple thing like lacking a physical form wasn't enough to destroy them once formed.

These were the *old* runic alphabet, they would exist for as long as he lived.

"Stay on guard Sunshine, I'm going to do a scan to be sure." Gold Bit said, his horn brightening and a ray of light from it started to play over Prey's firmly gripped front hooves.

There was a long tense minute as Gold Bit completed his scan, Sunshine standing ready and Prey trying not to hold his breath.

"Still nothing. In fact, there's no magic at all, not even trace ambient magic." Gold Bit said. He narrowed his eyes, "That's really unusual."

"Do sheep even have ambient magic?" Sunshine asked.

"Yes, every pony has ambient magic, even earth ponies-" Gold Bit broke off, "Right. All ponies. Sheep aren't ponies." He said with a dismissive snort.

If Prey had been less in control of himself, he would have let out his breath in relief, but he didn't. They would surely notice such an obvious tell. It did however irk him how Gold Bit had said; 'Sheep aren't ponies.'

"Are you quite finished?" Prey asked with a raised eyebrow.

Gold Bit looked at Prey for a long moment, then released the magic that held up the sheep's hooves, "For now." He answered.

Prey did sigh this time as he was finally able to lower his forelegs. The limbs felt off, they were too light and almost like they were floating now that they didn't have the constant weight of shackles

pulling them down. 'I have some readjusting to do.' Prey thought as he rubbed them together. He winced.

'Ow, that hurts. My hooves have gone soft and weak, I hope that the fur grows back in too-'

He was jarred from his inspection as Gold Bit abruptly reached over a leg and shoved him off the cushion stack. Prey was in no way prepared for it, and went over backwards with a high-pitched yelp of surprise and forelegs wind milling.

Half way down to the wooden floor in what would have ended up being a very painful landing on his face, Prey's momentum was arrested as Gold Bit's magic caught him.

Prey gaped as he was levitated back onto the chair, "What the hell was that for?" He squeaked in anger, then scowled as both Solar Guards attempted to stifle laughs at his high pitched voice.

Prey hated that his voice did that whenever he got angry. High pitched squeaking, no matter the fury behind it just didn't get the point across. Coupled with his innocent face, large droopy ears, fluffy wool and small size, Prey knew full well how ridiculous he looked when trying to be angry.

'They laughed too. They thought a runt lamb fighting a war was just a joke. Look who's the last sheep standing. These two unicorns will just be another tally mark.' Prey thought in comfort to himself.

"Hehe, right. My apologies. I was just making sure." Gold Bit said without a trace of remorse.

"Sure of what?" Prey squeaked, still struggling to regain his composure.

"Apparently, you're a mind leech. So we were checking to see if removing those shackles unsealed your..." Gold Bit's face creased with disgust, "...Mind reading capabilities. If it had, then you would have known I was going to push you off the chair and reacted."

"Or I could have read your thoughts and known it was a test, and then just faked being surprised." Prey retorted.

"Nah, even if that was the case, I doubt your little panic could be that..." Sunshine smirked, "...Hilariously convincing."

Prey decided a change of tact was in order, these two Solar Guards were quickly starting to dismiss him as nothing more than the lamb he looked like. Now that Prey had gotten his annoyance under control and was thinking clearly, he could see both positives and negatives to this.

On one hoof, it could lead them to underestimating him, although the fact that both of them were Solar Guards and that they'd fetched him from Dreverton made that seem unlikely. They were trained against carelessness, and to let their guard down around a former inmate from Dreverton would be lax in the extreme. Plus, while he was wearing the rest of these crystal enchanted chains, escape was still just a dim possibility.

On the other, he was being forced to solve this crime for them without any choice in the matter, and if they didn't take his suggestions seriously, suggestions which he would make sure benefited him in some way, then he would lose his only chance of tricking his way out of here.

Prey decided a mix of both approaches was the way to proceed.

He crossed his forelegs over his fluffy wool and pouted at them with a haughty sniff, "That was unnecessary. I didn't think Guards, especially *Solar* Guards, resorted to such petty tricks for amusement. Evidently I was mistaken in thinking you were Celestia's best."

His response was carefully calculated to both appear childishly annoyed, but still intellectually competent enough to offer a barbed retort.

Both Solar Guards grins faded, "I think you mean *Princess* Celestia." Sunshine emphasised.

Prey sniffed again, "Whatever. But my point remains, that was unnecessary. My mind reading, if you want to call it something as unsophisticated as that, isn't sealed in my hooves. I don't even know why they bothered put those hoof shackles on me in the first place,

no, this..."

Prey tapped a hoof against the metal collar around his neck, "...This is what keeps my mind reading capabilities sealed." He casually lied.

Sunshine and Gold Bit both nodded, evidently completely buying the lie as it appeared quite logical from their perspective. It wasn't the heavy collar that kept him from sensing the thoughts of those around him, it was the much larger metal band around his middle that held the mind sealing enchantments. Prey was certain of that. He'd had over fifty-seven years to study it after all.

Which was why he told them it was the collar. If for some reason the Guard eventually decided to remove any more of his bindings, something he would be anxiously working towards, he wanted them to remove the wrong piece, and then he'd regain his ability to hear other peoples' thoughts.

'Everything goes so much easier when you can second guess your opponents every move.'

Neither Guard stopped to consider why they were getting freely volunteered information directly from their prisoner, they both just seemed to buy it. 'Arrogant, naïve fools.' Prey sneered internally.

"Right, that's enough stalling. Time to get to work." Gold Bit said clapping his armoured hooves together sharply.

Prey looked back over the piles of files on the desk stacked higher than his head. The thought of having something to read and study after all these years, even if just badly written Guard reports, made his hooves tremble. Learning and acquiring knowledge was perhaps the only thing he didn't regret about his time before Dreverton. It was that same hunger for learning that had kept him from giving up.

'That knowledge was also what stopped me from just dying off alone in the jungle and kept the war going.'

Whether that was a good or a bad thing was very much open for

debate.

'But then again, that's also what got me cursed and eventually caught.' He mentally added with a sigh. He had to acknowledge failure if he was going to learn from his mistakes. Something it galled Prey to admit but he wasn't actually that great at.

But back to the matter at hoof, he couldn't appear too eager to start digging through these reports, not least because he planned to use the details he learned to start building an escape plan. The Guards might get suspicious if he didn't offer at least token resistance.

"You really expect me to read all this? There must be thousands of these useless reports. What about eating and sleeping?" Prey asked.

"You'll get food and shelter 452, and you will also do as you're told and work." Gold Bit told Prey in a level voice, his tone making it clear there was no room for any other possibility.

"Seriously though? There has got to be a more efficient approach than this."

"You've been offered this privilege. Captain Valour won't extend the chance a second time, so I suggest you cut out the whining and buckle down." Sunshine added in exactly the same tone of voice as Gold Bit.

Prey made a show of looking angry before letting his shoulders slump in defeat, "Fine," He muttered, "But this would be much easier if I knew what this crime is, as I'm supposed to be solving it."

Completely true, but for different reasons than the Guards thought.

Sunshine adjusted his golden chest plate absentmindedly, resettling it across his broad shoulders with a shrug, "Well, the captain did say that somepony would explain the case to you 452. I guess I might as well do it."

Gold Bit sent over a questioning look, "Shouldn't 452 just read the reports instead? Captain Valour told us to keep all interaction with the prisoner to a minimum."

"Well somepony's got to do it. And it's not like we've been all too focused on sticking to that last part." Sunshine pointed out with a grimace, making Gold Bit blink and then also grimace at himself in realisation. Sunshine continued; "It's going to have to be one of us Guards to explain it all anyways, might as well do it now so she can get to work."

Prey frowned, 'There it is again, *she*, not *he*.'

"I'm a *ram*, not an *ewe*." Prey spoke up, giving Sunshine an offended look, even if he was just acting like it annoyed him.

Sunshine squinted at Prey, "No you're not." He said bluntly.

Prey rolled his eyes theatrically, "I think I would know best, don't you? Besides, what would I gain from lying? Especially about something as obvious as gender?" He questioned sweetly.

"I don't know what you're trying to prove, but you're obviously not a colt. Where are your horns for one?" Sunshine asked, dismissively swishing his tail.

Prey made his face go blank, "Ram, not colt. And I was born this way. Along with being a runt, apparently that means my horns will never grow in."

That was a lie. He'd sacrificed his horns when they were still half grown to a certain black magic ritual. Dark magic always has a price, so when he'd been forced to pay, he'd chosen the body parts most useless to him.

He hadn't stopped to consider that this would make him look even more like a tiny ewe than he did already. Prey imagined that the Resistance fighters would gleefully have taken every chance to taunt and humiliate him even further than they already had over his new appearance. If any of them had been left by that point.

Sunshine was giving him a disbelieving look while Gold Bit seemed like he was trying to put a stop to all this and go back to following Captain Valour's orders, by standing stiffly at attention and ignoring everyone.

"What? Think I'm lying?" Prey asked.

"No, but I'm not..." Sunshine shrugged and shook his head dismissively, "Just trying to figure you out."

"How about you stop that, and give me a run down of why exactly I'm here, *warden*?" Prey asked.

"You will refer to us by our names or proper titles alone. Not 'warden'." Gold Bit drawled, without even turning to look from where he'd taken up guard position.

'Yes. Definitely sensitive about using correct rankings and titles. He must place a lot of his personal worth in being a Solar Guard.' Prey noted.

Sunshine didn't pay Gold Bit any mind and moved to stand in front of the desk, "Best get comfy in your wool then sheep, it's a bit of a long explanation. This all started weeks ago..." He began.

---I---

[[[Bonus Picture - For those who were wondering what Prey looks like]]]

https://imgur.com/n115Ejb

Author's Notes:

I am coming back to write in this AN box about chapter 40. So, first, hello to anyone reading. 👍

Second, at the time of writing this, someone has been kind enough to submit a funny and great piece of fan art to go with this story. See HERE. If you want a laugh, check it out.

It was made by GreatSpaceBeaver, so thankyou to him! 😊

3.0 Punishment by Paperwork?

"So, let me recap and see if I've got this correctly..." Prey began, rubbing his face.

"Three weeks and two days ago, a burglary was carried out on one of Vanhoover's richest citizens, and earl to hoof, High Toff. Supposedly secure safes were found unlocked and emptied, and his mansion's carpets, paintings, sculptures, vases, book shelves and china were vandalised or otherwise destroyed. Correct so far?"

"Yes. The specifics and accurate bit values of the damages are written down here. Somewhere." Sunshine replied, with a vague hoof wave at the paper-strewn desk.

"But that's not the interesting part. The first bit being that no one-"

"-Nopony." Sunshine broke in.

Prey twitched a drooping ear and continued, "That no one saw anything. This is strange because apparently, this attack was carried out in the middle of the day, estimated between 12:00 and 4:00. Now, the strangest part of all is that High Toff doesn't remember anything about that day. Additionally, the first he knew of it was when he came to, lying in the middle of the hallway the next morning."

Prey tapped a hoof to his chin, "Added to this confusion, is that all the servants were out of the building. When questioned, they all swore it was High Toff himself who ordered them to go home, at around 10:00 that first day. Unusual is an understatement."

Sunshine nodded, "That it is. The fact that all the servants gave the same testimony, and that High Toff can't remember any of it himself, means only one thing. Mind magic." He snorted with disgust.

Prey shrugged, "One incident isn't enough to prove that."

"How can you say that? Of course it's the work of a mind leech!" Gold Bit broke in.

"I said *one* incident. Everyone's immediate answer to no memory is 'mind magic'. But they don't understand that's not how it works, and just how rare a competent practitioner is. But as you've told me, this wasn't a lone incident, there have been five further cases of robbery since then, all with similar circumstances. Valuables gone and the mansion vandalised. No evidence, no memories, no leads. Correct so far?" Prey checked.

"Unfortunately, yes." Sunshine sighed deeply.

"Then my next question is: what steps have been taken to prevent further attacks?" Prey asked.

"That's no concern of yours." Gold Bit interjected.

Sunshine frowned slightly, "The captain ordered that you are to have no details of anything not directly pertaining to the reports in this room or the victims of these attacks." He explained.

Prey sighed and waved a small hoof at the massive stacks of paper and scrolls, "Alright. Then, the only way to get any further information is to get to work on these reports. There's got to be something useful in at least some of them."

His tone was dismissive, but in fact, he was only too happy to begin. Finally having something, *anything*, to study was making him practically drool. Prey also doubted he was going to be able to worm anything further out of his two guards, but they were just two. He'd try again with the next two when they rotated shifts.

He smiled inwardly, because he already had the basis of a plan. A weak plan admittedly, but any chance was better than no chance.

All the while he had been listening and asking questions of Sunshine, he'd kept half his mind busy analysing and thinking ahead. The overconfident fools had freed his hooves, so now he had access to his runes again. Well, some of his runes. The problem would be getting any Guard close enough to touch, and then

keeping them there long enough to work through their mind, all without the other Guard on duty noticing anything.

That wishful scenario didn't seem likely to happen any time soon.

So far, all the Solar Guards had wisely kept out of hoof's reach, and additionally, because he couldn't work on more than one mind at once, it ruled out the possibility of getting both Guards close enough to do at the same time. It was one at a time or nothing. Add in the length of time it took to properly take over a mind, and his chances were looking bleak.

Also, he wasn't currently able to simply drive an unsuspecting victim insane with a mere touch, so that option was out. The lock around his middle still kept *that* curse sealed away. His eventual escape (because he *would* escape, he was too afraid of what it would mean if he bungled this one chance), would take time and effort to pull off.

So Prey didn't plan to try and take any of their minds at all. He had his hooves free, he had his runic knowledge, his carefully preserved memories, and that would have to be enough.

With that in mind, Prey flicked the long chain on his collar out of the way, grabbed the closest report, and then without so much as a halfway caring glance at his two Solar Guards, dived right into it.

---**The Past**---

"The forest does not care about you. It does not care about me. It does not care about anyone. If you die, you will only feed its soil. If a monster eats you, it is just the law of nature. It is higher than you. You are lower."

The newly named Prey was trying not to tremble as he stood waiting for the zebra named Snake to turn and face him. There was no one else in the clearing with them.

Prey had been cornered by Stinger earlier this morning, and informed that he was going to be Snake's assistant from now on. The sadistic grin Prey saw under Stinger's mask as he delivered the

news was enough to make Prey want to turn and run, but he knew what would happen if he did. 'The weak work or suffer'. Disobeying Stinger's order might even possibly result in being 'Put in the Mud.'

Prey had heard a host of stories about Zebra shamans, but even among the bloodthirsty Resistance, this zebra in particular, 'Snake', was spoken of with exceptional disgust and fear. All Prey knew was that Snake was the camp's voodoo witch.

"You will do what I say, when I say. If I tell you to pick a Blue Chime flower, you will pick a Blue Chime flower. If I tell you to act as bait for a strangler vine, you will act as bait for a strangler vine. If I tell you jump in front of a manticore, you jump in front of a manticore." Snake told Prey in exactly the same calm, accented voice as before.

The voodoo witch didn't even look at Gossamer as he spoke. He instead kept intently watching the yellow and black butterflies flitting through the sun beams in the clearing.

A long minute passed as they waited under the shadows of the trees, then another. Prey stood miserably considering what he had gotten himself into.

'Why me? Why me?' Half of him thought. The other half kept asking the same miserable questions he'd been asking himself over and over for the last month; 'Why did Fleece leave me? Where is my brother? Why did they burn our village? Why did they kill our mother? When will they finally kill me?'

"Do you know why you're here?" Snake eventually asked, voice flat and uncaring as if discussing the the qualities of dirt.

"T-to be your assistant." Prey forced out.

"Partially correct. You are indeed here to become my assistant, but do you know what that means?" Snake inquired.
Prey didn't answer, he knew Snake wasn't expecting one.

"No," The Zebra continued, "You know nothing. Remember that. You. Know. Nothing. Put simply, you are to be my hooves. You are

to risk your life collecting, testing and handling my alchemy and potions. Your life is worth nothing compared to mine. If you want to stay alive, you had best be a fast learner, or else I will have to find myself yet another assistant. Do you want to know what happened to my last three assistants?" Snake asked, still not looking away from the butterflies.

No, Prey didn't want to know, but he knew there was only one answer he could give;"W-what happened t-to them?" He croaked.

"The first one spilled a test brew down his barrel and failed to cleanse himself in time. His skin melted down to the bone, and Stinger had to come and put him out of his misery. The second one tried to kill me in my sleep, and I fed him to the Deeper Green of the forest. The third one confused Half-Corpse mushrooms with Brown Caps, and died after swelling up to twice his normal size. It took over two days for death to come. I did not fetch Stinger that time. I pushed him out of the tent and left him." Snake said, as calm as a summer breeze.

Prey watched as Snake extended a long stick with a blob of something yellow and sticky on the end. One of the butterflies fluttered over and settled lightly on the stick, wings almost glowing as they caught a shaft of sunlight. Snake slowly drew in the stick as the butterfly sipped from the honey, never taking his eyes from the delicate insect.

"There are many ways to die in my service." Snake said quietly, "Take this butterfly for instance. Beautiful, no? Small, delicate, colourful, and deadly. This one alone has enough toxin on its wings alone to kill an adult bear if inhaled. Digesting even the smallest part of this butterfly is certain death." Snake said quietly, tilting his head to better examine the butterfly. In the shadows outside of the shaft of sunlight, his cold eyes glinted. For the first time Snake turned to face Prey.

Gossamer took a step back. Those eye's didn't see Gossamer, just a resource.

"The Resistance is full of monsters. But no matter who they are, there are always worse monsters in the Deeper Green. I may be part

of the Resistance, but my loyalties lie elsewhere. With myself. If at any time I think you are endangering my life through inattention or carelessness..." The zebra paused to consider, "There won't be enough left of you to put in the mud. Am I understood?"

Prey nodded so hard his neck hurt, trying not to meet those blank eyes in the mask, 'I'm gonna die...' He thought hopelessly.

"There is always a worse monster out there." Snake echoed.

---**Present**---

Prey blinked, wondering for a moment why his cheek was stuck to a piece of paper, then realised he was lying on the desk. He hadn't even noticed he'd fallen asleep. 'Those memories... It's been a while. I must have been more tired than I estimated, to allow myself to dream of that without meaning to. Perhaps my subconsciousness is trying to tell me something?' Prey pondered.

It might be strange to think that someone like Prey, who was so objective and logical in his observation and analysis, would give any regard to a fleeting sensation. But that is where most people would be wrong.

Prey *was* logical, coldly so. But he'd seen too many things, experienced too much to ever dismiss his instincts like that.

Sometimes his instincts were wrong, or he misinterpreted them. But there had also been those dark nights alone in the rain and mud, where you couldn't even see the trees two paces from you, and all you wanted to do was get under cover but some horrible little voice inside told you not to go back to camp but to turn around and walk away. You didn't know what was waiting for you back at camp, but you knew it wasn't a manticore or a chimera or even a basilisk, but something else. Something worse.

Even if it ended up being nothing, those particular little voices had a way of getting you to listen.

Prey shook himself and raised his numb face off the desk, 'But I'm not in the forest anymore. I'm about as far from the Deeper Green as

you can get. This time, I think it's just leftover from my bad dreams.' He decided, stretching out with a stifled yawn.

"You're awake." Sunshine said behind him. Prey swivelled a droopy ear in the Solar Guard's direction, but didn't turn. He didn't have to see Sunshine to be able to carry out a conversation with him, and the less he had to look at the unicorn, the better.

"Evidently. Has your shift not ended yet?" Prey asked, half listening as he considered the leftover report in front of him, 'Now what was I doing with this one?' He wondered.

"It did. This is our second shift. The other pair have already rotated through their twelve hours. Didn't you notice the Guards change?" Sunshine asked.

"You talk to the prisoner too much." Gold Bit muttered. Prey ignored him.

Now that he thought about it, Prey did remember the guard changing. He had been too busy reading through the reports and sorting them into piles to take note. Trying to hold all the various reports in his head while cross referencing them with what he'd already read, left little room for concentration on other things.

Prey stretched his neck under the metal collar, considering the multiple new stacks of files in front of him, papers sticking out all over the place.

There was a pile over there on the corner of the desk for reports on the victims traits. Another pile near his hoof for papers he deemed interesting. One over there for files about the servants of the rich pony victims. More piles for what'd been taken, the day of the week, times, types of locks picked, the weather, carpet choice, and even one for the colour of books vandalised.

There was also a scattered pile (more a dump) on the floor for reports Prey mentally marked as 'waste of time'. Prey looked at what would've seemed like a disorganised mess to anyone else and nodded in satisfaction. 'Everything is where it's supposed to be.' He thought.

Incidentally, he also now knew how many Solar Guards there were guarding him. If Sunshine and Gold Bit were back on duty, that meant there was only one other set of unicorn guards, if they were rotating on a twelve hour shift. Coupled with another two outside the door at all times, as Captain Valour had ordered, that made eight Solar Guards in total, excluding the Captain himself. Two in here, and two outside at all times.

'Eight. Eight in total. Better than I'd feared but worse than I'd hoped.'

Prey placed the report in his hoof into the 'Almost completely useless' pile. It was written by a certain city guard pony by the name of Grey Plod. Grey Plod had written six reports, one on each of the robberies. All but one of Grey Plod's reports had ended up in this pile. That one had ended up on the floor.

'Grey Plod, you need a less demanding job. Perhaps rock farming, or anything that doesn't require higher brain functions. It's obvious the thief didn't come in through the window, the broken glass was on the outside of the building you foal.' Prey thought with disdain, reaching for another report from his dwindling pile.

"Aren't you hungry?" Sunshine abruptly asked, sounding a bit forced.

"Yes." Prey answered without looking up from the report. He was trying to decide between the 'Wednesday' pile and the 'Misdirected' pile. Not very inventive names, but seeing as no one else needed to know what each pile contained, he could label them however he wanted.

There was a long silence as Prey kept reading, the two Solar Guards exchanging looks behind him. Sunshine raised his eyebrows with a frown. Gold Bit scowled back, but then looked away. "You know, you are allowed to stop to eat. Even as a criminal, you still have some rights." Sunshine said. Prey flicked an ear but didn't respond otherwise.

Behind him there was a sigh, "It's been thirty six hours since you began, and you've been awake for thirty one of them going at those

files. That's not healthy." Sunshine added.

Prey gestured with a hoof around the room, "I don't see any food here. What do you suggest I eat?" He asked, placing the report in the 'Wednesday' pile and picking up another.

There was another sigh, this time surprisingly from Gold Bit, "Sunshine is right. You need to take a break."

Prey did turn this time, blinking large blue eyes at Gold Bit in question.

Gold Bit scowled, "Don't misunderstand. You're of no use to anypony if you collapse from exhaustion. And I'm not just saying that, the Guard has enforced rest periods for a good reason. After a certain point, your alertness and thinking capacity is negatively affected. More so for the old or young. Like you." Gold Bit said with a pointed nod at Prey, not breaking from his annoyed scowl.

Prey narrowed his eyes ever so slightly, 'Soft. They're so soft.' He thought in disgust. Oh, physically and magically they were strong yes, in peak condition even. But all their regulations and rules bound them down and made them soft.

'It's because they have the luxury. They can *afford* to have things like 'breaks' and 'rest periods', and even the Solar Guard expect to have their comforts supplied it seems.'

Prey understood that these things did indeed make a more effective guard, but the fact that they seemed to think it was the norm and that even he, a prisoner, was somehow entitled to them instead of constantly having to struggle just to survive startled him. Startled and annoyed him, because it wasn't what he'd subconsciously expected from them. He didn't quite know how to proceed.

"There's still nothing here to eat. If anyone was supposed to be delivering rations, then it's probably safe to say they've forgotten." Prey pointed out, waving at the food-less office.

"Hmm, you might be right there." Sunshine commented with a frown.

"None of the city guard is to know the prisoner is here, so a meal schedule wouldn't have been set up." Gold Bit told Sunshine.

"She's still got to eat something."
"*He*." Prey muttered.

"Of course. I just meant that the Solar Guard will have to take turns doing it outside of our shift is all." Gold bit replied.

Prey tried to ignore their pointless mutterings while he sifted through the remaining reports. He estimated there was about another five hours of work before he'd sorted all the files. Then would come the task of re-sorting the more promising files again, and starting to build up a picture.

"Hey, here's a dumb question, but have you had access to the rest room yet?" Sunshine asked Prey awkwardly.

"No."

"Ahhh...."

It turned out that the other door in the room which Prey had first noticed lead to a small, windowless bedroom and toilet. It seemed he was actually meant to sleep in here, rather than chained to the desk as he'd been expecting. The mattress was even in a bed frame, not just tossed on the floor, and had sheets and everything. For some reason, it made Prey angry that they would even think to provide for him.

The sink was almost too high for Prey to reach though, and the fact he couldn't see in the mirror improved his mood somewhat. He could now be justified in thinking, 'Stupid *Rag'Hagig* ponies.'

Before he was led back out by the chain on the suppression collar, Prey lightly touched a cloven hoof to the bed frame. Under his sensitive hoof, he felt the slight thrum of dormant magic. A containment and alarm enchantment no doubt.

'Seems they've thought of everything.' Prey noted. He hadn't

expected anything less, but he wouldn't know unless he double checked, and the same went for the rest of the room. If the unicorns had forgotten something, Prey would find it.

Gold Bit re-clipped the chain to the bracket in the floor, while Sunshine watched Prey clamber back onto the chair with its precarious pile of cushions. Prey was just settling back into the rhythm of sorting the reports when he was interrupted yet again.

"Want a cupcake?" Sunshine asked.

Both Prey and Gold Bit turned to look at Sunshine.

"What? There won't be any meals for at least another ten hours, and I happen to have a cupcake on me. The prisoner should get to eat something, don't you think?" Sunshine shrug.

Gold Bit narrowed his eyes at his fellow Solar Guard, "This is a *mind leech* remember? Just because it looks like a lamb doesn't mean it isn't one. So don't go feeling sorry for it." Gold Bit hissed in an undertone. Prey was certain he wasn't meant to catch that, but large ears do have some uses.

Sunshine responded with a scowl of his own, "I know my duty. I will never put somepony's life at risk because of the prisoner. But seriously, what's the harm in this? It's just a cupcake." He hissed back.

Gold Bit held the glare for a moment longer then shrugged, "Fine. Whatever." He said flatly. He went back to being a statue on guard.

Sunshine looked away from Gold Bit and gave Prey a bright smile, "So, cupcake?" He asked.

Prey was giving Sunshine a very suspicious look, but he nodded. Sunshine's horn lit up and a cupcake with thick white icing was plonked on the desk in front of him. Prey wasn't convinced this wasn't some trick, or that Sunshine wasn't going to whisk it away the moment he reached for it as some joke. Sunshine's face didn't hide any guile however.

"Thank you," Prey offered cautiously; "But I think it's only fair that

we split it."

"Nonsense, it's just a small cupcake. You eat it." Sunshine waved him off.

Prey put an innocent expression, tilting his head to enhance the appearance, "No no, please, I insist." He said to Sunshine. He stretched over the desk with his short forelegs and carefully broke the crumbly cupcake in two, "After you."

For a moment Sunshine didn't take it, and Prey was sure he'd been right. But then Sunshine's yellow aura surrounded the proffered half as the Guard took it.

Prey's eyes narrowed as Sunshine took a careless bite, the Guard raising a bemused eyebrow at the watching sheep as he chewed. Very suspiciously, with one final glare, the lamb copied him.

Prey went still and his eyes widened. Slowly he finished chewing the mouthful of cupcake and swallowed. "What is this?" He asked quietly, lifting up the cupcake to squint at it, as if it would reveal some great secret.

"It's just a cupcake. Vanilla." Sunshine answered with some puzzlement.

Prey didn't even look up at the Solar Guard. "It's... so sweet." He muttered to himself.

"Yes. It's a cupcake. What did you expect? Haven't you ever eaten one before?" Sunshine asked with a smirk.

Prey eyes narrowed ever so fractionally, but that was the only outward indication of the sudden anger that had flared to life in his thin chest. 'They know nothing. They don't understand how privileged they are to be able to take such simple luxuries for granted.' Prey thought to himself.

He lifted the cupcake and took another small bite, savouring the taste. He'd never had anything like it before, never in his life had he tasted sweets or sugar. On the farm, they'd never had the bits to spare. The Deeper Green had been strangely lacking in cake trees as

well, and in Dreverton there was nothing but the tasteless fare every day, twice a day.
'Fleece would have loved this.' Prey thought absently taking another bite.

All too soon, the cupcake was gone. Prey had no choice but to return to sorting the desk, filtering the reports in search of something useful.

Prey was about a quarter of he way through re-sorting and cross referencing the more promising stacks of paper late that evening, when the door was thrust open and in marched the huge figure of Captain Valour.

"Anything to report?" He barked at Sunshine and Gold Bit.

"No sir." They responded as one.

The captain nodded at them, "Good job." He turned to Prey and his gaze soured, "Where is our loose criminal?" Captain Valour snapped.

Prey met his gaze with a big innocent smile, "No idea."

It was the wrong answer, "Why not?" Valour roared.

Prey let the smile fade, "Are you being serious? You just threw me in here with a huge unorganised mess of reports and expect me to find something in less than two days? Think realistically. Most of these reports are irrelevant to start with, and none of them relate to suspects. How do you expect me to identify the criminal?" Prey asked.

Captain Valour stalked forwards, and Prey was very glad there was a desk between them as the captain loomed over him, "I've been patient, I've given you a chance at redemption, but my patience is running out. You will tell me what you've discovered, or I'm putting you back on a chariot for Dreverton tonight. Do I make myself clear inmate, 452?" The captain asked with deceptive calm.

'What brought on this fit of insanity?' Prey asked himself in disbelief. This unicorn's expectations were entirely unreasonable. Perhaps Captain Valour was simply testing Prey, to see if he could make the sheep slip up in a lie by pressuring him. Worse, the Captain would be half right if that was his suspicion.

Prey wasn't like one of these Guard ponies. His mind thought along different paths from their rigid moral structure of right and wrong. He could think like a criminal. After skimming these reports just once, (even with all the distracting side reports that got in his way) Prey had found what he wanted.

Prey had started seeing a deeper picture the moment he had compared the first two reports, and started to build it up from there. He had been lying to Captain Valour in a hope to be able to stall for more time to work on his real agenda, namely; escape. The fact that his completely believable excuse about 'not being given enough time' had been so harshly rejected forced Prey to rethink what he could get away with.

'This is a test, it's got to be. Is it merely a ploy to intimidate me to work harder? Is the captain growing desperate? Is it merely all a bluff? Or was I wrong and he does know more about me than I thought?' Prey thought, mind speeding from one possibility to the next. He regarded Captain Valour's dark expression.

'Unfortunately, I am in no position to test him. At a stomp of his hoof I could be thrown back into Dreverton to languish away until even I die. He seems just angry enough to make a snap decision like that, his all important investigation be damned,' Prey thought. 'I have no choice but to give him something.'

"Wait. I might have something-" Prey started.
"So you were lying to me?!" Valour roared.

"No, I wasn't." Prey hastily protested, "I said I didn't know who the perpetrators were. I do however have a profile of targets that these ponies are likely to strike at next."

Captain Valour took a long, slow breath, "You have five minutes prisoner 452. And if I even think you're lying to me again, you'll go

down so fast you won't even have time to cry for your mother." He growled.

Prey resisted the urge to spit on the captain, instead lowering his hooves below the edge of the desk to hide the trembles of fear and anger. Fixing a penitent look on his face, Prey cleared his throat, "Right. Well, first, these ponies are targeting-"

"Ponies?" Captain Valour snapped.

"Yes, at least one powerful unicorn of magic tier six or higher, who else could wield such potent mind magic competently?" Prey pointed out.

The Captain contrived to somehow look even angrier about being told that his criminal was a pony, and a unicorn to boot. A powerful one too. 'Can't stand the idea of a unicorn falling off the straight and narrow can you?' Prey thought with venom.

"Yes," He continued, "I theorise a group between four and six individuals. Most likely all ponies, as anyone of another species would stick out amid the predominantly equine Vanhoover population. I estimate two Pegasi, who are both lookouts during the actual robbery, and scouts to stake out their next rich target. The rest of the group is most likely almost entirely unicorns, but with at least one earth pony."

"Explain." Valour ordered.

"The reports show that at least some of the vandalism that took place after the robberies showed hoof scuffs. Unicorns would use their magic. The Pegasi are most likely up on top of the building acting as lookouts, which leaves the only explanation of an earth pony. The earth pony was also probably the driver of a cart in which they covertly removed what they stole from the premises. There was simply too much stolen to remove it all in just saddle bags without arousing suspicion. It would look odd for anyone but an earth pony to be pulling a cart, no?" Prey asked.

Prey could see that the captain and the other Solar Guards were listening intently, even if they still had their professional masks of

disinterest in place. You just had to know what hints to look for. He found the ears were a particularly good indicator in ponies.

Prey took a breath and continued; "Right, onto the second point. This group always hits the same type of rich ponies. Ones with enclosed mansions or walls to avoid prying eyes while they do the deed, and ones which have had their fortunes for at least five generations. As to what the thieves are after-"

Here came the delicate part, to hide the fact that he was almost certain about what these ponies were after, although not the reason why. This would take some careful misdirection.

"-I would suggest that these targets are picked out based both on their wealth, and some sort of grudge the thieves carry. Family feuds perhaps? That would explain the otherwise pointless vandalism to the mansions after the thieves have already managed to steal everything they can carry off."

"Wait, I disagree." Gold Bit broke in, then balked slightly when the captain looked at him, but at a nod he continued;

"Sir, I disagree with 452. What's to stop them taking everything? If they have such powerful unicorns, why not teleport in and take everything and teleport out? If they have one strong enough for the level of untraceable mind magic we've seen, they're definitely strong enough to handle one large teleport with all of it." Gold Bit explained.

"Almost right," Prey said calmly, "Aside from one thing, all of these mansions are old, the newest one is still pre-Altherate era."

"Why is that important?" Valour demanded, the patience with which he had listened to his subordinate immediately replaced with barely restrained anger when it was Prey whom was speaking.

"Because all of these mansions were built before said era. Back then, all of the richest house owners had their mansions built on bedrock along a leyline. There used to be a huge market in obtaining such plots of land, if you had the bits for it."

"Get to the point!" Captain Valour almost yelled. Prey mentally cursed himself for flinching. Gritting his teeth he continued:

"Long story short, you can't teleport into or out of one of these particular mansions unless you were either exceptionally powerful, at least magic tier eight or higher, or had a certain room built off from the leyline that could accommodate teleportation. But unless you knew which room it was, you wouldn't know it was there, nor could you scan for it. Something about the signature being lost amid the rest of the ambient natural magic." Prey said with a dismissive wave of his small hoof.

If any of the Solar Guards thought it was odd that such a young sheep somehow knew all this information, none of them mentioned it.

"Sir, permission to speak?" Sunshine asked from where he stood guard behind Prey.

"Granted."

"Thank you sir." Turning to Prey; "You missed one. Proud Table is an exception to that pattern. He's only recent to the upper class ranks, yet he was still targeted." Sunshine pointed out.

Prey lifted an eyebrow at the Guard's alertness, "Correct, but he's just that, an *exception*. However, if you look back at Proud Table's family tree, you find it traces back to the old country gentry. Can you guess what you soon spot if you have a look at the rest of these victims' family trees?" Prey asked.

It wasn't really a question, the answer was obvious.

"And this supports the old family feud idea." Gold Bit muttered to himself, but everybody heard it anyway. Prey saw the two Solar Guards behind the captain exchange thoughtful looks of their own, 'Ah, so they think they're starting to understand. Yet they miss the fact that I'm misleading them in their moment of self-enlightenment.'

"So, here is what I suggest." Prey said, drawing their attention back

to himself. "Find out how many rich ponies there are that own one of these houses and have been around for at least five generations or more. Then see where their ancestors hark back to. Next, place undercover Guards around their mansions to be on the lookout for anything suspicious. The moment the alarm is raised, gather your guards, wait until the thieves move in to rob the mansion, then jump them while they're unable to teleport away." Prey told them.

It was a good plan. It was simple and had logic behind it. He could see that Captain Valour liked it. Although from the way he was working his jaw, the captain was seriously considering throwing it out just because it came from him.

'Too bad it'll never work.' Prey thought smugly, 'Just another ploy to keep them pointlessly busy and out of the way while I prepare to escape.'

Prey allowed his hoof to brush against the underside of the desk. There, he felt small rune he'd painstakingly traced into existence over the last forty hours. It had been slow going. Always having to be careful to hide his actions under the pretext of reaching for another report.

It wasn't much, and this rune hardly did a thing. It was just a test to see if it tripped any alarms.

This particular old rune, '*J'nud*', was very particular in its use. The only thing it did was act as a mild activation trigger. Prey was sure if there were any scanning enchantments for the old Runic alphabet in the room, they would've been triggered. Yet none had.

Prey felt the old sick feeling of the Hunt stir within him, the flutter in his stomach of nerves and writhing anticipation. The nervous fear. Herbivores weren't meant for the Hunt, but all in the Resistance knew it well. He hated it and loved it. It was the feeling of closing silently in. He was in magical chains, watched by the strongest magical Guards in all of Equestria, but in the end, would that be enough to stop him? Only time would tell.

'When they leave, I can go back to pretending to study these reports. Then tomorrow, I can feign needing more information to

work with, and from there I can formulate-'

Prey never got to finish his mental scheming. Instead, his carefully constructed gambit to both distract and meet the Captains' demands, while setting himself up to seize upon their blindness later, was rudely crushed underhoof.

Just as it looked like Captain Valour was finally done with his own mental planning, and about and leave to commence staking out all of Vanhoover, there was that magical ripple over the door and it burst open. One of the pegasus Solar Guards rushed in.

"Sir! The thief has struck again!" The winged guard shouted, snapping off a quick salute.

The Solar Guards response was immediate, "Form up and head out! Two teams, we brief on the way!" Captain Valour shouted as every pony in the room scrambled.

Prey covered his soft ears as best as he could in the resulting barrage of shouted exchanges:

"Location?"
"Hoofdally lane, Cedar Fields' mansion."
"City Guard?"
"Local guard unit on route to site. Five minutes."
"Our ETA?"
"Eight minutes gallop, four by wing. No teleport beacon."

Captain Valour cursed, "Horseapples. They'll be long gone. Change of plan, we go as one team. Our objective is to intervene before the City Guard can disturb anything. Strong Flight?"

One of the Pegasus Guards snapped a salute, "Yessir!"

"Get to Hoofdally Lane. Take command and do not let any of the City Guard in. Go!" With another salute the Pegasus accelerated out the still open door and away.

Captain Valour gestured sharply with his head, "Everypony else, fall out. The thieves are probably long gone, but we might yet still catch something fresh. Once there, split up into pairs and sweep the

mansion. You know the drill, fall out!"

Amid the unanimous shout of 'Yessir!' the Captain seemed to remember his prisoner. He frowned at the sheep, before nodding decisively as he came to a decision, "Gold Bit, get a large travel cloak to hide the prisoner, he's coming with us."

Sunshine's blink of surprise at Captain Valour confirming that the sheep was indeed a 'he' was lost to Prey as the Captain's horn lit up and a thick golden aura surrounded the sheep.

Prey went ridged as he was lifted into the air. He gave a muffled yelp of fury and grabbed hold of the closest object to hoof, the top most cushion on the chair, and flung it at the Captain, "Don't touch me!"

A cushion was not high on the list of most dangerous objects ever thrown, but the Solar Captain's trained response was automatic.

The magic lifting Prey vanished as a golden shield burst into life a foot in front of Captain Valour's muzzle. Unsurprisingly, the cushion bounced lightly off, but that was just the distraction.

Prey latched hold of the desk and launched himself over it with a warbling squeak of fury mixed with terror. It was fight or flight instinct, and the only way out of the room was past Captain Valour. The fact that he was still chained and surrounded by Guards didn't even register in that moment.

Prey wasn't seeing Captain Valour in front of him, for that split second there was only Fire Strike.

Nevertheless, the moment the cushion left his hoof, the Solar Guards' training took over and they leapt into action. Prey didn't even manage to get halfway across the desk before the stunning spell hit him in the face, another two impacting not a split second later.

Prey didn't even feel himself hit the floor in a mess of chains.

[[[Bonus Picture - Snake from the Resistance]]]

[image]

Author's Notes:

At this point, I am already not sure if I am drawing pictures to go with the story, or writing this story so I have an excuse to try and draw pictures.

Also, important editor here: **Sweetolebob18** Thank you to him for his help with this.✧

Edit April 2020: **HERE** is a link to another picture of Snake, done by someone much better at drawing than me. It's really well done, and I'd recommend having a look. Kindly submitted by: GreatSpaceBeaver 🌲

4.0 Next Trot on a Pointless Investigation

Prey knew he was unconscious. The fact that he was reliving the nightmare under Snake's iron hoofed apprenticeship made that much obvious. In a foggy, and detached, dream logic sort of way.

Even while Prey hung in the stillness of thoughtless existence, his mud splattered younger self crept through the forest in the pouring rain. A small, raggedy bag was slung across his back.

He must be fairly deep into his lower mindscape then, the one which most people only visited unawares in their sleep. But Prey wasn't most people. He recognised and was familiar with where he was.

'Definitely unconscious then.' Prey thought as he, for want of a better word, 'looked' around.

The best way to describe what it was like being in his lower mind scape was to imagine being underwater in an ocean, but without the drowning. High above you, the surface. Brightly lit water, as if sun rays were filtering down. But the deeper you sank, the darker the water got and the harder it was to move or think.

Dropping away from the surface, the oceans endless expanses of water faded. From light blue, the shade getting deeper and deeper until you were looking straight down and saw nothing but a vast blackness, so far away and yet so close because of its enormity.

Things and scenes from Prey's life floated silently around him. Some large and stationary, and others quick and darting; A hot sunny morning. Carrying a heavy bucket of water. Tall trees under a half moon. A worn smile in a tired face. A blue ribbon. A cracked horn. A crude wooden mask. All these things and more bobbed silently around him, close, near, and faraway.

Prey wasn't in the water, he *was* the water. It just varied on what depth level he currently existed at.

And currently, Prey felt like he was floating in one of the lower bands of light. Somewhere on the deeper violet level. If he went all the way down to the blackness he would fall into dreamless unconsciousness. Prey knew that, but it was hard to think if he wanted to or not. At present, he wasn't able to ascend up to the surface of consciousness either. So Prey just hung there, existing as part of the familiar weightlessness.

'What happened? Was I attacked? No, I was the one doing the attacking.' A flash of memory, 'Captain Fire Strike! No, that's not right. Captain *Valour*.' He remembered now.

Prey looked down at himself creeping along in the forest, while also reliving the very same moment. He felt the fear thumping in his chest as he strained his dripping ears, trying to pick out anything that might be a predator against the heavy spatter of rain. Yet he also knew that this was just memory, and could observe it with detachment.

Prey took stock of his mental condition, a familiar and practiced action. It informed him that his mind was stable, his walls still held firm, and his checks and backups were still in place.

That meant there was nothing to do but wait.

Prey watched/experienced his past self carefully filling the soaked bag with tiny red mushrooms, using hooves that shivered. He didn't feel strongly one way or the other if he wanted to or not. It was hard to care down here. 'Might as well go along for the ride then.' He thought.

---**The Past**---

"Pathetic." Snake spoke it as a statement, without any particular dislike or anger as the zebra observed Prey's attempts at brewing Bone Rot.

Prey trembled. He didn't know where he had gone wrong, he'd been sure he'd recalled everything correctly. Snake hadn't given him instructions or even explained what Prey was supposed to do. The voodoo witch expected Prey to be able to perfectly recall how Bone Rot was made, from seeing the zebra brew it once four days ago.

"This will barely melt through the fur and skin, to say nothing of the muscle and tissue, let alone the bone." Snake said dispassionately, waving a hoof at the dull green concoction, bubbling thickly in the lead bowl that was Prey's attempt.

They were currently in the voodoo witch's tent, which doubled as a twisted laboratory. Bundles of night shade, death cap, last whisper, and many other deadly herbs and fungi hung from the grey tents roof poles, while around the rest of the canvas tent, many horrible and noxious things were packed.

Jars of squirming maggots piled high on a rickety table. A fresh pony skull on a shelf. Vials of blood and poison stored in stained racks. A black pot out of which a foul smoke lazily curled. It was something out of a nightmare.

But this wasn't a nightmare, this was Prey's reality. Every moment he was forced to spend serving the witch he feared would be his last. The zebra was insane, but in the cold and merciless kind of way. Prey became more and more terrified the longer he was around Snake. Less than a week ago, Torment had brought in a captured earth pony.

Prey didn't know what the pony was supposed to have done, but he was there in the tent when Torment arrived with a large grin to inform Snake. The voodoo witch had calmly finished engraving a rune on the bone he was working on, pulled on his voodoo cloak hung with feathers and charms, and walked out the tent.

The desperate screaming and sobbing had started up soon afterwards. The laughs and taunts from those Resistance members

who'd gone to watch died away as the sounds of agony and fear carried through the trees. Prey had cowered under the bench, trying to block his ears until it finally ended.

In the awful silence that had followed, Snake had walked back in through the tent flap as if nothing had happened, wiped the blood off his hooves, picked up another bone and resumed carving. No one laughed about what Snake had done ever again, aside from Stinger and Torment. Those two were as insane as the zebra.

"Come here." Snake ordered without even turning his head to look at Prey, still disdainfully regarding the attempt at Bone Rot in the lead bowl.

Going closer to Snake was the last thing Prey wanted to do. He was scared and tired all the time, always terrified of what someone or *something* was going to do to him. He didn't want to be here. He hadn't seen his brother since he'd been rejected, and he knew it was only a matter of time before he slipped up in Snake's tent and died horribly.

However, he also knew the cost of disobedience. His back now bore three new, still healing scars from Stinger's whip.

Trying to hide the shivers, Prey shuffled over to the zebra. The moment he was within legs reach, a hoof shot out and grabbed him by the scruff. With Snake's hoof digging painfully into his wool, Prey was dragged up onto his back hooves, tottering for balance as Snake's grip brought Prey's face dangerously close to the bowl.

Prey went still, eyes locked on the dark green mixture slowly bubbling away in the bowl a few inches from his nose. He didn't dare move, if he over balanced or if Snake let go... Prey swallowed, trying to only take shallow breaths to avoid the acrid scent that burned his nostrils. His eyes were watering.

"I have no use for failure, but I have even less use for those unable to learn from their mistakes. Tell me where you went wrong." Snake's calm voice spoke in his ear.

Prey didn't dare take his wide eyes from the bowl, but his heart and

mind were racing, 'I have one chance before he dissolves my face, but what did I do wrong?' He frantically thought. 'Did I measure the bone powder wrong? No, the ratio was three to five. Wasn't it? Yes I'm sure. Think think!' Prey stuttered, trying to buy time; "I- I think- I mean... I don't-"

What had it been? What?! He was sure he'd recalled everything correctly. 'Enough to bet my life on?' He had no choice, if he didn't choose Snake would push him in face first and then- 'No! Don't loose focus! I know I measured everything everything right.' So that only left-

"IWaitedTooLongBetweenAddingIngredients!" Prey blurted out, "I waited too long. I should have added the ingredients at the correct intervals. I'm sorry I'm sorry! Please! Please I'm sorry, please don't do it!" He begged.

Snake grunted and let Prey fall back onto his hooves, "For now that will do," He said to where the sheep had sunk to the floor, breathing erratically and looking sick, "As you know where you went wrong, you can try it again. I expect no failure this time."

Prey wanted to curl up and sob, but then he would die. He didn't want to die. He just wanted his mother and his brother back. Tears silently leaking from his eyes, Prey forced himself back to his shaking hooves and started again.

One week later, the news came that his brother was dead.

Prey pulled back from the memory as he felt the tingle of returning consciousness, a feeling of his mind speeding up and rising out of the water and then he was wincing through slitted eyelids as sight and sound slowly came back into focus.

"-no further involvement. We will take it from here." The loud voice sounded like one of the Solar unicorn Guards that he didn't know the name of. There was quite a lot of noise in the background, murmured conversations and some shouts. 'A crowd then.' Prey thought. He sniffed. 'Smells fresh, open air. Must be outside as well.'

They must not have reached this Cedar Field's mansion yet, but it sounded like they were just outside. Why couldn't he see though?

As he returned to full consciousness, Prey became aware that he was bundled up in a much too large travel cloak, the dark green material hiding his every feature from any ponies curious eyes. 'Wouldn't want word to get out that the Solar Guard is using a hardened criminal to solve their problems for them now would we?'

He didn't actually feel too bad, considering he'd been hit by at least one stunning spell. Just tired and sore, with the lingering taste of bile at the back of his throat.

He was also being carried through the air with magic.

Prey stiffened and had to stop himself from lashing out instinctively. 'Filthy *unicorns*.' He snarled internally. He hated having magic used on him in any shape or form, and he *especially* hated it when it left him powerless to do anything about it. He was completely at someone else's mercy right now, and he hated it.

"Sir, I think the prisoner is awake." Came the voice of Gold Bit.

"About time. Sky Flight, Sunshine, get inmate 452 in through the servants entrance. Take him to a secure room until we have need of him." Came the voice of who could only be Captain Valour. Although the fact it wasn't a booming shout for once was almost enough to make you think twice about the speakers identity.

"Yes sir." Came the joint reply. Prey felt himself being floated along after the clop of four pairs of armoured horse shoes. The cloak was still covering him and Prey couldn't see, but when he tried to shift to take it off the magic around him rapidly constricted.

"Keep still." Came a curt voice.

Prey didn't want to keep still, he wanted out, but he was powerless to do anything about the magic holding him immobile. He hated being powerless. 'If I ever escape, the first thing I'm going to do is get this blasted inhibitor collar removed.' Prey promised himself. Then at least he'd have some way to fight back against unicorn

magic. Prey forcibly slowed his breathing to calm himself.

There was a change in the hoofsteps like they'd arrived at a door, and then the air changed and the sounds of the crowd cut off, meaning that they were now inside.

"Left or right?" Came the voice again. It wasn't Sunshine's so it must be this Sky Flight. 'Undoubtably a Pegasus with a name like that.' Prey thought. Which meant that the only unicorn currently guarding him was Sunshine. Prey perked up at this, 'Perhaps there will be the opportunity to escape then.' He thought.

The Solar Guards decided to go left, and Prey focused on memorising the path they took as he floated along behind them, counting the number of hoof falls.

There was the faint creak of hinges, and then the expensive kind of 'thump' from a thick door which spoke of oak, antique and money. Then there was a shuffling and scrape of chairs and tables while he still hung there sightless, and then the magical aura holding him vanished.

Prey tensed in anticipation of hitting the floor, but only fell a couple of inches before landing in a chair. He'd kind of expected to be thrown to the floor.

Prey still couldn't see out of the cloak, but when he moved to take it off he was stopped, "That stays on until I say it comes off." Sky Flight snapped.

"There's no one else in here to see me," Prey pointed out with a long suffering sigh, "At least let me shift the hood so I can see out if it."

"Fine. But keep your face hidden." Sky Flight warned.

Prey did as instructed without further protest, he'd gotten what he wanted out of the exchange. The travelling cloak was much too large for someone of his small stature, so once Prey had managed to locate the hood and arrange it enough to at least to see out of, he still looked a lot like he was wearing a sheet.

The room was square, with not much in it aside from one sturdy

antique looking table and seven other plush chairs, the latter pushed against the wall. Prey was sitting in the eighth chair behind the table, opposite the door, where the two Solar Guards stood on guard. The only other thing of note about the room was the fine hoof carved wooden panelling adorning the walls.

None of them moved, just silently watched each other, waiting.

Prey spent the long wait splitting his focus between watching the guards for an opportunity to escape, and slowly scraping a series of patterns under the table. A very specific series of patterns.

The voluminous cloak hid the movement of his forehoof, but he could still only proceed drawing at a crawl. Making runes wasn't as easy as just scraping out the symbol, there was much more too it than that.

Some runes could only be drawn with certain materials, or *on* certain materials, or both. Others required power or fuel. Things like blood and energy to give them power. Some could only be made in the presence of other types of runes, or sometimes in their absence. The price for getting it wrong or over extending your self could quite easily be agonisingly fatal.

Prey didn't have the means, time, energy, necessary sacrifices or strength to inscribe anything powerful.

The three runes he was repeating under the table top were some of the most basic. 'Thj', 'Myru', and 'Grem' were their pronouncements. Together these old runes made up one of the simplest foundation arrays. If Prey added one more of four possible runes to the array, he could get one of the following results: A compass, a minor heat sink, an air veil, or a lesser power conductor.

All of those results would be weak in the extreme, not having any supporting runes or interlocking arrays. Additionally, they were only inscribed from the lower, weaker side of the Old Runic Alphabet. Such a weak foundation array would never do more than be a tool, the magical equivalent of a spoon or fork.

However, at present that was all Prey could manage, and only one of the four possible combinations was likely to be useful anyway. Specifically, the lesser power conductor.

As he finished the last line of the rune, he felt the slightest tingle on his hoof, like the lightest trace of a feather. It was a sign that the array was finished and working. A trace of background magic began to trickle into the conductor, starting to fill up its very limited storage capacity straight away.

The pull would be unnoticeable to all but the most magically sensitive, because it only drew from the environment in such minuscule quantities. Prey knew the conductor would never hold enough power to even lift a paper weight, let alone help him over power the guards and escape. But he wasn't a unicorn who could throw around lightning bolts at will, this was all he had. He'd save the build up from the conductor for later.

There was the faint sound of hooves approaching from the corridor. Prey shifted his ears to listen, counting one, two, three, four? Yes, four, at least four sets of hooves heading in their direction.
Prey casually laid his own hooves, still covered by the cloak, back on top the table and waited. A few moments later when Sunshine and Sky Flight heard the approaching '*clip-clop*' as well, they shifted and half turned to the door in readiness.

There was a sharp rap on the door in a quick pattern. Prey immediately memorised it; 'Two, pause, three, pause, three, pause, one.'

Sunshine pulled the door open and both Solar Guards saluted; "Sir."

"As you were. Anything to report?" Captain Valour asked as he strode in. The other ponies in the hallway stayed out of Prey's line of sight for now and didn't come in.

"No sir. We just brought the prisoner in here through the building, and kept her-err, *his* head covered the entire trip. Nothing else of note sir." Sky Flight reported, shutting the door after receiving some signal to do so.

A vicious scowl furrowed Captain Valour's brow when his gaze turned to Prey, looking angrier than usual. 'It was just a cushion.' Prey thought sardonically. Or perhaps the captain was just annoyed at being outsmarted by these thieves yet again.

"Cedar Fields is outside, he's had his memory tampered with. You're going to interview him." Captain Valour told Prey shortly. Prey wasn't surprised, it made sense. Why else would he have been brought here?

Swallowing his hate of the unicorn, Prey pitched his voice calmly; "Are you asking me to try and restore his memory? If so then you're going to need to remove this inhibitor-"

"I don't ask anything! I *tell* you. And I'm telling you to interview Cedar Fields. You will not tell him anything about yourself, or allow him to see your face. You will not answer any of his questions pertaining to this investigation outside of his own part in it. Your only task is to find out what he still remembers about the attack, and to dig out any details about who could have done this. Am I clear?" Valour asked, just managing to keep his tone civil.

Prey only nodded. It was more than the Captain had said to him in one go before, at least without shouting. Prey could plainly see how much it grated on the captain. The feeling was mutual. But once again he was being presented with a problem by the Solar Guards, and told to solve it without being given all the pieces.

The Captain jerked his head at Sunshine, "Bring Cedar Field in, then tell True Spear to guard the door and the other two to set up a perimeter patrol outside."

"Sir." Sunshine acknowledged, opening the door with a glow of his horn and stepping out.

A few muttered words were spoken outside while Prey tried to plan a way to turn this interview to his advantage, and then Sunshine was leading the way back in. He lead a dazed looking unicorn, with orange fur and green mane wearing a rumpled silk shirt in behind him.

Prey could tell straight away that this orange unicorn was Cedar Fields. The fine grooming, glossy coat and slight lines of soft fat spoke of good food and care. Even the way the unicorn walked spoke of confidence and entitlement.

'Inherited money then.' Prey decided.

Cedar Fields glanced around at the rooms inhabitants, the uncertainty quickly giving way to caution, "Okay, I'm here. Care to explain why I can't remember anything, Captain Valour wasn't it?" Cedar asked, his words all clearly pronounced, indicating grammar schooling.

"Take a seat please." Captain Valour told him politely but firmly, pulling one out for the other unicorn with his magic. After only minor resistance, Cedar did just that. Sky Flight moved to stand behind him while Sunshine stood behind Prey.

"Well?" Cedar asked curtly, but Prey could sense the hidden fear. The unicorn didn't know what was going on or what had happened to him, and he was afraid but not quite sure why. All of these were clear signs of a sharp memory extraction. 'Crude, but effective.'

Captain Valour gestured to Prey where he sat shrouded in the cloak, "This here is-" A moments hesitation, "-One of our special investigators. He will be talking with you, Mister Fields. Don't worry, you're not in any kind of trouble. You're the victim here, we're just here to try and ascertain the facts."

With that the captain stepped back. Cedar shifted his gaze back to the cloaked figure of Prey, apprehension at not being able to see who or what he was speaking to clear in Cedar's green eyes.

'Oh if only you you knew. I'm sure you'd be shaking in your hooves at the sight of a lamb runt being your interrogator.' Prey thought with sour amusement. Prey cleared his throat, and then ruined the impression of some dark and spooky cloak and dagger investigator by speaking; "Please tell me what you last remember on Friday the 17th."

Cedar blinked stupidly at the high pitched and carefree voice.

Obviously not what the unicorn noble had been expecting.

"Err, right, 'ehem'. I remember I was sitting in my study." Cedar answered, confidence returning to his tone.

"Do you specifically remember why you were doing that?"

Cedar shook his head, "No, not really. I was having a glass of carbenet and reading a report-"

"Which report?"

Cedar frowned slightly in an aristocratic fashion, "Is that important?"

"Please answer the question."

"Then no, I don't remember." Cedar declared.

"What do you remember then? The title, author, anything?" Prey asked.

"No, I already told you I don't remember, weren't you listening?" Cedar replied. Prey could see that the pony was getting worked up, all the uncertainty about what had happened to him and what was going on was wearing on the unicorns nerves.

"Can you tell me approximately what time it was then?" Prey asked.

"Ye- No..." Cedar said with a frown.

'*Interesting*.'

"Tell me about the attack then." Prey said, abruptly changing tack.

"Attack? What are you talking about?" Cedar demanded. Around the room Prey noticed the Solar Guards stiffen ever so slightly.

"Why, the attack on yourself, your house and your property." Prey answered sweetly.

Cedar stared at Prey, "What are you talking about?"

"Surely you have noticed the state of your mansion? The damage and stolen goods?" Prey asked. To be fair, Prey hadn't seen it either. He'd been stunned and wrapped in the cloak on the way in, but he was certain from the pattern of the previous attacks, that this mansion too would have suffered the same treatment.

Cedar stared at Prey with a blank look in his eyes.

"What- My.. My mansion, nothing- nothing was..." His eyes snapped back in to focus, "Could you please repeat the question?"

"The attack and robbery on your person? Do you not find it strange that you have no memory of yesterday? I am sure that you had appointments that you needed to keep? Can you not remember why you didn't keep them? Or why none of your servants are around? Surely you can figure it out, can't you?" Prey pushed.

Cedar's green eyes were glassy and his mouth worked, "I- I don't.. I.. There isn't... But that mean's-" his eyes cleared and locked onto Prey.

"You!" Cedar screamed in fury, "I'll kill you!" He leapt from his seat and was across the table before Prey could blink.

Prey tried to hastily slide under the table, a remarkably safe place for someone of his size, but the folds of he oversized cloak tangled his limbs. "Die!" Cedar screamed swinging a hoof into Prey's face. The blow was wild and unfocused, and Prey managed to roll with it, but the force still rattled his teeth as the hoof caught him in the jaw.

Prey was knocked to the floor spitting blood. Prey tried to scramble to his hooves but couldn't manage it in the cloak, but for some reason Cedar didn't follow him to the floor. Prey had expected Cedar to jump after him in a mad attempt to rend him limb from limb.

Prey squinted up through dazed eyes to see that Sunshine had finally stepped in and stopped the fight. A golden aura held Cedar back as the orange unicorn continued to spit and thrash on top of the table, "Die die! Kill die!"

Prey realised his heart was hammering in his ears, he hadn't been expecting such a violent reaction at all. Anger kindled in his chest, "What was that?" Prey squeaked, cradling his injured cheek.

"This is what has happened with all of the victims. Any attempt to make them think about the break in on their property is met with a violent rejection." Sky Flight answered loudly over Cedar's screamed death threats , trying to gently drag the restrained unicorn back to his chair

"And you didn't think to warn me of this before hoof?" Prey half squeaked, half hissed. He could tell the inside of his cheek was split quite badly.

"No. Seeing is believing." Valour said dismissively, "Let this be a lesson not to do it in the future."

Prey wiped a string of blood from his lip as he got up, "A lesson? What kind of lesson was that?! Getting punched in the face is a lesson? If so, I've had plenty of those lessons in my life already." He turned his head and spat out the rest of the blood, "I think your real reason, Captain, is because you're petty and power abusive. Just what I'd expect from a *Unicorn*."

Prey hadn't meant to say that last bit out loud, usually he was in much better control of his feelings.

However, right now, Prey wasn't operating under the best of circumstances. He hadn't slept more than five hours in the last two days, he'd been blasted unconscious, punched in the face, he'd only eaten half a cupcake during all this, he was in chains, surrounded by those he despised, and for the rest of the time spent under their control, he'd been working hard non-stop on all those reports.

Not his worst day, not by a long way. He wasn't bleeding to death in the mud for one, or crippled by pain for another. But the thing that really lead Prey into goading Captain Valour was hate. Pure and simple. Captain Valour was too much like Captain Fire Strike.

And so it was that the last insult slipped out. Huge muscles bunched under Captain Valour's fur and his furious scowl said it all. 'Fool!

This will delay my plans, how am I supposed to escape with broken legs?' Prey berated himself, focusing only on the impending threat to his chances of escape rather than the incoming pain.

To Prey's surprise, instead of eviscerating him with magic, Captain Valour only pointed at Prey and yelled in a voice loud enough to make glass rattle; "I will not tolerate disrespect from a criminal! This is your last warning, understand?"

Prey blinked. Why wasn't he sobbing in pain right now? In the war, a unicorn Guard wouldn't have hesitated to rip the legs off any resistance fighter.

"Sir," The voice came from Sky Flight who had succeeded in getting Cedar Fields back into his seat, "He'll be waking up soon. We don't want him to know about 452, right?" The Pegasus asked.

'Oh, that's why. There's a witness present.' Prey thought, mind immediately starting to go over possibilities of how to use this to his advantage.

The 'witness', Cedar Fields, was currently sitting in his chair stupidly, eyes blank and expression slack. Despite Sunshine's magic having faded away, Cedar Field's didn't immediately leap back up and resume the attack. Prey understood what was happening at a glance; 'He's resetting.' Prey thought. Cedar Field's mental state was reverting to the point from just before he snapped.

'Therefore the trigger must be trying to force him to think about the robbery. Quite a clever control memory implant by whichever unicorn did this.'

"Sir, is it a good idea to continue?" Sunshine asked with a glance at Prey.

"Yes." Prey immediately snapped at the Solar Guard, if they stopped now then he wouldn't be able to learn what he needed.

Sunshine ignored him and looked to Captain Valour, "Sir?"

The Captain was considering Cedar Fields with something that could almost be called concern, "For now we'll continue. We have

no choice." He eventually said.

"Will you at least put him in a binding in case he snaps again?" Prey asked.

"No. He's a victim, not a criminal like you." Valour responded curtly. Prey wasn't surprised, it's what he'd predicted the Captain would say. 'So *noble*.'

Cedar Field's blinked and shuddered slightly, the light returning to his green eyes, "What? I'm sorry did you say something?" Cedar asked in mild confusion.

"Don't worry about it. You're safe and there's no need for concern." Valour told him.

Prey hoisted himself back up into the chair with some difficulty, legs kicking as he scrambled up and turned around to face Cedar Fields again, "Mr Fields, if we could please continue?" Prey asked sweetly, even as the hot pain in his cheek flared.

Once again the Solar Guards withdrew into the background as Cedar focused on the cloaked figure of Prey, "Who are you?" The unicorn asked.

"That's not important. Sufficed to say that I am a special investigator called in here by the good Captain Valour." He said in his sweetest tone.

Once again Cedar frowned in surprise at the light tone completely at odds with the sinister cloak wearing figure in the chair opposite.

"Alright then." Cedar answered cautiously.

"Please tell me what you last remember on Friday the 17th?" Prey asked.

The Solar Guards shifted in the background at the repeat of the same line of questioning from last time, but when Prey held up a hoof they kept quiet.

"I remember I was sitting in my study." Cedar answered confidently.

"Do you specifically remember why you were doing that?"

Cedar shook his head, "No, not really. I was having a glass of carbenet and reading a report-"

"Which report?"

Cedar frowned slightly, "Is that important?"

"Please answer the question."

"Then no, I don't remember." Cedar declared. 'Hmm. Very interesting. Exact replication of circumstances.' Prey noted, before continuing on with following the script.

"What do you remember then? The title, author, anything?" Prey asked.

"No, I already told you I don't remember, weren't you listening?" Cedar replied

"Then no, I don't remember." Cedar replied. 'Still exactly the same.' Prey thought.

"What do you remember then? What was the article was about, a headline, anything?" Prey asked, word for word.

"Alright that's enough." Captain Valour said stepping in. Prey ignored him and focused entirely on the orange unicorn in front of him, "Please answer the question Mr Fields."

"No, I already told you I don't remember, aren't you listening?" Cedar replied, getting frustrated.

Prey saw the Captain opening his mouth to order Sky Flight and Sunshine to intervene, so Prey quickly cut in, "Could you please tell me the items of greatest monetary value on your estate?" He asked. Unseen by Cedar, the Captain paused as Prey changed his line of questioning.

"I'm not sure that's something I'm comfortable with sharing." Cedar replied, straightening his back and lifting his chin to look down at

Prey.

'Ah, and there's the noble breeding coming into play.' Prey thought nastily. "And why's that?" He asked.

"That's personal." Cedar replied.

"Personal you say? I can understand that completely Mr Fields. Heirlooms aren't to be taken lightly after all. But it's important to this investigation you understand, so I'm afraid I must insist. So, tell me, what is the item of greatest monetary value on your estate?" Prey asked. He watched the unicorns face carefully for the tell tale blank look.

Cedar looked back at Prey flatly, "I refuse." He stated.

"And why is that? Do you have something to hide perhaps?" Prey asked.

Cedar Fields shoulders tensed, "Don't be ridiculous, of course not," He scoffed, "But I know how this works, I read about it. I'm not obligated to answer anything I'm not comfortable answering." Cedar replied, folding his hooves.

"Come now, what's the harm? We'll just be going through your estate anyway looking for clues, so why delay the inevitable? Please, it really would be most helpful to us." Prey said innocently, his tone of 'butter wouldn't melt in his mouth' making Cedar Fields half nod before he caught himself.

"I'm still not comfortable with this..." Cedar muttered.

"How about this? I'll make it easy for you." Prey offered;

"Since these thieves have likely stolen or destroyed your valuables, by telling us what you have we can work out what was taken or damaged. Then we will know what to look for, and what we need to recover for you. Also, when these criminals are caught, it will be a lot easier to charge them in court, and make them repay you the correct amount of compensation. Wouldn't you like that?" Prey asked persuasively. He cringed internally at how heavy hoofed his bait was.

Prey didn't know if that bit about recovering what had been stolen, or charging the criminals in court was true, and he didn't care either. Cedar Fields misfortune meant nothing to Prey. He was only plucking on the heart strings of what Prey knew mattered most to any wealthy noble: Money.

Cedar Fields thought about it for a while. Prey didn't interrupt him, already knowing what the unicorn would do.

"Alright. For the good of reclaiming what is rightfully mine, I will help you." Cedar decided.

"How very generous of you." Prey exclaimed happily; "So, what item has the greatest value in your mansion Mr Fields?"

"That's not a straight forward question. There are many items of great value that I own, even if I do say so myself. Naming just one over all the others isn't easy you know?" Cedar Fields boasted, having already forgotten his previous reluctance to talk.

"I'm sure that you have many things of great worth, this is a very impressive mansion after all. But for the sake of consideration, would you please tell me anyway?" Prey asked, silently wishing that this unicorn would stop posturing and just skip straight to the bit where he told him what he wanted..

"Hmm. I've decided picking one is impossible. So I shall pick three." Cedar announced;

"The Autumn of Blessing vase, one of a kind, antique, over 700 years old, made by DeHoofing himself. The second is the diamond necklace from the La Fresza set. 34 ice tint diamonds were used in its construction alone, white gold metal work, with of course the centre piece being a pure, twenty sided sided, hundred and eighty five karat sun diamond. And the last item would be, hmm, I think it would have to be the hoof crafted crystal wine goblet set dating back to the crystal empire itself, very hard to come by you know. Priceless in fact." Cedar told them, voice animated, having obviously gotten carried away in the moment.

Prey regarded the unicorn. He very much wanted to inform Cedar

that all those things were no doubt lying smashed and broken upstairs. With the exception of the diamond necklace, which had probably been stolen instead. But Prey controlled his spiteful instincts and offered words of praise and awe instead. 'Wait until after he's answered my questions.' Prey told himself, gingerly probing his split cheek with his tongue.

"That certainly is impressive. Very impressive. But what else do you have?" Prey asked.

"There are many heirlooms and treasures that a wealthy family such as mine will have." Cedar agreed.

"Good, good, how about this; You list them and I'll tell you when to stop?" Prey suggested, knowing that the unicorn noble would like nothing more than to do so.

"If you insist. Let's see. There's the paintings from various eras, the centuries old silverware and gold platters, velvet Prancean carpets, a number of black pearl necklaces, my collection of ancient Germane puzzle boxes, the actual mansion itself is marble, oak and cedar you know, inlaid with carvings from many famous artists done over the generations." Cedar Fields listed.

Prey murmured encouragement and gestured for the unicorn to continue.

"I of course have a strong box full of gems and gold bits, although I won't tell you where. There's a pink crystal statue of the Hearts era, the antique Hallmaker grandfather clock, my specially tailored Istallion suits and coats, all of them silk embroidered. Antique self sustaining magic glow stone lights, my great great great grandfather Half Fields gold and topaz encrusted pocket watch, a whole box full of diamond cuff links, any number of wall to wall woven tapestries, the jade lacquered desk in my study, and the red alchemy stone." Cedar Fields said with satisfaction.

Prey waited a moment to see if he was finished, "Are all those the items that hold the highest value?" He asked.

"Yes. While there are plenty of other things I own, but those aren't

worth nearly as much. Those other things cost under a thousand bits." Cedar answered airily with a dismissive wave of his hoof.

Prey nodded, "Mmhm, so you won't mind me asking; what about your library?" He asked, having finally arrived exactly where he wanted to in the conversation.

Cedar Fields froze, "My library?" He asked uncertainly.

Prey's smile went unseen under the hood, but it was the smile of a Timberwolf's. "Yes, your library. Spell books, old scrolls, ancient history texts, all of these must be worth a pretty bit. Surely you must own some. So why didn't you mention them?" Prey asked. Cedar opened his mouth but nothing came out as he just stared blankly at Prey.

The Solar Guards took a silent step forwards that went almost unnoticed.

"Mr Fields, could you tell me about your library. Please." Prey added pleasantly.

Cedar Fields eyes went blank, then fury surged into them, "I'll kill you!" He screamed.

This time Prey was ready for the outburst and rolled off the chair onto the floor away from Cedar Fields lunge. Gripping the chains and cloak in a bundle to keep from entangling himself, he braced for the raging unicorn to leap after him.
It was unnecessary. Sunshine had acted before Prey got struck this time, and Cedar Fields was already restrained harmlessly in the gold aura, floating just above the table. Sunshine was a powerful unicorn to be able to do that.

Prey glanced at Sunshine as Cedar Fields continued to scream and kick, "Why didn't you put an inhibitor ring on him? If he starts casting magic while in this state we're all in trouble." Prey told them.

"That's not your call." Captain Valour answered, moving closer to Cedar Fields in case his help was needed, "We already measured

him, he's a tier 2. We can handle it."

Prey kept his opinion on the matter to himself. Magic was never something to be underestimated, it could be dangerous and unpredictable to the extreme. From what scraps of information he'd either stolen or found on unicorn magic, he'd read of more than one incident where an ordinary unicorn's magic went wrong with horrible consequences. Like where a stallion had accidentally grabbed a chisel in his telekinesis wrong and it'd ricocheted out and skewered his wife. But he was a lowly prisoner and had no say in the matter.

"Why did you do that?" Sky Flight asked Prey angrily once he'd gotten Cedar Fields back into his seat, "There was no call to put Cedar Fields in danger once more. We don't know what damage it'll do to his mind each time-"

"He'll be fine." Prey cut in.

"You don't know that." Sky Flight responded.

"Yes I do actually," He turned to Captain Valour and forced himself to be polite, "I have everything I need from him. I just need to check the house to be sure." Prey told him.

"Explain." Valour ordered.

"I will do, just not in here. If we could just go and look at the library section of the mansion I'll explain it all." Prey soothed.

"I said explain. *Now*." Captain Valour responded.

"I'm sorry, what's going on?" Cedar Fields broke in, having recovered. Everyone glanced at Cedar Fields, who was looking back with some confusion.

"I'll explain everything. But not here, or else he's going to have another incident." Prey said.

"Excuses me, but who are you and what are you talking about?" Cedar asked with a mixture of annoyance and nervousness.

"I can promise you won't regret it." Prey told Valour, completely ignoring Cedar Fields.

The Captain all but sneered at Prey, but at a glance at the confused Cedar Fields he relented, "Fine."

Captain Valour rapped sharply on the door, 'two', 'three', 'three'. The question of "I demand that somepony tells me what's going on right now!" From Cedar going unanswered as Captain Valour spoke to the two Solar Guards who opened the door.

"Day Light, Storm Ride, you two take Cedar Fields to the hospital, you know which ward. Get his details sorted out and settled in with the others, then return here. Be gentle." He ordered in an undertone. Prey heard it perfectly with his large ears, put Cedar was still asking what was going on as the the Unicorn and the Pegasus gently lead him away.

Unnoticed by all the ponies, Prey casually pressed his hoof to the underside of the table for a moment.

"Now explain 452." Captain Valour ordered, returning to Prey.

"Take me to see the library in this place and I can show you-"

"You will do as I say and explain it right now! I don't trust you not to try something if I let you out of this room, so you're gong to have to explain it from here." Captain Valour shouted, back to his normal volume.

"Take me to see the library." Prey repeated stubbornly, "There is something that I need to check before I can give you an answer. Currently I'm not sure, and I don't want to give you the wrong idea till I know for certain."

Prey tried to put on a brave face and not cower as Captain Valour towered over him. His hatred and fear of unicorns was enough to make the manacles jangle faintly under the cloak as he tried, and failed, to suppress a shiver.

Never the less, he stood his ground.

Captain Valour's hoof twitched as if he longed to reach out and strike him. Even though Prey had his hooves free of the magical restraints, he couldn't invade the Captain's mind to defend himself, *even* if he could touch the unicorn for long enough with the runes on his fore hooves.

Taking over a mind and stealing its memories was hard, the stronger the mind the longer it took. Unicorns always took the longest because of how much magic they naturally had to focus their minds to use. And in that time, Sunshine and Sky Flight would bring him down before he'd even half way finished stealing the Captain's mind.

And since Prey wasn't currently able to break Captain Valour's mind either, that option of self-defence was out. Plus, it would ruin his plan of escape if he did. He needed to get one of the Solar Guard's alone and unawares, so that his meddling would go unnoticed by their comrades.

"How did you even know there was a library in this mansion? Cedar Fields didn't tell you one way or the other, so how did you know?" Captain Valour demanded, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Because all the other mansions that were robbed also had one." Prey replied calmly, rubbing his cheek, "Besides, you just confirmed it."

"Fine, you can look at the library for clues, but not touch." Captain Valour said, still glaring down at Prey, "Sunshine, get the chain leash back on the prisoner. Sky Flight, you and Sunshine keep a close eye on inmate 452. I don't want him stealing or messing with any evidence on route. This is still a crime scene." He reminded them all, opening the door back out into the mansion's corridor.

"This way."

---I---

Author's Notes:

Okay! Another chapter, and same editor credit goes

again to 🎭**Sweetolebob18** 🏆
But if you can spot any grammar error's or something, please let me know.

So, for the TL:DR of this investigation so far: Ceder Fields cookoo in da' head. Library suspicious'ey. Go der' next!

5.0 The World belongs to those who Read

Prey stood between Sunshine and Sky Flight as they kept watch over him, the end of the chain leading from his inhibitor collar to Sky Flight's grip. Thankfully, they had at least let him remove that stifling cloak.

He kicked a fragment of burnt scroll across the ash stained carpet , regarding the tall racks that had held Cedar Fields small library. '*Had*' being the key word here. Now it was a half burnt mess, with old book spines, slashed covers, scrolls and loose or ripped out pages scattered all across the circular room.

"Well?" Captain Valour asked impatiently from behind him, "What is it you needed to see?"

Prey pointed at one of the wooden racks. The top shelves were empty, with the remaining books in the lower half badly blackened. Almost all of the rest of the racks were also either smashed or burnt respectively, aside from one shelf which hadn't been touched at all in the rush, "That." Prey said.

"What about it?" Captain Valour asked, annoyance clear.

Prey couldn't resist an innocent smile, blue eyes wide and head tilted to the side, "You mean you don't you see it?" He inquired. If it weren't for the clear mockery in his tone, you'd never have known it from his angelic expression.

The Captain gritted his teeth, and Sunshine and Sky Flight copied their captains glare as they all stared at him, "This is the last time I will say this. *Explain*." Valour growled.

Prey knew that the Captain meant it, so he ducked his head submissively.

"Alright. Let me explain my thought process." Prey said, and inside he added, 'And let me mislead you.'

"See that shelf over there? Go over and have closer look, specifically at the top shelves. What do you notice?" Prey asked.

Valour took a step closer to the indicated shelf while keeping a watchful eye on Prey in case of trickery, "What of it? The rest of the shelves are also all burnt or pillaged, aside from that one." He said, indicating the lone book shelf which stood almost untouched.

"Yes, but I'm not interested in that one. Look carefully at this shelf, notice anything about the burn marks on the empty shelves?" Prey asked. There was a minutes pause as the Captain studied the shelf, Sky Flight and Sunshine subtly doing the same while still standing guard over their prisoner.

"The scorch marks go all the way to the back." Captain Valour said.

"Correct. If you look at the marks other shelves, then you can see that the scorches are only near the front. Meaning that there were still books in those shelves when the fire spell was cast. A flash fire most likely. In fact you can plainly see the charred remains of said books still on those them." Prey explained.

"Why is that important?"

"It means that those shelves were emptied before the spell was cast. Have a look at the label for the shelf. The metal tag hasn't melted away, so you can still see that." Prey said. Captain Valour scuffed off the lingering ash from the small plaque, easily reaching the high shelf whereas Prey would've needed a ladder.

"'L - O'. All the books starting L, M, N or O. So what? There are a lot of destroyed books around here, they're just another hoofull at this point." The Captain said with a dismissive snort, although Prey caught a hint of interest in his tone.

"Those books were purposefully taken from the shelves before the vandalism took place. I would bet if you sifted through these remains, you wouldn't find any titles starting L, M, N or O. The

thieves took these books on purpose rather than destroy them."

"You can't be sure of that." This came from Sunshine.

"Yes I can. And how am I so sure? Simple," Prey said with a shrug, "Because it was the same at other mansions. Or at least, those which had a report detailing the damage to their respective libraries. In passing, the reports noted the same pattern, titles beginning L, M and N taken. Not in as many words, but enough to spot a pattern. Once is coincidence, but this is the third occurrence which has been clearly documented. I bet the other mansions were the same, just nobody noticed."

"Nopony." Sky Flight corrected immediately.

Prey ignored him.

"Why does any of that matter in the long run? Why do these books matter?" Valour questioned.

"To that, I'm afraid I don't know the answer-" Prey replied.

Captain Valour snorted dismissively and turned away.

"-However I do know that these books are very important to the thieves. After all, those books were the whole reason Cedar Fields mansion was targeted in the first place."

Captain Valour paused, "Can you be sure of that?"

"Yes. When I questioned Cedar Fields about everything of value in his mansion, what was the one topic I brought up that made him snap?" Prey asked, pausing to let them answer the obvious question themselves.

For a moment it seemed none of them would out of annoyance or spite, but within a few moments Sunshine gave the answer; "The subject of his books and library."

"Yes. The topic of these stolen books is clearly linked to the theft. Why else would Cedar Fields snap after the mention of them, but not for the rest of his things that were stolen, like the diamonds or

gold? Now why would these thieves remove this memory in particular and leave a trigger in it's place? Why go to such effort to cover their tracks for these books? What is so special about these books in particular?"

"That is what *you're* here for. Figure it out." The Captain stated bluntly.

Prey paused to give the captain a bright smile just because he knew it annoyed the unicorn.

"I can only speculate, but all the libraries from the robbed mansions haven't been the ordinary variety of books. The books here are, or were, rare and hard to obtain. Some of them could easily have been one of a kind before they were burnt, not something you could pick up at your local library." Prey said with a shrug, shifting around on his tired hooves to try and find a more comfortable position. It had been a rough forty-eight hours.

"But how are these thieves figuring out which ponies to target? What's the link?" Sunshine mused, then answered his own question, "Of course, their families all go back generations to the Old Country Gentry."

"Yes. These books must've all come from the same era or place. There's something important in those books." Prey confirmed.

"So they're searching for something, and they haven't found it yet." Sunshine said.

"Or they already have." Prey chimed in.

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe they're trying to stop anyone else finding it too. Maybe that's really why they're breaking into all these houses and burning the books. To stop others learning the secret." Prey suggested.

"I think you're mistaken," Sunshine broke in, "If they are trying to suppress this knowledge, then they're only drawing more attention to it if they keep destroying a certain set of books. No, they must still be searching. It's the only explanation that makes sense."

Prey pushed aside his tiredness to give Sunshine one of his most winning smiles, "Oh really?" He didn't say anything else, just smiled at Sunshine.

The unicorn evenly met his eyes, not giving in for a full minute. "Alright, what am I missing?" Sunshine asked with a scowl.

"Just the fact that if that was what they wanted, why would they make it so obvious? They could just sneak in, steal the one or two relevant books and leave. But that's not their tactic. Why leave so much evidence of their crime if not because they have no other option?" Prey asked, kicking aside another fragment of burnt paper.

"It's because the thieves don't know when they break in if what they're after is in there, and neither do they have the time to read all the books to be sure. They roughly know what they're after, in the M, N and L section, but not which titles specifically. So they take them all." Prey explained.

"The prisoner is mistaken, the books are not their main objective. Most likely they only want a certain book because of its high value." Captain Valour said to Sunshine.

Prey shot the Solar Guard captain a questioning look, "What part of my explanation was not clear enough-?"
"You ignored the main point 452. These thieves stole many thousands of bits worth of gold and property, and destroyed what they could not carry off. Greed is obviously their primary motivation, plain and simple." Captain Valour told Prey.

"I'm afraid you're the one mistaken captain. The rest of what they take is just a distraction, although a welcome bonus no doubt. Think about this. If they could just get in, take all the books, remove Cedar Fields memory, and get out unnoticed, wouldn't that be better than leaving all this evidence behind?" Prey asked.

"That only proves my point, that they want bits, not books." Captain Valour snapped.

"Not so. They did it because they have no choice but to conceal their theft of the books under the guise of greed. They do this

because there are some memories they can't remove. Those of the servants and house keepers." Prey replied.

All the Solar Guards paused at that.

"Their memories?" Sky Flight asked dubiously.

"Yes. The thieves cannot remove all these memories. There are just too many ponies who would have seen the books. Maids who dusted them, butlers who sorted them, family, guests, etcetera. So they disguised their efforts by robbing the whole house, and burning the rest of the books to make it difficult to tell which was which." Prey explained, waving a hoof at the destroyed out library.

"Your logic is looping back on itself. If that were the case, why bother to remove the memories of Cedar Fields at all? Just steal, burn, or destroy everything instead. And why remove the knowledge of the books in particular? Removing the memories only makes it more obvious by their very absence." Valour pointed out.

"You didn't notice it before I told you," Prey responded. "And you're forgetting the original reason the thieves removed Cedar Fields memories. The thieves took control of his mind on the Friday evening, and had him send all of the staff home on the Saturday morning. Then, after they'd come in and ransacked the place, they removed all memories of their identities and also what they were really after as a fail safe. Quite clever really." Prey said.

Captain Valour gave Prey an ugly look, then turned to the other two Solar Guards standing either side of Prey, "What is your opinion? Does what the prisoner say make sense?" He asked.

"Sir, we follow what ever you think is right." Sky Flight replied immediately.

"Thank you, but I want and value your opinion as one of my Solar Guards." Captain Valour said.

"Sir, in that case, I think that 452 is probably correct. What she, er, *he*, had to say made sense. Mostly." Sunshine answered.

Captain Valour looked at Sky Flight, "And you?"

"Sir, I'm not sure I agree with all of it, but unfortunately, I do think the prisoner has a point." The Solar Guard responded, looking slightly guilty for having agreed with anything Prey had to say.

Captain Valour considered for a minute longer before making his choice, "Alright. You two, get the prisoner under the cloak and take him back. Don't let him touch anypony or anything on the way and stand guard. I'll send your relief in about four hours. I will get somepony to work with the local Guard to draw up that list of potential victims that match the thieves known targets and get undercover observers in place immediately. That is all."

"Yes sir!" Came the joint response.

After being bundled back into the overly large cloak once again, Prey, despite his furious protests, was picked up by Sunshine's magic and carried out of Cedar Fields mansion. Sky Flight got annoyed by Prey's demands to 'be released' and 'allowed to walk', and told his partner to put a silencing charm on the small sheep.

Sunshine did so straight away when Prey's protests immediately went up a notch at the suggestion. "Honestly," The Solar Guard unicorn told Prey as his horn lit up, "Why're you complaining? I'm the one carrying you and it's much faster than you'd be able to walk. Stop making a fuss, it's just magic." He said as he finished casting the charm.

After that there was relative quiet as they moved through the streets. The approach of dusk had cleared out the majority of ponies who might have been out and about. Meaning they arrived back at the local guard compound without incident, entering in through a back door. Sky Flight sent away the few ponies they met in the corridors on route to Prey's prison/office. After Sunshine used the 'magical key spell' to unlock the door, they went inside and shut the door.

Only once the ripple of magic flowed out to signal the room was again sealed, did Sunshine drop both the silencing charm and Prey.

The Solar Guards stood alert and out of hoofs reach while Prey struggled out of the cloak. Prey didn't say a word as he kicked off the last fold with a rattle of his chains. Just levelly glared at the Solar Guards instead. Picking up the cloak, Prey moved to go towards the small bedroom, but Sunshine stopped him.

"Where are you going?"

Prey gave the Solar Guard a blank look, "To sleep of course. There's a bed in there, so I'm not going to let it go to waste." He replied.

"The captain gave no orders for you to retire for the night." Sky Flight intoned like he was reciting scripture.

Prey turned his flat gaze on the Pegasus. He was tired and not interested in arguing, "I'm tired, and there are no other tasks that I have been set, so it would be the best use of my time to rest now. I cannot keep going indefinitely without either sleep or food. There is no food present in here, so I shall sleep instead." Prey told the two Guards.

Once again Prey made to leave them behind and go to the large bed, or large for him anyway. The chain brought him up short before he could get through the door. Sky Flight had the other end firmly wrapped around his hoof, "We did not give you permission to sleep." He said.

Prey just looked at him, no expression on his face. He didn't say anything, curling up right where he was in the doorway instead and closing his eyes.

"Hey-!"

"Let him sleep." Sunshine broke in.

Sky Flight flicked an ear at the unicorn, "You're not getting soft and feeling sorry for the prisoner now are you?" He asked with a snort.

Sunshine gave a snort of his own, "Hardly, but there is no reason not to let him use the bed. It's easier to watch him in there, and it's only for another three hours, then we're done with our shift. I'll be going to the bar, you want to come?" He offered.

Sky Flight merely shook his head, "You're a drunk." He told Sunshine, but he let Prey's chain go slack.

"Wonder bolt fancolt." Sunshine returned easily, as Prey got up silently and went over to the bed.

Sky Flight didn't deign to reply to that directly. "We're on duty. Try to act like a Solar Guard." He sniffed, standing up straighter at his post.

Sunshine rolled his eyes but matched him, both Solar Guards standing at the entrance to the bedroom, one watching where Prey had buried himself under the blanket, and the other watching the office room and the other door.

Prey made sure he was properly hidden by the blanket and curled up tightly before he let the shivers come.

Tiny tremors that rippled up and down his body as the day caught up with him. It wasn't the lack of food or sleep deprivation, he'd endured much worse before. Neither was it getting stunned by Sunshine or punched in the face by Cedar Fields, although that still ached.

No, it was that unicorns had used magic on him, repeatedly so. Casually and blatantly flaunting their power over him without giving it any thought. Like it was nothing. He was currently helpless and could not do a *thing* about if they decided to kill him.

Prey could hide his fear when they weren't directly using their magic on him. When they did, even for something as mundane as telekinesis, he couldn't control the terror he felt. Fear of magic had been ingrained into him, as it had for every Resistance fighter who'd been at the Hill that day. They'd learnt the true meaning of the word 'helpless' in the face of the overwhelming magical fire power of a full company of Border Guard unicorns.

'I'll kill them.' Prey promised himself, 'I'll kill them I swear. Sunshine, Valour and all the rest of them. They have to die so I can be safe.'

A part of him still just wanted his mother and brother back even after all these years. The need was childish and pathetic, and he wished as he'd wished a thousand times before, that he could just grow up and move past it. But the curse that preserved his physical body and spiked heart also kept his mind that of a youth in many ways.

If it weren't for the fact that he was a prodigy, it was likely Prey would never have developed beyond the mental age of nine. Prey had taken on the curse sixty one years, five months, one week and one day ago. He'd been fighting and killing in the resistance for three years by that point. He'd been nine at the time. But he'd joined when he was six.

'I'll kill them. Unicorns die just the same as any other pony when their head melts from Bone Rot. I will kill them. I promise.' Prey told himself.

Prey hugged himself tightly until the trembling stopped and he finally drifted into sleep.

The dreams that night felt like they wanted to be nightmares, but Prey wouldn't let them develop into that. With iron concentration he bent them to his will, only allowing them to show what he wanted. Prey had disciplined his mind beyond what most could hope to achieve. Fifty seven years in the isolation of a cell had left him nothing to do but either completely give in to insanity, or exercise his mind.

Prey had already defeated the madness he carried, and what was insanity compared to madness? So he chose to train his mind instead. Because of this, Prey could control his dreams except in cases of either extreme exhaustion or enforced unconsciousness.

Like when he had been hit with that stunning spell earlier.

Prey rarely ever *truly* slept. Even while asleep, his mind kept working and thinking, although not at its full capacity. Somewhere in the deeper blue fading to dark blue level. In this lucid yet asleep

state, Prey could work on his problems or review memories looking for new insights.

This night, while asleep in a bed under watch from two Solar Guards, a certain memory came to mind. Prey let it run its course, taking in the details and feelings afresh.

---The past---

Prey was crouched over a piece of slate. Sweat dripped into his eyes as he manipulated the fragment of bone in his fore hooves to correctly scribe out the rune '*Besk*'. Behind him, his master Snake stood watching his efforts critically.

"You must be swifter. When we travel out to prepare the ground, we will not have the luxury of time. If you delay us, I will break your legs and leave you to distract the Guard." The zebra stated in that blank accent of his.

Prey didn't respond. He didn't have the energy to, even if he had been brave enough to form one. Instead he tried to speed up, moving from the '*Besk*' rune to the '*Yress*' one. These were apparently lesser runes in the old Runic alphabet, but Prey had been at it for hours. Each time he made a mistake or even simply took too long, Snake made him start again.

Prey was exhausted. Creating runes drained him in a way that he had never experienced before,. It left him feeling thin and stretched inside, as if even breathing was too much effort. If these were only lesser runes, he didn't want to know what creating a higher one would do to him.

Prey didn't know what these runes did. All that had happened was Snake had ordered him to stop preparing a batch of Vox'vola poison and to copy out a set of runes.

Prey had promptly done so, tracing out the runes perfectly and presenting them for inspection. Snake had then struck him with a thorny withe across the back of his legs and instructed him to do it again, but this time "Focus your energy into it." It had taken six more failed attempts and increasingly heavy blows from the thorn

switch before Prey had finally figured out what it was that Snake meant.

The trick was to 'know' what you were creating, not just writing it, and put your all into it's creation. He was pathetically grateful when he figured it out, he'd been growing desperate. Prey wasn't sure how much longer Snake would have kept at it before the voodoo witch decided he was a lost cause and simply disposed of him. Snake was not forgiving of failure. Prey's back legs were already beaded all over with spots of blood by that point. It had actually been one of Snake's less harsh punishments.

Apparently, even the zebra had known that Prey couldn't learn to properly create runes the first time around. If Snake had just explained, Prey could have done it sooner, but that was not the zebra's way. He only ever showed you the process once, and then you had to do it. Sink or swim. That was how it was for a lot of things in the resistance. So far, Prey had managed to swim. Thank the Moon for that, or else he'd have been buried in the mud by now.

He didn't feel thankful.

Prey moved as swiftly as he could to the '*Myru*' rune. 'Only three more to go, only three more to go.' He silently chanted in his head through the grey fog of pain and exhaustion.

Prey didn't want to know what these runes were for, he'd only caught glimpses of Snake working with them a few times. But he knew that whatever these were for, they were evil.

'*Thijak*' came next. Prey felt like he could hardly muster the energy to blink away the sweat, but he forced his hooves to keep going. The curve of the runes double barrel took shape while Prey panted.

Prey didn't even have the energy to hate Snake, the source of his torment. He hadn't had the energy for a while now. Not since Fleece's, no, *Breaker's* death. Nothing seemed to matter anymore.

Not the exhaustion, sorrow, or the painful and cruel pranks of the camp that were frequently heaped upon him, as the Resistance fighters took out their anger and frustration on him, the camps

weakest member. He often went to sleep bruised and bloodied. Prey couldn't even hate them, there was no point.

He had fallen into apathy and melancholy. Nothing held any value to him, because there was no one left.

Prey knew he had despaired. He felt crushing guilt at his brother and mothers deaths. Yule Leaf had been exactly the same when she'd heard her son had been accidentally killed in a raid. She'd blamed herself, and nothing anyone did could shake her from her downward spiral into despair.

Prey recognised and acknowledged it was the same for him. But that only made it worse. He knew, and felt even more guilty and torturous for realising it. Prey had failed both of them, he should never have left his mother that night, he shouldn't have ever let Breaker leave.

The Resistance had taken everything from him, and yet here he was, carving runes on a piece of slate for them. He hated himself. He hated that he was weak. He hated that he still couldn't stand up to them, even if they were going to kill him. He hated that he couldn't bring himself to care. Nothing mattered anyway. The only thing left to do was minimise his own suffering till his time came to join his family in the next life.

Maybe once there he'd at least have the opportunity to say sorry before he was cast down to hell.

It was all his fault. Out of all three of them, he should have known better. He'd always prided himself on being cleverer than everyone in the village, yet he hadn't saved his mother or brother.

'Mother.' 'Brother.' Prey felt unworthy to even think in such terms. They were the mother and brother of Gossamer. He wasn't Gossamer. He was Prey. Gossamer was gone. He was all that was left behind to struggle on futilely.

"That is acceptable." Snake's words broke Prey out of his stupor. Prey realised he was lying on the ground, his legs having finally given out. The piece of slate lay next to his head. 'Did I finish?' Prey

wondered numbly. He couldn't see the surface of the slate from where he lay, and his head was too heavy to lift and look.

Snake reached down and picked it up, Prey saw the leg with its witch charms and bracelets come into his field of vision, then withdraw with the slate. Prey just wanted to go to sleep, but his mind wouldn't let him. It was still too active, chasing itself in miserable circles.

There was some clattering in the tent, and then the voodoo witch moved back into Prey's line of sight, although still completely ignoring the collapsed runt. Snake laid the slate on the ground face up, then carefully sprinkled a pinch of some green powder on it. 'A required activation agent.' Prey's exhausted mind supplied an answer, even if he didn't care. Keeping a wary distance, Snake went over to a jar on the far wall which contained a living mouse, and, catching it by the tail, lifted the squirming animal out.

With a flick of his hoof, Snake tossed the mouse through the air and onto the slate. The was a squeak, a green flash and then a muffled bang.

Through bleary eyes, Prey looked for the mouse. It was still there, but crumpled and twisted with little bits of white poking through its skin. Bone fragments he realised. The mouse was very dead, but the slate had broken into tiny pieces as well.

Prey was no fool, he knew why he'd been forced to learn this skill, and what Snake was going to do with it. Runes that exploded with bone shattering force when a living creature passed over them could only have one use. And with what the voodoo witch had said earlier, he was going to to force Prey into accompanying him to lay a trap for the Guard. Snake was going to turn him into a killer, and there was nothing he could do about it.

"Acceptable." Snake decided, studying the result, "Clean this up before I return." That was all the zebra said before he turned and walked out of the tent, leaving Prey lying there.

Through half closed eyes that couldn't even cry anymore, Prey stared at the canvas tent wall. It was stained and streaked with dirt

and fouler things. 'How much longer?' Prey thought. 'How much longer in this hell until I die?'

It wasn't till later when he looked back, that Prey realised he'd learnt an important lesson that day.

Those who said 'when you have nothing you have nothing to lose' were wrong. As long as you were still alive, there was always something more that could be taken from you. Your pride, your health, your mind, your body, your innocence, your love, your self respect, your sanity, your blood, sweat, and tears, and finally in the end, your life.

'Guess I'm going to keep living and losing everything, piece by piece, till someone finally takes my life as well.' Prey let out a hollow giggle through numb lips, "And may you find much joy in taking it, because I'm going to bring nothing but misery until you do." He mumbled to the dead mouse.

---The present---

Prey lay under the blanket. His eyes were closed and he hadn't moved an inch from where he'd lain down, but he wasn't asleep. He was thinking, letting his mind pick over his past life. Prey knew he'd been only young back then, grieving, shattered by survivors guilt and depression. That was only to be expected.

But he'd been wrong to feel such despair when there were those still left alive to pay. Captain Fire Strike still had much to lose for taking his brother from him. It hadn't been Fire Strike personally, in fact Prey didn't know who it was that had actually killed Breaker. Probably just some Border Guard.

It hadn't been anything out of the ordinary. His brother was simply in a patrol that ran into a Guard unit by accident. Five killed, all of them on the Resistance's side. The griffin Razor and his brother Breaker were among those slain.

Prey had collapsed from shock when they'd announced the news. He couldn't believe it, his brother was dead? But how? Wasn't Razor supposed to be one of the Resistance's founding members and a

strong warrior? Even though Razor had stolen and twisted his brothers mind, Prey'd still held the desperate expectation that the griffin's presence would somehow be enough to keep Breaker alive.

Prey smiled bitterly to himself under the covers. He'd learnt another important lesson on that day. No one is immortal. Anyone can be killed. There had been a deer in the camp who had been annoyingly fond of saying; 'We all have to cross the river some day.' If Prey remembered correctly, and he always did, that deer had died to a bug-bear. But Prey remembered his words.

'Captain Valour shall learn both lessons. You can't bring a snake into your home and think you won't get bitten.' He thought.

Captain Valour had many things that could be taken from him, as did all the Solar Guards. They just didn't realise it yet, nor what kind of threat Prey posed. He would continue to play his part, lulling them into a false sense of security. He would leech away their wariness, let them think they were making their own decisions when in fact they were just following his. 'The best pieces are those who think they are making their own moves.'

Like right now, the Solar Guard thought that these thieves were after a set of books from the L, M, N sections of these rich ponies libraries.

That was only half the truth. The Solar guard thought that looking for these books and then laying a trap was what would lead them to catching the thieves.

That might work, if not for the small fact that the *real* stolen books had been the ones hidden in safes and lock boxes throughout the raided mansions. Prey refused to believe that someone like Cedar Fields didn't have a hidden safe. And if *he* did, then so too did most of the other rich mansion owners as well.

Safes and lock boxes that had now been forgotten by their owners.

Safes and lock boxes that had now been forgotten by their owners. The thieves would have discovered these stashes when they read the owners memories. Later, when they removed said memories, the

safes existence became lost to all but the thieves themselves.Even now, hidden under floor boards or behind picture frames lay empty safes which their owners had no knowledge of. Just forgotten and collecting dust.

What the Solar Guard didn't realise was that almost all the mansions they were watching had already been hit.

That drivel about the thieves not being able to teleport into mansions on leylines and bed rock was the truth. What Prey's captors somehow had failed to grasp, was that this didn't stop the thieves simply robbing mansions which *weren't* built on leylines. These books weren't exclusive to only those mansions after all.

The difference was, that when these normal mansions were hit, there was no crime scene. The thieves simply teleported in, subdued the owner, and searched his memories to see if he had the books. If he did, they took the books and his memory of the books. If not, they simply took his memory either way and teleported out with no one any the wiser.

The only reason for the elaborate crime scenes and vandalism inside the mansions which couldn't be teleported in and out of was to serve as a distraction. Prey *had* been telling the truth when he'd informed the Solar Guards of that.

That just left the question of why they took the M, N, and L books from Cedar Fields mansion and also the other houses they'd obviously raided . Prey guessed it was as an insurance policy. It wasn't a large stretch of the imagination to think that a rich pony, (with a house so big they had to hire others just to keep it running) might have more books on their shelves than they even knew the titles of.

Hence, when the thieves checked the owners memories, the owner didn't actually know all the books they had in their collection. Additionally, in the mansion's like Cedar Fields where they couldn't teleport out of, they were no doubt pressed for time. So they took all the 'L' to 'N' books both in the safes and also the ones on the shelves. Just to be sure.

It all made perfect sense to Prey, even if it wouldn't to anyone else. It was quite similar to something he'd do in their place. 'I wonder who the unicorn leader of this group is, and what's in those books that they're so desperate to find?' Prey wondered.

It didn't really matter. He could learn it all once he ripped it from their memories. However, it would certainly make it easier to predict their actions if he could figure out what was the information in those books. But since the thieves had already gone to such lengths to prevent it coming to light, that was probably a vain hope.

Any theory he might produce was as likely to be wrong as right under such circumstances, and he would be disinclined to trust anyone else's theory on the matter. It could even be possible that such a theory was a ploy cleverly left behind by the thieves to throw Prey off the scent. 'Me off the scent? No, the Guards, but not me personally. Unless the Solar Guards have a traitor in their midst, the thieves know nothing of me.'

Captain Valour had ordered a list of all the potential mansions the thieves had yet to hit be created yesterday. They hadn't drawn up the list yet, but Prey had already worked out that out of the thirty two possible targets, at least twenty one of them had already been hit. Although the Solar guard only knew about six of those incursions. Out of the remaining eleven mansions, another five definitely hadn't been raided yet, while there was insufficient evidence to determine the status of the remaining six.

'Five targets left atleast. I have some time then.' Prey decided.

Time that he was currently spending lying on a surprisingly comfortable bed. Much more comfortable than he deserved, what with being a dangerous criminal responsible for some of the most heinous crimes imaginable to ponykind, and quite a few more that they couldn't.

Then again, for some reason they didn't seem to have his full criminal record. That, and the Solar Guards were *ponies*. They were soft, having grown complacent under the safety of Celestia's wing.

'The blanket's nice though.' Prey thought, pulling it closer around

him. They had not allowed the prisoners in Dreverton blankets, only a bunk firmly bolted to the floor. The Guards didn't want the prisoners hanging themselves or anything. Absently, he probed his split cheek with his tongue where Cedar Fields had struck him. To his annoyance, he found it still stung.

With a sigh, Prey kicked the blanket off and rolled into a sitting position with a clink of chains, he'd rested long enough.

The two Solar Guards at the door stiffened at his movement and stood alert. It was two unicorns that Prey didn't know the name of. He'd been aware of the Guard shift changing during the night despite being asleep, but it wasn't important. Paying them no attention, he let himself down off the bed, sliding off to land on the floor with a 'plop', rear hooves first. He took a drink from the sink, hauling himself up to the tap and dangling by his front hooves, luckily still not high up enough to look in the small mirror.

When he was done he walked out of the door into the office. The two unicorns said nothing, just floated over the chain leash and clicked it back onto the bracket in the middle of the floor. Prey spared the unicorn an eye roll before he scrambled up the chair leg and onto the high pile of cushions.

"Don't worry I've got this covered, I don't need any helping hoof up, I'm fine." Prey sweetly told the two Guards.

They flared their nostrils but otherwise did not react. Seems they were determined to keep out of hoofs reach. 'Oh well, it was a slim chance anyway.' Prey thought with a mental shrug.

He took a moment to survey all the piles of paper he had sorted over the last two days. They were exactly as he'd left them.

Prey didn't have anything to do. He'd already read all the reports, and with some concentration, could recall any one of them on demand. Prey looked out the barred window, which showed nothing but the blank side of another Guard building. It looked like it was still early morning. Prey looked down and gave the chain attacked to his inhibitor collar an experimental tug. 'Nope, still no change. Still a prisoner.'

Prey sighed and picked up one of the closest reports. Dully he began picking through it, the very picture of boredom while the grey light from outside slowly filtered into the room.

Inside, he waited and planned.

[[[Bonus Picture- The Deeper Green Fireside Camp]]]

https://imgur.com/OPRi54Y

6.0 Lies are the best sympathy

Prey was interrupted from doing nothing by the blue ripple of magic unlocking the door. It opened and one of the two Pegasus guards came in bringing what could only be called a tray of breakfast.

Prey wasn't actually too sure, and had to look twice before he could confirm it. What was even more startling was when the Solar Guard passed it to one of the unicorns who then, instead of eating it, floated it over and dropped it in front of him. Prey cautiously extended a cloven fore hoof, "Is that an orange? And an apple? And... Bread?" He mumbled. The unicorn quirked an eyebrow under his helm at him, but said nothing.

Prey surreptitiously checked the food for poison as he hesitantly lifted the apple, something which required both his front hooves because of his size, sniffing it and checking its glossy red surface for contamination.

Not that he thought the Solar Guard would poison him, but old habits die hard.

Prey let out a muffled giggle, "Truly, they weren't lying when they said ponies were the privileged chosen." He mumbled to himself.

"Are you going to eat that or just sit there looking at it?" The unicorn asked pointedly.

Prey shot him a murderous look, cold enough to almost make the Guard take an instinctive step backwards, "You're so privileged and you don't even know it. It makes me feel sick." Prey told him.

Before the Guard could offer a reply Prey returned his attention to the food. With one last check for poisons, Prey took a small, neat bite. He just sat there for a while slowly chewing, face blank. He swallowed and looked down at the rest of the apple in his fore hooves. "And they don't even realise it." He mumbled to himself. Bringing up his hooves, Prey took a much larger bite.

Prey was slouched on the tower of cushions, idly shifting through reports. He was keeping up the appearance of looking busy while still managing to annoy his Guards, when the magical ripple flowed out from the door.

Prey didn't react, but his soft blue eyes keenly watched the effect. Every time he saw it, he got that much closer to figuring out what type of barrier spell it was. Assessing and eliminating possible scenarios until eventually only one would remain. He didn't know what the spell was, but he could figure out how to get around it.

In marched Sunshine and Gold Bit. Prey pretended to ignore them as they exchanged a salute with his other two unicorn Guards and a few whispered words that even Prey's ears weren't able to pick up. While they were doing so, Prey slipped a hoof under the desk. He lightly traced a different rune, letting the faint build up of stored energy from yesterday flow out into his newest creation.

The two unicorn Guards he didn't know left, and Prey caught a few of their words as the door closed; "-she even ate the orange peel." Then the ripple once again spread out as the door closed. Sunshine and Gold Bit took up their position either side of his chair and settled into stance.

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Three or four of hours passed in silence.

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Prey slowly grew restless. First, he began flicking through reports carelessly. That moved onto leaning his chin on one hoof and then the other and fidgeting with the chain, shifting the cushions under him into different positions, and swinging his legs.

-

Eventually, after the fifth hour, Prey tossed the current report he was leafing through back onto the pile and swivelled on his cushion pile to face Sunshine, "Well, not that this isn't riveting, but what's

happening out there with the investigation? I'm bored." He said.

It was of course all an act. Prey had the patience of a snake. That's why he'd spent the last five hours visibly building up to this. The Guards would expect him to be able to keep going for hours, just as he first had when he got here. But now that he'd already sorted all the reports and given them the information they needed, he would be forgiven for acting bored.

"Not our problem if you're bored." Gold Bit stated.

"But I am your responsibility, so *surely* you won't object to just talking?" Prey asked. He'd asked it as a question to get a response, one which Sunshine provided.

"That depends."

"On what I want to talk about?" Prey guessed with a raised eyebrow, "How about what's happening out there with the investigation? You are still running that aren't you, or have you given up?"

"No, obviously we haven't given up. And that's restricted information." Gold Bit immediately replied.

"Even though I'm an integral part of this investigation and so far have done all of the work for you?" Prey asked with fake innocence.

Gold Bit scowled at him, "Did you secure the grounds or search the mansion? Have you stood guard over the victims or questioned the servants? Are you currently nursing and caring for Cedar Fields at this very moment? Did you personally search for clues instead of making clever guesses? Or did you just get fed all that from these reports, which were compiled by numerous other hard working ponies *might I add*? If not, then no, you didn't do all the work." Gold Bit retorted.

"Peace," Sunshine calmed him, "You're not the only one who's frustrated by this whole thing. If you want to rant, you can come to a bar with me later after we're off duty, I heard there's a good one around the corner." He suggested with a smirk.

"I take it that means it's going poorly." Prey said before Gold Bit could give Sunshine a response.

Both Solar Guards gave him a look, "You could say your mere presence here, instead of in a cell back in Dreverton, indicates as much." Sunshine dead panned, while Prey caught a mutter of "Criminal mind leech." From Gold Bit under his breath.

"Oh come on, am I really such a terrifying criminal as all that? I hardly strike fear into the hearts of ponies. I mean, have you looked at me recently?" Prey asked flippantly, spreading his small hooves wide and smiling at them.

There was a slight pause, the tiniest flicker of hesitance on the Guards otherwise stony countenances before it was gone. "Those who resort to the cowardly acts of criminals and discard their decency don't have the right to complain when they are caught and punished. You made your choice, and these are the consequences." Gold Bit stated firmly, flicking his ears dismissively and turning his eyes away.

"Punishment follows breaking the law, it's the natural way of things. This is your chance to repay society for some of the misery you've caused." Sunshine added to his fellow Guard's statement.

Prey decided not to bother arguing the concept of 'he who made the law decides what morals are'. He knew neither Solar Guard would budge in their loyalty to their duty. "Yes yes, you've already told me that multiple times before. I'm a dangerous criminal and I should be thankful to dragged out and press ganged into service to your princess." He retorted.

"Princess Celestia is the rightful ruler of Equestria-"
"No, she's *yours*. Tell me, does Celestia rule the Griffin empire or the Deer Kingdom? The Minotaur lands or the Dragon roosts? How about the Diamond dogs or the zebras? The yaks, hippogriffs, buffalo, camels, or any other sub-race?" Prey asked.

"Of course not, she simply rules Equestria, guiding it along a better path. She allows the other lands the right to govern themselves as they see fit." Sunshine confidently replied at the same time that

Gold Bit muttered, "Hippogriffs?"

Prey pointed a hoof at Sunshine, "You see my point? Celestia does not rule the whole world, so why should I name her my ruler? What has she ever done for me?" Prey demanded.

"The princess raises both the sun and the moon every day and night. She keeps us all safe and rules with love and kindness, none go hungry and all are treated equally. She stands against the darkness and protects us all. The very bed you slept in and the food you ate was funded by her policies and government. *Everyone* is in the Princess's debt." Sunshine said, emphasising the word '*everyone*' and not '*everypony*' for once.

Prey laughed. It was a delighted sound, light and bubbly, "Heh heh. None go hungry and all are treated equally?" He laughed, "Heh heh heh. Obviously you've never been beyond your borders before."

Both the Solar Guards frowned disapprovingly at him, "You don't know what you are talking about. You are too young to have gone out there either. You're just repeating hateful phrases that you have heard others say instead of thinking for yourself." Sunshine told him.

Prey giggled harder, "You are so sure of your own inherent goodness that it blinds you to the blatant hypocrisy of what you just said. 'Just repeating what you've heard others say instead of thinking for yourself?' Ha! So what does that say about you?" Prey retorted with a grin.

Gold Bit snorted and turned away, "Don't bother arguing with the mind leech Sunshine, he'll just twist anything you try to say."

"I thought this was the land of free speech," Prey responded with a shrug, "But obviously you don't believe my words anyway, so I'll save my breath."

Gold Bit flicked an ear in annoyance at Prey, "You do that."

"You still haven't answered my question Gold Bit," Prey shot back at the Unicorn, "Aside from your personal dislike of me, what have I

done that's so wrong?"

Gold Bit scoffed, "Stealing the thoughts and memories of others to use for you own twisted purposes like any mind leech obviously. We all read the file so don't think you can fake your innocence." He replied.

"Oh?" Prey perked up in genuine interest. This was one of the things he'd been aiming to learn from this conversation, and there was no harm in making that interest known. Either they would tell him, or they wouldn't. "So what did it say?" He enquired.

"What's it to you?" Sunshine asked suspiciously.

"Nothing really, I was just asking." Prey responded, returning to the piles of paper on the desk in front of him like he hadn't been that interested anyway.

"Illegal use dark magic, use of forbidden mind magic, theft and invasion of privacy, subduing and enslavement of ponies through said forbidden magic, threatening the general populace through reckless misuse of both dark magic and forbidden magic, non-compliance with existing magical laws and magical registration, indirect involvement with a pony's death, and numerous other minor law infringements." Gold Bit recited from memory.

Prey took note of that, 'Good recall. He hasn't shown any previous aptitude for a eidetic memory, so it seems likely he read the report multiple times, and recently too. Something must have made him want to double check on me to reassure himself. Was it wariness of my abilities, or uncertainty about what they're doing?' Prey wondered.

Sunshine nodded in agreement at his fellow guard's words, "What he said."

"Is that it?" Prey asked lightly, "You forgot a few things from that list." Sunshine frowned disapprovingly at Prey's words. 'Many many things.' It seemed that for some reason the Solar Guards really didn't have an accurate report of him. There was one way to be sure.

"How old am I?" Prey asked.

"Huh?"

"How old am I? I lost track of time in Dreverton, but it can't have been long. I'd like know how old I am. So what did it say in that file of yours?" Prey asked.

Gold Bit narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, but didn't respond. 'He doesn't know.' Prey thought. 'Unsurprising, considering how little they seemed to actually know about me, but still interesting.' Prey turned his attention to the other guard for his answer.

Sunshine thought for a moment, his eyes regarded Prey uncertainly, "You can't be older than than ten. If you were in there for, say, at most, three years, then that means..." He trailed off, " Seven. So young." He muttered to himself. Prey wouldn't have caught any of that if he hadn't been Prey. He often found that those without excellent hearing often underestimated those who did.

Prey hid a grin at their confirmation of his suspicions, "It's alright if you don't know, it's not really important. Why don't you just tell me about something else instead to pass the time?" He suggested.

"We already told you it's not our problem if you're bored." Gold Bit repeated.

"Be honest. The real reason you don't want to talk with me is because you're afraid you'll let something of vital importance slip, and then the next thing you know I'll have taken over all of Equestria. You're just being paranoid, what words could you possibly say that would lead to my escape? But since you're paranoid, you've decided it's just better that you don't say anything at all. Isn't that right, Gold Bit?" Prey asked with another infuriating smile.

"Better safe than sorry." Gold Bit groused, while Sunshine hid a cough.

Prey just gave Gold Bit another bright smile and turned to a Sunshine, "How about you or are you also afraid?" He asked.

"You certainly don't act your age." Sunshine noted dryly.

"What can I say? I'm young at heart." Prey joked.

Prey was once again getting the impression that although the Solar Guard took his job seriously, he perhaps didn't take Prey seriously enough as a threat. In fact none of them did. They didn't seem to realise that he was a threat because of his small and weak appearance. They let him speak out of turn rather than beating him into silence every time he did, like they'd done in the Resistance whenever they took a prisoner. But Sunshine more so than any other of the Solar Guards. That was why out of the two unicorns, Prey had been subtly politer to Sunshine, in the hope of influencing the unicorn to do the same.

He was still going to kill both of them though.

"That's not what I meant." Sunshine said.

Prey shrugged, "Never mind then. So are you going to answer my question or not?"

Sunshine hesitated, "No, I can't. We're under strict orders." He said.

"But what's the harm-?"

"No." Sunshine repeated firmly, "Don't you have work you need to be doing anyway?" He asked.

Prey decided not to risk what he'd gained by pressing any further and instead answered Sunshine's own question; "No actually. I've already found out all I can from these reports, so unless new information is brought to light, there is nothing further I can do right now. That's why I'm bored and trying to talk to you."

It was the truth, he didn't have anything else he could learn from these reports. That he hadn't quite shared everything he'd learnt was beside the point. Prey knew when to hoard bits and pieces to use as leverage later on.

Sunshine 'humph'd' and shrugged his well muscled shoulders, "That's your choice. But if you can't provide anything further to this

investigation, I doubt Captain Valour is going to keep you around much longer. You might want to think about that before saying you have no work to do." He said.

Prey gave the unicorn a patient look, "I cannot work with old information to make new discoveries, and it's you Solar Guard's who are the ones who gave me this '*job*' in the first place. Besides," Prey added with a sideways tilt of his head and a smirk creasing his soft white face, "I never said I have noting left to offer to your captain."

Sunshine had asked what he meant, where as Gold Bit had demanded that Prey tell them what he'd found. What Prey told them was that they'd have to wait until their Captain came in person.

Gold Bit had then tried to order Prey to tell them, but he'd just giggled at them, even when it looked like Gold Bit was getting ready to blast him with another stunning spell. It's not that Prey wasn't terrified of the unicorns magic, because he was. It's just that he hid it and pretended he didn't care. Much can be gained from a perceived position of invulnerability. If you acted like you weren't scared, then they believed that you weren't scared.

Eventually, in the face of Prey's stubbornness, Sunshine had opened to the door and told one of the pegasus to send a note to Captain Valour. Prey caught them saying something about the Captain being in Canterlot for; 'an important meeting with Captain Shining Armour and Major Hard Hoof,' and that he wouldn't be back util later that night.

Gold Bit had once again tried to order Prey to tell them what he 'd learned, but Prey brushed him off saying, "It's not time sensitive and doesn't relate to catching your thieves. You can wait." This had annoyed both the Guards to no end, but they couldn't do anything short of beating it out of him.

Despite his seeming indifference, Prey was keenly aware of time.

He was counting down every hour, working out how many more of the remaining six untouched mansions the thieves would hit. How soon? Which approach would suit him best? Prey tried to analyse it all. He estimated that he had another two days, possibly two and a half at the minimum, and six at the most if they only hit one a night.

Prey hoped the thieves decided to be cautious and took it slow. The longer they delayed the longer Prey had to work on his escape and come up with back up plans. Like the runes he was carving into the underside of the desk right now for instance.

Prey kept his face completely blank as he pushed his hoof into the wood, ignoring the still recovering hoof's twinges of pain as he did so. His hooves had stared to harden up again after being released from their restraints, but it was a slow process and they were still quite tender.

That didn't matter though. This could hardly even be called discomfort, let alone real pain. Besides, in a little while he'd have to spill some of his blood for a couple of the more special runes. Still only lower tier runes, but as he had no other available energy source, (and wouldn't have risked tripping the magical alarms even if he did) the life energy from his blood was his only choice. *If* it didn't set off the alarms. He still wasn't 100 percent sure about that, not knowing exactly what alarms were being used.

"What are you thinking about right now?" Sunshine abruptly asked.

"Home," Prey immediately lied, "Not that it's any of your business."

"You're the one who said you were bored and wanted to talk." Sunshine replied.

Prey decided to run with this conversation and see what happened, "I suppose I did." He offered a shrug, "I was just wondering what home looks like right now, how it's changed over the years. I wonder if thorn bushes have over taken the fields. I imagine vines have covered the well by now too. Maybe grass has grown over the ruins, the New Moon knows we tried for long enough to get grass to grow."

Gold Bit rolled his eyes derisively, "Stop being precocious and melodramatic, you're still just a lamb. It takes more than a few years for buildings to collapse anyhow. The sheep flocks living from wherever you came from rest easier at night now that you're safely locked away mind leach." He snorted.

Sunshine picked up on something else, "You said, 'we'?" He took a step closer to where Prey sat, "You're file made no mention of gang participation or gang action. What was the name of the gang? There has recently been a crack down on gangs, this might be useful."

Gold Bit looked up in interest, "You're right, that might be important. What was your gang name and who was its leader? Was it disbanded after your capture?" He asked aggressively.

Prey shrugged, "No idea, because there was no 'gang' as you so quaintly put it. Not by the end anyway. It was just me left in the end. Me against everyone else." He paused for a moment, the amended, "And the Deeper Green. We were all against the Deeper Green, and it was against all of us."

"Deeper Green?" Sunshine asked.

"You didn't answer my question." Gold Bit said.

Prey flicked an ear over his shoulder in annoyance, "That's because you misinterpreted my words. When I said 'we', I didn't mean a gang."

"You're village then?" Sunshine butted in.

Prey looked at him coldly, "Yes, but no. I meant my old home and farm." He answered.

"Despite their criminal lamb, I'm sure your family is doing fine. Parents and siblings won't be punished even indirectly for their child's crimes. There is also a self help charity set up in place to assist loved ones cope and face the reality of their family or spouse being a criminal. Face it 452, they're better off without you." Gold Bit said with a dismissive motion of his hoof.

Prey had stopped tracing the rune's under the desk half way

through Gold Bit's little speech on fairness, and turned to give the unicorn his full attention and a blank smile.

Now Prey started to giggle, then laugh, hooves clutching his thin sides. The laugh was just as light and happy as before, but now it held an edge, "Well you're not wrong there!" He laughed, "A charity for the families of criminals? Heh Heh Heh! Brilliant! Of course, it's exactly what you ponies would do, Ha! Why don't you dispatch them at once? Just give them directions to the village of Rush Weed and they can get right to comforting all those bereft families. Heh heh heh! Oh I haven't laughed so in ages." He chuckled, pushing a droopy ear out of his face. Laughing had made his split cheek start to hurt again.

Prey sighed and settled back down, that blank smile still in place as he looked up at Gold Bit, "Oh you have no idea how sheltered and privileged you really are." He repeated softly with a shake of his head.

Prey was lying with his head on the table, ears folded out of the way, pretending to be asleep.

He'd been like that for the last hour, one foreleg cushioning his head and the other tucked limply under the desk. Millimeter by crawling millimeter he continued with tracing out the runes, his movements so gradual that they were unnoticeable. The Solar Guards hadn't said anything after his small laughing fit. They had remained stoic and composed, (they were the Solar Guard after all) but he'd seen in their faces that he'd unnerved them, even if only slightly.

"Do you think?" Prey heard Sunshine ask softly.

"If you mean, 'do you think the prisoner is actually asleep?' Then yes." Gold Bit answered in an equally quite undertone. Prey could already hear everything they were saying perfectly, but he focused his attention to listen harder anyway.

"Then are you holding out?" Sunshine whispered. Although Prey

had his eyes closed and didn't hear Gold Bit answer, he could clearly imagine the questioning glance that Gold Bit returned.

"You know what I mean; are you still managing to stay impartial?" Sunshine asked quietly.

There was a pause, then Gold Bit gave a small sigh, "Yes I am. But for the opposite reasons than normal."

"Because he's just a lamb?" Sunshine asked.

"Yeah. It's not what I expected from a mind leech. Usually criminals just make me angry, not...Angry *and* uncertain." Gold Bit said, clear irritation in his tone.

"Are you sure you're still impartial as our job dictates?" Sunshine questioned jokingly.

"Of course I am! I'm well aware it's a mind leech who'll try anything to escape, I'm not totally stupid. It's yourself that you should be worried about." Gold Bit replied.

"Good job that I'm not worried then." Sunshine returned lightly.

"Are you sure? If not, then you should speak to the captain." Gold Bit said.

"Yes I'm sure. Just like you, I'm not totally stupid. It's just hard sometimes-"

"-To not be stupid?" Gold Bit interrupted in a rare display of humour.

"Hardy har har. No you idiot. Sometimes it's just hard to associate a mere lamb with everything he's done in the file. In my books, criminals shouldn't look so innocent when sleeping. Or like a filly." Prey heard a quiet chuckle and the movement of armour as Sunshine shrugged.

"You know I'm required by protocol to raise any concerns to the captain if I'm worried you're no longer impartial towards the prisoner. Especially something like him." Gold Bit stated somewhat

reluctantly.

"Don't worry, if it gets to that stage I'll speak to Captain Valour myself and ask for reassignment. I was in the briefing, same as everypony else." Sunshine reposed gravely.

"That's good to hear." Gold Bit said, much happier now.

"No worries." Sunshine replied easily. Both Solar Guards lapsed back into silence.

Prey stayed where he was, unmoving aside from his soft, rhythmic breathing of feigned sleep. That had been most...Interesting. He'd just been thinking about something similar, when the two Solar Guards had confirmed quite a few of his suspicions.

It was very convenient, which of course made Prey wary of taking it at face value, 'Did they know I was listening? Was it a staged conversation?' Prey considered it carefully, before deciding that it had indeed been a genuine conversation. Unfortunately, it seemed the Guards were already aware of their breech in self discipline, and were working to keep an eye on it. So in the end, he'd gained almost nothing he didn't already know.

Another hour passed and Prey drew out three additional non-active runes on the underside of the desk. These weren't passive runes, but either triggered or activated runes.

Essentially it meant that they currently were turned off. Prey was fairly certain turning them on would trigger the magical alarms, so he'd only get one use out of them before the Guards came running. But he wasn't quite ready for that stage of his plan.

A further hour was already well on its way in passing them by, with the time was fast approaching for the Guard shift change. That was when the now familiar blue ripple of magic spread out from the door.

"-Princess Celestia's prodigy." Captain Valour said, finishing of his conversation as he stepped in through the open door, "I received the

message. Anything concerns to report?" He barked to Sunshine and Gold Bit.

"Nothing of importance sir." Sunshine answered smartly, Gold Bit echoing his words a moment later.

"Good work." Captain Valour came to a stop across the desk from where Prey was still pretending to be asleep, "Get up prisoner 452!" He roared.

Prey flicked open one eye and looked up at the massive unicorn, "Yes captain?" He asked politely. The familiar sight of Captain Valour's face looking like a pot approaching the boil greeted him. Captain Valour wore that expression a lot when speaking to him Prey noted smugly.

"Why are you sleeping and not completing your task?!"

"As I already explained to your Guards, I am unable to make new discoveries with old information. Unless you give me something new to work with, I am limited in what I can do." Prey replied evenly, keeping his tone, if not *respectful*, then at least neutral.

"I will not tolerate lies 452, nor laziness. You will work, or I will return you to Dreverton within the hour. Is that understood?" Captain Valour threatened.

"Alright." Prey answered after a moment.

Captain Valour narrowed his eyes suspiciously at Prey's easy surrender, obviously having expected more of a fight. Without breaking his gaze the captain addressed Prey's two Guards, "The message said you had something, what was it?"

"We don't know sir, the prisoner refused to say until you arrived." Gold Bit answered.

As expected, Captain Valour did not take this well, "How dare you! You think this is some game? That you, a criminal, can decide with who and what you want to share? You forget your place prisoner! What about your position gave you the illusion that you have any say in the matter? You. Will. Do. As. I. Say. When. I. Say!" The

captain bellowed into Prey's face.

Prey rubbed his ears to try and alleviate the ringing, "And I have been. You just never said anything about doing as your lackeys ordered, and as you're here now I see no reason to continue-" Prey was cut off as Captain Valour grabbed the chain attached to his inhibitor collar and savagely yanked him across the desk, scattering papers.

He was still struggling to regain his breath when Captain Valour bore down on him, nose to nose, "Your constant excuses and attempts to find loop holes are as transparent as your lies and twice as annoying. Are you that deluded that you take me for a fool? I know your kind, I have brought many of you filthy scum low during my time. Now you will tell me what it is you think you've discovered, and pray for your sake that it's good." The Captain's brown eyes shone with barely restrained righteous fury, as he glared into Prey's own where the sheep lay on the desk.

Prey swallowed and took a moment to get his breathing back under control, 'This is all temporary and part of the plan, I'll kill him later, I will!' Prey reminded himself. He took a deep a breath as he could with Captain Valour's face still filling his vision; "I know a way to restore the victims memories and find out who these criminals are." Prey hurriedly said.

Captain Valour's gaze grew even more intense if that were possible, and Prey could hear the other Solar Guards leaning in closer in interest, "Tell me." Captain Valour demanded.

Prey took a steadying breath, then shakily tapped a hoof against the crystal studded collar, "Just take this off and I'll fix them for you." He told them.

"-And if you so much as even think of touching them again I will break every worthless bone in your runt body! I will have you thrown into Tartarus itself! You will never have access to them to twist their minds to your wretched schemes! Your threats are meaningless-"

"Captain," Broke in Sunshine, "I think the prisoner is running out of air.

Prey was busy scrabbling at the collar around his throat as he dangled in the air, swinging back and forth on the chain as he struggled to breathe. His back hooves were only an inch off the desk, but for all his frantic kicking, he couldn't quite reach it to alleviate the pressure on his throat. Captain Valour paused in yelling into Prey's face and regarded the sheep where he swung on the chain. The coils were firmly bunched around his armoured hoof that he'd used to yank Prey into the air with.

'Part of the plan, part of the plan, just keep up the act and don't give in to fear.' Prey repeated to himself.

After a moment, Captain Valour let go of the chain and Prey dropped back onto the desk with a clatter of chains. The unicorn captain glowered down at Prey as he gasped and panted, scrabbling back to get out of hoof's reach. Prey wasn't nearly as winded as he let on. He knew he could have remained conscious for at least another three and a half minutes before fully blacking out. The collar had only restricted his airway, not cut it off entirely, but he played it up for all it was worth.

'gasp' "W-what-", *'Cough cough cough'* "Is that how-" *'wheeze'* "Treat those-" *'cough'* "-Offering to help?" Prey gasped out as he curled up on the far side of the desk, nursing his throat. A furtive glance at Sunshine and Gold Bit saw that although slightly grim faced, neither seemed inclined to disagree overly with their Captain's actions.

"You're lucky to still be breathing after threatening to turn those poor victims into your mind puppets." Captain Valour growled.

"I was offering-" *Wheeze* "To restore their memories and fix what's wrong with them." *Cough* "All I'd do is go inside and undo the trigger that turns them into raving lunatics, if you'd just take this collar off." Prey protested. Actually, he could already do that if he could just lay his hoof on the victim. However the Solar Guards still thought the collar was what was restricting his mind magic, and he needed to keep up that appearance.

"Your blatant attempts at tricking us into freeing you will not work-"

"I'm-*cough* Telling the truth!"

"-And your vile attempts to play off our sympathy towards Cedar Fields and the other victims condition is disgusting. The Solar Guard is sworn to their protection. As much as it pains me to see them like this, I know that letting you loose on them would be crueller than death. For you would not undo the damage, only appear to, and secretly enslave them to your will through your disgusting magics." Captain Valour spat.

"That's not true! I would heal them and leave them exactly as they were before." Prey lied.

He could do that, in fact he doubted it would be hard. From what he'd seen, Cedar Felids memories had only been suppressed and not erased. And to fix the issue of the trigger memory relating to the stolen books, he could simply reset the victims memories to the night before the attack ever occurred and leave them none the wiser.

It would be a bit more complicated than that, but not that hard to pull off in the long run. Prey *could* do it. He hadn't been lying about that. He just *wouldn't* do it. If the Solar Guard captain had indeed been foolish enough to let him 'fix' the victims, he would have done just that. Except with a few hidden touches of his own left behind.

Captain Valour gave Prey's protests of innocence all the consideration they deserved, "You're despicable." He snorted in disgust. With a clump of armoured hooves he turned and headed for the door, "Prepare the prisoner for transport. He's tested both my patience and wasted my time. We're sending him back to his cell in Dreverton immediately."

"Hang on, I was telling the truth-" Prey shouted over the joint chorus of "Yes sir." As Sunshine and Gold Bit jumped to their Captain's command. Prey knew he had to act quickly, this was he risky part. Either the Captain would listen or he would not, but he'd needed to distract and unbalance Captain Valour with a feint first.

"-And besides, that wasn't all I called you here for, I also know how to figure out where the thieves are going to strike next." Prey called.

For a horrible moment, Prey thought he'd over judged the captains thirst for retribution on the thieves , but after three more steps the Captain Valour came to a halt.

"If this is some further trick in an attempt to buy yourself time..." Valour began.

"There's a further connection between the attacks! I have a theory, but I don't have the information that I need to be sure. But if I can get it I know I can find it for sure and predict the location of the next attack down to the hour! Please, just give me a chance!" Prey frantically babbled. He wanted to come across as desperate, that was part of the plan. Captain Valour needed to think that Prey was too panicked at the prospect of being thrown back into Dreverton to come up with a lie. He needed to think that he had the upper hoof, so that he wouldn't even think to be suspicious of Prey's real intentions.

"I just need some information, that's all! With it I can definitely find out where the thieves are going to strike. I can prove it, if you'll just give me a chance." Prey hurriedly told Captain Valour, the words all coming out in one breathless rush.

The Solar Captain didn't turn around or say a thing, he just waited.

Prey drew a shaky breath and continued; "A list of the nobles and their families and how many servants they roughly employ, the furthest and closest distances the mansions are from each other, and a street and plan of the shops around those mansions. If you can, then also which nobles are planning to go out of town, and, a-and also if they've hosted a party or banquet recently. That bit could be very important." Prey said, cringing as he finished the list as if expecting a blow.

Captain Valour was silent, brooding on what Prey had said. The prisoner cast an anxious glance at Sunshine and Gold Bit, but they stood unmoving, waiting for their captains orders.

"Fine," Captain Valour said, "We lose nothing by at least letting you attempt to find them, but that is all. I will decide what to do with you further once you have presented your findings." He nodded to the other two Solar Guards, "As you were." And then he marched out the door.

Prey felt the smile building, the queasy fluttering feeling in the stomach of the hunt growing. He knew the sickly, unpleasant tingling well. He'd experienced it many a time fighting the Border Guard. It was the feeling that came after tracking your prey, locating it, and next began the stalk closing in for the kill.

'Oh how I hate and love this feeling.'

7.0 When you try your best but you don't succeed

Author's Notes:

If you see a mistake, please point it out to me.
Thanks.
Edit: Thank you once again to **Sweetolebob18** for doing just that.

They brought all the information he'd requested, and dumped the reports on the desk without a word. Prey could tell that he wasn't the most popular lamb right now, but then he'd never cared in the first place. So for the next day and a half, he pretended to work.

Prey poured over the maps and lists of names, cross referenced them with each other, linked and unlinked them, built up and dismantled stacks of paperwork, read and reread reports for hours on end in a massive display of dedication. It was all a sham.

Prey already knew when and where the thieves were going to strike. All the information he'd requested had been an act to cover it up.

An act because he needed none of it. A cover up because there was only one list out of the many Prey asked for that he was *actually* interested in. He was copying the thieves strategy of throwing others off their trail by hiding their real goal's in plain sight. Hence why he'd asked for various unimportant things like the nobles names, their party plans, and who'd been out of town recently.

The only information Prey cared about was where the mansions were situated on a map. That would be important later for his plan.

And so it was Prey spent each waking hour of his days chained to the desk, (quite *literally*), pretending to be hard at work. Secretly he carved more runes into the desk. He ate the food they gave him slowly, still not quite able to believe that, a) they fed him, and b) they fed him well. It was nothing like in the Resistance.

He didn't lower his guard though. He didn't let the fact he'd never eaten some of the delicious and seemingly mundane foods provided make him complacent. Things like hay burgers, toast, bananas or oranges, hay wraps and macaroni. Prey gathered that what he served was cheap, fast and lacklustre at best, by their standards anyway. To him, they were the height of luxury. But never the less, he still checked every time for poison or tampering before he ate.

It wasn't just simple paranoia either. One particular memory of a time a hoof full of Resistance members had gotten their hooves on him one evening when they were bored. What they'd then forced him to eat for their amusement came forcefully to mind. He suppressed a shudder and took another bite of his apple, savouring the clean, sharp taste over those in his memories.

Sunshine and Gold Bit had gone back to being little better than slightly more talkative statues when they were on duty guarding him. Prey was fairly sure they'd either decided it was easier to remain detached if they didn't speak with him, or he'd somehow offended their delicate Solar Guard sensibilities. Prey's non-existent bits were on a combination of both.

The other two unicorns who rotated on and off the twelve hour shifts with Sunshine and Gold Bit really were the metaphorical statues. They never spoke a word to him. Prey had still learnt from eavesdropping that their names were West Light and Wilful Heart.

Just two more names for The List, although somewhat near the bottom.

The runes progressed, multiplied, interlocked and overlaid. Slowly they became the many complicated arrays they were supposed to be, almost at the final stage of completion. This was the other reason Prey had stalled for time.

All of this occurred over the course of the two days Prey acted out the charade. He shuffled the reports, sorted them, scratched his head and poured over them, ate his three meals a day, pretended to work on the reports more, slept briefly, watched the Guard change, mumbled to himself about dates and places just loud enough for the guards to overhear, went to the toilet, and then returned to compiling the reports.

Celestia's sun fell and her moon rose, and then fell and rose again as Prey continued with his false efforts. Time ticked past as he counted the seconds, weighing the moment and judging his chances for success from behind a face of innocence.

Prey looked up from the reports and stretched, rubbing his back with one hoof while he considered the plaster ceiling. It was a good ceiling he supposed. It was waterproof and didn't have any holes, so it ranked fairly highly on the 'best ceilings' list.

Prey idly rubbed at the long, rope like scars that wound across his back, hidden under the wool. A reminder of Stinger and his whip. Prey hadn't figured out till after the sadistic Earth Pony's death that he'd soaked the whip in Rip'Tuck juice to make its lashes burn and scar horribly. No one had claimed the whip after Stinger's death. They'd burnt it instead.

Prey lightly shook himself, that wasn't important right now. He'd learnt his lesson from Stinger, 'Don't get caught.' It didn't matter if you hadn't done anything, just don't get caught.

Prey took a deep breath, 'It's time.' He decided.

"I've got it!" He shouted, "I know what's going to happen." Prey spun round to the two unicorn Guards, right now that consisted of Wilful Soul and West Light who were looking at him in interest, "Quickly, what time is it?" He demanded.

"A little past six pm." West Light answered reluctantly.

Prey stared at him, "What? It's that late- Listen, there's no time! I've

worked it out, but you need to call for your captain right away, the thieves are going to strike within the hour."

That motivation proved sufficient to get them moving. One raced to the door and magically unlocked it, ordering one of the Pegasus guards standing in the corridor to go and tell the captain immediately.

In the rush, Prey casually finished tracing the last swirl of the final rune under the desk. He leaned back and smirked as the solar Guards rushed about unknowingly to his bidding. 'Well Captain Valour, soon you'll be nothing but my next tally mark.'

"**What**!?"

Prey cringed away from Captain Valour's deafening shout, "I can only narrow it down to two possible mansions, one of which I am certain will be hit tonight, within the next forty five minutes. I'm sorry but I can't be any more precise, there's just no time." Prey repeated, sinking down fearfully in the chair. In his experience, there was no such thing as playing a part too convincingly.

Ponies saw what they expected to see. A cowering prisoner delivering bad news, not a scheming master mind.

The room around him was crowded with thirteen Solar Guards, including the captain. They had all listened to Prey's announcement with grim focus. The number of Solar Guards was close to what Prey had estimated were posted here at the City Guard station, although he wished he could have overestimated instead for once.

Captain Valour breathed deeply in through is nose and held it, then let it all out in a long, frustrated sigh, "Locations. Details. Now." He said.

Prey hastily scrambled onto the desk and grabbed a map of the city, knocking aside stacks of paper to make room as he spread it out, "Here and here. Both Lord Snow and Rich Almond's mansions." He said, tapping on the map at both respective places.

Prey knew which one the thieves were going to be attacking, the mansion belonging to Rich Almond. Lord Snow's place was just another one of his distractions, with one important side point.

It was too far away from Rich Almond's mansion for the Solar Guard to get to if they went to Lord Snow's first. The only way they'd be able to cover both is if they split their forces.

If they had more time, then they might have been able to enlist the city Guard to cover both, but they didn't have time. Prey had waited and chosen this moment well. Looking up, he could see that all the Solar Guards and the Captain had come to the same conclusion. 'What will you do now Captain Valour?' He thought smugly.

"Are you sure of this?" Captain Valour snapped.

"Yes, or as certain as I can be. If I had more time I could review the list and cross reference it with-"

"Spare me your prattle 452. Lieutenant Bright, we are short on time. We will need to split up. You will lead one group, I the other. Gold Bit, Sunshine, Wilful Soul, Swift Flight, Hard Wing and Cloud Weft, you're with Lieutenant Bright. The rest of you, you're with me. Lieutenant, you take Rich Almond's mansion, we'll take Lord Snow."

"Sir yes sir!" Came the instant reply.

Captain Valour glanced over his shoulder as he made for the door, "You're also taking the prisoner." He added.

The smile that Prey had been wearing vanished, "What?" He squeaked. That wasn't part of the plan, they were just supposed to leave him locked up here. There was no tactical reason for Captain Valour to order him brought along.

"Sir, is that necessary-?" The lieutenant began.

"I don't trust this not to be a cunning trap of some kind," Captain Valour snorted glaring at Prey, "You can never trust a mind leech. If it is a trap, he'll be a hostage against his own schemes."

"You can't be serious, this again? What could I possibly have done? I've been here under magical lock and key the entire time-hm*phm*!" Prey's protests were cut short as lieutenant Bright's magical aura clamped his jaw shut and he was levitated off his seat. Prey tried to grab hold of the desk, desperately hitting one last rune before he lost his grip and floated free.

In a matter of moments, Prey was stuffed back into the too large travelling cloak, the chain unclipped from the floor and transferred into Bright's grasp. Then the two groups of Solar Guards were thundering down the corridor and out the door, across the gravel courtyard and out the stations gate.

The group lead by lieutenant Bright, (and Prey floating along for the ride) rushed left, Captain Valour and his five ponies went right in the fading light of evening.

As Prey spun around helpless in the telekinetic grip, like a leaf caught in the wind, he couldn't even shout his protests at his treatment. In their rush, the Solar Guard lieutenant had forgotten to release the band of magic holding his mouth shut. Or not.

The three Pegasus Solar Guards kept pace with them in the greying sky, while the unicorns galloped down the streets. They dodged bins and carts as straggling ponies hurried to get out of their way. Despite the pace and the distance they had to cover, none slowed, their endurance training as Solar Guard easily seeing them through.

Prey's mind whirled through scenarios as he tried to find a way to adapt to this unexpected change. He hadn't foreseen Captain Valour ordering him brought along, as it was completely illogical. He would just pose a risk and a liability, so why would the captain have brought him along to a potential combat situation? That would only endanger the ponies and increase the chance of the thieves escaping when something went wrong. Did the captain suspect he'd been manipulating them or was the unicorn just crazy?

Prey had planned for multiple situations. Ones where he was left under guard, ones where his magical restraints were reapplied, and others where he'd been stunned and tied up. But how could he have foreseen something as ridiculous as this?

'This was not part of the plan.'

"Are you insane?" Prey hissed at Bright the moment the magical gag was removed, "What the hell am I doing here? I have no part in your Solar Guard operations. I've cooperated and done everything you've said so why are you risking my life-"

"Shut up or I'll make you." Bright hissed back, "If you alert them that we're here I'll carry out Captain Valour's threat and beat you within an inch of your life myself."

"You wouldn't be the first." Prey spat back.

They were currently hiding in the dark, narrow alleyway between two shops off from the main road, watching Rich Almond's three story mansion. The light was definitely failing now while the shadows lengthened. As of yet there had been no sign of the thieves.

Prey was certain that they were going to make an appearance though. That was yet another strong reason why he wanted to be as far away from here as possible. One of the first things he'd learnt in the a Resistance was to avoid a fight if at all possible. Ambushes and traps were the way to go.

Prey decided to try another tack, "Please lieutenant Bright, think about what you're doing. The thieves are cunning and ruthless, and if you're having to Guard me as well, you'll be outnumbered and at a disadvantage." He said

"Out numbered maybe, but the Solar Guard is never out matched. It's too late for you to hide like a coward, mind leech, so be quiet and let us do our job." Bright replied, never taking his eyes from the large mansion.

He had ordered no magic until they were sure the thieves were inside. It was unlikely the thieves had a unicorn with a sophisticated enough scanning spell to pick it up, but Bright wasn't taking any chances. The Pegasus Solar Guards were currently

perched hidden on the roof tops above the alley, watching their backs and the surrounding area.

"Please lieutenant, don't do this. I have no part in any fight. I'm small, weak and in chains, are you trying to get me killed?" Prey whined.

Bright and the rest of the Solar Guards all ignored him.

"What about their mind Mage lieutenant? He's been beating you at every turn so far, surely you don't think this is going to be easy do you? Who ever they are, they'll have a back up plan ready. You're going to get yourselves all killed, and me along with you. How do you plan to stop him or her from simply turning all of our brains to mush?" Prey demanded, sounding desperate.

Although he wasn't too worried about his own minds safety, he was just protesting the point.

Bright grit his teeth in anger, but kept up trying to ignore his prisoner. It was Sunshine who provided an answer, breaking his previous commitment of not speaking to Prey, "We're prepared. All us Solar Guards have a mind lock enchantment installed in our helmet, see?" He said, removing his gold helmet and lifting up the red tassel, tilting it so Prey could see a thin strip of gold inlaid with three yellow crystals that had previously been hidden, "The crystals have been enchanted by our strongest Magi's in the field of mind magic to prevent others from either reading or altering our thoughts."

"The crystals light up if somepony actively starts trying to mess with our heads, mind leech." Gold Bit added with a knowing smirk at Prey, where he still dangled in the ridiculous cloak.

Prey kept his dismay hidden, and was very glad for the fact that so far, he hadn't found the opportunity to try and break one of their minds. He would have been caught straight away and that would have been that. They had laid both a trap and a test for him, to see how honest he was really being.

It was well thought out Prey grudgingly admitted, his heart still

racing at the realisation of how close he had come to disaster. Prey had never heard or read anything about these so called 'mind locks', but they were probably an invention of the last fifty seven years while he'd been in prison.

Until he could escape and get his hooves on one of these mind locks to study and figure out how it worked, he had no idea how strong they were or if there was a way around them. Prey was willing to bet there was a way, there almost always was, but right now it looked as if he would be thrown back into Dreverton before he ever got the chance. Or killed in the next half an hour or so.

"At least take this inhibitor off then so I can defend myself and fight back." Prey tried.

Sunshine and Bright glared at him.

"Come on, if you're safe with your mind locks, you don't have anything to fear. But what about me? Shouldn't I be able to defend myself as well if this unicorn mind leech wants to shred my mind? Please, listen, I know better than any of you what a mind mage is capable of!" Prey begged, eyes wide, breath fast, wringing his hooves, going the whole nine yards with the act.

His mind magic was already unlocked, he just couldn't read surface thoughts currently. But he wasn't lying when he said he wanted them to remove the magical inhibitor around his middle so he could defend himself.

Prey didn't have any magic like unicorns. He couldn't even throw his mind out to attack others by mere line of sight like he'd read a powerful unicorn mind mage could. He had to *physically* lay a rune covered fore hoof on the target. But once he did, he usually won.

There was just the small problem of the two magical inhibitors still on him, the one around his middle and the other around his neck.

That was why he was currently trying to manipulate the situation into tricking lieutenant Bright into removing one or both of them. He may not be scared of the thieves mind mage's attacks, but he was very much afraid of their regular magical attacks. Mage fire,

electrocution, drowning, frozen, crushed, there were so many delightful ways to die when facing a powerful unicorn.

And those were just the examples which didn't involve curses or black magic, which had the well deserved reputation for being worse than death. Who knows what might have been in all those books the thieves had been stealing? Forbidden dark spells passed down the noble blood lines weren't too far off the chart of possibilities.

"Please?" Prey begged.

Sunshine grimaced but joined everypony else in ignoring him. Prey was just about to move onto threats in an effort to be taken back and locked up, *anything* to avoid the upcoming fight, when a low whistle came from above them.

Four unicorns and one sheep all looked up. The pegasus Solar Guard who was leaning out over the brick ledge above them, silhouetted dimly against the gloomy sky. The pegasus made same a few quick signals with his hoof.

Apparently it meant something to the rest of the Solar Guards, as the atmosphere immediately grew charged with tension. Everyone looked to the mansion, and after a second of straining his eyes Prey saw a flicker of movement by one of the first floor prench windows. A tail just passing through the half open window, and a second later a hoof drew it closed behind the tail.

"They're here, we're a go." Bright growled. His hoof flickered through a number of sings to the watching Pegasus above, who signalled back and then withdrew. All the Solar Guards got to their hooves and began creeping towards the alley's shadowed mouth.

"Split up and cover as many exits as possible. One of them must have gotten to Rich Almost last night already if they're here today, so they must be heading for the library and expect to go undisturbed. Corner them in the library and block off all exits." Bright ordered.

He didn't wait for acknowledgement of his order before creeping

out, he didn't need to. This was the Solar Guard. And their one prisoner. Prey would've been protesting most vocally if Sunshine hadn't magically gagged him again the moment the Pegasus signalled. Apparently the 'no magic' usage rule hadn't extended to that.

Prey glared hatefully at the back of Sunshine's helmet as he was floated along helplessly for the ride. What could he do? He was bound, suppressed, and gagged. Prey couldn't do anything. He was just going to be a powerless observer to whatever came next, a mere spectator to the outcome.

The unicorn Solar Guards crept along with practised silence, keeping out of sight against the low garden wall as they headed for the rear of the mansion. The Pegasus drifted like cloud shadow onto the mansions roof, and began clambering down to the upper windows.

One by one the Solar Guards slipped over the wall by a rose bed, using the thorny stems as cover from anyone who may have been looking out of the mansion. Prey was busily scanning the mansion, counting the windows and their placement to try and build up a mental map of the buildings interior. So focused was Prey on that he almost missed Bright's hoof signal to move out.

The Solar Guards split up and moved with surprising speed out from hiding behind the rose bush. They covered the open ground within three seconds, quickly vanishing round the respective sides of the mansion. That just left the lieutenant still levitating Prey, and Sunshine in the fading light.

Sunshine reached the mansions wall and pressed himself up against it next to the prench window that the thieves had entered through, while Bright took the other side.

Prey was gesturing frantically and trying to speak, flailing about in the cloak and fighting the silencing spell, attempting to inform both the Solar Guards that they were idiots. You don't follow an enemies entry path, it's almost certain to be trapped or guarded. You go around or parallel, not march into the back of them or what ever presents they'd left behind. But, as before, he went ignored.

Bright nodded to Sunshine, who nodded back. In a joint movement so synchronised it could have been rehearsed, Bright pulled the sliding window open and Sunshine leapt through, horn glowing. Prey cringed and braced for explosions to go off, but nothing happened. Prey couldn't see what was in the room until Bright also stepped inside, floating Prey's magical bubble in through the window behind him.

The seemed to be in a sun lounge, although Prey had never seen one personally. All his knowledge on such things came from the reports he'd read. Bright and Sunshine were already creeping for the opposite door, ears swivelling for any sign of the thieves. Preys own large ears were doing the same and his attention was strained to the maximum.

Still nothing, just shadowy stillness. Prey knew sight was going to be less effective than hearing in the mansion's shadowy interior. Neither the thieves nor the Solar Guard would risk a light for fear of raising the alarm.

Prey had heard that spells existed that improved night vision. He wished he'd figured out how to make a rune equivalent to allow himself the same. The door lead into a deserted hallway, half visible paintings and candlesticks hanging from the walls, shadows making the windowless corridor feel like it was either abandoned or underground. Prey knew there must be some stairs somewhere close by.

Sunshine and Bright hurried to the end of the corridor, their armoured hooves making almost no sound. A quick study revealed why, a 'Silent walking' charm on their hooves. Prey couldn't hear their hoofs hitting the carpet, but could still pick up traces of noise when they lifted their hoof back up. An oversight in the charm, but no one had noticed and tried to kill them yet.

Prey closed his eyes and listened harder, searching for any sign of an ambush. But there was nothing aside from the light breathing and stifled movement of his two Guards. He sniffed, but couldn't pick out anything that alerted him to a trap. Faint traces of polish and wax, carpet and fabric, rose blossoms and ponies. Nothing fresh. Scent unfortunately wasn't one of his strongest senses.

This only made him grow more nervous as he floated along, more and more certain they were walking into a trap.

'I don't sense any servants either. Unless they aren't stationed here overnight, the thieves have had an enthralled Rich Almond organise a schedule that removes them all from the premises. Or at least away from the library.' That meant the thieves aimed to be quick about their task, as a servant would be returning at some point.

A grand staircase came into view around the corner at the end of the hallway, just as Prey had predicted. Again they all stopped to listen, but this time Prey caught the faintest traces of noise coming from above. He strained his ears, closing his eyes to better focus. But before he could figure anything out, Sunshine and Gold Bit started up the carpeted stairs, breaking his concentration.

Prey's eye's snapped open and he waved frantically for their attention, pointing up the stairs and trying to speak. Sunshine gave him a dark look and gestured for him to be quiet. 'Idiots!' Prey thought, 'What do you expect me to do over here? Burst into song?!'

Moving cautiously, they got closer and closer to the landing they ascended the staircase, hugging the carved banister as they neared the top. Prey could hear whomever it was approaching from on of the branching off corridors. Bright and Sunshine gave the wide landing a once over, moving to take up positions beside a marble bust of some earth pony. They started signing to each other and shaking their heads, but Prey had no eyes for them. His attention was fixed in the source of the noise.

Prey's heart began to thump painfully as he floated there, staring down the left hand corridor towards the faintly approaching sound of breathing. Who could it be? Another Solar Guard, a servant, or one of the thieves?

A white Pegasus snuck out of the dark corridor, coated in gold armour. Prey let out a sigh of relief that went unheard as Sunshine and Bright both spotted their fellow Guard. They may not have heard him coming, but they could hardly fail to see the gold wearing Pegasus once he stepped into the half light. A few hoof gestures from Bright and the Pegasus joined them, barely sparing a

glance for the floppy cloak wearing sheep.

"Report." Bright whispered.

"No sighting yet. They're further in, near the middle." The Pegasus whispered back. Apparently the Solar Guards didn't have a sign code language for everything, just common orders.

Bright nodded once, then looked to Sunshine, "You're on offensive spells, I'll hold a shield when we engage." He whispered. Sunshine nodded back. All three Solar Guards exchanged a look, then started moving stealthily down the corridor that lead deeper into the mansion.

They hadn't gone fifteen paces when they came upon the thieves.

At the end of the corridor was a balcony railing, which encompassed a circular opening, dropping down to the first floor below them.

Carefully, they crept close enough to see through the polished railings. Below, Rich Almond's dimly lit library was laid out. Although perhaps library was a bit too grand of a term. It certainly *was* still an impressive collection of thick volumes, stacked into oak shelving. It was so tall the top shelf's reached to just underneath the balcony's height where the four of them currently hid. But it was not necessarily *a* library. The defining factor of a library tends to be its abundance of books. Books which were currently in the process of being stolen.

Six ponies hastily moved about below, sorting through the shelves of books, and occasionally throwing one of the volumes into a crate set in the middle of the floor amid half a dozen comfy armchairs. Three unicorns, two Pegasi and one earth pony, all wearing black, full face masks. For some reason, no sound rose from below.

Sunshine crawled up to the railings to get a better view, and, from where he floated, Prey could see the thieves muzzles moving under their masks in speech. He also saw how a book land heavily in the

box, but no sound arose. "A silence bubble." Bright muttered, pointing out the obvious to the Pegasus Solar Guard.

The Pegasus nodded in response, then signalled across to the opposite side of balcony, which encircled the open drop to the library. Prey saw another Pegasus Solar Guard crouched over there, although Prey hadn't seen him arrive. Now they waited, ready for the order to attack.

Below the thieves hurried on with their work, oblivious.

Prey held his breath at a movement from Bright. It was instinct. The lieutenant was slowly raising his armoured fore hoof, eyes fixed on the thieves below. Prey saw Bright's lip curl, this was it.

All Bright had to do was signal and the Solar Guard would attack. They could target and take out the three unicorns before the thieves even knew they where up here. The remaining two Pegasus and one earth pony would be no match for the Solar Guard. The Guards had the element of surprise and magic on their side. This fight was already won.

"This is the Solar Guard! You are surrounded! Lay down and give yourselves up!" Bright shouted, magically amplified voice almost deafening Prey.

'What is that *idiot* doing?!' Was all Prey had time to think before everything went to Tartarus.

The thieves who had frozen for a second on hearing Bright's deafening bellow, now unfroze and leapt into frenzied motion.

Which ever unicorn had been holding the silence bubble now dropped it, as sound returned from below in a mass of shouting; "The Guards!" "Get the books!" "Don't let them interfere!" The three unicorn thieves horns lit up. Some sort of dark blue magic blasted off two of their horns at the Guards above, while the third charged up something big.

He never finished casting it, as one of the Pegasus Solar Guards crashed into their group, sending ponies flying. Another Solar

Guard Pegasus slamming into one of the masked Pegasus a moment later.

Things quickly degenerated from there.

Prey had flinched and tried to duck instinctively when the unicorns thieves shot off their spells, but two separate shields of dazzling golden light sprung into existence for each dark bolt and blocked them in a shower of magical sparks.

Everypony seemed to be shouting at the top of their lungs, the old familiar sound of battle assaulting Prey's ears as he blinked to clear his dazzled eyes from the light show.

He caught a glimpse of Sunshine firing off a rapid succession of stunning spells at one of the enemy Pegasi as they wove desperately between the shelves and arm chairs, yelling out for assistance. A moment later the unicorn guard Wilful Soul charged out from a corridor and threw himself into the fight, swinging a magically empowered fore hoof into the Pegasus's gut as they shot past. Electricity flickered from the gold horse shoe and danced over the pegasus's wings, who promptly crashed muzzle first into the floor, limbs and wings spasaming.

The earth pony thief was trying to drag the half full box of stolen books away. He was so focused and desperate on getting the books out that he didn't even see the Solar Guard Pegasus, who'd just clubbed one of the unicorns over the head into unconsciousness, leap for his exposed back with a yell. A mad wrestle commenced, the large earth pony's strength against the Solar Guard's training.

Another blast from a masked unicorn was intercepted by another shimmering gold shield cast by Bright, whose horn was flashing as his eyes darted back and forth across the brawl below, casting shield after shield in quick succession to block each and every blast from the unicorn who seem intend on shooting his way out amid the yelling.

The other still conscious unicorn thief decided to change tactics. With a shrill cry of desperation, the masked unicorn levitated up three of the big arm chairs and heaved them at Sunshine before

making a break for it.

Sunshine ducked behind the railing as the armchairs shot overhead or impacted the banister and bounced off, falling towards the fighting ponies below. Prey thought he heard Sunshine shout, "Oh no you don't!" Before his magic snatched the falling chairs out of the air right before they crashed into the fighting mess ponies below.

At that moment the Pegasus wrestling with the earth pony finally got the upper hoof and closed out the fight by putting the earth pony in a double leg lock, the pegasus's wings beating furiously as he hovered in place, forcing the earth pony's muzzle into the floor, muffling his curses.

The unicorn that had been fleeing had almost made it to the door when a binding spell hit him in the back, magical chains lashing around his legs and bringing him crashing down. A moment later Wilful Soul, who'd cast the spell, pounced on the downed unicorn, grabbing the masked pony's horn and slipping an inhibitor ring over it.

'...What?'

Prey looked back just in time to see the last unicorn thief brought down. A combination of the Solar Guard Pegasus launching constant attacks dodging and weaving around the unicorns head, Bright's shielding spells blocking the thief's every attack, and Sunshine's constant quick cast barrage of stunning spells finally working their way through what ever counter charm the unicorn had cast upon himself.

With a groan, the unicorn crumpled into unconsciousness, a moment later the final thief joining him on the floor as the third and final Solar Guard Pegasus, who had so far been absent from the fight, finally made an appearance from one of the dark corridors and dump tackled the last thief.

'What's going on?' Prey thought in shock as he watched the Solar Guard expertly twist the downed Pegasus's hooves behind his back and cuffed them there.

The fight was over. All of the six thieves they'd jumped had been accounted for, in varying stages of consciousness. The Solar Guards started dragging both the responsive and unresponsive masked ponies into the middle of the library, slipping inhibitor rings over the unicorns horns and cuffing all of them.

Bright let out a long breath, relief clear in the way his ears fell forwards, "Thank Celestia." He muttered. Beside his lieutenant, Sunshine joined him, "It's over. After all those bucking sleepless nights and patrols." He glanced at Bright with a wry grin, "Drinks on me tonight, if you're coming sir." He said.

Bright snorted, "I'll think about it after were finished here." He replied, then called out, "Hey, Cloud Weft! Get up here and give us a lift down."

The Pegasus Cloud Weft flew up without complaint and grabbed hold of Sunshine round the barrel, lifting the armoured unicorn first over the banister rail and then swooping down to the floor without apparent effort. A second later he was back for Bright. The Pegasus spared a raised eyebrow for Prey, but said nothing and gave Bright a lift down too. Prey's magical bubble floated over the banister and along behind him like some balloon on a string.

Somepony cast a light spell, and a globe of white light floated up into the air, illuminating the library properly, clearly showing the mess that had been caused. "Well done ponies. Let's get this sorry lot ready for transport while I notify the captain and the city Guard of what's happened. Sunshine, keep a stunning spell ready in case they get frisky." Bright ordered.

The Solar Guards all saluted and got to it, shoving their prisoners into a kneeling line, pulling off their face masks and relieving them of anything else they had on their person, while one of the Pegasus Solar Guards stood in front of them and began reading off their rights from memory.

"You have the right to remain silent, you have the right to legal advice and counselling, you have the right..." He droned on.

Sunshine sauntered over to Prey, although he still kept his eyes

firmly on the defeated prisoners, as the lone earth pony and the one conscious unicorn glared around hatefully. The rest of their compatriots all either unconscious or seemingly in a stunned daze.

"What was that about them being prepared for us little lamb?" Sunshine asked Prey with a smirk.

Prey glowered back silently through narrowed eyes and waited. It took a beat before Sunshine caught on.

"Oh, right. Lieutenant Bright, think you can take the silencing spell of 452 now?" He called out.

"Right, okay." Bright replied distractedly, still focused on finishing his message and sending it off. A moment later Prey felt a slight change in the bubble. It was nothing you would normally be able to notice so slight was it, but Prey did and he assumed it was the silencing spell being lifted. He decided to confirm it.

"What was *that*?" Prey spat out, as if the words burnt his tongue.

"Huh?" Came Sunshine's eloquent response.

"Why are they still alive?" Prey demanded, waving his small hoof wildly at the captured thieves, "That wasn't a fight, that was a childish scuffle! You could have blasted them to ash before they even knew we were here, but no, you just go and announce your presence and shout 'surrender' instead. Fools! Why aren't they blood splatters on the floor right now?"

Sunshine was taken aback, visibly shocked at Prey's bloodthirsty words then the unicorn scowled in outrage and stepped up to Prey shoving his muzzle in the sheep's face, "No, what are *you* doing? Thinking you can give us orders and we'll to follow your vile little expectations?! We aren't some sick killers, where do you think this is, the Bad Lands? We are the Solar Guard! We protect, not destroy. Ponies. Do. Not. Kill. Other. Ponies!"

Sunshine waved a hoof back at the middle of the library with the prisoners and their Guards, who weren't paying Sunshine and Prey any attention.

"Do you think this is some game? That none of it's really *real*? Well it's not, everypony here including you is flesh and blood. They live, breathe, have families, and have just as much of a right to live, in fact even *more* than you." Sunshine told Prey, nostrils flaring and hoof unconsciously poring the ground.

Prey glared right back at him, not backing down an inch.

"Don't speak to me of who deserves to live or not. I know full well there are many more deserving than I. And guess what? They're all already buried in the mud. And to think I used to believe that the Solar Guard were supposed to be *elites*. What good is an elite fighting force who's scared of a little blood? You're precious equestrian peace has made you blind to the realities of life." Prey responded coldly.

Prey couldn't understand it. He just couldn't wrap his head around it. What about the war? What about all that killing and death, why was this any different? The thieves were the Solar Guards enemies, so why hadn't they killed them? They were the *enemy*!

So why weren't they dead yet? Prey just couldn't understand it.

Sunshine jerked back in angry disgust, "You really are a sick, twisted little lamb, you know that?" He asked coldly.

"Oh yes, more than you can possibly imagine. But that doesn't change the fact that I'm right. You're all fools."

"I'm warning you, stop slandering us or I'll-"

"If you're not a fool, then where's Gold Bit?" Prey interrupted.

"That's none of your business-" Sunshine started to snap.

"*Fool*. He's fallen to their mind Mage, who's already escaped."

Sunshine faltered, his anger clearly affecting him as he tried to shift mental directions, "...What?" Sunshine asked.

"Look around you, where is he? Everyone within the mansion would have heard the fight and converged on this point, so there's no way

he's still relying on stealth. That means he's been defeated, and as their mind Mage isn't among the captured unicorns, that also means he or she's escaped. And none of the crystals in your helmets lit up, none of those three unicorns tried mind attacks, which proves they're not the mind Mage. Likely he or she were dealing with Rich Almond's memories when you sprung your little ambush. They heard the racket and fled, running into and defeating Gold Bit in the process." Prey said, enjoying the look of realisation that stole over Sunshine's face as he explained.

"No, you said there would only be six thieves-"

"I said six to eight actually."

"You can't know that for sure." Sunshine insisted.

"I already do." Prey said.

"How?" Sunshine demanded hotly.

"You mean aside from the explanation I just gave? Easy," Prey said, lowering his voice, "That earth pony has been trying to listen in to this entire conversation and, from his expression, I can see that I'm right." He replied.

Sunshine spun round just in time to catch the earth pony jerk his head to face forwards again and try to school his features back from vicious satisfaction into sullen rebellion. But he wasn't fast enough and Sunshine still caught it. Sunshine didn't waste any more time on exchanging further words with Prey, "Lieutenant!" He yelled.

There was a pop and a shower of green sparks from Bright's direction as he finally finished and sent off the scroll he had been writing. He looked up, "What is it?" He asked.

"Gold Bit and the mind Mage aren't here." That was all Sunshine needed to say for the lieutenant to draw the conclusion.

"Pony down, pony down! We have a potential casualty. Reinforcements will be here in fifteen minutes. Wilful Soul, Sunshine, Hard Wing, secure the prisoners and sit tight. You other two, you're with me. Keep formation and don't separate, that's how

he's got one of us." Bright ordered, rushing for the far corridor as the two Pegasus lifted of with a clap of wings and shot after him.

Prey let out a startled squeak as his floating prison was yanked after Bright's retreating form. Spinning round and around helplessly in the bubble, he was pulled down first one corridor then the next, shadowy paintings and tapestries passing in a blur.

Mercifully his prison spell was a tracking sort of magic, as it followed Bright's twisting path exactly rather than a straight line. If not, Prey would have smashed into any number of corners and furniture as he was yanked along, like a run away cart dragged by its traces.

The Pegasus blitzed along just behind and to either side of Bright, wing tips barely an inch from brushing the walls. Amid the constant dizzying spinning caused by their back wash, Prey spat out a mouthful of cloak and tried to find up from down so he could get enough air to yell at Bright that; 'There's no point in running! What ever damage has been done to Gold Bit's mind is already done, and the mind Mage is long gone.' But before he got the chance the trio of Solar Guards skidded to a stop, the Pegasus flaring their wings.

Prey finally righted himself and pulled the stupid cloak off his head, but then had to still flick first one then the other tangled ear out of his face before he could see why.

Bright was crouched next to the still figure of Gold Bit. The downed Solar Guards eyes were open but it was obvious he didn't see. His helmet lay on its side a few feet away, ignored.

"I've got a pulse, quick, help me lay him on his side." Cloud Weft instructed, rolling the prone unicorn over into a recovery position.

"What are you doing?!" Prey yelped, "Don't touch him, it might set of a delayed trap-"

"You shut your face!" Bright roared, "One more word out of you mind leech and I'll crush you like an egg."

Prey's mouth snapped shut and he tried to make himself look as

small and contrite as possible. Bright was currently emotionally unstable as a result of the casualty before him, even if the extent of the damage had yet to be established. Anything that could push the unicorn who currently held him in their magical field over the edge was a bad idea.

Prey could quite easily see the sub conscious connection that had formed in Bright's mind. He, Prey, was a criminal, and all other outlets for Bright's fury at failing to both protect his subordinate and capture the mind mage were nowhere in sight. Added to all that, Prey was a mind leech, and so associated with the escaped mind mage's despicableness.

Prey knew that he was currently climbing on thin branches over the Timberwolf pack.

Prey kept silent and still as Bright and the two Pegasus tried to get Gold Bit to respond, even going so far as to slap the downed unicorn in an attempt to bring him round. Prey could have told them that it was a fruitless endeavour. Unless they had a unicorn of their own skilled in mind magic, there was nothing they could do except wait and see if Gold Bit came round on his own.

The city Guard arrived en-mass ten minutes later in a rush of shouting and demands to secure the building and evidence, but Bright pulled rank and ordered them out of the room and to "Go do your job elsewhere."

Sunshine came in to inform the lieutenant that the other prisoners were being transported to the city station under guard. Bright stoically told him to go with the city Guard and make sure nothing went wrong, and that he and the two pegasi would wait for Captain Valour with Gold Bit. Sunshine saluted and told him that a medical team from the hospital were on their way and then departed.

And then Captain Valour turned up.

He marched in with the other half of the Solar Guard he had taken to investigate Lord Snow's mansion behind him.

"Report."

Bright snapped to attention, "Sir, the building has been secured. We encountered the thieves in the act of stealing from the library and apprehended them. Six were captured and have been taken to the city jail under guard. But there was a seventh thief not in the room, the mind leech, and they escaped. But, before they did..." Bright trailed off and half turned to look at where Gold Bit lay, the two Pegasus standing guard either side of him.

Captain Valour sighed, a world weary sound, "Thank you lieutenant. You did the best that you could." He reached out a large hoof and rested it in Bright's armoured shoulder.

"Don't worry, he's going to be fine. Gold Bit's strong, he'll get through whatever spell that mind leech put on him." Valour reassured his lieutenant. Prey would have snorted at the display of compassion if it wouldn't have drawn attention to himself.

Bright swallowed and nodded just once, then stepped back and saluted, "Sir. Orders?"

"Wait till the hospital staff arrive, then go with them and keep a watch on Gold Bit. Hard Wing, you go with him. I'll send replacements in about five hours time. Aside from that, there's nothing more we can do here. There's no need to investigate the mansion, not when we have the thieves under lock and key. They'll tell us everything we want to know, and then some." Captain Valour said with almost gleeful certainty.

"Speaking of telling us everything," Bright began, turning to face the cloaked figure of Prey floating along haplessly, "This mind leech hasn't been telling us everything, I'm sure of it."

Prey opened his mouth to protest and offer valid excuses but Captain Valour didn't even look at Prey. "Oh I'm certain he hasn't. He's a liar and a criminal, utter trash staining the face of Equestria. But not for much longer, we don't need him any more. We're

sending the leech back to Dreverton tonight." Captain Valour told Bright.

"No, you can't do this to me!" Prey shouted, "This isn't fair, after all I've done? Is this your way of showing gratitude?! I've done everything you said, followed every order and gotten you everything you wanted, and I've done what you could not. How can you just throw me away? How is that fair?!" Prey demanded, frantically gesturing.

Captain Valour's strong jaw clenched in anger, but he still didn't even turn to face Prey, "Your crimes are not forgotten, 452. What service you've offered, as twisted and unwilling as it was, does not absolve you of your guilt. Equestria thanks you for your service, and now its time to do Equestria a far greater service and protect it from something like you." Captain Valour told him.

"This isn't justice! You're just trying to take your anger out on me. I've completed your task, given to you by *your* Princess herself, *my* information has lead to the capture of ponies who have caused hundreds of thousands bits worth of damage, and done so in the face of your scorn and derision. And you're forgetting the most important thing; That mind Mage is still out there. You can't do this without me. You. Still. Need. Me!" Prey emphasised each word, voice tight with desperation.

"We'll get everything we need to know from the prisoners." Captain Valour nodded to the Solar Guards who had accompanied him, "Take him."

"They won't tell you anything, the mind Mage would have removed any sensitive knowledge from his followers memories. You have *nothing*, you still need me-"

"Lieutenant, if you would be so kind, please give me a detailed run down of the encounter, perhaps there was something you missed." Captain Valour said to Bright, completely ignoring Prey's squeaky shouts as the Solar Guards clicked the chain into place around the inhibitor collar and began pulling him away, as if the captain couldn't even hear him. Like Prey was no longer worth the effort it took to even notice.

Prey gave one last thrash in the tangle of cloak and manacles, snarling something vicious in zebrican that would have made the Guards eyes water if they'd understood it. He got one last hateful look at Captain Valour, standing there so calm and *free* as Prey was dragged away.

There the unicorn stood, giving orders to Bright, the lieutenant of a whole platoon under *his* command, who'd follow his every order, who served under the Sun Wolf, a *literal* goddess. What could Prey do compared to that?

Then Prey was dragged around the corner, and the Solar Guard Captain was lost from sight.

[[[Bonus Picture - Sketch Balcony Fire Fight Scene]]]

https://imgur.com/zSBbR0i

8.0 An unexpected visitor

Author's Notes:

Here's the next one. As you may notice, the chapter is a bit shorter. Don't worry, that's because I took one long chapter and split it into two. The next half (Chapter 9) will be up within the week probably.

Thank you again to Editor: **Sweetolebob18**

Also, **This** great picture here was very kindly made by **GreatSpaceBeaver**

Prey hung limply in the Solar Guards magical grasp as he was carried through the night of Vanhoover, the long cloak almost trailing on the road. He'd refused to walk once Bright's own levitation spell had worn off, and so without missing a heartbeat one of the Solar Guard Unicorns had just cast another one on him and they'd continued on uninterrupted.

Prey didn't respond to anything around him. He just hung there head drooping and eyes glazed, the picture of defeat. But on the inside he was thinking furiously, trying to think of a way, *any* way, out of this.

He hadn't really expected his calculated words to sway Captain Valour, the unicorn was too self righteous and stubborn. He'd judged his chances at one in ten of success. Still, he'd had to try. Unfortunately, Prey now didn't have many other options.

If the Captain hadn't listened to his pleadings, then these Solar Guards escorting him certainly wouldn't. There was no way they would go against their captains orders. And as all of them were still ever so careful to keep out of hoof's reach, he couldn't break into their minds and force them to release him either. Even *without* those mind lock helmets they wore.

In fact, Prey only had one gambit left to play, and it was a shaky gambit at that. The desk that he'd placed all those runes upon one by one, during those tense hours where he'd been under constant supervision risking discovery.

They hadn't been supposed to bring him along when they went to confront the thieves. If they'd just left him behind, he could have used that wooden block of prepared runes to disable to magical locks and escape unopposed. But even the best laid plans can fail.

But Prey had one consolation. A back up that he'd worked into the runes. Not a strong, or even certain one, as all the etchings had been lower runes and weak ones too, but it was all he had going for him at the moment.

Prey'd only just managed to set off the correct activation rune before he was dragged from the office. However, the back up was a long term one, it would probably take a month to fully take effect. *If* he was lucky. And Prey didn't believe in luck.

Prey was carried along by the unfeeling Guards down one dark side street, then the next. It was a clear, starry night, but no one, pony or otherwise, was out, all safely tucked away behind cozy yellow windows of light.

Prey pushed the hood back, his manacles clinking as he did so, and looked up at the night sky. There was the mare in the moon as they called her, the Scorpion and the Manticore, the North Star, the Dipper, it was all there, exactly the same. This might be the last time he ever saw its vast starry expanse spreading above him.

Prey had hated the night, but then he'd hated the day too. All the rising of the sun did every morning was remind Prey of Celestia and all that he despised about Equestria. Hypocritical yes, but he'd rather be free to hate in freedom than from within the belly of an inactive volcano.

Prey'd hated the night for a different reason. Because of all it brought. In the Deeper Green, night was a time to curl up and hide.

Although it certainly made sneaking past Border Guard patrols to lay a Bone Rot mine in their Sargent's tent easier, it also brought out all those things that go bump in the night.

Prey'd heard the screams on both sides of the war, and sometimes, if he was unlucky, he even found the remains in the morning.

The Border Guard may have named him as one of those horrors in the night, but Prey knew he was nothing compared to *those* things. There is always a worse monster out there.

The Solar Guard seemed to be heading up the side hill under gem street lamps, towards a large, squat, square building. The darkness hid any of its features, making it nothing but a solid block of blackness as they approached. It stood next to the river, invisible in the night.

Something wasn't right. It was small, but Prey was almost certain something was watching them from the darkened streets.

Prey's head snapped up, scanning the sky. Most people tend to forget to look up, but being a runt, Prey always knew to look up for threats.

He couldn't see anything up there, no drifting patches of darkness against the stars that indicated a pegasus or griffin. Prey licked his lips, eyes darting to the Solar Guards surrounding him. He weighed the possibilities, then closed his mouth and held his tongue.

In under a minute they'd reached the squat building as it loomed over them and passed through its gates. The faint gurgling of the lazy river came to them on the breeze as they entered, sounding secretive in the dark. The Solar Guards went round the side of the building, and Prey saw they were heading for a metal rung staircase that zigzagged up the side of the building till it was lost in the night.

They didn't even pause, evidently the Solar Guard knew where they

were going and just marched right up to the stair, armoured horse shoes clanking noisily on metal steps as they climbed.

The number of of quadrupled hooves hitting the stairs raised quite a din, drowning out anything else that there might have been to hear. Prey covered his sensitive ears as best he could, but the Guards were unbothered by the noise. That meant they knew no one was around, which just made Prey even more nervous as they neared the top. It would be the perfect place for an ambush if anyone *did* know they were coming.

But once again, there was no ambush waiting for them as the Solar Guard filed out onto the large open roof. Prey squinted at a number of low blocky objects set in rows all around the rooftop, all neatly lined up. When the Guards started moving towards the centre where a wide, cleared strip down the middle lay, Prey finally made out what they were.

Flower boxes, with what looked like in the dark, the first shoots of young plants just starting to grow in. Prey did not like it up here.

The Solar Guard unicorn to Prey's left pulsed his horn with a flash of blue magic, seeming to listen to the results only he could hear, "It's clear. Just us up here." He announced after a moment, and the other Solar Guard's relaxed somewhat at his words.

"How soon will they be here?" One of the other Guards questioned.

"The chariots are about fifteen minutes out, then we can rid ourselves of this filthy mind leech." The other Solar Guard replied, giving Prey a look of disgust.

Prey didn't spend any time thinking of a response. He was casting about in the dark, turning this way and that where he floated, trying to stop the cloak falling in his eyes as he searched. The feeling was back, that instinct that all prey naturally possessed. Some*thing* was up here with them.

Prey saw it first, or rather saw him. He opened his mouth to sound the alarm, but the Solar Guards had seen the intruder a second after he did, "Halt! Identify yourself!" The unicorn next to Prey barked.

The figure stopped and raised his hoof to show it was empty as he stepped closer, but didn't reply. Three horns around Prey started to glow as stunning spells were readied. "Halt-!" The unicorn started again at the exact same time Prey tried to shout out a warning, "It's a distraction, just shoot-!"

"Gold Bit? Is that you?" The Solar Guard asked in sudden confusion.

The golden armoured unicorn finally stepped close enough to be clearly seen, his white coat coming into view. It was indeed Gold Bit, but Prey's eyes were drawn to one thing; the unicorn wasn't wearing his helmet.

"What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in hospital-?" That was as far as Prey's guard got.

All of the Solar Guard had relaxed their guard for a second on seeing who it was. They'd then hesitated a second further in confusion as they tried to process how Gold Bit was here standing in front of them. By the time they came to the same conclusion that Prey had immediately reached, it was too late. Gold Bit was too close, and they'd hesitated too long.

Gold Bit's horn flashed, and a yellow shockwave slammed every Solar Guard off their hooves. The magic holding Prey disappeared with a faint pop and he fell, twisting at the last instant to avoid landing on his face and taking the impact on his side instead.

There was another yellow flash from Gold Bit. A crackling stun spell leapt off his horn and blasted the closest downed Solar Guard before he could rise, the spell crackling with raw, excess energy. It overwhelmed the Guard's armour and threw him into spasms.

Prey rolled, desperately trying to get himself behind the nearest planter and out of the line of fire, as Gold Bit turned a vacant expression towards the next Solar Guard and fired again.

The downed unicorn was casting what looked like a shield spell when Gold Bit fired. The Solar Guard wasn't quick enough and took the bolt to the face.

"No!" The pegasus solar Guard pushed himself to his hooves and lunged at Gold Bit, wings driving him forwards in a blur of speed. Gold Bit's empty eyes didn't so much as flicker, even as his already smoking horn lit up again. Prey saw the pegasus contort mid air, somehow swerving around the crackling bolt that blew past and tackled Gold Bit, who went down like a sack of bones. Then Prey was behind the planter and his field of view was cut off.

'Got to get out of here, Gold Bit isn't alone, the mind Mage controlling him must be close by.' Prey thought as he scrabbled to his hooves, almost tripping over the cloak and chains.

The only way he knew off the roof aside from leaping into the river was past the fighting and down the stairs, but there must be another route. Someone came up regularly to tend to all these flower boxes, likely from within the building itself. A trap door or skylight then, but where? Prey couldn't spot it in the dark.

There was a crash and a cry of pain, and Prey peeked out to see Gold Bit had sunk his teeth into the pegasus's wing. With a mighty wrench of his neck, he threw the Solar Guard over his head and into the side of a flower box. His horn lit up once more and another crackling bolt lashed out, but this time a shield sprang up over the struggling pegasus and deflected the bolt.

The last Solar Guard unicorn had finally regained his footing and his bearings, despite the trickle of blood leaking from under his helmet. Now he was up and casting again, sending out a stunning spell of his own that took Gold Bit in the chest, "Stand down Gold Bit!" He yelled.

Gold Bit twitched and stumbled, tendons in his neck spasaming, showing the damage from his over exertion in bodily tossing the large pegasus overhead, but his face never changed and he didn't go down. His scorched horn lit up again in preparation to cast, "Don't make me do this, I don't want to hurt you." The Solar Guard yelled even as his own horn lit up in response.

Prey saw the pegasus pull out a small crystal and crush it under his hoof at the exact moment both unicorns fired. Gold Bit's spell went wide, but the returning shot knocked him off his hooves.

Prey didn't wait to see if he stayed down, he was already crawling away, searching for wherever the roof entrance lay.

"Is he down?" The pegasus groaned from somewhere behind Prey as he crawled away in the dark.

"I'm not sure, quick, get me-" There was a choking noise, and the unicorn's voice abruptly cut off.

"Hey, what do you think you're-!?" The pegasus shouted.

"Be silent heathen." A new, cold voice stated. Prey crawled faster. Behind him there was a thump, and then a groan of pain, then several more thumps and the sound of something blunt and metal indiscriminately striking flesh. Then silence descended.

Prey went still. He lay in the shadows of one of the box planters. He couldn't see what had happened, but he didn't need to, he could quite easily picture what had taken place. His best chance lay in staying hidden and silent until help arrived, he'd seen the crystal the pegasus had crushed. There was a chance that this second enemy, likely the mind mage, wasn't here for him.

"I know you're there, so come out and stop wasting both of our time." That voice called.

Prey got to his hooves, took a deep breath, and walked calmly out from behind the planter, the cloak and chains dragging in his wake. If the mind Mage already knew he was here, then there was no longer any point in hiding. Because of that, Prey did as he was commanded. Continuing to try and hide would only show weakness and fear, where as stepping out into the open showed that he wasn't worried.

A cloaked unicorn stood in the midst of the downed Solar Guards with his hood thrown back, revealing what seemed to be a dark blue coat and white mane, although in the dark it wasn't certain. The outlines of his face appeared soft, but the unusually sharp and curved horn atop the unicorn's head was anything but that. In his silvery magical aura, the unicorn held aloft a battered and dented Solar Guard helmet.

A glance around showed Prey that it'd belonged to the third Solar Guard unicorn, who'd been the last of his kind to go down. From the looks of both the helmet and the bloodied face and unmoving form of the pegasus, it had been used to viciously bludgeon the winged Solar Guard into submission.

"Ah, I was wondering if it was you, the little ewe lamb. I got a glimpse of you and Captain Valour's operation from that heathens memories." The blue coated unicorn said, idly tossing the helmet at Gold Bit.

Gold Bit's open eyes didn't even flicker as the helmet bounced off his bloodied nose. Frozen tendons stood out in his neck and there was a faint trace of smoke drifting from his scorched horn, but there were no signs of life. Prey gave Gold Bit a cursory examination as he stepped closer, before turning his head back to the now confirmed mind Mage.

"I don't believe we've had the pleasure of meeting before. Whom might I be addressing?" Prey asked with a polite smile.

"To you, I may be called Night Watcher. And you are Gossamer." The unicorn replied.

"Please, call me Prey." Prey answered, his smile tightening ever so slightly.

"Hmm, an interesting name. Do the implications of such a name also apply?" Night Watcher asked with a nasty smile.

Prey shrugged and started pulling off the cloak, using the mundane actions to force the unicorn to wait till he was free of the baggy thing, "That depends on your perspective I guess. But I doubt that's why you're here." Prey stated, giving the unicorn a chance to explain.

"Maybe, or perhaps I am indeed on the hunt and looking for 'prey'." Night Watcher's eyes narrowed, "It was because of you that these filthy heathens interrupted our work, which also lead to the capture of six of my brethren." He said flatly.

"I had no choice in the matter, I was their prisoner and had to do what they wanted." Prey answerd simply. This was a dangerous game, at any moment the mind Mage might snap and attack him, so the longer they talked, the better.

"That still leaves you on the opposite side of the board to me." Night Watcher said, casually starting to walk forwards, "And those who stand in our way will be eliminated."

Prey started shuffling sideways towards one of the flower boxes, "Then why haven't you done it already? Because you want something else. Information? A traitor in their midst? Or a new recruit?" Prey asked, unhurriedly gathering up a loop of chain in his fore hooves.

"What you can do for me remains to be seen, as you may be of no use to me after all." Night Watcher said airily, still maintaining his unhurried pace towards Prey.

"A recruit or information then." Prey decided.

Prey reached the flower box, and with a flick of his hooves threw the loop of chain over its corner. Pulling it tight, Prey used it to help him scramble up the side of the planter to take a seat on its edge in front of Night Watcher.

"Sorry about that, but it makes my neck sore to be looking up at ponies all the time." Prey said with a lopsided grin. Anything to appear less vulnerable than he really was, and sitting on eye level with the mind Mage was a start.

Night Watcher saw and understood what Prey was trying to do. He offered the tiniest nod. Not of acknowledgement, but to show he knew what Prey was doing. "You seem like quite the interesting little ewe, perhaps you wouldn't mind answering a few questions for me? Or we could do this the hard way and I could simply take the answers, it's your choice." Night Watcher said, his indifferent tone saying he didn't care either way.

"You know it's impolite to go rummaging around in another's mind," Prey responded airily, "Especially a fellow mind leeches. They

might have anything nasty locked away in there."

"Please don't waste my time with bluffs. I know what those inhibitors on you are, so if I decide to simply take my answers by force, all you'll be able to do is offer a piffling resistance at best." Night Watcher replied.

Prey shrugged, "Touche. Alright, what are your questions?"

"What is that fool Captain Valour planning? And please, don't bother lying."

Prey could of course have answered that he didn't know for sure. And while that was true, Prey assumed that Night Watcher knew that as well, and expected Prey to give him his best estimate instead.

"I imagine Captain Valour will interrogate his six captives. However when he finds out that they know nothing, he'll probably build a task force to try and bring you in. He's proud, so I doubt he'll go to Celestia yet, not until he's tried and failed first for himself." Prey glanced dispassionately at Gold Bit, "That is unless you already got Captain Valour's plans from that fool over there." He said.

"Unfortunately, I didn't have much time to look around before I had to shred his mind so I could install my own commands. I was on a bit of a tight schedule, what with the Solar dogs raiding the mansion and all." Night Watcher replied.

"They really are like faithful hounds to the sun tyrant aren't they?" Prey agreed.

Night Watcher regarded him with dark amusement, "More than you realise. Now, next question: Do they know what it is that we were after?" He asked, turning serious again.

"Aside from that you're searching for certain books, no." Prey replied, kicking his heels against the flower box as he pretended to consider, "Certainly, they know you're after some type of forbidden knowledge, even they would be able to see that after I discovered it was the books you were really after. A books value is based off

what it holds inside after all." Prey added.

Night Watcher gave him a long look, "You are not as clever as you think you are, little ewe. Don't push me, tonight I'm not in a forgiving mood. I am giving you a chance here, do not waste it or you will live to regret it." He told Prey.

Prey cast a quick look over the unconscious figures of the beaten Solar Guards. He knew Night Watcher caught the look, and misinterpreted it as one of nervousness. Although Prey was nervous, it wasn't an instinctive need to look caused by fear; Prey was checking if all of the Solar Guard were still alive. All but Gold Bit were definitely unconscious, not dead. But the fact that they hadn't been overtly killed and that Night Watcher hadn't taken any steps to rectify that spoke volumes.

'Or you will live to regret it.' Prey repeated to himself. That threat was terrifying to those who'd seen what could be done to an individual while still keeping them alive, to the point where death was a mercy.

But, in this case, Night Watcher's threat showed that he, despite being a mind Mage who spoke of eliminating those who stood in his way, still instinctively leaned towards preserving life rather than ending it.

'Even their criminals are soft.' Prey thought disgustedly. What had happened to those ruthless ponies from the war? What had become of that mentality? Had Equestria really been saving them all up to be born at just the right time to oppose the Resistance? Everything had been against them from the start it seemed, even fate.

Prey twisted his head sharply away, long ear obscuring his view, as if looking at the defeated Solar Guards made him nervous, "Oh? I'm listening." Prey said quietly, hiding his thoughts behind a fake mask of deliberately false bravado.

Night Watcher saw what he wanted to see, "I'm glad you can realise a way out when it is being offered to you, and nor are you too proud to take it. These worthless day ponies can't get off their high rears to realise when they're beat, they always think they're so

much better than us." He paused to sneer down at Gold Bit.

"But I see you know better. No doubt you had your own plans and schemes to escape from their custody. Judging by the fact that you were still in their grasp when I turned up, those plans fell through. Despite your youth, you have almost as much reason to hate these day ponies as me. So Prey, my little ewe, how would you like the chance for revenge? To serve the one who would bring this filthy land down around Celestia's ears?" Night Watcher asked with a slow, cruel smile that bloomed over his face as he spoke, till by the end of his little speech he was practically grinning like a crazy pony.

"To serve your exiled mistress, Nightmare Moon your mean, cultist?" Prey asked quietly.

Night Watcher hid his surprise masterfully, but Prey saw it anyway, "Why yes. It certainly is a surprise to find one so young who has been blessed with knowledge of the mistress, but a happy one. Tell me, how did you come to know her?" Night Watcher asked.

Prey could hear the silent 'did you lie to me about the Guards not knowing?' question just as loudly as Night Watcher wasn't asking it.

Prey also knew that he was expected to provide the answer without Night Watcher having to ask. It was a dance they moved to, of words and questions that to an observer, appeared to be inconsequential. But both of them knew what was really being said, and both moved to the tune.

Prey idly twirled the end of the chain from the collar round his hoof, making Night Watcher wait a moment before he answered.

"To be honest, it wasn't that hard to see, even if the Solar Guard couldn't. I had my suspicions when I learnt the titles of the books being taken; L, M, N. Luna, Moon, Mare, Night, Nightmare. But that was just one possible theory. However, during the raid, I saw the titles of the books, 'Luna Cycles of the Ages', 'The Longest Night', 'Lunacy Follows', 'Night & Regime.' One of the books even flipped open in the fight, old star maps and archaic moon cycle spell theories. All clearly point to one known factor of restricted

knowledge; Nightmare Moon." Prey answered.

Night Watcher gave another small nod, "Deductive reasoning. But you haven't given me your answer, will you serve the mistress? Her return is nigh. Hurry with your answer, the Solar dogs with their chariot come to return you to whatever dank hole they pulled you from. They are only fifteen minutes out. I intend to be safely gone in ten. The only question is, will I leave here with or without you, little ewe?" Night Watcher asked with a faint curl of his lips. He was confident and sure.

Once again, the was the unspoken message that Prey heard clearly, 'I know about the coming Solar Guards, and I will be long gone before they get here. If you were waiting for help to arrive, it will come too late.' Prey understood, it was Night Watcher's rejoinder. He'd shifted the advantage of the conversation back into his favour after Prey unexpectedly swung it towards himself by his knowledge of who, or on this case *what*, Night Watcher really served.

It was all just words, push and pull, posturing and digging at one another while remaining civil. But words wouldn't mean a thing when the knives came out, when push and pull turned into stab and slash.
But that's all peace and negotiation was, wasn't it? Two parties smiling at each other and exchanging pleasantries all the while eyeing up their opponents throat.

Prey considered Night Watcher's offer. Did he want to take it or not?

Truthfully, Prey had already known what he was going to pick. He was just evaluating and double checking his reasoning to make sure he wasn't missing some benefit or hidden cost.

In the end, it was an easy decision. Night Watcher did not know everything, or even as much as he pretended to. He kept calling Prey 'little ewe'. Prey had at first thought that Night Watcher was merely subtly insulting him, but as the unicorn kept using the term 'ewe', it showed that he truly thought Prey was an ewe. Which meant he'd extracted even less from Gold Bit than Prey had originally thought, or else he would've known that Prey was a ram.

That meant Night Watcher almost certainly didn't know about that crystal the Solar Guard pegasus had crushed just before he'd been taken out of the fight. That was an alarm crystal, linked back to its larger counterpart somewhere in the Solar Guards headquarters. Prey had seen a Border Guard major use something similar once before back in the Resistance. The Solar Guards weren't fifteen minutes away, they were probably less than five.

Night Watcher hadn't been bluffing then in an attempt to catch Prey in a lie. The unicorn really did think the Solar Guards were only arriving with the transport chariots and that he had plenty of time. He didn't, and Prey had no intention in being dragged down with him when he was caught. And, at the end of the day, Prey would never choose to willingly serve someone who had tried to threaten him into compliance.

"Hmm, how about no?" Prey answered.

Night Watcher's smile faltered, then turned into something ugly, "Are you sure? Think carefully about your answer, little ewe. If you're not with me, you're against me." He warned.

Prey sneered at Night Watcher, mouth twisting down with scorn, "Your little cultist activities have gained you the attention of the Solar Guard, allying myself with you now, once you've already lost, would be an idiotic move. You've shot your quiver and you've missed, so don't try and drag me down with you, *filth*." The disdainful hate in Prey's words actually drove Night Watcher into speechlessness for a second, but then the unicorn returned full force with his own contempt.

"I've offered you the safety of the night's embrace and you've thrown it back in my face. I will not offer again-"

Without warning Prey sprang to his hooves and with a running jump, leapt from the flower box and onto the next one, choosing to run rather than listen to the end of Night Watcher's words.

Prey heard Night Watcher snort in frustration behind him and felt the tingle in his wool as the unicorn called up his magic to grasp Prey, but he had no intention of allowing Night Watcher to do as he

wished.

Prey leapt from his current flower box and dashed off between them, weaving in and out with surprising speed, considering he was still chained. He heard Night Watcher start after him. No breath wasted on shouts to stop or calls to come back, just the sound of hooves striking the roof as Night Watcher ran after him.

Prey ducked behind one flower box and into its black shadow, putting it between him and Night Watcher's line of sight so he couldn't be magically grabbed. Then he started off at a dead sprint for the fast approaching edge of the roof, starry night sky panning down to a long, *long* drop to the blackness of the river below. Prey skidded to a stop not two paces from the roofs lip.

Across the divide to the invisible river below, the outlines of high buildings were clearly visible in the night, an uneven sprinkling of lit up windows scattered across their surfaces. Prey looked down towards the black river he couldn't see, but his keen hearing picked up its far off watery gurgle.

A jump from this height would be almost certainly prove fatal, at a ninety five percent probability. He was over fifty yards up, the impact with the rivers surface would break his underdeveloped bones, not to mention he wasn't a strong swimmer and weighed down by the manacles and two inhibitor collars. He would be dragged to the river bottom and drowned.

Prey didn't need to turn to hear Night Watcher cantering up behind him, "Well that was pointless," The unicorn sneered, not even breathing hard, "Have your senses so deserted you as to reject the one and only life line offered to you? I was your only hope, but now the night is devoid of help, and you'll have to reap the consequences of your actions."

Prey spat over the edge into the night, still not tearing his eyes away from the drop into blackness, "Don't make me laugh, a plan to return a foal's tale demoness from her imprisonment? I don't know which is the greater mistake, releasing a demon or expecting it to reward you. Fool, you have no understanding of this world, you will receive no thanks. Predators eat the prey, they do not consort with

it." He said.

"On that last point, we are agreed, '*Prey*'." Night Watcher replied, "But I have delayed long enough..."

His horn started to glow, "And now-"

"And now you lose, just like me." Prey interrupted gleefully, "The Solar Guards aren't ten minutes out, they're less than one. You didn't realise it, but that useless pegasus Guard sounded the alarm before you disposed of him. It's too late to run, I know your name, your face, and your goals, I can inform them when they arrive. I'm sure I can negotiate time off my sentence for that. I wonder, do you think maybe they'll even put us in cells next to each other?" Prey asked with mock pondering innocence.

Night Watcher didn't waste any time in answering Prey's words. Prey knew what Night Watcher was going to do a moment before he did it.

Night Watcher couldn't be sure if Prey was telling the truth, but if Prey was, then he didn't have much time, but nor could the unicorn just afford to flee straight away either. Prey knew Night Watcher couldn't just leave him here, he knew to much. The safest course of action would be to kill Prey and run. A simple spell, just a magical push off the ledge and that would be that.

But Night Watcher wouldn't do that. His words earlier had shown he still wasn't a killer. He still lacked the necessary ruthless, bloody minded calculation for such a course of action to immediately occur to him. Killing Prey wouldn't occur to him in that hurried moment of decision. No, Prey knew Night Watcher would instinctively resort to his biggest strength to solve his problem instead: mind magic.

He could invade and simply erase all knowledge of this encounter from Prey's mind, and also learn if Prey was lying about the Solar Guards arriving shortly at the same time.

Also influencing Night Watcher in his moment of decision was that

he couldn't just grab Prey and teleport away to interrogate later. A unicorn needed to be quite powerful, tier four and above, and clearly know where he or she was going before they could teleport just themselves, and uninterrupted focus to cast. To bring anyone or anything else along with you either took multiple unicorns participating in the spell, an additional external power source, or a unicorn who's special talent was teleportation.

Night Watcher had none of these. He was a mind Mage, that was his special talent. But however mystical, rare, and outright hated his branch of magic was, it didn't actually take that much magical power to use. Just lots of skill.

Prey had led Night Watcher here with his little fleeing act, away from the staircase, which was now all the way on the opposite side of the roof. Meaning it would take Night Watcher even longer to escape. Prey guessed that Night Watch had followed them up the stairs and not through whatever roof trap door or skylight was around here. Gold Bit had come from the direction of the stairs, and that scan the Solar Guard had done when first they'd gotten up here had shown that Night Watcher wasn't already lying in wait.

This was how Prey knew that's what Night Watcher would do, and it was his one chance. Night Watcher would try to invade his mind, but once the connection was made, it went both ways and Prey could bite back. Not much of a chance, he was weak, still bound by two inhibitors, and facing a mind mage specialist.

But it was the only chance he had.

All this took less than a second as Night Watcher's horn lit up with a red light. Prey only had time to fervently hope he hadn't miscalculated, before Night Watcher's spell took effect and his consciousness was yanked out of his body, and sent tumbling into his mind scape.

[[[Bonus Picture - Night Watcher - Praise the Moon!]]]

https://imgur.com/r8JRKm6

9.0 If you don't control your Mind, someone else will

Prey's consciousness arrived in his outer mindscape and was immediately under assault.

Prey'd rarely had to fight while within his *own* mindscape. Usually it was him doing the invading, not the other way around. His victims' defences were always pitifully weak, if they even existed at all. Most simply didn't know what was going on or how to defend their minds against the foreign touch, getting overwhelmed before they even realised.

But now it was him doing the defending, as red tendrils of thought stabbed at his consciousness.

Prey's Outer mindscape was completely different from his Lower one, the plane formed of a bottomless ocean. This one, his Outer mindscape, was easier to define and manipulate. It was where Prey came when he meditated.

When not directly being shaped by conscious thought, his outer mindscape usually looked something like a grey, foggy, poorly defined and burnt out jungle. Vaguely tree shaped husks sprouted everywhere like spines. A band of darkness sat in the distance, bordering on the edge of this desecrated forest.

Prey had no time to note what shape his Outer mindscape currently took, because by then he was having to fight back against Night Watcher's invasion.

Summoning up walls of thought, Prey defended against the spreading invasion of tendrils stabbing down from a purple tinted sky.

Fighting mind to mind wasn't a matter of mental visualisation. No

summoned armies or imagined fiery spells. It was all willpower. The sheer dominance of one mind over the other and the ability to bend them to your will.

Of course, those with experience in any fight will have the advantage because, by nature, a mind is hard to control and discipline. The average mind flits all over the place and cannot marshal any solid defence. Anyone who's tried to concentrate exclusively on only one concept and nothing else will realise how hard this is.

You cannot afford even a single moment's distraction or uncertainty, or all will be lost.

Prey's walls of thought jumped into place, sealing off his outer mindscape. He had to stop Night Watcher before he pushed in any further, he'd invaded too far already. Prey just needed a moment to properly marshal his thoughts, and then he would begin his counter attack.

Night Watcher didn't seem inclined to give him that moment. A smashing blow of cold willpower crashed into Prey's defences, then another and another, coming so fast that Prey couldn't adequately harden his will and repair his walls between each successive strike.

Prey fell back, hastily summoning up additional barricades as the first cracked, formed from his determination. '**I shall not let you in**.' The walls promised.

'**You are weak. You cannot stop me. Give in**.' Came the return command, like a cresting wave of red. It splashed out, seeping into the cracks, searching for any weakness.

Prey hardened his will, then split his mind, breaking off a piece and holding both halves within himself. It was a feat of balancing more precarious and delicate than walking any knife edge, and far more dangerous. Leaving one half to fend off Night Watcher's hammering blows, the other half of Prey gathered itself up and flung out an attack volley of barbed thoughts.

Images, bright flashes of memory, impossible concepts and paradoxes peppered Night Watcher like a swarm of wasps. Annoying, painful, and above all distracting. They constantly niggled away at Night Watcher focus, exactly like they were supposed to. Prey's walls repaired themselves in the moment's breathing room he'd managed to buy himself.

But already Night Watcher was already adapting, hardening himself to Prey's distractions and forcing himself to ignore them. Gathering his willpower back up, Night Watcher flung it headlong at Prey's defence again.

'**Give in, you cannot stop me**.'

Prey summoned up another barricade. Then another and another as Night Watcher smashed through them one after the other.

But each time the unicorn did, there was already another in place to meet him, each one fuelled by a slightly different concept than the one before, making it impossible for Night Watcher to break them with the same attack more than once. Prey's attacking thoughts continued to buzz and hum, flitting like insects and parting like smoke around Night Watcher's powerful strikes. Yet all the while those vicious little thoughts continued searching for any weakness to sting.

This battle continued for however long it was, seconds, minutes, hours, who knew? You could only focus on surviving the moment. Prey *had* to win, he couldn't afford to loose. He knew what the alternative to victory was.

Unfortunately Prey had to admit, Night Watcher was good.

The cultist's attacks and defences were stubbornly strong and rigidly controlled. He was almost academic in his execution, like advancing pieces one after another on a gaming board. Night Watcher masterfully controlled himself too. He never let anything distract his focus for more than a moment, and never more than once, before brushing it off with pure belligerentness to press forwards once again.

Prey sprung his trap, the one he'd been setting up since the start of the fight. As Night Watcher smashed down yet another wall, the unicorn no doubt expected to find another fall back defence behind it. But what came rushing out to meet him was a roaring scream of glistening blackness that shot towards Night Watcher in his moment of surprise.

Prey's will pierced through Night Watcher's solid wave, drilling past it before the unicorn could summon any walls.

And suddenly it was Night Watcher on the defensive, struggling to protect his own mind. Prey squirmed in, working his way into Night Watcher's consciousness. A thought moment later Prey was through and fighting into the borders of Night Watcher's private mindscape. Prey caught a flash of a well defined, starlit courtyard, the moon huge overhead.

The reversal of tables had Night Watcher panicked, Prey could feel it as the unicorn desperately tried to keep him out, '**No! I shall not let you in here**!'

A twisting mass of redness ever refolding on itself, like bubbling quicksand, rose out and upwards to absorb Prey's punishing assault.

The spike of blackness that Prey wielded drilled and stabbed, slicing bits off Night Watcher's defence even as his attack lost pieces of its own self in the assault.

Back and forth, both of them teetered on the brink, swaying on the border between tipping over and finally breaking into Night Watcher's mind.

One... Two... Three... Four... Four times Prey almost broke through, and four times Night Watcher managed to blunt and deflect the assault at the last possible second.

Prey was loosing momentum, already he felt the strain. Night Watcher's sheer stubbornness refused to be broken. The nightmare worshipping cultist simply *refused* to be beaten. Prey drew on his mental reserves and gave it everything he had left.

Prey's thoughts were like the raging storm, a thousand angry voices howling and biting. Night Watcher's walls were a unified fortress in the face of it. A strong, indomitable mountain.

Prey's defence was a shroud of stinging smoke, stabbing thoughts like black shards of shrieking glass, slicing and gouging anything they touched. Night Watcher's attacks were like that of an iron smithies hammer, striking away on a red anvil of forged steel.

Prey gave it one more push, a last twist of malicious thought that ripped into Night Watcher's defences, seeming to come from all sides at once.

Night Watcher shuddered, crumpled, folded down, compacted, and came back up harder, stronger, reformed with that same sheer stubbornness of will. It was the mental equivalent of bracing your back under a loaded cart, and with teeth gritted and jaw clenched, giving it your all in one last, great, heaving shrug. Night Watcher's will collided with Prey's own.

Prey lost.

He was too weak. The inhibitors still took too much from him. Prey had vicious experience on his side, but Night Watcher had theory and strength. And when you came down to it, a unicorns natural magic will always give them an edge. Not to mention the magic of Night Watcher's special talent spearheading that strength. Prey had no magic of his own, only stolen secrets and runes. It wasn't enough, and Night Watcher beat off his attack. The assault turned once more in an all engulfing wave of furious red than rushed in like the iron tide, eager for revenge.

Prey was beaten back, bowled over and out from the borders of Night Watcher's mind, back into his own Outer mindscape and then back again and even further back. Prey struggled and snarled, forcing Night Watcher to fight for every inch of Prey's burnt, purple lit territory, '**You cannot come in here**.'

'**You cannot stop me**.' Came the response as Night Watcher plowed slowly but relentlessly on. Closer and closer to the dark border that lay at the edge of Prey's outer mindscape. Closer and closer, slower and slower Night Watcher's advance came, until it was barely moving as the mind mage strained against the mind leech.

Prey held him there, '**I will not let you in. This is mine and mine alone**.' Came Prey's grim promise.

'**It will be mine**.' Was the answer.

Prey knew what was going to happen. Night Watcher was going to break in. Prey couldn't invade his mind, the unicorns defences were too strong and his assault too relentless. He'd tried his best, but he was never as good at taking over minds as he was at breaking them. And currently, that was locked beyond his capabilities, and *oh*, how he *hated* being this weak.

Night Watcher was going to get through. Prey accepted that, dropped his defences, and let him in.

In a great tidal rush of red thought, Night Watcher came pouring in, trampling over the abandoned remains of Prey's tattered walls. With a roar of triumph, he dived head long into Prey's mind.

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Night Watcher crashed into something like an ocean. It spread out in every direction. Up, down, left, right, backwards, forwards, the whole of the world was filled with silent water, fading away into the distance.

'What's this? Where is my prey?' Gone were the commands, it was too late for them to matter any more. Night Watcher was already in and now they were too close for him to be denied.

'I'm here. I'm everywhere.' Came Prey's answer, echoing against Night Watcher's consciousness, a voice without any source or sound.

Prey could feel Night Watcher casting around, trying to find his mental representation, his avatar of self. Night Watcher was a ball

of red tendrils, small in the vast emptiness of the ocean, keeping his defences tight, unsure just exactly what all this was.

'Another type of wall, a last ditch defence? Clever, not something I've ever seen before. I will remember it, once I am through with you.' Night Watcher's thoughts came.

'You'll have to find me first.' Echoed the silent reply from all directions.

'Now that I'm in, you cannot force me out. I've already won. It's merely a matter of time.' The red tendrils promised as they started to spread out, growing and searching through the still waters.

'Fool. You do not understand. I am not here, I am everywhere.' Echoed Prey's response, a silent, mocking laugh that carried to Night Watcher through the vast ocean.

'Then you are nowhere,' Came the blunt dismissal, 'And if you are nowhere you cannot hope to stop me, for I am strong and concentrated right here. You are too spread out, thin and weak. You are powerless as you are now.' The red tendrils thought, still expanding and probing further into the infinite ocean.

But in infinity, that red stain in the silent water was very small.

Night Watcher's consciousness noticed the shapes floating in the water below. Images and flashes on panes of glass, and he knew them for what they were, just as Prey did. 'Your memories. I was right, a clever ploy, but this is not an endless expanse, it just appears as such. And now I have found what you thought to hide. Run and hide little ewe, cower in some dark corner while I pick apart your life, or take form and face me one last time. I will win either way.'

There was no response this time from the ocean, just the silence of deep water.

Prey felt Night Watcher's irritation at his refusal to come out and face him, but Night Watcher put it aside and delved down deeper, the memories and floating pieces of life rising up to meet him as he

dived.

With a suddenness, Night Watcher was in the middle of them, everything floating and twisting silently as it hung there, suspended in the ocean about him. 'Now let us see little ewe, what are your deepest, most private secrets.' A shard of memory floated past. A red tendril shot out and ensnared it.

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Prey lay on the dirt inside of Snake's tent. The voodoo witch had left. He had no energy to move. Through half closed eyes that couldn't even cry anymore, Prey stared at the canvas tent wall. It was stained and streaked with dirt. 'How much longer?' Prey thought. 'How much longer in this hell until I die?'

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The memory ended. 'What is this? Real or imagined memories?' Night Watcher's question came. Still, there was no answer. Another shard drifted into range, and once again Night Watcher snagged it with a thought.

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Prey crouched behind a screen of bushes. A little way away, Snake was almost invisible in the shadows, sharp eyes glinting through his snake mask slits. Prey's very wool seemed to vibrate with the violence of the shivers that wracked his frame. He felt sick. He wished he were dead.

The muffled '*whump*' and '*crack*' from the runic traps he and Snake had carved into the stone shelf the path meandered across had stopped a while ago. The screams had also stopped, or been stopped after the Resistance swept in to finish off the crippled patrol.

'I've killed someone. I've killed someone.' It kept going around and around in Prey's head. He couldn't think of anything else. His head hurt, his chest hurt, his stomach hurt. He didn't even notice the tears dripping from the end of his muzzle. It wasn't what he'd expected.

It was so impersonal. Just a trap, a contained internal implosion that would shatter the lower leg of any living thing that laid hoof or claw upon it. Prey hadn't wielded the spears that skewered the downed Border Guard ponies as they'd lain screaming, but it was still him who'd killed them.

'I've killed someone. I've killed someone. I'm a murderer. I'm one of them.' Prey heaved into the bush, not that he had anything left to throw up. He hadn't eaten before Snake had dragged him from camp, he hadn't been able to, not when he knew what was coming. He didn't think he would ever be able to eat again.

"I'm a murderer." Prey sobbed to himself.

Prey looked up blearily as Snake came over, the feathers and bones on the witches cloak clinking slightly, "Congratulations. You have earned your face. This is now yours. Change it as you wish." Snake said emotionlessly, holding an object out to Prey.

It was a wooden mask. It was roughly formed and crudely hacked out of thick tree bark, a large crack running along the top edge.

It was a symbol, something that showed he was now one of the blooded Resistance fighters. They all received their masks after their first kill, to strike fear into the hearts of their enemies. He was now one of them. The empty eye's of the horrible thing stared up at Prey.

'I'm a murderer.'

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Nigh Watcher's tendril snapped back as the memory petered off. 'What is this?' The red mass of thought seemed to hesitate for a brief moment. More memory's and shards of objects slowly floated and swirled around Night Watcher in the water, waiting for him to reach out and read them. Night Watcher gave himself a mental shake. Almost hesitantly, wary of a trap, Night Watcher reached out once more.

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Prey stood beside the body of a earth pony, over six times his size, where it lay, half submerged in the sucking mud. Prey was also spattered in the freezing muck, and a light drizzle trickled through the trees. For some reason, Prey had a filthy ribbon tied behind one ear, where it hung beside the wooden mask. Prey had not done anything with the mask, had not personalised it at all. It was still just a crude wooden construct that would hide his face. And his eyes.

Two black circles that stared out at the world and down at the dead pony, who's swollen tongue was extruding from his twisted features, eyes blood shot and bulging. He'd died clawing to breathe as his lungs tried to suck air through a windpipe swollen shut. Prey wondered what it had felt like. What had the dead Guard's thoughts had been in those last few moments before the poison had finally suffocated him? Prey hoped he never found out.

Prey tilted his masked head and looked down at the body, "You shouldn't have come. None of you should have come. You should have stayed away. *I* should have stayed away. I should have killed myself before it came to this..." Prey's voice trailed off.

Prey shook himself, he had a task to carry out, before Snake came looking to find out what was delaying his witch experiments. Or a predator was drawn to the fresh corpse. Prey didn't want to do it, but he had no choice as his trembling hoof uncorked the dirty jar he'd been given.

'I am not who I am. I am now someone else. There is no Gossamer anymore. He's dead and safe. Gone from here. I'm wearing this mask, so it's not even Prey doing it. It's not *me*.' Prey told himself as he shakily withdrew the small knife from its sheath. He had to grip it firmly between his hoof cleft and jerk it free, the water having swollen the wooden sheath.

"I would say I'm sorry for what I'm about to do, not that you can hear me. But I'm not, because this me can't be sorry. Because it's not *me*." Prey repeated to the nameless Earth pony, bringing the chipped blade up to the ponies first eye ball and positioned the jar underneath to catch it.

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Night Watcher recoiled. His red tendrils of thought coiled defensively about his consciousness. 'This is wrong. That couldn't be real, it's just not possible. Do you hear that? I know this isn't *real*! You're not fooling me little ewe!' Night Watcher thundered out his defiance.

The empty ocean absorbed his mental shout and remained just as it had always been, silent and empty.

There was a long breath of time as the ocean waited. But in the end, with something like morbid fascination, Night Watcher reached out once again.

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"Why are you doing this?" Prey asked the donkey called Ruin, who wore a ragged toothed mask, painted red to resemble blood. Behind the donkey, the pegasus prisoner bound to a tree cried out the same question to the grimly smiling crowd as they gathered.

Ruin turned around in annoyance to see who'd spoken to him. Then he looked down and spotted Prey, "Ah, the little lamb, or is it little ewe? Lovely day isn't it? Pathetic you're looking today is what you are. Perhaps you'd like to put an end to your uselessness and join him?" Ruin asked with a leer towards the sobbing Pegasus.

Prey shrunk back down, the courage to speak he'd managed to scrounge up from somewhere deserting him. He knew what they were going to do. This was the second Pegasus Border Guard they'd taken alive. He hadn't known with the first one, but he knew what they were going to do with this second one. Prey tried to sink into himself and disappear.

"That's what I thought." Ruin growled, "Beat it." He ordered as he turned back, gesturing for them to bring up the ropes.

Prey started to slink away, when a heavy claw grabbed his ear and yanked him back. Prey yelped in pain as his head was twisted up and he found himself stating up into the sharp beaked grin of

Torment, "Where do you think you're going?" She asked, viciously digging in the tips of her talons.

"Nowhere, I'm not going nowhere. Please, please just let go." Prey gasped out, trying to free his ear from Torment's talons. Blood was starting to trickle from the punctures and down the inside of his ear.

"Good, that means you can help." Torment enthused, shoving Prey to the front of the crowd.

The prisoner was now whimpering, staring wide eyed in silent horror as a rope was tied around the base of each of his green feathered wings. The crowd were taking up positions either side, forming a line down each of the ropes, all grinning nastily at the Pegasus with something dark in their eyes.

Torment shoved him to the front of the left hoofside line and pushed the rope into his mouth, "Here you go, have fun." Torment said, finally jerking her claws out from Prey's abused ear.

Prey barely suppressed the cry of pain as his ear began to bleed properly, but he managed it. He'd had worse from many of these same Resistance fighters surrounding him, some of whom were watching him with sick amusement.

"Please," Whispered the Pegasus, tears and snot running down his face, "Please don't, just don't. Please oh *please* no. I can't, I can't, no. Y-you can't do this. Y-you're just a foal, don't do what they say, please *please*. You don't know, you don't understand, just please don't." The prisoner begged him.

Prey looked away, whole body drooping as blood continued to worm it's way down inside his ear. This poor Pegasus was right, Prey didn't have to do this. The Resistance fighters wouldn't even kill him if he didn't participate. They would certainly punish him, but they wouldn't kill him. He provided far too much fun and stress relief for them to do that. And oh, how they would *love* it if he ran away right now.

Prey reached round the back of his neck, and pulled the strap

around. He settled the crude mask firmly into place, then squared his thin shoulders and picked the rope back up without complaint. The streaming eyes of the Pegasus met his own, just blank holes, completely devoid and detached.

"*No please*!"

Torment raised her talon, grinning with mad glee, "Pull!" She screeched, and let her talon fall.
Prey put his back into it and pulled along with everyone else.

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'What was that?!' Night Watcher demanded, red ball of tendrils quivering in distress, 'That was different. I *felt* it. The emotions were real, I was there! What did you do? That wasn't a memory viewing, I felt it. Stop hiding and face me you vile twisted spawn of incest.' Night Watcher's consciousness yelled into the empty ocean.

No reply. The ball seemed to tilt forwards, as if finally looking down for the first time. The waters slowly fell away, down and down, fathom after fathom of deepening water to the black maw of nothing.

Prey felt Night Watcher realise how silent it was. How quiet and empty it was in the open ocean. The red ball contracted, bunching up more defensively. Prey knew what it was. The beginnings of fear. The silence of the deep.

'Perhaps...' Came Prey's silent voice, creeping through Night Watcher's defences and crawling into his understanding, 'You are beginning to realise that you should have stayed out. This place is mine, and mine alone. You cannot take what is mine. But instead, I will give.'

Prey's mental communication was saturated with baleful spite, a surging ripple through the vast empty waters, hissingfrom every side at once, 'You never stopped to consider, that to hurt you, I am willing to hurt myself.'

With that, the floating shards of memories shuddered under some

directionless force and began to stir, drawn by an unseen current through to circle around Night Watcher's consciousness. The ball contracted and hardened further, tendrils jabbing out at the shards without actually touching them, trying to keep them at bay.

It wasn't enough, and one of the many windows of memory swirling in the water got past Night Watcher's defences and was dragged into contact.

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Prey was hiding at the foot of The Hill, as he would later know it, waiting with baited breath for the attack to begin. This was it, what those in charge of the Resistance said would be '*the battle*'. The one that broke the Border Guard and sent them crawling back to their sun tyrant.

This was the first time the Resistance had come out to fight head on in a pitched battle. Hidden all around, unseen in the trees, the Resistance stared up hungrily at the force of unicorn Border Guards, milling amidst their tents up on the crest. Captain Fire Strike was up there too. The Resistance had sworn that today he would die.

It didn't go like that at all.

"Attack!" Came the shout, and the Resistance swarmed out from every nook and cranny, flooding the bottom slope and rushing halfway up the hill in a matter of seconds. Prey stayed firmly hidden where he was, watching with wide eyes as the battle unfolded.

It appeared the Border Guard had been expecting them. The unicorns formed up smartly, and then a huge dome barrier popped into existence, just as the first wave of arrows and javelins reached it. The projectiles all deflected and pinged off uselessly, as harmless as flies. The pink shield encircled the entire Border Guard camp, not a single chink left uncovered, the horns of the unicorns aglow as they sustained it.

The Resistance screamed in rage, shooting off arrow after arrow, all to bounce ineffectively off the shield. The unicorns seemed

unworried, in fact Prey saw few even talking amongst themselves as they kept the hoards of the Resistance at bay.

The Resistance had completely underestimated just how powerful unicorn magic truly was. So far, they had only been raiding or ambushing patrols unawares, never giving any unicorn's time to bring their magic to bare. They hadn't recognised the overpowering might the horned ponies wielded.

Magic was versatile. It was both close range and long range, offensive and defensive, targeted or widespread, the start and the end of any fight. And the Resistance had no way to counter it.

Prey thought he caught a glimpse of one the unicorns even taking a break to drink from his canteen as they maintained the shield.

Then Captain Fire Strike emerged from his command tent. It was the first time Prey had seen the blazing red maned unicorn, but he knew him immediately. There was no one else such a commanding figure could be. The Border Guard captain slowly surveyed the scene before him before coming to a decision.

Prey didn't hear Fire Strike's order, he was too far away. But he saw it instead. The hind ranks of unicorns fell back, and tilted their horns up. A fiery glow began to build as they took aim.

Prey read Captain Fire Strike's lips as he soundlessly sneered at the helpless Resistance below him, "Fire."

It seemed the barrier only kept things out. It certainly didn't keep the fire balls in. Bolts of fire soared into the air with deceptive slowness, gaining altitude. Everyone looked up, pausing in whatever they were doing mid assault. Then the wave of fire balls came hurtling down.

Fire exploded amongst the Resistance on the hills slope, scattering them amid an orange blaze of heat and screams. The devastating force of a full firing line of unicorns tore the Resistance's assault to ribbons. Donkeys and goats writhed and bucked, fighting to get out of the hungry flames. Zebra pushed and shoved their fellow deers and rams. Panic was everywhere.

Then the second salvo of fire balls arrived, and hot on its hocks came another and another, bombarding the Resistance fighters as they tried to flee, but walls of fire and burning trees barred their only escape route.

It was surprising how quick fur could ignite.

Within a minute, the horrible stench of scorched meat had filled the air. Screams rent the air. Prey couldn't look away as foul greasy smoke stung his eyes. He was frozen. *Fire*. It was happening again. Everything all over again. His world had burned the first time, and now this one was burning too. But he couldn't look away.

Sometimes, all you can do is stand and watch.

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This time when Night Watcher broke free of the haunting memory, he didn't try to find Prey or demand answers. Instead, he immediately started to try and retreat, pulling his consciousness back. He didn't get very far, another shard swept in on the current and made contact.

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Something was out there in the dark, Prey could feel it. Beyond the safety of the fires weak light, something was watching him. It had been out there for the past three nights as well, every time he took his turn on watch, he could feel its presence. Watching. *Waiting*.

Prey strained his eyes, staring into the dark trying to see what it was, and just as afraid that he would. But he couldn't look away, searching for whatever it was that hunted him. Somehow, Prey knew it had selected him, and not any of the others around him, who lay in exhausted sleep. He was small, fragile, and weak. He embodied everything his name said.

Prey shivered, and huddled tighter in his mouldy blanket, his back to the fire so as to preserve his night vision. It was out there somewhere, hungrily licking its chops as it slunk closer.

He was tired, so tired and scared. They'd been fleeing for three days

now. Hunted by the Guard during the day, and hounded by whatever this horror was during the night.

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'Leave me alone! Let me out of here, I want no part in your madness!' Night Watcher trashed, propelling himself up through the ocean of Prey's lower mindscape in an effort to get away. But the surface grew no closer and the shoal of memories swirled after his retreating avatar of self. Another memory struck home and stuck.

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It was quiet, too quiet.

All the nearby night birds and insects had gradually drifted into silence some time ago. It was close. Prey didn't know if he was going to last until morning. The mental strain of a further two nights spent in sleepless fear even when he wasn't on watch was slowly driving him insane. His burning eyes drooped, but he couldn't sleep. If he fell asleep, he wouldn't wake up again. But he could barely stay upright.

There was a sound behind him, on the other side of the fire. A wet, crunching sound.

Prey didn't turn around. His heart hammered in his chest and his throat constricted so tightly he could scarcely breathe as he cowered in the dark.

There was another awful crunch, and wet ripping sound from the direction of the sleeping Resistance fighters. Prey didn't look, he didn't turn, he was frozen. Seconds were hours, but he couldn't turn, couldn't look. 'If I don't look, it can't get me.' The primal logic of the terrified child. On and on it went, the quiet, *terrible* noises echoing in Prey's trembling ears.

Eventually the noise stopped. That was worse.

Prey started to cry as the deafening silence grew longer.

'I'm going to die.' Prey decided. He was just *so* tired, tired of it all.

Still he couldn't gather up the courage to turn around.

The dark ground on, minute by agonising minute.

An eternity passed in that night.

As the first light of dawn crept over the tree tops, Prey finally succumbed to exhausting and muscle cramping terror and collapsed.

They never found out what it was that had eaten the doe Fleet Leaf. It didn't leave anything, except her four hooves, laid out neatly in a row on the blood soaked turf.

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Night Watcher's attempts at fleeing the ocean were proving fruitless. No matter how he thrashed and struck out wildly with his mind, his position in the ocean didn't change. The memories continued to come on, in more violent flashes and roiling emotions, forcing themselves onto Night Watcher one after the other.

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A twisted clearing in the dark trees, a shaft of moonlight illuminating the shape in the middle. Prey shuffled closer, tiny knife clutched tightly. The sound of rattling breathing grew stronger.

A donkey. Eyes bulging and staring mindlessly, each rattling breath a laborious effort.

Maggots the size of earth worms crawled through the donkey's lower half, squirming and bulging under the flesh as they crawled sightlessly from one weeping tear in the flesh to the next.

The laboured breathing, each inhale and exhale an effort of unimaginable suffering, but the donkey wouldn't, *couldn't*, die.

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The memory snapped off, but more kept coming, faster and faster in a blur of forced recall pushed upon Night Watcher. The memories

started to become unreal and disjointed from reality too.

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Hiding in the tree branches, wool painted and died in camouflage as the five pony patrol passed underneath. They'd seen his false trail and taken the bait. They wanted this war to be over, to finish off the last few remaining resistance fighters so they could go home.

They were heading right towards the Bone Rot mine set at chest height just around that thorn bush.

Prey grinned sickly as the five ponies that made up the patrol passed underneath his branch. They'd taken the bait. They were headed right for the Bone Rot, just past that thorn bush.

Prey frowned, 'What? Didn't they already-?'

There was the sound of five sets of breath as the ponies passed under his tree, heading right for the Bone Rot trap.

Prey did the sensible thing and ran for it.

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A memory of something on the other side of the stone wall of the cave he'd found. Or been led to. He wasn't sure which. He just knew that it held something. And that it also held nothing.

The rough stone wall seemed to shift in the dancing torch shadows, as if something moved on the other side of its grey skin, pressing up against his reality. Prey's head hurt and his eyes swam. Lifting the sputtering torch higher, Prey continued on down into the earths dark mouth.

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An earlier flash of memory, before the doomed hill assault. Prey was covered in sweat and blood slicked back the wool around his face and dripped from his large ears. Not his. The goat's on the makeshift plank table. His head rang from the screaming as he hung on grimly to his side of the straps that held the goat down.

Snake re-threaded his gore stained bone needle and stepped up again, "Tighter. Do not let him break free again. I didn't let him steal that egg infested loaf just so he could eat it and die after I got the first batch of cinder lava out of him. He still has at least another three harvests left before his liver gives out, and my stock of ingredients is running low."

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Prey hung in a ritual circle, blood and something worse dripping from his hooves and scrawny chest. Everything was wrong, *twisted*. The ground seemed to move out of the corner of your eye, a ringing filled your ears. Prey's shockingly white teeth in a sunken visage of exhaustion stood out frighteningly.

"Finally. It worked, it was worth it." He whispered as his body started to spasm, his face twitching and jerking about without his control, "All those runes and preparations. Three rituals all at once. *Ha*!" He laughed madly, voice cracking horribly, "I must be mad!" He screamed shrilly to the grey sky.

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A pile of half dissolved bodies lying in a pool of spent Bone Rot. Two earth ponies, one Pegasus would been walking instead of flying, and even a unicorn. All swimming together in a mix of melted flesh and liquefied organs.

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The Border Guards launching wave after wave of fire as the whole world burned, ash blackening the sky and flames blotting out the sun in a roar of flame.

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A stolen book of dark knowledge, taken from one of the Border Guards enchanted chests used to securely transport dangerous artifacts. The locks hadn't been good enough. Prey put his hoof to the cover and the book grew teeth and lunged at him.

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'-letter to my wife-', '-uniforms filthy despite washing it-', '-need a break-', '-every Celestia damned day it's the same-', '-can't wait till I rotate out-', Prey clutched his head, trying in vain to block the voices from his mind. The Border Guards thoughts were too much, too many of them all at the same time. It *hurt*. He hadn't known it would be like this, he wouldn't have taken the runes if he'd known.

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Tightening off a wire mesh strung just below the tree canopy, stretching from branch to branch. Prey reached out from his perch and twanged it with a hoof. The fine wire web shivered and hummed, taut as a bow string and almost invisible. Just waiting for some*pony* to fly into it at lethal speeds.

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It was just him, he was the only one left. 'It's only me. Me against the world.' Bitter hate swelled in his breast, so strong he could hardly breath, "Then I'm taking everyone with me."

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'-the monster-' '-the phantom-' '-it's just a story-' '-it's real, it's out there-' '-how much longer-' '-there's only one of them-' '-there's a whole swarm-' '-a blank mask dripping with blood-' '-a little lamb-' '-a towering monster-' '-can never catch it-' '-why me? Why is this happening to me?-' '-the war was supposed to be over-' '-the war is over-' '-then why are we still here?-'

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A rotting corpse crawling from its shallow grave, an unhallowed moan on its lips as it clawed itself free from its burial ground. It morphed and twisted, teeth lengthening into canines as it gnashed its jaws at the moon in raging hunger.

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A stuffed doll in the shape of a sheep. A pin cushion on its back. Staring button eyes, straw poking out of the seams. The thread stretched, opening wide to let the darkness of the mouth gape open

from within, hungry and empty and endless.

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"You should have taken my warning and stayed out Night Watcher. Now you're dead in the water."

'You're evil, pure sick evil! The Mistress will put you down like the rabid cur you are. Leave me alone.' Night Watcher's consciousness shouted in fear. The vast ocean mocked him as he continued to futilely try and reach the surface. Prey could feel the fear and mounting despair radiating from his thoughts.

'Give up, you can't escape. All that time you were viewing my memories, I was busy sealing the exit. You're stuck in a loop. Didn't any*pony* ever tell you it's dangerous to get lost in someone else's thoughts?' Prey mocked him from everywhere and nowhere.

'You lie. It is possible to break into and out of every mind. You hadn't trapped me, I'll figure out how.' Night Watcher gave a massive blast of will power, stronger than any previously. Not even when Prey had been knocking on the threshold of Night Watcher's own mind had he fought so strongly. This was strength brought on by desperation, this was fear.

The ocean shivered, from one horizon of water to the next. And then nothing else happened.

Prey laughed, 'You're mistaken. This is not my inner mindscape, this is just the lower one. This isn't where I am at my most vulnerable, this is where I am nowhere and everywhere. I made this place, specially for keeping myself sane. This is where I store dark things.'

'This was all a trap.' Night Watcher realised.

'Well done. Too little too late.'

'I'm not finished yet! I'm not dead, you hear me?! You couldn't beat me before, you can't beat me now!' The ball of tendrils contracted and hardened, solidifying and growing denser and smaller, like an enormous red marble. It's surface was smooth and unblemished, no chinks to exploit. Night Watcher had given up any attempt at attack

or even escape. He only meant to survive, to hold out against Prey's assault which he knew was surely coming.

He waited, braced, ready. Prey did not attack. The frightening silence of the ocean slowly become unbearable the longer he waited, the strain building.

Night Watcher curled ever tighter, 'Come on what are you waiting for?!'

'Not just yet. I have one last memory to show you Night Watcher.'

It was a reflexive action, the desperate need to know what horror Prey had install before Night Watcher could clamp down on the impulse. It was hardly anything, just a slight twitch, a miniature crack in the marble, but that was all Prey needed.

'Made you look.' Prey taunted and shoved the memory shard through the crack before Night Watcher's could react.

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And Night Watcher saw what Prey had found all those years ago. He saw the barren and warped earth of that forsaken piece of land Prey had wondered into. Saw the towering spikes of stone thrown up by something that had twisted down into the earth. He saw Prey travel down into the dripping dark and find it.

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And Night Watcher realised why Prey was so good at breaking minds. He was just a runt sheep, with no magical talent, just borrowed and stolen strength from forgotten runes. Prey was weaker than almost everything out there. But he had something else. Prey hadn't used what he'd found burrowed down there into the earth, or tried to call forth more from where ever it had come from. No, his instincts of self preservation were far too strong to even consider attempting such an act of suicidal folly.

Prey hadn't tried to use it, but he'd done something else instead. He'd kept a physical sliver of it in just his thoughts. Prey knew he wouldn't be able to overwhelm all those he tested his mind against.

But when you have a link to unreality in your thoughts, logic and mental defences meant nothing.

It was a piece of madness, suppressed and hidden, corralled and penned in by iron will power every minute of every day.

It wasn't simple craziness, or even insanity. People often think they're the same thing. They're not. Madness is so much worse, so much more dangerous.

Crazy doesn't make a calm, rational, happy family stallion design a spell to turn himself into a living fuel source to immolate the whole village in unquenchable spell flame. Insanity doesn't make a pregnant mare chew through her own belly to consume the unborn foal. Only madness did that.

And madness is catching.

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If Night Watcher had stayed out of Prey's mind, he would have been safe. The inhibitors on Prey were of the strongest variety known to ponykind. Prey couldn't bring the madness out, but Night Watcher had come in.

'You're evil, you're twisted! You're a threat to the whole of Equestria, to everything! That thing could devour us at any time. You're evil! Evil!' Night Watcher shouted at Prey, the word 'evil' seemed to be all he could articulate.

Prey laughed bitterly as Night Watcher's defences dissolved and he bolted, the unicorns mind blindly making one last bid to escape from Prey's.

'Go to Tartarus!' Night Watcher screamed in defiance.

'**Come with me**.'

The depths of the ocean rose up in a terrifying rush of hungry blackness, streaking towards Night Watcher. The vast terribleness of it was enough to blot out everything. Like a candle enveloped within the coming night, the whole ocean rose from beneath Night
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Watcher to envelop him with nothingness.

Except there was something in the depths of the black ocean. Long shapes stretched and shifted down there in the silence of the deep where Prey never dared venture. Stretched and unfurled, looking up towards the surface with eyeless heads to see the tiny helpless speck of Night Watcher framed far above them, if they even were a 'them'.

Prey withdrew, pulling back his oh-so-breakable mind from those things locked down there that could sunder understanding. They weren't his, he didn't control them. A flea does not control the manticore on which it rides.

Hunger stirred, and opened its maw wide and rose up to meet the escaping mind. Night Watcher didn't even have time for one last thought. And then the ocean was empty once more, returning to the endless underwater stretch of empty blue silence.

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[End of Arc 0 - Next time, Arc 1]

[[[Sinking - Concept art only- The mindscape Ocean]]]
https://imgur.com/TPmSKDp

Author's Notes:

Had to re-write this loads.
If you notice any mistakes, or story inconsistencies, please point them out.
Thanks.
Also, this great picture was done by ShankMaster of Prey in the Mask.
Found Here

10.1 Bring on the Night

Author's Notes:

Hello all. Start of ARC 1 officially (and end of ARC 0 too I guess)
Thanks be to Sweetolebob18 once again ⬅(Editor here guys 🐞)
Please point out mistakes so I can correct them and improve.

[Beginning of Arc 1]

Voices on the rooftop. Prey's eyes were closed. He lay on his side by the edge, unmoving.

He didn't respond or even twitch as the hated Solar Guard's voices drew near. He couldn't see but he could still hear them.

"-Captain Valour is on his way. Melody, set up a light spell, and get those sky chariots out of here, we need room. Sargent, how are they?" Prey heard. He knew that voice, dazed as he was. It was the lieutenant, Bright. The other ponies, sounded like at least eight of them, he wasn't so sure about.

"Not...not good I'm afraid sir. Gold Bit, he's, I don't think he's going to make it." A voice answered. Prey could hear the sorrow in it. Prey would have laughed in delight if he could.

"You're the medic, isn't there something you can do?" Bright asked angrily.

"Sir, I wish I could. But, his magic is burnt out, he's badly hurt and, well, he's not there anymore sir. Gold Bit's gone-"

"Don't say that!" Bright snarled.

"Sir, it's the truth. What ever that filthy mind leech did to him, he's gone. Do you really think Gold Bit would've viciously attacked his two fellow Guards on the way to the hospital, before coming here to do all this? The mind leech took Gold Bit sir, and only left this husk behind." The second voice said sadly.

"...Tartarus take him. He'll pay for this." Bright cursed.

"I'm sorry sir. He was a good guard. I know he was your cousin too..." The second voice trailed off.

Prey heard the sound of an approaching set of armoured hooves.

"Sir, here's the prisoner. The other mind leech is gone though. The magical signature ends here at the roof's edge. It's faint, and will fade in a few minutes, but it looks like he's gone." A deep, third voice said. 'But not an earth pony, or he couldn't track the magical residue. A unicorn then.' Prey thought, 'Well you're not wrong Mr. unicorn. Night Watcher, or rather Lemon Pink is gone.'

Prey had caught that bit, right at the end, a wash of disjointed memories from Night Watcher. It wasn't much, but he saw that he'd actually been a she. A pink unicorn mare called Lemon Pink to be precise.

'Still dead either way. Went over the edge.' Prey thought. His body still wouldn't move. Everything he heard had an odd ringing echo to it.

"Sargent, get the pegasi in the air and start scanning. Wherever the mind leech went, it doesn't seem like he teleported out of here. I want that scum found." Bright ordered.

"Sir, I don't think he went far. In fact, I think he went down." The third voice near Prey said. The other two trotted over, armoured horse shoes clopping over concrete, and stood listening to the faint gurgle of the river far below.

"What are your thinking?" Bright asked, breaking the silent vigil. Prey could hear the effort the lieutenant was putting into controlling his anger and frustration. 'Captain Valour would be *so*

proud of you.' Prey mused.

"Seems like he used poor Bright Bit to do his dirty work for him, then came for prisoner 452. The lamb tried to flee, and the mind leech caught him here. Seems like they fought. Either they both lost and whomever they were fell over the edge afterwards, or they won and then jumped to try and escape us."

Prey could feel their gazes move to him even if he couldn't see. None of the Solar Guards had made any move to pull him away from the edge or see if he was injured.

"452 couldn't have fought back, the inhibitors are still in place. And there's no chance something as physically weak as him could have pushed a unicorn off the roof." Bright noted.

"Perhaps the unicorn tried to invade the prisoners mind and was injured in the process?" The second voice suggested.

"Injured?"

"I don't know sir, I haven't a clue how mind magic works. Perhaps injured mentally?"

There was a brief, thoughtful silence, broken only by the noise that drifted back along the roof top from the other Guards, doing what ever it was they were doing. Weeding the flower boxes for all Prey cared. He wasn't quite in his right frame of mind at the moment.

"Then the other mind leech might still be out there. It's possible he could have survived the fall." Bright said.

"I hope he didn't." The third, deep voice muttered.

"I know. I shouldn't agree, but..... Sargent!" Bright abruptly barked, snapping out of his melancholy.

"Yes sir!"

"Get the pegasi down there and scan the banks. Rouse the city guard and have them trawl the river for a mile upriver and five down. I want his body found, or his tracks. I don't hold out much

hope of finding either, but it's better than doing nothing."

"Sir yes sir!"

"And prisoner 452?" The third voiced asked with distaste.

"We will wait on-"

There was a clatter of running hooves interrupting Bright, large and heavy sounding.

"Lieutenant!" Came the unmistakable bellow of Captain Valour. It always sounded like he constantly was on the brink of losing his temper.

"Sir!" All three voices replied at once and there was the scrape of armour as they all presumably came to attention.

"Lieutenant, report!" Valour ordered.

As Bright quickly ran over everything they'd just discussed, along with their fears about the mind mage's escape and Gold Bits bleak condition, Prey could hear Captain Valour getting angrier and angrier.

And why wouldn't he be? He'd just lost. They had apprehended the thieves, done what they'd set out to do and yet they had still lost in the end. The ring leader had escaped, quite a few of their number were injured, and one looked likely to die. Whether it was physically or mentally made little difference at this point. In the end, one outcome would result in a casket, and the other in a lump of still breathing meat for his relatives to mourn.

Prey didn't feel any sympathy. He felt nothing but contempt for the Solar Guards and Gold Bit. They'd held him prisoner, threatened him, forced him to work for them, dragged him into dangerous situations, handled him with magic, almost gotten him killed, and refused to listen to his warnings. This was the outcome. Gold Bit deserved his fate.

Bright finished his report. There was a pregnant pause before Captain Valour finally spoke. Rather unexpectedly, he sounded tired

rather than 'frothing-at-the-mouth' livid, "Thank you lieutenant, please continue. Sargent, I want you to take the sky chariots and get the casualties to the hospital. We'll finish sweeping the roof top and begin the search for a body. Meet us back at the City Guard station in the morning." He ordered.

"Yes sir." Came the subdued responses. Then, "What are your orders regarding the prisoner?"

"Ah, *that*." There was the furious contempt that Prey had been expecting.

A magical field grabbed Prey's limp form none too gently and jerked him into the air. Where before Prey had immediately lashed out and protested most vehemently at being so much as touched with magic, now he didn't even twitch. His numb body just flopped about bonelessly in Captain Valour's magic.

"Prisoner 452, stop pretending and answer me. What happened here?" Captain Valour demanded loudly.

When no response was forth coming, Prey was shaken bodily, "Answer me criminal! Do you think that I can't touch you anymore? That you have nothing left to loose? I have had it up to here with you. So help me you are going to tell me one way or another what happened up here or I'm going to get violent!" Captain Valour roared. Prey felt spittle strike his face.

A few seconds later when still no response came, a blow joined the spit, rolling Prey's slack head on his shoulders. The mostly healed cut in Prey's cheek from Rich Almond split open again from the blow. However Prey's body didn't react, despite the poisonous fury he felt coursing through his veins at his treatment.

Prey could hear Captain Valour fuming, and he braced himself mentally for more blows. "Doesn't seem to be faking it. The other mind leech must have done for him." Captain Valour said abruptly, and dropped Prey like a sack of potatoes.

"Should we put the prisoner on the chariots for the hospital too sir?" His Sargent asked.

"No, have him sent to the city dungeons. I'll deal with him later. He's just an empty husk now, I'll get in contact with Dreverton when this is all over to see if they want it back or transferred somewhere else. He got his just desserts in the end." Captain Valour said turning away. His hooves clopped off, and a few moments later Prey heard the captains voice raised in shouting orders.

Someone grabbed the chain from Prey's inhibitor collar and began dragging him off.

Prey was bumped and roughly hauled about, but he couldn't see where he was taken. The rough handling lasted for a long time. All Prey could do was listen, his body didn't move and his eyes wouldn't open.

Prey knew whomever was carrying him was taking him to the dungeon, but he had no idea of the route they took or what they passed on the way. He didn't like that, he wanted to be able to see.

Whomever they where, they didn't say anything. Why would they? He was a brain dead vegetable to them, a broken tool that now served no purpose. 'At least I'm still alive.' That fight with Night Watcher, or rather Lemon Pink, had been very dangerous. Both of them could have lost their minds, but in the end only the unicorn did.

He was dumped unceremoniously in a cell on what felt like a bale of straw, and heard the squeal and clang as the cell door was shut. There was a rattle of keys, then the jailer and the Solar Guard who had brought him here walked away.

Prey had only been aware of his trip into the Guard station and subsequent delivery to the dungeons from what he had overheard. The Solar Guard had spoken briefly with the jailer, (who once he'd heard that Prey was a dangerous criminal and that the Solar Guard themselves wished him imprisoned, had been all to happy to oblige) leading them past the entrance and down here.

'A faithful believer of the Sun queen then. Never even thinks to ask

questions once the authority of Celestia and her lackeys is mentioned.'

Prey listened. All was quiet, just the feeling of straw poking into his wool and the smell of dry stone walls. 'From one prison to another.' He'd been in far worse places before.

However, Prey could feel the enchantments on this cell. It was unlikely anyone but a unicorn would have normally noticed, but Prey had spent fifty seven years in one of the most heavily enchanted and magically suppressed cells in Dreverton. He knew what that feeling in the air was.

Despite its humble appearance, this dungeon cell was nothing to be laughed at. Or broken out of. Especially as an invalid.

Prey couldn't sense anyone watching him, but that didn't mean there wasn't. This could quite easily be another test. Prey waited.

One hour dragged by, then another. Still no sign or feeling of being observed, just the quietness of being underground and the itch of straw.

Another slow hour, counting the minutes.

Prey opened his eyes.

Of course he hadn't been crippled by the fight, although it had been a distinct possibility. Fighting is never safe, and one like he'd just fought even more so, but in the end he'd emerged the victor. But it had been advantageous to pretend otherwise. He'd been acting, playing at having been removed from the picture by having his mind shattered just like Gold Bit.

It had gone better than Prey had anticipated. The odds had still been in favour of Captain Valour throwing his body back into Dreverton out of pure spite. But evidently for once sense had trumped emotion in the angry Solar Guard Captain. Valour didn't

have the time or resources right now to spare a contingent of his Solar Guards to transport Prey back to Dreverton. Instead, he'd just secured Prey, who was no longer a threat, and decided to deal with him later.

Later is what Prey was counting on. The longer he had to come up with an escape plan, the better his chances of success.

Prey would've preferred being locked back in the office with all his original rune work, but he could work with this too. Also the longer Captain Valour took, the longer the runes on that desk would have to work their slow influence. Prey moved cautiously around the cell.

It was just as he'd pictured it. Three stone walls, floor and ceiling, and one set of metal bars and door leading out into a corridor. Prey looked as far up and down the corridor as he could but saw no Guards.

Down the corridor lay more cells like his, all empty, and up the corridor was a large, heavy bolted iron door.
But the real problem was those enchantments on the cell that Prey had first noticed. After he'd had time to further inspect them, he discovered that they were indeed what he'd predicted.

Suppression against teleportation, both in and out, attempts at telekinesis, further enchantment, transmutation or long distance communication, and alarms to trigger if any of the above were tampered with.

Nowhere near as sophisticated or thorough as his old cell in Dreverton.

Prey decided that they must also put inhibitors and shackles on all their prisoners. They would have been suicidally stupid not to. There was just no way that the Guard would throw someone like a unicorn in here and expect them to still be behind bars when then they got back. Magic was just too powerful to be imprisoned by so few wards. Any unbound unicorn with half a brain and arcane power at their hoof tips could find a loop hole. Either that or the city Guard were complete push overs. Prey wasn't placing any bets.

For all their, admittedly lacking, wards, the dungeon didn't have anything to stop Prey in the long run.

Whomever had designed this cell, hadn't accounted for ancient runes. Probably because it was a lost art, but still, their failure was his gain. All that Prey needed was time to fully circumvent the wards, and then he would be free. Prey rubbed his bruises and scrapes, took a deep breath, and got to work.

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'If I didn't know better,' Prey thought with venom, 'I would say there was something out there with it in for me.'

He just couldn't catch a break, no matter how he schemed and squirmed. That was life, forever unfair, but that didn't make it any less bitter. Prey knew that there wasn't any greater force out there messing with his life, but sometimes, no matter how illogical, it sure felt that way.

'I don't believe in fate.' He knew many ponies did, in Destiny or Harmony, but he didn't. The world was too random and cruel for that. There was only what you could take, and what the world could take from you. If he failed to take something, or if someone took from him, he was the only one who had the power to change that.

And right now, Prey had no power to do anything, he was trapped and helpless, held by the whims of others who held power over him. He hated that.

Prey was sitting in a lead lined cell, more of a box really. Apparently, the City Guard did have this one cell for especially dangerous individuals. From the dust and cobwebs, Prey doubted it had ever seen use. Dim light filtered in through a small, smoky, crystal panel. Half an hour ago the jailer had abruptly returned with two unicorn guards, and had transferred Prey to here without a word.

Prey suspected that either Captain Valour or his Lieutenant, Bright, had sent a further message detailing that he required 'special

treatment'.

What had made it so frustrating and galling, was that if the jailer had turned up just fifteen minutes later, Prey would have already claimed his freedom. Twelve hours of non-stop engraving during through the night and what must've been the rest of the morning. He'd worked until his hooves shook, never pausing, with no*pony* coming to check if he was even still alive or breathing, and then this happened.

On hearing the first jingling of keys, Prey had flopped back onto the straw bale and pretended to return to nothing more than an unresponsive husk. But the cursed jailer and his guards hadn't left. Instead, they'd picked him up in their magic and thrown him in this lead lined coffin instead.

'Well, that's that then,' Prey thought. 'There is nothing further I can do.' The walls would not hold any runes, even if he had a power sources for them. In the other cell, he'd been going to feed the arrays by siphoning off from the original enchantments, riding them like a parasite till the enchantments harmlessly collapsed.

But in here there was nothing he could use. Every surface was just blank metal, even the door, and the hinges were on the outside for good measure. For all intents and purposes, this might as well be his old cell back at the prison fortress, Dreverton.

He was stuck once more, and there was nothing he could do.

Prey dug his hooves into the hard floor until the still tender quick screamed, and then pressed harder. "Damn," he muttered quietly as the pain flared unheeded, "I was so close."

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It was like he'd never left Dreverton. The monotonous drag of hours passed exactly the same in the maddening boredness .

There was nothing to do, nothing to see, only time to think. Prey had spent fifty seven years doing nothing but that, and after being

so close to his freedom, only to have it snatched away, was a hard trial to endure.

Prey tried continuing faking to be comatosed to see if he could get one of the Guards to come and try to feed him. If he could just lay a hoof on one of them, he could steal their minds.

He lay unmoving throughout the first whole day on the cold hard floor, ignoring the hay and water they gave him. Even the tray and bowl were made from glazed lead. He did the same for the long second day as well, resisting the tantalising tray as his hunger and thirst grew.

However by the end of the third day, when still they made no move to enter the cell aside from opening the door just far enough to push in the new tray and grab the old, Prey was forced to drop the act.

Prey came to the conclusion that either they didn't care if he died, which seemed unlikely for these soft ponies, or, more likely, they were just incompetent.

Apparently it didn't occur to either one of the two Guards who brought him meals that there was something wrong. Evidently, it just never crossed their minds. They just continued on merrily with their work, assuming that everything was fine and that theirs was a job well done.

If Prey ever got out of here, he was adding them to The List.

Captain Valour had not been forgotten either, he too would have his comeuppance. A few days did nothing to blunt the edge of Prey's thirst for revenge against the unicorn. A few days was nothing. Prey had waited fifty seven years in his last cell, and The List was still as fresh as the day he'd written it. And it never got any shorter.

Three days dragged into four. Four became six. Six turned into a week. One week lengthened into one and a half, then two, and still

no one came to collect him from the Solar Guard. That could only mean one thing, Captain Valour had forgotten about him.

And that meant the back up runes he'd left on the desk were working.

That desk had contained runes that were supposed to be used for Prey to break free and escape, but when he'd been dragged away he'd been forced to set off the back up.

It was a series of runes that slowly leeched away at anyone's memory who was in the room. Prey had added additional rune combinations to make it only affect the period of memory from its creation onwards. Or in other words, to make the Solar Guard forget the period of time when Prey had been locked in the room. Roughly.

It wasn't exact, and the process was so slow and gradual that you wouldn't notice unless you were looking out for it. Prey also estimated that those arrays would only last for about three weeks. The back up runes would cannibalise the original runic arrays power source as fuel until there were none left.

It wasn't foolproof, and there were gaps in the theory. Not least of them what if the mind lock on the Solar Guards helmets counteracted the memory loss effect?

Evidently, by the fact that Prey had been abandoned in here, it had worked.

Prey comforted himself with that fact as he sat on the hard lead floor. At least he wouldn't be returning to Dreverton where escape was ninety nine point nine percent impossible. Here it was ninety nine percent, making this outcome the more desirable one.

As the third week slowly ticked into the fourth, Prey sat and waited, as a spark of confidence slowly kindled within him. Prey knew escape was extremely unlikely, but that didn't mean he wasn't getting out of here.

As far as he could see, there were two possible outcomes from here.

Outcome one; the jailer would eventually request orders from the Solar Guards on what to do with him. If that happened either the Solar Guard wouldn't have a clue who he was and have him investigated. Or someone would still retain their memories of him or track down his record and he would be thrown back into Dreverton.

Outcome two; Eventually, someone would make a mistake and he would be let out. One of the jail guards would eventually wonder who he was and what he was doing here. After finding out that they actually had no idea, they would let him go. Or, the same events that'd occurred the first time would happen again. Someone in a position of power would want his services.

Now that it had happened once, it was much more likely to happen again.

More days slowly passed. Prey spent them planning and meditating. He relived more old memories over again, occasionally bittersweet, more often than not just bitter. There was no day or night in here, just the schedule of meals and Prey's own internal body clock. And so it drew close to a month.

On the twenty ninth day, there was one thing out if the ordinary that happened.

The jailer did not bring his daily meal on time. That was slightly unusual. Normally, they kept the same unimaginative, predictable schedule. When they finally did appear, five hours late, from what Prey glimpsed of their tired faces, they seemed distracted and scared. 'Perhaps they have a new prisoner?' Prey didn't think too much of it.

The half way point of the second month rolled around.

'If they don't feed me something else aside from hay soon, I'm going to start deteriorating.' Prey noted in detachment, rotating his hoof and critically examining the wasting muscle. It was true. In Dreverton, the meals had been awful, but contained every essential vitamin and food group a prisoner needed to stay healthy.

Prey had only lasted this long because he was so small and unable to grow any further. Also, the curse kept the break down of his body to an extremely slow and gradual deterioration. But eventually even that wouldn't be enough. 'At the current rate of deterioration, exterior muscles will start to fail in approximately three weeks. And there's nothing I can do about it.' Prey thought.

One week later, something happened. Afterwards, Prey still didn't know exactly *what* it was.

It happened when Prey was sleeping or meditating, one of the two. For him they were both very close to being the same. He was in the ashen fields of his outer mind scape, reliving a memory of cowering in a fallen tree trunk, stuffing his hooves into his mouth to keep his teeth from chattering while outside a bug bear rampaged.

Prey felt a presence, just the lightest touch against his mind. It felt like it had come to watch. The suddenness of it and the ease with which it reached out for him and established the connection scared Prey.

Immediately Prey shifted the memory, conjuring up a false landscape.

A happy scene sprang into existence, of a flock of young lambs and donkey colts laughing and playing on a grassy hill. The sky was blue, the birds sang, daisies bloomed. It was a picturesque scene, but under its surface, Prey silently coiled up his mind and prepared to attack. Like a cragadile just under the water. The light touch of the foreign presence didn't seem to come any closer, instead it observed from the outskirts.

Prey silently reached out for it, spreading his snares to drag it down

the moment it came too close.

But it was like trying to catch smoke. Smoke that was always drifting just beyond your line of sight. The presence was strange and fleeting, moving from one corner to the next, but never letting Prey get a feel for it. He didn't have a clue what it was, and that frightened him.

Soon it left, or at least Prey thought it did. He couldn't be sure, it was so light and quick that he didn't know for certain. Grimly he kept up the happy scene of childish merriment, while under the dream he braced for an attack.

Prey stayed like that long into the night, fruitlessly casting about for the presence, always unsure if he was alone or being watched.

The feeling did not return that night, or the next. If Prey didn't have complete faith in his memory, he would have been inclined to think he'd imagined the whole experience. As it was, he decided he would likely never know what the unnatural phenomenon had been.

Then one week later, it returned while Prey was in the middle of another dream meditation.

Prey was already on edge, still tense after the last incursion. So when he felt that first tendril of alien presence brush against his mindscape, he immediately snapped the scene back to that happy scene on the hillside. The foals and lambs began mutely chanting some half remembered nursery rhyme, the first that came to his head.

"Raven magpie fly away, Scarecrow, keep at bay,"
"Wheat n' barley dance and sway, Harvest King, come to play."

This time, the presence stayed and watched. It seemed to be searching for something as it floated at the edge of his consciousness. Prey pretended to be oblivious, once again secretly preparing himself for a fight.

Then a feeling came from the presence, one that would best be described as one of safety and strength. The presence seemed to be projecting the feeling that it wasn't a threat and that Prey shouldn't be alarmed.

That made Prey immediately distrust who or what ever it was even more.

The feelings changed, almost like it was asking a question, 'What is it you want?' It didn't ask in words, only with subtle feelings and impulses. Yet the prompting washed into him, like a warm tide. Quiet, gentle, but almost irresistible.

Prey recognised what it was doing. The presence was trying to influence his subconsciousness, to get him to change this scene and unwittingly reveal information about himself.

'This is bad.' Thought Prey.

Again the prompting came, more insistent this time, 'What is it you want?'

Prey almost reacted, almost lashed out in an attempt to strike back against whatever it was, but at the last second he stopped himself, 'Keep up the facade.' He thought.

The scene of the sunny hillside shifted, with the playing children melting away to be replaced by just two figures sitting on a small wooden porch, pretending that the outside influence had succeeded in it's goal.

The sun was setting, throwing long shadows over the rows of carrots in the field. It was quiet, no birds. The scene felt far away, like it was forever out of reach. On the porch, facing away, Fleece leaned into their mothers cream wool and hugged her, while she hugged her brown coated son back. Just the two of them sitting quietly there watching the field.

They never turned to look at Prey.

The presence watched for a while, and Prey got the distinct impression that it was satisfied.

Prey expected it to disappear without a trace just like last time, but it didn't. Another prompting came, powerful yet quiet; 'What would you give?' It didn't specify '*give for what*'. Just 'what would you give?'

Prey oh so gently spun the scene into another, letting it seem natural and unmanipulated. A hoard of treasure, such as one might expect from a mighty dragons den in the stories, came into view. It was unfocused, but gave the unmistakable impression of extreme wealth and value. The message it portrayed was clear, 'I would give all this'.

'What would you give?' The feeling came again, firmer this time. Prey thought fast, 'What does it want to see? Gold and treasure didn't inspire it, so it must expect my subconsciousness to offer something else of value.'

Slowly the treasure melted into a golden pool of dream stuff, and out of it rose a banner on a pike staff. It grew larger and larger, flapping proud and regal in the dream wind, and it radiated 'Honour and Loyalty.' That was the concept that Prey had put behind it.

It seemed to have been the correct choice, for Prey felt a sense of approval, almost of arrogant confidence emanate from the unknown presence.

And then just like last time, it was abruptly gone without any warning.

Prey kept the banner flying high as he spread out feelers of consciousness, cautiously searching to see if he was really alone once more. The presence felt like it was gone, but Prey wasn't about to let his guard down.

Gone or not, it had left behind even more questions. Prey was certain whatever it was, it was highly intelligent and capable of rational thought. It had also proved to be subtle and powerful, a dangerous combination. Prey did not like it. He didn't need any more powerful enemies. Especially with being as weak as he currently was.

It was a long night once again.

Prey spent one more day and a night in the cell. The morning after, the jailer came along with four Royal Guards, chained him up, and took him away.

Prey sat silently on the train journey, across from him the four Royal Guards did the same. The train car was empty aside from them, the Royal Guards having politely directed the previous occupants of the car else where. Prey had never been on a train before. Actually, he'd never so much as even seen a train before. Back when Gossamer had lived in the village, trains were only tall tales of new fangled pony inventions over the mountains.

Who would've thought he'd ever end up riding in one? It was too bad about the Royal Guards.

There were two unicorns, one pegasus, and even an earth pony. Prey was dismissive of that last one. An earth pony? Why use an earth pony as a Guard when you could have a unicorn who could set your internal organs on fire? Prey supposed this wasn't quite the Solar Guard. For one thing these Royal Guards were far less alert, and no where near as professional.

"What did a foal do to end up in prison?" The earth pony whispered into the Sargent unicorns ear, his eyes fixed curiously on Prey.

The unicorns hazel eyes stayed firmly on Prey as he muttered a reply out of the corner of his mouth, "No idea, maybe somepony put her there out of harm's way? I read a book where the guy hid in a jail to keep safe. Maybe her father hid her there? Why else would-"

"Maybe the little gal's a bad guy?" The earth pony interrupted quietly.

"Shh! Don't let the kid hear you, she's just a lamb still." The unicorn hissed back.

The pegasus joined in, cupping the earth pony's ear with her wing, "Remember our orders, don't let our guard down. Even if she looks adorable, she must have been in there for a good reason." The mare whispered. That seemed to do it, all of the Royal Guard shifted back to attention and fixed that look of watchful disinterest back on their muzzles.

Prey snorted and lightly kicked the chain leading to the Sargent's grip, before propping himself up against the window. Once again everyone seemed not to realise that his big droopy ears weren't just for decoration. *And* they'd made the same inaccurate deduction about his gender once again. For some reason. Idiots.

Their masks of professional detachment were also flawed. Prey could see the small tells on their faces.
The unicorn Sargent was bored and curious.
The other unicorn was also bored but more relaxed.
The pegasus mare was the most alert out of the four of them. She was guarded but curious too.
Earth pony was just curious.

'Definitely not up to Solar Guard level.' Prey decided.

Unfortunately, they were still professional enough not to leave him unguarded. They kept four sets of eyes on him closely enough that he couldn't place any discreet runes on his bench either.

They'd also maddeningly kept out of hoofs reach, even when he had faked a bad stumble being led onto the train. One of the unicorns had merely levitated him over the high step and onboard. It had been so quick and mundane that Prey hadn't even had time to freeze up at having magic used on him.

Prey gave the two unicorns a sour glare, plotting the best way to kill both of them. Sargent unicorn seemed not to notice and his fellow unicorn seemed to find it funny. Prey turned away and tried to see out the window. He propped himself up on his hind legs, chained front legs resting against the wall so he could reach the window sill. This was his first time travelling by train after all. It was more unpleasent than he'd expected.

There wasn't much to see outside, just rocks and trees passing by in the evening light. Prey gave up and sat back down, "How much longer?" He asked, speaking for the first time.

He got four blinks of surprise in return but no answer.

"How much longer?" He repeated patiently.

The Royal Guards exchanged glances and raised eyebrows under their helmets. The Sargent shrugged, then answered, "Four hours."

Prey started going over all the old maps he had seen in his head. It had been over fifty seven years and things could have changed since then, after all he didn't remember Vanhoover from the maps (albeit few) he'd seen. A glance out the window at the position of Celestia's blighted sun gave him their direction.

After a quick calculation of distance, time and speed, Prey came to one conclusion and it made his stomach drop, "Canterlot." He breathed.

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The capital city of Canterlot is in and of itself a monument to the achievements of pony kind. From an engineering perspective, it is impossible. But as with a lot of things, pony kind had the distinct advantage of magic at their disposal through unicorns.

So what should have been completely impossible, simply became completely unfeasible. By all rational perspectives, building a entire city so that it overhung a massive mountain side was folly. It would be much easier, simpler, cheaper, and faster to build the city down on the plains, or even on the mountain side itself rather than jutting out over oblivion.

It would certainly make mundane things like sewer lines, travelling access, and supply routes easier.

Yet its construction had gone ahead. The city's foundations and support structures themselves were feats of technical genius and each one unique. Support beams, stress points, load bearings, counterweight, foundations, the sheer amount of forward planning

involved was staggering. And yet without the addition of an obscene amount of enchantment that took an entire generation of unicorns to lay, all those blue prints and dreams would have been for naught.

Looked at another way, Canterlot was a monument to unicorn pride and superiority. A blatant statement that pony kind was unbound by the laws of nature. The sheer waste of resources that could have built ten cities, all spent frivolously for this one. To those who looked unfavourably on the equine race, it was an arrogant declaration. 'You cannot compete with us. Bow your heads and be still.'

And at the heart of this great cities display of power, sat the crowning jewel of this achievement. From all those centuries ago, the orchestrater herself. Celestia, the sun queen.

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He was in a temporary holding room. The chains clinked gently as Prey methodically tested them. The Royal Guards situated around the room didn't react. They had been visibly surprised at Prey when he had been brought in, but now they'd re-donned their masks of professional calm.

Prey could feel the sickly touch of fear coiling in his gut. He was all too familiar with it.

It was the type that came just before the plunge into a fight. The slight but uncontrollable tremble in your hooves, the tiny shivers that ran up your frame every few seconds; Prey was sadly very familiar with the helpless state of miserable anticipation of knowing that shortly you were going to be fighting for your life, and there was nothing you could do to avoid it.

The longer he stood here waiting, the worse it got.

A Royal Guard shifted on his hooves and readjusted his spear. Prey's eyes locked onto the movement in an instant, then his gaze flicked away, darting around the large room, constantly searching for something, *anything* that might give him a way out of this.

But there was nothing he could use. Just plush furniture, a gilded tapestry, fancy wall mosaics and ornate candlesticks set in alcoves to light the room. Prey would've marvelled at the opulence of it all, at the gold leaf and marble work everywhere if he'd been here under better circumstances. He would have been made mute by the vast wealth on display in every inch of the palace, (and likely sneered and cursed at the ponies who took such luxury and waste for granted). But he didn't have time for that.

A sound of hooves on the other side of the door. A knock, the ring handle turning and being pulled open. A servants stuck his head in and murmured something to the closest Guard that even Prey's sharp ears missed. The servant vanished and the Royal Guard turned to the rest of his fellow ponies, "She's ready. You may bring the sheep now."

Prey swallowed, and fought down the urge to be sick. He hated feeling afraid, but the fear had never left him, no matter how many times he stared into the jaws of death. Prey knew he was only negatively impacting his chances of survival by letting the fear get to him, but he couldn't help it, no matter what logic dictated. All he could do was learn to keep it under control, at least enough to prevent it from controlling him instead.

The Royal Guards tugged on the chain, and Prey fell in behind him as he was led out into the corridor. A tall, stain glass window cast moon light over them as they passed. Prey tried to look out of it for one last glimpse of the night sky as he was dragged by, but the refraction in the coloured glass prevented it. Prey felt cheated. 'Stupid ponies, they manage to deny me even this.'

He was dragged into a high ceilinged marble hall, with gilded torch bracketed columns stretching from floor to ceiling. Clever crystal patterns inlaid into the ceiling gave the impression of a twinkling night sky.

Prey only paid attention to those details for the brief amount of time it took to note them, evaluate them, and dismiss them. He was far more interested in the number of Guards in the room and the placement of the exits.

'Twelve guards. Three unicorns, three earth ponies, six pegasi, spread out around the perimeter. Alert. All armoured and armed. No windows low enough to reach. Only one other exit, guarded. Chances of escape: nil.' Prey bitterly observed.

The Royal Guards arrayed against the walls were looking at Prey with interest and some surprise. They were obviously all thinking the same old thing, 'A tiny sheep in chains? What's going on here?'

Prey squinted closer at the pegasi, there was something off about them. It took a moment for Prey to work out what in the low light. His hearing had always been better than his sight, but when he saw it, his eyes widened involuntarily.

'Those are Bat ponies. Dusk fliers, night wings, or thestrals.' He had never seen one, and had thought from the literature that he'd been able to steal out on the border that they were supposed to be extinct.

Yet here they were, bat winged and slit eyed. Prey looked again at the other Royal Guards, looking for other signs of abnormality. All he saw was normal ponies. Normal ponies, now that he was looking more closely, that seemed slightly leery of their fellow bat pony Guards. It was in the way they stood, the slight placement in their hooves and drift of their gaze, 'Something big has happened here in Canterlot, but what?' Prey thought.

The far exit opened before Prey could hypothesise further, and his eyes immediately snapped to the grey maned unicorn who stepped through. He was dressed finely in a suit jacket and wore a look of bored haughtiness on his long muzzle.

"Ehem," He cleared his throat, "Presenting her Royal majesty, Lady of the Night, Mistress Nocturna, Lady Protector, rightful ruler and Heir to the Throne and dierarchy of Equestria, Princess Luna of the Night." He announced.

'*Princess Luna*?! Didn't she die a thousand years ago?' Prey thought in shocked disbelief.

Both doors swung open, and in strode the formerly deceased

Princess of the night. Her dark mane was a dark pool of flowing stars, and her long horn was held high as she marched in.

From the moment she entered, there was an almost unnerving air that clung to her, something that couldn't be properly described. Not something you would ever be able to put your hoof on. Just the niggling sensation in the back of your mind that you were in the presence of something dangerous and not all together equine.

Maybe nobody else felt it, but Prey knew it the second his eyes rested upon the alicorn.

'Alicorn.' The mere word instilled fear and made Prey want to curl up and hide.

Prey hated ponies for their gifted station in life. He hated unicorns the most out of the three pony tribes. But that was nothing to how he hated and feared Celestia, although in a more broad and abstract way.

He had never even been within a hundred miles of the sun queen. But it had been the Resistances biggest unspoken fear, of what would happen if Celestia ever bothered to notice them and took the field.

It is impossible to overstate how much the Resistance had feared the Solar alicorn. All of their propaganda revolved around pulling down her and what she ruled, but deep down they were afraid. And why wouldn't they fear and hate her? She was so far above them they couldn't even see her.

They told themselves comforting lies to bolster their courage; "She's not here." "She won't come." "She doesn't care." "We're safe here." "She won't find us." "The stories aren't true." "She's just a liar." "The Sun Wolf..."

But now before him stood another alicorn, the second one in existence. And if she was anything like the stories about her sister, able to warp reality for fun with powers that lesser mortals could barely imagine. Prey's head was reeling with the implications, thoughts racing frantically at break neck speed.

Princess Luna. A joint ruler to Celestia, her long lost sister. Nightmare Moon and what Night Watcher had said, 'Her return is nigh.' If Luna didn't die, then was Nightmare Moon also alive? No, that didn't fit, Luna was Nightmare Moon. But no longer.

'Celestia did something. Returned her sister. One thousand years. Sun Celebration happened recently. Luna is linked to the thestrals. Night ponies and Princess of the Night. Celestia didn't send for me, so Captain Valour didn't report in. Luna had me brought here instead, not the sun tyrant.'

As a prisoner, Prey was likely one of the only people in Equestria who'd been unawares of the reemergence of the moon deity until right this very moment.

The lightning quick connections took only two seconds, as Prey stood there staring as Princess Luna strode into the centre of the room with fluid grace, and up onto a raised dias. With a flick of her long horn, a glowing blue throne made of magic popped into existence. She sat, head high as she peered imperiously down like some giant bird of prey at the assembled Royal Guards, who were all bowing. And Prey, who was not bowing.

"Does thou not kneel before thy princess?" Princess Luna boomed, voice loud enough to hurt Prey's ears. He didn't answer, still frozen as he stared wide eyed at the dark blue alicorn towering above him. Her magical throne was more than ten hoof lengths away, but it felt like she was towering right above him.

A Guard reached over and pushed his head down, "You need to bow in front of the princess, kid." The Guard muttered. Prey hardly even noticed the Guard's touch.

The smallest smile of amusement flitted across the princesses' muzzle, "We see thou art struck speechless with wonder. It is a refreshing prospect to behold, when held up against the screams of terror. Never the less, onto weightier matters, we have business with thee."

All at once it came to Prey why he had been brought here, 'It's the same reason Captain Valour fetched me from Dreverton, I had

expertise he wanted. Something similar must be true here.'

"Princess Luna." Prey squeaked, then as a few Royal Guards worked hard to stifle laughter, Prey hurriedly cleared his throat and tried again.

"Princess Luna-" That '*Princess*' bit stuck in his throat, but he carried on:

"-What task is it that you want me to do for you? I am but a lamb, surely there is little I can offer somebody like you." He said. His hooves did not tremble.

"Thou art well spoken for a lamb. We commend thee, but thou art also mistaken and sell thyself short. There is much that thou mayst do for us." Princess Luna replied in the same booming voice.

Prey winced at the volume, but managed the discomfort off his face. Never show weakness of you can help it. If Celestia was the Sun Wolf, then right now he must be facing the Moon Wolf. The sense of invisible danger still exuded from her presence. Prey licked his lips, "Well your majesty, I suppose that depends on what it is exactly that you want me to do."

"Excellent!" Princess Luna announced with a smile, "We knew thou wouldst be eager to serve ponykind in what ever capacity was offered to thee. Let us proceed to-"

"Forgive me, but you misunderstood me Princess Luna," Prey interrupted quietly, yet all heard him, "I never agreed to anything. I was just asked what you wanted." He stated calmly. It had taken all of his courage to say that.

The room went deathly quiet. Prey could see the looks of disbelief that he had dared to interrupt the Princess reflected in the faces of the Guards. But Prey had to know what sort of enemy he was dealing with here, that and the mere idea of serving the new joint ruler of Equestria made him want to vomit.

Princess Luna seemed to grow bigger as she drew herself up and took a deep breath, and all around the room the Royal Guards

braced themselves.

"THOU DOEST NOT INTERRUPT THY PRINCESS WHEN SHE IS SPEAKING! WE ART THE RULER OF THE NIGHT. WE HAVE A RIGHT TO THY SILENCE AND RESPECT! WE HAVE BEEN FORGOTTEN ONCE BUT IT SHALL NOT HAPPEN AGAIN!" Princess Luna roared in a volume so extreme that it could only be magical.

The backlash physically picked Prey up and tossed him almost three yards back, where he lay curled up on himself, trying to block out the awful noise. His ears hurt and his head rang something fierce. 'Oh. So that's what I'm dealing with.' He thought.

Princess Luna blinked and sat back down, enormous dark wings refolding themselves. Taking a deep breath, she composed herself, "Ehem. My apologies to you all, that was most unbecoming of us." She coughed.

"It was nothing your majesty." The two bat ponies on either side of her magical throne murmured.

Prey squinted as he got shakily to his hooves. He felt dizzy, every word they spoke echoed oddly and he could only hear through one ear, 'Burst or damaged ear drum on the left side.' Prey noted distractedly. He didn't have time to spend dealing with that, he needed to focus here. At least he wasn't crying like some pathetic cry baby.

"My apologies as well Princess Luna, it seems prison has left me irritable." Prey apologised, only slurring his words slightly.

Princess Luna nodded magnanimously, then coughed again and gestured the bat pony on her right forwards, "Yes, well. *Ehem*." She cleared her throat. Her words sounded flustered, but Prey felt sure it was no more than an appearance the alicorn chose to put on. "Captain Nighthawk, if thou wouldst kindly read him in?" Luna asked the Guard standing next to her throne. A look went around the room and there were a few raised eyebrows at realisation of the word: 'him.'

"Of course princess." The grizzled looking bat pony answered. He

stepped forwards and pulled out a scroll from his armour. Sitting on his haunches, the bat pony known as Captain Nighthawk unrolled it and began to read out loud clearly. Apparently, those slit eyed pupils let him read in the gloom.

"Her Royal majesty, Lady of the Night, Mistress Nocturna, Lady Protector, rightful ruler and Heir to the Throne and dierarchy of Equestria, Princess Luna of the Night, " He began, repeating the titles from earlier.

"With the military authority granted her, hereby orders the creation of a sub section of the newly created Division of the Royal Guard, the Night Guard, to be headed up under supervised direction and under the direct command of the Captain of the Night Guard, Nighthawk, to assist with the defence of national security, secrecy, and protection of the crown. This new division, to be known as ISND, the Intelligence and Secrecy Night Division, is in effect immediately. All posts and positions are by approval of Princess Luna, the Night Guard Captain, or their duly appointed representative."

With that, Captain Star Wing rolled the scroll back up.

"Please forgive me for asking, but it didn't make any mention of your sister in there. I mean, Princess Celestia is your sister, isn't she your majesty?" Prey asked as meekly as he could stomach. Using the words *Princess* and *Celestia* in the same sentence left his mouth tasting of ashes, but he had bigger issues right now. His emotions wanted him to shout and scream at this Princess Luna, but the desperate need to live kept his mouth in check.

"Tia, we mean our royal sister, Princess Celestia, has given us permission to do as we believest best in this matter and expressed her heartfelt support of our proposal. We believest it to be sound and it offers great potential for the future." Princess Luna replied stiffly.

Stiffness at the mention of her sister? Some resentment there? No, it was directed at him for daring to ask whether Celestia was her sister. 'So,' He thought, 'You want to exercise you authority, and Celestia gave her younger sister her blessing to do so. You want to

prove your worth to the Sun Wolf, desperately, but she doesn't think your suggestion holds any merit. But it costs her nothing if you fail, so she told you to go ahead.' Prey thought. His new headache was getting worse.

"You want me to serve under your hoof in this new ISND you've just created," Prey started carefully, "I must respectfully ask Princess Luna, why?"

Princess Luna frowned, and for a moment Prey held his breath, but then she shrugged, "We suppose that thou hast asked a valid question of why we wouldst have thee. It is for a cause most noble." She announced with pride.

"We have been searching for those who wouldst be worthy at a chance of redemption. Thou wast in prison, yet thou couldst, if offered the chance, right thy wrongs and emerge a new pony. This is an opportunity not granted to many, yet we know thou art one of the few who would embrace the chance. Except villains most foul, all who are truly willing should be offered the chance at redemption. This we firmly believe." Princess Luna told him, offering what was probably meant to be a benevolent smile.

Redemption?

Redemption?

Prey's face twisted, 'This again?!' He thought murderously, 'They think I need to repent and change, and that I should serve them to do it. What's wrong with them? Are they all insane? I'm not the one who needs to change! You're the ones who caused all of this. Everyone who died" All of this is all your fault, not mine!'

"Redemption?" Prey spat, unable to keep up the polite mask as fear and hate finally got the better of him, "Be honest here Princess, you just want me for what I can do. I don't know what your reports said on me, but whatever you found must have been something you wanted. You're just using your power and influence to get it, and threats to ensure I comply." Prey squeaked furiously. Then slapped a leg over his mouth in horror.

Prey never let emotions cloud his judgement and dictate his actions. *Never*. But these were so strong that they overwhelmed his usual survival instincts, caused by years of hate finally bubbling over. But with the hate, came the terror.

To the observers, Prey's outburst probably didn't appear any worse than a particularly angry child. But to Prey, it meant he'd completely lost control of both himself and the situation. That feeling of helplessness was almost as terrifying as the being sitting in front of him.

Princess Luna frowned again, but it wasn't in outrage with like Prey had feared. Annoyed yes, but angry? No.

Waving a hoof to the Royal Guards who'd stepped forwards, or more accurately the Night Guards, to stand down, she addressed Prey imperiously, "Thou art too young to think thou knowest anger and resentment, and thou wouldst do well to lay it aside lest it brings thee grief as thou grow up. This we know. Also know this," Her gaze turned icy, "Lamb or not, we know that thou clearly understands right from wrong. Thy disrespect will be forgiven this once, but let it not happen again." Princess Luna warned.

'Just like every other pony she rules over, they all think respect is their automatic privilege.' Prey thought, disgust mingling with dread. His legs trembled badly, but he refused to sit. He needed to remain strong right now.

Prey took a shaky breath, and made his tone as polite as he could, "Since I'm so small and young, what happens if I decline your offer, your majesty? Your ponies have chained me and imprisoned me, dragged me about to their wishes, isolated me, and now press ganged me. Will you throw me back into the dark to waste away on starvation rations if I say no, Princess Luna?" He asked, eyes politely lowered.

The Night Guards were getting restless, clearly annoyed by his disrespectful words, even if he'd managed to keep his tone deferential this time around.

"Thou misunderstands. The good captain has already read thee in. A

tad unorthodox admittedly, but it amounts to the same as a full swearing in. If it makest thou feel better, thou mayest now consider thy conscription to our new Night Guard Division official, by our own Royal decree. We both know and expect thee to do thy best in thy new calling. Thou wilt see'st fit to thank us in the near future." Princess Luna announced with a smile.

'Oh, I see how it is. Free will is *only* for those who are born ponies and don't currently hold skills you want.'

Prey gritted his teeth, having to brace his manacled hooves to stay upright under the ringing sound that kept pounding away at his ears, "Alright Princess Luna. Since you know me so well and can decide what's best for me without any of my own input on the matter, then may I present an easy question. What's my name?" Prey challenged.

Princess Luna didn't even notice his impertinence, she seemed to only hear the words, not the tone they were said in. Luna blinked at Prey's question, "Why, thou art Gossamer of course."

"*Gossamer's dead*! Stop calling me by that name!" Prey shrieked at her before he could stop himself, then flinched and shrunk back.

Princess Luna paused, looking perplexed rather than offended, "Thou art not Gossamer? Then who is Gossamer..." She trailed off, then rapped her gilded shoe sharply on the dias, "Aha! You have our most sincere apologies, we truly did not mean to cause thee distress. Gossamer was thy father, was he not?"

She lowered her tone into what was probably supposed to be a comforting tone, but coming from something like her, it just sounded creepy, "We didst not spy him with the others, only those we take to be thy brother and mother. We understand now, to return to thy remaining family is thy dearest wish. Separation is cruel, especially for one so young, and death doubly so. Know this though, if thou servest truly and honestly, thou mayest visit them and be reunited. Thy remaining family must surely miss thee, and will stand ready to forgive thy trespasses." Princess Luna said to him.

Prey froze. There was only one scene she could be talking about, and only one way she could seen it, "That presence, those nights. In my dreams, it was you. Y-you, you, you were in my head." Prey murmured, not even noticing the complete inaccuracy of her statement as an even greater sense of fear stole over his wool.

'She was in my head!'

"In thy dreams, yes. Tis' our duty to oversee the land of dreams and keep it safe. It is how we searched for ones who were worthy of a second chance." Princess Luna confirmed with a touch of pride.

'She was in my head, *she was in my head*! How dare she.'

Prey felt violated and terrified that someone as powerful as Luna could come and go inside his mind at will. The fact that she also took pride in that made him furious. The mind was supposed to be the last retreat, the one place were you were safe. No one understood quite like Prey just what it meant to shatter that last resort of protection. That was one of the reasons Prey had become a mind leech, to protect himself against anyone ever doing that to him again.

It was ironic that he, a master at breaking minds, should be so deathly afraid of the same when he came up against someone like an alicorn.

Against Night Watcher it had been different. Prey could fight back then. He could protect himself. But against the likes of Princess Luna, a literal deity, he would be as helpless as a mouse in the talons of an eagle.

Prey took a step back, then another and another, hardly even realising that he was doing so. Princess Luna paused, "Where art thou going? There is nothing to fear. It is our duty to conquer nightmares. We used the opportunity to see that thee are also pure at heart. Most wouldst be pleased by such a visit by ourselves." Princess Luna told him, a look of slight puzzlement on her almost scarily perfect features.

"You need you to stay out of my head. I want to be left alone." Prey

mumbled, taking another step back. The closest Guard took a step towards him, blocking his retreat.

"It is our Royal duty to visit the dreams of our subjects-"

"No, I need you to stay out of my head." Prey repeated, louder this time. He swallowed, then bowed his head until he was touching the floor, "Please. Please just stay out of my head. *Please*..." He begged.

The words burned in his throat, but he had no choice. 'She's an alicorn, I cannot stop her if she does that again.' Prey realised he could not run. If Luna had invaded his dreams while he was locked in that cell, then distance was obviously no obstacle to her powers.

There was no way to keep her out, and it didn't matter how far he fled. He would have to sleep eventually, and then, *then* she would get him.

The princess seemed a bit baffled by Prey's entreatie, and she looked over questioningly at Nighthawk. He shrugged, "I have no idea your majesty." He murmured in his gruff tone.

"A strange request. But if that is what thou truly wishes, we see no harm in it. It is but a small boon to grant thee. We will stay out of thy dreams unless we detect thou art being afflicted by a nightmare." She raised a hoof to forestall anything Prey might have to say further, "This is how it shall be. The dreamscape 'tis our rightful domain to rule, and it is not thy place to contradict us." She announced firmly.

Prey swallowed again and forced himself to murmur his thanks, scarcely able to believe that she had actually listened to anything he had to say. 'I can work with this, I can work with this. I'm safe for a little while, at least until I can find some way of protecting my dreams fully. Until then, I cannot afford let myself have a nightmare at any cost.' Prey thought fervently.

"That leaves the question then, what is thy name, if not Gossamer? Thou canst not work within our Night Guard nameless." Princess Luna stated.

Prey sucked in a slow breath filled with bitter resentment. He wanted to reply with with a zebra vulgarity that would have melted paint at Luna once again taking his obedience for granted. But he didn't. He knew he was beaten. There was just no way to fight back against something like an alicorn. He had no choice but to become a slave and serve.

He'd become Prey rather than accept death. He'd killed while still a child rather than lay down and die. He'd fought on when only he remained rather than bow his head and fade away.

Yet now, he would have to kneel and wear the yoke.

But he would do it the same manner that he'd served Captain Valour. Secretly searching for any way to escape, and looking for any chance to cause harm.

"Your majesty, my name is Prey." He answered, eyes still lowered. His voice did not waver.

"Prey? We are curious. That is truly a most unusual name. Tell us why thy parents didst named thee such." Princess Luna ordered.

Prey affected a polite but nonchalant shrug, "I never actually asked them." He replied truthfully. He had never asked them, because they'd never called him Prey. He was wary of lying to the Princess. He didn't know if she had some way of detecting it. So instead, he just didn't tell the full truth so that it probably didn't technically count as a lie.

"Hmm, it seems our curiosity shall go unanswered this night. But enough of this," She boomed, clapping her hooves together with a ring of metal and making Prey wince, "Thy fellow will be here any moment, so we shall abdjourn until he has joined us."

Prey squinted, had he misheard? His hearing was damaged after all, so it was possible, "Your majesty, who do you mean?" Prey dared to ask.

"Why, we hast found another whom thou shalt work with of course." Luna answered cheerily, looking quite pleased with herself.

Next to her, Captain Nighthawk smirked nastily down at Prey.

Prey mostly had the captain figured. He didn't like Prey, and only seemed to care what the Princess thought. So it was easy to guess why he might be grinning sharp toothed at Prey.

"I beg your pardon, majesty. But you mean you've been trawling the prisons of Equestria and found other criminals that you now want me to work with." Prey stated, rather than asked. At least he managed to keep his tone submissive, rather than screaming the blatant stupidity of her idea.

"Of course. Did we not explain that earlier?" She asked in frank puzzlement, turning her piercing blue gaze towards Nighthawk to double check.

"No your majesty, you were waiting for the other one to arrive before you explained what their duties entailed." Captain Nighthawk murmured from beside her, still grinning tightly down at Prey.

"Ah, thou art indeed correct my good captain."

There was a knock at the door, and the same grey maned servant from earlier stuck his head in, "They are here with the prisoner your majesty." He announced formally.

"Our thanks Long Scroll. Send them in." She replied.

'This is insanity. She's pairing me with a criminal. A pony criminal. But most importantly, a pony. Pony's who think they're hardened and tough. And one she already knows will be loyal to her. Or worse, someone cunning like me who will play along and put my own schemes at risk. A pony that I'll have to kill. It's going to be a blood bath.'

Perhaps something must have showed in Prey's expression, for a strange look of sly amusement spread across the luna rulers features that made him shiver, "Surely thou didst not think thou wast to be in charge of our new Division? Nay, we have found another worthy individual for that role, for the darkest nights produce the brightest

stars. Perhaps when thou art a bit older." She chuckled.

And with that the door behind Prey swung open.

11.1 Induction Day (Or Night)

The double doors swung open and in marched a contingent of four Night Guards, surrounding a fifth. Positioned in the middle was a dark red pegasus with tufted ears, wearing manacles and a wing clamp.

They didn't so much as glance at Prey as they marched into the middle of the room and stopped before the dias, "Your majesty. Presenting one Crimson Trace, as per your orders." The foremost bat pony amongst the new comers announced, snapping off a salute.

"Excellent Lieutenant Screech," Princess Luna boomed, "If thou wouldst be so good as to remove the shackles. They wilt not be necessary here."

"Yes your majesty." The Lieutenant replied with another salute, before pulling out a key and stepping over to the red pegasus.

Prey seemed to have been momentarily forgotten. He leaned sideways past the Night Guard blocking his view to get a closer look at this Crimson Trace. The Pegasus had not said a word or moved when Lieutenant Sharp started to remove his chains, nor had he visibly reacted to being confronted with an alicorn.

Crimson Trace had a look of controlled quiet about him, his expression carefully blank. Squinting closely, Prey noticed a few small scars along his wings and across his upper chest. He had the look of a warrior, lean but well muscled. A glance at the stallions flank showed a tear drop shaped Trace over a spiked tree. It didn't mean anything to Prey. 'Why did she have his shackles removed? What's the difference between him and me?' He wondered.

The wing clamp came off last, and Crimson Trace carefully stretched out one wing, then the other before neatly folding them again. Then he offered a formal bow towards the magical throne where Luna sat, imperious and untouchable, "My thanks, Princess Luna." He said quietly. His voice was just like the rest of him, measured and controlled.

""Tis nothing, and we were only removing what ort not to have been in the first place." Princess Luna said with a dismissive wave.

"Princess?" The red pegasus asked.

Princess Luna inclined her head, "We knowest much of thy story Crimson Trace. Thou had thy reasons, many of which were beyond thy control. We believe that thou tried the best that thou couldst with the knowledge that thy had when presented with hard choices." Princess Luna said in a quieter tone, which just meant her voice wasn't quite as ear splitting as before.

Crimson Trace didn't look at Luna, just at the base of her throne, "I... Thank you, your majesty. Dost that mean you won't stop me if I go after them?" He asked, a sliver of emotion creeping into his tone.

Princess Luna regretfully shook her head, "Thou must not do so. Thee were not in the wrong, but never the less, revenge is never the answer. Let it not cloud thy judgement and blind thee to the right path Crimson Trace. We will not allow, nor condone such an act. But we do sympathise and understand thy feelings."

Crimson Trace looked up and met Princess Luna's gaze, "It is my duty to seek them out. That is the way of the clans. I am sorry, but I am duty bound to do this your majesty." He answered.

Prey fully expected Luna to start yelling again, just like when he had dared to tell her 'no' not ten minutes ago, so he immediately covered his abused ears. But she didn't.

"We know what it is to be rejected and snubbed amongst those who should be thy own. We have thus made efforts to restore the thestral clans that they might step from the shadows to stand alongside their pony kin once more." Luna paused and looked briefly to Captain Nighthawk next to her.

"There is much that is owed to thee by right of thy heritage, and here thou mayest find it if thou wilt but try." Prey could have sworn he saw Nighthawk dip his head slightly to Crimson Trace as Princess Luna said those words.

"However, thee will do so in our service. We knowest thee value 'Honour and Duty', for it was thy clans words, were they not? We are the Princess Of The Night, Lady Luna to thy clan's histories. Does thou acknowledge us?" Princess Luna asked.

Crimson Trace bowed his head, "How can I not your majesty, when you stand before me in the flesh?"

Prey saw a look of pride cross Luna's face, pride in possession, before she rose to her hooves and proclaimed, "We claim thee Crimson Trace, if thou wilt serve us. We offer thee the chance for honour and duty, where thy actions will help benefit and protect many. Wilt thou join us?" Princess Luna offered.

Crimson Trace glanced around at the thestral Night Guards stationed around the room, then he bowed, fully this time, "I am still young, and never finished my father's training, but I think he would've wanted me to take your offer. I give you my word that if you are true, I will also be." He said, reciting some oath.

Princess Luna nodded and preened smugly at his acceptance, like some large feline. "So be it. We knowest thou still hast much to learn, but we know thee wilt be of worthy service and do thy best. Our first order is thus, lay aside thy vengeance Crimson Trace. Thy service is now pledged to us, and I relieve thee of that task. Thou canst not serve us and vengeance also." She admonished sternly.

Prey watched a number of emotions flashed across Crimson Trace's previously blank face. They changed from one to the other so quickly that if you weren't watching closely, you could have missed them.

Uncertainty, anger, sadness, and even a hint of relief at the end. It occurred to Prey that Crimson Trace, despite his hard appearance, was probably no older than twenty summers. Young enough to still be unsure about the path he was on.

"Yes princess Luna." Was all Crimson murmured in the end, finally accepting her order with another small bow.

Princess Luna dipped her horn towards Crimson Trace, "We also are

sorry for thy loss. We wilt not allow such to happen again now that the thestral clans have been reunited. The time for such things is long past. Would that it had not cost thee thy father." She said sorrowfully.

Crimson Trace did not respond and he kept his face blank and his ears still, but Prey saw the shiver that went through his tightly folded wings.

"Although a tragedy, in this instance at least, you have common ground with thy partner. He does also know of what thy loss of a father feels like." Luna stated, as if there were nothing unusual about saying that in the middle of a room filled with other ponies. Perhaps from her slightly other worldly perspective, it wasn't.

"My partner? You haven't actually said how I will be serving you, your majesty." Crimson Trace said.

"As to what thee wilt be doing, Captain Nighthawk, if thou wilt be so good as to read Crimson Trace in as well? As for thy fellow servant, he is already here. Look." She said, pointing one silver shod hoof towards Prey.

Crimson Trace looked round in his direction, then as most had to do when looking for Prey, looked down. His carefully controlled visage cracked for a second and Prey saw the surprise that he was so used to by now.

"A lamb?"

"Yes I'm a lamb, and you're a pegasus. Well done." Prey retorted automatically.

Crimson Trace blinked slowly then walked over. The Night Guards exchanged looks and followed, but otherwise did not stop him. Prey shuffled back a step and tensed, wishing the ringing in his left ear would stop, but he refused to be the first to speak as Crimson Trace loomed over him.

"What is a lamb doing in chains?" He asked, sounding genuinely puzzled.

"That is your partner, Crimson Trace." Nighthawk said in his gruff voice as he unrolled that scroll again. He cleared his throat while Crimson Trace and Prey continued to silently observe one another, "Her Royal majesty, heir to the throne and dierarchy of Equestria, Princess Luna of the Night..." Prey tuned out the rest of the reading.

He carefully observed Crimson Trace, assessing and weighing his opposite up. Crimson Trace did the same, one ear turned in the direction of Captain Nighthawk, and the other towards Prey.

Prey decided his original assessment of the dark red Pegasus was correct. A young warrior, and probably quite a good one from the disciplined way he held himself. 'Skilled warriors die just the same with half their head melted off.'

Prey knew that his own measure was being taken, and wondered grimly how much those watchful yellow eyes really saw.

Nighthawk finished the reading and rolled the scroll back up.

"Your majesty, this is a lamb." Crimson Trace stated.

"Oh really? We hath not noticed." Princess Luna quipped with a grin. Everypony in the room looked at their ruler who had just made a joke in shocked amazement.

"Forgive me your majesty. What I meant to ask was; why?" Crimson Trace asked after a moment of slightly stunned silence.

"This is thy partner, Prey. We hath found him to work alongside thee. Do not be mistaken, Prey will not weigh thee down or be a burden, and has much to offer. In his own way."

Princess Luna clapped her hooves once more, "Now, we have to leave shortly to attend our night court and make ourselves available to all who would avail themselves of our wisdom. Captain Nighthawk, will that be all?" She asked.

"I believe your majesty, that there is still the issue of the tracers." He replied respectfully.

"And perhaps, we might trouble you while you're at it your majesty,

if you could please also tell us just what is going on?" Prey hastily spoke up. No details of this new form of forced servitude had actually been given yet. Just grand words and gestures towards this idiot warrior Crimson Trace, and implied threats towards himself.

Princess Luna paused, then waved Prey's question away, "We did not forget, we just hath more weightier concerns on our Royal mind than explaining the particulars. Yes." She coughed. That almost threw Prey, before he realised it was all likely an act. An all powerful alicorn able to kill them all with a mere thought surely wouldn't do something so mundane as *forget*. 'Maybe it's another strange attempt at humour?' Prey wondered.

If it was, it went above all of their heads. The thestral Night Guard standing on the other side of Luna's throne to Nighthawk bowed, "Princess Luna, perhaps now might be a good time to explain what my part is to be in this?" He politely asked.

"Ah, yes. Crimson Trace and Prey, may we present thy handler, Sargent Gloom. Both of thee wilt listen to and follow the good Sargent's orders. He shall report to Captain Nighthawk, so thou would do well to listen to his instructions. Sargent Gloom is well informed, and will help thee become accustomed to Canterlot and thy task. Sargent Gloom is there for what ever questions-" A knowing look at Crimson Trace, "-Thou mayst have."

She stood, "Captain Nighthawk, if thou wouldst bring the chest, that we might finish up here and move on to our next appointment." Luna boomed.

Nighthawk didn't even have to signal before two of the normal pony Night Guard's stepped forwards carrying an iron bound chest. Prey had the feeling that he wasn't going to like what was inside.

Captain Nighthawk laid his hoof on the chests lid. There was a click and then the lid popped open by itself. He reached in and hooked out four golden bands that vaguely resembled a collar, "These are the tracers." He said gruffly.

Princess Luna spoke up, or rather shouted, "We hath enchanted these ourselves, so they art of the finest spell craftsmareship. Fear

not that they might fail. These wilt let us know of thy presence and wilt also serve to trace thy actions, and we art the only one who canst remove them. This is as much for thy own protection as for others of pony kind." She told them.

'Another type of magical inhibitor, but worse. This one was made by an alicorn.' Prey thought with a sinking feeling. There could be no breaking or tricking such an item.

Crimson Trace didn't hesitate, just held out both his front hooves for the bands without protest. Nighthawk slipped first one then the other on.

As the bands settled above his fetlocks, they started shrinking until they fitted to Crimson Trace's legs perfectly. The gold gleamed dully in the dim torch light.

"Now you." Nighthawk said turning to Prey, while behind him Crimson Trace flexed his legs and examined the bands.

"I-" Prey opened his mouth to protest, to appeal to Princess Luna and say that he would give his word of good behaviour instead. Nighthawk was suddenly in his face, his shadow looming over Prey, "Is there a problem?" He growled. Prey got a close up view of his fangs, two sharp canines just like in all those vampony tales.

Prey wasn't scared by the teeth, he'd seen far, far worse things to be frightened of, and even some he hadn't. The threat behind the fangs was much more frightening. It doesn't have to be a broadsword to kill you, it could just as easily be a hoof knife.

Prey hid his swallow. "Look at me, I can hardly walk as it is. Does it look like I need any more chains?" He asked with only a slight squeak to his words. He rattled the chains and manacles to emphasise his point.

"Don't worry. You won't need them once you're wearing these." Nighthawk told him. He snapped open one leathery wing and gestured a unicorn Night Guard forward, "Hurry and remove these chains so I can put these on instead. I still have patrols to run." He ordered.

"Yes sir." The unicorns horn lit up and a glow enveloped Prey's inhibitor collar and shackles. Nothing further happened. The unicorn started to sweat after a minute, a look of strain crossing his face.

"What's the hold up?" Nighthawk barked.

"I'm sorry sir, my magic just can't get a hold on it. The lock is warded and I don't know the combination, and I can't force it either. It just absorbs my magic, no matter how much I pump into it." He puffed.

Nighthawk shot a sharp glance at Prey, "What exactly are these and why are they on you?" He demanded.

"To the first, I don't know. As to the second, I imagine they're probably to stop me running away." Prey answered with an expression of confused innocence.

"'Tis taking too long," Princess Luna announced, striding over, "We shalt do it."

Prey cringed and tried to scramble away, but Nighthawk stuck an unmoving hoof into the small of his back that effectively halted all attempts at flight.

Prey's whole body reflexively flinched away the moment it came into contact with the Captain's hoof, "Don't touch me-!" He began on reflex, then reality reminded him of the far more threatening figure of death standing right in front of him.

Prey whirled round just as Luna's horn lit up with an aura the colour of the night sky, "No please-!" Was all he managed to squeak.

"If thy magics art not strong enough, we shalt simply overpower these enchantments." Luna boomed merrily, heedless of his terror.

Prey's wool rose up as a static charge passed through it, and the air grew heavy, making his damaged left ear shriek at the change in pressure.

"Aha! A most ingenious spell, but it is not enough to pose a

challenge to us." Luna exalted. There was a crack, and the smell of ozone. The inhibitors and crystal inlaid manacles that Prey had been wearing for over fifty seven years broke and fell apart. There were no calluses underneath, the enchantments had seen to that. Cold air played around his suddenly tight throat, the draft unfamiliar and strange now that the collar was gone.

Prey stared down at where the remains lay, then up at the alicorn princess in fear. Those had been made to bind anyone and anything they were placed on. They had come from Dreverton, the most secure magical prison fortress in all of Equestria (aside from Tartarus itself), where the worst the world had to offer were stored.

Those inhibitors should not have broken under magical pressure. Unlocked yes, but broken? Never.

It was just another reminder of what an alicorn really was. Power incarnate.

"And now we must away. We wilt see thee later for thy report Captain. For now, fare thee well." The deity of the moon announced, and spreading her enormous wings flew out of the still open double doors. Four Night Guards rushed out behind her, trying to keep up.

Prey numbly watched her go, not even flinching as Nighthawk roughly grabbed one hoof and shoved the golden band over it, then the other.

Prey felt a buzzing sensation as the bands shrunk down, but stopped just short of becoming too tight. He could twist them around on his leg, but couldn't slide them any further up or down the fetlock. They were surprisingly light considering, the material.

'And these were enchanted by that alicorn herself.' Prey thought glumly, 'I haven't a hope of getting them off.' At least she was no longer in the room. That was a small comfort.

Prey poked one of the bands. If they'd been fitted on only one leg, he might have even considered cutting the hoof off to escape. On three legs he might have made it, but not on two.

The Night Guard seemed to relax marginally as their Princess left, but Captain Nighthawk quickly snapped them from what ever reprieve they might've had.

"Enough lazing around, there's work to do and not enough hooves to do it. If I pulled you off patrol for this meeting, get back to it. If you were on break, tough, break's now over. Lieutenant Sharp, meet me in the Day Guard Captain's office for coordination. Until we can get enough recruits to cover the gaps, we're all on time-and-a-half. Jump to it!" Nighthawk barked, in much the similar way Captain Valour did. The difference was Valour was passionate. Nighthawk seemed like he was grimly determined instead.

"Yes sir!"

Gloom turned to Crimson Trace and Prey who were just standing there watching as all the Guards rushed about. He offered a tired smile, "Follow me please, I need to fully explain what's going on... Is something wrong with you Prey?"

Prey's head snapped up, "There's a lot wrong with me," He hastily replied, whipping up a cheery smile, "But if you're talking about right now and more than usual, then no, I'm fine."

Behind the smile, it was all Prey could do not to whimper. The magic from those runes he'd carved into himself were slowly returning, creeping back into his limbs now that those inhibitors had been removed. The process was agonising, like pins and needles. If the pins and needles were real pins and needles. Prey's throbbing left ear wasn't helping the over all effect in the slightest.

Sargent Gloom blinked owlishly at him, and Crimson Trace seemed more interested in the backs of the departing Night Guards than to care if Prey was mocking him or not.

Gloom sighed and rubbed his face with a hoof, "Follow me. There's a room near by that we can sit down and use." He said to them.

"For what purpose?" Crimson Trace asked, flicking his yellow gaze back to the Sargent.

Gloom started for the door, apparently expecting them to follow, "We're going to sit down and have a chat. There's much that wasn't explained, but more importantly, we don't know each other. My first order of business is to correct that."

Prey did follow the thestral, but only after considering if he could either kill both Gloom and Crimson Trace, and/or escape.

A glance down at his fore legs told him the answer. They felt physically lighter, now liberated from their manacles that'd encased them for fifty seven long years. Yet somehow they were now even heavier. The golden bands nestled snugly against his leg fur and mocked him. 'So close and yet so far.' They seemed to laugh at him.

Prey could think of no plan that would get him out of this, no way to avoid an alicorns tracing spell. 'Princess Luna is definitely going on the list.' Prey thought despondently, wincing and hobbling after their retreating tails.

Sargent Gloom kicked the door closed behind him, and pulled the last blue floor cushion into place around the low table. He sat atop it.

"Well let's get this started. The sooner we start the sooner I can get some actual sleep." He said.

They were in a room that led off from a servants corridor that looked like it was some sort of small private tea room. Although small was a subjective term. In Canterlot, what passed for 'small' was what most would call normal. And what was normal to everyone else was big to Prey.

He was currently sitting on one of those 'small' floor cushions, looking a bit like a cloud against an open blue sky.

Sitting was good, and sitting on something soft was better. It made it easier to ignore the sharp discomfort across his body from the returning magic, mainly in his forelegs.

On the other side of the low table, Crimson Trace was sitting atop

his own cushion, poised and back perfectly straight. His yellow eyes flicked from under his long mane over to Gloom, "What are we going to be doing here, Sargent Gloom?" He asked calmly.

"This is informal and technically off duty, so it's just Gloom, which brings me nicely onto our first item of business. We're going to be working closely together, whether you want to or not. So. Introductions." He pointed a hoof at Prey and Crimson Trace, "Let's start easy. We'll go around, say your name, age, and tell us a little about yourself. Think you can manage that?"

Gloom didn't wait for a reply before launching in, "I'll start."

He sat up straighter and fixed a tired grin on his face, "Name's Dusky Gloom, Gloom for short. Sargent Gloom or 'sir' while on duty. Crimson Trace already knows what I am, but if you didn't catch it kid, I'm a thestral. Let's see, I'm thirty one years old, and grew up in the Westfallow Hollows. When Princess Luna contacted our clan two months ago, I was among the first group to sign on."

He waved a wing towards Crimson Trace, "You're up."

"What clan are you?" Crimson Trace asked quietly instead.

Gloom pushed up his helmet enough to show the base of one ear. A small, black band pierced its edge, looking quite like obsidian, "Cilldara. I'm from the Cilldara clan."

Even with the budding headache, Prey noted how Crimson Trace's eyes clearly lingered on the earring.

Apparently he wasn't the only one who'd noticed, "If you want, we can get you yours later. I know they didn't want... Never mind. Point being, you can do what you want, it's your right and they're no longer here to gainsay you." Gloom said with a shrug. "Now come on, it's your turn to talk." He added.

Crimson Trace didn't move, only his eyes slowly roved from Prey to Gloom and then back, as if assessing if it was worth the effort of bothering to speak.

Prey matched his blank stare with one of his own, showing how

little he cared what the Pegasus did either way, but still daring Crimson Trace to go ahead and actually say anything.

Whether it was Prey's ploy to provoke the taciturn Pegasus, or if Crimson Trace had been going to speak anyway, he did.

"It doesn't matter. About the clan ring, I mean." His gaze flicked away, before he continued speaking in a dull monotone, "I am called Crimson Trace. I prefer just Crimson. My skills lie in the use of my wing blades and my father's training. When will I be able to get my father's blades back?" He asked Gloom.

"Sorry, but not for a while. They're safe in the Guard's lock up, but you need to prove yourself a bit first." Gloom replied.

"I already gave my word." Crimson said, narrowing his eyes.

Gloom calmly met Crimson's cold look with his own cat slit pupils, "Yes, but there is a procedure to follow. It's nothing personal, but that's the way Captain Nighthawk has said its going to be." He answered.

"Those blades belong to me. They were passed to me by my father."

Gloom sighed and massaged his eyes with the crook of one bat wing, "Look, I'm not doing this to be cruel, I'm in the ISND too you know, so anything that makes life difficult for you makes it difficult for me. Nopony is going to touch your wing blades. But until everypony trusts us, not just you, but *us* a little more, I'm afraid that they're going to have to stay locked away. I promise that no harm will come to your blades." He said tiredly.

Crimson gave him a long, measuring look, "I'll hold you to that." He huffed, then turned away.

Prey noted how Gloom's face tightened in annoyance, but hid it well. He wasn't the only one unhappy about this outcome, because Crimson's wings also ruffled slightly in agitation. The red pegasus really wasn't as expressionless as he wanted to believe. You just had to know what to look for.

Prey had the thestral Sargent's measure now. A slightly world worn

pony, who still believed in duty and saw himself as something of an experienced hoof at dealing with the short end of the stick.

A long moment passed as no one said anything.

"Alright, enough awkward silence, we're all on the same team here. I don't expect us all to get along straight away, but we've got to start somewhere. And Luna so-help-me, by the time I'm done you're going to be best friends." Gloom announced. Prey bit back a snort of laughter, the distracting pain made that statement rather funny for some reason.

"Alright kid, start talking. Tell us about yourself." Gloom said turning to Prey.

"I want to hear more from Crimson first." Prey answered, suppressing a wince long enough to wave a hoof at the pegasus, "You still haven't really told us anything about yourself. Just some meaningless facts that I could have guessed myself."

Crimson turned his cool gaze back from examining the wall to stare at Prey, "I have told you all that is important. If you feel the need to guess to amuse yourself, then go ahead. You haven't said anything about yourself yet either." He challenged.

Prey ignored it, "Guess, is it?"

Well, it would serve as a welcome distraction from the pain. "Alright then, if you insist." He said, offering them both a smile so wide and innocent that it creased his eyes shut. Which also incidentally hid their watering. 'I won't even need to read your mind for this.' He thought.

"I can guess that you have some kind of connection to one of the thestral clans. Obviously not Gloom's, or you would have already known him." Prey started off.

"But how many clans are there I wonder? At least two, but I'm guessing three or four. And you're estranged from your own clan Crimson. You're not a thestral, so it's likely you were shunned for that. Yes? No? Ah, yes I see. No slit night eyes either. But you were

still part of the clan. Originally adopted then? Possibly." Prey mused, ignoring the look on Crimson Trace's face as he continued with his flow of reasoning.

"Your clan has not joined with Princess Luna. Why? Too independent and headstrong? More likely she does not want them. Outcasts or exiles then. Both? Regardless, you left them, likely because of your father." Prey saw the reaction in Crimson's eyes at the mention of his father. 'Ah, now were getting somewhere.'

"Your father was important in some regard, was he part of the clan council? No, you obviously don't like the mention of them. Your father means a lot to you, and you no doubt follow his example, which means it's more likely that your father was a dissenter. He trained you. Those scars come from many practice fights with real weapons." Prey lazily flicked a hoof at the smattering of scars under Crimson's chest fur and along his wing edges.

"Kid..." Gloom began.

"But what happened then?" Prey went on unperturbed. "You haven't made any mention, even indirectly, of your mother. Likely died when you were young then. Sickness or accident? Monster attack? No, most likely an accident. No mother figure, so you latched onto the only person in the clan who didn't shun you. Your father. You were very close to him, weren't you? He was a thorn in the clan councils side. Politically in some fashion. Your father is now dead. Did they kill him? Assassination or was there some sort of ritual combat-?"

"Shut up!" Crimson snarled, rising to his hooves at the same time that Gloom barked, "Kid. That's enough!"

Gloom and Crimson both stood, the pegasus glaring at Prey who still sat with a bemused smile on his face, while the thestral put a restraining wing in Crimson's path, "Let's not get violent." He said. Crimson didn't sit back down, but he didn't lash out either. It was a marked change from the controlled Pegasus who'd there just a minute ago.

Turning to Prey, Gloom scowled, "That was out of line and you

know it." He said disapprovingly.

Prey let the confused smile drop, "You told me to guess, so I did. If you don't like what I have to say, then be careful what you ask for. I could tell you anything if you're not careful." He replied flatly.

Gloom's scowl turned into a frown, and Prey could see the hint of uncertainty there as he looked down at Prey. Crimson also bore that look of slight confusion under his anger. "You aren't like what I expected. What happened to the lamb?" Gloom muttered.

"How did you know all of that?" Crimson demanded.

"As I said, I guessed through deductive reasoning. It's what I'm good at, and why Princess Luna decided to enslave me to this cause-"

"This is *not* enslavement." Gloom interrupted, "I don't know what you did, and I won't judge you either, but you have a debt to pay. Actions have consequences and it's your own fault you're here, so you may as well play nice and make the most of it."

Prey just looked at the Sargent, 'I'll kill a thousand ponies before I let even one make me a slave.' He thought, but kept it to himself. Instead he bowed his head briefly, "As you order, Sargent Gloom."

Gloom sighed in frustration and sat back down, "This is only as hard as you make it kid. I'm here to help you, *both* of you, but only if you accept it." He said.

"My name is Prey, not kid." Prey responded, annoyance flaring in his chest. Or maybe it was just the pain.

"You're kid to me until you grow a bit." Gloom responded, the corner of his mouth quirking.

"Kid is a baby goat. I am a sheep, not a goat."

"A *baby* sheep. So until you grow up, you're 'kid'. Or I can just call you 'little lamb' instead." Gloom joked, stretching out on his floor pillow.

Prey didn't respond, and instead just moved Gloom up The List.

"You do not act like a lamb. Why is that? And what did you do to earn imprisonment at such a young age." Crimson asked abruptly. He'd re-seated himself, but there was an angry intensity to the way he was looking at Prey.

"I'm not a lamb, just a runt." Prey responded.

"No, you're definitely still just a lamb. If not, you'd at least have the beginnings of your horn growth. What? I do know a bit about sheep." Gloom said, stretching util his joints popped.

Prey didn't have an answer to that. He couldn't very well say that he'd sacrificed his horns as part of a dark magic ritual, and neither could he prove that he was actually a runt.

That was stupid. Why would he want to prove that anyway? He shot Gloom a dark look instead.

Prey could see the smug light in Gloom's eyes as the Sargent thought he'd finally figured out a piece of the puzzle about Prey. He could practically hear the thestral thinking so. It wouldn't be too long until he actually could do that again, now that the inhibitors were gone. Just as soon as the pain of the magic returning to his runes finally finished up.

"Enough stalling. You still haven't told us about yourself. We both have, now it's your turn. So talk." Crimson told Prey.

Prey pushed aside the nagging ringing in his ear and quickly concocted a history for himself.

"My name is Prey. Short for Prey. That's it, just Prey. I'm fourteen-"

Crimson snorted while Gloom joined in giving him a look, "We've just been over this. You're not any older than ten. I can tell when something isn't right, so don't think you can just make stuff up and get away with it." The thestral stated flatly.

"Which would make you feel better? That the ten year old lamb is so abnormal, can hold this conversation with you, and has been conscripted into a military division? Or that a fourteen year old one has?" Prey asked sweetly. That got an uncertain look from both of

them, although with Crimson it only manifested in the way his wings shuffled.

"You're definitely... Different," Gloom allowed, "I can honestly say that I couldn't have taken you seriously if Princess Luna hadn't picked you out. I think I'm starting to see why her majesty did." He added. He didn't sound happy about that.

"You're stalling again. Keep talking." Crimson said.

Prey silently ground his teeth. The headache was getting to him along with the pins and needles. Plus, having to deal with everything else that'd happened to him in the last six hours wasn't helping.

"As I was saying before I was interrupted, my name is Prey, I'm fourteen, I was born a runt out in a little village you've probably never heard of. You wouldn't even find it on a local map. You've already seen what my skills are. As to why I was in prison, it's mainly because I was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and made a poor decision." Prey said. It wasn't even a lie.

It also hadn't gone unmissed by Prey that Crimson had neglected to state why he'd been in prison either.

"Your father's dead too?" Crimson asked, perhaps hoping to get a rise out of Prey in return. If so, he was disappointed.

Prey folded his forelegs, "That's right." He agreed pleasantly.

That seemed to throw both of them, so he capitalised on it and pressed ahead with questions of his own.

"Sargent Gloom, the title implies that this little ISND group is military. I hope that's not the case because the military is dangerous, but as no one has actually told me any details, I don't know do I? So what exactly is going on? What are we expected to do? Who are we supposed to work with? How many? What is the over all goal? And what is your role in all of this?" Prey asked Gloom.

Crimson also looked to Gloom, waiting for him to answer.

"Look, it's already been a long night, and this discussion has dragged on longer than I thought it would. We have been assigned the use of a bunk room, if you're tired we can continue this tomorrow-"

"I would appreciate it most greatly if you told me exactly what it is that I've been press ganged into right now, not later. I'm sure Crimson feels the same." Prey said with another if his innocent smiles.

Crimson flicked his gaze to Prey, then back to Gloom, "I find I agree with the runt." Crimson admitted.

Prey ignored the insult this time. His ear hurt fiercely, and he just wanted to try and go to sleep, hoping that when he woke the pain of returning magic was finally gone and that he'd have his old mental powers back.

"Alright," Gloom sighed, "To put it simply, this ISND section is an idea that Princess Luna had, with the focus being on stopping any secret criminal or cultist groups. Which is something Princess Luna feels very strongly about, I might add. We thought it was just a passing fancy, but as you can obviously see, her majesty decided it had merit enough to pursue after all."

Gloom paused, "Princess Luna is... She means well and has a great vision, and I will hear nothing against her. It's only that she is sometimes distracted by the smaller details." He said delicately.

'In other words,' Prey thought, 'This ISND group I've been enslaved into was a spur of the moment thing, with no forward planning. And now no one really knows what happens next.'

"How do we accomplish her majesty's wishes to stop these types of ponies?" Crimson asked.

Apparently Gloom had been having similar thoughts, because he coughed awkwardly, "Eherm. To be honest, I don't really have anything to go on. Captain Nighthawk has ordered me to do what ever is necessary to fulfil her majesties wishes, so we will have to figure something out. We'll find leads. Somehow." He looked

resigned, but still determined.

"I do not mean to question her majesty, but do we even know if there are any groups of cultists or criminal ponies out there?" Crimson asked.

"We don't," Gloom answered, "And I hope that's because there are none. I doubt Princess Celestia would have allowed black market traders, smugglers, dark worshippers, thieves guilds or black magic users to exist under her rule. She would have stomped them out long ago." Gloom said with obvious approval.

"Or her majesty has dealt with the majority, and now the only ones left are those best at skulking in the shadows." Crimson said.

"Or that." Gloom allowed.

Prey shook his head to himself, 'Is that the worst you can truly imagine? Just petty thieves and smugglers. No mention of mass slaughter, murder or rape. Then again, I wouldn't put it past these ponies for even their criminals to be soft.'

"But more on that tomorrow. The ISND has newly designated offices, so tomorrow will mainly be getting our processes up and running. You'll be bunking here in the guard quarters of the palace, and I'll be joining you. Eventually, you should be able to move to an apartment close by in the city, if you show you can be trusted." Gloom told them.

"There are still many things you haven't answered-" Prey started.

"Tomorrow. I'm tired and the answers will keep." Gloom pushed himself to his hooves, Crimson flowing smoothly to his own hooves a moment later without protest.

Gritting his teeth, Prey did the same, forcing his twitching legs to support him as he stepped off his large floor cushion. The lack of balance caused by his damaged eardrum made it harder than it should have been to stay upright.

Extending a wing, Gloom picked up the lamp by its hook with his wing claw, "Follow me. The palace is a bit of a maze till you get

used to it. You're unlikely to run into anypony but the Night Guard at this time of night. We'll also see about getting you properly outfitted later..." He trailed off and stepped closer to Prey, his cat eyed pupils fixing onto Prey's face, "What is the matter?" He asked.

Prey blinked his watering eyes, and felt something wet slide down his cheek. Surprised, he swiped a hoof across his face to rid himself of the tear which had overrun, "It's nothing, I'm fine." He snapped, inwardly cursing at his body for having betrayed him and shown crybaby weakness.

Gloom set the lamp back down, "I told you, I can sense when something isn't right. It's my talent, and why I was chosen for this post. Don't lie to me, what's wrong?"

"You're trembling, lamb, and having trouble standing." Crimson noted from over Gloom's shoulder. Prey silently cursed him.

Gloom took another step forwards as Prey instinctively backed away, "Are you hurt? Or is it something else? You're still very young to be having to-"

"Drop the patronising tone. I'm not a child, *yes* I know, all visual evidence is to the contrary, but I'm not. And I know perfectly well what's wrong with me, it's a damaged or possibly burst left ear drum. And yes. It hurts." Prey added flatly.

He'd decided to tell that bit of the truth to distract Gloom. He didn't want the thestral discovering that his trembling was due to the pain from the reactivating runes, and not from his ear.

Inwardly he also changed from cursing out Crimson to Gloom. A talent that could detect when something was wrong or when someone was lying was going to be a massive pain to deal with. Although obviously it was not completely accurate, or else Gloom would have called him out earlier. 'Another obstacle.'

"You've just been sitting there with a busted ear and you didn't say anything? How did it happen?" Gloom asked moving forward and reaching for Prey's ear.

"Don't touch me," Prey snapped, scrambling out of reach, "And as to how, I thought it would be quite obvious. I got hit with a magically amplified sound wave strong enough to knock me to the ground by your Princess. I don't know if that's a common occurrence for you ponies, but for normal people, that kind of thing inflicts damage." Prey said.

Gloom paused, "Oh, right..." Then he added, "I'm sorry. That shouldn't have happened, her majesty didn't do it on purpose."

"And that makes it all better I suppose." Prey replied.

"No it doesn't, but you should have said something. Why didn't you?" Gloom asked.

Prey gave him a blank look, "Why would I have?"

"So we could have gotten it seen to instead of sitting here. If you're in pain you must speak up and get some help. You do yourself no good by acting tough."

"Right, that's it, 'the little lamb is acting tough'," Prey mocked, "I'm not a fool. I didn't say anything because it wouldn't have done anything to change the situation. My ear would still have been burst either way. I'll tend to the ear myself later, and not bother you two with it further." Prey answered dismissively.

Gloom didn't look happy, in fact he looked upset by something, 'Whats his problem?' Prey thought distractedly, biting down on another wince. 'He's not the one injured, so why is he making fuss?'

Crimson was watching Prey with an odd expression, perhaps interest, as if Prey had finally proven worthy of his notice. 'Well *Kum'Daie* you too.' Prey thought.

Gloom grabbed the lantern again, "Come along, we have a detour to make." He growled.

"Where to?" Crimson asked before Prey could.

"The infirmary of course. We have a lamb who should know better to get patched up."

"My name is Prey."

"Don't touch me, I can do it myself." Prey said, snatching the padded compression from off Gloom's hoof.

"If you'd just hold still I would do it for you." Gloom replied irritably.

Prey ignored him and started applying the gauze and padding to his ear, looping it around his head and neatly tying it off. It still felt weird to have such a range of movement with his limbs again, now that the chains were gone.

However, Prey was more intrigued in the small but clean medical room they were in than his strangely light weight limbs. There was no doctor (as it was the middle of the night), but Prey was still astounded at the quality of the small infirmary.

The lamp light played over the scrubbed tiled floors and white walls, almost glistening. Also present were the four clean and neatly made cots, cupboards stocked with high quality sterilised bandages, and abundantly supplied medicine.

He'd never seen anything like it. All he knew was the tent hospitals of the Resistance. Where the cot was nothing but blood stained boards and the only help the injured could look forward to was the needle or bone saw, followed all too often by infection and death.

It made Prey uncertain about what other false expectations he might be holding without even realising it. 'This isn't the Deeper Green anymore, this is Canterlot.' He reminded himself as he tucked the last edge of the bandage in.

Gloom was watching him with an unreadable expression, "You're quite competent at that." He said.

"Is there a reason I shouldn't be?" Prey asked. His words sounded muffled to his one unblocked ear.

Gloom grumbled something, "No. What do you want for the pain?"

He asked.

Prey looked at the shelves and glass cabinets. He didn't recognise any of the neatly labelled bottles or vials, and it was a bit too dark to read them anyway. All his experience and knowledge of medicine came down to herbs and plants.

"No idea. I don't know any of this stuff." Prey admitted. Something he hoped to rectify in the near future, "What is Crimson doing?" He asked.

The Pegasus had wondered through the door into the next adjoining room, which was almost exactly the same as this one. However the lamp's light didn't spread far enough inside for Prey to see the red pegasus through the doorway.

"I don't know, and I don't care. That's his business. So long as you both follow my orders and stay out of trouble, I'm not going to interfere with the rest of your lives too much." Gloom said, nosing though the contents of a shelf, "Ah, here. Try these."

Gloom turned and offered Prey a couple of small white capsules. Prey gave them a distrustful glance, "I take it these are 'pills' of some kind?" He asked.

"Yes, haven't you ever seen them before?" Gloom asked.

"No, and you're one to talk. I imagine that you hadn't seen pills either till recently, as your thestral clan was cut off from the rest of pony kind and its developments." Prey pointed out.

Gloom gave him another one of those looks that said, 'I see a lamb but I'm not hearing one'. It seemed the Sargent was already getting used to wearing that look. "You're right, but that doesn't explain why you didn't know what they are either. Your family would have known at least. You weren't cut off from Equestria, so what's your excuse?"

"Ignorance, deprivation, and lack of contact with the outside world." Prey answered dismissively, waving the pills on Gloom's hoof aside, "I'll be fine, I don't need those." He said.

"They'll help you with the pain."

"I have no idea what went into them or their possible side effects. I don't trust them. So I'm going to say no." Prey told him. It was a subtle test he was conducting on the Sargent, what would Gloom let slide and what would he enforce?

Prey was keenly aware that at present he only had as much freedom as Gloom allowed him to have. So the question then was; how much control did he really have? How much minor insubordination and stubbornness could Prey get away with?

Gloom just shrugged, his wings mirroring the motion, "No skin off my nose, I'm not the one in pain." He said as he replaced the pills.

Gloom looked back over his shoulder and caught Prey watching him. His cat slit pupils held Prey's own levelly, "I'll say it again. I'm here to help, but only if you let me. I'm not going to fight you every step of the way." He said.

Prey kept his face controlled, letting none of the anger at the thestral's suggestion that he needed help bleed into his sky blue eyes, "Sure, whatever you say. Are we done here?"

At some point during that last part of their conversation Crimson had returned, and stood in the door waiting. Prey's eyes passed over the red pegasus's muzzle, 'I wouldn't mind eating either. I've been living off just hay for the last month. It's a wonder I haven't collapsed already from malnutrition.' It was hard to see because of how puffy his wool was, but underneath it every one of his ribs could be felt.

"Let's go." Gloom ordered, pulling open the far door and propping it there so they could follow him out into the shadowy palace corridors, "I've been on double duty for the last two days. I am going to get some decent sleep for once, come Tartarus or high water." He yawned hugely, showing off his set of sharp canines.

"*Yaaawwwn** I think the world can afford to wait one more night before it ends. Come along."

Prey pushed aside his gnawing belly as he had been doing for the last two weeks, and half walked, half hobbled out the door. He'd survive, it was just food. And he'd made himself look weak enough for one night already.

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[[[Bonus Picture - Dusky Gloom]]]

https://imgur.com/WPUnSxb

Author's Notes:

Big thank you once again to the editor: Sweetolebob18
That said, if you spot anything I'm doing wrong, please let me know.
Also, just to reiterate, I own NOTHING.

12.1 Welcome to the Office! Here's a bucket

They gave him a bunk, with both a pillow *and* a blanket.

It was one of the bottom bunks so Prey could reach it, and although far too large for his small size, that didn't matter. It was a bunk, with actual sheets instead of a lead lined floor. It was luxury compared to what Prey was used to sleeping on. Or possibly sometimes even in.

Crimson took the top, far bunk in the corner, and Gloom chose the one closest to the door. Then he blew out the lamp, curled up, and they all went to sleep.

Or two of them did. Probably. They could just have been faking it extremely well like Prey was.

Prey shifted under his blanket. The tingling pain roaming through his limbs and ear would've made sleeping hard regardless, but he had planning to do. It felt like a swarm of fire ants, and it had been a long, frightening, and tiring day. So much had happened, and all scarily reminisce of his last encounter with the Solar Guard. There were so many new factors to take into consideration.

Like meeting a formally deceased Princess (and now joint ruler of the nation he hated), getting conscripted, the thestrals, Gloom and Crimson, Nighthawk, Canterlot, the list went on and on. There were so many new variables to account for. Prey lay there in the dark, mulling it all over. In the end, it boiled down to two important points.

Prey had his runic powers back. Or would, soon, once the dreadful pins and needles ceased. That meant he would once again be able to read surface thoughts, and protect himself against magic.

Unfortunately, that was a bit overshadowed by the magnitude of the second point.

Prey was now bound more tightly than he ever had been before. He could feel the warmth of the twin gold bands against his leg fur. Their presence was a constant, horrible little reminder of his captivity. He couldn't get away from it, he was chained more effectively than he'd ever been in Dreverton.

Because even locked under the earth, it had never personally been the second most powerful creature in the world binding him. Princess Luna had made these shackles. She had placed them on him. There was no hope of escape from an alicorn.

Prey shivered despite the blanket, and pulled it more tightly around his small form.

'Still, there's nothing for it but to crawl onwards. I always knew there was a monster out there that would eventually get me. But I'm still alive. Due to either arrogance or oversight on Luna's part, I'm still alive.' He thought.

'This doesn't change my goals. Just the path I take. I will bow my head, crawl and scrape, beg and plead. I will play the role they have assigned me. I will live. I will survive.'

A pitiful goal. The goal of the weak.

That was fine, he knew he was weak. But it was his goal. Prey had no delusions about how small he really was in the world. 'A little goal for a little lamb.' He thought mirthlessly. Prey slept fitfully that night.

He was awake in an instant, "Don't touch me."

Gloom returned his outstretched hoof back to the floor, "Come on, time to get up. There's a long day's work ahead." Gloom mumbled.

The first rays of grey morning light slipped through the window of the small bunk room, revealing the Sargent's bleary expression.

Gloom looked just as tired as he had last night, with dark bags under his yellow slit eyes. Prey felt just as bad.

Prey hadn't stirred when Gloom had woken, only finally awaking on hearing the thestral approach. That wasn't like him. He must have been even more worn out than he'd realised. A glance at the far corner showed Crimson sitting on his top bunk in some strange posture, eyes closed. He seemed to be meditating. "How's your ear?" Gloom asked.

"It's fine." Prey automatically replied, crawling out from under the blanket and stretching. Then he winced and raised one hoof to check on the padding around his injured ear. Oh yes, that's probably why he hadn't heard Gloom approach. Prey paused, 'No, that's not right.' That wasn't what had woken him.

Prey felt a tingle of excitement as he turned where he sat in the bed and looked up at Gloom. It had been so long, fifty seven years to be precise, and he'd almost forgotten what it sounded like. '-get some coffee. I doubt either of them have tasted it before. No, wait, Prey's still a lamb, I can't give him coffee. Crimson though... What's with that creepy smile?-'

Prey realised he was grinning like a maniac. Quickly he wiped it off, "Right, I'll get up now then." He chirped and slid off the bed. Surface thoughts! It had been so long since he'd heard them. 'Too long.'

He hadn't noticed when first he'd woken, but now he was paying attention, he realised that he could hear the thoughts at the forefront of Gloom's mind. '-So much to do, Luna help me, and I've got to get Crimson and Prey to trust me too. But how? Gah, I haven't a clue what the next step is-' Gloom's thoughts faded into a low buzz as he walked over to Crimson's bunk and out of Prey's perception range.

The closer someone was, the easier it was to hear their thoughts. It wasn't perfect, Prey could only hear what they were thinking at that moment.

It was also restricted to a range of about four to five yards in a

circle around him, depending on how loudly and clearly they were thinking. Beyond that range, their thoughts became an indecipherable buzz.

Another grin twisted Prey's lips as he watched Gloom flap up and poke the meditating Crimson's flank, telling him to "Take a break from that and come get breakfast." Prey might be muzzled and on a leash, but now he had claws once again. Metaphorically at least. 'This is wonderful.' He thought.

Prey was not feeling wonderful.

After a long, winding route through the lower palaces corridors, passing the first servants of the day just beginning their routine, Gloom had led them in here. The Guards mess hall.

Prey cradled his aching head where it lay slumped on the table. Realistically, Prey should've been expecting this.

The long walk on legs still weak from poor nourishment, plus the long time spent in chains, general dizziness from his sense of balance being off, coupled with trying to keep up with Gloom's and Crimson's longer stride had made it hard enough. But now it felt like his head was stuck in a vise.

Around the room, Guards milled about and stood in line for breakfast, either starting their day shift, or coming off their night shift before heading home.

How did Prey know this was the case? It was the very same reason for his distress. He could hear their thoughts, all of them. It was too loud. There were too many of them. He wasn't used to this. It was too much and too soon after just regaining this ability.

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'-polish my armour after that-', '-to get going soon-', '-bat ponies wings creep me out-', '-I hope she remembers-', '-left the cake out to cool-', '-stay over there and away from me-', '-got to take my glasses to the-', '-that idiot ground pounder-', '-washing out on the line-', '-

Grape Limb said he would-', '-don't have enough bits for-', '-why Celestia lets Luna keep them around-', '-serving carrots again?-', '-aren't they going to get some food?-'

-

"Aren't you going to get in line? If you don't, the food will all be gone." Prey sighed at Gloom's rasping voice. Who else could it have been saying that? Scratch that, who else would be speaking to them? Not to mention, he'd heard the thestral's thoughts as Gloom came over to their relatively unnoticed table in the corner.

So far, none of the Guards had really noticed the new comers in their midst. Prey forced one blue eye open and looked up at Gloom from where his chin rested on the tables edge. It was about as high as he could reach. Being a runt was the worst.

"Is there no sort of pecking order or higherarchy? What will the Guards say when a sheep and a random pegasus barge into line? I imagine the cooks also know everyone by sight. You should just go and get us the food instead." Prey told him.

"Nice try kid, and the correct word is 'everypony'. Now get up and get into line. You're going to have to meet the rest of the Guard at some point, so it may as well be now." Gloom said sliding onto the bench and slipping his tray off his back.

Oatmeal, carrots and water. Prey swiveled his eye over to Crimson who seemed to be meditating again, despite the noise and bustle. 'Probably catching up from when Gloom interrupted him earlier to meet his daily quota.' Prey thought sarcastically.

The interesting thing was, he couldn't read Crimson's thoughts to confirm that. Prey had tried looking when they had been walking down here, and had come up short against a smooth wall in Crimson's mind that he couldn't get past. It was like a mind shield.

Prey could catch flickers and shapes of thought from the other side of the wall, but unless he put a hoof on Crimson and invaded his mind directly, there was no way of knowing exactly what those flickers were. Prey certainly *could* invade his mind, Crimson's

mental strength wasn't strong enough to defend against a direct attack, but he would definitely get found out by Luna and executed. So currently, that option was off the table.

It wasn't completely unexpected, and it wasn't the first time Prey had come across such individuals. There were just very few of them.

Crimson was a warrior who'd obviously been trained since he was small, and that training seemed to involve disciplining the mind as well as the body. Crimson thought in much the same was as he walked, moved and talked. In a calm, controlled manner.

This self mastery allowed Crimson to keep his thoughts hidden, even if unintentionally. Prey had encountered a few individuals like him before.

Captain Fire Strike had been one of them.

"Crimson, how about you getting us something instead?" Prey asked without moving from his spot.

Crimson didn't respond from his meditative state.

'-leave him be kid, he's not going to fall for that either. You're cute, but not that cute-' Gloom's thoughts said as the thestral took a bite from his carrot, an amused smile playing around the corners of his mouth.

"Well then, if we're just going to stroll up and demand food, I'm sure you've thought of a good cover story for why me and Crimson are here." Prey said to Gloom.

Gloom stopped chewing, '-what?-', "Oh, ehrm, right. Cover story?" Gloom muttered.

Prey sighed and tenderly massaged his aching ear, "*Is* there a cover story? Or are we just to tell all the Royal Guards who ask that we're press ganged convicts?" Prey suggested tiredly.

Gloom's mood improvement that had come with getting breakfast faded as he put down the carrot, '-what do I say here?-' He thought. "If they ask, just tell them that you're in the Night Guard, in a new

special Division set up by Princess Luna. It's the truth. Just don't mention the whole 'came out of prison' bit." Gloom ordered.

There was a moment of relative quiet as Prey tried to gather up the motivation to enter the headache inducing crowd, while Gloom sat there looking sour. And Crimson, who wasn't responding much to anything.

Hunger won out in the end. Prey groaned and dropped off the bench. He hugged the wall as he slunk around to go join the end of the short line of Guards, avoiding as many eyes as possible out of habit. When Prey reached the start of the line, he was immediately presented with a problem.

The counter was so high that he couldn't even see over it. Prey scowled.

"Here." Crimson said, coming up behind him and dropping two trays onto the counter, one for each of them. Seems even food trumped meditation.

There might have been the hint of a smirk on that red furred muzzle as Crimson glanced down from his convenient height, but with his blank mask and shielded thoughts, it was hard to tell.

Prey rolled an eye back up at him, "Decided to mock me instead of hate me? Or can't decide on which?" He asked, but without any real feeling. The grinding headache was a bit distracting.

Crimson offered a slow blink and spoke carefully, considering each word before he let it out, "Hate is a strong word. I do not hate you, strange though you are. But if you do get mocked in return, it is only reaping what you sow, little lamb."

"I see what you did there. Well done, barely been introduced and already with the height jokes. Very witty." Prey deadpanned.

Crimson just did that slow, methodical blink again and they continued to shuffle down the line. As they were at the back of the queue, it was only about now that a few Guard ponies started to notice them.

'-who's that red-', '-Pegasus? Haven't seen him before-', '-is that-', '-a baby sheep?-'

Prey felt the tickle of nerves along his spine as the eating ponies began to take interest. Old instincts told him to run away. Whenever someone took interest in him, it was always for a bad reason. He didn't like this.

"One serving only. Come back when you're done if you want another. If there's any left." Came the voice from above Prey's head. He glanced up. They'd reached the breakfast hatch without him realising it. Prey couldn't see over the counter, and so was out of sight to the grumpy sounding cook.

"It's not for me." Crimson answered.

"Then send which ever pony it is up to get his own serving. Wait, Autumn didn't send you up did he? I'll tan that cowards hide, teach him to raid my cupboards. You're not a friend of his are you?" The cook asked suspiciously.

Crimson blinked slowly at her, "I don't know any Autumn. We're just here for the breakfast." He answered.

"Come to think of it, I don't know you lad, and who's *we*?"

Prey was tired of waiting, and was growing twitchy just standing here as Guard ponies watched them. He could feel the cold glances being cast their way. They weren't a recognised part of the Guard, and so weren't welcome here in the Guards mess hall.

Prey took a step back, crouched, wiggled his hips as he measured the distance, and with a spring, jumped up and got his hooves over the edge of the counter, "He means me." He said as he hung there with his chin on the counter.

The cook was a large grey earth pony mare with a cream mane and a crumpled apron. Her grouchy scowl turned into one of surprise and then delight as she leaned over the pans of oatmeal to get a better view of Prey. "Ooh, just look at you, you're an adorable one ain't cha'? What are you doing in here dearie?" She asked with a big

smile on her plump cheeks.

Prey bit back his blistering retort. Insulting the mare and all the gooey thoughts of adorableness she was currently having wouldn't get him breakfast. So instead he offered her one of his most winning smiles, "Morning miss. Could I get some breakfast please? I'm quite hungry."

"Of course dearie, and just call me Cookie. Everypony else does. Now what are you and your.." She glanced at Crimson who was still just standing there, "Eh... Friend doing in here?" Cookie asked as she ladled out the oatmeal.

Prey swung one of his dangling legs unseen under the counter and gave Crimson a light kick. Crimson's muscles bunched instinctively to retaliate, before he took the hint and spoke, "We are actually part of the Guard. The Night Guard, in a new Division set up by Princess Luna." He explained.

Prey could hear the closest Guards listening in behind them, both metaphorically and mentally.

'-the Night Guard is it?-', '-explains a lot-', '-bunch of weirdos-', '-forget the lamb, no way she's a Guard-', '-cute foal though-', '-but this Crimson-', '-ahh, so that's what Captain Nighthawk meant-'. That last thought came from one of the few thestrals present, who was sitting by himself at a near by table, listlessly picking over his oatmeal.

Cookie "Hrumph'd" at Crimson's explanation and shoved both now full trays back to him, "Well Mister Mysterious, don't let me catch you making trouble in here or I'll toss you out the door on your wings. You take good care of little dearie here, you got it?" She ordered, waving her ladle at Crimson.

All the red pegasus offered the cook was a cool almost-glare as he picked up the two trays and balanced them on his back with his wings.

'Fool, this is such a small thing. Unbend your pride and at least pretend to show some humility. You might have to interact daily

with her if you want to eat.' Prey thought contemptuously.

With a final scowl at Crimson, and a smile and admonition to come back soon to Prey, Cookie let them go. Prey beamed a smile that would have melted solid ice and promised that he would, and then they headed back to where Gloom sat waiting.

'-new Division huh?-', '-fluffy little sheep-', '-he's not a thestral though. Strange to be in the-'

Prey stuck close to Crimson's hooves as they wound through the occupied tables, and so was able to avoid most of the Guards attention as they passed, which was fine by Prey. Let them dismiss the lamb as a child that the new Night Guard pegasus was taking care of for some strange reason.

Already some seemed to be discussing if Prey was adopted as Crimson's younger brother or something, he could hear their speculation as he passed. That, and that they seemed to think he was a ewe for some reason. Again. 'Gormless idiots.'

Crimson didn't say anything as he put the two trays down on the table and sat, ignoring everyone else. Gloom just sighed and thought, '-it's going to be a long road-'. Prey felt like joining him in sighing, but only because he hated both of them. But instead of doing that, he climbed onto the bench and stretched over the high table top, pulling his tray closer so he could actually reach it.

"The Royal Guard are evaluating us, and they're not liking what they're seeing." Prey commented as he picked up his spoon, which was almost too large for him.

"How do you know that?" Gloom asked in an undertone.

"Easy. The way they look at us, and then look away. They judging us, well, me and Crimson at least, to be interlopers. Mainly Crimson though, I'm just a child. They don't know us, we weren't introduced by the Captain so we don't have any credibility with them, and they don't think we're worthy to be part of the Guard. Military units are close knit, where acceptance is earned, not given. They don't take kindly to outsiders." Prey explained casually, taking a large spoonful

of oatmeal. It was plain, but it had some texture and it was hot. Not that Prey cared about the taste. Food was food, and he was hungry.

Gloom was looking at him funnily again, '-that's... Quite perceptive. How did he work that out?-' But the thestral didn't comment out loud.

Their meal continued in silence. For them anyways. The Royal Guards on the other tables continued to chat and exchange pleasantries loudly.

To Prey, it felt like every one of them was shouting directly at him, almost to the point of being overwhelming, even with only one working ear. Noisy thoughts kept intruding and overlapping, making his now firmly established headache even worse. Prey shoved another mouthful of oatmeal down his throat, 'Just deal with it.' He thought grimly.

Prey would have happily finished his meal before letting himself be taken away to do what ever it was Luna had enslaved him to do, as long as it was away from here. Indeed, Prey was already almost finished with his meal, having overtaken even Gloom who'd gotten his breakfast first. Sadly, those hopes were not to be.

Prey heard them coming before he even perceived their thoughts, and then as they came into range he could hear those too. He sighed and sunk lower in his seat. Perhaps he could just go ignored and let Gloom or Crimson deal with the annoying group of approaching Guards.

"Morning, haven't seen you around before."

A group of four, one unicorn mare, two pegasi and an earth pony stallion, all outfitted in the enchanted gold of the Royal Guard armour that turned their fur a uniform white.

'-get to know the new-', '-guy. Haven't seen him around-', '-in the night Guard didn't he say?-', '-oatmeal every single Celestia blessed morning!-' Came the accompanying thoughts.

'Well at least they have no interest in me.' Prey thought, taking some small comfort in that.

Their thoughts had been focused on Crimson. Being able to hear others thoughts was both a blessing and a curse. Usually all you heard was the obvious, or like 'mister-oatmeal-hater' the earth pony, you just got pointless drivel. And it was being shoved into your head all the time whether you wanted it or not, in a constant stream of information that you couldn't block out.

"No, you have not. That is because I have not been here before. We only arrived last night." Crimson said cooly, laying down his spoon and turning around. "What is it that you four want?" He asked.

"M' name's Songbird, and you're Crimson, nice ta' meet'cha. Thought we'd come say hi." The unicorn mare said, sticking out her hoof with a friendly smile.

Crimson considered it carefully before reaching out and bumping it with his own, "Likewise." He said calmly.

"You said you were part of the Night Guard or something, right? What's up with that? I'm Sandy by the way." The earth pony said, stepping forwards and offering his own large hoof.

"That is correct. Princess Luna has created a new Division, called the ISND, and has put us in it." Crimson answered.

"Oooh, shiny new Division, you're something special then if you're put in charge of it. Congratulations." Songbird said.

"Hey, that means you haven't gotten your induction yet." One of the pegasi said.

"I'm not. In charge I mean. And Princess Luna and Captain Nighthawk have already-"

"No no, not that. Your proper induction, the Royal Guard welcome one. That's something to look forward to." Sandy chuckled.

"Who's we? I just see you here, so who else is in this ISND, introduce us. Or haven't they arrived yet?" Songbird asked looking

around the slowly emptying tables.

Crimson looked at her, then waved one wing as if it were obvious towards Gloom and where Prey *had* been sitting.
Prey had ducked under the level of the table top and out of sight the moment no one was looking his way, 'You can deal with the fools Crimson, don't get me involved.' Prey thought.

Rather interestingly, the Guards seemed taken aback. Prey caught flashes of annoyance, dislike and disappointment in their thoughts.

"Want to come sit with us at dinner if you're around? It'll be no bother, always like new faces." Songbird said to Crimson, with the other Guards offering similar cheery statements, "Always got a spare seat for a fellow Pegasus. Sandy here knows some great tales that'll make you laugh every time."

"Hey, they're not that good..." Sandy said poring the ground self consciously.

"Stop being modest Sandy, you're too big for it to work." Songbird chuckled, "But seriously, you should come with us instead."

"We can give you some pointers, stuff to watch out for from inspections and stuff. Best way to avoid a Sargent's prying eyes." One Pegasus offered.

"Pegasi should stick together, you never know who's really got your back until somepony dyes your mane pink." The other Pegasus said with a meaningful jab at the first ones side.

Songbird offered Crimson a hoof, "How about it? You don't have to sit in your assigned Division, you can eat wherever you want with anypony you want. There's no rules against it in the book, so if anypony told you otherwise, they're a liar. See you at dinner then? We usually grab the table in the middle with the other normal Royal Guards." She said with a smile.

Prey, who could hear their thoughts, was disappointed. 'They're so petty its pathetic. Even when trying to exclude someone they don't like, they're soft.' He thought in disgust. How he hated ponies.

Apparently it had taken Crimson a minute longer to work out just what the group of Royal Guards were implying, because it was only by the end of their exchange that his look of guarded interest turned to one of carefully concealed anger. Again, it wasn't in his expression, but it showed in the bristling of his feathers.

"This is Sargent Gloom," Crimson said pointing at Gloom, "Do you have a problem with this?" He challenged flatly.

"Hey, don't be like that. I just thought you might like to eat with some of your own-"

"Own what? My own species? Do you think those who are of thestral descent are not ponies?" Crimson asked rising to his hooves, no expression on his face.

Sandy moved up beside Songbird, "You're putting words in our mouths, we never said any of that." He grunted, ears going back.

Crimson gave him a look of cold disdain, "You," he said slowly and clearly, "Are a bigoted coward. I've had far too much experience of your kind. You skulk and whisper, then when confronted you hold up your hooves and claim innocence. You disgust me."

The four of the Guards drew back, offended and annoyed, "Fine, be that way. I was just trying to be friendly but if you're gonna' be like that..." Songbird said with a flick of her tail.

"Yes, I am going to be like that." Crimson said, raising flat his voice. Other Guard ponies started to look over from where they sat.

'Fool, you're in the minority here. You're going to make enemies of them all,' Prey thought angrily, 'And that means enemies for me as well.' Prey could also see a change in Crimson's mental shields. Emotion's were making them unstable, flashes of angry thoughts coming through. That was worth remembering and exploiting.

"If you're a racist, do not dance around the issue, come out and say it. I am right here." Crimson challenged the room, swivelling his hard yellow gaze from one corner of the room to the other.

Most of the Guards his gaze passed over just snorted and rolled

their eyes before turning their backs on him, a small number looked slightly abashed, and a couple met the red pegasus glare for glare, heads held high.

Songbird and her three fellow Royal Guards were in the latter group. "Come on, I know when we're not wanted." Sandy said with a snort.

"You can't say we didn't try ta' help you." Songbird added, turning away.

Crimson watched them leave for a moment, then with another glare to the room in general he sat back down. Prey was finding it interesting to alternatively watch the shaking of Crimson's mental walls, and reading Gloom's thoughts. '-hmm, I can see why you thought he deserved a second chance Princess Luna. He's not afraid to stick up for what he knows is right-'

It sounded like Crimson had earned some more respect from the Sargent.

Crimson pushed his half finished tray of food away, "I am no longer hungry. Could we make a start on this day Sargent Gloom? There is still much we haven't been yet told."

Gloom offered him a nod, then looked to his left, "What are you doing down there?" He said, addressing the empty spot.

Prey poked his head out, "Avoiding trouble of course. Many of these so called Guards see me as nothing more than a lamb, and I have no wish to be treated like one." He answered.

Gloom frowned and pushed his own tray away, "You are now technically a Guard too, so speak of them with more respect. I don't want to have to bring this up again. And you *are* still a lamb." He added.

Crimson joined in with a disapproving look, "You just hid and did not say anything."

"Yes, I did. What of it? It's what I expected those guards to say. This can't be the first time you've realised just how racist ponies are. And

it certainly won't be the last." Prey said with a dismissive wave. "Besides, there were four armoured Guards, and I, as Gloom keeps pointing out, am apparently 'just a lamb'. Either I would have been mocked, beaten, or humiliated. So the logical choice was to stay out of the confrontation you decided to have." He told Crimson.

Gloom brought his hoof down on the table firmly, "Enough of that Prey. It would not have come to violence, this is The Guard, Royal or Night makes no difference. Fighting in the ranks is strictly prohibited. The only reason you're saying such things is to try and bait out a response. Quit play acting all the time and behave." He ordered.

Prey bobbed his head obediently, eyes lowered, "Yes sir, what ever you say sir." He murmured. He didn't mean it and Gloom knew it, but Prey could hear the thestral deciding not to press it. The small victory made Prey's headache feel just the slightest bit better.

"Come on both of you," Gloom said with a weary sigh, pushing himself to his hooves, "Our first shift starts in fifteen minutes. From here on out were on duty. Follow me." He paused and looked down at Prey who was absentmindedly rubbing his bandaged ear.

Prey heard Gloom's thoughts before he spoke them and had to suppress a preemptive snarl, "We'll go slowly so your legs can keep up kid." Gloom said with a nasty grin.

"How thoughtful of you."

"Is this it?" Prey asked.

"Yes. This is the new head office of the ISND. It's not quite what I expected actually." Gloom answered.

"It's a refuse dump, sir." Crimson said shortly.

Prey looked around at the broken furniture and dust almost thick enough to plow, "I am inclined to agree." He muttered.

They were in an abandoned room that split off into three large

alcoves, wooden shelves lined each wall. If you ignored the dust, it would have been quite nice if not for the fact that it looked like the servants had been using it as a disposal site. Splintered chairs, worn down mops and brooms, candle stubs, dust, scattered papers and general rubbish lay in piles, a couple as higher than Prey's head. It smelt of dust and old polish.

The floorboards creaked as Gloom stepped somewhat gingerly through the mess, "It'll serve for an office quite well. It just needs some cleaning, and once we expand- Ahh, who am I kidding, it's a dump." Gloom sighed.

Crimson was looking at the mess with blank distaste, "Does her majesty know this is the office we were assigned?"

"I think it more likely that the details of our assignment were left to the Royal Guards, who decided to get some petty revenge on the Night Guards while still adhering to orders. In case it wasn't obvious, they don't like thestrals." Prey said, nudging an old pan away with the toe of his hoof.

"Enough of that! No complaining while on duty." Gloom snapped, although his thoughts said, '-although he's probably right-'.

"I'll just have a word with the staff and have them take a message and get this sorted out in no time." Gloom said heading for the door. His tone indicated he didn't hold out much hope.

Fifteen minutes and an angrily whispered conversation with one of the Royal Guard officers at the door later, they were still standing in the same filthy room. Except now there were buckets of hot water and rags.

Gloom was quietly fuming and Crimson was looking like he'd stepped in something, in his blank sort of way. Prey was resigned, "How much of this do we need to clear out?" He asked.

Gloom muttered something uncharitable about the Royal Guard

officer under his breath, which Prey would have heard perfectly if he'd had two working ears, but picked up regardless because the Sargent had been so good as to think it too, '-foul blooded little cave sucker not worth his armour polish-'

Prey tuned him out. He wasn't feeling quite so bad about this. It was just work, and it was blessedly quiet in here. Already his headache was dimming. This room would also be perfect to start placing runes in unnoticed while they worked. Prey knew this mess was a snub from the Royal Guards, who had the excuse that they were just following their orders to the letter. As far as insults paid to him went, this didn't even rank in Prey's top eighty.

Besides, he was keeping track of the tally, and one day he'd collect.

"So, that mean's all of it then, doesn't it sir?" Prey asked sarcastically.

"Yes. We have a lot of paper work relating to our new department that's going to be delivered, we're going to need somewhere to store it. Regulations state so." Gloom answered tiredly. With an effort of will which Prey read clearly, Gloom pushed aside his annoyance and decided to set a good example, '-Crimson and Prey are supposed to follow my lead-'. He thought.

Gloom dipped his hoof into one of the buckets and hooked a rag out, "Alright, the sooner we start the sooner we'll finish." He said.

First they shifted as much of the rubbish from the central space as they could out the door, piling the splintered chairs and ripped floor cushions in a line down the corridor. Next came the smaller junk, like the broken ornaments and cracked plates.

After that they mopped the floor. Then mopped it again with clean water. This sent up plumes of dust that had all three of them sneezing. Next they wiped everything down, then repeated the whole process by making a start on the first alcove.

To get that far took four hours alone, and Prey was trembling with

fatigue by the end of the first hour. His body was still weak from malnutrition, and it was ill suited to manual work to start with.

But he refused to show weakness and ask to stop. 'If they can do it, so can I.'

Eventually however, Gloom seemed to notice how badly Prey was flagging, and hurriedly told Prey to take a break and focus on lighter tasks.

"Here, use the cloth and wipe where I've cleared instead." Gloom's thoughts gave away that he felt bad for forgetting that Prey was an injured lamb. '-should have remembered that from the start-' The Sargent told himself.

By that point however, they were all filthy and tired. Gloom had grudgingly removed most of his armour at one point to keep it from getting any more dirty. It was a slightly interesting to see that without the armour enchantments changing his colour, Gloom's pelt was a only shade lighter than the grey the Night Guard's re-purposed Royal Guard armour cast him in.

Gloom saw Crimson looking at the ragged scar that dug into his lower chest, "That's another story." He said with a grin.

"Why this armour?" Prey asked, stopping for a moment to catch his breath and re-tighten the bandage on his ear. In truth he wouldn't have minded a second one or perhaps a ribbon to tie his other ear back with, as it kept dragging in the thick dust whenever he bent down to clean.

"Is your ear bothering you?" Gloom asked.

"I'm fine," Prey said with a bit too much force, "What about the armour?" He repeated.

"What about it?"

Prey sighed at their inability to pick up straight away what he meant, "The armour. It's Royal Guard. Solar Guard's have a slightly different set, and the Border Guard another style still. Why doesn't the Night Guard?" Prey asked.

Gloom shook out his cloth, then sneezed as dust went up his nose, "Well spotted. The Night Guard are actually going to get their own set, styled more after Princess Luna, but the order hasn't been completed yet. Till then, they've just altered the colour changing enchantment on regular Royal Guard armour for us to use." Gloom explained.

"What other enchantments does Royal Guard armour have?" Prey inquired innocently.

"Why use enchantments like that at all?" Crimson also wanted to know.

"Don't know kid, I'm not a unicorn. Just stuff to make it stronger I think, and to answer you Crimson, it's to make everyone look uniform and to protect the Guards when they finish their shift." Gloom said.

"In what way?" Crimson asked, pushing a broken hoof stool out of the way so he could get to the tattered apron underneath.

"By protecting their identity. Look," Gloom half turned and pointed at his flank, "See this? Usually the armour covers all ponies marks. And with them all the same colour, it makes it much harder for anypony who might hold a grudge against one of the Guard to find them. It offers anonymity outside of work." Gloom explained.

Prey also got the first good opportunity to study Gloom's cutie mark. Although personally he thought that the idea of manifest destiny was a complete lie, you could still sometimes tell quite a bit about an opponent by their mark. Gloom had a pair of rocks that looked mildly like teeth under a white bird. Prey looked up at Gloom, listening into the thestrals thoughts, '-still remember following that dove out of the cave to safety. Thought we were never going to get out again-' Gloom's passing thoughts read.

"We'll have to see about getting you outfitted when the quarter masters office is open later after we're done here." Gloom said, then added with a dark look at the other two alcoves they had yet to touch, "Eventually."

"Will I also receive back my fathers wing blades to go with my new armour?" Crimson asked.

Out of the corner of his eye Prey caught the slight grimace that pulled at Gloom's mouth, "I'm afraid not, the probation still stands. You've only been here a day. I trust you, but you need to show some patience." He replied.

Crimson's wings tightened in annoyance, but he didn't say anything as he continued with his task. Prey was listening to Gloom's thoughts.

'-I trust you? Do I actually?-' The Sargent paused, then snorted softly to himself, '-I actually do. More the fool you are Gloom, you barely know him, only his story. Can't judge a pony by their past, for either good or bad. But I have a good feeling about this stallion-'

The thestral paused as he was struck by a stray thought, and half turned so he could study the sheep who was wiping off the dust from a low shelf. Prey would have noticed Gloom's regard even if he couldn't hear the Sargent's thoughts. He had a gut instinct for such things.

'-what about Prey? He's just a lamb but... He's also not. Luna give me strength, he's confusing. Something is off, but I can't put my hoof on what. Nothing for it but to keep watching then-'

It seem the Sargent also had good instincts. That was annoying.

Prey decided that it might waylay some of Gloom's suspicions if he did indeed act a bit more like the young lamb they saw him as. Or that just might make him even more suspicious as he already knew Prey was far from normal. 'Either way, it can't hurt to find out a bit more about how Canterlot and the palace works. Surely he won't be suspicious if I'm just curious. The Guard don't seem like the sort to whip me just for asking mundane questions.' Prey thought.

"Hey, Sargent Gloom, how many of us are there in the night Guard?"

That question was just the first of many from Prey, as Sargent Gloom quickly learned to his long suffering dismay.

Incidentally, the answer to that first question was about four and a half score, or ninety ponies. Mostly thestrals but with some normal ponies mixed in. And one sheep. From further questioning, Prey also learned a host of other facts, some trivial, some useless, and some potentially interesting.

Standard Royal and Night Guard shifts were twelve hours apiece, four days a week. However, as the Night Guard was still new and understaffed, they were doing twelve hour shifts six days a week, and those twelve hours often overran into fourteen. Apparently, that still meant that they, as in the three of them, would be given one free day at the end of the week. If they didn't get called upon.

Prey had no idea what he was supposed to do with a free day. He suspected it was either a trap or a test.

Gloom also informed them about some of the Guard positions that existed within the palace. Like the liaisons officer, Royal, Solar and Night Guard captains, petty officers, recruiters, medical, Quartermaster, blacksmiths, farriers, the lieutenants, Sargents, Corporals, and the whole host of other lesser titles that made up the complicated inner clockwork of the Guard.

Gloom also told them that if they ever got tired of the plain mess hall food (and if they were ever allowed out), they should go to the 24 hour diner just outside the Palace grounds.

Apparently that was were half the Guard went to get their daily meals rather than face the drudgery of Cookie's en masse cooking. Prey read in Gloom's thoughts that their Sargent was only relating from second hoof sources about the quality of the diner, but very much wished to find out for himself one day. '-the sooner the better-'

There were also occasionally tours of the upper Palace for civilians, but the ISND wouldn't have anything to do with that, not least because most of their shifts were going to happen during the night, as it was a Division of the 'Night' Guard after all.

Exercise and a weekly training session was mandatory for all Guards. However the Night Guard had their own style and separate sessions.

Prey got the inkling that a lot of what the Night Guard did was similar yet detached from what the Royal Guard did.

He wondered if that was just because of the opposite ends of the day spectrum the two operated on, or if Princess Luna was trying to prove her Night Guards individuality.

Prey kept asking questions, firing them off one after another, "What martial authority does a Sargent have?", "Do palace servants have any authority with the Guard?", "Where are the emergency exits?", "What constitutes an emergency?", "Are there any pass codes? And if so how often do they change?", "What areas are out of bounds?", "How are the dungeons operated?"

Gloom tried his best to answer most of Prey's questions, sometimes in wry amusement, others with curious surprise at what the lamb thought to ask. Crimson would occasionally interpose to quietly ask a question of his own, and Gloom always gave the best answer to the pegasus he could.

This took up another three hours of slogging through the piles of clutter, and the soon to be office was slowly starting to look inhabitable. The cost was that they were all tired and filthy, and Prey was breathing hard while his legs wobbled. But at least his ear hadn't gotten any worse.

Gloom said they would have to go clean themselves up soon, as there was a uniform standard, and, "We don't even come close to meeting it. You look like dust bunnies. There's a wash room down by the Guard gym for times like these." Gloom had said. Prey didn't know what a 'gym' was.

It was about this time that Prey casually slipped in perhaps the most important question of all, "Will we ever have to report to Princess Celestia, sir?" He asked innocently. His voice didn't shake.

Gloom shook out his left wing, sending a slew of dust off its leathery surface, "Hoping to get a chance to finally see the Sun Princess, heh kid?" He asked with a quirked lip, which incidentally showed off one of his sharp canines. Probably not intentionally.

Prey shrugged and fiddled with his ear, "Well, I just thought I'd ask. I'd rather not, though." He said shuffling his hooves.

'-looks really innocent when he does that-', Came Gloom's thoughts.

"Well seeing as you're neither an officer in the Royal Guard or the Captain of the Night Guard, and since we answer to Princess Luna, I'd say you're unlikely to get to see much of Princess Celestia I'm afraid." Gloom told him regretfully.

A wave of relief washed through Prey, actually making him dizzy for a second with the strength of it. 'Oh thank every dark God out there, I'm not going to face the Sun Wolf.' He thought. The only being he currently feared more than Luna was her big sister, the deity of the blazing sun.

Prey knew that Celestia would sniff him out immediately. She'd know what he was. Somehow Luna had missed it or over looked it, but Prey couldn't believe for a second that Celestia would make the same mistake.

She would burn him to a crisp in outrage the moment she laid eyes on him for daring to appear in her sight. It would be personal, and Celestia was not the forgiving type if she was anything like the Border Guard Captain she'd selected all those years ago to quell the Resistance; Captain Fire Strike.

Gloom misinterpreted Prey's relief for disappointment, "Hey kid, I don't know about meeting her, but if you just want to see her majesty, you could stay up and I could maybe see about slipping you into the back of the Day Court so you could at least see the princess if you want." Gloom offered. '-wants to see her majesty. Quite normal, everypony visiting Canterlot wants to see her majesty-'

"No, that's okay. I'm sure I'll get the chance at some point, no need

to rush ." Prey answered dismissively.

'And when that chance comes, I'm going to run as fast as possible in the opposite direction.' He thought.

Another hour of work later, and Gloom announced that they were done in here for today, "Got other tasks we've got to do."

Prey asked why in fact they were doing it '*today*' and not '*tonight*'. Hadn't Gloom said that most Night Guard shifts would be happening during the evening or night?

"That's right kid, but this is only until we finished getting set up," Gloom explained, "We need to coordinate with the Royal Guards during the day for getting you outfitted and getting the paperwork done. Once the office is up and running, ISND shifts will probably be from six in the evening till six in the morning."

He was leading them down the palace corridors, heading for this 'gym' place. The thestral was carrying his armour in a bundle on his back, although he still wore his helmet. Apparently Guard's armour was designed to fit together into quite a tight package.

Quite a few servants gave them dirty looks to match the footprints they were leaving as they went. Gloom didn't think much of the servants, and they didn't think much of the thestral either as Prey clearly heard as they walked. If anything, the thoughts of the servants he read seemed even more bigoted than the Royal Guards had been.

As always, Prey memorised the route they took, carefully analysing and storing away each room he looked into as they passed. Prey knew he would have to run for his life at some point.

'Of course,' Prey thought sourly as he tried to keep up with Gloom and Crimson, 'Running isn't currently an option.' Somehow the golden tracer bands on his legs had avoided all the dirt and were still as bright as ever.

'So, this is a gym.' Prey thought. Some of those things called 'weight machines' or 'bell bars' looked distinctively like torture devices.

"Come on, the wash rooms just through here." Gloom said starting around the side of the spacious room, heading for a double door on the opposite side.

There weren't many ponies in here at the moment, Prey had counted nine of them on stepping inside. They all ignored the ISND, instead continuing with what ever exercise they were doing, be it wing push ups or jogging. There was a five lane track that circled the room, with exercise weights and equipment set out in the open middle for anyone to use who stepped across the track and avoided the three runners who were currently making use of it.

Prey took note of all the mane and fur combinations, as well as the cutie marks on display, memorising characteristics and faces, for none of the exercising Guards wore armour. Never knew when knowing their out-of-uniform identities might be useful after all.

Gloom pushed the far double doors open and held it for them to follow him in. With a suspicious look Prey slunk in, sticking close to Crimson. Crimson was bigger than him, and so would serve as good cover or a meat shield if there was a sudden ambush.

The empty white tiled wash room failed to produce one. Lining one wall were sinks and mirrors, which Prey hastily diverted his gaze from. The majority of the room was occupied by large open cubicles with a spout set high on the wall, and taps about normal pony height.

"Finally," Gloom muttered, stretching out his wings with a shudder, "That dust got everywhere." He paused, then wrinkled his nose and went cross eyed, "Even up your nose it seems." He said with distaste.

"I couldn't agree more." Crimson said with a shiver of his wings, and Prey was interested to hear some real inflection in the normally laconic stallions words. 'Really doesn't like dirt, but doesn't mind pitching in when there's work to be done. Just doesn't like being filthy any longer than is needful.'

Prey smiled mirthlessly to himself, 'You would not have survived long in the jungle.' Being caked in weeks old mud and blood without any chance to wash was the norm. And what water in the Deeper Green was likely either just as filthy or infested with parasites.

Prey didn't like the feeling of grime under his wool anymore than the next sheep, but he'd grown accustomed to the experience of feeling like you were never going to be clean again after only a month in the Resistance.

Speaking of which, Prey did not see any large bodies of water in the room, and he highly doubted they were supposed to bathe in the sinks. "Where are the baths?" He asked looking around.

Crimson and Gloom raised their eyebrows at him, "Baths? No, we're here to shower." Gloom answered.

"What is a shower?" Prey asked.

"What? You've never had a shower before-?" Gloom raised his hooves to forestall Prey's retort, "Alright alright, calm down, I forgot that you're not used to this, coming from out in the country and all." He frowned thoughtfully down at Prey, "Actually, you never said what background you came from."

"And let's keep it that way." Prey grumbled. He turned and pointed at one of the cubicles, "I take it a shower has something to do with those and the taps on the wall?" He asked. It wasn't really a question, he'd gleaned as much from Gloom's thoughts in passing when he'd said the word 'shower'.

"Yes, they're communal showers, come, I'll show you kid."

"My name is Prey."

"That's what I said kid." Gloom smirked, and Prey caught a flash of amusement from Crimson too as he followed them into the shower. It was obviously the way they'd decided to get back at him.

The was a drain set into the floor, and the was enough space under the line of spouts for about six ponies at any one time. Gloom set

his hoof on the tap.

"What about your ear?" The unexpected question came from Crimson.

Prey reached up to the bandaging. He hadn't forgotten about it, and he'd already gotten used to only hearing through one ear.

"Ah, yes, how is your ear Prey?" Gloom asked. '-I should have remembered that. Doesn't look good if I forget when my subordinates are hurt, especially a foal-'

"It's fine. A little water won't do it any harm." Prey responded flatly, sitting down to undo the binding.

"You'll need a fresh one." Crimson said, offering his unwanted opinion.

"We'll get you a fresh one after we're dry." Gloom said, offering what was probably supposed to be a sympathetic look to Prey.

Prey tilted his head quizzically, looking down at the bandages he'd removed. They looked fine to him. The outside was covered with ingrained dust, but there was plenty of good use left in them. He'd used much worse for emergency treatments before. 'Oh wait, that's right, they have no shortage of essential supplies here.' Prey reminded himself.

"Alright." He tossed the bandage aside and moved under one of the shower heads, the one furthest away from the other two.

Gloom raised his eyebrows and Crimson didn't look like he cared.

"What?" Prey asked flatly, "Are you going to keep trying to analyse every thing you think is strange about me?"

Gloom held up his wings in a placating way, "Kid, you're my responsibility to watch over, so there's no need to get upset when I'm doing my job and just looking out for you." He said. Prey was still plenty close enough to hear, '-strange doesn't even begin to describe you kid-'

Prey gave him an unimpressed look and waited.

Gloom shrugged and turned on the tap. Hot water quickly started to fall. The sensation was like being out in heavy rain, but much more pleasant and warm.

Prey closed his eyes and stepped further into the stream of water, tilting his head to let the water run down his neck and wash the dust and grime away. 'I could get used to this.' Prey thought quietly.

Hot water was a luxury he'd never really had, back on the farm all those years ago. All they'd had was a tin bath that had to be filled with water heated over the fire. That or the river. 'Canterlot really is the city of the privileged.'

Gloom and Crimson were quickly scrubbing themselves off, sending trails of dirty water down the drain. Gloom grabbed a bar of soap and stiff brush with his bony wing tips, starting to work up some lather into his mane and fur. Prey got another passing look at the jagged scar that curled down Gloom's chest, water running down its channel and dripping off. It was a large and nasty looking thing, and although it seemed old, the fur had never regrown.

'I'm a bit surprised he survived something like that. I estimate the chances were three out of four that he should've died.' Prey thought.

He sat down under the steam of hot water, enjoying heat on his stiff muscles. Tilting his head, Prey started washing out one sodden ear, then the other, being especially careful with his injured one. One big downsides of large floppy ears, especially when you were a runt and close to the ground, was they tended to pick up a lot of dust and grime. He was just waiting for the comment about him being a mop or broom.

On a completely unrelated note, large ears were also unfortunately a good target, as they held a lot of nerves and blood close to the surface. Prey remembered a leech latching onto the inside of his ear and how alarmingly fast it had swelled up. He shook his head, that memory wasn't important. He got on with cleaning his wool.

Speaking of advantages and disadvantages, Gloom was already

almost finished, but Crimson was still carefully washing out his wings one feather at a time, taking care to make sure each pinion was cared for before moving on. Thestral wings beat feathered ones it seemed.

Crimson caught him watching, "Not seen a pegasus's wings before?" He asked coldly.

"I'm not one of those thestrals from your clan who treated you like a freak for being different to them," Prey answered pleasantly, "And yes I have. And actually I've even been able to observe how pegasus wings work up close." He said. The fact that the wings hadn't been attached to a pegasus anymore was beside the point.

Another flash of annoyance from Gloom at himself for not thinking of that earlier, and a shift in Crimson's mental shields that indicated a change in emotion. "Oh. Yes. Never mind." Was all he said, tone awkward, before returning to almost obsessively picking over his wings.

Prey went back to enjoying the hot water. Dreverton had magical enchantments that constantly sucked dust and particles from the cell and kept it clean, but left the air dry and stale. 'But never again.' Prey thought with a smirk. It disappeared as he looked down at his forelegs. 'I need to find a way to study these tracers without tripping whatever alarm spells are in them.' He thought looking at the bands of gold.

"You two done yet?" Gloom asked.

The Sargent had already stepped from the shower and was wringing water from his tail, "We have places to be. Usually showering while on duty isn't permitted, but considering how filthy we got and that you'll need to be clean for outfitting, it's acceptable. That and we only answer to Captain Nighthawk and Princess Luna." He added with a touch of pride.

Prey could read between the lines. It was the Royal Guards who had gotten them to clean out the office instead of having the servants do it in the first place, as a show of their dislike. So the Royal Guard could hardly protest when, citing the rules about dress code, they

went and washed up afterwards. 'Is everything to do with the Guard so petty and snide?'

Prey got out of the shower and pulled down one of the many worn but clean towels from the railings, leaving wet cloven hoof prints behind him. He was stopped when he caught a thought of amusement, directed at him.

"What's so funny?" Prey asked turning round.

"I think you mean, 'what's so funny sir'?" Gloom corrected. Prey saw through the stoic mask to the suppressed laughter behind it.

"You're half fluff." They both looked at Crimson, who had water dripping from his tufted ears. The pegasus had a strange look on his face. Was that the barest hint of an actual smile? Crimson smiling? Surely not.

"You're half fluff," He repeated looking down at Prey. "You're even smaller than I thought." He added after a moment.

Gloom fought to keep a grin off his face, "Crimson, that's hardly something appropriate to say to your comrade in arms." He admonished. There note of suppressed laughter in his voice.

Prey glanced down at himself.

His sodden wool coat was plastered down against his sides, and he appeared to have lost half his body mass. Prey looked a lot smaller and thinner than before his shower, in fact he flicked like a drowned rat.

"You're all skin and bone, we've got to feed you more kid so you grow up big and strong." Gloom chortled, having giving up on pretend he wasn't amused.

Prey could have been accurate and told them that he never would grow and was stuck in this body until the day he died, but that would require answering some difficult questions. Instead, he sat down right where he was in a puddle on the tiles. "Alright, let's get this over with here and now." He said calmly.

"Hey don't be like that kid-"

"My name is Prey. Yet you still keep refusing to call me by my name even after repeated requests to do so. You both keep treating me like a lamb. And do you know why you're doing that?" Prey asked, voice still completely calm.

He waited just long enough for Gloom to begin to speak before plowing unstoppably on.

"I'll tell you why. It's because every time you look at me, you see a little lamb." Prey held his hooves up and gestured to himself to illustrate the point.

"You see someone of foal age, someone who has no business speaking, acting, or thinking like I can. And that unnerves you. It's unnatural, so you respond by trying to make me conform to your expectations by calling me and viewing me as a child within your own mind. Do you think I ever wanted to be this way? I didn't have a choice, but people like me and Crimson are born like this. Different."

Prey fixed Gloom with a look. It wasn't cold or angry, just flat. "I've already tried proving to you that I'm not a lamb in mind, only in body. How do you think I feel about having to do that? It's humiliating. You are both treating me much the same way Crimson was treated by his clan, refusing to accept who I can be. The Princess herself said we were supposed to work together."

That more than anything else got a mental wince out of both of them.

Prey continued, "So I'm going to settle this right here and now. Make up your mind and either treat me like a child, or else accept me for what I am and treat me like a freak instead. But have the decency not to patronise me. Pick one and be done with it." He stated.

Both of them stared at him.

Prey wasn't forcing the issue because they'd annoyed him (although

that was a small part of it). He was just following the same line of reasoning he'd taken with the Solar Guard.

Prey couldn't work effectively if they weren't going to take him seriously, and would just going to get in his way. That's why he was forcing the issue here and now. His words were also carefully chosen to provoke guilt in them both, which would incline them to behave more favourably towards him.

Crimson's eyes darted to Gloom for a second and his ears twitched about as if uncertain in what position they were supposed to be in. He looked slightly guilty, which on Crimson probably meant he was feeling very guilty. That and Prey could easily read the unease in his shifting mental shields.

'Seems my words struck closer to home than I'd anticipated. Even better.' Prey thought, 'Now what about you?' He thought looking to Gloom.

"Look kid-I mean Prey, I didn't know you felt so strongly about that, and perhaps I should have known better," Gloom said, somewhat ashamedly, "All I can say is I'm sorry and I'll try not to do it in the future." He was thinking, '-I'm getting told off by a lamb, no*wait*, not a lamb. I messed up again. Gah, being in charge is so hard-'

"You'll try?" Prey repeated, "Just like that? So simple?"

"Look, I'll be honest and say that it's difficult to remind myself that you aren't a, err, lamb or sometimes even a colt. I've been trying, and I keep forgetting anyways. So I can only promise to do my best. But that I will promise." Gloom answered.

"I will also so swear." Crimson hastily chimed in. It seemed Prey's words really had struck some hidden chord. Once again, Prey was reminded that Crimson was actually quite a lot younger than him.

"Thank you." Prey said, making sure to look like their words really meant something to him.

"That said, what about other ponies? They're still going to treat you like a lamb, like the cook today. You can't lash out at everypony

you'll ever meet." Gloom pointed out.

Prey decided now would be a good opportunity to gain some false trust, so he smiled wryly and shrugged, "I don't really care what they think of me, but if we're going to work together, I need you to see me for who I am. So it only matters how you see me." He answered. That ought to make them feel special about themselves.

Gloom looked at Prey, then at Crimson, "Okay, I'm glad that we've had this talk, and I'm sorry you felt the need to bring it up. But we really do need to get moving. And, this isn't a criticism, as it's neither of yours fault, but we need to get you two up to date and following Night Guard procedure. There's a rule book we are all supposed to memorise. Hang on," He looked to Prey, "No offence, and I'm very aware of the conversation we've just had, but can you read?" Gloom asked.

"None taken. Yes, I can." Prey answered.

"Good, because again, this isn't criticism to either of you, as you didn't come out from the academy or boot camp and were just drafted directly in, but you need to start acting like you're part of the Night Guard. There are situations when following protocol can keep you safe, so it's important." Gloom told them.

Prey looked to Crimson, catching the pegasus yellow eye. He didn't know what Crimson thought was communicated with that look, but the pegasus offered a simple nod. Prey smiled back and answered along, "Yes Sargent."

Perhaps Crimson was viewing Prey in a new light, and actually seeing him as someone who could contribute. He probably respected Prey a bit more for having spoken up for himself. Warriors respected courage.

Crimson saw a potential equal, if not in stature then in spirit.

Prey saw a tool he could bend to his will.

"Awkward truce then?" Prey offered, shuffling his hooves and only looking at them nervously out of one eye.

"Ha!" Gloom laughed, "You said it kid-er, Prey." He answered.

"Aye, truce. You're not as bad as you seem." Crimson agreed.

Gloom looked at both of his charges and saw two very different individuals who he still didn't quite understand, but who, if he did his job right, would overcome their past to become friends and assets to Princess Luna. '-your majesty, I will not fail you-' He thought proudly.

"Come, get dried up and let's get moving. We've a quarter master to meet sharpish." Gloom said clapping his hooves together. But he was having to fight down a proud grin. '-finally, I'm getting somewhere-'

Prey completely agreed with that sentiment.

[[[Bonus Picture - Crimson Trace - Bunk bed]]]

https://imgur.com/xZoXgJK

Author's Notes:

🎨Picture? Meh, could be better. Was too lazy to get a better one. Hope you liked the writing though. If you see any mistakes, please point them out. 🎸
Thanks to Editor sweetolebob18

13.1 Carrot's and Hugs don't Mix

"Good one Sargent, now what's a lamb really doing in my store?"

"I'm here to get both these new recruits outfitted for the Night Guard, Quarter Master Carrot." Gloom repeated.

The grizzled earth stallion across the counter gave Gloom a look like he suspected the bat pony had spent too long out flying under the sun, "I'm being serious." He said.

"So am I sir." Gloom replied.

Crimson and Prey waited behind Gloom in the Quarter Master's store house. After getting Prey a fresh bandage for his ear, they'd come straight here. Behind the Quarter Master's counter, isles of chest plates, champhrons, helmets, plumes, horse shoes, and other armour hung on racks that went back into the gloom, and a metal cage from floor to ceiling blocked off access to it all.

Carrot leaned over the counter and looked down at Prey, who returned his disbelieving look with a bright smile.

"It's a lamb." Carrot stated flatly.

"Yes sir, he's also part of the ISND too." Gloom said.

"The lieutenant told me about the Princess creating some new Division. Can't say I think much of the idea. Waste of resources." Carrot said gruffly.

Prey silently agreed, but as it was this 'waste of resources' that had gotten him out of prison, he wasn't complaining. Crimson was watching the whole conversation with the cool stoicism that Prey expected, while Gloom looked like he was resigned to patiently arguing this one through.

"Quarter master, I was assigned by Captain Nighthawk to outfit them as I thought best, and I have his permission to request supplies from the store house. If we could please get them outfitted, we'll get out of your mane and on our way." Gloom sighed.

"You're not getting anything for your pet lamb, and that's final. As for your pegasus friend, that depends on whether I think he can be trusted not to injure himself." Carrot replied flatly, not caring in the least about Gloom's authority from the Night Guard Captain.

Prey thought the Quarter Master was smarter than he let on. Prey didn't want to be outfitted in anything thank you very much, and for good reason. He was a runt, so nothing would fit, it would only weigh him down. He had no experience wearing armour of any kind, and neither did he wish to be dressed up like some child's doll with a sigil proclaiming him property of the Night Guard.

"Sir, I agree with the quarter master. I don't need anything, and I doubt there's anything in my size anyway." Prey spoke up.

"You're a member of the Night Guard, you need some form of uniform." Gloom said, hurriedly gesturing for him to be quiet.

"A sheep, especially a lamb, is not a Night Guard. That's just a bad joke." Carrot grunted.

Crimson stirred, "Excuse me sir, but Prey is actually part of the Night G-"

"I already told you quite plainly no," Carrot interrupted, "And I'm not changing my mind. You're not the one who has to keep this here store house running, and I'm not about to bust my back for something as foalish as outfitting a sheep."

The Quarter Master turned away as if the dispute was settled, "Let's see about outfitting mister Crimson Trace here, if he can pass muster that is." Carrot said flipping up the hinged counter stall, "Get in." He ordered, jerking his head at Crimson.

Gloom made to follow but Carrot slammed the counter shut again, "Respectfully sir, I must remain with all my soldiers-"

"Soldiers, hah! I only see the one, and even that remains to be seen." Carrot reached under the counter and pulled out a battered and scratched plain version of the Royal Guards chest plate. "Here," he said tossing it at Crimson, "Let's see if you can put that on without your mother holding your hoof."

Crimson caught the chest plate stiffly, his wings bunching with irritation, but, "Yes sir." Was all he quietly said.

Gloom meaningfully put a hoof down. "Quarter Master Carrot, I'm not trying to start a fight, but I have orders to follow-"

"And I have mine, you over grown bat," Carrot snapped, making Gloom's slit eyes narrow, "And I'm not intimidated by the likes of you either, so you can just stand there like a good Sargent and wait till I'm done. I didn't get this post because I'm all cushy and soft, and I can take you any time." He said flatly.

"I'm not instigating a fight, and it is my duty to inform you that you are out of line and prohibited from taking action that might lead to one either." Gloom answered.

Carrot didn't so much as blink, "Not impressed. The lamb still isn't getting anything." He said with a snort.

"And you, aren't you done yet?" Carrot snapped swivelling back around. Crimson met his gaze levelly, "Yes." He answered. The chest plate was now strapped on.

Carrot grunted and stepped closer, tugging harshly on the plating and checking the straps and adjustments. Crimson kept his blank look but Prey could tell he was barely tolerating the abrasive stallions inspection.

"Hmph, it could certainly be worse. For instance, you could be missing a leg and blind." Carrot grunted. Stepping back to the counter he pulled out the rest of the armour set, "Prove that you also know how to put that on and I'll consider the *faint* possibility that you *might* know the *very* basics." He groused.

Gloom tried not to glower, then his ears flicked up and he looked

around, "Prey? Where are you?"

Prey looked up innocently from where he was perched on a box in the corner, "Right here sir. I'm just..." He looked at Carrot with a strange smile, "Just watching."

Watching and listening to the constant stream of casual racism, not that anyone else could hear it. The Quarter Master didn't think much of Crimson, '-overgrown chicken-', and even less of Gloom, '-jumped up bat who thinks he's Princess Luna's blessing to all of Equestria-'. The grizzled stallion thought of himself as a 'veteran', and obviously felt very entitled to his own opinions.

His thoughts on Prey were; '-whiny children don't belong in here. Must be some mistake or big joke on her majesty's part. Maybe she was just desperate for a mascot-'

Prey somehow doubted Carrot was a veteran. He certainly had the attitude, but he was a pony. Ponies were soft. Unless there had been a war in the fifty seven years Prey had been away, he doubted Carrot had seen any real action.

While Crimson was struggling with putting on the rest of the training armour set and Gloom silently fumed, Prey decided to test his theory.

"Carrot sir, how often do these sets of armour get damaged?" Prey asked, drawing everyone's attention.

"Too often." Was the blunt reply. '-they never listen to my warnings on proper maintenance-'

"What happens when they are? Do you repair them or is there a blacksmith?"

"No. Armourer." Carrot answered. '-Almond's smithy. Annoying lamb won't shut up-'

"How many sets of armour do you have in here sir? It must be quite a lot to outfit all of the Guard." Prey asked next.

"None of your business lamb." Carrot retorted turning away. '-only

two hundred spare sets, but Captain won't listen to me and order in more-'

"Hmm. How about the Royal Guard weaponry then?" Prey hummed.

Carrot shot Gloom an annoyed look, "Keep your sheep in check. If all he's gonna' do is ask questions, you can get out." He snapped. '-strange lamb, I don't like it. Short swords and a surplus of presentation spears. Bah! Nothin' proper like we had in my day-'

"Just one more question please sir, and then I'll keep quiet, I promise." Prey said with all the innocent sincerity his nine year old lamb frame could muster. Carrot didn't acknowledge him, but the ear cocked in his direction showed he was listening.

"You look like an old army hoof, you must have been in lots of fights," Prey squee'd, clashing his fore hooves together and leaning forwards in eager anticipation, "Have you ever killed somebody?" He asked.

They all jerked at that. Gloom's look of wary confusion as he watched Prey question the Quarter Master changed to open disapproval.

"Prey!" Gloom reprimanded.

"That's none of your bucking business you oversized piece of dandruff." Carrot snarled rounding on Prey, but he pulled up short when he saw the look of wounded innocence on Prey's face. So instead of storming over, Carrot just jabbed a hoof in his direction, "Not. Another. Word. Got it?" He growled.

Prey nodded dutifully, "Yes sir. My apologies. I didn't mean to remind you about that griffin." He said.

Carrot's head jack knifed around, "What did you say?!" He demanded, a look of stunned outrage on his face. Gloom took a step forwards like he might be getting ready to put himself between the Quarter Master and Prey.

"I said, 'my apologies sir. I didn't mean to bring up any bad memories.'" Prey said, blinking slowly, "Why? What did you think I

said?"

Carrot glared at Prey for a long moment, his hooves grinding into the floor boards, but he couldn't do anything about it, "Nothing." He eventually snorted.

Gloom and also Crimson were giving Prey confused looks, but he just smiled back at them.

"Finished." Crimson quietly declared, having strapped on the last shin guard.

Carrot took a moment to refocus on his task, having been caught up in his thoughts, "Alright, let's see how bad it is then." He muttered.

He walked around Crimson following the same routine he had with the chest plate. Tugging on straps, checking the tightness and looking for loose play in the way the armour was settled.

"Congratulations, you're not as useless as I first thought. You get you're own set of armour. Come by tomorrow same time to sign for it. Now let's see how you hold a spear." Carrot grunted.

"Sir, only armour for now please. The ISND will have its own issued weaponry, so that's not needed." Gloom hastily interjected, "But is there any way we can get that armour today instead? The sooner Crimson's outfitted and in uniform the better." He added.

'More like you don't trust Crimson enough yet and you don't want to come back here to deal with Carrot again.' Prey thought reading Gloom's real intentions in his thoughts.

"No. Come back tomorrow." Carrot said bluntly. Gloom looked distinctly put out by that.

Prey didn't blame him, the Quarter Master was definitely abrupt and rude, but Prey didn't actually hate Carrot, at least not how he usually hated every single pony he met on sight.

For one thing, Carrot was an earth pony, the only type who had ever been in the resistance. Earth ponies were the only ones who had ever farmed, sweated and laboured amongst the villagers, and

the only ones to oppose the Sun Wolf. 'And much good it did them in the fire storm.' Prey snorted to himself.

The other reason was that Prey didn't deeply hate Carrot on sheer principle, was that the earth pony was, or had been at one point, a killer. He knew what it was to take a life, and Prey saw in Carrot's thoughts how that moment had changed him. Prey could forgive a lot on Carrot's part because of that. Prey could understand that.

They finished up in the Quarter Master's office, got Crimson out of the test armour, and left.

The door had barely shut behind them before Gloom demanded, "What was that Prey?" It was obvious what Gloom was referring to, so Prey didn't bother playing dumb, "Exactly what it sounded like, finding out more about our Quarter Master." Prey replied.

"What were you talking about, what 'Griffin' where you referring to?" Gloom pressed.

Prey unconsciously put a bit more distance between the two of them so that he was out of hoofs range as always, "The griffin he killed in his career, of course." He answered.

Both Crimson and Gloom went quiet and looked at him. "And how do you know that?" Crimson asked carefully.

Prey stopped so he could face both of them and made a show of taking a deep, calming breath. "The same way I could guess about your story Crimson. There were loads of clues. His abrasive attitude and temper, his profession in the Border Guard at one point shown by the old epaulette hung on the wall, the fact that he most likely asked for a transfer before he was commissioned as the Quarter Master, the four talon scars poking out under the armour on his left shoulder. All that points to the possibility, but his reaction to my question definitely confirms it." Prey explained.

Crimson's wings twitched, "Why did you say it though? Did you feel it was necessary to bring it up and throw it in his face?" Crimson

asked.

"No, but I did it anyway. Ponies always feel entitled to pry into others past, but don't like when it's done to them. Also, it's now our job to dig out secrets in this ISND Division." Prey answered.

"Not like that. We are on the same side, and what you did was not okay." Gloom said disapprovingly. '-and I thought we were getting somewhere-' His thoughts read.

Prey frowned, this was going further than he'd intended, he'd merely wanted to get under Carrot's skin. "He was being rude to both of you, and almost openly racist against you Sargent. I don't like racist ponies any more than Crimson does." Prey replied, glancing away. That would make him look like he was just being loyal, in a misguided sort of way.

Gloom pushed down a sigh, "Thanks kid-err, Prey, but you didn't need to do something like that. I can deal with my own problems." Gloom said.

"If that's what you want, then okay." Prey said simply with a shrug.

They resumed walking in a thoughtful silence after that, as Gloom lead them towards the Clerk and liaisons office. Prey knew that as he'd plucked it from Gloom's thoughts as they went.

Prey's legs were still weak, and the long hours spent cleaning out the office certainly had not improved his general condition, the shower not withstanding. And the fact that he hadn't magically grown in the last ten minutes or so meant he had to, as always, canter all the time just to keep up.

So it was that Prey was actually glad when they came to a stop outside of the clerks office. It said so on the door.

Gloom knocked briskly, "Ma'am, Sargent Gloom and company." He announced. Personally, Prey would have listened at the key hole to check for an ambush before announcing his presence.

"Come in." Came the muffled call through the wood. Gloom pushed the door open to reveal what once was a spacious office, but due to the filing cabinets and stacks of brown folders stuffed into every available space, it ended up being cramped instead.

In the middle of the room stood a desk that matched the style of the room; groaning under forms, paper trays, files, and used mugs. Behind the desk sat the clerk herself, a medium sized unicorn mare. Prey immediately slunk behind Gloom to provide himself with a meat shield.

The mare glanced up from her furious scribbling, the orange aura fading from the quill as she slotted it back into the ink well, "Ah, Sargent Gloom, great! You're just the pony I wanted to see." She said, mane looking slightly frazzled.

Gloom cocked an ear, "I am, ma'am?" He asked cautiously.

"Yes, yes, there's so many forms here that require your signature. Your new division in the Night Guard has so much paper work involved, it's not even funny. Even more so than usual I mean. We're still trying to catch up with the backlog from the re-institution of the Night Guard, and now this too. Honestly, couldn't you have waited?" She asked huffily, rummaging around behind the desk, "Now where did I put that stack?"

"It wasn't intentionally done just to spite you Taffy." Gloom said drily.

"That's what they all say, yet they don't do the paper work." The mare called Taffy grumbled, "Aha! Here we go." She said levitating up an intimidating stack of papers and dumping them in front of the Sargent.

Gloom gave it a wary look, "Surely this isn't-"
"Everything that you have to sign, yes. In triplicate." Taffy said gleefully.

"Ma'am, I don't really have time for this. We came to get the assigned records and files that have been set aside for the ISND. We were supposed to pick them up this morning and now are running

behind schedule. Can't you please just give us the files and we'll do this later?"

"Nope!"

Gloom sighed, "Taffy please."

Taffy scowled at him for a long moment. "Who's your civilian friend?" She asked, abruptly changing topics.

"Crimson." Crimson said, answering for himself.

"He's one of the new ISND Night Guard, we just haven't gotten around to getting him his armour yet." Gloom put in.

Taffy blushed slightly, "Oops, sorry Sargent. I was trying to guilt trip you into the paper work in front of the civilian. Wait, I didn't mean it like that."

"Taffy Hopes, could you please just give us the files, I promise I'll come by later and deal with the paper work." Gloom sighed.

Taffy was still eyeing up Crimson, "You promise?" She asked suspiciously.

"Yes."

A smile lit up her features, "Alright then, but first, Crimson, what's your favourite type of fudge?" Taffy asked.

Crimson blinked, "Pardon? I don't see how-?"

"Getting to know you. I always ask everypony new, breaks the ice see? So what is it?" Taffy asked leaning forwards across the messy desk.

Crimson looked at her blankly, "I do not have one. I have never had fudge." He answered.

"What? Never? How come?" Taffy asked with a disappointed frown.

Crimson shrugged, "It was never a luxury that was available where

we- I mean where I come from." He replied.

"Oh? Where's that? It must be somewhere very far away if it doesn't even have fudge. Is it beyond the mountains or up north? I always love learning about foreign cultures, and that also explains your accent. You must have some interesting stories to share from before you joined up." Taffy enthused.

'So that's why you aren't opposed to the Night Guard or Gloom.' Prey thought. He could hear that the thestral Sargent being referred to thought that Taffy Hopes was '-a bit of a weirdo, but harmless-'

"I do not wish to talk about it ma'am. It's no longer relevant." Crimson said flatly.

She looked a bit hurt, but Gloom took the opportunity to jump in, "Ma'am, we really need to get going. Can we please have the files?" He asked.

"Oh, those aren't here." Taffy shrugged.

Crimson's eye twitched for a second before he got it under control, while Gloom took a deep, calming breath before slowly letting it out, "If they're not in here, then where might they be please?" Gloom asked patiently.

"In the records department of course. Why? Didn't anypony tell you Sargent?" Taffy asked with a smirk.

"No, no they didn't. It's just something else to add to the list of what nopony thought to tell us." Gloom growled quietly. He snapped a quick salute to Taffy, "Thank you for your help ma'am, but we need to be on our way then."

"Fine, but don't forget your promise. I need those all signed in triplicate, remember!" Taffy laughed as they filed out the door.

Her eyes alighted on Prey just as the door was closing, and he saw her look of confusion just before the door closed, "Sargent, who's-?" And then the door clicked shut.

"And now on to the records department." Gloom grumbled.

"That was the clerk and liaisons officer?" Prey asked.

"Yeah. She's friendly, good at her job, but always complaining about it. I imagine that we're going to be seeing a lot of her over the course of our time in the ISND." Gloom said.

"Is her officer position military, or...?"

"No, it's clerical." Gloom answered.

'Ah, good. That means she has no real authority over me.' Prey thought.

"What is the difference between her role and this record department?" Crimson asked.

"Taffy deals with everything related to the Royal and Night Guard. The records department deals with everything else. And don't they let you know it." Gloom answered as they went.

They passed a number of Royal Guards as they left the Guard section of the lower palace, heading for the records department. Apparently to get there, they needed to pass through a more civilian area of the palace. Prey knew for a fact that Gloom didn't miss the scornful and/or fearful looks the few servants they passed gave the thestral, and he doubted Crimson did either.

At one point, Gloom stopped and led them down a side corridor to avoid someone who was apparently a noble coming the other way. A sicon of the ridiculously wealthy House Fell apparently. Whomever they were when at home.

"There it is." Gloom finally said as they came out from around a bend and saw a set of double doors, through which a couple of distracted looking ponies were going in and out of. Prey wasn't close enough to hear their thoughts, but from the waist coats they wore and papers they carried, he was sure they were accountants' or clerks.

They had a certain look about them, so similar to that one he'd caught sight of in the Border Guards camp that one time. Prey had found the stallion's tent left unguarded on one of the three times he dared to sneak into the main encampment. He'd never ventured in deep, but on that occasion he'd come across the accountant's tent.

The fool had come out from Canterlot to see where the funds were going, having apparently heard that the 'fighting was over' and 'they'd won the war', and so came out to demand an explanation for the constant drain on the treasury. He'd thought to earn a couple of feathers in his cap for a job well done.

Fire Strike had confined him to his quarters out of the way, and Prey had read through the stallion's angry letter that he'd left out on the cot. The clerk had written it to be sent back to Canterlot, complaining about 'his appalling treatment'. Prey left a little something lethal in the accountants water flask before he slipped out.

Gloom marched up, still put out about the whole '-office dump cleaning out-' earlier and pushed the doors open.

Inside was a more organised and laid out version of Taffy Hopes's office, but on a larger scale. For one thing it had about six desks in use instead of just the one, and far more filing cabinets for another. Prey observed the hustle and bustle with interest.

"Yes? What can I do for you?" A bored looking blue stallion asked from the closest desk, barely looking up from his writing.

"We're here to pick up the folders for the new ISND Night Guard Division. Taffy Hopes said they would be in here." Gloom said.

The clerk looked up from his work with a thin smile, "Ah, yes. Sargent Gloom. We were expecting you..." He glanced up at the clock above the doorway, "Some six hours ago." He finished with dry contempt.

"I apologise. There were multiple delays. But if you could just give us the correct papers, we'll get out of your way." Gloom said calmly.

"I'm sorry Sargent, but the allotted time slot has come and gone, and we're very busy. We don't have time to unpack all of the folders again today. Come back tomorrow on time and we'll see about it." The clerk sniffed.

"He's lyyying~" Prey spoke up in a sing song voice, "That's the files over there." He said waving his small hoof towards a large stack of boxes. Everyone stopped to look at him.

"I beg your pardon?" The clerk asked, too shocked by the manner in which a lamb had spoken out against him to even be offended.

Gloom turned back to the clerk, a cold look on his face, "My talent let's me know when something isn't quite right, and Prey just confirmed it. Why did you lie?" He asked. '-so sick of these back biting pencil pushers-'

The pencil pusher in question gaped for a second before hastily composing himself, "What're you talking about? Those boxes could be for anypony, I cannot be expected to keep track of all the myriad things-"

"Oh look, someone was kind enough to put a label on the boxes. 'Night G. Sgnt. Gloom, today' it says. How thoughtful." Prey announced joyfully.

Gloom and Crimson joined in giving the clerk a look. Prey couldn't see it as they were turned away from him but, the blue stallion started sweating and couldn't meet their eyes. "Well, would you look at that. I made a mistake, how unusual, my apologies. It's been a long day after all." He hurriedly blustered.

"Yes, I'm sure." Gloom said icily. Turning he swept his gaze over the office, where every pony was busily eavesdropping without looking up from their all important work. He snorted softly and jerked his head at Crimson, "Come on, let's get these boxes shifted." He said.

"Too many to carry in one go sir." Crimson commented as he eyed the stack.

"To start with we'll just shift them into the hall, and decide where to

go from there." Gloom instructed, "Come along Prey."

As it turned out, only Crimson and Gloom had to shift all seventeen boxes to outside the door. Prey'd braced his hooves and dug in his shoulder. He'd tried tilting or levering the box up, but no matter his efforts, it hardly lifted off the floor. Huffing, Prey kept trying, silently cursing his runt body for over the millionth time in his extended life.

Prey had lifted heavier weights before, but these boxes were just too large for him to get them off the ground so he could shuffle them onto his back. 'If I was still in the Resistance, it would be 'find-a-way-or-scream-in-agony'.' Prey thought as he strained, but still the box wouldn't budge. It was infuriating. It didn't help that he was still tired out from a log day doing heavy duty cleaning.

Nor did the indulgent chuckles from the office clerks behind him as they watched the '-little lamb try and copy the adults-'

"Prey," Gloom began uncertainly, "Perhaps you should let us do that." He suggested, giving Prey a look like he suspected that the lamb would yell at him for daring to interfere.

"Alright." Prey said and stepped away. "What?" He asked the surprised Gloom as he headed for the door. He might not like being small but he didn't have a complex about it, and they were much better suited to move large bulky objects than he was.

"Alright, let's get going. This is going to take a couple of trips." Gloom sighed.

The three of them were standing outside of the records department's doors, with the pile of boxes now stacked against the wall. Gloom and Crimson were each balancing three boxes apiece on their backs with the aid of their wings. They hadn't given Prey any to carry, and he wasn't about to volunteer.

Crimson eyed the remaining boxes with mild distaste, "No one will take the boxes while we are gone?" He questioned.

"Who's going to want to randomly move boxes of paper work? Luna knows I certainly don't." Gloom grumbled.

"Just find some servants and order them to help." Prey suggested bluntly, then added, "Sir."

Gloom grimaced as he shifted to get the boxes into a position hopefully less likely to fall and make a huge mess, "As nice as that sounds, the Guard doesn't have the authority over the palace staff to interrupt their tasks and assign them new ones, as it's caused problems in the past. Only to keep them out of restricted areas or if they are proving to be a nuisance." He answered.

"Then grab a unicorn Guard, or find a cart." Prey said.

"Can't. They're on duty. And besides, the only ones nearby are in the Royal Guard. All the Night Guard are either off duty or busy. I can't countermand standing orders for the Royal Guard, only the Night Guard because I'm not a lieutenant. Might have to see about a cart though." Gloom said tiredly as he began the trek back towards the recently cleared ISND office.

"You don't seem to have much authority over anything, considering we apparently only answer to Captain Nighthawk and Princess Luna." Prey noted. Not that he wanted anything from either of those ponies. One behaved like some nighttime vigilante, and the other was an over enthusiastic dark Goddess.

"Yeah, sure seems that way. The Night Guard is still very much in its beginnings, and there's so much legislation that hasn't yet been sorted out." Gloom answered.

"I dislike having to fight past those that should be standing beside us." Crimson said flatly. Prey got the feeling he was talking about more than just today.

"Me too." Gloom sighed, also referring to something else.

"Me three." Prey agreed, completing the trio of unvoiced events.

Gloom groaned and stretched his back, hearing several bones pop, "Finally." He grumbled.

"That was... A most annoying waste of time." Crimson agreed flatly as he reviewed the freshly emptied stack of boxes in the middle of their new office. It had taken a while, what with carting the boxes back here, then unpacking the files and shoving them onto shelves to be sorted out later.

Even so, the seventeen boxes didn't go very far to filling the solidly made shelving that lined the three alcoves.

There was a minute's silence as they each evaluated their work and how empty the oak panelled room still seemed.

'This place will be perfect for laying down hidden runes.' Prey thought. Provided the gold bands around his legs didn't prohibit him from doing so. He still hadn't tested what capabilities he had left to him yet, and he didn't dare do so without preparation.

That was also assuming Gloom took his eyes off him long enough for Prey to do so. Annoyingly, despite the Sargent's fairly relaxed attitude so far, the thestral still hadn't let either of them out of his sight for more than ten seconds. 'Maybe I should blind him then.' Prey thought.

"Come, enough day dreaming where Princess Luna can't even have the joy of overseeing them, let's get moving. It's dinner time." Gloom said, snapping them all from their thoughts.

"Her Majesty can do that sir?" Crimson asked.

"Er, no, I was just saying- Look, I was trying to be funny but it wasn't. It happens quite often, so don't dwell on it and let's go." Gloom said, herding them towards the door.

"Ah. I was just wondering. I have heard many tales from my father of her Majesty's strength. I was wondering if that was one of them." Crimson said, obviously feeling the need to explain his foolish question.

"No, from what I understand, Her Majesty can't enter dreams unless

the dreamer is properly asleep. Don't quote me on it though." Gloom said.

Prey breathed a sigh of relief at that, although it was only a small reprieve.

Luna had said she wouldn't enter his dreams unless he was having a nightmare, not that he trusted her word for a second, but at least it was something. Luna was an all powerful alicorn, and would do what she wanted when she wanted, but at least the Moon Goddess wouldn't be invading his waking mind during the day whenever she felt like it. Probably.

They entered the bustling Guard's mess hall through the same door they had that morning. This time they went straight to the back of the queue for food, and once again Crimson pulled out a second tray for Prey.

Prey noticed the approval in Gloom's thoughts at Crimson's actions, and so reluctantly voiced his own polite thanks to the pegasus to keep up the appearance that he was trying to form a team bond, gaining further mild approval in Gloom's thoughts. 'It's all so you can kill them unsuspected later.' Prey comforted himself.

As the three of them shuffled down the line, he paid special attention to the non-thestral and Night Guard members, listening to their thoughts as they shuffled down the line to see how they reacted to their counterparts.

It was about what he expected. More dislike and distrust on both sides, although for the most part not overtly displayed.

"Hello there again. Where's your little companion? You haven't done anything with him have you?" Came the threatening voice of Cookie above Prey's head over the counter. They had reached the serving hatch.

"No I'm right here." Prey piped up, and a moment later he jumped up and caught hold of the edge so he could see over it, "Hello again

miss Cookie." He said sweetly.

"There you are dearie. It's good to see you. Tell me, has Crimson here been looking after you?" She asked with a smile, although on her stern muzzle it looked out of place.

"Why yes he has. Thanks for asking. He doesn't say much but he's a good colt isn't he?" Prey asked with false cheer, silently wishing that he could kill the old cook right then and there. It was a shame that this humiliating act was so effective at winning the mare over, as attested to by her thoughts, '-such a polite little lamb. Almost makes my whole day worth while-'

Prey could feel Gloom's disbelieving stare on his back. Prey jerked his chin at the thestral standing in line behind him, "Miss Cookie, I'd like you to meet Gloom. He's my Sargent." Prey told her.

"Just Cookie dear," She automatically corrected, then, "Wait, did you say Sargent? Your Sargent?"

"Yes, I've been signed up to the ISND. Isn't it great?" Prey giggled.

Cookies glare locked onto the Sargent's, "Has he now? I didn't know it was legal to sign up children, *Sargent* Gloom." She said, making the rank sound like a filthy word.

Gloom shot a look at Prey which clearly said, 'I can't believe you're doing this to me and I'll get you later', in fact he swore as much in his thoughts as well.

"Don't let him fool you ma'am," Gloom hastily defended himself, "Her royal highness Princess Luna brought Prey into the Night Guard herself. There were special circumstances that necessitated his conscription."

"Conscription now is it?" Cookie said, anger clear in her tone.

"Miss, you're taking this out of context, Prey here-"

"Prey?! Is that how you thestrals see him? He's just a foal." Cookie snapped.

"Um, excuse me Miss Cookie, but it's alright. Prey is my actual name, really it is. And if Princess Luna decided that I must be here, then it must be alright, right? I mean she wouldn't do it otherwise, so I'm sure it's fine." He offered her a heart melting smile, "Sorry, we seem to be holding up your line Miss Cookie. Could we please get some of your food so we can eat? I'm quite hungry."

The earth pony mare was struck speechless for a second before she managed to get her voice back, "Of course dearie. It's no problem at all." She said faintly.

With a bowl for each of Crimson's trays and another shoved aggressively at Gloom, they were shuffled up the queue and out of the line. A number of quiet murmurs followed them as they moved to a table in the corner and sat.

"What was that for?" Gloom hissed at Prey the moment they were seated. Crimson didn't say anything, but he too was looking hard at Prey as they waited for an explanation.

"Because I felt like it." Prey shrugged, stretching across the table to try and reach one of the bowls of vegetable stew.

Crimson moved it back a couple of inches and out of reach, "I would like to hear a proper explanation too." He said to Prey's annoyed glare.

"Yeah, what was that earlier all about how you didn't want to be treated like a foal and then you go and pull that act and also sic the cook on me infront of everypony, all while making the Night Guard look bad. Did you stop to consider any of that?" Gloom demanded in frustration.

"Of course I did," Prey said with startling coldness, "I also distinctly remember telling you that I don't care what these other ponies think of me. If playing a simple child makes them like me, then I'll act like a child. It's an easy mask to wear."

"You're just trying to garner sympathy by play acting cute? That isn't acting childish, that *is* childish." Gloom snorted. Crimson nodded.

"Yes it is, and I don't like it but I'll do it anyway. Makes life easier for us all in the long run." Prey answered, reaching across the table again for the stew, but once again Crimson held it out of reach.

"And why do you think that makes it okay for you to try and manipulate everypony you meet? Others get by just fine without having to fake it, and so should you. Lying is the root of every problem. Princess Luna has picked us to live a second chance. Your words reflect badly on her. I am trying to befriend you, but you are making it hard." Crimson said, his odd phrasing strangely eloquent as he lectured Prey.

Gloom joined in, "You shouldn't have done that Prey. Now they're going to be even less inclined to take the ISND seriously, and the story of the 'Night Guard employing children' is only going to spread if you keep making displays like that."

Prey rolled his eyes, "That was going to happen anyway. Ponies talk, and seeing a lamb in the Night Guard was going to provoke those reactions regardless. The Night Guard is insular, and Princess Luna's decisions are already second guessed by almost everyone. Aside from the difference in species and the fact that the Royal Guard perceive you as intruding on their territory, the reason the Royal Guard don't trust you. Because they still remember Nightmare Moon-"

"-She is *not* Nightmare Moon and never was. That demon has been banished for good." Gloom hissed.

Prey held up his hooves placatingly, "I never said she was. I said *they* still remember Nightmare Moon, and it's colouring all their views. You know I'm only telling the truth."

Gloom scowled, but reluctantly conceded the point, "Nopony puts it quite like that, but yes." He muttered.

"And that will take time to change. But for now, anything to make the Night Guard less alien is good. So, my point boils down to this. I am a freak." Prey stated without emotion. Prey didn't care about any of what he'd just said, it was all just a ploy to get everyone else to underestimate him.

Prey held Gloom's yellow eye as he continued, "The Night Guard doesn't need another freak, so I'll be a normal lamb instead and fade into the background. That's the entirety of my point. There, finished. Done." He paused, and let a smirk pull up the corner of his mouth, "And I'll admit, it was partly for fun. Don't say you didn't find that funny in hindsight." Prey said slyly.

Gloom didn't return the smile, and neither did Crimson, although it would have been astonishing if the pegasus had.

"That's the second time you've called yourself a freak. Is that how you see yourself?" Gloom asked, a thoughtful tone in his voice.

"Of course. What else could I be?" Prey asked blankly.

Gloom muttered something to himself and sighed, "Alright fine. I'll concede the point that the Night Guard isn't treated the best, and also the point that they wouldn't have taken you seriously regardless. I'll even concede that from a certain perspective," He looked hard at Prey, "That might even have been funny. But I'll say this," Gloom leaned across the table, making Prey shrink back in his seat.

"You're putting too much thought into all of this. Lighten up. Boop." Gloom's serious expression broke and before Prey could leap away, the thestral shot out a fore hoof and lightly poked Prey on the nose.

"What?" Prey asked crinkling his nose, currently too confused to be mad that Gloom had touched him, 'Has he taken complete leave of his senses?' He hadn't even seen that coming in the Sargent's thoughts, it had been completely spontaneous.

Gloom sat back in his seat with a lazy grin, "You're over thinking everything Prey. Not everypony is an anomaly that you've got to factor into whatever calculations you run in your head. Sometimes, you've just got to be yourself and trust other ponies." He said.

'Trust ponies? Never.' But Prey was far from stupid and didn't say that out loud. So instead, he just "Hrumph'd" and stretched across the table for his bowl a third time.

Crimson slowly slid the bowl into his reach, examining Prey through heavy lidded eyes, "You are very strange. But because this serves the good of Princess Luna in the long run, I see no harm." He said.

"And it's not up to you, it's up to Sargent Gloom. He's our baby sitter by Royal Night Princess decree, remember?" Prey reminded him waggling his spoon at Crimson.

"Unfortunately, yes, I'm responsible for you two mental asylum cases. And my diagnosis is; there's been far too much deep talk and philosophy for one day. By the Night, this is, what, the third one today? We need to cut down on that, it's exhausting." Gloom laughed lightly.

"I believe that is just the fourteen hour shift sir." Crimson said carefully.

Both Gloom and Prey raised their brows at the red pegasus, "Did I hear that right? Was that a second joke?" Gloom asked in fake amazement.

Crimson just shrugged, as expressionless as ever.

Prey dug into his vegetable stew while it was still warm after surreptitiously checking for poison, gulping down the chunks of cauliflower and carrot like they might run away or get stolen if he didn't consume them first.

Gloom gave Prey a look and a thought of' '-I've seen wolves less ravenous-' but didn't say anything and just got on with his own lacklustre stew, Crimson reluctantly joining him a minute later in the consumption of Cookie's cooking.

Prey was just finishing up scraping out the bowl when he heard them coming. They'd just entered his perception range, and he could hear their thoughts. There were five of them and they were heading purposefully straight for him and Crimson.

Prey froze.

Deep rooted instinctual fear gripped him. For a split second he hovered in indecision.

Fight? He would only have to lay a hoof on them and it would be over, but it wouldn't be worth it. Would it? His eyes locked on Gloom, his warden and jailer. He'd be caught straight away. He was surrounded by Guards in the mess hall. Indecision wavered in Prey's heart.

The moment stretched, lengthened, and ended as Prey did nothing.

"Just look at you, so adorable!" Squealed a mare as she grabbed Prey from behind in a hug, pulling him up into a hug as she nuzzled his wool, "So cute and fluffy."

Gloom looked up at the intrusion, mouth open to protest, but stopped.

"What are you-?" Crimson started half rising from the bench.

"Welcome to the Royal Guard!" The group cheered as they hurled a bucket of confetti in Crimson's face.

"*Don't touch me!*" Prey's high pitched squeak of fury went unheard over the cheer as the five Royal Guards who had come over started to laugh.

"What?" Crimson spluttered, bits of coloured paper stuck to his mane.

"Its the Royal Guard custom made welcome." One of the Pegasus laughed.

"Used to do it with rice, but Cookie complained about the waste of food." The unicorn with the empty bucket joined in, setting it down on the table.

"But I am in the Night Guard." Seemed to be the only thing Crimson could come up with, casting a confused look back at Gloom who was just smirking faintly.

"Ah, the Night Guards all come from their big brother, the Royal

Guard, so you're still one in our books." The Pegasus answered cheerfully.

"Hey, stop struggling, I only want to give you a cuddle." The earth pony mare hugging Prey crooned as Prey flailed at her, "Put me down!"

His squeak of outrage made them all laugh, except for Crimson who still just looked confused. "He's so cute, are you looking after him for somepony or something?" The mare asked, her earth pony heritage making her quite unaware of Prey's struggles to free himself.

"No," Gloom grinned, "He's been inducted into the Night Guard, as a 'special case' to keep him out of trouble. He's quite the hoof full let me tell you." His eyes taunted Prey, '-you wanted to act like a child, so here you go-'

Prey knew this wasn't a serious situation, and that any act he took to escalate it like, say, shredding the mares mind and turning her into a vegetable, would result in death by outraged alicorn. But the instinctual fear of being touched, especially by a pony, was striving to override his rational mind.

'I will kill you.' Prey seethed, heart hammering under his all too brittle ribs.

All the strong earth pony would have to do would be to squeeze too hard and he'd break like a twig. His hoof twitched mere inches from the leg across his chest as the mare, called Topaz Honey, rubbed her cheek vigorously against Prey's head, "Your ears are just the softest. Oh, what happened to this one? Never mind I'll kiss it better. Too bad you aren't a filly or you'd look adorable in a tutu."

None were really paying attention to Prey's struggles, only as light amusement that he was providing with Topaz. They chatted merrily away, none of them realised that Prey was mere seconds away from killing one of their number.

They just chuckled. They were laughing at him! This wasn't a joke, this was dead serious to Prey, but they just thought it was funny.

None of them understood the irrational fear, the clammy terror, they just laughed.

"I was not expecting...I'd expected I'd made an enemy of everypony at breakfast." Crimson said carefully.

"Why? What'd you do?"

"Songbird and a couple of others apparently were racist to the Night Guard this morning," The pegasus said, "You know how it goes."

"Songbird? Really? That's not like her, usually she's much better behaved than that. I'll talk to her later." Topaz Honey said, finally looking up from nuzzling Prey.

"There is no need for that." Gloom said at much the same time Crimson announced, "It is not worth your time."

"So why've you got a sheep? Is he your adopted little brother or something Crimson? The lieutenant says until recently some pony had an adopted baby dragon in the palace." The unicorn asked.

"No, I am not related to Prey at all." Crimson replied somewhat stiffly.

"New in the ISND division in the Night Guard. Anypony heard of it?" Gloom asked.

"No, sorry sir. Can't say I have." The unicorn answered, using the formal address now that Sargent Gloom had asked him a direct question.

"It's just Gloom while not on duty. But yeah, it's new in the Night Guard. You'll probably hear about it soon. It's a small task group made up of us three, set up to track down drug dealers, smugglers, and other stuff like that." Gloom explained, refraining from going into detail. Their purpose wasn't exactly secret, but, '-no need to tell anypony more than that-'

"Well I wish the both of you the best of luck sir. And your lamb. Night Guard or Royal Guard, stopping criminal scum is all that matters."

The was a chorus of agreements from them all, and a general smatterings of good luck wishes, while the unicorn started to gather up the confetti with a brush spell back into the bucket. It would be against regulations to leave a mess.

Topaz finally loosed her grip enough for Prey to squirm free and dash under the table unnoticed, while the ponies exchanged a few more words before they left.

"See ya' around."
"Nice to talk with you."
"Congratulations once again."
"Perhaps we'll get to train together sometime Crimson."
"Have a good evening."

Gloom and Crimson offered smiles and returned the goodbyes, or Gloom did anyway, with the departing ponies only flinching ever so slightly at his fangs.

"That was...Better than I had been led to fear." Crimson commented quietly once the Royal Guards had left.

"Some of them are alright I guess." Gloom said with a small shrug, "I think Topaz wanting to cuddle Prey is what made them really come over. That, and wanting to throw confetti in your face." He added.

"You did not warn me that I should be on my guard." Crimson said, as if that were all the explanation needed.

"Hey, it wasn't a test of your reflexes or anything. They were just doing what the Royal Guard do. They are quite big on their traditions, as I think you'll find out before too long." Gloom told him.

"Are all their traditions like that?"

"No, just most of the time. Mentioning time, we should be going, we don't have time for a full dinner, we've unfortunately still got stuff to do. Grab the trays and we'll drop them off as we go." Gloom said standing up.

"Prey, where are you?" He asked casting around, before thinking to

check under the table, "Come out from under there. Topaz is gone." He added with a mocking grin.

Prey was sitting like a statue against the table leg in the shadow. He didn't say anything to Gloom's taunt, just slowly got up and shuffled out, head down. Gloom didn't think anything of it and they set off for the mess hall's exit.

If anyone had been crouched down low enough to meet Prey's eye, it might have been a very different story.

'They laughed.'

Perhaps it didn't mean anything to them, but it had meant something to Prey, a deep seated fear originating back from when he was in the Resistance's clutches. And they'd laughed.

'*Unforgivable*.'

By the time they'd reached their destination, Prey had calmed down and the imperceptible tremors in his legs had ceased.

It wasn't that Prey had nearly lost control of himself, because he hadn't. Not 'nearly', only about half. Prey was always aware of who he was and what he was doing, but at least the fear mixed with adrenaline had finally worked its way out of his heart. No one likes the the feeling of being afraid after all.

"You two wait out here. If you know how to stand at attention, then stand at attention. I'm to report to Captain Nighthawk. It shouldn't take long so just wait till I'm finished." Gloom ordered, and it was an order, he was back in Sargent mode.

The fact that they'd been told to wait outside made it obvious what or more accurately who Gloom was reporting about. Them. The two recently freed criminals, and he didn't want them present for said report.

Gloom knocked, and the gruff voice of Nighthawk ordered him to, "Come in and shut the door Sargent."

That left just the two of them standing outside in the otherwise deserted corridor.

This was the first time that Gloom had let them out of his sight for more than a minute. Prey looked at Crimson, who as per Gloom's order, stood at attention. It was a fairly good stance as well, straight, legs braced, wings folded tightly, tufted ears up and yellow eyes forward. It was just the two of them.

Prey didn't actually have anything he wanted to say to the Pegasus. The opportunity to talk unobserved didn't currently hold any appeal to Prey, and to be honest, he was still feeling a tad bitter. So they waited in silence.

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Ten minutes passed, and no sign of Gloom returning. That was fine, Prey was a patient lamb.

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After a further five minutes with still no sign of the Sargent, Prey decided it was likely that Gloom had been caught up in something else by Captain Nighthawk, and so wouldn't be out any time soon. Prey sat himself down to wait, receiving an ear flick from Crimson for breaking stance, which Prey ignored.

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Ten minutes later a pair of Night Guards, a unicorn and a thestral, went by. They eyed Crimson and Prey carefully, before entering the next door down the hall, the lieutenants office. Unlike the Royal Guard, they clearly knew where Prey and Crimson came from.

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Another ten minutes of silence. It seemed being a Night Guard meant a lot of standing around doing nothing in the late hours of the day.

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Prey was just running over some old plans that he'd concocted back in the confines of Dreverton in case he ever got free one day, (and deciding what was possible and what was completely unfeasible even by his own standards), when Gloom finally returned.

Prey's eyes flicked open as Crimson's hooves stamped as he came more fully to attention, "Is everything alright, sir?" He asked.

"You were in there a while, what went wrong?" Prey asked, brushing back his ears as he tiredly got to his hooves. He'd asked that question specifically to make Gloom think about the answer, so he could read it as it ran through the thestral's head.

'-something like this happening already. We're not ready, not a team yet. I must do my duty for Princess Luna though. Must bring justice to the memory theft victims-' Gloom cleared his throat, "It's not a problem for today. We'll make a start on it in the morning, but for now we're done for the night. Let's go back to the bunk room." He said, tiredness evident in his tone and the slope of his ears. It had been a long day for them all.

Crimson nodded, accepting Gloom's words. Prey didn't.

"Some crime or the like has been committed, and Captain Nighthawk wants the new Division to pull its weight, right? Sir." Prey asked, looking carefully at the Sargent.

Gloom blinked, "I'm not sure why I'm even surprised. Got it in one again, Prey." He said.

"It must be something that can't be dealt with by the normal Royal Guard," Prey noted, still carefully observing Gloom, "A crime that falls under what the ISND's specialities are supposed to cover. Treason? Smuggling? Spies? Intelligence? Kidnap?"

'-kidnapped the foal and the mothers memories have been stolen-'. "Kid*Prey*! I mean Prey, it's a problem for tomorrow. The Royal Guard have done what they can already. But we're all too tired to do any good tonight, but we'll get on it first thing in the morning." Gloom told him, rubbing a fetlock across his eyes.

Gloom didn't wait for an answer and set off, leading them back along the route that Prey recognised memorising. It would take them back to the bunk room where they'd slept away the previous night. Already the maze like palace corridors were taking their correct place on an internal map in Prey's head.

Prey wasn't thinking about that though, he was thinking about what he'd heard in Gloom's thoughts. 'Stolen memories.'

Why did that seem so similar to what had originally brought him out of Dreverton?

It could just be a coincidence, but Prey had a bad feeling in his gut.

Mind mages weren't common. From what Prey knew, almost every form of mind magic was forbidden. And Prey was a hundred percent positive that Celestia strictly censored or controlled access to any knowledge about such magics. It's certainly what she'd been doing fifty seven years ago, much to his frustration when he tried finding even so much as a reference note in any magical tome he stole.

Different city or not, for another such incident that was going to involve him again to happen so soon, it was suspicious.

'Something bigger is going on.' Prey thought, but without more information or being able to examine any evidence, there wasn't currently anything he could do to find out what it was.

Arriving back at the bunk room, Gloom lit a candle to light the dim room, although Prey suspected it was more for his benefit than for either of theirs. The thestrals slit eyes gave excellent night vision, which Prey was sure creeped other ponies out all the more. Predators hunted at night.

Prey also suspected that Crimson's own yellow eyes, although not slit pupils, still saw better in the dark than his own. Maybe he'd find some way to correct that flaw in the future.

"Right," Gloom said yawning hugely, prominently displaying the other key difference in thestrals from ponies, not counting the bat

wings. "Daily debriefing session and then I'm going to sleep. I haven't got more than five hours a night for the past two weeks, and the day and night shifts keep getting switched round. My body clock's broken, so I'm really looking forward to a full eight hours sleep." Gloom said, pulling off his helmet and setting it down on the closest bunk.

"Debriefing? For what sir? We were with each other all day and so couldn't have missed anything." Crimson said.

"Apart from whatever you aren't telling us that Captain Nighthawk told you." Prey grumbled.

"No, what I meant was just talk with each other. You know, discuss. Like last night, trying to build team work and all that." Gloom said waving his hoof in a vague circular motion.

"Teamwork is just obeying the chain of command. You do whatever the person holding the chain says." Prey told him.

Gloom barked a laugh, "That was fairly quick, I'll give you that one. But no dice, we're still doing this. You two could benefit from some interaction. You aren't exactly..." Gloom trailed off, struggling to come up with a work that correctly encapsulated all the strangeness that was Prey and Crimson.

"Social? Amicable? Stable? Sane? Friendly? Nice?" Prey suggested.

"Normal." Crimson supplied flatly.

Gloom sighed, "This ain't a rant at you. Look, normal isn't a requirement around here. In fact it helps if you're a bit strange in the Night Guard," Gloom joked, "But trying helps, especially when working with other ponies in a professional environment."

Prey snorted, this was ridiculous. He wasn't normal and never would be, and had no interest in being so either, especially for them. Even a blind goat could see that much. Yet somehow even Gloom's enhanced thestral vision had missed the obvious. 'Oh well, just play along.' He thought.

"Right, debriefing. Let's do it. What next?" Prey asked dismissively

as he wondered over to his bed.

'-this is stupid but got to take it seriously. So tired though, can barely keep my eyes open-' Gloom started undoing his shin guards, "Er, just anything really. This debriefing thing is going to be a daily occurrence, so let's not turn it into a chore. Just five minutes and then done. But seeing as you two are still supposed to be integrating back into society after your..." Gloom hesitated briefly before just deciding to say it how it was, "Imprisonment, it's for the best. This is going to help with you that."

Crimson just nodded and shuffled his wings. Whether that was in genuine acceptance or just aknowledgement that he'd heard what Gloom had said wasn't so clear.

Prey felt anger flare to life in his chest, like an ember suddenly fed kindling. They were the ones who'd shoved him in Dreverton to rot, thrown away the key and then forgotten about his existence until Captain Valour deemed him useful. They were the ones who'd sent the Border Guard and Captain Fire Strike. Their action, or inaction, had contributed to the deaths of the only two people he cared about.

Yet now after all they'd done to him they expected him to change and fit into their perfect little society.

It infuriated him. But as he could do with almost every emotion except for fear, Prey controlled the anger and hid it under an iron wrought expression of calm innocence.

"Okay, and how would you suggest we use these five minutes?" Prey asked politely, as he stood up on his hind legs and began the process of hauling himself up onto his bunk. If they were going to waste five minutes he might as well be comfortable whilst doing so.

'-bunks too high, that's kinda' amusing to watch-'

Prey ignored Gloom's thoughts as he pulled himself up and dragged the pillow over, and began to plump it.

"Try just being open and honest I suppose. We're gonna' be working

with secrets every day in this job, so having somepony to be honest with will help." Gloom suggested.

'Pathetic, they're so soft in absolutely everything they do.' Prey snorted as he settled onto the pillow, which because of his small size was big enough for a bed roll all by itself. He folded his legs and waited.

"Come on, somepony say something." Gloom told them when neither made any move to speak.

"I am unused to this. Canterlot and the Night Guard. Royalty and the palace. I have no experience with what is expected of me by Princess Luna." Crimson abruptly spoke up.

"Don't worry, you're doing fine. Everything's still very much up in the air, so it'll all sort itself out at some point. You're not going to fail her majesty, in fact none of us are. We'll just do our best." Gloom reassured him. It came off a bit awkward, but his thoughts were sincere. Prey fought the urge to gag.

They all went back to just watching each other, Gloom and Prey sitting on their bunks and Crimson still standing by the closed door. Prey glanced between the two ponies, who were both looking at him expectantly.

"What? I don't have anything to add. Nothing you'd want to hear anyway."

Gloom looked like he might protest that, but his thoughts were constantly being dragged back to sleep, "Alright. You get to pass this time, but I expect you to contribute something tomorrow." Gloom yawned.

Crimson's ears flicked at Prey in annoyance, so Prey gave him a big smile of innocence.

Crimson snorted and turned away, trotting over into the middle of the room where there was the most space between the double bunk beds. While Gloom removed the last of his armour and stacked it in the foot locker, Crimson began a series of stretches.

Prey watched with half an eye while carefully unwrapping the fresh bandage around his ear. It looked like Crimson was following some set of predetermined movements, oddly flowing as he moved from one set to the next.

Prey ceased checking his ear to watch properly as Crimson finished his warm up and began a series of swifter movements that were clearly martial arts in origin.

One wing snapped out in a strike while Crimson pivoted on his fore hooves, before shifting stance and following up with a blow from the opposite wing, covering the opening the first strike had caused. Crimson was in complete control of his movements, making the flowing forms look easy, almost like a dance. However Prey could tell that each stance the pegasus moved through took a lot of effort to pull off so smoothly.

It looked like the style was based exclusively around pegasi, because it incorporated wings heavily into the strikes and movements.

Each form was basic, but there was no wasted movement or effort, no step further than it had to be, no strike harder than was necessary. It was perfect in its simplicity. Crimson must have been practising these movements since he was smaller than Prey. 'So this is what his father trained him in.' Prey guessed.

He was sceptical of how much use Crimson's martial arts would be in real combat. It was one thing to practice by yourself when there was no danger of getting hurt, and another to do so when someone was trying to kick your skull in.

Crimson clearly had training and practice, and Prey wasn't going to underestimate that. But having never seen it in action, he was unimpressed. Being under pressure, sleep deprived, a hoof deep in mud while someone screamed their life out next to you and unicorn fire blasted overhead would turn even the most hardened drill Sargent into a bumbling amateur who didn't know up or down, let alone keep it together enough to employ a high calibre of martial arts.

Maybe Prey was being too judgemental. He hadn't actually seen anyone use martial arts in an actual fight before. Perhaps it was unbeatable.

Or perhaps the simpler reason was that it was just a bad idea. Being able to crack a boulder with a single kick didn't do much good against a crossbow bolt or a unicorn blowing your head off.

Gloom had finished stowing away his armour, but had also paused to watch the show. He caught Prey's eye and offered a fanged grin, "Princess Luna knows what she's doing." He silently mouthed to Prey, before clambering into bed and pulling the grey blanket up.

Prey looked down at the golden bands on his fore legs, 'Unfortunately, you're not entirely wrong.'

Prey finished re-tying the bandage just as Crimson was coming to the end of his little dance, breathing lightly. Carefully the pegasus went about resettling his wings, straightening out each feather and pinion so they lay properly as he folded them.
The stallion was a puzzle, but a remarkably simple one.

"Good night, sleep well." Prey said out loud to Crimson, pulling his own covers back and sliding underneath. He got a grunt in response.

Prey laid his head down on his uninjured side, flicking his good ear aside before he did so as not to go to sleep lying on it. Waking up with a dead ear wasn't something to be laughed at.

Not that Prey planned to go to sleep. He had work to do.

Crimson blew out the candle and climbed up to his own bunk. There was some shifting as he got comfortable, and Prey wondered if Crimson even followed a set pattern of practiced forms for that.

Once it had gone quiet, Prey settled down in the warm darkness to wait.

[[[Bonus - Ray of Sunshine-*Does this look like the face of*

***Happiness?*]]]**

https://imgur.com/QlVyxR9

14.1 A Tulip Flower Bed

Prey had lain awake for two hours before he judged it safe to rise.

He waited until he knew Gloom was asleep. The thestral certainly hadn't been faking how tired he was earlier, however Prey couldn't be sure about Crimson. Although he doubted the pegasus would do such a thing as faking. Crimson was remarkably honest in his own self imposed sort of way.

'More the fool him.'

Prey slowly and carefully shifted the blanket off himself inch by inch until he was free of its confines. Then, with his good ear strained for the slightest noise, he began letting himself slide off the bunk.

He'd tested the floorboards for squeaks when he'd walked to his bed earlier, so he knew which ones to avoid as he crept towards the door.

It felt far longer than the five seconds it took Prey to reach the door, but thankfully there was no movement from the shadowy form on Crimson's bunk, which was encouraging.

Prey licked his dry lips, 'Alright, now for the dangerous bit.'

He raised one hoof to the door frame, and prepared the form of a rune in his mind. This was the part that Prey had no idea about. Either nothing would happen, or things would go terribly, terribly, wrong. The gold band on his raised foreleg felt very heavy all of a sudden as he prepared to take the plunge.

Prey had studied the tracer bands as best he could, but he couldn't get a read on them. And without magical means, he wouldn't get any closer to figuring out just what Luna had strapped to his forelegs either.

For that, he would need his runes, *but* laying a rune might trigger some enchantment on the bands that would alert Luna to what he was doing. A dilemma. There was simply no way to tell.

So what Prey was doing was conducting a little test. He would place a lesser rune on the door frame, one which would record when someone entered or left the room. If nothing happened, then he'd work from there. If he was caught, well, he had a number of explanations and good excuses ready, but doubted they would do him much good.

'Here goes nothing.'

Prey concentrated, and traced the pattern of the rune on the door frame, forcing it into existence. It glowed yellow faintly for a brief moment in the darkness, then faded away into the woodwork.

There was no explosion of miasma or star spangled darkness. No vengeful Nightmare teleporting in to rip him limb from limb.

Perhaps she hadn't been alerted yet, or maybe she was too busy to come right now. That didn't mean she wouldn't drop in later though. Prey shivered at the thought and slunk back to his bunk.

For now, Prey had done all he could risk. He'd have to wait for the morning light to reveal the outcome.

Morning came, far too quickly and yet not soon enough for Prey.

The nervous suspense as he lay in the dark, against the wish for it just to be over with was nothing new. Many a night in the dark forest had been spent that way while something prowled about. But familiarity didn't make it any less unpleasant. Much as he hated his weakness, fear was the one emotion that he never could control. It could rob even the most bloodthirsty warrior of the ability to fight. He'd seen it before.

So when the first early morning hoof falls of Guards finishing their night shifts filtered in from the corridor, and still no squad of unicorns burst through the door horns aglow, it was definitely

something of a relief.

Prey lay curled up under the blanket, a tight little bundle of wool and warm covers. Of course, now that most of the immediate danger had passed, he was reluctant to leave his soft cocoon.

'So,' He thought as he lay there with the blankets over his head, 'My current state of relative comfort and peace leads me to the conclusion that these tracer bands don't pick up runes. Or the old runic alphabet at any rate.' That was huge. It opened the way for so many opportunities to deceive and scheme.

Of course, things were never that simple.

Maybe Luna *had* realised, but she was waiting to see what he did now that he thought he was unobserved. Watching and waiting while giving Prey enough rope to hang himself with. Toying with Prey by letting him think he had a chance.

Another possibility was that she'd been alerted that he had done *something*, but didn't know what that something was. At least not yet. She could still be tracking back exactly what it was.

Or another possible theory was that she did indeed know, and knew of the old runic alphabet too, but as the rune was a small and weak one, she wasn't concerned. But if he did display anything stronger, she would stir herself like some Ursa Major annoyed from her lair to strike down the impudent fool who'd dared disturb it.

Such outcomes were just as possible, and he wouldn't know what his golden shackles were capable of until he prepared a runic array to help him analyse them. Hence his dilemma.

Prey was interrupted from further contemplation on the subject by a horrible buzzing ring that jerked him upright and out of his bed in alarm.

Within half a second he'd rolled under the bed, trusting in the only hiding place he had in the room to shield him against whatever was about to happen.

"Ughh, is the night over already?" Came a muffled groan from Gloom's bunk.

A hoof emerged and landed on a small round clock set on the floor by the Sargent's bunk. Prey had seen it there last night when he'd surveyed the room for dangers, but thought nothing of it.

It was only now after the initial second of panic that Prey finally worked out where the jarringly loud noise was coming from. Abruptly the ringing ceased, and with a yawn Gloom sat up.

There was the sound of movement from Crimson's bunk, although from his current position under the bed, Prey couldn't see the red pegasus. Gloom heard it too and poked his head out to glance in that direction, "Morning. Up and at 'em, we leave for breakfast in five minutes." He said.

Then he glanced over at Prey's empty bed and stiffened, "Where's Prey?" He demanded sharply.

Prey crawled out from under his bunk and glared at Gloom, or more accurately his clock which had made such an awful noise. "What is *that*?" He asked scornfully.

Gloom blinked at him, "It's an alarm clock," He said slowly, "Haven't you ever seen one before? Wait, scratch that, were you sleeping under the bed?"

"Of course not." Prey snapped, "And you never said anything about an alarm clock." He accused Gloom.

"Why would I have? It's just an alarm clock," Gloom said in bemusement, "While not something a fully ponied barracks would have, because it would just be plain inconsiderate to everypony else, the ISND is only us at present, and we can't afford to oversleep." Gloom told Prey as he rose and started to pull his armour out from the hoof locker.

"That clock wasn't there the night before last." Prey said.

"No, but I picked it up. Thought we should best get into the habit." Gloom responded, only half listening.

A flap of wings indicated that Crimson had also vacated his top bunk, but if Prey didn't have as sensitive ears as he did, he would have missed the sound of the pegasus's hooves touching down. 'A warriors landing.'

'-what was he doing under the bed? Bit jumpy. How hasn't he seen an alarm clock in his whole life? All households in Equestria must have one-' Thankfully however, Gloom kept his annoying questions to himself.

Crimson's thoughts were as masked as ever this morning.

"Good morning sir. Good morning Prey." Crimson abruptly said in his flat tone, rather off in the timing of his greeting. They weren't even looking at Crimson when he'd said that.

'What is it with him? At times he's eloquent but controlled, and at others awkward and socially insecure.' Prey thought.

"Good morning Crimson, sleep well?" Gloom responded cheerfully enough, glancing up from tightening the straps on his shin guards to offer a brief smile.

"Well enough." Crimson said after a moment.

"So what do you have lined up for today? Obviously whatever Captain Nighthawk has for us, organising the files from yesterday, picking up Crimson's armour from Carrot? Did I miss anything out?" Prey asked Gloom.

'-hope he doesn't speak like that to the lieutenant or it'll be trouble-' Gloom's thoughts were tinged with traces of annoyance, but he didn't outwardly show it.

"The armour and paper work will have to wait, it's gonna' be another long day I'm afraid. After breakfast, we're reporting straight to Lieutenant Swift Arrow of the Royal Guard for a briefing on the situation." Gloom answered, picking up his helmet and putting it on, making sure his ears didn't end up squashed.

"And what situation is that sir?" Crimson asked.

"We'll get details at the briefing. Now come on, we're going to miss breakfast."

They didn't miss breakfast, in fact they were among the first in there.

Cookie was happy to see Prey, same as yesterday, and Prey played the act of the little lamb again for her, being polite and bubbly. She returned his childish attention with warm affection, and disdained Gloom and Crimson.

'-I didn't know Cookie could smile-' Gloom thought.

Fear of getting killed by Luna or not, Prey still gobbled down his tasteless oatmeal in record speed before the other two had even started.

They passed Honey Topaz as they were exiting, the earth pony mare from yesterday who had so enthusiastically hugged Prey. She pouted in dismay as she saw Prey leaving, '-awww, cuddles is getting away-'

Prey picked up his pace.

They went down into a part of the Guards section of the Palace Prey had not seen yet, and assumed that this was the 'Royal Guard' half. That would certainly fit with the thoughts he picked up from the Royal Guards they passed.

'-bat pony again-', '-humph, Night Guard my hoof-', '-not my problem-', '-wouldn't be here if they didn't have a reason, so I won't challenge them-'.

And, of course; '-a lamb? How'd she get in here? Oh wait, I think I heard something about that-'

Thankfully Gloom brought them to their destination quickly, Lieutenant Swift Arrow's office, who's door was open. Inside, the

pony who could only be Swift Arrow, a unicorn, was sitting behind the desk, talking to another Royal Guard unicorn who was standing at attention.

Swift Arrow glanced over the other unicorn's shoulder and spotted Gloom about to knock, "Come in Sargent. Shut the door behind you." He called out.

"Sir, my fellows?" Gloom asked indicating Crimson, who looked as placid as ever, and Prey, who was deeply annoyed that Gloom had pointed him out to these two unicorns. And fearful.

"Bring them in too. It'll save time." Swift Arrow decided. '-a lamb? What joke is this? Princess Luna goes too far-'

Once Gloom had shut the door and they all stood in line next to the other unicorn, who was still holding to attention, Swift Arrow cleared his throat and began.

"Right, I won't waste time. There's been an incident. An earth pony, name of Tulip Bed, appears to have had her foal stolen. Foalnapping is a serious crime, one we haven't seen in Canterlot in over a year. This is big, but what's worse is that Tulip Bed has no memory of her foal. Her memories were stolen." Swift Arrow said grimly.

There was a moment of silence as they all digested that. Prey, from listening to Gloom's thoughts, saw that the thestral had known most of this yesterday, but still didn't know the fine details. No, those were known by the other unicorn in the room, who was currently standing at attention next to them.

"This is private Twining Ivy, who was the one called out to the scene. Private Ivy, if you would?" The lieutenant asked.

"Yes sir." Twining Ivy said snapping off a quick salute before turning about to face the three of them, settling back into attention again.

"Tulip Bed, twenty seven years of age. First alerted her neighbours last night when she felt something was wrong, but was unable to pinpoint what it was, only that something was off. Her neighbours, a pair of flat mates, calmed her down and questioned her about

what was wrong." Ivy paused to take a breath.

"When they asked after her young colt, Rocky Bed, earth pony colt aged five, she didn't know what they were talking about. After further questioning and Tulip Beds continued denial that she had a son, they naturally called the Royal Guard. There was no sign of a struggle in her house. From asking the primary school teacher, it was found Rocky Bed had attended school yesterday before his mother picked him up. This puts the foalnapping time anywhere between three and half past seven in the evening when Tulip alerted her neighbours." Ivy said.

"So," Swift Arrow moved to finish, "Captain Shining Armour gave this case to Captain Nighthawk on his request, and apparently he's assigned it to you." There was a note of suppressed displeasure in his voice and a much louder one in his thoughts.

"I expect you to solve this as quickly as possible. A foal is at risk, and there's no room for buck ups. I have Royal Guards out searching every place they can think of, but we're keeping it quiet. Don't want to spook this criminal. I expect you to report back to me personally, not just Captain Nighthawk, this evening. Clear?" Swift Arrow asked.

"Yes sir." Gloom and Crimson replied in unison. Prey just tried to look as unassuming as possible in the presence of the two unicorns. Already they were forgetting about him. Good.

"Private Ivy will give you the directions to the house. Tulip Bed is staying with the neighbours with a guard posted outside the house. Anything else you want to ask Sargent?" Swift Arrow asked briskly.

"Just some specifics if you would sir." Gloom said.

"Ask away, Twining Ivy has most of the details."

Gloom nodded and looked to Ivy, "This son, Rocky Bed, do we have a picture?"

"Yes, we found a couple photos in the house. You can see them when you get there." Ivy answered. Prey didn't know what a 'photo'

was, but he got the concept of a picture capturing a moment in time from the thoughts of those around him. He could also tell that Twining Ivy was secretly very uncomfortable around the thestral.

"Do we have any leads? Tracks or evidence?" Gloom asked.

"Not yet, that's what we hope you can find." Swift Arrow said, answering for the private.

"Alright, just one more question, is there a way to restore Tulip's memories? It would probably solve this crime straight away."

Ivy and Swift Arrow seemed to share a look, one between unicorns who'd just been asked a stupid question, "Sir, mind magic is forbidden in every form. Nopony can just 'restore' her memories, it doesn't work like that." Ivy replied.

"Even the Palace doctors only have limited procedures they can try, and they have to take those slowly and carefully. Most likely, Tulip Bed will eventually regain her stolen memories on her own. But we can't afford to wait, a colt's life could be at risk here." Swift Arrow added.

Prey found their knowledge interesting, if flawed.

If Tulip's memories had been stolen, they wouldn't return on their own. That would only happen if they'd been suppressed instead. That was much easier to do than erasing them, and from what little he'd read, magical accidents resulting in suppressed memories sometimes occurred because of miscast spells. Which was probably where Arrow and Ivy's misconception came from.

"Alright, thank you for explaining that. We'll leave immediately sir." Gloom said.

"You do that. Twining Ivy, follow them out and give Sargent Gloom the directions. Dismissed."

Canterlot. The capital of Equestria, seat of the Sun Queen and more recently the Night Queen too. Home to the rich, the privileged, and

the wealthy. A place of marvels. The old city of Unicornia, full of heritage and history.

Prey hated it.

This was the first time he'd been out of the palace and walked Canterlot's famous streets, (the first time he'd been in a locked Guard carriage so that didn't count). But now, after receiving the directions from Twining Ivy, here they were.

All it had taken was a foal kidnapping, magical restraints, the return of Nightmare Moon, a series of magical thefts, a stint with the Solar Guard, and fifty seven years in prison to get here. He remembered the Resistance's grand schemes for one day toppling Canterlot. No one had ever really believed them, it was just an idealists' dream.

Prey also remembered his old life, where Fleece had once joked with his younger brother about Gossamer one day making it into Canterlot's prestigious university. What a bad joke that had been. It was probably a mercy that Gossamer was gone, or else he might have felt something as he looked up at the shining spires and glittering towers.

'I hate this place.' It was like his brief glance of Vanhoover, except more so in every way. All the neatly paved streets and sidewalks, except cleaner. All the beautiful houses and impressive mansions, except bigger. The happy, well off pony residents, except dressed finer. That little bit extra wherever you looked.

All it did was remind Prey of what they'd never had. Then again, privilege like this was reserved for ponies only. For just like Vanhoover, there were no members of any other species in sight, only the multi coloured coats of the pony race thronging the wide streets. Prey doubted if a sheep had ever set hoof inside the capital before. The way that some of the finely dressed ponies they passed had to stop and look at him incredulously, it certainly seemed possible.

Or perhaps it was just the thestral leading their merry little band. He was certainly racking up the unfriendly and haughty stares.

Gloom pretended to ignore their looks and the way that mothers pulled their foals close or crossed the street, and stallions putting their noses in the air, but Prey, as he struggled to keep up, knew that the thestral noticed. '-the Night Guard shouldn't have to go out in the day, this is what happens-'.

Gloom avoided the prosperous main streets, but even then, the structural quality of the buildings they passed on the side streets was still obvious. No greying mortar or worn brick, only fine cut stone and freshly painted houses. Prey was kept busy trying to read every sign and street name, every shop banner and front window they passed, all the while trying to keep up.

"You know, one of us could carry you. You don't look like you weigh more than a feather." Gloom offered.

"Don't touch me." Prey panted. 'Curse this malnutrition. And curse their long legs.' He thought, hurrying over the polished cobbles of the side alley Gloom had had them cut down. If his muscles weren't still weak, he could've kept up just fine.

"It would be far easier for you." Crimson observed, trotting along quite comfortably.

"No thank you." Prey all but growled. It sounded more like a wheeze.

"Seriously though, if you can't keep up, I'm going to carry you." Gloom told him, eyes swivelling back and forth as he tried to recall which turn of the approaching junction they were supposed to take. '-was it Marigold street or Cutterdale street?-'

"I've kept up just fine so far. And Twining Ivy said Marigold street. Sir." Prey grunted, focusing on not slipping on the polished cobble stones.

"Pardon?" Gloom asked in surprise.

"You were looking lost. It's Marigold street. Except I think we were supposed to come in from the other end, but because you took a short cut we're on this end instead." Prey answered.

"You worked that out already? Have you been to Canterlot before?"

"No. I just paid attention to the street names. It's not difficult." Prey said, breathing hard.

"Well then I'm pretty sure we're almost there." Gloom said.

"Two lefts, then the second right." Prey agreed, taking a moment to catch his breath.

"Yeah, definitely not mentally a foal. I think you should probably be in charge of stuff like navigation and the finer details in the future. How good are you at paperwork?" Gloom asked with perhaps a tad too much excitement in his voice

"Don't know yet, haven't done any before have I?" Prey lied, thinking back to the investigation Captain Valour had forced him to conduct. He was glad that they hadn't run into any of the Solar Guard in the palace yet. Prey would rather not test how successful the runic memory trap he'd left them had worked.

"He did well yesterday. Sorting the files." Crimson commented.

"If only all paper work were that simple, but there's all sorts of rules and regulations. I'm surprised you can sneeze without filling in the correct form in advance and getting it signed off by duly appointed 'sneeze authority'. I still have to go sign all those things for Taffy." Gloom groaned.

It was quite obvious when they arrived at the crime scene. The two Royal Guards standing outside the door kind of gave it away.

The house was one in a small series of red roofed, terraced homes with a small flower garden in front of each. A bit of a step down from the large, spacious houses they'd been passing, but still attractive as homes in their own right. And about eight times the size of Gossamer's old home before it had burned.

Gloom nodded to the two Royal Guards, who gave the three of them funny looks, '-a thestral, an out of uniform pegasus, and a

baby sheep?-' But they didn't stop them.

Gloom knocked and then pushed the door open without waiting for an answer, "Hello?" He called out, "This is the Night Guard, we're here on behalf of the Princess Luna, looking for Tulip Bed?"

"Come in. She's in here with us." Came a call from down the short corridor.

They wiped their hooves on the welcome mat and made their way inside. Passing down the short hall lined with picture frames, they stepped into what must have been the living room.

A brown earth pony with a dark green mane stood up from one of the two sofas to greet them, "Please, take a seat. You're earlier than we expected-" His breath caught as he spotted Gloom, and it was only after a moments stuttering that he managed to continue.

"Ah, p-please, do sit down, can I get you anything? Tea or coffee?" He asked with a small, nervous laugh. '-or perhaps some blood?-' His thoughts added unbidden.

"We're fine thank you, mister...?"

"Ah, sorry, where are my manners? Holly Leaf." His hoof twitched as if he might offer it, but apparently thought better of it.

"We're here to see Miss Tulip Bed. It's reported that she stayed the night with you and your house mate?" Gloom asked, staying polite despite the annoyance Prey could read in his thoughts.

"Err, yes, that's right," Holly Leaf stepped back around to the side of the sofa that had its back facing them, "Tulip? Tulip, I'm afraid you need to wake up now." He said, shaking the unseen figure lying down.

There was a groan, and a muffled, "Where'm I?"

"Tulip Bed, it's me Holly Leaf, your next door neighbour. You remember that, right?" Holly Leaf asked with some concern.

There was a pause, "Yes." Came the quiet answer.

"Oh, good." Holly Leaf said with obvious relief, "Jumping Jack's still sleeping, but there's some of the Royal, um, the Night Guard here. They want to speak to you." He told the still prone figure anxiously.

"Okay." There was a pause, "I still can't remember."

"Um, no? That's a shame." Holly Leaf laughed nervously again, eyes flicking between the still patiently waiting Gloom and Crimson.

"Err, I'll just go wake Jumping Jack. I'll leave you all here to do your, ah, investigation. Or something." Holly Leaf said, backing towards the door, "Call if you need anything."

"Thank you." Gloom said, stepping around to the other sofa, and finally getting a clear view of Tulip Bed, Crimson following him.

Prey however, was already there. While they'd been talking, he'd simply snuck around the end of the far sofa and was sitting against its armrest, partially hidden from view. He'd also taken the opportunity to scan the room; 'Quite a few things I don't know the name or purpose of, but nothing suspicious.' And of course, to examine Holly Leaf's and Tulip Bed's thoughts.

'Holly Leaf appears to be exactly what he seems. A concerned, if nervous, neighbour. Don't know about Jumping Jack, haven't met him,' Prey'd gotten the impression of a unicorn from Holly Leaf's thoughts. 'Tulip Bed however, is another matter.'

Prey couldn't read any obvious signs of memory or mind alteration or tampering, the mare's thoughts were clear and well jointed, if a bit scared. However, someone's surface thoughts gave absolutely no indication as to the state of the mind that lay underneath. Without setting hoof on Tulip Bed and invading her mind directly, he wouldn't know.

'This is interesting. Worrying and interesting.'

The mare herself was a orange dappled earth pony, with a dirty brown mane braided into a messy plait that was coming undone. She sat up slowly on the sofa, pushing aside the blanket she'd slept under, eyes still heavy with sleep, and strands of fur sticking out

from a rough night. She certainly looked the part.

"Miss Tulip Bed?" Gloom asked just to be sure.

"Yes, that's me." She answered quietly, pulling the blanket around her knees.

"I'm Sargent Gloom of the Night Guard, part of a division set up by Princess Luna, called the ISND. We deal with incidents like the one that is reported to have taken place yesterday evening. The foalnapping of your foal Rocky Bed."

"Yes, Rocky Bed, my foal. So they tell me." Tulip said, looking away.

"So they tell you?" Gloom asked.

"Yes. I mean, it must be true. I know something's wrong, but I can't remember him. There's the pictures and everything, with me and Rocky, but I can't remember him. They told me somepony cast a spell on me and stole my memories. Is that true?" Tulip asked, fidgeting with the blanket.

"Yes, they told you the truth. Your neighbours remember Rocky, his primary school teacher remembers him, you've got pictures of him, so he exists and is indeed your son." Gloom said, trying to sound comforting.

"Yes..." Tulip trailed off.

"Do you want a son even though you can't remember having one, ma'am?" Crimson asked abruptly.

Prey smirked, Crimson had hit the nail right on the head. It had been floating around in the mares thoughts, but Tulip hadn't wanted to say anything.

Tulip started, "Yes, of course! Of course I do. If I have a son, of course I would want him back. What mother wouldn't if she'd had a foal stolen from her?"

"But are you really a mother if you don't believe you are one? Does it still count if other ponies are the only ones who tell you that you

have a child?" Prey asked.

Tulip jumped, not having spotted Prey, "W-who are you?" She demanded.

"This is Prey, he's with us," Gloom assured her, then turning to Prey, "What do you mean by asking something like that?"

Prey brushed aside Gloom's angry tone, focusing intently on Tulip Bed, "Do you feel trapped? A feeling of being bound by obligations to a child you do not know, and, for all intents and purposes, have never loved?"

"No, I mean yes! No, not like- Who are you?"

"I'm nobody, just a little freak. Never mind, just forget about it. A passing thought, nothing more." Prey said, shrugging and finally dropping his gaze.

Gloom was giving Prey a hard look, "I'm sorry Miss Tulip Bed, my colleague-"

"-Is not finished. Tell me Tulip, do you have any memory of leaving your house between three and four o'clock?" Prey cut in.

Tulip Bed gripped the blanket, eyes darting this way and that, "I-No, no I don't."

"No memory of the primary school?" Prey asked.

"No-"

"How about the teacher's name?" He pressed.

"I-er, yes, her name is Miss Pottery."

"Strange, why would you know her name? Have you ever met her before?" Prey asked, affecting a curious tone.

"Um, no, no I'm sure I haven't met her."

"Then how do you know her name?"

Tulip shrunk under the diminutive sheep's questions, "I don't know..." She mumbled.

"I think its safe to say then that the mind Mage who did this to you was very thorough. He, or she, either went through all of your memories with a fine toothed comb and erased every single one involving taking your foal to school. Or they somehow used a trigger memory linked to Rocky Bed to wipe them all out." Prey observed thoughtfully, as if he was talking about an arithmetic problem, not a person.

"So this unicorn, or unicorns, were skilled. That leaves little avenue for finding out how this was done. Instead, we should focus on the who-"
"Excuse me," Gloom cut in moving over to grab Prey, "-We need to discuss our findings so far. Please excuse us a moment." He said to Tulip as he pushed Prey into the corner, Crimson following closely behind.

"Don't touch me." Prey hissed, backing up. Unfortunately, there was nowhere to go. He tried to ignore the stirrings of instinctual panic as he found himself cornered.

Gloom took a deep breath, before letting it out through his nose. "Alright, I'm not even angry. I'm not sure why I still expect anything different. I see the lamb but there is no lamb, right, got to remember that." Gloom seemed to be talking to himself more than anything with that last one.

He sighed again and rubbed his eyes, "Alright Prey. We'll give you the benefit of the doubt. It's clear you've figured something out. Although how you know anything about mind magic like you were talking about back there is beyond me. So spill, what's going on?" Gloom asked.

Prey belatedly realised that he might have appeared a bit too knowledgeable about mind magics just now. 'Careless.' He berated himself.

"Well, it's more a theory based off what Ivy and Swift Arrow said-"

"-*Lieutenant* Swift Arrow."

"-about her memories being locked away and eventually coming back on their own. So I just thought I'd see if I could trigger her memories to return sooner." Prey offered. It wasn't entirely a lie, so it shouldn't trigger Gloom's special talent.

"What you first said. About Tulip Bed not wanting to be a mother..." Crimson stated.

Prey knew what he was asking even if the pegasus didn't phrase it as a question, "I had a hunch. And my concern was right. She doesn't feel like she's lost anything, and so doesn't feel much need to reclaim it. It's a responsibility that she doesn't want, but propriety tells her she must accept, because it's the 'right' thing to do. Reclaim her foal, Rocky Bed." Prey added, in case it wasn't obvious.

"How does that effect this investigation?" Gloom asked.

Prey considered, "Hmm, not much actually. Unless we get her foal back that is. In that case, there might be... 'problems'... In their future life. Just something to be aware of." He said. Personally he didn't care, but it would be good to appear like he did.

Gloom groaned, "Great, another problem to take care of."

"Possibly. Do you feel it will become one?" Crimson asked.

"Maybe, maybe not. It's a problem for the future though, for now, let's stick to finding Rocky Bed."

"That stallion, Holly Leaf. He seemed too nervous. I wouldn't trust him." Crimson said.

"I don't think it's anything. I'm pretty sure he's just scared by the Night Guard. And me." Gloom added in an undertone before clearing his throat and continuing.

"It's nothing new, that's how civilians usually react unfortunately. We're not the Royal Guard that they trust, and, well," Gloom bared his fangs, "Actually, it's out of the ordinary when they do accept us." He looked at Prey and muttered, "I always thought it was unusual

that a lamb didn't react. Now of course I know that 'unusual' doesn't begin to cover it."

"You might want to stick to solving this crime first before you go throwing out compliments like that." Prey told him sweetly, "We still have yet to figure out anything." He stressed the 'we' to show he was part of the team and actually cared. Not.

"Well, if you have a solution, I'm open to suggestions." Gloom said.

"You're sure there's nothing off about Holly Leaf sir?" Crimson asked.

"Fairly sure."

"Your talent telling you that sir?" Crimson pressed.

"No, it only lets me know when something is amiss, not when something is right. If that makes sense. And it's not an exact science, just a feeling sometimes. We can't rely on it." Gloom answered with an apologetic shrug.

Prey sighed, this was painful to listen to. "If you let me ask all the questions, I'm sure I can get us something. You can pretend it was you later and take the credit or whatever. Just don't get in my way." He told them.

Crimson didn't seem too keen on the idea, "More questions like the ones you've already asked?" His flat tone still effectively managed to convey his scepticism.

"He has a point. You weren't very...'tactful' in what you said to Tulip Bed earlier." Gloom agreed.

"But I learnt something for us. I can do this, if you'll let me. Help me or stand aside, I don't care. Just don't get in my way." Prey said, his tone firm.

Gloom looked down at Prey, clearly unconvinced, but before he could say anything, Crimson spoke, "Sir, why not? Prey is weird. I mean, he has a unique viewpoint. Perhaps he can see something we cannot?" The pegasus suggested.

Gloom paused, '-yes, why not? Tulip doesn't trust me already, nothing wrong with giving Prey a chance. We're all on the same team, but why did he say I should take the credit earlier? Nah, doesn't matter, stay focused-'

"We've talked long enough already, Holly Leaf and Jumping Jack-"

"Won't be coming out of their room till were gone, or you go and get them. They want as little to do with the Night Guard and thestrals as the rest of these ponies, but are too polite or scared to say it to your face. Sir." Prey interrupted.

Gloom and Crimson grimaced slightly before the Sargent continued, "Tulip's waited long enough and we have a foal to find. I know I'm going to regret this, but fine. We'll do it your way Prey. But only because you look much more 'approachable' than us."

"Until they get to know you." Crimson added.

"But if you take it too far, I'll step in." Gloom warned Prey.

Prey rolled his eyes but nodded to show he understood, "Alright, sir." He huffed.

"I mean it. We're here to help, not hurt." Gloom stressed as he turned back.

"What do you think I'm going to do, bite her or something? Terrifying, a runt savaging a full grown earth pony." Prey muttered sarcastically. Gloom and Crimson either ignored him or pretended not to hear.

"Thank you for waiting Tulip Bed. We've discussed your situation, and we've a few more questions."

Tulip looked up from where she'd just been sitting despondently on the sofa, fiddling with the blanket. "Oh. Okay, what do you want to know? I can't remember anything about Rocky, so, so I can't answer any questions about him." She said looking away.

"We understand that, but if you could still answer the questions to the best of your ability, it would help us a great deal." Gloom told

her.

"Alright, what do you want to know sir?" Tulip asked, forcing herself to meet the Sargent's thestral eyes. She managed it for all of three seconds before having to look away again. '-scary Nightmare eyes-'

Gloom cleared his throat, "Actually, it's Prey here who has the questions. Prey, if you would?" He said gesturing the sheep forwards.

Tulip looked back up uncertainly at that, '-the lamb? But, why, how? But earlier...-'

"Um, hello, err, Prey was it?" She asked hesitantly.

"Why yes, sorry for what I asked earlier, I didn't mean any of it like that." Prey said bashfully.

"No, its fine. I didn't-"

"Well that's good," Prey cut in cheerfully, "Because I have lots more questions."

He dropped he smile, "Who do you think took your foal?"

Tulip was taken aback by the sudden change, "I, I don't know anypony-"

"Who would you suspect then? Or to put it another way, who would want to take your foal?" Prey asked.

"I, I really don't know anypony that would want to do something like that. They're all my friends."

"What about Rocky's father?" Prey pushed.

Tulip stalled, "What?"

"You haven't made any mention of his father. Do you even remember who the father was? Evidently, he's not around anymore. Did you part on bad terms? When was the last time you saw him?

Where does he live? Would he have either the motivation or ability to abduct Rocky?" Prey asked, each probing question causing Tulip to stutter as she tried to form a coherent answer. Answers which he read clear in her thoughts.

"What- no that's not possib- But, what if-? No I do-"

Prey sat back on his haunches and regarded her smugly, "Ah, I see, you do have some idea who the father is. From four or five years ago, yes? And you did part on bad terms. Just before or after Rocky was born I'd bet, not that you'd remember. Tell us, what was his name?"

Tulip was looking more and more like a trapped animal, "If, if it's him, it, it would have been..." She looked down in shame, "Patch. Coat Patch." She whispered.

"And where does Coat Patch live? I'm assuming not in Canterlot, so an outlying town or village? Let me guess, your parents wouldn't have approved. Do even you remember that much?" Prey asked, ignoring Gloom's hiss to "tone it down." He was doing this his way.

"N-no, there was no falling out-" Tulip protested.

"Then when was the last time you spoke with them? Why aren't they here right now to comfort you? I thought that's what families were for. Wait don't tell me, you didn't get in contact with them to let them know about what's happening. Now why do you think that is?"

Tulip Bed's jaw worked soundlessly as she gaped at Prey.

He continued, "It's because your memory has been tampered with. Your foal, the father, giving birth, and all the linking incidents have all been removed from your memory. So it's not just the memories of Rocky that have been affected, other things have been lost as well." Prey explained. Crimson and Gloom were looking like they were just beginning to catch sight of the picture Prey was painting.

Prey too was impressed, although for a different reason, 'Whoever did this was very skilled and very thorough. They didn't leave much

behind for me to work with.' It was also worrying. It was increasingly plain that this kidnapping was part of something bigger.

"But, but I-" Tulip gulped, looking close to tears, "I don't know what to do. What else have I forgotten? I don't know, I don't know!" She cried.

"Easy there Tulip Bed. Breathe, we're here to help." Gloom said stepping forwards to offer her a comforting wing.

Tulip flinched back, then flinched again as she realised she'd done so. You could see the thoughts plain upon her face; fear of offending the Night Guard Sargent, fear that she'd been caught doing so, then indecision as Tulip tried to work out if she cared right now, then back to realisation and fear of the situation she was in. It warmed Prey's heart to observe.

"What do I do? Why me?! I don't want this, I don't want to deal with this?" Tulip cried, the first tear starting to slide down her cheek.

Surprisingly, it was Crimson who stepped up. The Waning Moon knows Prey wasn't going to offer her any comfort, and Tulip was too distraught to accept any from Gloom.

"Tulip Bed, your tears solve nothing. The longer we sit here doing nothing, the further away they could be taking Rocky Bed."

Crimson took another step closer, "And also the further away the ones who've done this to you will be getting."

He paused, making sure he had Tulips rapt attention before he continued; "You may not have any memories of your foal to care about that, but you care about what's been stolen from you. Life isn't fair, and if you want justice, you will have to work for it. If you are not willing to try, why should we?" Crimson asked.

Tulip's throat worked as she looked up into Crimson's hard yellow eyes, trying to find an answer, "But I don't-"

"No excuses. Just the truth. Lies are the root of all evils. So answer

me honestly, are you willing to try?" Crimson interrupted, but not as coldly as he could have done.

Tulip hesitated for a long moment, then slowly nodded. She gulped, taking a minute to compose herself enough to be able to talk once again, "Yes, yes I can." She swallowed and sat up straighter, "What do you want me to do?"

"Answer the rest of Prey's questions. It will help find these ponies." Crimson told her, stepping back into line along side Gloom, who gave him a small nod of approval.

Tulip steeled herself and looked to Prey expectantly.

Prey wondered if he should ruin the moment by saying that he didn't actually have anymore questions and had just been going to suggest instead that they went next door and had a look though Tulip Bed's house for tracks.

Prey decided it would be a poorly thought out idea, so instead, he quickly made up a question, "It probably would have been removed from your memories, but we would be remiss in not asking if you remember any strange events that have occurred recently? Shadows outside your window, drawers searched, the garden disturbed, anything like that?" He asked.

Prey already knew the answer. Whom ever this mind Mage was, they'd gone to a lot of trouble to remove all traces of the foal from Tulip's memory. There was no way they would forget to erase any incriminating evidence as well. Still, Tulip gave it her best effort, brow scrunched up as she thought as hard as she could.

However, after a full two minutes she was forced to concede, "I can't think of anything. Nothing's coming to mind. Sorry."

"In that case, we're done here," Prey announced brightly. He looked up at Gloom, "Perhaps we should go search next door now to see if we can find anything. Sir." He suggested.

Gloom nodded, "Thank you for your time Tulip Bed, and for your courage in answering our questions. The Royal Guard will be

remaining outside this residence to protect you. If you do remember anything, anything at all, please let them know. You have my word that we will do everything we can to bring this matter to a close." He assured Tulip.

"Thank you. And I will." Tulip said.

"Will you be alright if we see ourselves out? Or would you like us to call Holly Leaf?"

Tulip sniffed, putting on a wobbly smile, "No, I'll be fine thanks." She answered.

"Moon protect you ma'am." Gloom said by way of goodbye as he led the way out the door. Crimson gave her a parting nod, and Prey didn't even look back.

Gloom passed a couple of words to the Royal Guards on the way out to let them know what was going on, and that they were going into Tulip Bed's house to look for clues.

"Learn anything?" One of them asked.

"Nothing worth mentioning." Gloom called back as they walked out the gate and down the five paces of side walk to the garden path of Tulip's front door.

Even in the short space of time they'd been inside Holly Leaf and Jumping Jack's house, Celestia's sun had cleared the roof tops and was now shining brightly, chasing away the last vestiges of shadows cast in the street.

Prey saw how the thestral Night Guard had to squint and lower his eyes under the bright sun, even in that short walk around to Tulip Bed's house. Crimson, despite having far superior night vision to Prey from what he'd observed, didn't seem overly negatively affected by the higher light levels.

Tulip Bed certainly lived up to her name, the small garden was full of tulips in early bloom. '-that's kind of sad-' Prey caught Gloom thinking as they passed the colourful blooms.

Crimson even stopped briefly to smell a particularly big red one leaning onto the path, but didn't eat it. Prey was slightly tempted, but it would probably make Gloom angry at him.

Besides, he hated tulips.

Author's Notes:

Hello. So, another Chapter, not quite as long as the last two, but I like to think it's good.
As always, if you spot any mistakes, please do point them out. Thanks.

Praise be to editor in chief: **Sweetolebob18**

15.1 A Bed made for Rocky

The door to Tulip Bed's house wasn't locked, which was foolish. Although, it had already been robbed once, and there were Royal Guard's present just next door, so perhaps they assumed it was safe?

Or maybe someone had gotten here first and laid an ambush.

That meant either carefully scouting out the house first to certify if anyone was inside, (always slower) or sending someone in to trigger any possible traps, (fast but risky). Prey never took risks if he could avoid it. He got others to take them for him.

So it was that Prey didn't protest when Gloom pulled the door open and marched boldly in.

No explosions or hail of arrows. Still, it never hurt to be paranoid.

"Come on Prey, keep up." Gloom called back. Prey scowled and cautiously followed Crimson and Gloom in, still listening hard for any signs of trickery.

'Can't hear any unknown ponies thoughts, so probably not an ambush. That just leaves the possibility of traps.' Prey thought as he tiptoed down the familiar looking corridor. The house's layout was an exact copy from Holly Leaf's home next door. The only difference were the pictures and decorations Tulip Bed had chosen to liven up her home.

Prey joined the other two in the center of the living room as they surveyed the place.

A small bookshelf, a table, a sink, cupboards with a foal's hoof paintings tacked on. More tulips in flower pots on the window sills, some children's toys in an open chest, and a couple of brightly patterned floor cushions.

Prey didn't have much experience of what an 'average modern household' looked like, as the only home he'd ever lived in before

prison was the log cabin. But everything about Tulip's house shouted 'ordinary'.

Gloom and Crimson were having much the same thoughts, "I don't see anything out of place sir." Crimson observed.

"No signs of a struggle. This doesn't look promising." Gloom sighed.

"We haven't even checked the other rooms yet, don't you think it's a bit too soon to be giving up?" Prey enquired lightly.

"Not giving up." Crimson grunted.

"We haven't even begun yet. Alright, split up and search the house. We'll rotate and cover every room once each, to double check everypony else's work. Don't touch or move anything if you can help it. See if you can find anything that seems off, no matter how insignificant. Okay?" Gloom asked.

"Yes sir." Crimson answered to Prey's single, "Yes."

"In a house this small, a search won't take long. Call me if you think you've found anything." Gloom said, heading for the first bedroom.

Prey and Crimson shared a glance,"I will search in here. I can more easily reach the top shelves." Crimson said, turning away to begin.

"That leaves me the foal's room," Prey muttered, scowling at the back of Crimson's head, "I see what you did there. Hilarious."

"We will all take turns searching every room. You just happen to be searching in there first. Not everything is always a purposeful mockery of your size." Crimson responded calmly.

"You sound like Sargent Gloom. And don't try and pretend." Prey said, turning and trotting towards the bedroom, "That was one of the times where it *was* purposeful." He called back.

Prey heard something that might have been a grunt from behind him. "Perhaps..." Crimson allowed, "But you should be focusing on what is really important in grim circumstances like these." He finished.

"Grim? We're searching an ordinary house. How is that grim?"

"A foal has been foalnapped. That is grim."

"Please. He isn't currently dripping from the ceiling and were not hoof deep in flies, so it's hardly grim." Prey returned.

Crimson stopped, and looked at Prey for a long moment. Then he shook his head and returned to searching.

Prey rolled his eyes and pushed the door open.

Rocky Bed's bedroom was... More or less what Prey had expected.

A cosy looking cot with blue blankets and fluffy pillows, children's toys scattered on the floor, a child's mobile of pony drawn carts hanging above the bed, happy smiling button eyed stuffed animals dotted about the place to complete the picture of childish innocence.

If Prey'd been sixty years younger, he might have been jealous.

Tulip Bed was by no means the richest pony. In fact, unless he was very much mistaken, she was what Canterlot would call 'lower working class', and an earth pony to boot.

Yet even she as a single mother could still provide more for her foal in this one room than all the children from Gossamer's village had, (excluding the land owner Green Field's own foals) put together. Prey looked down at a wooden toy cart by his hoof and had the irrational urge to kick it. Not because he was jealous, at least not of this. Prey didn't care in the slightest about what Rocky Bed had compared to what he'd had as a lamb.

No, what Prey was envious of was Tulip Bed, who had so much she could give to her ungrateful brat.

Gossamer and Fleece's mother had tried so hard to provide for them, to make them feel like normal children. Yet he'd still caught glimpses of the longing in her eyes as they'd passed tinkers selling

toys. The longing to provide for them. That had made Gossamer sad. It made Prey angry.

Prey shook his head, 'Enough of that.' He had a room to search.

Prey started poking around the room, starting from the door and sweeping the floor back and forth in an increasingly wide arc, making sure he didn't miss anything.

He took note of the toy's position. Did any of them seem like they'd been thrown or knocked aside in a scuffle? No.

How about the faint traces of dust on the window sill? Prey rested his fore legs against the wall and reared up to check. No signs of recent disturbance. While he was there, he also had a look at the window. Still latched.

He sniffed at the bed, closing his eyes to try and find any scent that stood out. Soap, hay, cotton, feathers, a stronger trace of the scent of 'foal' that permeated this bedroom. No, nothing out of the ordinary.

Prey checked under the bed and the pillow. In the toy chest. Across the tops of the skirting board. The window panes. Behind the door. The handle for scratches. The door frame for scuff marks. Anything and everything he could think of that might be helpful.

Nothing stood out, nothing roused his suspicion. Chances were then that Rocky Bed had not been in his room when he'd been taken. Assuming he didn't go with his captor willingly.

He moved back to the center and looked around once more.

Prey frowned, something was off in this room, his gut was telling him so. Whatever it was, it wasn't obvious, or else he would have picked it up straight away. Prey scanned the room again. What was it? What was wrong?

Nothing, everything was as it should be.

"You done in here yet, kid?"

So focused was he that Prey hadn't heard Gloom come to the door. He blamed his bad ear, 'All Luna's fault.' He didn't even call Gloom out on the thestral calling him 'kid' again.

"No, nothing." Prey said, tearing his eyes away from the room, "I take it that you haven't found anything of use yet either or else you wouldn't be in here asking me." Prey said to Gloom.

'-we've got to work on those manners more-', Gloom thought, "Unfortunately, no. But things like this take time and patience, that's why we're taking turnings doing this. Crimson is double checking my area, and I'll be doing yours, so you can go and do his. Then we'll rotate again in a bit. Okay?"

Prey almost rolled his eyes. Gloom had explained the procedure the first time, did he really think Prey would've forgotten? It was perfectly self explanatory in any case. Had Gloom already forgotten he wasn't a lamb?

No, he was being silly. He was just getting riled up because he couldn't put his hoof on what was bugging him.

"Yes I've '*got it*' okay. See you in a bit. Or if I find anything." Prey responded without looking back, heading out the door and into the living room, leaving Gloom to begin his own sweep of the foals bedroom.

Prey moved slowly though the living room, carefully checking it in much the same way that he had the bedroom. The end result? He didn't find anything. Honestly, if the kidnapper had left any obvious clues, they would've been picked up by the Royal Guard already.

And neither were his instincts telling him something was off in here like in Rocky's bedroom. Prey made a note to go back and have another look in there before they left.

Prey was just climbing under the table to check under there, (not something difficult for someone of his stature), when Crimson called, "Sir, I may have found something."

Prey emerged from under the table and followed Gloom hurrying towards the other bedroom, "What do you think you've found?" Gloom asked.

"I do not know if it means anything, but this drawer is empty." Crimson said, waving to a half pulled out drawer in the dresser. Prey couldn't see inside, as the drawer was higher up than his head, but he took the pegasus word for it that it was indeed empty.

Gloom looked in, "Yes, it is. What of it? What is it about this that makes you suspicious?" He asked, sticking his nose into the drawer.

"Because it's empty, sir. Completely. I mean, it looks like somepony emptied it all into a sack and took it away. All the other drawers have something in, even if it's just clutter." Crimson said, leaning over and pulling open the other dresser drawers to show them.

Prey peered into the couple that were low enough down for him to look into, idly shuffling through the contents, "Old cards and invites dating back years, aged letters, scraps of ribbons and bows, two spare bits, a horse shoe nail, the handle from a broken mug, some pressed flowers. Yes, definitely clutter." Prey mused.

"Leave that stuff alone, it's not yours." Gloom instructed absentmindedly, then back to Crimson, "What do you think this could mean?"

Crimson shrugged with his wings, although his face stayed expressionless, "Not sure sir. Maybe there was something important in that drawer. Could be a reason for the foalnapping." He suggested.

"Yes, but unfortunately it's gone, so we have no way of telling." Prey noted sounding bored. He was still thinking about what it might have been in Rocky's room that had thrown him off.

"We could just ask Tulip Bed." Crimson responded.

"Oh yes? Think she'll remember? If it is important, the kidnapper would have removed it from her memory." Prey said.

Gloom and Crimson paused to consider that. "I'm getting

increasingly angry at whoever this guy is. It's filthy, the way they've abused Tulip and her foal, then tried to hide their crime. What's worse is that they're succeeding." Gloom muttered, fangs showing as he glared at the empty drawer as if it were the source of his problems.

"Perhaps the drawer contained details about Rocky Bed, and they removed them to keep from reminding Tulip about her foal, sir." Crimson said.

"Hmm, no. Good idea but it doesn't fit. I mean, Holly Leaf said the foalnapper left pictures of Rocky in the house somewhere, so they're probably not concerned with that. Actually, we haven't found that picture yet, so keep an eye open for it you two." Gloom ordered.

"It's in Rocky's bedroom, framed on the second shelf, a picture of him and his mother pushing him on a swing. Can't miss it," Prey spoke up. It had been unusual to see how realistic one of these photos looked.

"It would be strange after going to such careful lengths removing Tulip's memory to still leave that picture here, unless it was unimportant in the long run. So I think Gloom is probably right that the contents of that drawer weren't linked to Rocky at all. Oh well, nothing that we can do further with an empty drawer." Prey said, shrugging and turning to go back out into the living room.

"It's Sargent Gloom or sir while on duty." Gloom reminded him patiently, "And please try and be a bit more focused, this is serious. A foal is at risk here Prey. A lost, scared little foal." He added quietly.

"Why was he taken? I mean, that's the key to this whole thing isn't it sir?" Crimson abruptly asked.

Gloom nodded thoughtfully, "Yeah, you're right Crimson. We haven't actually stopped to consider that properly yet, but it's both the crime *and* the reason. We just don't know what that reason is. Alright, let's think about this. What do we know? Somepony foalnapped Rocky Bed and removed Tulips memories. Why?"

"They wanted to delay the Guard from coming after them." Crimson suggested.

"Why remove Tulip's memories though? Why not just foalnap her too? It would have been easier. Hmm, *unless* it actually wouldn't have been easier." Gloom mused.

"Could just be one pony sir. I mean, it would be much harder to keep both a foal and a full grown mare tied up and under control." Crimson said.

"Yes...Yes that would make sense. So it's probably only one pony we're dealing with, or two at most. Still, ponies who can use mind magic are very rare, and even fewer from what lieutenant Swift Arrow said could have pulled off something like this." Gloom said, scratching at his chest thoughtfully.

"You've forgotten to ask why a highly skilled unicorn, who has so far gone undetected, would come out of hiding to do something as mundane as kidnap a foal. In Canterlot of all places. Tulip Bed isn't anyone important. She doesn't have any connections or money, so why her foal?" Prey spoke up.

They all went quiet as they thought on that.

"Something about Rocky Bed then. Something special that only his mother knows about. That's why they removed her memories. So she couldn't tell anypony about what made him special." Crimson said, sounding very sure of himself, obviously believing that he had hit on something.

"Or there's nothing special about Rocky, and that's precisely why he was chosen. This could all have been random chance. The kidnapper just wanted a foal for their purposes, and because Rocky and his mother are nobody's, they were targeted." Prey argued.

Crimson's wing did that little flicking motion, as if flicking water off his feathers. Although Prey was no expert on pegasi gestures, it quite accurately conveyed the sense of dismissive disagreement, even if the pegasus didn't vocalise his private thoughts on the matter.

"Alright, let's think Prey's suggestion through. Why might the foalnapper want just any foal rather than Rocky in particular?" Gloom asked, gesturing for Prey to share his thought process.

Prey shrugged, "There's plenty of possible reasons."

Gloom hid a sigh, '-like trying to get blood out of a stone-', "Okay, and those reasons are?" He prodded.

Prey sat back and stroked his uninjured ear absentmindedly as he listed them off; "For a slave market, or someone wanting a hostage for leverage against the Guard, body parts for black magic rituals either for personal use or to auction off, perhaps even for an underground carnivore or cannibal ring, to torture and maim for psychotic amusement, or to sell as a child prostitute-"

"Stop! Just, just stop." Gloom ordered. The thestral closed his eyes and took a steadying breath, "I think we get the idea. It's bad." He said.

"Why were such things the first reasons you could think of?" Crimson enquired, wings looking slightly ruffled at what he'd just listened to.

"Well there's plenty more possible-"

"Thank you that's quite enough Prey." Gloom interrupted hurriedly, '-just glad he didn't start listing off all his horrible suggestions in front of Tulip-'

Prey let out a long suffering sigh, "Alright, I can see when I'm not wanted. What's next then, Sargent? I think we've established that unless we find something else, this empty drawer doesn't tell us much on its own."

Gloom gave the drawer one last inspection before pushing it shut, "Unfortunately, you're right. We need to find something else. Crimson? Any other thoughts?" He asked.

"No, sorry sir."

"In that case, everypony back to their assigned room and keep

looking. There's got to be something else in here that we can use to catch this bastard before it's too late."

None of them found anything further in their second rooms, and so Gloom reluctantly rotated them onto their third and final room. (The kitchen and the living room had both counted as one)

Prey could see that Gloom was starting to feel the pressure. If there wasn't anything in here to clue them in, there wasn't much else that could be done. Crimson looked like he wasn't too happy about their lack of progress either, although he showed it in the stiff way he held his wings.

Prey wasn't sure what they'd expected to find. A convenient map with a big red 'X'? This unicorn kidnapper was obviously very skilled in what they did, and would not make such a mundane mistake as to leave some trace.

Prey was no expert on this sort of thing either, as he had no experience with towns or cities. Urban tracking was an unknown to him, no tracks in the mud or disturbed moss to give away a hint. Instead there were hard floorboards and white washed walls. Gloom and Crimson weren't the only ones out of their depth here.

The difference was, Prey didn't care about the foal Rocky's fate. The world was cruel, another drop in the ocean of injustice made no difference.

The only reason he was making an effort right now was that it would reflect badly on him if he didn't. He was essentially a bond slave in the ISND, and his continued freedom hinged directly on its success, and quite possibly even his continued existence. If the ISND sunk, it was taking all hooves down with it.

"Nothing?" Gloom asked without much hope.

"Nothing sir." Crimson answered, and Prey just shook his head. They had all congregated back in the living room.

Gloom grimaced in frustration, '-now what do I do?-' His thoughts were saying.

They all glanced sideways at each other as they stood silently for a minute in the now abandoned house. It had only been empty for a day, and although there was no destruction or damage to the place, it had been changed for the worse. This place would never act as a sanctuary to Tulip Bed again. This was no longer a home, from now on, this place would be a crime scene.

"Well, if we aren't doing anything else, it's back to the ISND office to write up the reports on our search here, sort out the rest of the paperwork, and start on the other cases we've been given." Gloom announced, trying to hide his frustration.

"Other cases sir?" Crimson asked.

"Yes. There are already a number of stagnant cases lined up for the ISND. We were only assigned to try and help with Rocky and Tulip because Captain Nighthawk requested it, in the hopes that we might find something. The Royal Guard will do their own interview and continue their search until Rocky is found." '-*hopefully*-'

"So we weren't needed in the first place." Prey stated.

"That's not true. We tried our best to help speed this along, as time is of the essence. It's a serious case, a foal has been taken and a mare abused, and the longer it takes, the greater the risk to Rocky Bed." Gloom let out another frustrated sigh and kicked halfheartedly at the sofa.

"Unfortunately, we couldn't find anything. We failed. So the Royal Guard will continue to search until he is found, and I hope for his sake it's soon. Now come on, we've got to report back to Lieutenant Swift Arrow and then write up a report." Gloom said.

"I want to have another look in the foal's room before we leave." Prey announced.

Crimson looked at him sideways, "You want to check the foal's room again?"

"Yes I do. Will that be a problem?" Prey asked sweetly.

"Why?" Gloom asked.

"Thought I might have felt something off in there. So I just want to double check." Prey answered.

Gloom considered for half a second before shrugging, "Can't do any harm."

Rocky Bed's room was exactly the same as it had been when Prey had searched it forty minutes ago. That included the gnawing sensation that something was off in the room.

"Find anything?" Gloom asked. He and Crimson stood in the doorway while Prey sat in the middle of the room, eyes narrowed as he scanned the room once again. 'What is it?' He thought.

Prey looked at the chest of toys again, was it anything to do with that? No, he didn't think so.

How about the window? No, checked that already.

The floor? The rug? The door? The photo? The stuffed animals? No, it was none of those.

Wait. The stuffed animals. Why was there a stuffed sheep half tucked under the covers? Something about it sitting just there seemed...off...

It certainly didn't seem any different, they were all just as colourful and fluffy as each other. The smiling toy dog was the largest, that pegasus doll over there with the lopsided wings was the smallest, and the other assortment of animals and ponies were all somewhere in between.

So why did the sheep doll seem off?

It was hardly the only mock country denizen among the stuffed animals, there was also a goat and a donkey.

Was it because of it's placement in the bed? It wasn't the only toy up there, the goat lay at foot of the bed. So why did his eyes keep coming back to the sheep doll? Yes, Prey was now certain this is what had set his instincts humming, he just didn't know the reason why. Yet.

"What are you doing?" Gloom asked cautiously as Prey walked over to the bed.

Prey ignored him and stood up against the bed frame so he could examine the doll closer. It looked like real wool, cream in colour, with stubby limbs and button eyes, neat little stitches running up the seams.

The doll sat there, half tucked under the covers, inconspicuous and inanimate. Nothing but a toy.

And then Prey knew what it was that seemed off about the stuffed toy, and he didn't like it.

'Zoma'Gricka,' Prey thought with a zebraican curse, 'I've got the shadow of one noose hanging over my head already. I don't need another.'

He could be wrong of course, perhaps just pure coincidence, but there was no way to tell.

Prey hoped it was just healthy paranoia. He had enough on his plate already, what with trying to survive in a military organisation, under an alicorn, while hoping that she didn't notice his runic and mind leech craft.

"Never mind, it was just my imagination." Prey said dropping down from the bed and trotting back over to the door, plastering on a sheepish smile to hide the churning in his gut.

Gloom raised his eyebrow, '-wanted to look at a stuffed toy? Well he is still a kid, although not like any other kid. Never mind, got lots of work left to do-'

"If you're quite finished, let's be off then. We've plenty left to do before the night's, err, the day's out. Hopefully, some of those tasks

are ones we can actually achieve." Gloom sighed.

The two Royal Guards standing guard next door watched them as they exited Tulip Bed's home, Gloom squinting in the sun, and looked smug.

It was obvious that the three of them hadn't found anything in their search of the property, same as the Royal Guard, who'd also come up empty. Prey bet they would have hotly denied it if questioned, but it was obvious that the Royal Guard didn't like it that the Night Guard were sticking their noses into this case.

They were no doubt secretly pleased to see that their previous assumptions about the capabilities of said Night Guard had been proven correct.

'Petty competitiveness in all things military. Even when, as Gloom keeps reminding everyone, a child's life is on the line. Well don't worry,' He thought looking back as they began the return trip, 'I don't think much of you two either.'

His gaze however wasn't for the two Guards. It was for the empty house they were leaving behind and what he'd found.

"Nothing else?" Swift Arrow asked.

"No sir. Just that we believe it is most likely a single unicorn acting alone, that they were very thorough and careful to cover their tracks, and that it is quite likely that Rocky Bed was selected as a foalnapping victim at random." Gloom answered, standing at attention.

Lieutenant Swift Arrow did not look impressed. Some of that was no doubt in part due to the presence of Prey, who picked up from Swift Arrow's thoughts that the lieutenant still thought of him as the '-Nightmare princess's little joke and insult to the Guard-'

Prey stood at something resembling attention, trying not to make

eye contact. His still weak hooves were sore and his legs ached from the long trot back to the palace. But he didn't make any movements to relieve the pressure on his tired hooves, which might have drawn attention to himself from Swift Arrow, who already seemed to hate him.

The captain didn't sound too fond of Crimson either, although that was just because the red pegasus didn't seem to be paying attention.

"Alright. If that's all, then you're dismissed. Write up the report and submit it to me before the end of the shift. We'll be taking over active supervision of this case. Report that to Captain Nighthawk. Kindly shut the door on your way out, Sargent." Swift Arrow ordered.

"Yes sir." Gloom saluted, '-mister high and mighty-' He didn't add aloud.

Prey didn't have to be told twice, and was already half way out the door before Gloom had even finished saluting, wasting no time in putting some distance between himself and the Royal Guard unicorn.

Crimson exited and Gloom closed the door quietly behind them with a click.

They stood there for a moment in the corridor considering what to do next. It was obvious that Gloom was disappointed.

This was the ISND's first job, given to them by Captain Nighthawk himself, and already they had all but admitted they weren't up to the task. The fact that there was nothing more they could reasonably accomplish was beside the point. Gloom, and likely Crimson too, felt like they should been able to do better. The ISND was Princess Luna's creation, and they were failing her.

Gloom took a deep breath, but whatever he was going to say was cut short by a call coming from up the corridor.

"Yoohoo! Sargent Gloom. You still owe me one stack of paper work."

Taffy Hopes came trotting down the corridor with a large grin that managed to look slightly manic on her face, completely ignoring the looks from the two Royal Guards.

"Taffy Hopes ma'am." Gloom acknowledged. '-Moon curse it, I forgot about signing all that paperwork-'

"Hello Gloom, and hello to you too Crimson. You haven't flown off screaming like Driven Snow within your first twenty four hours, so you aren't doing too badly yet." Taffy told Crimson cheerily, coming to a stop in front of them and readjusting the peaked cap on her head.

Crimson blinked slowly, "I don't know what you're talking about, ma'am."

"Oh, you haven't heard that story yet? It's great for a laugh. See, Driven Snow was a new recruit just out from Cloudsdale on his first day, very proud of his natural white plumage, and his Corporal took him down to the castle latrines-"

Gloom cleared his throat.

"-But I guess that story'll have to wait till your Sargent's less busy. Don't think I've forgotten about all that paperwork you promised me Sargent Gloom." Taffy said without missing a beat.

"Thank you for reminding me about that ma'am," Gloom said, sounding very unconvincing in his thanks, "Is there anything else we can help you with till then? No offence Taffy, but I'm kind of running late as it is."

"Just to let you know that your pile of required paperwork has grown since yesterday, and there's a couple of forms that quite urgently need your signature. Not because they're important, just because the records department is getting angsty." Taffy shrugged.

"You came here to tell me that?" Gloom asked dubiously.

"Don't be silly, I'm here to get Lieutenant Swift Arrow to sign these." Taffy said levitating out a sheaf of papers from her standard issue saddle bag, "But as you're already here I just thought I'd say hello to

my favourite bat pony Sargent and remind you that stack isn't going to get any smaller without you doing something about it." She said with a slightly too gleeful grin.

"I'll keep that in mind ma'am. Good nigh-, err, day to you." Gloom said with a forlorn smile of his own.

"Bye, see you then Crimson. I'd better see you soon too Sargent Gloom." Taffy said waving as they continued on and she made for the lieutenants door.

She was just about to knock when she seemed to remember something and jerked her head around just in time to catch a glimpse of Prey as he dodged round the far corner, "Sheep again-?" was as far as she got before they were turning the corner and out of view.

Once again Prey had kept out of sight and mind of the unicorn mare, keeping Gloom or Crimson between them at all times during their conversation. He didn't want to be noticed, no matter how easy going Taffy seemed. She was a unicorn. That was all there was to it. Thankfully neither Gloom or Crimson had noticed his avoidance.

Taffy, by dint of her upbeat presence, did seem to have banished the previous onset of melancholy that had been quietly settling over Gloom and Crimson. They'd already moved on thoughts of their failure and were resolute to go again. Not that they'd been about to give up, only taking a bit of time to rethink and start again. By Prey's evaluation, Taffy had merely sped the process up.

Prey fell into step behind Gloom as he lead them towards the Night Guard section of the palace, no doubt to report as Swift Arrow had ordered him too, despite the fact that Gloom didn't in fact have to answer to the Royal Guard lieutenant.

"Why did you hide from Taffy Hopes?" Crimson asked Prey quietly without looking over.

Prey almost missed a step, but hid it masterfully, "What do you mean?" He said, feigning ignorance quite convincingly.

Crimson swivelled one yellow eye to looked down at Prey as he smiled uncertainly back up, and snorted, not convinced in the least. But that was all Crimson said on the subject. The red pegasus saw more than he let on. From behind a bemused expression Prey cursed Crimson's mental walls and silently vowed to be more careful in the future.

Gloom stopped in front of the Night Guard lieutenants open door, Prey saw from Gloom's thoughts it was a thestral by the name of Starry Wing, and peered in.

It wasn't Starry Wing in the office though. It was a different thestral going by the title '-Sargent Major Sharp Tang-'. Again, this information was picked out of Gloom's thoughts as he recognised the pony inside. Sharp Tang was busy signing a heap of papers, and only looked up once Gloom cleared his throat.

"Sir, is Lieutenant Starry Wing here?" Gloom asked.

"No, I am covering until he gets back Sargent." Sharp Tang answered.

A Sargent major was only one rank lower than a Lieutenant. Sharp Tang was a large thestral and his eyes held an intimidating quality as he put down the quill he was using and regarded Gloom. "Is there something I can help you with instead?"

"Do you know if Captain Nighthawk is in his office, sir?"

"No. His duties have taken him off the palace grounds. What did you want to see him about Sargent? Is it about the foalnapping?" Sharp Tang asked, his question showing that he was in the loop about the investigation. The Sargent major's hard gaze flicked over to Crimson and Prey where they stood behind Gloom, and Prey was able to catch, '-does Gloom perhaps want to raise a concern about these two scum suckers? It better not be trivial-'

"Sir, we've just returned from the city after conducting an interview and search of Tulip Bed's house. I'm sorry sir, but we couldn't find anything further of note. I came to report to Captain Nighthawk that lieutenant Swift Arrow and the Royal Guard have taken over

active supervision of the investigation." Gloom answered, standing stiffly at attention and reciting his message to the empty space just a couple of inches above Sharp Tang's head.

The Sargent major merely nodded once, "Understood Sargent Gloom. I will inform the Lieutenant and Captain when they return. I have been ordered that we will continue to offer our assistance and expertise on this case to the Royal Guard. Was there anything else?"

"Nothing pressing sir. I'll address them to Captain Nighthawk when next I give him my report sir." Gloom answered. Prey wasn't an idiot, what Gloom would be 'addressing' was him and Crimson to the Captain.

"Very good. Do you have your further orders Sargent?" Sharp Tang asked.

"For the ISND? Yes sir, Captain Nighthawk gave them to us."

"Carry on then. And keep an eye on that one, Sargent." Sharp Tang ordered, looking directly at Crimson. The Night Guard Sargent major had dismissed Prey as a threat, and didn't even seem to think Prey was worthy of his distrust. Crimson didn't seem outwardly phased by Sharp Tang's hostility, but his mental walls tensed at the officers words.

"Yes sir." Was the only answer Gloom could give. Regardless of his personal opinions, Sharp Tang was his superior.

Those orders that the Sargent major had referenced were pretty much the same ones Gloom had spoken of back in Tulip's house. Namely; finish cleaning out the ISND office they'd been allotted, and deal with the paper work.

Gloom dropped a form in front of each of them and pushed a quill across the table top. Except it wasn't a table, because they didn't have a table, and was instead the floor boards.

"Sir?" Crimson asked, looking down at his paper.

"I'm not sure if you've picked up on it or not yet, but the Royal Guard basically runs on paper work. The records department thrives on this stuff, and I'm afraid you're gonna' have to get used to filling out these things after every mission, however small and mundane. Captain Nighthawk doesn't think much of this way of doing things, and from what little I've heard, Princess Luna doesn't approve either. But for now, that's just the way things are." Gloom said apologetically.

Crimson grunted and picked up the quill in his teeth, and began filling out the form with a surprisingly smooth and flowing script. Evidently, his father hadn't neglected Crimson's academic advancement in favour of warrior training.

Prey leaned across the table top with the tip of his hoof and managed to snag the corner of his paper. It was titled 'Form B-39A'. Prey could only speculate at what leap of the imagination the clerk who'd designed this form had been blessed with to come up with such an uninspired name.

Once Gloom had found another quill for Prey, the contents of the form proved to be just as boring as its name. That was just the beginning.

"Sir..." Crimson trailed off, frowning down at the piles of folders in front of him, seemingly struggling to find words, "...I don't understand what I'm doing." He finished, some real frustration working its way into his normally flat tone.

Once 'Form B-39A' had been filled in, Gloom had taken them back with a muttered curse about how'd he'd have to "take them back to Taffy," and "get ambushed". Then he'd retrieved one of the boxes filled with files labelled 'A.C.P.', and given each of them a pile.

Apparently these were 'Active Cases in Progress', or cases that were open but with no one currently working on them.

Which really meant that the Royal Guard or whomever had filed the report had hit a dead end, either due to lack of information or

evidence, and couldn't do anything further. Or had just been too lazy to see it through.

"Right. The first thing to do is sort through these and see which are important cases, and which are not." Gloom instructed.

"Are not all these crimes serious?" Crimson asked.

Gloom waggled his hoof in the air back and forth as if to say 'sort-of-maybe'.

"Yes and no. See, not all of these reports here are necessarily crimes. Some might be too old or lack enough evidence to work on, or just even anomaly reports. And of the actual crimes or suspected crimes, only a few of these are important enough to concern the ISND."

Crimson's wing did that little flick, "Sir, I think every crime somepony commits is important. I mean, at least to the victims. I thought it was our duty within the Night Guard and as Princess Luna's Watcher's to bring justice."

Gloom nodded, "Yes, you're right. I don't mean to trivialise crime, far from it. What I meant was that..." He paused to try and find the word.

"To put it simply, the ISND is small. It's just us three. But Princess Luna knows what we're capable of, and she knows that we will do our best. I wish we could stop all these crimes," Gloom said waving a leathery wing down at the files, "But we can't. We must best utilise our time. We are the Intelligence and Secrecy department. Pertinent things are what we must focus on, and trust in the rest of the Guard to do the rest. Our duty is to do everything we can, and once we have, leave the rest in the hooves of the Princess's."

Crimson seemed suitably impressed by Gloom's little impromptu speech. Prey *might've* given the Sargent some credit for his quick thinking, if he couldn't see from Gloom's thoughts that the Sargent had been on the receiving end of almost the exact same speech from the Night Guard captain just recently.

"Alright, let's get to it." Gloom said, picking up his first file out of

the box.

Prey doubted that any of these files would contain anything serious enough to be worth getting worked up about, except by soft pony standards, but he wasn't about to tell that to Gloom. Besides, this might help distract him from the leaden weight of worry sitting in his gut.

There was the threat of what would happen if Luna had found out about his runic capabilities. Although with every passing minute, that danger slowly decreased.

The Night Princess didn't strike Prey as the sort to sit back and dilly dally. If Luna was going to do something, she would've done it by now. Whatever the alicorn decided was best, she would see through without flinching or second guessing herself, no matter how bloody.

So either Luna hadn't caught on, or she already knew but wasn't concerned.

The second thing eating away at Prey was what he'd seen in Tulip Bed's house. That stuffed sheep in the bed and the possible message that it bore.

'But who could have sent me a message? Everyone I've ever known is long dead. Who else?' It couldn't it be one of the Solar Guard's who'd dragged him from Dreverton, for a whole host of obvious reasons.

First, why would they, a devoted Guard, commit a crime just to leave him a cryptic message? Second, they didn't have mind magic and detested its use in any form, and third, none of them should be able to remember him anyway.

But who else could it be? Unless it wasn't anyone he knew, but was a new player in the shadows. But how would they know what he really was? There was something he was missing here, Prey was sure if it.

That or he was being paranoid and had imagined the whole sheep doll message thing.

Either way, the most he could do was remain alert and vigilant.

Prey had been right about his previous assessment. He didn't find any case file he thought was serious enough to even consider investigating. Not that he had a choice. The golden slave bands robbed his right to just get up and walk away from this stupidity.

So Prey picked a couple of files that didn't seem very dangerous, and dropped them infront of Gloom, "There. These two."

He saw that Crimson had his own pile of cases he considered to be important at his hooves. Which basically meant his entire pile.

Gloom, rather interestingly, had two separate piles.

Prey pointed at the first pile, which was made up of three thick files, bursting at the seams with loose pages "What are those ones, and why are they singled out as important?" He asked bluntly.

"I'm glad you asked," Gloom said, splaying out the three files infront of them, "These three are active, large scale, ongoing cases. They involve multiple ponies and span multiple years. Captain Nighthawk wants us to work on these three no matter what, and my talent agreed with him." Gloom paused to answer the unasked question in Crimson's eyes.

"Yes, these three are the most important cases, but because they've been ongoing for so long, it just shows nopony has made any real progress either. I expect it'll be equally slow going in trying to solve them. We'll probably spend half our time working on other stuff between these three big ones. That's why we're picking out other folders that you thought were important." Gloom explained.

Crimson nodded slowly, "I see sir. Thank you for explaining."

"No problem," Gloom smiled, "Now, let's have a look at these three fat bookends."

Gloom opened the first of the three large folders and barely managed to stop papers from going everywhere, "Oops. Here, give

me a hoof."

Between them, or between Crimson and Gloom with Prey acting like he was helping, they spread out some of the sheets into a more legible format across the floor.

Prey picked up a page, eyes darting across it as he sped read it, "...Unknown dealer source... no indication if supply is increasing or decreasing... stop and search revealed nothing..." Prey lowered the paper, "A drug den?" He asked flatly. This was what constituted one of the three most serious unsolvable problems in Canterlot?

"Yes, although unfortunately it's a bit bigger than just one den." Gloom said, sliding another page across the floor towards him.

Prey didn't more than glance at it, reading what it said out of Gloom's thoughts, "A network spread throughout the lower city, but nothing the Guard does against them seems to do more than superficial damage. You stop one salt ring or dealer, and another pops up on the other side of the city." Prey stated, not asked.

"Er, yeah that's correct." Gloom answered, slightly thrown.

"Salt? I know it's not good for you and can be addictive if you eat too much, but ponies cook with it. Is it that serious, sir?" Crimson asked.

"It's not the kind you cook with. It's unrefined, more potent." Gloom answered, pulling out a couple of sheets and showing them around, "See? It's been going under the radar for almost two years. We can't even be sure it's only one gang supplying it, but for now the circumstantial evidence seems to support that theory."

Prey held back a laugh at how pathetic this was. If he'd been so inclined, or wanted to help, (or if he'd cared), he could have cracked this problem like a rotten egg.

It would be so simple to solve. Merely capture one salt user, break into his mind and trace back who'd sold it to him. Then go and do the same to that pony, and so on and so on back up the chain of command until he encountered the ring leader. But obviously he

wasn't going to do that. It would reveal him as a mind leech.

Sure, in the end, he was probably going to be the one who had to solve this case for these incompetent Guards, just like with the Solar Guards. But he was going to take his sweet time with the situation and bleed it dry for everything that he could first.

From what little he'd heard, he was already certain that someone in the Guard was in on this salt trade, so he could-

"Any ideas how we're going to go about solving this? Crimson? Prey?" Gloom asked, interrupting the lambs plotting.

Prey shrugged, "Doesn't seem like too much you can do. You say it's been going on for years, so they must have some idea what they're doing and how to avoid detection. They're obviously well established, so you've got to be cautious. Can't be reckless or rush into things."

Prey pretended to consider, brushing his ear back as he looked up thoughtfully at the ceiling, "You might want to start by trying to find out where they're getting their salt from. Someone's got to be bringing it in from outside Canterlot, but how? Trains, crates, imports, courier, pegasi, or dead drops? How about trying to get a pony in on the streets? Infiltrate them as a common thug and see what they can learn." He suggested.

Prey could see from Gloom's face that the idea of infiltrating this gang by pretending to be one of them hadn't occurred.

Which was likely also why he hadn't caught on that someone, or rather some*pony*, in the Guard was in on this deal. The Guards? Give into temptation? Traitors? Never.

"That is..." Crimson started.

"An excellent idea. Lots of ideas. Hmm, some of that is quite interesting. Did you just come up with all that off the top of your head?" Gloom asked.

"Yes."

There was a bit of a pause as the two ponies considered Prey and the open case file before them.

"Hmm..." Gloom murmured distractedly, mulling over Prey's suggestions. Then he seemed to remember that they were supposed to be working.

*"Alright, that's the first case file. But as Prey said, it's going to take time. We'll see about trying to get help implementing some measures like Prey suggested, but that's for later. We still have these other two ongoing cases that're going to be playing a big part in our lives for the next however long." Gloom said, and pushed forwards the other two thick files.

"Right, the second case is, well, it's herd control. Sort of." Gloom opened the file in question and spreading out some of its contents.

"Out in some of the more rural towns, mainly around and along the railroad, large scale disputes keep cropping up and fights breaking out. It usually involves more than one crowd, and so it can get quite violent with lots of ponies involved. The local magistrates lock up the offenders for a week or so, but that's about all they can do, and then a month down the line there's another fight. Now here's the thing, these disturbances all seem to be connected."

"Sir?" Crimson questioned.

Gloom cleared his throat and returned to lecture mode, "Despite these fights and disturbances happening in different towns, the underlying theme is the same; distrust. The how and why varies, but it always seems to be enough to ignite into all out brawls. There have been multiple hospitalisations, many serious and some even life threatening, but thank Luna no deaths so far."

"And this is a problem for the ISND specifically rather than other Night Guards because...?" Prey asked.

"Because of how strange these are. Here's the thing, none of these problems seem like they should be big enough to spark into conflict. Look;" Gloom said, pulling out a couple of sheets and beginning to read from them.

"Dispute over crop exchange rates between two farmers somehow over the course of a week evolved into a brawl between more than thirty ponies."

Gloom flipped the page over, "Here's another. A couple of ponies came into town looking for work. A short while later half the town hated them and the other half hated the first half, which ended in another massive punch up. Nopony even knows what they were fighting over, everypony interviewed gave a different answer."

"Another example, dissatisfaction with the magistrate over how well the streets were lit at night. One week after, the unicorns and earth ponies had banded together and burned out the pegasi weather team's homes."

"What?" Crimson asked.

"Yeah I know, not really sure why that's connected, but that's apparently how it all started. But that's just what makes Captain Nighthawk certain that somepony is spreading malcontent and sedition through the outer settlements. How else would this disharmony keep cropping up? We know it's all connected, just not how." Gloom sighed.

"So that is where we come in I'm guessing?" Prey asked, although it wasn't really a question if everyone already knew the answer.

"Got it in one kid, oops, sorry, I mean Prey. But yeah, we've got to investigate and find out who's doing this, and then bring them to justice. Whoever is doing this seems to just be doing it for their own sick amusement. They must be stopped." Gloom announced.

"This is more serious than the salt gang sir. Or it demands a more immediate solution at least." Crimson said.

"I agree," Prey spoke up, "But I disagree that we should do anything about it."

"What?!"

"*Ourselves*." Prey emphasised, "This problem is too wide spread. You will definitely need to call in the Night Guard or Royal Guard to

assist you, I mean us, with this one. Otherwise we've no hope of halting this problem as it continues to spread."

"What do you mean exactly, Prey?" Gloom asked, much calmer this time.

Prey picked up a sheet and showed it to them, "It's simple, see this?"

"Yes, you're waving it right under my nose."

"What does it say? Right there at the top, under the heading."

"It's the date." Gloom deadpanned.

"Well done sir, you can read as well as me, the nine year old runt lamb. But look here at this one, and this one and this one," Prey said pulling out respective sheets that he had noted while Gloom was flicking through, "What do you see about the dates?" He asked.

"They're about two to three weeks apart. Whomever is doing this is travelling from one town to the next. We already know this. How does it help us Prey?" Gloom answered, ignoring Prey's jab.

"If you look at the areas, it does. One area is hit after the other, but unless I miss my guess, each town or village affected seems to be the next stop up from the previous one, if you follow the rail road. Roughly. Before they rotate back to this first town and set up another disturbance." Prey told them, laying out the papers in date order to clearly illustrate his point as he continued.

"There are a few exceptions like Farm Gate here, but it's just a small village so they could reasonably have skipped it. Point being, they're town hopping, and being systematic about it. So if you know where they were last, you can probably work out where they are going next." Prey explained patiently. Really, he didn't get enough credit for being as patient as he was.

"Really?" Gloom asked, surprised as he lent over to check for himself. '-something really that simple?-'

"That's great. Well done Prey. While there's still loads of ponies in each town and travellers passing through every day, that still helps

narrow it down." Gloom congratulated Prey while still considering the open file. The he frowned and glanced up, "How do you know that all of those towns were in a line travelling along the rail road? I don't think it mentions it in here."

"I have seen a map before you know. Sir." Prey answered. In fact it was one of the maps he'd taken the opportunity to memorise while being held prisoner by Captain Valour and the Solar Guard. And the fools hadn't thought to stop him either.

"Is your memory always so sharp? Can you recall anything on demand?" Crimson asked.

Prey smiled wryly, "I wish, but unfortunately no," He lied, "I do have a good memory, but I can't recall everything. Things like dates, numbers, times and places yes, but on other stuff I think I'm just a bit better than average."

Never let your enemies know what you can do.

"That is still a most impressive memory." Crimson told him.

"Thank you." Prey responded, making sure to sound polite.

He noted that Crimson had been giving him a fair number of compliments and conversation starters over the course of the day, albeit in a stilted, monotone and forced manner. That meant he wanted something, something Prey couldn't read from his walled off thoughts. Good, Prey could understand people when they were working for their own benefit.

Prey made a note to more carefully evaluate all of Crimson's actions in the near future to figure it out. If he survived long enough that is. The 'doll-leaver' and Princess Luna might yet see him dead before the end of the day.

"Yes, I can see you're going to do well in the ISND." Gloom said, returning them to the topic of the three files. '-just wish a foal weren't needed-' He thought.

"So," Gloom added, "What do you all think we should do about this? We can roughly work out which area is going to be hit next, but

that doesn't help us much if we still can't stop them, whoever they are."

Crimson shuffled his wings and spoke carefully, "Sir, I think we might have success if we can go to the town we think will be affected next, to investigate any newcomers. From hiding, I mean." He gave a tiny frown, "But there would be too many ponies for just us to follow. We would need help." Crimson didn't sound thrilled by the prospect of asking for help.

"Or you could just make a list of the new arrivals, wait for the town to have its little riot, then on at the next town make a second list. See who matches up on both lists." Prey suggested.

He was getting tired of this, having to listen to all these details he didn't care about, for a problem which should've been simple for these idiots to have stopped long ago. It wasn't like he was here by choice after all. Yet still he remained patient, getting frustrated would only negatively affect his decision making.

"Prey, you are suggesting we just let the first town descend into chaos as a sacrifice to catch them in the second. We've already had this conversation. Doing things like that isn't acceptable. Don't make me keep repeating myself." Gloom sighed.

Prey sniffed and looked away, unphased. It wasn't his fault they refused to think about this logically, "Well then Crimson is right. You're going to need additional bodies to help shadow these suspects."

"*We're* going to need additional help." Gloom reminded him.

"Yes, sorry, my bad sir." Prey said humbly, ducking his head and not meaning a word of it.

"That's okay, but anyway. We have a rough plan. When Captain Nighthawk returns, I'll present it to him and we'll see about getting some help with this one. I'm kind of surprised nopony has tried this yet. Or maybe they have and it didn't work. I'll have to ask about that too, but for now, let's quickly review the last file before we go." Gloom said.

Prey felt like groaning, but hid it under a polite mask of interest. This was idiotic. What a waste of his time. Every minute spent here bound to this ISND just made him hate ponies all the more. Perhaps Gloom was also growing tired of this, as he thankfully kept the explanation of the third file brief.

"This one is a fair bit more general. We've been assigned with fixing the leaks in the Guard-"

"Leaks?" Crimson asked.

"Security or information leaks." Gloom explained, "Over the years, mistakes have been made which led to the leaking of classified information to the public. These breaches have been noted and corrected where they can. However, some must still be occurring. Maybe they're intentional, maybe they're not. Doesn't matter, our overarching task as the ISND is to monitor and put a stop to all these breaches over the course of our career." Gloom paused and looked at both of them in turn.

"I don't imagine we'll be very popular. Ponies in the Guard, especially the Royal Guard, will see us as inspectors spying on them.", '-and because we're Night Guards-'

"And we're going to be doing this every day. I seriously doubt we'll uncover any plot to overthrow the Princesses, as nopony would want to do that. But Canterlot is the seat of power, and with that comes politics." He grimaced, like he'd bitten into something sour, "Nobles and underlings bicker and back bite all the time, and it's their actions were going to have to keep a sharp eye on."

Prey could tell that Gloom was, for his part, quite intelligent. As far as ponies went anyways. Yet from Gloom's thoughts, he could also tell that the Sargent felt out of his depth. He'd explained quite clearly what they were going to be doing, and showed no uncertainty in his outward bearing, but on the inside he didn't really have a clue how they were going to be doing most of this stuff.

It came as some satisfaction to Prey to see that his jailer was also having a hard time with what was being asked, no, *demanded*, of

them.

Crimson just looked his usual unflappable, brooding self. Perhaps with the slightest expression of determination. No doubt determination to not disappoint Princess Luna.

"So," Prey started with a big, beaming smile that made his blue eyes sparkle with false enthusiasm, "How do we start Sargent Gloom?"

'-ahh Tartarus-'

What they, or rather Gloom decided upon, was that it would be best to start by pinning all of the files up to the wall and start adding their own notes and bits of coloured string to link anything they could find together.

This encountered a problem when they didn't have any coloured string. Or pins. Or cork boards to use those pins on. Or nails to put the boards up with. Or a hammer.

Frankly, Prey thought creating a visual brainstorm map was a waste of time. For him at least. He did however concede it might be useful for people with less disciplined minds than his own. Prey could recall anything and everything. But he'd told Gloom and Crimson that his memory wasn't perfect, only excellent. So it would be best to maintain that lie by using said pointless cork boards, which they finally obtained from a much put upon supply clerk.

However, once they'd obtained their supplies, they (or rather Crimson and Gloom because Prey was too short to reach) didn't have time to do more than nail the boards up before they were informed by a thestral Night Guard that; "Captain Nighthawk is back in his office and would like you to report in, Sargent Gloom."

"Thank you Cleft Fang, we'll be there shortly."

The head of Cleft Fang nodded once, gave Prey a look, '-lamb? Thought they were joking-', and withdrew from the half open door.

With a small sigh Prey pushed himself onto his tired hooves, while

Crimson dropped the hammer and Gloom grabbed their report. Then they all trooped out the door.

Captain Nighthawk's office wasn't what one would typically expect when the words 'Captain' and 'Office' were used together.

It was dim, small, almost to the point of being cramped, and was loaded with bits of dented armour that had seen better days, and, surprise surprise, more paper work.

All in all, it gave the feel of a spartan or minimum requirement office. There was nothing in the office that made it feel personal, as even the armour looked like it was just getting stored here until further notice, and Prey supposed that the dimness didn't affect the thestral Captain.

"Sargent Gloom, thank you for coming so swiftly. What is your report on the case of Tulip Bed and the foalnap of her son?" Nighthawk asked in his gruff tone. He'd been furiously scribbling away at some papers when they'd filed in.

Gloom stood at attention and began his recital, "Sir, we went to the scene and investigated it, and interviewed Tulip herself, who is staying next door with friends until she recovers, and is under Guard. We didn't find much, whomever did this was thorough, and left no evidence in the house-"
"No traces of blood?" Nighthawk asked.

"No sir. I'm almost positive that there wasn't a struggle." Gloom quickly answered, before hurrying on with his explanation.

"All we found in the house was an emptied drawer, which may or may not have been relevant, but because of Tulip's memories being removed, we can't ask her what was in it. I've written it all up in full here, sir." Gloom said moving to hoof over their reports he'd brought.

Captain Nighthawk waved it away, "I'll read the copy Taffy sends me later. For now, I want to hear it in your own words." He said.

"Yes sir. We interviewed Tulip to see what we could learn from her, but I'm afraid that whomever did this was very good at their vile magic. They left nothing in her memories of relevance, everything she ever knew about her own son is gone, sir."

Nighthawk nodded slowly, looking grim, "I feared as much. It almost sounds like the incident the Solar Guards dealt with two months ago, but they assure me that the unicorn responsible died attempting to avoid pursuit, so it can't be him."

'Her.' Prey silently corrected.

"Any theories on motives or possible suspects?" Nighthawk asked.

"Yes and no sir. It was actually Prey who put the pieces together enough to get a picture." Gloom said.

Prey wanted to kick him, hadn't he told Gloom already that he didn't want any recognition? He wanted to fade into the background where no one would think he was a threat.

"Oh? Please explain." Nighthawk said, looking over the desk and down to Prey.

"Prey here, after talking with Tulip, he brought up some excellent concerns, and also the possible fact that this was a crime of opportunity rather than targeted at the Bed family in particular. It is most likely Rocky Bed was stolen because he was a nopony, and the foalnapper wanted to avoid notice as much as possible."

"That rules out ransom or hostage situations." The Captain noted, working his jaw thoughtfully, and Prey got a nice view of the four long incisors in his mouth. "That does not bode well. If there is no clear motive, it's going to be much harder to track this foalnapper down."

"Yes sir." Gloom agreed.

"So how will you proceed?" Nighthawk asked.

Gloom coughed, "Lieutenant Swift Arrow has taken over active investigation of this case. The Royal Guard are still conducting their

sweeps and searches-"

"Swift Arrow took over?" Nighthawk interrupted.

"Yes sir." Gloom answered.

Captain Nighthawk's eyes narrowed ever so slightly, and his yellow orbs began to smoulder, giving him the look of a pony contemplating explosive violence. "I see." Was all he said.

Because Prey could hear Nighthawk's thoughts, he knew that the Captain wasn't actually contemplating violence against the Royal Guard lieutenant. Partly for the reason that it would break the trust Princess Luna had placed in him, and partly because it was too extreme of a reaction. In that order. So instead, he limited himself to just thinking about it.

"Sir? Should we continue anyway or should we break it off...?" Gloom inquired, a tad hesitantly.

"No, leave any further investigation with the Royal Guard. Just continue on as normal Sargent." Nighthawk answered, pushing aside his thoughts of violence. Abruptly, his interest turned to the other two people in the room, '-was her majesty right offering them a second chance? Time will tell-'

"Crimson," Captain Nighthawk said, for the first time addressing the pegasus, "Answer me a question, what was your interpretation of this foalnapping?"

Crimson didn't hesitate, like he'd been expecting the question or perhaps had been already asking it himself.

"Sir, I think that Tulip Bed is going to need help in the future. Prey noticed it, but she doesn't realise what's been stolen from her, only that she's been stolen from. She will have problems. Everything else Sargent Gloom has already covered sir." Crimson answered, with a small, deferential dip of his head.

Nighthawk returned his nod, "Your concern is duly noted. Keep up the good work and stay alert. Ever watching." He said, repeating part of the Night Guard creed.

From matching Gloom and Nighthawk's thoughts that automatically moved to fill in the rest of it, the full motto went: '-Ever watching. Always there. Strike swift and true. Guardians of the night-'. A bit pretentious in Prey's opinion, but it probably got the point across.

"And your interpretation, Prey?" Nighthawk asked, turning his heavy gaze on the lamb.

"Much like Crimson sir. I think that Sargent Gloom has already said everything I could've wished to say." Prey replied readily, keeping it polite.

The Night Guard Captain wasn't satisfied with just that. "I am sure you have more you want to say. You were far more vocal about your opinions when you appeared before Her Majesty the other night. Not so talkative now?"

Prey didn't respond, just kept up the polite smile.

"I asked you a question, private." Nighthawk rumbled.

Prey knew that the Night Guard Captain was trying to more fully get his measure, seeing if Prey was daring enough to test his limits after only a few days imprisoned here. It wasn't hard to deduce, and being able to read the Captain's motivations directly from the thestrals own brain removed any guessing from the equation.

"Sorry sir, that I was. I hope you'll forgive me for that. Imprisonment and injury tend to bring out the worst in me I'm afraid sir." He answered, still keeping up that infuriatingly polite smile, lifting a hoof to indicate his bandaged ear.

Nighthawk regarded him levelly for a few moments more before he snorted and returned his attention to Gloom, "Thank you for your time, Sargent. Please return to your duties. Oh, and your time schedule will shortly be returning to normal. Dismissed." He said, picking up his quill again. His thoughts added, '-ask Gloom later what the sheep meant by injury-' As they filed back out the door.

"Come on, I may as well give these others to Taffy and the lieutenant before we head back." Gloom said, holding up the

reports.

Dropping off Swift Arrow's copy of the report as he'd demanded was the simple part. They simply retraced their steps from earlier into the Royal Guard section of the palace, got the weird looks that went along with it, and left the report on his desk. He wasn't in at the time.

'-probably out polishing his armour-' Gloom's derisive thoughts read, before the thestral chided himself for thinking something so foalish.

Giving the report to Taffy Hopes proved to be a far more arduous task.

"Sargent Gloom, do come in. The pile is just waiting for you to make a start on it. I've got a fresh quill and ink pot from the supply cupboard just for you because there's so much of it." Taffy announced with glee the moment Gloom walked through the door.

Gloom cast a longing look back over his shoulder at the door that Crimson had followed him through, as if contemplating making a run for it, but apparently he knew there was no getting out of this. Prey snuck in unobserved.

"I, er, have another report here Taffy-" Gloom started.

"I'll stamp it and take it down to the records department with the rest before I go home," Taffy said waving it aside. "But you, sit yourself down over there and start signing these." She finished, pointing at a free chair amid the clutter and levitating up one of the enormous stacks of paper.

Gloom sighed and shuffled over, "Are you sure you aren't just pulling my wing Taffy? There's hundreds here."

"Yep, I'm sure. So the sooner you start the sooner you finish. Until then, I'm just going to amuse myself by talking to your NCO over

here." She said cheerfully, indicating Crimson.

"Not an NCO, ma'am." Crimson answered.

"He and Prey are technically both just special division privates." Gloom told her around the quill in his mouth, as he dipped it and made a half hearted start on the stack of papers.

"Oh? Now that is interesting, special division. You must tell me Crimson, how did you get into the princess's new Night Guard division and become a special division private- Wait, who's Prey?" Taffy asked, screeching to a halt midway through her slew of questions.

'Zoma'Gricka.' Prey cursed at Gloom for mentioning him.

Up until now, he'd been succeeding in avoiding the attention of the frazzled unicorn mare. But as Crimson answered Taffy's question by gesturing with a wing towards his hiding place, it seemed that the manticore was out of the net.

Prey slunk out from behind the paper pile, trying not to look like easy prey and offered Taffy a bright a smile as he could manage, "Hi."

Taffy Hope's eyes slowly widened with something approaching glee. She opened her mouth to launch into something no doubt sweet and gushing, but then, against Prey's expectations, she apparently remembered herself. "Ehrem, I'm sorry, did you say your name was Prey little guy?" She asked, working hard to keep her enthusiasm in check.

"Yes." Prey answered cautiously.

Crimson and Gloom were both watching with interest to see what unfolded. Taffy's tail seemed to almost be vibrating with the amount of suppressed excitement she was obviously keeping contained. Prey anxiously eyed her as she cleared her throat again.

"Ehem* Well, it's lovely to finally meet you Prey. So you're with Sargent Gloomy over here, eh?"

"Sargent Gloom." Gloom muttered to no avail.

"I've been catching glimpses of you, you know, like when you first came here? And then later in the corridor? Oh it all makes sense now! You know you could have said something right? There's no need to be shy, I just love meeting new faces. Tell me darling, what's your favourite type of fudge? Caramel? Toffee? Chocolate? Strawberry? Banana? Cherry? Sunburst? Rose?"

It seemed that restraining herself had been too much, for by the end, Taffy was on the edge of her seat, with a huge grin plastered across her face.

Prey shuffled back a bit, cautiously watching the mares horn, "I do not have one. I don't think I've ever had fudge. It was never a luxury that was available where I come from." He answered.

"What? How come-Wait! You're just copying what Red said." Taffy protested.

"Crimson, ma'am." Crimson interjected.

"That's not a proper answer, wait wait, you were in here then as well too?" Taffy asked, staring at Prey.

Prey just shrugged, "Probably. You weren't looking very hard if you didn't see me."

"He was hiding from you." Gloom said, not looking up from the paper he was signing.

"What? Why? Don't be scared, I promise I don't bite." Taffy said, rising and taking a step towards Prey with a big fake look of hurt on her face, obviously angling for a hug.

'Because you biting me was the first time I was worried about. Not, say, your magic.' Prey thought, backing up further.

"My name is Prey-"
"-He's not a kid." Gloom added, still not looking up.
"-and don't touch me." Prey finished.

Taffy didn't seem to hear that last part and kept coming, "Aww, don't be like that. You'll wish you were still a foal when you're grown up. Enjoy it while it lasts."

Prey dodged behind Crimson, using the pegasus as some sort of meat shield, "Ma'am, as Sargent Gloom told you, I am a special division private of the ISND. I am just a runt, not a lamb, please don't treat me like one, and don't touch me." He hurriedly recited.

That finally seemed to get through to her, and she came to a stop, "Wait, you're actually a private?!" Taffy asked in disbelief.

"Yes ma'am. He was recruited the same time as me, and has so far been very efficient as we have performed our new duties." Crimson said, answering on Prey's behalf.

"But-but he's still just a foal!" She turned to Gloom, "He's just a foal, tell him right?" She demanded.

"Technically he's a lamb ma'am," Gloom said, taking a moment to carefully blow on a piece of paper to make the ink dry, "And yes ma'am, he's a private in the ISND."

Taffy gaped at them for a moment, "But Sargent...". '-just a foal, just a foal, just a foal, can't be in the Guard-!'

"Ma'am, Prey is not a lamb. Not really. I mean, he just looks like one." Crimson put in in his usual flat way. His eyes slid over to Prey, and Prey could see him wondering about something.

Taffy still seemed to be having trouble accepting what she'd just been told, "But, I mean, that's not allowed- but why would Princess Luna-?" She stuttered.

Prey wondered why she was taking the supposed conscription of a child so badly, when the other Royal Guards they met at breakfast had completely ignored it.

After a quick examination of the facts, he determined that the source of Taffy's upset was that, unlike the Royal Guards, she was not a military officer and so wasn't opposed to the Night Guard. Nor was she bothered by people like Gloom, unlike most other ponies. It

seemed that Taffy had an open mind and she actually cared.

Simply put, she was upset because a child had been conscripted into a military organisation. From her perspective of course. Prey wasn't actually a child, only technically. Taffy just hadn't listened when he'd told her that.

"Taffy ma'am," Gloom said, finally looking up from his work and catching Taffy's attention, "This isn't what it appears like on the surface. I can assure you in full confidence that Princess Luna selected both Prey and Crimson personally for the ISND for good reasons. I can also assure you that Prey isn't actually a kid. Trust me on this one. Talk to him for any length of time and you'll figure that out for yourself. Now, is this where I'm supposed to sign?" He finished, holding up a five page document.

Apparently the call of paperwork snapped Taffy from whatever disbelief had held her bound, for she immediately jumped across and started rifling through the document, "No, here here and here, not there, that's for Captain Nighthawk, fill in the date here and your Corp number here and here."

Prey read Gloom's thoughts. The thestral Sargent apparently held a soft spot for Taffy, as she was one of the few ponies who treated the Night Guard as normal.

It was also fairly obvious to all that Taffy, while good at her work, was prone to getting worked up about things. And so for that reason Gloom, even though he didn't need to because Taffy held no rank over him, had moved to divert her attention back to something she understood and could control. Paperwork.

Unfortunately for Prey, that distraction only lasted for a couple of pages before Taffy was back on his case, although mercifully at least a bit calmer.

"So, you're, uh, you're in the Night Guard?" She asked him somewhat cautiously.

"This fact has indeed already been brought up and discussed multiple times over the course of the last few minutes, yes." Prey

replied, still keeping a wary eye on her horn. He was sounding a lot more confident than he actually was. Inside, he wanted to run away. Taffy wasn't the most threatening unicorn he'd ever met, but she was still and always would be a unicorn.

That stumped Taffy, '-what? Lots'a big words-', "Huh?" She got out.

"Ma'am, respectfully, I told you so ma'am." Gloom said, back on working his way through his stack of paper.

Taffy stared at Prey for a couple of seconds, "Not a lamb?" She was finally able to articulate oh-so elegantly.

"Technically yes, but in reality no ma'am." Prey answered. He was being polite and using her title because she was a unicorn and could blow his head off.

Taffy blinked at him with her jaw slightly open, then turned to Crimson, "Did you know him from back before you joined the Night Guard, his flock or something, or...?"

"No ma'am. I mean, I only met Prey and Sargent Gloom two days ago." Crimson paused and gave one of his slow blinks, "It has definitely been a learning experience."

Prey wondered how recently it was that Crimson's father had died. Considering that Crimson's father was the only real family the red pegasus used to have, or at least the only one who hadn't treated him like an outcast, Crimson seemed to be holding together remarkably well after his father's passing.

Either his fathers death hadn't been too recent, and Crimson had come to terms with it. Or, more likely from the hints Prey'd been picking up, Crimson still secretly sought revenge on his old clan, despite Luna's order, and was merely suppressing everything. The mental fortitude Crimson exhibited in controlling such strong mental walls no doubt proved immensely helpful in controlling his grief too.

Prey thought it was a commendable achievement. It also made him trust the pegasus even less. Survivors are dangerous.

"So, where are you from then and, err, why are you in the Night Guard little guy?" Taffy asked Prey after a minute spent with the three of them regarding each other in awkward silence.

Prey ignored her insulting him at the end there, because she was a unicorn, "I am in the ISND to serve the role of, as far as I can tell, an intelligence specialist or strategic planner. No one's been quite clear on what the job title is yet, ma'am." He replied politely.

Once again, his understanding of 'big' and 'complicated' words stumped Taffy for a moment, "What, you didn't find that out before you signed up?" She enquired.

"It was more a commitment that I was required to make as a course. I didn't exactly have much time to read the fine print. In fact, the Night Guard was in such a rush that I still haven't seen the contract. I'm sure though that it's for a good cause, so I'm not worried about it, ma'am." Prey replied as airily as he could to deflect any suspicion about his criminal history, like Gloom had ordered.

He saw the Sargent's wings relax slightly. Prey didn't know why the Sargent bothered. His and Crimson's records were going to come out eventually. There were too many ponies who could and would talk. It was inevitable. Then any good will they might have built up would be null and void, so it was pointless accumulating it in the first place. But for now, he'd be a good little lamb and do what he was told.

"Well, that's a positive view that you've got there. Always keep a bright outlook on life, that way you'll always be expecting the best. Except when it involves cats. Cats are just plain nasty." Taffy told them seriously.

Neither Crimson or Prey really had anything to say to that, so they were back to standing there silently waiting for Gloom to finish his mountain of signing. Or they would have been if Taffy knew how to be quiet for more than thirty seconds.

While Taffy chatted away at them, going off on some tangent while

also managing to simultaneously work on her paper stacks, the joys of magic leaving your mouth free, Prey sidled over to Gloom's own stack. Picking up the top sheet of the 'done' pile, he started scanning through it.

Gloom gave him a strange look but didn't break in his signing rhythm. '-is he actually interested in paperwork?-'

The answer was yes, he was. Or rather Prey was interested in what these papers represented. 'As I thought, these are the legal waivers for the institution of the ISND. Seems the Records Department gets anxious if they don't have some way to cover their back.' He thought with derision. He'd heard that was what bureaucracy was like, but he hadn't quite expected the sentiment to be so accurate.

Prey started flicking through the pages, scanning for anything of interest or that might be of use to use as a loop hole later.

"-and my cousin, because he lives near by, is part of the clearing units for the Everfree, he's an excellent lumber jack-" Taffy whittled on, apparently completely heedless of whether anyone was listening to her or not.

'Interesting, the other Night Guard units should effectively be units commissioned under martial law if what I'm reading here is to be believed. As they're not, it most likely means this isn't to be believed.' Prey thought, flipping over another page.

"-the Hay Fief cafe, and I ordered the oat flat Jack and Gusty ordered the triple chocolate fudge cream layer cake-"

Crimson at least looked like he was trying to keep up with Taffy's ramblings. Too bad for him. Gloom seemed like this amused him, although his amusement was lessened somewhat by the veritable mountain of paperwork he still had to get through.

Prey stopped his scanning midway down a form as a paragraph caught his eye.

"Wait, we get *paid*?"

[[[Bonus Picture - The explanation for why ponies are afraid of thestrals]]]

When you say 'Thestral', the picture that comes to their minds.

https://imgur.com/O2CjJbE

Author's Notes:

Another long chapter here, which thankfully **Sweetolebob18** was kind enough to edit for me. So thanks be to him.

Never the less, if you do find mistakes or even just story inconsistencies, please point them out, thanks. 🎀

16.1 They Serve Steamed Hay in Jail

"Wait, we get *paid*?"

After Gloom confirmed to Prey that yes, they did indeed get paid, and Taffy had stopped giving him a suitably horrified look, they finally managed to complete all the required paperwork. Or rather Gloom did. Crimson and Prey just waited for him to finish.

Once that was done, they were off out the door with a cheery goodbye from Taffy Hopes, (as well as a promise to get Prey a piece of toffee because apparently he was living a deprived childhood) and on towards the next appointment of the day.

Quarter Master Carrot's store house.

"It fits you well. You were born to a life in the Night Guard." Gloom congratulated Crimson.

"Thank you sir."

"It fits because I know my job and got the correct size." Carrot told them flatly.

Crimson was wearing a full suit of repurposed Royal Guard armour. They'd come to pick up Crimson's armour set, despite Gloom's earlier assumption that they wouldn't have enough time today. It did indeed seem to suit Crimson. The way he wore the armour looked natural, like he was wearing a coat rather than solid sheets of lightly enchanted metal.

"It's a bit strange seeing you in grey. But now you're a proper Night Guard." Gloom commented, ignoring the Quarter Master's brusque manner. Gloom was referring to the armour enchantments changing

Crimson's coat colour to match the uniform grey of the rest of the Night Guard.

The only real difference between Crimson's current appearance and the average Night Guard, (not counting the wings) was that his lanky mane still hung loose. All the other thestrals Prey had seen wore theirs tied or braided back. But none had a close cropped version like the Royal Guards.

Prey himself was once again skulking around at the back of the room, avoiding Carrot's notice. Whenever the Quarter Master turned one way Prey would go the other, keeping out of his line of sight. Prey was willing to bet the Quarter Master still hated him from last time. It would have been an easy bet too. '-still got that bucking wool sack trailing around-'

It was understandable. Prey would've hated Prey if he was in Carrot's place. What he'd said last time was still hanging around in the back of everyone's mind now that they were all present in the same room again.

"One set of Medium Pegasus size 7 Marks & Spades make. Sign this," Carrot ordered gruffly, shoving a sheaf of forms at Crimson, "If you want the armour that is. Or don't sign. It's no skin off my nose what you little pansies do."

Crimson took the papers without comment and began to methodically sign through them.

"You join the Guard, you get a set of armour. You leave the Guard or it gets recalled, you give back a set of armour. If it's dirty or rusted, you pay to fix it. You lose a piece, you pay to replace it. You damage or break it outside of the line of duty, you pay for it. If I don't like the set you return to me, you guessed it, you pay for it. Understand?" Carrot growled.

"Yes sir." Crimson answered flatly.

"Good. Don't let the door hit your flank on the way out." Carrot said, already walking back to behind the counter flap.

Gloom thought some rather uncharitable things at the Quarter Master's back, before remembering and berating himself for being so uncharitable towards an '-old war veteran-'

From there, they went back up through the palace and along the winding corridors. Prey much preferred the slower pace Gloom set indoors as opposed to out on Canterlot's streets. Even if he hated the Palace, at least he could keep up in here. Crimson took the opportunity while they trotted to fiddle with a last few adjustments to his armour, testing his range of motion. Gloom offered him a few helpful pointers of his own;

"That back strap is the one that always ends up chafing. You'll want to put some padding around the buckle tonight."

"Thank you for the advice, sir."

"Welcome. It might also be a good idea to tie your forelock and mane back so it doesn't obscure your vision or get caught in the joints." Gloom added, nodding towards what Prey had noticed earlier.

"The helmet isn't all it could be." Prey observed, mostly to himself.

Apparently though for once, their less superior ears caught his words, "What makes you say that?" Gloom asked, not out of any real interest but just as something to say as they walked.

"Oh, I just meant that it's not great. It doesn't even have a chin strap to keep it on in a fight." Prey replied with a shrug.

"It fits snugly. It should not come off." Crimson said.

"Maybe. But it does leave you very open to someone slitting your throat deep enough to hit the artery." When they both looked askance at him, Prey brought a hoof to his neck, "No armour guarding your throat, see?" He pointed out.

"They would need to get close enough and overpower me first." Crimson stated.

"Maybe the new Night Guard armour will account for that. When we *finally* get it." Gloom said, adding his two bits.

Prey shrugged again, "It was just an observation." He said.

"Alright, morbid observations about cutting throats over. Let's get this all pinned up and sorted before the end of the day shift. I want to make some real headway on the train line case." Gloom said, pushing open the ISND's office door as they arrived back.

"Someone's been in here." Prey said the moment they entered.

"Somepony." Gloom corrected automatically before his ears caught up with the rest of Prey's words, "What was that?"

"Someone's been in here while we were gone." Prey repeated.

Crimson took a deep sniff, turning his head this way and that like he was scenting the air. "Can't tell. Too much else in here. Sorry." He said, shrugging his wings.

"How do you know that Prey?" Gloom asked, "It's a Guard divisions office, but there's plenty of ponies authorised to enter in here."

"I don't know who they were, I just said someone's been in here." Prey stated, "Look, some of the pages have been disturbed over there on the floor." He added.

"Okay, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything-"
"And someone's put a new file on your desk." Prey finished.

"Oh. Well would you look at that." Gloom said, trotting over and picking up the brown paper folder. Personally, Prey wouldn't have picked it up before checking the folder for contact based poisons or magical traps. Gloom flicked the folder open and began reading what it contained. He groaned.

"Sir?" Crimson asked.

"Of course it is, why wouldn't it be?" Gloom muttered to himself, discarding the folder and rubbing at his eyes, "There's been another minor riot, this time in the town of Hay Steam. Here, take a look."

He said, tiredly flipping the folder around and pushing it towards them.

Prey hopped up and managed to catch the edge of the desk, getting enough leverage to pull himself up, "Let me take a look-*Don't* touch me!" That last was almost snarled at Crimson, who'd moved forwards as if to give Prey a boost up.

Crimson raised a hoof placatingly and simply stepped to the side so he could see what was in the folder too.

Prey kept one eye on the newly greyed out Pegasus as he pulled out the pages, using only the tips of his cloven hooves to touch the paper. It still hadn't been checked for poison yet. Healthy paranoia kept you alive.

The first page was a section from a newspaper article, with a large headline shouting 'Third Brawl in as Many Months! Mayor Misguided?' Under it, there was a black and white photo shot of a crowded dirt street, with about twenty ponies swinging away at one another atop a number of overturned carts. What immediately caught Prey's eye was the newspapers date.

"It's dated today. That was some fast work getting it to us by, ah, private Stained Glass in the records department." Prey said, reading the name off the cover of the submitted report, "It appears this brawl happened yesterday, and we're seeing it in today's local paper from Hay Steam." He finished.

'-unusual for the records department to so much as give us the time of day-', Gloom thought, before shaking his head and putting that aside for now. "This is a problem, and I don't mean the riot, although Luna knows that's serious enough. It's that this doesn't fit with your model Prey. It isn't next on the rail road track from the last riot, it's further back on the loop." Gloom observed gloomily.

"What does the paper say, sir?" Crimson asked.

"Oh, a list of damages, like smashed glass and knocked down telegraph poles, along with the usual rubbish mixed in with a light sprinkling of truth. Have a read yourself." Gloom sighed, pushing

the newspaper article over to Crimson.

"So newspapers are highly inaccurate?" Prey asked. He'd never seen a newspaper before today, so didn't know how factual they actually were. His home village had been too far away from anywhere to receive them. Actually, he didn't know if newspapers had even been around back then. Shame, it looked like they made good fire kindling.

"Never trust a newspaper Prey. At best, they only ever give you one side of the story, and quite often overestimate the facts. Some papers are better than others, the Canterlot Express for example. However some tabloids are just entirely made up of sensational lies." Gloom grumbled.

"Yet it's actively read by a large majority of the population?" Prey asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, sort of. Someponies take it more seriously than others." Gloom answered.

"Still sounds like it's useful in gauging public opinion, and can be used to see what the most restless individuals in society have to say. Many ponies will just follow the herd by the sound of it." Prey said.

Gloom paused to think about that for a moment, "Well when you put it that way Prey, you make me wonder why I get out of bed in the evening." He sighed.

"The brawl was started over crashed carts it says here, sir. That can't be all it was." Crimson said, reading over the article.

"Most likely it isn't. It must have been simmering under the surface for a while, some hidden factor or feud." Prey told him.

"Prey's probably right. But this doesn't answer the question of why it didn't fit with the prediction. I thought you were on to something there Prey." Gloom said, disappointed.

Prey sat back on the desk, idly rubbing his good ear while he thought, "Perhaps. Or perhaps this riot was just an exception to the pattern, leftover tensions from the previous fight. Or maybe our

instigator decided to shake up their circuit a bit, realising they were becoming too predictable." He said thoughtfully.

"It would be good if we knew what the real reason for the fight was." Crimson said, putting the paper down and blowing a long strand of mane out of his eyes, which had been taped down awkwardly by the new addition of his helmet.

"No, it most likely won't tell us anything, aside from why they fought. It wouldn't answer the question of who is getting them to fight." Prey told him.

Crimson blinked slowly, then looked back to their Sargent who was supposed to be in charge here, "How should we proceed then sir?" He asked.

'-horseapples-' Gloom thought.

"Ah, well, perhaps the best way to proceed is to go to Hay Steam ourselves and find out what really happened." Gloom said, sounding a lot more sure of himself than his thoughts let on, '-what if we don't find anything though?-'

"You would let us out of Canterlot?" Prey asked slowly.

"We would be going together as a unit." Gloom said, his thoughts already running into logistics for the trip, '-need tickets. No chariot. Prey can't fly. An amulet too-'

"You would trust us?" Prey clarified.

Gloom quickly sat up straighter and looked Prey in the eye, "We would be going as a unit." He repeated seriously, "And, this isn't to insult either of you, but it doesn't matter if I trust you or not, because you have those on." He said, tapping his shin to show where the golden set of bands sat on Prey and Crimson's own fore legs.

"You must have figured out that those act as tracking spells." Gloom said, sounding apologetic but uncompromising, "We're the Night Guard. I expect everypony on their best behaviour out there." He told them.

Prey just shrugged and nodded, because everything Gloom said he'd already known. The only reason he'd brought it up was to try and use reverse psychology to make Gloom trust him more. If he'd agreed too eagerly to getting out of Canterlot, it would be suspicious. But by carefully pointing out the fact that he was a probationary prisoner, Prey was showing Gloom that he was trying to work with, rather than against, the Sargent.

Crimson on the other hoof, although his face didn't change, looked like he wasn't pleased by Prey's insinuation that they might not be trusted. It was in the way he shifted his wings.

"Are you sure this isn't something the Royal Guard would be better tasked with? No one out there likes the Night Guard." Prey pointed out. He already knew what Gloom was going to answer.

"It's 'nopony'. They're all busy trying to find Rocky Bed. Rescuing him takes priority. We will go instead. Night Guards don't only work at night, we are Guards at every other hour of the day also, and our duty remains the same." Gloom said, pushing himself to his hooves.

That was almost exactly what Prey predicted the Sargent would say. Gloom and Crimson were too honour bound to even consider putting this off. That suited Prey just fine for once. He would be happy to get out of Canterlot.

"We're going to the Lieutenant's office to inform him where we're going and there's something I need to grab, but then we're out of here. Come on." Gloom said, heading for the door.

Prey swung himself off the desk and followed Crimson after Gloom. He spared a glance for the office as they left. The cork boards were still bare and files still scattered everywhere. They'd barely made a start. 'From one thing straight to the next.' He thought, and then hurried to catch up.

The train was already pulling out of the station before they even found their seats. Prey collapsed onto the seat in exhaustion,

breathing hard. It had been a hard run. For him. Gloom and Crimson had found it no more stressful than a brisk trot through the scenic streets of Canterlot. Outside, the '*clack-clack*' on the train tracks steadily increased in rhythm as the train gained speed.

"The offer to carry you is still open." Gloom said.

"Huff... Don't touch me." Prey gasped, still catching his breath.

"Feel free to take a nap if you're tired. It's at least a forty five minute ride to Hay Steam." Gloom suggested, settling back into his own seat.

Despite it only being about half past three in the afternoon, there was almost no one else on their carriage. Just another five ponies, sitting far away from the ISND's position. Prey caught a couple of uneasy looks in Gloom's direction.

Interestingly enough, the tickets had been half price. Something about the train company having a deal with the Guard for guards travelling when on duty. Prey was confident that if Gloom pushed, the nervous mare behind the counter would've given him the tickets for free just to get the intimidating thestral out of the ticket office.

Not that the tickets were coming out of Gloom's pocket. Night Guard expenses and all that.

"You fine over there?" Gloom asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Fine." Prey responded, resting his legs. He was glad to finally have the chance to sit and down rest his sore hooves after running everywhere. The hard cobbles of Canterlot's streets had been merciless.

"Perhaps we should get you some horse shoes. Could probably get a farrier to resize a foal's set for you." Gloom suggested.

'Idiot.' Prey thought. He wordlessly lifted one cloven hoof with a flat expression, bottom facing out so Gloom could clearly see the cleft in it.

"Oops. Didn't think about that. Cloven hooves and all." Gloom

muttered, rubbing at his chest.

Crimson cleared his throat, "What are the regulations on horse shoes in the Night Guard?" He asked.

Gloom held up his own hoof, showing them the fairly thin and nondescript horseshoe nailed to the bottom of it. It didn't have a lip or indent, it was just a flat semi circle of metal. It hadn't shown obviously when he walked, but had been easy enough to hear when he trotted across any hard surface.

"Almost any permanent kind is fine, apart from studded horseshoes like you sometimes see rural ponies wearing. Hammer hooves and war shoes are a bit different, as we can take those on and off, but those are only permitted when somepony is heading to an active conflict zone, like monster detainment." Gloom said.

'And yet another fine example of pony biology being superior to sheep's.' Prey observed, rotating his hoof this way and that as he examined it.

Having cloven hooves, sheep could not have horse shoes, which was quite inconvenient if you spent a lot of time traveling across rough terrain or alternatively, cobblestone streets. There was a slight upside. Cloven hooves did provide some slight advantage in being able to grip small objects between the cleft, like a quill for example.

"I have not needed shoes before. Is it necessary in the Night Guard?" Crimson questioned, tufted ears flicking for a moment as the trains wheels made a particularly loud 'cla-*Clack*.'

"They're not a requirement. But personally, I would highly recommend that when you get your first pay check, we get you some. A good set of horseshoes goes a long way, and it certainly lends some extra weight if you ever get in a fight." Gloom said.

"I am afraid... Hoof to hoof is not my strong suit. I am passable. I was trained with wing blades and in the use of my wings." Crimson said.

"Don't sell yourself short, I know you're more than passable.

However, you need to remember, even after you get your fathers wing blades back, I don't want you using them if we can help it. We are part of the Guard. We maintain the peace, not maim or kill ponies. And wing blades weren't made for subduing." Gloom said. In Prey's opinion, that was the best option to neutralise a threat, but ponies didn't see things that way.

Which was probably why he was still alive.

They'd captured him in a trap he'd been dumb or rather desperate enough to fall for. He still wasn't sure why, but rather than execute him, they'd thrown him in Dreverton to rot. Perhaps it was spitefulness, perhaps it was because he hadn't been able to fight back, their reasons didn't really matter in the end. If not for an error in Prey's record, Captain Valour would never have fetched him from that dark hole. For some reason, they hadn't known he was a murderer, just a dark mind magic user. Sunshine had admitted as much.

Prey still hadn't a clue how that had happened. But after fifty seven years, someone messing up filing a single sheet of paperwork was pretty understandable.

After all, the Resistance's war had been fifty seven years ago. There was no way a lamb was alive fifty seven years ago.

'Except this little runt lamb.'

"What about weight sir?" Crimson asked, and Prey recalled himself to the conversation. "Horseshoes are heavy, and I am not used to wearing any. It would throw off my flight." Crimson didn't sound like he was protesting, merely setting out his concerns.

"Cloud steel." Gloom answered, holding up his shod hoof again with a grin, "Made in Cloudsdale on a thunder forge. They barely weigh a thing, but are tougher than normal steel, last longer, and are even resistant to some types of magic. Not cheap, but well worth the investment."

Crimson considered for a moment, before giving a sharp nod, "Yes sir. You are quite correct. I will obtain a pair at the earliest

opportunity."

"Hey, it wasn't an order. I was just making a recommendation as a friend, not as an officer. It's still your own choice to make." Gloom said quickly. '-I didn't make that sound like an order did I?-'

"I have. I will follow your advice and obtain a set of cloud steel shoes." Crimson said resolutely.

"What other properties does cloud steel have?" Prey asked, joining in on the only interesting bit of the conversation, "Thunder forging implies that it involves a process only available to pegasi, or possibly unicorns. Cloud steel would therefore be a commodity metal, much in demand to certain buyers." He reasoned.

"Err, I don't know much about what cloud steel actually does or how it's made. Sorry. The thestral clans only knew of it, we didn't know how to make it, and since we were trying to avoid detection..." Gloom trailed off with a shrug, "You're right about it being quite expensive though. Why're you interested? Planning on starting a monopoly and bankrolling Cloudsdale?" He joked.

Prey didn't even bother formulating a reply to his ridiculous suggestion. The economy would never be decided on the forging process of some rare but ultimately substitutable metal. That said, he was still interested in its potential uses. It was frustrating that Gloom didn't know anything further. Oh well, he'd have to find out later for himself.

"What're you thinking about in that big brain of yours, Prey?" Gloom asked the lamb, stretching out languidly on his seat.

"Nothing. Just considering if our Sargent actually has a plan. So far, all I've been told is 'go to Hay Steam'. Sir." He finished with a click of teeth and his patronising smile.

Gloom actually grinned back, which made Prey scowl and made Gloom's grin increase in width, "Yes, your Sargent does indeed have a plan. We are-"

"-You're going to walk into the sheriff's office, pull rank and

question the rioters. Then we're going to snoop around and hope to find something of note before we get back on the train and return to Canterlot. How close am I sir?" Prey asked sweetly.

Gloom closed his mouth, '-can he read my thoughts?-'. He gave Prey a critical look. Prey just kept on smiling.

"Something like that." Gloom muttered with a sigh.

"Is there a plan to make them actually listen to you? Sir."

"They don't like the Night Guard. Or thestrals sir." Crimson put in rather needlessly.

"Ah, not true. They don't like me, the thestral. They shouldn't have anything against the Night Guard, so I'm just going to be a 'normal' Night Guard..." Gloom's mouth quirked up, "-With this." He finished before they could ask, pulling out the small brown pouch, which was what he'd picked up from the Lieutenant before they left.

Gloom pulled the drawstring open and shook out what was inside onto his hoof. A pendant fell out, made up of a silver star engraved with a stylised eye. Prey's droopy ears twitched in sudden interest, he could tell that the amulet was enchanted. He stared intently at it as he tried to analyse just what it did.

"Either of you know what this is?" Gloom asked, holding it up by the loop of string.

"No sir." Crimson answered.

"Really? Well, it's called a Dusk Pony amulet. They used to be a closely guarded treasure, but thankfully after the clans reunited with Equestria, we've had unicorns to make them again. What a Dusk Pony amulet does is that it-"

"-Has an illusionary based enchantment on it that conceals your thestral traits somehow." Prey interrupted once again, eyes still locked on the dangling amulet as he tilted his head so as to be able to examine it better. "They must've been used by a few thestrals from within each clan, tasked with infiltrating regular pony society now and then to try and keep abreast of developments.

Prey blinked, he hadn't really meant to say all of that out loud, as it had only been a theory. But from Gloom's thoughts he saw that his deduction had been accurate.

"Are you sure you haven't seen one of these before Prey?" Gloom asked.

"Quite sure."

"Then did you figure out all that just by looking at it?" Gloom asked, sounding slightly impressed.

"Only partly. It simply made the most sense and explained how the thestrals don't seem as disjointed from society as I would otherwise have expected after one thousand years of separation. It wasn't hard to figure out." Prey answered, deflecting most of the accomplishment.

He glanced towards Crimson, "It would also explain why he didn't recognise it, mainly being an outcast within his own clan." Prey stated. Then he added, "Sorry." to Crimson.

He wasn't sure why he bothered apologising, it wasn't his problem how Crimson's clan had treated him, and if he took offence at Prey's observation, then that was his problem.

"That explanation makes sense to me." Crimson said calmly. Seems he hadn't taken offence.

"Well done Prey, that's quite something to be able to figure out a clan's ancestral secrets within only a few seconds." Gloom said with a light chuckle.

"We're you taught how to analyse magical items Prey?" Crimson asked, yellow eyes regarding Prey speculatively.

"No, I just have a knack for figuring things out. It's nothing special." Prey answered, looking out the window and deflecting their curiosity.

"Hey, it was a compliment. That's going to be quite a useful knack to have. Might even be your cutie mark. If, you know, you were a

pony." Gloom added.

"But I was born a runt sheep freak instead. Fate is cruel, no?" Prey responded with a lopsided grin. He didn't let the bubbling hate he felt for pony kind bleed into his tone.

Gloom chuckled at what he thought was a joke, and with a quick glance to his Sargent, Crimson attempted to follow his lead, trying to pull off what was supposed to be an amused smile. It just looked creepy.

'-were gonna have to work on that-', Gloom thought with a small grimace, '-oh well at least it was an honest effort-'

Crimson seemed to become aware that he'd fumbled the initiative, and hastily let the 'smile' fade, his wings shuffling slightly on his back.

"Well try it on then." Prey said to Gloom, drawing their attention back to the amulet he still held.

"There's no hurry, but if you wanna' see what it looks like," Gloom pulled off his helmet and slipped the amulet over his neck, letting it come to a rest with a slight clink against his chest plate, "Not bad, eh?" He asked.

The amulet glowed a deep blue for a second, and then a ripple of magic raced over Gloom's frame, completing the circuit of his body within a second. The magic left Gloom mostly the same aside from a few key points. He was still a grey, armour wearing Night Guard, but his feral looking slit eyes had been replaced with normal looking pony ones, (although still yellow) and his bat wings now appeared to just be pegasus's wings.

"You look like one of them, pardon, I mean a pegasus, sir." Crimson said, then after a further moment of examination, "Your eyes are like mine now." He added, sounding vaguely surprised.

"Quite a useful little trick, isn't it?" Gloom said, giving the amulet a small flick.

Prey was observing the illusionary disguise closely, and, not to his

surprise, found it didn't hold up under close scrutiny. That was the case with most illusions, especially those bound to a living or moving form.

Gloom's new eyes didn't react quite the same way as natural ones did to light stimuli or when he blinked, but otherwise, unless you were either very observant or looking for it, you wouldn't notice. The wings had their own slight visual problem, which was that the feathers were too similar, almost perfect copies of each other rather than having the small imperfections or slight variations a normal wing would possess.

Again, not something anyone would notice at a passing glance, but Prey imagined that if Gloom tried to fly, the illusion would become clearly apparent to all. Overall though, it was a decently constructed illusionary glamour.

"How does it hold up under contact? Does it dissipate, give the perception of touch, or simply allow someone's hoof to pass through?" Prey questioned.

"Well, the shell is almost skin tight, so nopony should notice. But if you mean what happens when you touch it, why don't you see for yourself?" Gloom offered, extending one wing towards Prey for him to test.

Prey shrunk away with a look of disgust, "No thank you, I'm perfectly fine to just observe the effect." He answered. He didn't want to risk dispelling the illusion by accident and them finding out about the runes on his hooves.

True to his previous predictions, the wing didn't behave like a normal one should. The feathers didn't flex or shift in the air as the wing was extended. "You'll have to keep your wings closed if you don't want anyone to notice it's fake, sir." He told Gloom.

"It's a fault I'm already aware of. You're not the first to notice a Dusk Pony amulet's weakness, but you were rather quite quick on the uptake." Gloom said.

Prey wondered for a moment if he should point out the other

problem, which was that Gloom had just put the amulet on in full view of the other ponies in the carriage, which kind of defeated the purpose of a glamour. Not that he thought the five ponies down the other end of the carriage would be saying anything. Prey decided he would save his breath and instead went back to looking out the window at the passing scenery of scattered farms and grassy plains.

Thankfully, the other two were also content to let the rest of the journey pass in peace. Crimson spent it familiarising himself with every inch of his new armour, checking and rechecking all its joints and buckles.

Gloom appeared to be catching up with his disturbed sleep schedule and had his head down, lightly dozing when the train pulled up to the platform with a shrill whistle and loud hiss of steam. Through the window, Prey got a quick look at a small train station and beyond that the start of the town.

"Hay Steam! This stop Hay Steam!" The conductor yelled from somewhere outside.

"Come on Prey." Crimson and Gloom were already on their hooves, and stepping out into the isle. Prey took another quick look out the window and then followed them.

Jumping across the gap and down onto the platform brought a small wince to his face, as his hooves reminded him that they were still upset about their last jaunt through Canterlot.

"Which way to the town sheriff's office sir?" Crimson asked as they stepped away from the train.

They'd exited near the far end of the platform, and were relatively separated from the rest of the ponies climbing on and off the train. Gloom shaded his eyes looked around the platform and up the one street they had clear vision of, but didn't spot anything helpful in locating the local lockup.

"Hmm. Crimson, fly up and have a look for the sheriff's office would

you? I would myself but..." He flicked the amulet again, "Would give myself away. I'll stay with Prey." Gloom said.

"Yes sir. This should only take a minute." Crimson answered, starting to back up so he could get a quick running start.

"The jail should should have a sign or something, look for that." Gloom told him, looking back over his shoulder as the train let out another shrill whistle and started to slowly chug away.

Crimson flexed out his wings, spreading his impressively large pinions wide. Then with a spring and a few powerful flaps Crimson was airborne and rapidly gaining altitude.

Prey had snapped his eyes shut as Crimson took off to avoid any dust kicked up by the downdraft. He'd been unlucky enough to be blinded a few times before when standing too close to a griffon taking off in the Resistance. It was an annoying hazard of fliers.

He cautiously reopened his eyes enough to squint around, and seeing no floating dust opened them fully, looking up to track Crimson's flight as the now grey Pegasus tilted in the air and began a sweeping glide over the town.

It didn't bother Prey to admit that, even from this short demonstration, he thought Crimson was quite an impressive flyer. He wasn't an expert, but the Pegasus's form looked good and he was managing a fair pace despite being weighed down with his new armour.

"You ever been flying before?" Gloom asked, seeing his observation of the distant figure of Crimson, and squinting his own yellow eyes against the sun to join in watching.

Prey looked at Gloom flatly, then turned his head so he could look over at his wingless back, "What do you think, sir?"

"No, I mean has anyone taken you up before? You're certainly small enough to be a passenger." Gloom said, then winced slightly, "Ah, I didn't mean it like that." He hurriedly added.

"That's of no consequence. I'm a runt. While I do not appreciate

being treated like a child, it would be pointless to deny my small stature. As long as people don't keep equating one with the other, I don't have a problem." Prey informed Gloom matter of factly. It looked like the figure of Crimson had reached the far side of Hay Steam and was starting the return sweep.

"So, has anyone ever taken you up?" Gloom asked again after a few long seconds of digesting that.

Prey thought about the trip he'd taken in the sky chariot when the Solar Guard had retrieved him from Dreverton, "Yes. Once."

"Did you like it?" Gloom asked cocking his head.

"No."

"Don't like heights?" Gloom asked.

"No." Prey repeated, choosing the answer that would be most likely to ensure Gloom never make the offer himself, and also hopefully drop the question.

"Who took you? A Pegasus from the local weather team?" Gloom asked Prey, obviously not catching the hint and just trying to make conversation.

"There were no weather teams where I was from." Prey answered.

"What? No weather teams? Where did you live?" Gloom asked, now in interest. '-everywhere in Equestria at least have access to a weather team or even just local pegasi-' he thought.

Prey gave the disguised thestral a sideways look, before refocusing on Crimson as he came in to land, "I doubt you would have heard of it. It's just a tiny little village out in the middle of nowhere. Nobody goes there anymore. It's a nowhere-nothing place." He told Gloom. He wasn't even lying.

Crimson swooped in and came to a stop in mid air, flaring his wings and giving a couple of downward beats as he killed all momentum, before letting himself drop the last bit onto the platform with a 'clop'.

Prey reopened his eyes when his ears picked that up, and so was in time to see Crimson point off down the main street, "The building I assume to be the sheriff's office is down that way and on the fourth left sir. It's not a big town." Crimson reported, taking a moment to carefully refolded his wings.

"Excellent. Well, we're not solving anything by standing here, let's go." Gloom said, and started off at a brisk trot. Prey sighed and tried to keep up.

Now that they were actually heading through the streets of Hay Steam, the pony residents had no choice but to notice them. The ponies they passed all moved out of their way, some with hesitant curiosity, some with mild confusion as to who these nonstandard looking Royal Guards where, and some just tried to avoid eye contact altogether.

Prey listened in to the reactions of those who passed within his mental perception range, but didn't pick up anything too important.

'-the Guard finally come to put a stop to all these fights-'
'-Oh I hope Blossom doesn't get in trouble with them because of the riot yesterday-'
'-Grey? Grandpa always told me they were white or brown coated, not grey-'
'-only two? What use is that? Misty won't be fazed by only two Royal Guards-'
'-baby sheep? Where are they taking a little filly like her?-'

Prey took note of a slightly familiar looking area coming up on the street where some ponies were clearing up a mess strewn across the street. It reminded him of the photo from the newspaper. The damaged shop fronts, smashed bins, and broken planking they passed, along the deep gouges in the hard packed dirt of the street outside those same shops quite clearly indicated where the overturned wagons and riot had happened yesterday.

"Many of these ponies are acting guilty sir." Crimson said quietly.

"And why wouldn't they be? There's been a riot, and it's not even the first one. I'm willing to bet everypony knows somepony who was involved. They feel guilty by association, if nothing else." Gloom explained, ears flicking as he scanned the faces they passed. He was alert, but not tense.

Soon, they reached the correct street and turned off the Main Street, passing two wooden planking houses with brightly painted doors, that seemed to be the standard design for almost all of the houses and shops in Hay Steam they'd seen so far. The town still had the feeling of being new, a bit hurried and unsure of itself. Prey recalled from the report that it'd only been built seven years ago.

There were signs that someone, most likely the mayor, had made efforts to try and establish the town proper. Like the smattering of new looking gem lit street lamps, street signs that still had all their paint, and a couple of oak saplings planted at street corners, still tied up to their guidance posts.

Prey decided he despised Hay Steam.

"Here it is sir." Crimson said. They'd come to a building with a hanging sign of a pained golden star, and the words 'County Law' underneath.

The building was starkly different from the rest of the town, in so far as it was made out of red brick instead of wood. 'The sheriff probably didn't want the locals burning down the place in a drunken rage.' Prey thought.

Gloom marched up to the door, and found it locked. Not perturbed, he knocked loudly, horse shoe striking wood, "It's the Guard here on official business. Open up." He called.

There was a minute of silence as they stood on the street waiting.

Gloom glanced back at them and knocked again, repeating his call slightly louder, "It's the Guard, open up."

Nothing happened.

Gloom was about to knock a third and final time before, '-go find

the mayor and demand access-', When Prey's unbandaged right ear picked up the faint sound of movement from on the other side of the brick wall. Then, as they came into range, he picked up their thoughts:

'-Celestia give me strength, if you don't stop kicking my door-'

"There's someone coming." He said.

"Some*pony*. You sure? I don't hear any-" There was a rattle of keys, followed by what might have been a muffled curse, and then the lock clicked and the door was pushed open.

"Yeah?! Who's got the apples- Oh." The large green earth pony stallion on the other side of the door stopped mid way through his demand as he caught sight of the Royal Guard armour. He squinted from under his battered looking stetson through bleary eyes, "Wait. Are you the guard?" He asked gruffly.

"Yes, the Night Guard. I'm Sargent Gloom. Are you the sheriff of Hay Steam?" Gloom asked.

"Yeah, I'm him. Turf Apple." The green stallion answered, a touch uncertainly. He wore a crumpled and dusty jacket, a polished gold star badge on the collar. '-dang it, why didn't anypony give me a heads up?-'

"Excellent. Our business would be better discussed inside." Gloom said.

Turf Apple wavered on the door step for a second as he processed that, "Oh. Right. Come into my office then." He said awkwardly, steeping back.

Gloom strode confidently into the sparse office, with Crimson close behind. The pegasus jammed the door open with his hoof as Turf Apple automatically went to shut it. "What?" Turf Apple demanded.

Crimson just gave him a level look and pushed the door back open enough to also admit Prey. The lamb didn't pass comment as he slipped inside. Just gave the office a quick once over for threats, before stepping smartly out of reach of the sheriff. Turf Apple was

blinking and trying to come up with an explanation for what his eyes were seeing, '-what in tarnation is a lamb doing in here? Why're the Guard carting around a sheep?-'

"You've got a lamb following you, Sargent." He stated somewhat stupidly.

"Yes, he's also part of the Night Guard. Where are the cells?" Gloom answered without looking back.

"He? I don't think you've seen enough sheep mister Sargent, but I've been a farmer and this here's a baby ewe." Turf Apple said, apparently still bemusedly caught up on the fact that a lamb of all people had been escorted by the Night Guard into his office. Prey was starting to suspect that the sheriff might be slightly drunk.

"No. He's a he. He's part of the Night Guard, no I'm not making this up, his name is Prey, and now where are the cells, sheriff Turf Apple?" Gloom repeated.

"Cells? What're you wanting with the cells?" Turf Apple asked, finally looking away from Prey, who was making a point of looking normal and harmless like he always did around strangers.

"We are here to interrogate some of the ponies from the riot yesterday morning. It's my understanding that you have a number of them locked up here." Gloom said, starting to get impatient.

"Oh. Oh right of course. Yes, they're down there." He said, jerking his head towards a door behind the desk.

"Good. After you sheriff, if you would be so kind. You do have a secluded room for interviews and interrogations, yes?" Gloom asked, gesturing the sheriff to lead the way.

Turf Apple dithered for a moment, then set his jaw and faced them squarely, "What do you want with them? These here suspects are my responsibility and I'm the sheriff of this here town. In here you do things my way." Turf Apple announced firmly.

Neither Gloom or Crimson appeared fazed, "Sheriff, we are the Night Guard, we have jurisdiction in any investigation assigned to

us by duly appointed officers, in whatever part of Equestria we're required to enter. Rest assured, we're just here to uphold the law. Same as you. Now if you would kindly lead the way?" Gloom said politely, gesturing once again for Turf Apple to take the lead.

"You're not here to take any of them away then?" Turf Apple asked suspiciously, "This here's their town of residence, and so I've got power to arrest them and hold them here for'n breaking the law." He insisted. Why the sheriff was even arguing about this raised a few questions in Prey's head, but he decided to save them util later.

"Sheriff, the cells please." Gloom repeated pleasantly. '-what's his problem? Why is there even a problem?-' He thought. "We can discuss what action we take, if any, after we've spoken to a few of the suspects." He added out loud.

Turf Apple finally did as he was asked, ducking his head so he could more firmly push his hat on and hide a muttered comment. Stomping over to the desk, he started shuffling through one of the draws. "Now where did Charcoal put the spare-? Aha." Turf Apple pulled out a large key on a string and pulled open the door.

"This way if'n you please." He muttered, not waiting to see if they followed him.

Gloom's eyes flicked over to Crimson, and then Prey. "Any thoughts?" He mouthed.

Crimson shook his head, and Prey shrugged and made a motion with his head that seemed to indicate 'ask me later.'

Gloom shrugged himself, and went after Turf Apple.

When Prey stepped around the desk to follow, he saw a mostly empty glass bottle propped underneath, a couple of inches of amber liquid still in the bottom. 'So he is slightly drunk then. I wasn't sure, didn't smell anything on his breath.' Prey thought.

The door they went through lead down a short, dingy corridor to another two doors set at the end on the left and right. Turf Apple unlocked the right one with the key, and they were able to step

through into a room with four barred cells, the area lit by sunlight from a line of small, high set dusty windows. The cells had brick walls between them, so that a prisoner couldn't see over into the next cell, but could see out the front just fine.

All of the cells were occupied, two ponies in each cell, in various attitudes of boredom or despondency. A couple looked up as Turf Apple came in, and then jerked upright as Gloom stepped inside in his Night Guard armour, followed by Crimson. As usual, few noticed Prey slipping in quietly behind them.

Quickly Prey scanned the cells inhabitants, looking for anything out of place and trying to shift through the jumble of thoughts that came from being in the same room as eleven other individuals; '-oh horse-' '-feathers the-' 'Guard-' 'now I'm-' '-why didn't-' 'I listen to Marj-' '-stay calm-' '-I'm innocent-'

Prey's breath caught in his throat as he spotted a blue unicorn in the last cell. The unicorn wasn't chained or bound in any way, the horn on his head free and uninhibited. Prey could not process the stupidity of imprisoning a unicorn without taking such basic safety precautions. 'Why hasn't he escaped?! Is fear of the sheriff really the only thing keeping him in here?' Prey thought in horror, backing towards the door.

"I am Sargent Gloom of the Night Guard, here on behalf of the Canterlot crown." Gloom announced loudly, standing proudly as he surveyed the inmates watching him with wide eyes. "I have a few questions that I'm going to be asking some of you. Answering them truthfully will only help your case."

Some of the ponies eyes darted to Turf Apple, who made an imperceptible motion with his head. Prey however, heard their thoughts loud and clear, '-what's going to happen to me?-', 'Turf won't let them take me away-', and then Turf Apple, '-don't worry I'm not letting any two bit Guard get between my family-'

"Sheriff Turf Apple, I would like to make use of that interrogation room you spoke of. We'll be taking them in one at a time-"

"Now hold on," Turf Apple interrupted, "I'm the sheriff, and I

demand to be in on any interrogations you fellas carry out. It's my duty to protect the rights of everypony."

The angry annoyance coming off Gloom at the towns sheriff for showing them up was almost palpable. Once again, Prey was flabbergasted by Turf Apple's blatant stupidity. 'You don't contradict the Guard, especially not in front of any prisoners. You at least pretend. Present a unified front, never show weakness! This stallion is a complete fool.' Prey thought from where he hid.

Currently, Prey was observing the proceedings from outside the room, only his head poking around the door frame, keeping well away from the blue unicorn. Who looked like he was trying not to cry.

"Of course sheriff Turf Apple, your input would be welcome," Gloom ground out, "Now however might not be the time-"
"I ain't going nowhere." Turf Apple insisted stubbornly, glaring at Gloom and Crimson.

"Wait, what about-" A large slightly banged up looking earth pony mare in one of the cells started, before she was cut off by Turf Apple snapping at her, "Quiet Honey Bush, I'm dealing with this."

The mare called Honey Bush snapped her mouth shut and shrank back onto the cells bunk, eyes glued to the floor. Prey caught a flash of guilt in Turf Apple's thoughts, before it turned to anger. The sheriff snorted and glowered back at Gloom, who returned it glare for glare.

"Sheriff, a suspect, in the interrogation room. Now if you would be so kind?" Gloom asked in an overly polite tone, which didn't match at all with his expression.

Turf Apple didn't budge, "I ain't letting anypony out of my sight while they're under my jurisdiction. Either come back with a custody transfer order, or I get to sit in."

Crimson moved ever so slightly closer to Gloom, shifting his centre of gravity and loosing his folded wings. It wasn't much, just a small shift in stance, but Prey recognised it for what it was. Crimson had

gone from passive observer to ready warrior. He wasn't the only one to notice.

"Crimson, that's not what we're here for." Gloom said in a low voice, not breaking eye contact with the stubborn sheriff. Turf Apple seemed oblivious to the fact that he was only one wrong move away from a fight, "I'm the one you're talking to here. So what's it going to be? My terms or no terms." Turf Apple pressed.

Prey shot a look at the prisoners. Their attitude of worry had shifted towards nervous hope, although they still seemed very concerned about what the Night Guard were here to do. A couple more so than others. Honey Bush was one of them, along with a yellow pegasus and a brown and white dappled earth pony in the adjacent cell.

'Those three definitely have something to hide.'

Gloom gritted his teeth, struggling to fix a smile to his face, "Yes sheriff, of course. How could I refuse such a gracious request. You're doing your duty and upholding the princess's law after all. Same as us." He gritted out. Prey thought it was a good job the Dusk Pony amulet's glamour hid the thestral's pointy canines, or else that smile would have crossed the line from 'forced' to outright threatening.

Turf Apple glared at them suspiciously for a last few long seconds, "Good."

The interrogation room turned out to be only the other room in the hall way, the one on the left. It looked more like it had been used for an impromptu kitchen or break room, what with the messy sink in one corner, half full of used plates and mugs.

Gloom hastily cleared the table, pushing most of the junk on it onto the floor, getting a filthy look from Turf Apple, which he ignored. Crimson dragged up two chairs, one on each side of the table, and took up position behind the far one where Gloom would be sitting.

"Sheriff, if you would be so good as to fetch the first suspect? The sooner we start, the sooner we all can get out of here." Gloom said,

taking the chair.

"Best not waste any time then." Turf Apple snorted sarcastically.

"Couldn't have said it better myself, sheriff Turf Apple." Gloom returned.

Once the green earth stallion had left the room to fetch the first prisoner, it seemed to dawn on Gloom that he'd lost track of the third member of their party. "Where's Prey?" He asked sharply, standing back up. '-how'd I forget?-'

"He's here.", "I'm right here." Both Crimson and Prey answered at the same time.

Gloom swivelled to pinpoint where his ears had heard the lambs voice, "How'd you get there? I didn't even see you."

"I was right behind you. Not my fault if you didn't see me."

"He was already waiting in the corridor when we came out sir." Crimson said.

"He was?" Gloom blinked, then to Prey, "You were?"

"Obviously. Now, before Turf Apple returns, listen. The sheriff is trying to cover for one of the prisoners. Not sure why, but my guess is that they're blood related, cousins maybe. Possibly that Honey Bush?" Prey suggested.

Gloom didn't question how Prey had come to that conclusion and just nodded seriously, obviously figuring that; '-he must have noticed something I missed-'. Gloom was correct, Prey had noticed something the Sargent had missed. Namely, their inner thoughts.

"Anything else? Quickly." Gloom asked in a low voice, eyes on the door.

Prey shrugged, "Turf Apple might also be slightly drunk. Not sure if that's important."

"Drunk? Drinking while on duty is a serious dereliction of-" The

door reopened and Gloom snapped back to sitting up straight in the chair, a look of bored professionalism on his face as Turf Apple entered, leading in the same brown dappled earth pony from before, with a pair of fairly loose hoof cuffs attached to his front legs. He was also sporting a large, hoof shaped bruise on his chest that looked a day old, and a dust matted mane from yesterday's riot.

'Good. This was one of the guilty ones I picked out earlier.' Prey thought. He didn't care about stopping these riots, just like he didn't care about helping Tulip or Rocky Bed. However he *was* here to prove he was useful to Luna and wasn't replaceable.

Nervously, the earth pony took the other seat when Turf Apple told him to, eyes flicking back and forth between Gloom and Crimson, who were watching him dispassionately. Or Gloom was. That was just Crimson's default expression.

'-oh horse apples, oh horse apples. Okay, keep calm, don't panic, they can't prove anything-', Their prisoner thought, taking a deep breath.

"Name?" Gloom asked abruptly.

The earth pony started, "I'm Pot." He answered, trying not to look Gloom in the eye. Even with the Dusk Amulet masking his normal slit pupils, the glaring yellow of the disguised thestral's eyes still gave them an unnatural intensity.

"Full name please." Gloom stated.

"I-I mean, Willow Pot." The cuffed pony hurriedly corrected himself.

"Age?"

"I'm thirty, thirty one next month." Willow Pot answered.

"Job or occupation?" Gloom asked next.

"Err, I don't have one at the moment. But I used to work in the lumber yard."

"Where? There's no forestry grounds here." Gloom asked without

missing a beat.

"D-down in Top Town, I'd catch the train down there four days a week for work." Willow Pot explained, shifting his cuffed hooves about uncomfortably on the table. There were mug ring stains on the wood.

"Household status?" Gloom asked.

"Um, I don't know what you mean by that..."

"Who you you live with? Where do you live? Marriage status or children?"

"No I'm not married. I, I'm still living with my parents on 2nd street." Willow Pot said, looking down.

"Thank you for confirming your details. Now if you don't mind, we'd like to talk to you about the incident yesterday morning. I assume you know what incident I'm talking about?" Gloom asked him.

"Yes." Willow Pot mumbled, sinking lower in his chair.

"Then I also assume you know why you're here." Gloom stated.

"He's here because he's a suspect, not because he's been convicted of anything." Turf Apple interjected, standing behind Willow Pot to back him up in much the same way Crimson was standing behind Gloom.

'-when did this become a stand off?-' Gloom thought.

Willow Pot glanced up at Turf Apple, perhaps looking for some confirmation or reassurance, however despite what he'd just said to Gloom, the sheriff didn't make any motion to do as Willow Pot obviously hoped.

"Willow Pot," Gloom said, recapturing his attention, "I would like you to explain, in your own words, both what happened yesterday and why you've been arrested."

"Held for questioning, not arrested." Turf Apple butted in.

Gloom took a moment to breathe, "Willow Pot. Please answer the question." He said.

Willow Pot looked up once more to Turf Apple, but again failed to spot the reassurance he was looking for. He seemed to deflate even further, and spoke to the table.

"I'm here because I got involved in the fight. When Yellow Turn upended Fence's cart because of what Grapejuice said last week to Yellow Turn and his sister, then from last months riot and Cheese an' Onion's son having to pay the hospital bill when it wasn't their fault, an' I had to stand up for my cousin wiv' my friends, an' next thing I know Fence is kicking Yellow Turn's own cart and then Coca kicked his back on account of him supporting Mistletoe-"

Gloom brought Willow Pot's breathless rambling to an end by bringing his hoof down loudly on the table, making Willow flinch and Turf Apple scowl. The spiel Willow Pot had been mindlessly spouting held almost nothing of value and had been difficult to follow.

'Focus on the key points.' Prey thought, listening closely, 'Yellow Turn. Last month's riot's resentment still simmering. Hospital bills and who was hospitalised.'

"Willow Pot, none of that really answers the question; why were you arrested and who started it?" Gloom asked slowly, punctuating each word clearly.

"No pony started the riot, no one anymore'n anypony else. Everypony is equally guilty on this one." Turf Apple said, putting a hoof on Willow Pot's shoulder before the hoof-cuffed pony could answer.

"Sheriff Turf Apple..." Gloom began angrily, and Crimson's wings twitched.

"A name. One name of who started the riot." The childish voice

brought all of them to a stop, as the ponies looked down in surprise at Prey who had spoken, "Give us one name." Prey repeated.

"Um, er, Sheriff? Why's she here? This lamb I mean?" Willow Pot asked in bewilderment.

"Don't have a clue. Gloom here seems to think she's part of some Night Guard division or something special." Turf Apple answered, his tone barely above scornful. He'd also made special attention to stressing Gloom's name without attaching the title.

"A name," Prey repeated once more, "Just tell us a name."

Willow Pot just blinked at him, then looked at Turf Apple, as if searching for the answer of what was going on. "You aren't obligated ta' answer that, she's just a lamb, not a Guard." Turf Apple said.

Prey let out a heavy, put upon sigh, rolling his big blue eyes and making an exaggerated shrug, "Oh well, I tried to be polite. Guess we're doing this the hard way then." He said, eyes creasing shut as he smiled sweetly. He looked as intimidating as a feather pillow right then, and everyone's thoughts present told him as much.

'-lamb trying to impress, how funny-'
'-do her parents know where she is?-'
'-kid...just what are you doing?-'

And then an actual surprise for Prey. Crimson's mental walls shifted, and for a few scant seconds the pegasus's thoughts were uncovered. Prey picked up just three words, '-big bunny rabbit-' and then the walls closed again. Huh. Unexpected, but that could be considered later, right now Prey had some ponies to manipulate.

"Sheriff Turf Apple, I'd like you to consider my words, just for a moment please," Prey said, the sweet smile still in place, "What do you think happens if we think you're lying to us? Hmmm?"

Turf Apple shook off the effects of cloying innocence and managed to scowl at Prey, "Well I ain't lying about whatever thing you think it is lamb, so it don't matter."

"Oh please sheriff Turf Apple," Prey said, throwing in a childish giggle, "But of course you're lying. Didn't you know that Sargent Gloom's special talent is to be able to spot when someone is lying?" Prey asked, then slapped a hoof over his mouth and glanced anxiously at Gloom, "Oops, I wasn't supposed to let that slip yet." He said, feigning chagrin.

'-what're you doing kid?! I don't have that talent-' Gloom thoughts raced, but he managed to keep up his cool facade, merely giving Prey a chastising look like Prey really had let something slip. Crimson was just watching everything with a slightly nonplussed expression, although you had to look really close to see it.

"Oh well, the manticore is out of the bag now," Prey shrugged carelessly, "I guess you know lying is pointless now. I mean, before you came back in, Sargent Gloom already knew you would try and lie to cover for some of the prisoners because they're family, like Honey Bush. He told us to keep it quiet about how you were trying to use your authority to keep custody of them so no one else could prosecute them, because he wanted to give you enough rope to hang yourself with, and also about the mayor, and the cider bottle, and your brother's farm, and, and..."

Prey deflated, "And I did it again." Cringing, he looked up at Gloom, "Um, sorry sir, I let slip again." He apologised, ears drooping.

Turf Apple was speechless, '-how did he know that stuff?!-'

"Thank you Prey, but that's quite enough now." Gloom said.

Inside, the Sargent was panicking, just slightly. '-what're you talking about, I haven't a clue what game you're playing-'

Obviously, Gloom'd worked out Prey was trying to unsettle these two enough to make them slip up, but he didn't know where to go from here without revealing that it was all a bluff, '-threw me in the deep end here kid-'

At least Prey's little act had worked, making it worth the humiliation. Turf Apple tried, and actually did a fairly good job in hiding his shock, but it was too late and they'd seen him flinch.

While Willow Pot didn't quite know the importance of everything Prey had just said, he too was starting to panic because it sounded like he was getting into even more trouble.

"What do ya' think you're trying ta'-?"

"I'm sorry I shouldn't have been in the fight, I swear it won't happen again sir. What've I got to do to prove I'm innocent?" Willow Pot blurted out.

'Excellent, now let's see if Gloom knows how to capitalise on an advantage.' Prey thought sitting back in the corner, his work done.

"Since you're feeling a little more cooperative now, how about you answer my original question; who started the riot?" Gloom demanded sternly, "And please don't bother lying. I'll be asking the other suspects the same question, and if I get different answers there's going to be trouble."

"W-!" The sheriff started.

"But, but they might not know, and they'll tell you it was somepony else!" Willow Pot protested fearfully.

"Then you best be the one telling the truth. So go on, give us a name." Gloom said.

"Hold on-!" Turf Apple tried.

"But I don't know either, it might have been Yellow Turn or Fence or Scrappy Date or maybe Timmy Tommy. I just don't know, I'm sorry." Willow Pot said.

"That's good enough for now. Sheriff Turf Apple," Gloom said, turning his hard eyes on the green earth pony, "Are any of those named individuals among those being held in the cells?"

"N-" Turf Apple started, then remembered Prey's assertion about Gloom's lie detection capabilities, and they could just go and ask for themselves anyway, "...Yes." He answered grudgingly.

"Good. Take Willow Pot," Gloom almost waved a wing towards the

nervous prisoner, but at the last second remembered to do it with his hoof instead, "Back to his cell and bring one of those ponies in. Please." He added with a polite grin that held no warmth.

Prey could hear Turf Apple's thoughts racing, but there wasn't anything the sheriff could do. Wordlessly, he helped Willow Pot to his hooves and half led, half dragged him from the room.

Gloom waited for the door to close behind them before swivelling in his chair to face Prey. He raised one hoof to forestall any comment. He closed and rubbed his eyes with the other hoof. "Okay, I'm not going to ask why," He sighed, "It's pretty obvious why you did that. If a bit creepy seeing you act like a, well, a foal. But a little warning next time please?"

"I was not planning on doing that. I was merely improvising." Prey explained nonchalantly.

"I guess it worked this time, but what if they'd called the bluff? I can't actually catch lies." Gloom pointed out.

"Is that not how your talent works? You said you can tell when something was right or wrong. That sounds like the same thing." Prey said innocently.

"No, I already explained this. My cutie mark let's me know when I'm following the right track, or path, or whatever'll get me to the correct thing or decision. Sometimes. Or sometimes it doesn't say anything. It's not like it says 'yes this way' or 'no not this way'." Gloom said, rotating a hoof in the air as he tried to correctly verbalise what he was in his head.

"It's more like... getting warmer or colder. But I don't always know to *what*, and sometimes it's for stuff that I don't even know I'm looking for, and it doesn't even tell me when I've found whatever it is either."

This was the second time Prey had heard the explanation, and it was just as vague as last time. But it confirmed what he wanted to know, 'Gloom can't tell when I'm lying, only when something in his subconscious raises a flag, nor does it speak to him in absolutes. He

has to interpret it.' This was good. That was one more pressing worry off Prey's shoulders.

That still left discovery by Luna and the possible sheep doll message to worry about.

"Sir, Turf Apple isn't coming straight back. I think he's gone back into the office to do something dishonest." Crimson said, grabbing their attention.

"You sure Crimson?" Gloom asked, all business again.

"Yes sir, he went past the door. I heard the floor boards squeak." Crimson replied. Prey had been distracted and hadn't heard anything. Or maybe it was because he only had one fully working ear at the moment. 'That's no excuse, what if it had been a raiding party at the door?' Prey berated himself.

"Crimson-" Gloom began, half rising and looking towards the door. He didn't need to finish his order. Crimson was already moving, pulling the door open and almost flowing out in one motion.

Prey heard a muffled exclamation of surprise down the corridor in the sheriff's gruff voice.

"What were you doing?" Prey heard Crimson ask flatly.

"Ain't none of your business." Turf Apple snapped. Prey stepped aside as Gloom over took him on the way to the door, stepping out ahead of him into the corridor.

"Sheriff Turf Apple, we are in the middle of an investigation. What was so important that it could not wait?" Gloom demanded. Prey stuck his head out the door. Down the corridor in the office, Crimson was blocking Turf Apple's route to the front door, while the sheriff looked a mix between worried and angry.

"Ain't none of your business. It's a personal matter." Turf Apple repeated, not budging in his denial.

"Sheriff, I'm sure we're all on the same page when I say that explanation just isn't going to fly right now." Gloom said mockingly,

"Either tell me the truth or I'll have you detained for obstructing our investigation."

Turf Apple glowered from under his hat brim, "It's a personal matter. But if you must know, I t'was sending a message to my brother, not that it's any of your business." He defended.

"A message to your brother." Gloom repeated flatly.

"That's what I said." Turf Apple snorted.

"In the middle of an investigation. After the suspect gave us names. After we instructed you to go fetch them from the cells, just across the hall. And you needed to send a message to family right then?" Gloom stated in obvious scepticism.

Turf Apple didn't answer. Prey didn't know what was currently running through the sheriff's head, as where he stood at the end of the corridor was out of Prey's perception range, but it wasn't hard to guess. 'Caught red hoofed and still trying to bluster his way out of it. The only question now is, who did he send the message to?'

"Who did you send?" Gloom asked.

"I don't like your tone there."

"Then answer the question, who did you send the message with?" Gloom repeated.

Turf Apple snorted, "My personal business is my own, and has no bearing on your investigation so it ain't my duty to answer none, so you can just keep on wondering." He said, making to shove past Crimson and walk back down the corridor.

Crimson easily side stepped and smacked Turf Apple back with a wing. It wasn't a hard or fast smack. More a firm push against the sheriff's side right as he was lifting his leg to step. Turf Apple was forced to stumble backwards or overbalance.

Considering just how strong a pegasus's wings were, and despite the sheriff being a large Earth pony, Crimson could have probably knocked Turf Apple flat on his tail if he'd wanted to, especially with

his strange form of martial arts training. Instead, all Crimson had done was stop the stallion from moving past him.

Turf Apple blinked, then frowned and tried again.

Exactly the same thing happened, Crimson moved aside and with a firm buffet of his wing forced Turf Apple to step back into his original position. It looked almost like Crimson was scolding him, like a pegasus mother might buffet her disobedient child.

Now Turf Apple was getting angry, and he glared at Crimson's neutral expression, "I'm warning ya', don't try that again. This here's my station and I'll go wherever I darn well please." He said.

Crimson didn't respond to him at all, just swivelled an ear back towards where Gloom stood in the corridor, "Sir?" He asked.

"Sheriff," Gloom began seriously, "I hope I don't need to explain to you just how suspicious this looks from our perspective. I think you'd best explain your actions or we'll be forced to jump to our own conclusions." He told him.

Prey could hear that Gloom already knew that; '-Turf Apple's going to just lie again, and then I'll be forced to do something I'd rather not, and I've already dealt with enough horseapples for one day. Why do things have to be so complicated?-' He thought in exasperation.

Turf Apple fixed his hat more firmly on his head, looking like he was getting ready to charge, "For the last time, it ain't any of your Royal Guard business what I say's to my family, and you ain't got any power to make me."

Prey was seriously tempted to sit back and let it come to blows. He was very interested in what Gloom would do when pushed and just how effective Crimson's moves were. In the span of a single breath Prey weighed up the pros and cons, and regretfully decided that it wasn't a worthy enough use of his time.

Right as Gloom opened his muzzle to give Crimson the order to do... what, the Sargent hadn't decided, but something, Prey said

loudly, "Ohhh, wait I know! You were just about to tell us how it isn't any of our business about the warning you sent to your brother's farm just now."

"What-? Ah' did *not*-"

"Who did you send it with? Someone who must have been near by, in fact they must have been waiting near this jail. What did you tell them to say? To hide or destroy any evidence?" Prey said, posing one question after another, not giving anyone else a chance to speak as he pressed ahead, eyes intently watching every tell tale twitch Turf Apple made.

"What evidence would there even be to hide? Hmm, stolen goods? Money? A bribe if that's case? No, how about one of the wagons?" Prey pressed.

"The Tartarus you-?"

"Ah, I see, not something, but someone. One of the instigators of the riot, no? Yes? Ahh, yes it is, I see. And you want them protected. Why? Do you owe them? No, it's because they're family? Ahh, that's it. Like Honey Bush. Why though? What are you protecting them from?" Prey asked, then rapped his hoof against the floor board as the answer came to him.

"I see, it's who you're protecting them from. Honey Bush and some of your cousins are locked in here, away from the ponies out there, I'm right aren't I? NoDon'tDenyIt! I see now, these riots have your family split down the middle, you're trying to keep them apart. You'll do anything to protect your family, yes? What kind of stallion wouldn't? I know how it goes, loyalty to family above all else," Prey grinned hungrily at Turf Apple as he picked him apart, the sheriff only able to gape soundlessly.

"But you're being pulled both ways aren't you Turf Apple? You don't know which side of your family to take. Oh but they each want you to pick them, you're the law in this town, aren't you? Very proud of the sheriff in the family. So you're not picking, just trying to keep everyone happy. So who are you trying to keep happy on your brother's farm?" Prey took an aggressive step forwards almost

without realising it.

"Who's there? Who's so important? Who would be in trouble if we found out? Who would those other suspects in the cells have named if we asked? Who would we have found at your brother's farm if you hadn't sent the message? Who? Who?" Prey almost squeaked excitedly, mind fully engaged in the job of digging out everything that Turf Apple was trying to hide.

The sound of his own high pitched voice that so annoyed him broke Prey's focus, reminding him of who was present and that perhaps he was saying too much. He'd never really had to worry about who might hear more than they were supposed to before. He'd always been alone.

"Please excuse me, I'll just be quiet now." Prey said stepping back and ducking his head, but not before he sent a nasty grin Turf Apple's way, "I think I've said enough already." He added smugly. The speechless Turf Apple flinched.

Although Crimson and Gloom were giving Prey weird looks, they knew Prey, so they weren't nearly as surprised at the trick he'd just pulled.

"I don't think there's any point in trying to hide the truth now Turf Apple, so why don't you just come clean and tell us?" Gloom asked, tone collected and in command once again.

"That's- but the, you, you told the lamb to, to,-" Turf Apple spluttered.

"Prey is a member of Princess Luna's Night Guard. You'd do well not to forget it. Now tell me, last chance, who did you send the warning to?"

Turf Apple looked at Prey who was grinning nastily at him, then at Gloom who was waiting, then at Crimson who stood ready to stop him, and then back to Gloom again. His shoulders slumped and his broad chest seemed to deflate, his jacket going slack with the gold star dangling off it. The hat covered his eyes as he looked at the ground.

"It ain't any of your business," Turf Apple muttered, "I know you're going to find out any ways, but I can't tell you. I can't turn my back on family." He said in defeat.

"Is that you're final say sheriff?" Gloom asked calmly.

"Yeah."

Gloom didn't say anything further as he looked at the green earth pony, who seemed to have resigned himself to waiting for his fate. The silence stretched. It would've made a very dramatic scene for anyone watching, but since Prey could hear what Gloom was really thinking, he could've debunked any such foolish notions. Because internally, the Sargent was panicking.

Gloom didn't know how to proceed. His instincts and also his duty were to detain Turf Apple, but that just raised a whole host of problems.

First, he had nowhere to hold Turf Apple. He was the sheriff, there wasn't someone else who he could hoof off custody to. And what about the other suspects in the cells? Who would watch and look after them if they arrested and took Turf Apple back to Canterlot with them on the train? He couldn't very well just release them all.

'-hang on I remember. This town recently got a telegram tower installed, didn't it? I'll order them to send one back to Canterlot and get, wait...Moon blight, that's right. The telegram tower was knocked out of commission by the riot-' Gloom thought, teeth clenching together in frustration.

And that still didn't solve the problem of who this pony was that Turf Apple had sent the warning to either. They couldn't just ignore that, and if they detained Turf Apple, they wouldn't be able to go after whom ever it was. And for that matter, who was going to oversee law in Hay Steam until they returned to Canterlot and reported the situation?

The fact if the matter was that arresting Turf Apple created far more problems than it solved, but neither could they just let him go. He was a law breaker, impeding an important investigation into serious

civil unrest, and who knew what else he'd been turning a blind eye to when it involved his family?

'-what do I choose? Crimson and Prey are looking to me here, I've got to choose correctly-'

And then it came to him, Prey could hear the relief in Gloom's thoughts as a possible course of action presented itself, and a sudden feeling of 'rightness' from the Sargent's cutie mark seemed to confirm it.

"Sheriff Turf Apple," Gloom announced, "As a Sargent in the Night Guard and by special powers of my Division, I revoke your authority as sheriff and order you to surrender yourself into our custody until such time as a fair trial can be held." He told the silent stallion.

Prey knew that Gloom was skipping the proper forms of arrest, he hadn't given him his rights or said why he was arresting Turf Apple.

Turf Apple pulled the gold star off his jacket and tossed it at Gloom's hooves, "There. Never brought nothing but trouble to me." He muttered.

"Good. Now where is the registry for the ponies in the cells?" Gloom asked. Turf Apple didn't respond.

Gloom sighed, "Crimson, start looking through the office for it. It's got to be here somewhere." He ordered.

Crimson moved to obey but Turf Apple spoke up, "There ain't one. I didn't want nothing recorded on my family." The ex-sheriff said. Gloom 'Tsk'ed in disdain.

"By the way sir, the longer we wait the further away the messenger gets." Prey said quietly.

"That's a moot point by now, it's too late to catch them in time." Gloom muttered back. When next he spoke, it was at normal volume so everyone could hear, "Crimson, stay here with Turf Apple, I will be five minutes. I've got to speak to the other suspects."

Quickly Gloom trotted up the corridor to the desk, grabbed a sheet of paper and a pencil, then back to Prey and the door to the cells. The key was still in the lock, and Gloom snagged it as he entered. Prey followed him to see what he was going to do.

All the inmates in the cells froze as Gloom entered. Willow Pot, who was also back in his cell came to a spluttering halt mid way through telling the rest of the listening prisoners about the, "Scary Night Guard captain's foalnapped a lamb, and-" The horrified look on his cell mates face made Willow Pot turn around and freeze.

Gloom gave the quivering stallion an unimpressed look, before addressing the rest of the rooms similarly frozen occupants.

"One at a time, I want you to give your name, age, and address. This is not a request. Understood?" Gloom ordered. His tone brooked no protest.

When he got no answer he repeated himself louder, "I said am I understood?"

The inmates snapped out of their silent stupor enough to give a smattering of "Yes,", "Yes sir," and even an "Aye aye."

"Good," Turning, Gloom pushed the paper and pencil across to Prey, "Here. Write their answers down." He ordered.

Prey thought it was pointless, as anything he heard he could repeat back exactly, but he was following his own advice from earlier and so did as he was told, rather than weaken their image in front of all these prisoners. Nervously, his eyes darted to the unicorn in the end cell as he picked up the pencil.

"Name, age, address." Gloom said, pointing to a dark purple earth pony mare in the first cell, who cowered when Gloom turned to her. 'Really?' Prey thought with scorn, 'He's not even that visually intimidating, especially with that Dusk Pony amulet on.'

"Speak!" Gloom barked when the mare just started to stutter uselessly, all patience gone.

"B-Bread Pudding, a-n' I'm twenty eight. I, I live at 17 Happy street."

She managed to force out.

"Good. Next." Gloom said, looking to the next pony in the cell.

Quickly the round of names, ages and addresses being taken from the assembled ponies was completed. Prey hadn't managed to get much of it down on the paper, because Gloom had been asking too fast, but it didn't matter, he'd remember.

Gloom finished up with the last pony and strode back to the centre of the room where all the occupants of the cells could see him. "Listen up everypony, because here's what's going to happen, and you'd best pay close attention as this is going to affect your immediate future." He announced.

"As of right now, I'm releasing you all on bail."

All of the ponies stared at the Night Guard Sargent.

"What?" Someone faintly asked.

"You are to be released on bail," Gloom repeated. "*However*," He growled before anyone could start celebrating, "Make no mistake, you are still very much in trouble, but that can wait until the proper trial. Any actions you take between now and then will have an enormous impact on your hearing. And there *will* be a hearing, you can bet your tail on it. We have your names, faces, age, cutie marks and addresses."

Gloom paused to give them a hard, yellow stare, "So to anypony thinking of skipping out, you might want to carefully reconsider your ill advised plan. Right now, the charges against you aren't too serious. However if you want to upgrade that to outlaw status, and to be hounded across Equestria by the Guard, feel free. The punishment for outlaws is a two year sentence. Minimum."

That seemed to properly cow the inmates to Gloom's satisfaction, because he nodded firmly once to let them all know he'd made his point, then he walked up and unlocked the closest cell door.

"Let everypony else out," He ordered, tossing the key to one of the two apprehensive earth ponies inside. He raised his voice:

"And remember what I said. For your own good and the good of your loved ones, don't do anything stupid."

Spinning on his back hooves, Gloom marched for the door, "Come on Prey, we've a pony to find."

Down the end of the corridor in the office, Crimson was standing watch over the former sheriff right where they'd left them.

"Sir?"

"No time. We've got a trouble maker to find. Talk as we go." Gloom glanced at Turf Apple, "Get out of here. The Royal Guard will be here in the morning. Don't make this any harder than it needs to be." He said as he headed for the door.

'That was not how I would have gone about securing the prisoners. I would have left them in those cells, especially with an unbound unicorn in there. Far to dangerous to get close. And I would either have killed or mind wiped Turf Apple.' Prey thought, then groaned as he realised Gloom and Crimson were going to leave him behind. Again.

Breaking into a ungainly run on his tired hooves, Prey dashed past the slumped Turf Apple. He caught a quick read of the depressed ex-sheriff's thoughts as he went, '-well, nothing for it old Colt. I hope the bar is open right now-'.

'Serves you right for getting caught.' Prey thought. Ahead, Gloom and Crimson were still accelerating. Damn.

'I hate being a runt.'

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Author's Notes:

Editor in chief: **Sweetolebob18**. Say thank you to him for his help [image]

17.1 A Turf Dispute

By the time Prey made it out the door and down the steps of the red brick jail station, Gloom and Crimson were already almost half way down the short lane, heading for the main street. Prey gritted his teeth and ran after them.

'Where are these idiots *going*?' Prey thought angrily as he tried to catch up. They didn't know *who* Turf Apple sent, or *where*.

Prey knew the answer, he'd read it from Turf Apple's surface thoughts, but he couldn't very well share his knowledge without having a damned good explanation for just how he suddenly knew all of this.

Ahead, Gloom glanced back to make sure Prey was following them, then hurried on, giving some sort of instructions to Crimson as they rounded the corner. When Prey skidded around it himself, ears swinging about wildly from the momentum, he saw Gloom had cornered some random Hay Steam citizen.

He only caught the tail end of Gloom demanding, "-where is sheriff Turf Apple's brother's farm?" The nervous pony pointed in a direction.

Prey had almost caught back up to them before they were off again, leaving Prey in the dust of the hard packed dirt street. Again. Gloom called back "Keep up Prey."

'What does it look like I'm trying to do?'

At a word from Gloom, Crimson took to the sky, powering up through the air and wheeling above them as he flew on ahead, no doubt to scan for this farm.

Ponies on the streets jumped out of Gloom's way as he galloped past, maintaining an easy loping pace that Prey was hard pressed to even match for more than a minute, let alone catch up with.

Prey was small and weak, with under developed muscles, and after having spent the last fifty seven years in Dreverton (plus his time held in Vanhoover), he was about as out of shape as he could get. Not that he'd ever been particularly strong or fast, but in the Resistance, he'd actually been good at one physical activity; running away. He'd had a knack for ducking and weaving through branches as he fled for his life, a skill mainly brought on by terrified desperation.

The point was, as stated, Prey was 'out of shape'. He'd only been out of a prison cell for about four days. That wasn't nearly enough time to recover some proper body mass, even for his small frame. The curse he'd willingly inflicted upon himself all those years ago slowed any natural changes to his body, making it incredibly difficult to gain any... the word wasn't 'muscle', but at least stamina.

So inevitably, Prey soon lost Gloom in the evening sun lit streets of Hay Steam.

'This is ridiculous.' Prey thought, coming to a halt, panting. 'It's futile to attempt to catch up in time, so why waste energy running? I will walk and get there when I get there.'

He was parched. He hadn't drunk anything since the mess hall this morning. Shaking the burn from his tired legs, Prey ignored his discomfort and snuck into the shadows cast by the houses and shops he passed. It didn't do much to hide him, as the sun was still up, but it was habit and making yourself even slightly less noticeable was better than nothing.

'What are the chances Gloom and Crimson have done something noble and stupid by the time I finally get there?' Prey thought, cutting down a small side alley that should, if it agreed with his mental map, be a short cut.

Sticking his head out from behind a planter barrel at the other end of the small alley way, Prey checked all around before continuing on. He didn't like this.

He didn't like being in an unknown place, he didn't like being in an area of known conflict, he didn't like having to be anywhere near

other ponies, and he certainly didn't like doing all of the above while tired and thirsty.

Prey paused as he went past the front door of a shop. Backing up a couple of steps, he craned his neck back so he could see the sign above the door frame. 'Apothecary' the sign read, with a couple of painted leaves woven amid the letters.

Prey knew that word, didn't it essentially mean a shamans hut? But what was such a place doing in the middle of a pony town?

Prey's experience with shamans was that their potions and brews were always sinister in purpose. Like foul poisons or blinding powders. Why would soft, peace loving ponies have such a place here? Prey looked up and down the street, but couldn't spot anyone who looked like they were concerned by the shop.

'Perhaps the meaning of the name has changed while I've been gone. It was over half a century after all.' Prey pondered.

Prey decided that Gloom and Crimson could wait. It wasn't like he cared about catching up in time for them to apprehend whomever it was anyway. With a cautious look round, Prey snuck back into the alley and up to what must be the back door to the place. Standing on his hind legs, he could just about reach the handle.

It was locked.

Prey weighed up whether it was worth risking using a rune to force open the door.

He still didn't know if the tracker bracelets on him could detect his use of runes. Prey decided that it wasn't worth the risk. He might be able to explain the rune he'd placed back in the bunk room, but probably not one he used to break into a shop. It looked like there was nothing for it but to use a much more conspicuous entrance instead, however much it went against his nature.

'The front door it is then.'

Two minutes later, Prey walked back out the front door, very displeased. Apparently, the word 'apothecary' did indeed mean something different to what he thought. Apparently it meant, 'New Age Spiritualism'. The shops own words, not his.

'Well that was a waste of two minutes of my life.' Prey thought sourly.

He'd been hoping for... He wasn't sure what, but anything else than the quaint little shop he'd found inside. There had been rows of herbal teas and brightly coloured dreamcatchers, little charms and natural remedies, scented candles and racks of common everyday herbs, like rosemary, mint, or thyme.

Prey wasn't sure why that annoyed him, perhaps it was the sleepy looking mare lounging behind the counter reading a book on chakra and star signs, who hadn't even looked up as he entered. He'd at least been expecting a zebra. But he supposed no self respecting zebra shaman would be caught dead in such a shop. That and ponies were racist and hated zebras.

Maybe he'd been hoping for something more primal in there to prove that the spread of ponykind hadn't erased everything that used to be. But it seemed that harder side of life only existed beyond the mountain range where he'd lived, not in pony lands under Celestia's benevolent hoof.

Or maybe it was that some of those stolen and self integrated memories he'd torn from Snake's mind were what was influencing him to feel offended by this place's existence. It wouldn't be the first time that evil old voodoo witch had clung to life through Prey's own memories.

Prey spat on the apothecary's front step as he left, annoyed that he was annoyed by something so mundane.

He honestly didn't know how such a shop could survive in a town like Hay Steam where the main industry seemed to be entirely production or labour based, like with the railroad. 'Waste of space.' Prey thought.

He'd at least been hoping to steal some deadly night shade or belladonna from in there.

He shook his head and recalled his mind to what was important. 'Alright, back to finding Gloom and Crimson. Wherever they've run off to.'

The break between the houses of Hay Steam back on to the grassy prairie was abrupt. One second wooden walls, and the next he emerged onto endless green grass. His hooves were complaining about yet more walking, but he'd made it here without incident and everything was going fine.

Emphasis on the past tense of *was* going fine.

Prey took a moment to pluck a blade of grass, completely ignoring the disturbance he could see happening in the distance up ahead, at what could only be Turf Apple's brother's farm. It looked serious, involving quite a few angry ponies. He didn't have any plans to sort it out, what ever it was. That was Gloom's problem. He could pick up raised voices drifting down to him on the wind as he pondered the blade of grass he held up.

'Tough, spiky, low nutrition content, stringy and fibrous,' He took a moment to taste it, 'Yep, also bitter. You couldn't live off this for long. My estimate, six weeks. Too bad, these settler ponies could've had a good thing going here.' Prey thought, discarding the stem.

The sound of raised voices increased up at the farm.

Prey let out a long sigh, the brief distraction over, and started through the long, rustling grass. 'How did this become my life?' He thought, wading through the grass stems at neck height.

In less than a minute, Prey had made his way to the source of the disturbance. Or rather the stand off that was taking place between Gloom and Crimson on one side, against a group of angry looking Earth pony farmers on the other.

They were quite literally divided, the farm properties fence running

between the two groups, and the farm implement wielding ponies on the far side seemed quite insistent on keeping it that way.

"If I've told ya' once I've told ya' eleven times, ya' ain't setting hoof on this here our land. Ah know my rights, I paid for this property an' I darn well get ta' say who can come in and who can't." A loud, pitchfork wielding earth pony, with a green coat similar to Turf Apple's, brayed stubbornly.

'Turf Apple's brother no doubt,' Prey observed, taking a moment as he crept closer unobserved to confirm that from the minds of the ponies present, 'Ah, yes it is. Seed Apple. Their name must run in the family, along with their stupidity.'

"And I'll also say it again," Gloom said through clenched teeth, obviously trying, (and failing), to hide his irritation, "As a member of the Guard, specifically the Night Guard, I, in fact, *do* have authority to enter your land if you're under suspicion of harbouring-"

"-Ain't no crime nor criminal here so ya' can just turn your tail around an' keep trotting back ta' Canterlot mister Nighty Night Guard." Seed Apple interrupted rudely, the rest of what must have been the Apple family clan cheering their agreement.

Despite the family name, Prey couldn't see any apple trees present as he looked through the fence. Just normal earthen fields of plowed sod, sprouting with what looked like the beginnings of cabbage shoots and squashes.

Crimson, who was standing next to Gloom, was looking almost ready to attack, leg muscles tensed and, if you looked closely, wings quivering with suppressed energy. The pegasus's mental walls weren't in great condition earlier, but right now this wasn't the opportunity to try and exploit his distraction.

"You are obstructing a Night Guard in the execution of their duty. Do you know what the punishment is for that?" Gloom snapped at them, rapidly loosing what little patience he had left.

"We ain't obstructing ya' duty, because ya' have no duty to do here.

Be off with ya'!" They jeered, not backing down in the slightest.

Prey backed up unobserved into the grass a couple of steps, then turned and circled round the arguing ponies, making sure to give both the stubborn farm family and the loudly arguing form of Gloom backed up by Crimson a wide birth.

It was far simpler than it should have been to just walk further down the fence line and climb through unnoticed, while the rest of them continued to angrily bicker.

Prey brushed off his wool, and calmly walked into the farm.

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Prey brushed off his wool and walked out of the farm.

When he looked, he was faintly surprised to find that Gloom, Crimson and the Seed Apple's family were still holding the stand off. Obviously not surprised that they were still out here, because if the Apples weren't in the farm house where else would they be? No, Prey was just surprised that their stubbornness had actually held Gloom and Crimson off.

'They could've just flown over them.' Prey thought.

The farmers could snarl and shout all they wanted, but there wasn't much they could do about Gloom and Crimson flying around wherever they pleased above the farm.

Likely the reason they hadn't was because Gloom was following the law and honouring Apple Seed's 'rights'.

Idiot.

That went for Crimson too. He and Gloom both put far too much stock in the silly notions of honour and duty.

Using deception, Prey had gotten in and out without a problem. So which of out of their two methods worked better?

"I'm telling ya', go on and get!"

"You ain't getting in so leave us in peace!"
"There ain't nopony here!"
"Yeah! We told ya'!"

The Earth pony family kept shouting at Gloom, who couldn't get a word in edge ways. Never the less, the Sargent and his one remaining unit member were standing their ground. 'Why though?' Prey wondered, 'Apple Seed obviously isn't going to budge, so why continue to wait here? Do they still think I'm still behind and are waiting for me to catch up?'

Prey could just keep sitting here hidden in the grass, and let this continue, but what was the benefit to himself?

He might as well subtly signal his presence to Gloom, just to let the Sargent know he was here. That way if Gloom was waiting for him, they could stop wasting time and leave. However if Gloom wanted him to join in trying to argue their way past the stubborn Apple family, he had another thing coming. If that was the case, Prey was perfectly happy to continue sitting back here.

Prey was just making his way closer through the tall prairie grass, keeping low, when Crimson lifted his head. He cocked it this way and that as if listening, or perhaps sniffing, and then turned and looked right in Prey's direction.

While Prey hadn't been trying to remain completely undetected, (he'd only been keeping low in the grass, not crawling through it), the unerring way Crimson's yellow gaze zeroed in in him was a bit worrying. He wasn't that slack, was he?

Prey met Crimson's eyes and offered a shrug. He raised an eyebrow questioningly at Crimson, as if to say, 'Well here I am. Are you two gonna' stay over there pointlessly arguing or what?'

Crimson's expression didn't change, but at least he lent over and nudged Gloom, muttering something in his ear while the Apples kept up the barrage of creatively rude shouts that all amounted to "Go away!"

At Crimson's prompt, Gloom quickly glanced Prey's way, his eyes

skittering over the lambs hiding place but failed to spot him, which was something of a relief to Prey. He'd been worried he might've been getting lax after Crimson spotted him so easily, but he put that aside for now, and quickly signalled his little hiding place with a single, quick wave.

Gloom spotted the flash of white fur first time despite the low light, superior thestral eye sight was a thing after all.

"Scat!"
"Get!"
"Shoo!"

Gloom spared a long glare for Seed Apple and his jeering family, still adamantly blocking their path. The disguised thestral gave being heard one last attempt.

"For the last time-"
"Beat It! Go On! Get Lost!" Came the combined shouts drowning him out.

It looked like it physically pained Gloom to turn tail and leave. From Crimson's agitated wing twitches, he wasn't any happier, but they swallowed their pride and stalked off into the tall prairie grass, not taking the track that ran back town in favour of making their way directly through the swaying grass to where Prey hid.

Prey picked up Gloom's angry thoughts as he came within range, '-nopony's been properly enforcing law in this town. Gone to the dogs. Thinking the sheriff in their family will get them out of anything-'

Gloom didn't slow as he strode past Prey, Crimson following Gloom's example in not stopping.

"Come on. We've got to get back to Canterlot." Gloom almost growled as he passed.

Prey was tired and his hooves hurt, but Gloom's annoyance, and by extension also Crimson's, couldn't help but bring a smirk to Prey's lips as he stood up. 'You shouldn't have left me behind then.' He

thought, sticking close behind Crimson's tail so as to let the pegasus break the trail for him.

"Alright Prey, what did you learn inside?" Gloom asked as the shouts of, "Ya' won't come back if'n ya' know what's good for ya'!" faded behind them.

Prey slowed for a step, "Pardon?" He asked carefully.

The Sargent's tail was flicking angrily, but not because of Prey. "Inside the farm. Crimson sm-saw you go in when nopony was looking, so we stalled them out front. Did you find who we're looking for inside?" Gloom asked, keen to hear a positive answer as they pushed through the grass.

Briefly, Prey thought back.

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The farm was made up a jumble of buildings. A couple of barns, the farm house, two sheds, an outhouse, the hen coup and a wood shed. Thankfully, the farmers didn't appear to own any dogs.

Prey skirted the barn headed for the back door of the farm house, eyes and ears peeled. He didn't see signs that any members of the family were inside, most likely they'd all rallied outside to confront Gloom. All the one's who weren't trying to hide from the law, that was.

'Turf Apple sent someone here bearing a warning, so they've got to be around here somewhere. Unless the messenger was also one of the Apple family out front. And if that's not it, then perhaps this mystery person they were sent to warn instead.'

Prey reached the back door, walking under the line of the windows view without issue. He cautiously closed his eyes and opened his senses, searching for anything amiss or signs of life.

Ten seconds... Twenty seconds... One minute...

Nothing but the sounds of chickens behind the house, the faint wind, a family of mice up in the thatch, and, wait, was that...? Yes,

breathing. Quite and light. Too far away to pick out any of their thoughts.

Pressing his hoof against the rough grain of the back door, Prey slowly, oh so slowly, cracked it open.

A normal kitchen was slowly revealed. Iron pots hanging from hooks, bushels of potatoes waiting to be cleaned, a large homemade table and wooden benches. No sign of the breather though. Prey got the door open to about six inches and then slipped quickly through with barely a hairs breadth to spare.

Taking a moment to wedge a splinter under the door so it wouldn't bang shut in any sudden breath of wind, he quickly trotted inside, all the while mind open for the first telltale trace of thoughts that would alert him to the proximity of the person still inside the farm house.

Prey didn't plan on confronting them, no, he had another idea in mind. But first, he needed to find them.

Prey wasn't too worried about discovery himself. After all, he was just a child and could play the role if need be. Who would believe that an innocent, lost little lamb was here to cause harm? Certainly not these soft, weak ponies.

'Killing an intruder doesn't even cross their minds. I mean, they haven't even come to blows with Gloom and Crimson, despite their open hostility. All they can bring themselves to do is bar their way and shout. It's laughable.' Prey thought with scorn, creeping down the corridor with his side pressed against the wall.

Never walk in the middle of the path. Keep to the edges. The middle was most likely to be trapped.

Unless of course the whole path was rigged. Then you were dead either way.

There was no one, pony or otherwise, in the Apple families living room when Prey looked in.

'Furniture old, older than Hay Steam. Must be family antiques,

meaning there is a lot more Apple family somewhere out there. Low set shelves, seems likely all earth ponies. Someone here paints, those small canvases are home made. Few other ornaments, so a frugal life style. Family photo's showing more ponies than I saw outside. I count three not accounted for by this photo. Which one is Gloom's criminal?' Prey thought.

Keeping to the wall, he headed across the living room, orange shafts of late evening light illuminating the room. The soft breathing was getting closer. It must be just through that door.

Slowly, cautiously, Prey snuck closer and closer, just waiting for his mental range to overlap with the person's thought's on the other side of the wall. Just a little closer...

And then Prey scowled and straightened up, no longer bothering to sneak.

He boldly walked through the door. There, sleeping peacefully in a small cot was a foal. A little brown colt, probably no more than four years old, with a soft blanket tucked under his chin. Although 'little' was subjective. He was a rather chubby colt, and was already almost as big as Prey.

'Waste of my time.' Prey thought. The Apple family had obviously left this colt inside to keep him from the brewing conflict outside, and it had side tracked him. It was annoying. There hadn't been any foal in the family photo. That picture must be older than four years then.

'Well there's nothing of interest in here.' He thought, leaving.

Prey paused at the door, eyes drawn back to the sleeping colt, who had a happily little smile on his unconscious muzzle. 'It's unlikely this colt holds any importance to anything, but I wonder what he's going to be grow up?'

Prey would confidently have bet it involved farming.

On a whim, Prey trotted back to the cot.

'I wonder...' Prey mused, looking down thoughtfully on the sleeping

colt's happy countenance. He'd never been into the mind of a child before. What might he be able to learn from the experience? He wondered how someone so young saw the world.

'It's probably bright and pure to him, untainted. An idealistic, happy child's view. I could destroy all of that, right here, right now.' Prey idly thought, his hoof a mere inch from coming into contact with the foals soft brown fur. Prey blinked, and slowly lowered his hoof.

What had he been thinking? Why harm a child? Not to mention, Luna would kill him if he got caught.

'It was just a passing notion, an ill considered possibility.' Prey thought, shaking his head. 'Yes my research is important, but it can wait. Be grateful Apple family.'

Still, he looked back at the sleeping foal, the blankets tucked snugly under the colt's chin. Prey wrinkled his nose and returned to his search, keenly aware that he'd wasted enough time and didn't have long left. He couldn't count on Gloom and Crimson delaying the farmers for more than another three minutes, maybe three and a half.

With his time limit in mind, and no longer having to worry about the other sole occupant of the farm house, Prey didn't waste any longer in being sneaky and just went straight in to check the other rooms. *After* checking for traps of course. Just because there weren't any so far wasn't any reason to make assumptions. Assumptions got you killed.

They were most likely all bedrooms, and he was proved correct when he pushed open the door to the first one.

A five by five room with a window was revealed. Probably what a standard bedroom for an earth pony farmer looked like Prey guessed. Not that he had really had anything to compare it against.

A messily made bed, a window sill and shelf jampacked with odds and ends, a basket in the corner containing a worn hoof file and

stiff mane brush. He glanced under the straw mattress bed, and saw boxes of more unidentifiable stuff. From the dust on the lids, those boxes hadn't been taken out in months, meaning they probably didn't hold anything of interest to Prey.

'Nothing in here.'

He re-closed the door to the exact position he'd found it in and hurried onto the next bedroom. He needed to be swift, he couldn't go over everything with a fine toothed comb like they had Tulip Bed's house. Had that really only been this morning?

The next bedroom was also a let down. He spent five seconds looking around. Just more bits and pieces that told a story about the pony who lived in here, but who was ultimately a nobody as far as Prey was concerned.

The third bedroom had two beds, but was just as much a waste of his time.

The fourth held a double bed, and an old wedding photo on the mares dresser. No prizes for guessing who this room belonged to.

The fifth bedroom held what Prey was looking for. This room didn't have many personal effects in it, the daily knick-knacks of accumulated life missing. Yet someone had clearly slept in here recently, the cover of the bed was thrown back and the pillow still bore the impression of the occupants head.

'So not someone who lives at the farm regularly. Excellent.' Prey swiftly entered the room and began looking for clues.

Light drag marks there under the bed, still fresh, something had hurriedly been pulled out. He looked over at the small wooden closet, noting how the door hadn't been closed, and that a coat hook had fallen off and was lying on the floor inside.

'They left in a hurry. This was definitely the one Gloom was after.'

Prey stepped up to the bed, taking a sniff, trying to pick out any scent that might be recognisable later. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything that stood out over the smell of linen and straw, not even

enough to tell if it had been a mare or stallion.

But there, on the pillow was something far more useful. He pulled a stand of dark blue mane off the pillow, thinking back to the faded family photo down stairs.

'There were three ponies in that picture not present outside. And only one of them had had dark blue in their mane.' Prey pulled back the blanket, eyes scanning for what he already knew he'd find. Yes, a couple of purple hairs. Prey knew who their trouble maker was now, and he finally had a face to put with the name he'd heard in Turf Apple's thoughts.

'Pebble Mill. Earth pony stallion, medium height, two toned dark blue and red mane and tail, purple coat, cutie mark of what appeared to be two bees above a triangle.' Prey thought, filing that all away in his head for later as he quickly went over the room, searching for anything further. Twenty seconds was all he allowed himself, and when he didn't find anything in that time, he immediately stopped searching and left.

Prey pulled the splinter from under the back door as he left, brushed off the specks of dirt on the porch where he'd stepped, and with another quick double check that he was still unobserved hurried away.

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"Well?" Gloom repeated, grass rustling as he impatiently lead them through.

Well Gloom was going to be disappointed, because the pony they we after, Pebble Mill, was gone. Prey didn't particularly care to share his knowledge on what their missing pony looked like either. Prey was tired and didn't feel like speaking. Pebble Mill was gone and that was that. But Gloom wasn't going to let him off without offering some feedback on his search.

"I didn't find much, sorry. The house had no one else inside apart from a sleeping foal. By the looks of things, our target grabbed their stuff and ran the moment they got the message from Turf Apple.

Sorry sir." Prey apologised with fake disappointment.

"We weren't the only ones stalling it seems." Crimson commented flatly.

Gloom's ears drooped a few inches on his head, "This whole day has been a failure from the beginning," He sighed, "But we mustn't get discouraged. We *have* done something worthwhile. Turf Apple has been exposed, and we have a lead. I was going to say we stay until nightfall and fly over the farm, but there's no point now."

It did feel that way. Nothing the ISND had set out to accomplish today had worked. But there was nothing further they could do.

"So... What is our next course of action sir?" Crimson asked.

"Back to Canterlot to report what's happened, and to send out a Royal Guard unit first thing to re-arrest the ponies we released from the cells. And Turf Apple of course. And probably his brother and his family too." Gloom stamped a hoof in the grass, "I wish they hadn't opposed us. Now they're going to have to face charges for interfering with our duty. Why couldn't they just do the smart thing?"

"They made their choice. Now there are consequences." Crimson said philosophically.

"I would rather not have to punish them at all. It brings me no pleasure." Gloom said as they exited from the tall grass and entered back into Hay Steam. From the light in the sky, it wouldn't be too long before Celestia's sun was touching the horizon. There were decidedly less ponies walking the streets as a result. Or word had gotten round about the Night Guards in town.

There were a couple ponies on the platform, waiting for the train to arrive in the waning light, travelling cloaks on and overnight bags at their hooves.

The ISND stood themselves at the far end of the platform and away from all the other travellers.

No one said anything as they waited.

It had been a long day with lots of walking, travelling, interrogations, and more walking. Prey was tired, and so were Gloom and Crimson unless he wildly missed his guess. They hadn't gotten much sleep the night before, and it didn't look like they'd be getting much sleep tonight either.

Prey had bits of grass stuck in his wool, and little hooked seed pods lodged in the fur of his fetlocks and ears. Such weeds grew wherever you went, he was used to it by now. He wondered if Gloom would allow them to use those showers again. Those things were a wonderful invention.

It wasn't that he minded the dirt. He'd hidden in a swamp for thirty six hours before, up to his chin in slime. But where there was the choice between being clean or being dirty, well, it was a no brainer.

Prey had been sitting watching the ponies down the other end of the platform, when he faintly heard the distant sound of the train, still a few minutes off. He turned to Gloom, interrupting the Sargent's downcast thoughts; '-can only hope this doesn't make the Night Guard look incompetent. Mustn't disappoint Princess Luna-'

"Hey sir, does the return train journey go straight to Canterlot, or are there other stops along the way?" Prey asked.

Gloom switched back to the present, "Uh, no it should just be a straight trip back."

Prey "Hmm'd", giving the other waiting passengers another suspicious look. "Well, here it comes." He said, twitching his ear in the direction of the approaching train.

Within a few moments, Gloom and Crimson could hear it too, and another couple before the other passengers-to-be picked it up for themselves.

'Hmm,' Prey noted, 'Thestral heritage doesn't just extend to night vision. I'd be interested to study what the full characteristic benefits entail, and what else they might be keeping secret. Besides the

obvious of course.'

The train chugged out of the fading light and came to a halt in a hiss of steam. They stepped aboard, and once inside, the three of them found an isle near the mostly abandoned end carriage. The rest of the passengers got into the other carriage, meaning that aside from about three ponies, the ISND had almost complete privacy in their carriage.

Prey tiredly climbed up onto his seat. Opposite, Gloom and Crimson plopped down with a clank of armour. Even Crimson's usually rigidly controlled posture drooped slightly. Five minutes later, after the train had pulled out of the station and they were on their way, Gloom broke the despondent quiet.

"Believe it or not, we actually did okay tonight-I mean okay today. We did the best we could with just the three of us, and we'll be coming back with more Guards tomorrow to properly clean up this mess." Gloom paused, flicking a piece of grass from his armour.

"So..." Gloom took a deep breath and sat up straight again, " So does anypony have any suggestions? Observations, questions, anything that we might have overlooked?"

Crimson shifted, carefully considering what he wanted to say before voicing it, "The sheriff, Turf Apple. What will we do with him?"

Gloom shrugged tiredly, "I'm not too sure. We don't dictate punishment, that's up to the judge. Still..." Gloom added, looking out the darkening window, "Technically he didn't even do that much wrong. And he did it all for family. I hate cases like this, when it's family and there's no happy outcome." He sighed, letting his head fall back.

"Blood is thicker than mud, and all that." Prey commented, without looking up from trying to pick bits of grass out of his wool.

"That is not correct. Blood is far more of a liquid than mud. Unless it is muddy water, and not mud. So that doesn't count." Crimson said with a tiny frown.

"Tested it have you?" Prey asked, looking up with an innocent grin.

Crimson regarded him, "No."

"It's just a metaphor Crimson. Do you have the list Prey?" Gloom asked, a might too hasty in changing the conversation.

Prey knew Gloom was referring to the list of prisoners from the cells, "Do you see any list on me?" Prey asked, looking down at his list-less self.

"What? We need that. Where did you leave it?" Gloom asked jerking upright.

"It fine, stop panicking, I've recorded it all in here." Prey said, tapping his head.

"You can't remember everything Prey, we need that list-"

"Willow Pot, brown dappled earth pony stallion, thirty, unemployed, residence on 2nd street, cutie mark two crossed trees." Prey interrupted.

"He's just one of-"

"Bread Pudding," Prey broke in, continuing his recital, "Grey blue earth pony mare, twenty eight, residence 17 Happy Street, cutie mark a clock with candles instead of hands. Tough Scruff, dark green earth pony stallion with orange spot over left eye, residence-"

"Okay okay I get the point. You can remember them all," Gloom conceded, "But I want you to write them all up when we get back. Tonight even. Just because you can remember it now doesn't mean you'll still be able to later."

That wasn't correct. If Prey stored a memory, then he wouldn't, *couldn't*, forget it. But instead of arguing that, he just rolled his eyes and nodded. "As you command. Sir."

"Who do you think the pony was that Turf Apple's brother was hiding?" Crimson asked, bringing the conversation back around.

"I don't know, but I hope we'll find out in the morning when we return with a warrant to fully search the premises and question everypony involved." Gloom replied, stifling a yawn. Prey kept quiet. There was a subject he wanted to raise, but not just yet.

Crimson also went quiet for a moment, eyes vacant, "Sir, I was thinking..." He started slowly, testing each word, "Hay Steam has had three riots. We are not the first Guards to investigate this. Yet they were not able to stop all these riots. Therefore I don't think the Apple pony we are after is the cause of all this. Even if we catch him, or her, it won't solve the riot problem sir." He stated.

"Unfortunately, you're right on the money there. However the only lead we've got is this one pony at the moment. Maybe we might find something else tomorrow, but until then..." Gloom shrugged, "We can hope, but hope isn't a plan."

What more could really be said on the topic of Turf Apple and the riots? Nothing the Royal Guard had tried so far had put a stop to them, and they'd been trying for half a year. Whatever the source of the problem was, it wasn't easy found.

Prey however, was more of the opinion that they were just plain incompetent.

'Seriously, with a little bit of forward planning, they could've put a stop to all of this by now. Hell, it's only so long before Celestia has enough of them disturbing her puppet utopia and sends in the Border Guard to wipe them all out.'

Or maybe she wouldn't do a thing. Celestia was immortal. What did she care about these riots? A couple of centuries from now, everyone will be dead and replaced. Except her. Prey shivered, a chill going down his spine at the thought of the Sun Wolf.

'Actually, that's not quite true. Her sister will still be around. Out of the two, Luna's the most likely to kill me first if she discovers what I am. She's claimed me for her Night Guard, and I don't think she takes kindly to betrayal.' Prey thought grimly, moving from picking dead grass out of his wool to disentangling the burrs from the fur of his ears.

Just another annoying consequence of having oversized ears. It always took ages to get out every hooked seed.

Prey saw Crimson watching him work disapprovingly. Or maybe the pegasus was zoned out. "You know if you want to stare judgingly, you could do with a good clean yourself." Prey said, just to make Crimson to stop staring blankly at him. He was tired and it was annoying.

"Pardon?" Crimson asked, recalling himself from whatever he'd been thinking about.

"You've got grass in your own feathers, maybe get rid of it instead of just sitting there?" Prey suggested, not stopping trying to get out a particularly stubborn burr lodged behind his ear. 'How'd that even get up there?'

Crimson frowned and drew back, "No." He said, eyes flicking about them for a moment.

"Oh?" Prey raised an eyebrow. With the way Crimson took meticulous care of his wings, he actually expected the pegasus to have already sorted them out by now.

"Uh, you may not know this Prey, but it's considered... rude by pegasi or thestrals to preen in a public setting." Gloom said, sounding just the tiniest bit uncomfortable. Prey hadn't known that fact about pegasus culture. He never had gotten around to stealing a pegasus's memories. He frowned in annoyance, 'That's something I'll have to correct in the future.'

"Prey, where do you and your family live?" Gloom asked suddenly.

Prey almost flinched. Almost. But he was ready. "I'm not sure how that's relevant to anything, sir." He responded calmly.

'-kid's still so distrustful-', Gloom suppressed a sigh.

"I just wanted to know if you grew up around other ponies. You've commented how you didn't have a weather team back home, so I was wondering what other basic Equestrian knowledge you might be lacking." He quickly held up a hoof, "Hey, I'm not suggesting we

can fill you in. We've not exactly up to date with what's common ourselves, but it might be something to look into..."

Gloom trailed off. Prey was giving him a look. It wasn't annoyed, condescending, or even angry. It was just blank. "What?"

What kind of idiotic suggestion was this? Gloom was basically saying, 'Hey, tell me what you know you *don't* know, and I'll find someone *else* to tell you, because I don't know *either*. Sound good?'

Gloom opened his mouth to find an explanation, then glanced at Crimson, looking for assistance. But either Crimson didn't understand Gloom's look, or he was faking social blindness on this occasion and keeping out of it.

"Never mind, it's actually not important and I'm too tried for this." Gloom grumbled. He closed his eyes again and leaned his head back on the seat, "I'm taking a nap. If I'm not awake when we get to Canterlot, wake me." He muttered.

Prey went back to looking out the window. Out in the east, Luna's moon was slowly rising above the darkened plains. Because of the flatness of the grass lands, it looked like the moon was actually emerging from out of the grassy horizon. Gone was the mark of The Mare in the Moon that had adorned it for longer than Prey had been alive, it's captive now free.

Prey still hadn't been informed how exactly Luna's return had taken place, or why she was no longer Nightmare Moon.

It didn't occur to him to just ask. He didn't believe for one second that the official version announced to the public and Guards was the real version of events.

Prey looked back from the window. He noted that Gloom hadn't actually dozed off despite the Sargent's wish to do so. Worries about Hay Steam, the Seed Apple family, Tulip Bed and her son proving to be too much of a distraction. '-I hope to Luna they've found that poor colt by now-'.

Prey doubted it. Whomever had stolen away Rocky Bed had been

far too thorough in covering their tracks to get caught. 'I still don't know for certain if that was a sign left for me in the colt's bedroom or not.' Prey thought, or rather hoped to the contrary.

He'd done all he could to prepare, which admittedly wasn't much because he was still a prisoner. But unless any new information came to light, there was nothing further he could do.

Prey checked the time against the mental clock in his head. There was still at least forty minutes before the train arrived in Canterlot, and thirty five more before he needed to speak up and raise the subject.

Thus, Prey decided to spend the rest of the time contemplating the shadowy landscape rushing past outside, his own half reflection looking back at him in the window. Prey jolted and quickly turned his head away. Never mind, he'd spend his time contemplating his hooves instead.

That left nothing but the rocking motions of the carriage and the '*chug-chug-chug*' of the train to keep him company in his thoughts.

Thirty five minutes came around quickly.

Prey had been keeping track. 'Thirty four and fifty seven, thirty four and fifty eight, thirty four and fifty nine...' Prey hopped off the bench. It was time.

"I'm going to the toilet." Prey said.

Gloom stirred and blinked his eyes open, "What? Oh, right." He mumbled, sitting up to let Prey out into the carriage isle.

Prey walked down towards the end of the carriage, where it adjoined via door to the first carriage, which itself linked to the engine that pulled them all. The few ponies Prey had to pass gave him the usual assortment of odd looks and thoughts;

'-little sheep doing here this late?-'
'-wasn't she with those creepy Guards?-'

'-well I'm not getting involved-'

Prey made a show of walking up to the bathroom stall's door in case Gloom or Crimson was watching, and reached for the latch. There he paused as if something had caught his attention, one hoof supporting him against the door, looking sideways into the next carriage.

Plopping back onto his hooves, Prey turned around and made his way quickly back to his seat.

"Sir," He said in a low voice, catching both Gloom and Crimson's attention, "I just thought you'd like to know that the pony we've been chasing is in the next carriage."

Gloom jerked upright, "What? When, how?" He hissed, all tiredness forgotten. A least he had the presence of mind to keep his voice down.

"Well if I had to guess, I'd say he got in the train at the station, same as us." Prey said bluntly. Which was true. He'd noticed Pebble Mill waiting to board the train at the platform, standing with his suit case and long coat pulled up, trying to look inconspicuous.

Prey'd had a suspicion that Pebble Mill would try and flee on the train, as it was the only way out of Hay Steam that didn't involve lots and lots of walking, but it had still been a fifty-fifty bet.

The stallion could've just tried laying low until they'd gone, but what about tomorrow? It didn't take a genius to work out they would coming back the next day, along with who knew how many more Guards. Pebble Mill either had to catch this, the last train of the day, or take his chances tomorrow.

Still, the stallion certainly had some guts to try fleeing on the very same train that his Guard pursuers were leaving on. It'd had been a bold plan taking the initiative like that, but too bad for him his gamble hadn't paid off.

"How can you be sure it's him?" Gloom asked, both him and Crimson staring down the isle at the carriage door.

"I saw a family photo in the farm house. I didn't connect the dots until just now when I looked next door, but it's him, I'm sure of it." Prey answered.

"How sure?"

"Certain." Prey answered confidently. Gloom looked into his eyes for a moment, before nodding in affirmation, "Yes. Yes, we're on the correct path." He said to himself.

"What is the plan sir?" Crimson asked, already on his hooves and waiting.

"Which pony is it Prey? There's quite a few ponies in through there." Gloom questioned, joining Crimson in rising to his hooves.

"Earth pony stallion at the back in the far right hoof corner, with the hat and rain coat. Medium height, two toned dark blue and red mane and tail, purple fur, cutie mark of what appeared to be two bees above a triangle from the photo. It's hidden under the coat, but still, you can't miss him." Prey said.

Gloom stopped looking at the door for a moment to give Prey an appraising look, '-are we all just some entry in a catalogue?-' The thestral thought for a second, before refocusing on the situation at hoof.

"Right, here's how we're going to do this," Gloom instructed quietly, "Me and Crimson will go in and arrest him, simple. Hopefully he'll come quietly. Prey, you stay back out of harm's way."

"Wasn't planning on getting involved anyway." Prey said cheerily.

"Sir, we're approaching Canterlot station. We need to act soon." Crimson spoke up.

Gloom grimaced, "Right, let's hurry and get this done." He said, and lead the way towards the carriage door, Prey trailing behind them.

Gloom and Crimson's eyes were fixed on the glass window of the partition door, completely ignoring the other carriage occupants. Looking through the glass, they spotted their target, sitting exactly

where Prey had described.

With a nod from Gloom, Crimson pushed the partition door open.

Ripples of attention slowly spread through the passengers, as ponies looked up and noticed the Guards had entering their carriage. Crimson and Gloom were almost to the figure of in the corner before Pebble Mill finally noticed that something was going on and looked up.

From his position back down the other end of the carriage, Prey caught the alarm that flashed across the stallion's features, but Pebble Mill was quick on the uptake and controlled himself. He was a bold one, Prey would give him that, "Can I help ya'?" He asked, pushing his hat brim back. Despite his rustic accent, Pebble Mill's voice was smooth and rich.

"I am Sargent Dusky Gloom of the Night Guard, and I hereby place you under arrest for suspected instigation of riots, fleeing from justice, and destruction of property. Are you going to come quietly or do I need to add resisting arrest to that list?" Gloom asked clearly, letting everyone in the carriage hear his words.

Pebble Mill surreptitiously glanced about, gripping the handle of his suitcase more tightly, but if he was expecting help from any of the other passengers he was sorely disappointed. However he wasn't about to be outdone, "I don't know what ya' going on about Mr. Gloom. I've ain't done nothing, and I'm sure this here is just a misunderstanding."

"Good. If this is a misunderstanding, then it can all get sorted out back at the Guard station and we'll release you from custody with an apology. We're almost at the station already, so I'd suggest you comply and come quietly." Gloom told him flatly, evidently not buying a word of it.

As if on cue, the train started to slow down, the change in the rhythm of the wheels on the track heralding their imminent arrival.

The tension caused by all the watching ponies increased as Pebble Mill failed to produce an answer. Ten seconds, then twenty seconds

dragged by in the charged atmosphere.

"Last chance." Gloom said quietly.

Pebble Mill threw one last desperate glance around, before his shoulders slumped and he slid off his seat with his head bowed, "I tell ya', yer' making a mistake-" Suddenly he whirled about and bucked his suit case straight at Crimson's face and made a break for the train doors, amid a chorus of of startled screams from the other passengers.

Gloom met him in a flying tackle half way through his attempted escape, coming in from the side and wrapping his hooves around Pebble Mill's middle and sending them both into the carriage wall. Prey didn't move, he just watched the unfolding scene with interest.

Crimson had managed to mostly knock aside the heavy suitcase as it was kicked at him, his quick reflexes keeping him from catching a broken nose, so instead had only taken a glancing blow to the helmet. Now he'd regained his balance and was looking to enter the scuffle.

Gloom had controlled his roll, and so had come out on top of the collision with Pebble Mill, letting the Earth pony stallion take the full weight of their fall, Gloom's armour making the impact that much harder. However Pebble Mill didn't appear to want to let it to end there.

Prey often dismissed Earth ponies as the weakest, or least threatening of the three pony tribes. However his judgement was made from purely a militaristic viewpoint.

Magic and flight beat muscle any day. Plain and simple. Unicorns and pegasi posed much more of a threat to Prey than any Earth pony, however that was a bit redundant, since any single one of the three tribes could crush him with their bare hooves. The extra strength an Earth pony possessed was just overkill by that point.

So since Prey would straight up lose to any pony, regardless of heritage, that meant the most dangerous ones were those who could kill him both from a range and up close, or who could attack him as

well from the sky as the ground. Meaning unicorns and pegasi.

However, that didn't mean Earth ponies were weak. Physically, they were on average the strongest and sturdiest.

Something Pebble Mill now put to the test. He wasn't a small Earth pony stallion, and his life on a farm now aided him in his attempt to escape.

Pebble Mill heaved himself to his hooves, trying to throw Gloom from his back. The disguised thestral hung on grimly, tightening his grip to ensure Pebble Mill couldn't get any leverage or bring his greater strength to bear.

Pebble Mill reared up amid more panicked screams from the other passengers as they scrabbled to get away, unintentionally blocking Crimson as he tried to get close enough to assist.

The Earth pony was bucking and heaving wildly, but it did nothing to make Gloom relinquish his grip. With a neigh, the stallion tried throwing his head back to headbutt the stubborn Guard clinging to his back.

That was a mistake.

Gloom was no amateur, and had clearly been expecting that, and turned his head to the side. There was a dull clang and a bellow of pain from Pebble Mill as he headbutted nothing but Gloom's helmet. He staggered, his cry muffled under the shouts of, "Guards! Help! Murder!" From the other panicking passengers. Prey almost laughed at their calls for "Guards!"

Gloom took a chance and shifted his grip from around Pebble Mill's middle to wrap his fore hooves around the stallion's thick neck instead.

At the same time Gloom flared open his wings in the confined space and started to beat them powerfully. He strained back, dragging Pebble Mill up onto his back hooves in a choke hold, keeping the Earth pony there by continuing to flap his wings and just about managing to hover, helmet plumes brushing the carriage roof.

Pebble Mill beat frantically against Gloom's forelegs in an attempt to breathe, but Gloom just grimaced as the stallion's large hooves struck and kept holding on.

Just then Crimson finally managed to make his way into range, having been blocked by the panicked passengers trying to get away from the fight, preventing Crimson from joining in for fear of injuring one of them.

Pebble Mill was in a choke hold and fast loosing air, and was effectively out of the fight. Or would be soon enough once he finally succumbed to unconsciousness, but Crimson was apparently unwilling to just wait him out.

Crimson drove one wing forwards, striking Pebble Mill full in the gut, driving the last of the breath from the struggling stallion's lungs.

Pebble Mill's eyes bulged and he sagged, back legs no longer able to support his weight. Too bad for him that Gloom *was* able to support his weight via Pebble Mill's throat. Crimson wasn't done however, and ignored the shouts and screams from the spectators caused by the violence as he struck again, movements controlled and precise, using no more force than was required to achieve the desired results.

Another two rapid strikes to each side Pebble Mill's barrel, painful but not dangerous, one to each leg joint, *Left*-Right, *Left*-Right, finishing up with a joint strike from both wings to each side of Pebble Mill's head, buffeting him with a powerful flap that stunned the earth pony. Crimson's face a picture of focused concentration throughout as he dolled out the calculated strikes.

Eyes rolling, Pebble Mill finally went limp.

Gloom allowed Pebble Mill's own weight to bear him to the floor as the Sargent alighted atop his downed frame.

Gloom and Crimson looked at each other. A nod passed between them, an understanding of teamwork well executed.

However now they were left with the mess to clean up. They looked about them, and the stunned and fearful looks of the passengers as they huddled in their seats said it all.

'-outrageous, how could they?-'
'-don't meet their eyes, they might snap again-'
'-I want the Royal Guard back, not these Night Guards-'
'-no better than Nightmare Moon cultists-'
'-I feel sick. Never seen anypony treated like that-'

Prey observed it all from his perch atop one of the benches, where he'd climbed to get a good view of the proceedings. He sneered internally at them, their naivety never ceased to astound him. He understood that most ponies were opposed to violence, (he wasn't overly fond of it himself), but to be so self righteous as to believe that violence was never the answer was blind.

Gloom cleared his throat and tried to break the silent wall of stares, "On behalf of the Night Guard I apologise that you had to see that. Was anypony else hurt in the fight?" He asked, hoping to soothe the situation.

He was met with nervous silence, none willing to meet his eye and flinching if he looked at them.

Gloom made another attempt, "Mares and gentle colts, I assure you that this was all..." He trailed off, not knowing what he could possibly say that wouldn't just intimidate the watchers even more.

'No need to be scared?' Too late for that.

'Go home?' Sounded like an order.

'You should forget about this?' Would make it sound like he was trying to cover something up.

It was a stroke of good fortune then, that right at that moment the train finally pulled into the station with a hiss of steam and came to a stop. "Canterlot station, all change!" Came the conductors call from outside.

From his vantage point, Prey could see Gloom breathe out a sigh of

relief, "If you could all please vacate the train in an orderly manner mares and gentlecolts, and leave this to the Night Guard. Please, try and have a pleasant night." He announced.

It became even more awkward however, when no one moved.

Everyone was unwilling to go first in case it was the wrong move and everyone else abandoned them or something. There was a drawn out pause as all the passengers waited for someone else to be the brave one and go first. Gloom and Crimson waited with growing unease while every other pony on the train, minus the one wheezing on the floor, shuffled their hooves and looked anywhere but at the Guards.

Prey suppressed a sigh of distaste and cleared his throat, "Everypony for himself!" Prey shrieked as loudly as he could, "Run for your lives! Last one out has to stay and testify to the Night Guard!"

It was almost comical the way that snapped everyone out of their stupor and into panicked flight.

As the mad scramble for bags, coats and the carriage doors commenced amid loud whinnies and neighs, Prey watched untouched atop his bench, until the last frantic mare managed to untangle her tail and made it out the door with a frightened shout of, "Wait for me!"

Gloom heaved a relieved sigh and gave himself a shake, getting rid of the last of the adrenaline running round his system, '-finally-'

Crimson, despite his words earlier about not preening in public, started doing just that, giving his wings a once over. Post fight jitters.

Prey hopped off his perch and strolled over to where Gloom was affixing the pair of hoof cuffs onto the groaning from of Pebble Mill. "Ya' going to regret that...I ain't never forgotten a face." The earth pony mumbled into the floor. His threat was given all the due consideration it deserved and was ignored.

Gloom gave Prey a look as he came up to them. "You're not helping the Night Guard's public image Prey." He said disapprovingly, but it was only a half hearted remand.

"It got the passengers out of our wool, or in your case mane, didn't it?" Prey responded cheerily.

Crimson let out a quiet snort, "And now they'll go home and tell everypony about the Night Guard brutality." He said flatly with that little disapproving flick of his wing.

"Hey, I wasn't the one who beat him up. Or the one who half strangled him for that matter." Prey said with a shrug. Crimson didn't have an answer to that.

"Still, you'd think after three riots they would've gotten used to a little bit of violence by now," Prey observed, tilting his head and bending down to get a good look at the hoof cuffs Gloom had applied, "The way they all screamed and ran off you'd have thought you were crucifying him to the carriage walls with rusty nails and string out his intestines for the next passengers to find or something."

"That's disturbing. Please never say something like that again, especially in public." Gloom muttered, hauling Pebble Mill to his hooves.

The earth pony wobbled about, blinking rapidly as he tried to figure out what was going on. "Eerghh." He groaned.

Prey could see in his thoughts that the stallion wasn't nearly as dazed as he let on. He wasn't fully cognitive, but he certainly knew what was going on around him once again, but was playing it up to try and stall for time. Prey knew that Pebble Mill hadn't even been knocked fully unconscious. The brain was able to reset itself within minutes. Longer than that though, and you needed to start worrying about permanent brain damage.

"Come on, let's get him back to the palace cells. Crimson, bring his suitcase. Might be it's stolen property, or has something incriminating in it. Either way, it's still in his possession at the time

of arrest." Gloom said, starting to steer Pebble Mill towards the door.

Pebble Mill dug in his heels and refused to move.

"Cut that out. You're already in enough trouble as it is." Gloom snapped.

Pebble Mill just shook his head stubbornly, head lolling about as he did so in a display of confusion, "Wha's I'm doing her'?" He slurred.

Prey could hear the stallion's panic making him stall for even a few more minutes of freedom, wild plans of escape running through his head.

"Do we need to subdue you again and drag you all across Canterlot's streets?" Gloom threatened. Crimson, who'd retrieved Pebble Mill's suitcase, lifted a wing and took a half step closer.

Pebble Mill was a good actor, for he did not flinch, "Guard brutality." He slurred accusingly, and promptly sat his rear end down.

Gloom let out a strangled growl, rubbing his eyes, "Crimson, it seems we're going to need assistance to get this...*Stallion*, moving. Fly up to the Guard Compound entrance and get them to send out a patrol wagon. Tell them what's happened and that Captain Nighthawk okay'd it. Oh, and don't forget that Palace airspace is restricted. Me and Prey will wait...Prey-hey, what are you doing?" Gloom demanded.

Prey looked up from flicking open the last latch on the suitcase, "Finding some motivation of course." He said.

"That was locked." Crimson stated, looking down at the now open suitcase.

"Hey that's mine, git' that lamb away from it!" Pebble Mill demanded hotly, suddenly a lot more lucid.

"Yes it was," Prey said answering Crimson, "But really, one-two-three-four can hardly even be considered a lock. Ah, what have we

here?" Prey said, pulling out a heavy pouch from among the messy tangle of clothing. Pebble Mill had definitely packed in a hurry.

"Hey, ya' put that back, yer hear me? That ain't yours and belongs ta' me." Pebble Mill started forwards, but only ended up stumbling and falling over with a groan of pain, the beating Crimson had administered still fresh. Unneeded, Gloom merely lowered the hoof he'd raised to restrain him.

"Prey...." Gloom half asked, half warned as Prey tugged the pouch open, Crimson looking on in mild interest.

"Ah, here we go," Prey announced, pulling out a single gold bit from inside, then turning to Pebble Mill, "You've been causing us quite a bit of trouble you know, Mr. whom-ever-you-are. I don't think an annoying pony like you should have all these bits. Doesn't seem right, does it?" He asked with a bright smile.

"I earned my fair n' square-"

"We are the Night Guard! We do not steal!" Gloom shouted, real anger in his tone.

"Stealing? Who said anything about stealing?" Prey said heading for the grate in the carriage floor, "It's only stealing if we keep it, not if we- *oh* oops." Prey carefully dropped the bit through the grate with a clink, "My bad."

Fishing out another coin from the pouch, Prey held it up critically to the light, "Hmm, I estimate there's about fifty bits in here. Forty nine now. Oh wait, forty eight." Prey said, dropping that coin too.

"Ya' can't do that! That's mine. I'm'a report ya' to the Guard." Pebble Mill cried, forcing himself to his hooves, but when Crimson stepped closer, one wing half raised, he stilled. His eyes remained furiously fixed on Prey though, "Oi! You, Sargent Gloomy, she's with ya' ain't she? Keep your lamb under control." He snapped.

"Prey, that's not how we do things." Gloom said disapprovingly.

"What? If he doesn't want to cooperate, it's his own fault. Granted, it's a relatively small amount of money, but either he can come now

while he's got forty eight bits left, or afterwards, when he's got no bits left. Why waste our time and also that of the Guards you'll have to pull off shift to come down here just to drag him back-"

"Ya' just assaulted me! I can hardly walk."

"Oh would you look at that, down to forty seven. What a shame." Prey said with mock concern, "Whatever will we do? Oh, I know," Prey held up a fourth coin with a big smile, "How about we-"

"Prey stop it-"

"I'ma report ya!" Pebble Mill shouted.

"Oh dear, forty six. Besides, what are you going to report? Money that you say is missing? Money that none of us will have? Do you really think anyone will believe you?" Prey asked, balancing yet another coin on his hoof.

"Don't ya' dare!"

"I don't hear any movement out that door and towards the dungeons. Guess that means you won't be needing this then-"

"Fine ya' little bucker-!"

"Oops. Forty five."

"Stop it! I'm going, see? Now put my money back!" Pebble Mill said, staggering for the door. When Prey saw that Pebble Mill was indeed moving, he simply pulled the drawstring bag closed again and tossed it back into the suitcase without further comment. He'd gotten what he wanted, so there was no cause to gloat or make any further threats.

Prey moved to walk out after the cuffed and hobbling stallion. He paused, one leg in the air, "Aren't we going?" He asked Gloom and Crimson innocently, "I thought you were tired and in a hurry."

Gloom opened his mouth. The thought of his bunk and rest flashed through his thoughts.

Gloom sighed and shrugged, "Just this once, no harm I suppose." He muttered.

All three of them were tired, hungry, annoyed, and not in the mood to constantly listen to their prisoner's threats by the time they reached the Palace.

"My lawyer ain't going to stand for this and ya' all gonna' regret this."

Eventually, Gloom had enough, and informed Pebble Mill of that fact in a tactful way.

"You have the right to remain silent. I suggest you use it. Else I'm going to exercise my right to tell the kid-*Prey* I mean, to do what he wants. If I remember, there's still forty five bits to go."

Which promptly shut the Earth pony up.

Now, they'd successfully deposited Pebble Mill in the overnight cells, (apparently these were the only cells that got any regular use) and filled out the paperwork the night warden on duty had given them. Pebble Mill had refused to give any of the details about himself, so for now Prey was the only one who knew his real name, and everyone else knew him as Mr. 'The-Right-to-Remain-Silent'.

Prey was sitting against the corridor wall, while inside, Gloom gave a report to Lieutenant Starry Wing.

"You were not disturbed." Crimson abruptly stated.

Prey kept rubbing one of his sore back hooves without looking up, "You know, just saying things out of the blue without any context doesn't explain anything. I can think of at least sixteen different avenues of possible conversation that we could diverge upon after that statement."

"...I don't follow." Crimson said cautiously.

"No, that's what *I'm* saying. I can't read your mind-", '*Unfortunately*', "-So you're going to have to explain your meaning. This conversation is getting sidetracked enough as it is." Prey said impatiently.

Crimson paused, "What are we talking about again?"

"Once again, that's what I'm asking. You said, 'You were not disturbed', and then we were trying to establish what you meant to ask with that abstract statement." Prey snapped.

Crimson blinked that slow blink of his, "Oh. That." He said.

Prey waited, but nothing else was forth coming from the cryptic Pegasus. Prey sighed.

"Social etiquette dictates you now ask your question after we've taken so long to get around to it. But since this isn't getting us anywhere, I'll just guess at your meaning instead." Prey told him.

That got a startled flutter of Crimson's wings, his eyes winding almost imperceptibly in apprehension, no doubt recalling every other time he'd seen Prey 'guess' the intentions of a pony, or more accurately verbally picked them apart.

"No need-" Crimson began.

"You were obviously referring to something that you viewed as disturbing about myself, likely related to an incident earlier today. The four major ones being first, the investigation of Tulip Bed's house. Next, the interview in Hay Steam of Turf Apple, followed by infiltrating his brother's farm, or most recently the fight and subsequent arrest of Mr. The-Right-to-Remain-Silent." Prey said, tapping his hoof on the hard floor as he listed off each incident.

"Now, from your perspective I can deduce that-"

"-I was referring to how you were not disturbed by the fight in the train." Crimson cut in, a tad hastily.

"Should I have been?" Prey asked, pulling a stand of grass out of his wool that he'd somehow missed earlier and discarding it

disdainfully.

"On the train. The arrest. Other ponies were scared, and they panicked. Everypony fears violence. That is the correct reaction, not so much in the thestral clans, but here in Canterlot, yes. But you weren't scared. Were you? You did not seem scared. A normal lamb would've been..."Crimson blinked, pausing awkwardly as he seemed to fully process what he was saying. "Oh. Right." He said contemplatively.

Prey offered him one of those sickly sweet, completely insincere smiles that were almost impossible to tell apart from the real deal, "I'm glad we could work through this awkward little social communication exercise together." He said.

"So you were not afraid?" Crimson double checked.

"Of that fight itself? No." Prey answered dismissively. Really, that could hardly even be called a 'fight'. No blood had even been spilt.

"We're you disturbed-?" Crimson pressed.

"We've just been over this." Prey rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"-By me?" Crimson finished.

Prey left aside checking the bandage on his ear and looked up. Crimson's focus was fixed solely on him.

"Were you expecting me to be? You beat up some pony who I couldn't care less about. Maybe you care, but I don't. I thought this is what you father trained you for. It's a bit late to get cold hooves about your life profession choice, don't you think?" Prey asked, cocking his head.

"That is a ridiculous suggestion," Crimson said flatly, "And I warn you not to insult my father's memory. My father's training was the best thing that ever happened to me. And I am asking why you didn't care."

"Why should I feel guilty? You don't care either, and you're the one who beat him up." Prey retorted.

"I am a warrior. I was trained for this life style. The fight on the train was necessary. But you're still wrong, I do care. A warrior without a heart is weak. But you should have been disturbed. You are not a warrior, you are..." Crimson struggled to find the word he was looking for, "...A lamb." He finished lamely.

Prey gave him an unimpressed look. 'I survived abominations that made the Deeper Green weep, you thestral reject. And you somehow think to imply that I am weak?' Prey sneered internally. Then he regretted even thinking about those memories, and had to fight down a shudder. 'Some memories aren't there to be remembered.'

Crimson turned his head stiffly away, "That is not what... Not what I really meant to say. But my point is... Never mind."

Crimson glared off down the dim corridor rather than look at Prey. The pegasus's mental walls shifted about in frustration at once again being unable to correctly verbalise what he meant to say.

'Typical side effect of previous social isolation from a young age.' Prey noted dispassionately.

The click of the door handle turning, and the office door being loudly pulled opened, brought both of their attention back to Gloom as he stepped out of Starry Wing's office. The Night Guard lieutenant certainly had been working late, lucky for them. If not, Gloom would've had no one to report about the situation in Hay Steam to.

"...-finish tomorrow Sargent. And get some sleep for Luna's sake." Came the tale end of the conversation through the door.

"Yes sir. Goodnight sir." Gloom answered with a weary but still perfectly regulation salute.

A quick check on Gloom's thoughts from Prey revealed they'd been discussing plans for Hay Steam tomorrow. It felt kind of redundant to double check something so blatantly obvious, but Prey did it anyway. Paranoia was healthy.

Gloom nodded tiredly to both of them as he shut the office door with a wing claw. He'd returned the Dusk Pony amulet, and was now back in full thestral form. "Let's go to the mess hall and grab some food." He said to them.

"Dinner was hours ago. There'll be no one-"
"-Nopony."
"-No one there. The cooks will have left and the evening meal will all be gone too." Prey finished, not shifting from his seat against the wall.

"Aren't you hungry?" Gloom asked bluntly.

Prey cocked his head to the side at such a foolish question. Of course he was hungry. None of them had eaten since breakfast, and it'd been a long day full of travel and activity that, frankly, Prey could've done without. He was ravenous, but he didn't see how that mattered since there would be no food, so there was no point in complaining.

"You know we can just raid the kitchen right?" Gloom told him.

"Is that allowed, sir?" Crimson asked.

"No. But I'm too tired and hungry to care. What Cookie doesn't know won't hurt her." Gloom stifled a yawn, "Come on."

It was a strange, sitting in the dimly lit and almost silent mess hall.

The rows of tables and benches that had been filled with Guards the last time Prey had been in here now sat glaringly empty. The lack of Guards definitely helped Prey to relax though. Low burning oil lamps cast the only illumination in the room, but the white marble walls helped to reflect it back and make sure the deserted hall wasn't completely cast into shadow.

They tiredly pulled up at a lone table near the middle of the room and sat round it, or slouched in Gloom's case, stretched in Prey's, or remained stiffly composed in Crimson's as they quietly ate the bread and carrots that they'd raided from the kitchen.

It was an odd feeling. After the hectic, non-stop rush of the day, just sitting and slowly chewing their way through their bland late night meal.

A thestral Sargent recently returned from exile along with his entire race, a socially unaware warrior pegasus outcast, and a cursed, mind leech runt lamb, sitting round a table breaking bread.

'There's a joke in there somewhere.' Prey thought, smirking as he chewed on a tough carrot.

It was pleasant, the silence.

It let Prey contemplate how much longer he might be alive, or what might be waiting in ambush for him once they returned to their bunkroom. Actually, it wasn't pleasant, but it was familiar, and was actually, unbelievably, preferable to talking.

"You did well not to panic on the train today, Prey." Gloom suddenly said.

'You just had to spoil it.' Prey sighed internally, "Sure." He answered dismissively, hoping the Sargent would take the hint and drop it.

Of course, Gloom saw it as his duty to '-make sure everything really is fine with my two charges-'.

"Anything you want to say about that? Any concerns?" Gloom prodded.

"Why're you only asking me? Don't you have any concerns about Crimson?" Prey responded, biting down on his carrot a bit harder than was strictly necessary.

Gloom wasn't so easily deterred by Prey's obvious hint. Gloom turned to Prey, "Crimson, are you okay with the violent nature of the arrest that took place earlier today?" He asked formally.

"Yes sir."

"Good to hear."

Gloom turned back to Prey, "This isn't to demean you Prey, but things are a bit different out in the clans. We're used to a rougher lifestyle living in the mountains. We have experience, and training. Not to mention we're older."

"This again?" Prey sighed, "You're a bit late to the speech, sir, Crimson already beat you to it while you were giving your report to the Lieutenant."

Gloom blinked and looked at Crimson, "You did?"

Crimson shuffled his wings, but answered truthfully as always, "I suppose I did sir."

Gloom blinked again, "Huh."

"So if you're quite done mocking me because of my age, *again*, and size, *again*-"

"This isn't about your age Prey. *Or* being a runt for that matter. Look, I know that's a sore point for you-"
"Since when?" Prey challenged.

"-But this isn't about that. I haven't forgotten our first talk. But this is a legitimate concern and my point still stands. I have my duty to follow, so; Are you okay?"

Prey dropped the rest of the carrot on the table, annoyance having stolen his appetite, "Look, just because I'm fragile physically doesn't mean I'm fragile mentally."

That was true and yet so untrue.

"So thank you you for your concern, but no thank you."

"Is that a yes then?" Gloom persevered.

"If I say yes, will you actually believe me and leave me alone?" Prey asked coldly, trying to give Gloom a proper disdainful glare from where he sat low on the bench.

For some reason, rather than frustrate Gloom, Prey's biting response

only seemed to serve to encourage the thestral sergeant, "Nope." Gloom replied affecting a grin, yet still maintained his serious attitude, "I'm going to ask you the same thing every time anything like this happens. You may feel it's awkward, but deal with it. And you still haven't actually answered the question." Gloom added with that slightly disturbing crooked grin. Maybe it was the fangs.

Prey flopped his head onto the table in the picture of defeat, "Fine. I'm fine. Completely, one hundred percent, a-okay. Nothing wrong here. Perfect, completely normal. Better even."

"Good. See? It's no big deal Prey. We look out for everypony in the Night Guard." Gloom said. Unseen, Prey rolled his eyes, head still resting on the table. Tired as he was, the hard wood made a remarkably enticing pillow.

"I'm thirsty. Should I search for a jug and water for us sir?" Crimson asked. Maybe he was finding the conversation just as sappy and awkward as Prey was and wanted an escape.

"I got this. And I think we can safely say we're off duty now. With that all over with, it's just Gloom again." Gloom said pushing himself to his hooves.

"Back in a minute." He called, stifling an enormous yawn as he headed for the kitchen doors.

Soon he returned, bearing some mugs hooked on a wing claw, a small jug balanced on his back, and a bottle wrapped in a twine basket in his teeth. He flipped a mug towards each of them, then poured Prey some water from the jug. But for him and Crimson, he filled up their mugs from the bottle instead with something thick and purple. Looked like it might've been grape.

"Don't think you'd like this. It's from the clans." Gloom said by way of explanation to Prey, hoofing one of the mugs over to Crimson, who took it with a slight frown, peering in at his drink. Gloom gave him a nod and took a sip from his own.

Crimson sniffed it, and his face smoothed back into normal, but his wings fluffed in surprise. He looked at Gloom who nodded at him

again. "This-?" Crimson started. Gloom just have him another nod.

Prey closed his eyes and silently scented the air. 'Ah.' He thought, observing Gloom's thoughts. He gave the bottle a quizzical observation, memorising it's style, then shrugged and finished his drink. Water was fine for him.

Prey was just checking the bandage on his ear when there was the sound of hooves at the mess hall doors. They all looked over, "Lieutenant Screech." Gloom said standing up quickly and saluting the thestral in Night Guard armour who'd stepped out of the shadowy doorway.

"No need for that Gloom, I'm off duty." Screech said clopping over, offering a nod to Crimson and, after a moments pause, one to Prey as well.

Gloom relaxed and sat back down, "Good evening then Screech. How was your night? Err, day." He corrected himself.

Screech sighed and slid into the bench next to Gloom, who automatically shifted over to make room for the thestral. "It could have gone better, you know how it is."

"Oh." Gloom said, rather unenlightenly. "Has Bramble Thorn sent back any news?" He tried after a moment.

"Nothing from the clan yet. As far as we know, they're still in Westfallow caves. They haven't even sent a raven. I don't know if they've decided to up sticks and move closer to Canterlot yet, or are still waiting. Princess Luna is keen for them to rejoin Equestria, but..." Screech sighed and rested his chin on his hoof, "The council is always cautious. Too cautious. No offence to your grandfather, Gloom." He added.

"None taken. I know better than anypony he can be a stubborn pain. At least there's the other four council members to keep him contained." Gloom said, waving it off. '-never saw eye to eye with that cantankerous old rain cloud-'

Screech seemed to notice Gloom and Crimson's drinks. He leaned

closer and peered at the half empty bottle, "Hey, is this-?" He asked.

"Yes it is." Gloom answered. He glanced sidelong at Prey. "Would you like me to get you a mug, Screech?" He offered.

Screech also glanced at Prey, then to Crimson who looked back blankly, "No, that's fine thanks. You know I never could stomach that stuff." He answered.

"Oh, that's right. Foolish of me, I forgot." Gloom shrugged.

"How's your new position? The ISND going well?" Screech asked, changing topic.

Gloom hesitated, "It's...going." He allowed.

Screech nodded in understanding, "Ah. I see. We're always available to help a fellow Night Guard if you need it." Screech offered.

Gloom nodded in acceptance, but didn't speak. Evidently Screech and Gloom knew each other from before they came to Canterlot on their moon goddess's wishes. Screech seemed like a distant uncle, or perhaps a teacher figure.

"Is her majesty well?" Gloom asked after a minute of them all sitting in silence, Crimson and Gloom sipping their drinks while Prey was thinking on plans for the coming night.

"Princess Luna is in excellent health." Screech replied straight away. Then he sighed and took his helmet off, resting it on the table top. Underneath, he looked almost as tired as Gloom did. "To tell the truth..." He glanced at Crimson and Prey cautiously.

"What? Think we're going to run off to the Royal Guard, who're *oh so* friendly to us? Maybe spread gossip all over the Palace like some scullery maid?" Prey asked opening up an eye, head still resting on the table.

"Sir, I swore loyalty to her majesty, and that means loyalty in everything." Crimson stated flatly. He looked like he might have been offended, but as always, how could you tell with him?

Screech's ears went up in surprise as he looked at Prey.

"Yes, that's Prey, don't let him get to you, he surprises everypony." Gloom told Screech with a slight smirk, before he let it fade, "What is the problem with her majesty? Is it a fault with the Night Guard?" Gloom asked, serious again.

Screech sighed again and lent back in his seat, "This is only me talking, and it's just my own private concerns, but I don't think Princess Luna is adjusting as well as she would like."

"A thousand years is a long, long, *long* time to be gone. I don't imagine I'd be able to readjust so quickly from everything I knew being here one minute and gone the next when she re-awoke." Gloom said.

"It's more than that. Again, this is just personal, but it seems like when I attend with Captain Nighthawk to report to Her Majesty, that's she's...Just, putting on a brave face almost. I think that everypony still being hung up on the demon is hard on her. Did you know that in the last two weeks, only three ponies have attended her Night Court?" Screech asked.

Gloom merely shook his head.

"Surely Princess Celestia must help Her Majesty." Crimson said.

"Of course she does. Her majesty cares a great deal, I'm sure nopony could be happier than her about Princess Luna's return. Princess Luna loves her sister too. But I just fear that Princess Luna doesn't tell her majesty everything. She's said previously how she doesn't want to increase her sister's burdens with other royal duties, so, I dunno', I guess I just worry that maybe she won't ask Princess Celestia for help or something." Screech confessed.

Prey sneering at them internally, 'Weak? Unsure? You're talking about an alicorn you fools. Power incarnate. They don't get lonely. You all obviously have no idea what you're talking about, just drawing parallels with what you expect and your own experiences.' He thought.

The very idea that Luna might be angsty was laughable.

Sure, he expected that Celestia and Luna did have emotions, but he also imagined their feelings came secondary to calculated instinct, not something mortals could understand. If they allowed themselves to show emotion, it must be just that, a show. An act to garner trust and reassure their subjects.

There was another quiet in the deserted mess hall as the three ponies thought dejectedly about their princess, wishing they could do better, and reflected on their own roles within her Night Guard.

Well, two of them thought that. Crimson probably did too, but Prey couldn't know for certain. Just ninety five percent.

Screech was tapping his hoof absentmindedly on the table, and had been doing so for the last minute. As his thought process finished up the light drumming reached its finale, "Right," Screech said pushing himself off the bench, "Sorry for taking your time. No doubt you're as tired as me, so I won't keep you from your bunks any longer. Luna watch over you." He said by way of goodnight. "You two as well." He added to Crimson and Prey as he left.

"Come on. We'd best try and get some sleep before tomorrow. Or this morning, I don't rightly know anymore." Gloom yawned, standing up as well.

'Curses.' Prey thought.

He still hadn't come up with a satisfactory back up plan in case there was an ambush or trap laid in the bunk room by whomever had kidnapped Rocky Bed. Well, it was too late for that now. At least Luna didn't seem to have discovered his test rune. Or at the very least, she didn't care enough to come and kill him. Yet.

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18.1 Mint Tea and Interrogation

Someone had been in the bunk room while they were gone.

'There's no need to panic,' Prey told himself, ' This doesn't necessarily mean anything. It could've been anyone, a palace worker, a laundry maid, another Night Guard.'

Statistically, those were far more likely possibilities than some unknown stalker, who might or might not have left a sign in Rocky Bed's room.

It wasn't going to be any of those, Prey just knew it.

"You coming in or not Prey?" Gloom asked with a hint of exasperation as he held open the door, wishing impatiently that Prey '-would hurry up so we can finally go to sleep-'.

"Yes." Prey said, finally following the impatient thestral through the door.

The fact that Gloom and Crimson hadn't exploded in a rain of gore stepping inside greatly helped to increase Prey's confidence it wasn't a trap. That didn't mean there wasn't one, just that he hadn't found it yet. But a glance around the room revealed no obvious signs, nor could he feel any magic at work in the room.

Gloom made straight for his bed, already pulling off bits of armour. Crimson was standing at the foot of his bunk, apparently patiently waiting for something.

'Still no explosions or horrible death. So far so good.' Prey thought, following the path Gloom had taken over the floor boards until their paths diverged and he headed for his own bed.

The black shadows under the bed weren't helping as he cautiously

approached. A pony could fit under there. Or something else. There was a clatter almost making Prey jump. It was just Gloom shoving his armour into his hoof locker. Crimson hadn't removed his yet Prey noted.

"Sir," Crimson cleared his throat.

"Yes Crimson?" Gloom asked, eyes locked onto his soft bed. He didn't even notice Crimson's insistence to stick to protocol and keep calling him sir.

"Last night, you said that every night we must have something new to say. I mean, to share, sir." Crimson prompted, with all the inflection of a dead tree branch.

Prey was only half listening himself. Slowly, he approached his bed, coming in from the side to avoid the most direct route that someone might've expected him to take. Still nothing. He couldn't smell anything and his magical perception, while admittedly not perfect, wasn't picking up anything either.

"Prey."

"What?" He responded, not taking his attention off his task.

"Share and tell time, and you're up first. Tell us something about yourself, or about the day." Gloom said.

"No. We already did that in the mess hall earlier." Prey said.

"Nope, that excuse isn't going to fly. Come on, it doesn't have to be too serious, anything will do." Gloom said.

"If it's not serious, what's the point? Besides, it's late and and we're all tired." Prey returned, scrutinising his bunk intently. Was that a tiny lump under the blankets?

"Yes it is late, so stop stalling. I said we're going to do this every night. Right now, not looking like my best idea I'll admit, but it's a good one in principle so we're going to persevere. I'd prefer not to make this an order." Gloom insisted. He sounded like he was getting annoyed, so Prey decided not to push his luck.

He hadn't forgotten who was really in charge here. 'Just testing the boundaries though.'

"Fine. Here's my two bits for the day; the train services are majorly under-utilised both within Canterlot and outside in neighbouring towns. The rail service seems to be mainly just for passenger use. Many farmers could use it for mass transportation of crops, but most just use normal carts instead. Whether this is due to lack of desired destinations to sell at, exorbitant tariffs, or simple reticence on the part of the farmers to change isn't readily apparent yet." Prey said, rattling off the first observation that came to mind.

Wait a minute, that *was* a lump under his blanket.

There was silence, and then a cough from Gloom, "That's, err, certainly something." Gloom hedged. It was apparent that he didn't have a clue what Prey was talking about. Neither did Crimson probably.

"You asked for something I wanted to share. Well there you go." Prey said, gaze fixed on the foreign lump of something just under the blankets edge, almost hidden by the pillow.

"Well, thankyou for sharing Prey." Gloom said a bit lamely. "Crimson you're up." He said turning to the waiting pegasus.

"Personally sir,-"

"Just Gloom. You're sounding like me and the kid, I-mean-Prey."

"Gloom," Crimson repeated slowly, "My observation. Ponies will do ill considered things for family, even when they know they are in the wrong. Turf Apple broke the law, and lied. And his brothers family too."

He stopped speaking there. "That is all." Crimson added, when Gloom politely waited for him to finish.

"So you don't sympathise with them in the least?" Gloom prompted neutrally.

Crimson paused, "They shouldn't have lied. Lies are what caused all

their problems." He decided.

"But can you understand why they told them, yes?" Gloom pressed.

"They shouldn't have lied." Crimson insisted.

"Would you understand if they were your family?" Gloom asked.

The pause while Crimson thought was longer this time, "I have no other family."

"That's not- Alright," Gloom decided, "We'll shelve that discussion for now. It's late." He said, moving to his bunk and slumping down.

"Today was busy, and it looks like tomorrow is only going to be busier. Don't let today get you down, we did the best anypony could've expected of us, and even if we didn't find Rocky Bed, our investigations will help the next Guards." Gloom reminded them, stifling his largest yawn to date. A truly intimidating sight.

"The Royal Guard will find Rocky even if we don't. They must." Crimson stated, like there was no other possible outcome. Or at least no other outcome he would accept.

"Yeah, they'll find him. It won't be long until he's back with his mother." Gloom affirmed, lying back and starting at the bunk above him. '-and somepony somehow figures out how to get Tulip's memory back-', He added to himself, thoughts of their recent success in capturing Pebble Mill fading when compared to the still missing foal.

Prey suspected that Rocky Bed could well be dead right now. Or worse. But he kept the likely hood of that statistic to himself.

Gloom gave himself a shake, stopping himself before he drifted off, '-c'mon, can't fall asleep *just* yet. One last thing to do-'

"Right, grimness aside, quick overview for the plan for tomorrow; interview our guest in the cells. Then go back to Hay Steam and put a stop to whatever's been causing these riots. Simple. How hard can it be..." Gloom snorted softly to himself, before raising his voice to address them again, "Think we can manage all that?" He asked, only

half joking.

"Yes sir."

"Off duty, remember Crimson?" Gloom said with another jaw cracking yawn.

"Yes. Gloom."

"Prey?"

"Yes, sure, whatever." Prey responded, only half listening as he studied his bed from all angles for a possible trap or trigger.

"I'll hold you to that." Gloom mumbled, eyes struggling to stay open, "That's it for me, I don't think I can stay conscious any longer. I've set the alarm clock for seven, you hear that Prey? No need to jump this time."

Prey twitched his good ear, but didn't otherwise respond, too busy peering into the almost impenetrable shadows beneath his bed, trying to pick out in the darkness, like a wire or a string. He didn't care if he looked like a child checking for monsters underneath his bed, there was no way he was touching the bunk until he was sure it wasn't trapped. He wished he could see in the dark like they could.

"Night watch over you." Gloom said by way of goodnight, dragging the covers over his head, "Blow out...lamp when you're done...Crimson." He mumbled, the Sargent's mind already submerging towards slumber.

Prey slowly let out his breath. He couldn't find any trap, poison or trigger, and if it was magical in nature, it was higher than his ability to detect. Only one thing left to try.

Prey took a moment to close his eyes and steady his nerves. It didn't help. Nervously, he used the very tip of his hoof to gently draw the blanket away from whatever it was that'd been placed under it, ready to leap away at any second.

In the shadowy lamp light, a small lump of cotton with something

wilted and yellow half wrapped around it was revealed.

No, Prey realised with a nasty jolt, that was a scrap of wool, not cotton.

And that piece of yellow, that was a flower petal. A tulip petal.

A tulip petal from the very flower bed he'd passed this morning in fact, he was sure of it.

Prey licked his dry lips. There was now no doubt whatsoever. Someone was stalking Prey, and they were letting him know it. It was almost certainly the same person who'd kidnapped Rocky Bed. There was only the slimmest possibly of it being someone else who wasn't part of all this, who merely wished to remain anonymous but still leave a message.

No, that was irrationally optimistic. He'd only been in Canterlot for three days. Yet now he'd confirmed without a doubt that someone, who could enter the Palace at will, was targeting him.

'How much do they know? Or suspect? What is it that they hope to get from me?' Prey asked himself.

For assuredly they wanted something from him, and they meant to take it. What did he have though that someone might go to such lengths to obtain?

'I have nothing, except my mind. And unless it's an alicorn, no one can take that from me. I won't let them. No matter what, never again. I'll feed their minds to the deep.' Prey swore to himself.

But that didn't solve his problem here and now. Who was it that was after him?

Was it possibly someone seeking revenge? If so, they were going about it in a very convoluted fashion, so no, probably not revenge. Besides, out of everyone alive, none were supposed to be able to remember him.

So what were they after?

No one ever took any interest in Prey unless they either wanted him dead, or wanted something from him.

Prey looked at the scrap of wool and petal. Was there a specific message this was supposed to convey? Was the kidnapper telling Prey he was next? Or it might be a boast, challenging Prey to try and rescue Rocky Bed.

If that was true, they would be disappointed that their efforts had gone to waste. Why should Prey care for some random foal he'd never even seen outside of a photo? He certainly wasn't going to be blackmailed or threatened into anything over the foal's fate.

Perhaps it was actually an invitation to join them? Betray the Night Guard and join this kidnapper?

As intriguing as that sounded, it wasn't an option. The golden bonds placed upon his legs insured he couldn't run.

There were just so many things this message could mean.

This did tell him something about his opponent though. First, whom ever they were, they were confident enough to sneak into a Guard's barracks to leave this. Or they were desperate.

Second, they were still in Canterlot, and hadn't fled with their captive, Rocky Bed.

Thirdly, they were either an expert at disguise, or stealth to get in here. Possibly they were actually a member of the Guard. Teleportation was blocked within the Palace, so that option was out.

And lastly, they were interested in keeping their visit quiet.

If they'd meant to make a statement, they could've left something obvious in the middle of the room for all the ISND to see. Like a bouquet of tulips, or, for slightly more shock and awe, something like Rocky Bed's severed head.

No, they were interested in Prey and Prey only. That didn't fill Prey with reassurance.

'I must make preparations.' Prey thought, 'Whomever they are, they could return, and most likely will. Possibly tonight even, but more likely tomorrow.'

He couldn't rely on his mind abilities to help him when the time came, because this adversary had clearly demonstrated they possessed advanced mind magic of their own. He might have beaten Night Watcher in Vanhoover, but so what? That hardly guaranteed future victory.

Fighting was like swimming. You might be able to stay afloat, but unless you find land, eventually you're going to sink. How to avoid drowning? Don't get in the water in the first place.

But Prey had a trick up his wool. The rune he'd placed on the door hadn't been noticed by the kidnapper. Which meant they wouldn't notice more runes.

And since he hadn't met his death at the hooves of the Lady of the Night, that meant she likely either didn't know or didn't care either.

Now he just had to wait until he was unobserved and he could begin his preparations. Time was the crux of the matter here.

Prey looked away from the message on his bed to find that Crimson was still, inconveniently, awake. The pegasus hadn't blown out the lamp as Gloom had instructed, and neither was he in his bunk. No, Crimson was going through that same warrior kata from last night, a light sheen of perspiration already on his brow.

The light click of armour on armour accompanied his mock strikes and kicks, Crimson having not removed it before he began. Prey bet if asked why, Crimson would have answered something to the effect of; "My lack of experience fighting in armour is an affront to the name of the Night Guard, thus I'm taking steps to correct my failure."

"Why are you doing that again?" Prey asked bluntly, but quietly so as not to reawaken Gloom.

"To train." Crimson answered equally bluntly, not breaking from his

rhythm.

"I meant, aren't you tired? Missing one night isn't going to make any difference." Prey pointed out.

"Yes it will. I would loose an edge, an edge that I might need, however small. And training while tired is good. The most effective actually." Crimson said. He was not breathing overly heavily, although it was clear that the addition of armour wasn't making his brisk exercise regime any easier.

Prey hid his scowl, wishing that Crimson would just go to bed so he could begin placing runes. But now Prey was the one obviously standing around instead of retiring for the night. Prey would've liked nothing more than to climb into another bed, (not his bed, that one had been tampered with), and just go to sleep. He was really tired. But safeguarding himself came first.

"Well I'll see you in the morning." Prey said reluctantly, wishing he didn't have to wait for Crimson to finish. He gave a last lingering look to the message lying on the bunk.

'Whomever you are, you will regret giving me warning. A mistake you won't learn from, because I will not return the favour.'

Prey chose another bunk at random, then chose a second one just in case his choice had also been predicted, and after double checking it, climbed up with only minimal scrabbling and leg kicking, ignoring Crimson's questioning look.

He refused to explain himself, especially not to the person currently stalling him. 'If you thought someone might've filled your bed with poisoned needles, you wouldn't be so keen to sleep in it either.' Prey thought.

That was something he'd once done to some poor Boarder Guard. He'd pushed rattle fish spines into the camp bed mattress, so that the barbed points lay just below the surface of the sheet. You wouldn't notice anything just by looking at it. However the moment you climbed in, and the weight of your body bore down on the poisonous spines, the points would puncture through the mattress

and into your flesh.

Prey imagined it had been a terrifying spectacle to witness.

A tired pony slumping on to his or her bed, then screaming in pain and trying to push themselves upright, only to cause even more agony as they tried to push away. Not to mention, the barbed spines would hook into the flesh, effectively anchoring the victim to the mattress as they tried to peel themselves off. Prey knew rattle fish poison was a particularly painful way to go. Not lethal in small doses, but he'd packed that mattress full with spines.

It hadn't been the worst way he'd killed someone. Not even close. Or the most painful. Or even the most inventive. It'd simply been a trap he'd employed in a small Border Guard campsite he snuck into while they were out patrolling, or to be more accurate, out hunting for him.

Prey felt no joy in their death, whomever the unlucky pony had been. They wouldn't have died well. Or quickly.

That had been before they'd stopped sending out Border Guard sweeps in anything less than eight pony strong patrols, and they'd grown wise to all his horrible little traps.

'And that's why I always check my bed before I go to sleep in it.' Prey thought. Why he always checked *under* the bed was an entirely different story.

With those grim thoughts in mind, Prey lay down and pretended to sleep while he waited for Crimson to finish his kata and retire for the night. What was it Gloom had said? Ah, yes; "Night watch over you." Prey said.

"You .Too. Prey." Crimson replied between taking quick breaths, "Lady night. Guide your. Dreams."

'By the Deeper Green, I hope not.'

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Night can be a strange phenomenon.

It stands in complete contrast to its preceding opposite; day. The temperature drops, plants cease to grow, there is no light, and many animals and even people go into a short hibernation until the return of the brightly shining life giver. Few choose to willingly remain awake during this period of lesser productivity. So for those that do, their reasons can be interesting and varied.

Prey was making a runic array to flash fry a pony in their skin for instance.

Actually, that wasn't quite true. He *was* going to make that array, just as soon as he finished making this first one. The array to kill someone via ninety percent skin coverage of second degree burns would come later. But first, he needed to be sure of what the golden shackles placed on him by the Goddess of the Moon did.

Runic arrays were sensitive affairs, requiring precision, perfect rune combination, energy, and time to set up.

A unicorn might cast a spell in as little as five seconds. It could take five hours to set up a combination of runes to achieve the same result. Not to mention it was slow, hard, tiring work. As much as Prey appreciated the fighting chance his craft gave him, being his only leverage against anyone bigger or stronger than him, (so everyone) it still only came a far second compared to the gifts of unicorns.

Prey was using the blanket for his work surface. While it did matter what materiel runes were placed on, these particular ones weren't picky. He sat there in the dark, breathing deeply, forcing runes into existence across the fabric.

First came the outer focus ring, slowly building it up, next came applying primary command runes along its circumference. Next, moving onto adding interlocking inner rings, making sure to contain each array separately to prevent spillage.

It was a simple array, but a decidedly complicated creation process, and if he got it wrong, either it would end up as a useless, inert mess, or something that might accidentally kill him. Hardly the outcome he was aiming for.

Prey was confident in his rune work though. He'd had fifty-seven years to study, plan, critique, ponder and otherwise analyse his extensive mental library of all the old runes he knew. In the endless abundance of solitude and nothingness of Dreverton, he'd advanced and then perfected his theory craft.

Indeed, the array to flash fry a pony he was going to build next was one such design he'd thought up while locked in that inactive volcano prison.

Prey had a whole repertoire of arrays stored in his head. From how to change the colour of a leaf, to the plans for an impenetrable-null-magic-deconstruction-force-repulsion-anti-flight-zone.

So Prey didn't have the best naming sense for his arrays, but so what? They were designs known only to him and he definitely didn't plan on sharing, which made picking an inventive and relevant name rather obsolete.

Prey took a moment to catch his breath and give his aching hooves a shake. He could barely keep his eyes open.

If he'd merely been tired from today, then he was now exhausted from his extensive rune work. The constant worry that Princess Luna might somehow notice his work and burst in at any moment didn't help, but so far no news was good news.

A glance at the sleeping forms of Gloom and Crimson, no more than black shapes in the dark, reassured him that his work hadn't roused either of them.

Prey stood up on his bed and tugged the covers straight, so the new array he'd built, (invisible to the naked eye), was fully laid out. He allowed himself one second of nervousness, another for double checking, before he stepped into the circle and activated the trigger rune.

Five minutes later, Prey reopened his eyes and sagged, legs giving

out under him as he almost collapsed onto the bed. He didn't even bothering to move out of the now deactivated runic array. Not all of it was from tiredness. His fears were confirmed.

Prey glared down at the gold bands around his legs. 'I'm just a piece of property, a dog on a leash.'

Essentially, that's what the bands were. A leash. From all the information and magical data he'd gathered with the array, he'd discovered that these bands were both a tracking device, and a controlling mechanism. If Luna wanted, she could track him accurately to within half a yard, no matter where he was. He wasn't certain how, but it seemed to have something to do with the position of the moon.

The magical tracking signature emitted from the device was powerful, unique, almost intangible, and with almost no way to disable or even temporarily mask it.

Worse, there were at least two powerful backup spells that Prey could detect, which would alert Luna if the nature of the enchantments were tampered with or the bands removed.

The enchantments were layered and intertwined around one another, each forming the lock for the previous once, so it was impossible to alter one alarm spell without triggering the second. There might even be more alarms hidden under them that he couldn't even detect.

From what Prey could read, Princess Luna could also, at any time that it took her fancy, render him unconscious.

Prey had expected to find this, but to have it confirmed filled him with hot rage bubbling in a mix of cold fear.

And last of all, there seemed to be another unknown type of magic on these cursed things. It was subtle whatever it was, yet powerful. It's purpose seemed undefined, but wide in scope. It was meant, in some way shape or form, to fight him if he ever attempted to destroy his magical shackles. Prey didn't know how it would do so, just that it would. The form of almost independent will the spell

possessed was staggering. And terrifying.

'Alicorn magic.' Prey thought, shuddering in revulsion at how the things were now permanently attached to his legs, wishing for nothing more than to rip the foul things off and melt them in a furnace.

Prey squeezed his eyes shut, 'I can manage this,' He thought, resting his head on the soft covers as his ears flopped out to the sides.

'I can manage this, just like I always do. It's easy. Bow down, eat the manure, pretend I don't know it, and keep living.' Prey opened his eyes. Yes. He could do that. Easy.

'I *can* manage this.'

Nothing had changed, in fact all this proved was that he needed to work harder. Prey was persistent. He would find a way free, no matter how long it took. More complicated arrays, different angles, higher tier runes, he would not give up.

Prey was patient, he could wait.

There was one loop hole, one point of relief. These bands didn't track what magic the wearer cast, probably because Luna had created them for a sheep and a pegasus, who didn't posses magic. Or maybe they just didn't pick up on non-standard forms of magic. Regardless, it gave Prey something to work with.

There'd been a griffin in the resistance, one of the more fanatical ones, who'd said something once. 'They broke my wings but forgot I had talons. I can still fight.'

With a force of will Prey pushed himself up before the softness of the mattress could claim his exhausted body. Prey still had work to do, and he could function on four hours sleep for almost a week before he crashed. Rest would have to wait, lest he find himself enjoying the final rest.

Just as silently as the night before, Prey slunk step by silent step across the dark floorboards until he once again stood before the door. Yet this time, he wasn't interested in placing a rune on the

looming door frame. No, this time he was more interested in the floor. Right where someone would step as they came through.

Prey knelt down, cleared his tired mind of anger and hate, and once more began to force runes into existence.

The shrill ringing of the alarm jerked Prey harshly awake, and he only just overrode his instincts to run as he recalled where he was.

It was a split second reaction, and a split second counter reaction. So to anyone who might've been watching, it looked like Prey had merely experienced a mini fit in his bed.

As a small mercy, there was absolutely no chance of Prey hitting his head on the top bunk. Because runt.

Gloom groaned aloud from his bunk, heaving himself upright and flailing around his bed side floor for the horrible alarm clock that continued to grate in Prey's ears. Why did it have to be so loud?

After far too long spent fumbling for the alarm clock in Prey's opinion, Gloom finally managed to turn the obnoxious thing off. Gloom sat on the edge of his bunk and rubbed his fetlocks across his eyes, trying to effectively wake himself up. '-I hate sleeping through the night-'

"Prey. Crimson. You awake yet?" He yawned, then finally opened his eyes.

"Oh."

Prey and Crimson were already up, the latter putting on his new armour in preparation for the coming day, meaning it was actually Gloom they were waiting for. Prey stood at the foot of his bunk and smiled that big, beaming, innocent smile.

'-that would be adorable if I didn't know you-', Gloom thought, immediately followed by, '-Luna's Mane, I'm never going to tell him that. He'd keep doing it on purpose-'

Prey endeavoured to make his smile even wider.

"What is the plan for today sir?" Crimson asked, tightening a buckle. "Oh, and good morning sir." He added, then further added, "Oh, and good morning to you Prey."

"I think the qualifier in that statement very much depends on what Sargent Gloom's answer is." Prey replied, still smiling at Gloom. A smile, even a mockingly fake one, made a good mask. It let you hide and worry behind it. Like about whether his runic preparations would be enough.

Gloom was up and pulling out armour from his hoof locker as he answered Crimson, "First breakfast. Then we go straight and interrogate our prisoner. There's a lot of questions he will be answering. Then we're off back out to Hay Steam, along with a squad of Royal Guard. Lieutenant Starry Wing said he'd coordinate with lieutenant Swift Arrow to get it to happen. Once we're all in Hay Steam...We'll go from there." Gloom finished.

"So we're just improvising again." Prey stated.

"Only slightly. I'm sure that we'll find something in Hay Steam that we'll need. I wasn't joking when I said I'm getting a feeling from my mark." Gloom answered, pulling his armour on.

"Well sir, if on route to following this path your destiny has laid out for us, might it take us past the medical station?" Prey asked with mock seriousness.

"Huh? What for?"

"I would like a fresh bandage for my ear." Prey said flatly, dropping the joking attitude.

"Oh, oh yes of course. It's no problem Prey." Gloom hastily said, "It's not been bothering you has it?" He asked with a touch of concern.

"No, in fact it's healing nicely. Barely hurts now." Prey shrugged.

"A qualified doctor could help make sure...?" Gloom left the offer hanging, cocking an ear at Prey expectantly.

"No." Prey said, standing firm in his refusal to let anyone near him.

"Well I'm not going to force you." Gloom shrugged. '-as long it's not life threatening anyway-'.

"What about all the outstanding paperwork still in our office, sir?" Crimson asked, joining in on discussing the day's coming events. He was standing at attention, all suited up and ready at the foot of his bunk.

"We really need to get an official room designation aside from 'the office'," Gloom commented, attaching his shin guards, "And we'll work on that when we have time. Later."

'-hopefully much much later. Or never-' Prey heard the thestral think.

"Either way it's going to be another busy day." Gloom ran a hoof through his long mane and grimaced in distaste, "Might even be time to shower tonight this time around. If we're lucky." He added, picking up his helmet.

"Right, breakfast."

Much like the morning before, they made it into the increasingly familiar mess hall early. Guards were just starting to trickle in, or out in the Night Guards case. Gloom snag a tray and dropped it onto the counter, Crimson copying him. Once again, the pegasus had picked up an extra tray for Prey along with his own.

Gloom slid his tray up to the hatch, and Cookie dumped a scoop of mixed salad onto his plate, dolled out from a large serving trough that Prey could've comfortably swam in. The serving spoon she used looked more like a spade too. Evidently, when feeding as many ponies as the Guard held, think 'Big'. The food was always plentiful, if not good.

"Here." Cookie grunted, shovelling a side serving of hay on to go with the salad, and tossing a pear from the barrel by her hoof in too with a practised flick, just so that it nestled in the hay rather than

bouncing onto the floor. "Next." She ordered without breaking rhythm.

"Hello miss Cookie."

"Who-? Oh it's you dearie, how are you doing?" The mare asked, delightedly looking over the counter at Prey, who was dangling from it's edge with that big smile in place.

"I'm doing good miss Cookie. Lots has been happening, and I'm meeting lots of new ponies. Are you doing well miss Cookie? Did you sleep well last night?" Prey asked in his innocent lamb voice. But he listened carefully to her thoughts as he asked.

"Oh I can't complain Prey dearie." Cookie said. '-if Gerald's fixed that door before tonight, if he knows what's good for him-'.

Prey didn't spot anything amiss in Cookie's mind, just the shape of normal fore thoughts generated by his question. Well, it'd been a long shot, but the possibility that this stalker was a pony within the Palace hadn't been forgotten. But whoever they were, they obviously weren't Cookie.

"Now, I suppose you'll be wanting your breakfast, yes?" She asked him with a smile. None of the others in the line had gotten a smile.

"Yes please miss Cookie."

"Coming right up dearie," She said kindly, '-always so polite-', "And here's yours." The mare said flatly, shoving Crimson his food.

"Thank you, ma'am." Crimson replied just as flatly.

"Yes, thank you miss Cookie. Have a nice day." Prey said cheerfully.

"You too dearie," The cook said, all smiles again, "And you can drop the miss, it's just Cookie." She added with a little wave as they left. Prey's happy smile lasted until they were out of sight and then vanished as fast as a quarry eel down its burrow.

There still weren't many Guard ponies here for breakfast yet, which helped cut down on the headache inducing background chatter

within Prey's perception range. There were still enough catch the drift of the opinions as he passed. He picked up a couple of things. For one, apparently the novelty of a lamb still hadn't quite worn off yet.

'-what is the Guard coming to? Foals running around in here?-'

That, and the normal assortment of Royal Guards with some derogatory thought towards Crimson, partly because he was a Night Guard, but mainly because he had stuck up for thestralkind on his first day.

Most of the Royal Guards didn't really care though. Crimson was still a pegasus, and therefore a normal pony. However, because he was also a Night Guard, it balanced him back out to neutral. If the pegasus wanted their friendship, then he'd have to go to them, not the other way around.

Prey didn't notice any glances or thoughts that lingered overly long upon him, which indicated the infiltrator wasn't one of these here at breakfast. Hopefully.

"The cook will learn you are just putting on an act eventually." Crimson suddenly spoke, low enough not to be overheard as they headed for their table.

"Almost certainly. But while it lasts she's happy. Not worth spoiling it for her, is it?" Prey replied.

Crimson blinked methodically and "Hmm'd."

"And thank you for carrying my tray." Prey thought it wise to add politely.

"Hmm'd."

The salad was a rather plain mix of foliage, tomato slices, cucumber and daisies. It must've taken effort to achieve such a bland outcome with such ingredients. Really, everything that had come out of the mess hall kitchens somehow conctrived to be just a step above

tasteless. As always, Prey didn't care in the slightest and wolfed it all down with impressive speed.

"Slow down kid, you'll get a stomach ache." Gloom commented with a touch of sarcasm. Since Gloom had meant it mostly as a joke, Prey didn't contradict Gloom's poke at him being a 'lamb' and not a 'kid' again.

"Do you fear that somepony will steal your food unless you eat it as fast as possible?" Crimson questioned with his usual, methodical blink.

"Are you hoping yours will take root and multiply if you don't?" Prey returned with his usual, innocent smile.

"No, it would be impossible to regrow this."

"I was joking." Prey sighed.

"So was I." Crimson stated blankly. "I am getting better at this humour." He added after a moment.

Prey studied him for a second, "Was that also supposed to be serious, or another a joke?"

"I'll leave that up to you to decide." Crimson replied with a rare flash of levity, and another attempt at one of his smiles. Unfortunately, it just came across as slightly manic.

"So close, and yet so far." Gloom mumbled to himself around a mouthful of hay, a smirk tugging at the corners of his own mouth. He swallowed, "Prey does have a point for haste though, we have places to be." Gloom said, biting down on the last of his hay and picking up the pear.

"Yes sir." Crimson said, dutifully speeding up.

"Technically, until breakfast is over we're not on active duty, only...Prey, is something wrong?" Gloom asked, switching his attention to Prey, who'd gone stiff, a rictus of a grimace on his face.

The whispered answer, "yes", went unheard under the cheerful

greeting of Honey Topaz, the large earth pony mare from the other day.

"Aww, you not planning on running off again this time without saying hello are you?" Topaz Honey announced, looming up behind Prey and enveloping him in an enormous hug.

"-*On't* 'ouch 'me!" Prey struggled futilely in the mares firm embrace. His desperate efforts weren't even noticed.

"Topaz Honey." Gloom said with a small, polite nod in greeting.

"Good morning Sargent Gloom," Topaz replied with a big smile, "We missed you yesterday, only caught sight of your tail leaving breakfast in a hurry." She addressed this to Crimson as Prey continued to thrash, almost hyperventilating.

"Already called away on duty?" Topaz's unicorn friend, the same one from before, asked, joining Topaz Honey in saying hello to the ISND. He also didn't seem to notice Prey's efforts were in earnest rather than just childish annoyance.

"Yes." Crimson answered simply. Then he blinked and looked at Topaz, "I do not think Prey likes your hug."

"He's just like my little nephews he is, always trying to squirm away." Topaz chuckled, rubbing affectionately between Prey's ears, "They love it deep down, but foals these days." She cooed.

Two days ago Gloom had laughed at Prey in the exact same position, and even Crimson seemed to have found the sight of the lamb getting a surprise cuddle amusing. Now, Gloom only found it slightly funny. Having been around the lamb for a few days had already skewed his perspective on treating Prey like one.

"Alright, I think he's had enough. You can let him go now, Private First Class Honey." Gloom said, deciding to take mercy on Prey.

It was a good thing he did.

Prey had been nearing the end of his self control and wasn't far away from destroying the mares mind. Rationality had nothing to

do with it. He'd held out longer than the day before, having experienced Topaz Honey's attack once already. But that was like saying if you rolled around in a Fire Thorn patch often enough, you'd get used to it. Stupid, misguided, unrealistic, complete torture, and quite possibly fatal.

Prey dashed under the table the moment Topaz released her grip enough for him to squirm free. She chucked again, thinking nothing of it as she shifted her attention to Crimson.

"Crimson wasn't it? Nice to see you again, and in armour too. You'll fit right in to the Guard I can see." She complemented him, sitting down next to her unicorn friend who'd already taken a seat.

"Topaz Honey." Crimson greeted blankly, then to the unicorn, "What is your name? I do not recall it from yesterday."

The unicorn thumped his chest, struggling to hurriedly shallow his food, "Bound Codex, and hello again. Not your fault, forgot to introduce myself. I'm usually on the day shift." He supplied. Why he thought that was relevant to include wasn't clear.

"Hello." Crimson answered.

"When are you on rotation? I mean, what shifts are you pulling?" Topaz asked Crimson.

"For now, day shifts. Things are busy." Gloom said, answering for him. The Sargent's attitude towards the Royal Guard's was fairly neutral. That was just the way things were. Gloom glanced up at the big clock above the mess hall doors, "Sorry, but we'll have to cut this short. We have an appointment with the holding cells to keep. Crimson, Prey." He called, standing up.

"Ooooh, already made your first collar? You almost beat my record." Topaz complimented Crimson.

"Thank you."

Crimson lowered his head to look under the table, but didn't spot where Prey had got to. He blinked and sniffed, eyes tracking left to another near by empty table. "We are leaving." He announced to the

table legs at large. After a moment, Prey slunk out. He refused to meet anyone's eyes.

Topaz Honey and Bound Codex wished them a good morning and waved as they left, "Catch you some other time when you're not on duty." Topaz called.

'-don't hold your breath-' Gloom thought, '-we're always on duty. Maybe some night though-'

They exited the lower palace and trotted out into the bright morning, heading for the Guard Compound, passing other Guards either coming or going from said destination.

The Guard Compound was just a short trot away, and although access to it was possible from Canterlot city, (the front entrance being situated outside the palace walls), it wasn't accessible to the general public. Access was only for Guards, or occasionally, a lowly convict destined for the overnight holding cells. Beyond the wall lay Canterlot, the sharply steepled mage towers rising above the decorative ramparts and shining in the sun.

Crimson's attention stayed on Prey all the way there. He kept his eyes forward, but his ears were tilted in Prey's direction as he followed along in Gloom's wake. Prey still wasn't meeting anyone's eyes.

Crimson might have been going to say something, but if so, he waited too long, because they arrived back at the overnight cells from yesterday without the silence being broken.

"Sargent Gloom, Night Guard, here to interrogate the prisoner we brought in last night." Gloom announced to the bored looking warden behind the desk.

As there was only one prisoner currently being held, the warden didn't need to ask who they were after. "He's still got five minutes for breakfast, then I'll take you to interview him. Regulations and rights." He shrugged, casually flipping a coin up and down on his

hoof.

Gloom thanked him curtly and returned to Prey and Crimson, who were waiting off to the side.

"Here's how we're going to approach this interrogation," Gloom instructed them in an undertone, "Prey are you listening?"

Prey was sullenly watching the warden flipping his coin, "Yes, I'm listening. I take it you want me to pull out everything he's hiding in his head?" Prey responded flatly. The irony of a mind leech asking the question was lost on Gloom and Crimson.

"No, you're going to be option B Prey. He doesn't like you, after that little trick you pulled with his money last night, so I think it would be better if me and Crimson do the talking." Gloom said.

"Me and you were the ones that beat him up last night sir." Crimson pointed out.

"Okay, so he probably doesn't like us either. But you forget, I was wearing the Dusk Pony amulet at the time, so he shouldn't recognise me. I'll be the one to offer the carrot, you use the stick. He shouldn't have a personal grudge against me. Yet." Gloom explained.

"Are you sure he will not remember you, sir?" Crimson asked, his expressionless face managing to look dubious.

"One Night Guard is much the same as another Night Guard. Besides, even if I sound and act similar to the pony he remembers from last night, I'm now a thestral. Everypony knows a pegasus can't turn into a thestral." Gloom said.

"Or he could react like the majority of the pony populace and revile you simply because you are a thestral." Prey spoke up, not looking away from the warden and his all engrossing coin toss game, "Just saying." He shrugged when they looked down at him.

"Or that." Gloom reluctantly admitted. '-wonder how the kid would've reacted to a thestral? A *normal* kid anyway. Hmm, now that's a headache I'm glad not to have-'

The warden caught his coin and tucked it into the front of his uniform, clearing his throat yo catch their attention, "I'll go and take your suspect to the interview room. You'll have to wait till Minty turns up before you can start though. She should have been here ten minutes ago." He gave another careless shrug, like he wasn't bothered either way.

"Minty?" Gloom questioned.

"She part times as a junior legal councilmare. Can't interrogate a suspect without legal council present. Regulations. Did you forget that?" He asked lazily.

"I haven't forgotten, I know the rules. I just assumed it would be you." Gloom answered coolly.

"Nah, I never took that extra course. Minty's stationed here on Thursdays, and stands in if we ever need a representative. She also cleans the cells." The warden added helpfully.

"Then we'll wait for her. If you could go get the room set up?" Gloom asked politely, hiding his annoyance. '-why are all the Royal Guard's trained to be a pain?-'

"Already ahead of you, but sure, I can do that." Came the drawled answer as the warden strolled into the next room.

"He's more capable than he lets on." Prey said quietly as he watched the stallion leave, "He's just lazy."

"Do you think?" Gloom asked, shooting a glare after the departed warden, '-so he *was* being deliberately annoying-'

"That is not a trait to be admired. He is in the service of their Royal Highness's. Sloth is for ponies with no will power." Crimson stated in his usual blunt manner. He sounded like he was reciting from some script, probably his fathers words.

"During the interrogation," Gloom began, recalling them to the topic at hoof, "Let me do most of the talking, but don't hesitate to ask a question if you think it's important. Our focus is to get him to reveal what he was doing in Hay Steam. Secondary is finding out about his

family and their role in aiding him. Remember, we only have thirty minutes until we need to leave and meet up the with Guard detachment for the first train to Hay Steam. Oh, and an important rule of interrogation is to never answer any questions. We are the ponies who do the asking. They do the talking." Gloom added.

Crimson nodded, "I will follow your lead sir."

"Prey?" Gloom prompted after a moment.

Prey sighed and finally looked up, "Yes I hear you. I'll keep quiet and stand in the corner unless otherwise called upon." He said with a sardonic smile, expression and visible temperament back to normal. On the surface.

Gloom took Prey's words as a sarcastic joke rather than sourness. Good. That's what Prey had been going for. He was fit to interact again without worrying about either turning a certain hated Earth pony mare into a zombie, or screaming and running away. He refused to give anyone the excuse to call him a crybaby.

Prey hated being scared of something as simple as touch, but after sixty one years, his irrational fear was here to stay.

Prey cocked his head, good ear angled towards the outer door. "Here comes our legal councillor for Mr-The-Right-to-Remain-Silent." Prey announced.

A few moments later, just as Prey had said, the light green earth pony mare called Minty hurried through the door. She was a bit flustered to see two members of the Night Guard waiting inside (and a runt lamb) and became even more so when she found out that it was her that they were waiting on.

Minty apologised and mustered up a hoof full of excuses for being late, while digging through a locker to find her legal representative documents and simultaneously trying to brush down her rumpled uniform. "I'm so sorry, but nopony told me we had a suspect who needed to be interviewed."

Warden, that was actually his name, Warden Rows, strolled back in.

"Your stallion's waiting in there. Now Minty's here, you can see him." He drawled, waving a hoof vaguely back down the hall.

"You left him unattended?" Gloom asked sharply.

"No, I locked the door. Standard procedure. I don't have to stay in there as long as he can't get out and isn't a danger to himself." Warden shrugged, sitting back at his desk and pulling out the coin.

"The key then please. We're already late." Gloom requested holding out a hoof, just the slightest edge creeping to his voice.

"No can do. Regulations." Warden replied. Before Gloom could snap a reply, or indeed Crimson who's wings were slowly starting to bristle, Warden tossed the key to Minty.

She yelped and did a bit of hoof juggling before finally managing to bite ahold of it. "Catch," Warden said, a bit late. "Minty can borrow a key. Regulations. No pony interviewing a suspect without a legal Rep. in the room. I'm a good multi tasker. Now you can both be in there at the same time." Warden said, leaning back and beginning to flip his coin, their presence apparently forgotten.

Minty looked embarrassed and asked them if they would like to follow her so they could begin the interview without delay.

The interrogation room was remarkably similar to the one they had left not twenty four hours ago back in Pebble Mill's old home of Hay Steam. A table in the middle and a chair on each side, the one with its back to the door already occupied by the stallion in question.

Pebble Mill, although the others still didn't know that was his name, had to twist in his seat to see who had come in. A minor mind game. A scowl of recognition at Crimson crossed his features, which flashed into nervousness at the sight of Gloom, a thestral this time around, "Who're all you? Somepony mind explaining what's going on?" He demanded.

Just then he spotted Prey at the back of the group, and the scowl

returned in force. But he kept his mouth shut. Prey gave him a smile that was especially big, just for him. Pebble Mill's scowl increased in size.

Minty shuffled her papers, and, clearing her throat, began to read her script, only making a couple of mistakes, "Sir/Madam, you have been detained on the authority of Her Royal Majesty Celestia's Guard, gosh they need to change that now to Royal Majesty's now don't they? Err, I mean, at the time of your arrival, were you made aware of rights, given a written copy of your rights, or had somepony read them to you?" Minty paused expectantly for his answer, the papers she held up blocking her line of sight of the prisoner.

"Are ya' a lawyer?" Pebble Mill asked cautiously.

"Oh, no, I wish. No I'm just acting as your legal councillor. You don't need a lawyer unless you actually get charged with something. I mean, you can hire one if you still really want to, but they're expensive. I should know, even their course fees are more than I can afford, even if I wasn't renting." Minty rambled, but she saw the look Gloom was giving her and hurriedly got back on track.

"Right right, err. Ah, here we are. In accordance with the civil rights act section 15c, during these sessions, you are allowed to ask me to explain any of the questions these Guard's ask you, you don't have to answer anything either. But it would be really helpful if you could please, mister... Err, sorry I don't remember your name." She said, obviously waiting for him to give it.

Nothing.

"Umm...right, well, I'll be in here the whole time, so if you need to ask anything..." Minty offered, shuffling out of the way.

Gloom and Crimson stepped up to the table, but neither took the other seat, another minor mind game. Pebble Mill didn't allow himself to be intimidated, repeating his plan to himself in his head, completely unawares that Prey could hear it.

"Alright, I have better places to be, so hopefully we can make this

brief. Let's start simple, what is your name?" Gloom asked, his voice brisk but not overly aggressive.

A small frown flitted across Pebble Mill's brow and his ears twitched, '-why does he sound familiar?-' But he didn't say anything in response, just folded his hooves.

"Keeping silent instead of confessing will only make your punishment worse." Crimson stated.

"I ain't done nothing and you know it. You ain't going to charge me with anything." Pebble Mill replied immediately. His voice and posture were sure, a good actor, but Prey could hear his thoughts racing, '-punishment? Punishment? It's not that bad yet is it? All I did was run...And resist arrest a little. Even if I get sentenced, it'll just be a fine or something. Right?-'

"Look, let's cut to the chase," Gloom started, gesturing between himself and Crimson, "We're going to Hay Steam to investigate today with a warrant. We *will* find what we're looking for, the Guard is the best at what it does. Were merely asking you as a courtesy to give you the chance to come clean. We'll discover everything anyway, so you might want to cooperate now while we're offering you the chance." Gloom said with conviction.

"Turf Apple has no authority anymore, he cannot protect you. And I do not think you want to make anymore trouble for Seed Apple and his family than you already have." Crimson put in stonily. That brief description probably didn't do Turf Apple's dire situation the justice it deserved. When the ex-sheriff finally brought out of jail and before the judge, he was likely going to be harshly tried under martial law. Or whatever constituted harsh for ponies when punishing their own.

Crimson was a tad off in the timing of his threat, Prey would've given Pebble Mill a bit longer to sit and worry first. Actually, Prey wouldn't have been doing this at all. Mainly because he could pull the answers directly from the stallions brain. Prey hadn't needed to glance at Pebble Mill's surface thoughts for more than five seconds to figure everything out.

'Come on its obvious,' Prey chided Gloom and Crimson, 'He's a rabble rouser, been stirring tensions in Hay Steam because he's unhappy with some pony. But he's not the source, he's being directed and he probably doesn't even know it.'

Annnnd he'd been ordered to keep quiet, so Prey couldn't even direct this conversation to hurry it along to its inevitable conclusion. He did seem to be getting dragged into a lot of interrogations lately.

Pebble Mill was alarmed by the confirmation that Turf Apple had been stripped of his position as sheriff, and also at the news that they would be returning to his cousins farm with a warrant. He kept his expression firm and his ears up, but his eyes gave him away. Gloom saw his moment of weakness, and Pebble Mill knew that he had.

"I've decided I don't want to answer any questions. Make them leave me alone." Pebble Mill said turning to Minty, looking for assistance.

Minty shook her head, shuffling in her seat, "Um, I'm just here as a legal representative. And they can ask you any questions they want. You don't have to answer of course, but, um, they can still ask."

"Some use you are. Aren't you supposed to be helping me?" Pebble Mill demanded.

"No, and it's us you are talking to." Crimson said loudly.

"Minty here is to explain your rights and make sure you are aware of the legal process, nothing more I'm afraid. It would be best if you just answered the questions. Now, what is your name?" Gloom asked, the rasp in his voice commanding. Perhaps it was the tone, or because of the fangs, or possibly the slitted pupils, but Pebble Mill's eyes dropped and he stopped trying to get assistance from Minty.

"Pebble Mill. There, I answered your question. Are we done yet?"

"What were you doing in Hay Steam?" Crimson asked instead of answering, just as Gloom had instructed.

"Nothing. Just seeing family." Pebble Mill said quickly.

"What have you to do with the riot that took place two days ago?" Gloom demanded.

"What? Nothing of course. I mean, I was in town when I heard the fighting, but I had nothing to do with starting it. If'n you want to arrest me for being there, why haven't you arrested every other pony as well?" He defended himself. It was a reasonable excuse, but nobody was fooled.

"Pebble Mill, lying to a Guard is a serious offence, especially in subverting them from performing their duty." Gloom told him. Prey caught the light kick Gloom gave Crimson's hoof under the table to signal the pegasus to pick up where he left off. To be fair, Crimson managed it quite well.

"Turf Apple covered for your wrong doings, because you were family. He admitted you should have been in jail. What you did must have been no small thing. What did you do to cause, or help cause, the riot?" Crimson demanded to know.

"I haven't done anything." Pebble Mill repeated. His eyes darted to Minty, his only chance for outside help, but she avoided his gaze. Her only job here was to mediate.

"Ponies were injured, some very seriously. The fault for their pain rests squarely on your withers. Do you feel nothing for what you've put those ponies through?" Gloom asked seriously, applying more pressure.

"Well of course I feel bad that ponies got hurt, I'm not inequine, and I hope they'll get fit and hale again soon, just as anypony would wish. But I didn't have a thing to do with the riot, and I didn't do anything to them." Pebble Mill said earnestly. His honeyed lies were good, his voice pitched just right to express sincerity.

But Gloom trusted in his instincts and in his talent, which was telling him the path to solving this crime lay through this interrogation room. As for Prey, he could see the stallions thoughts; '-change can hurt, but it's worth it in the long run. And Yellow Turn

deserved everything that bastard got-' Pebble Mill thought.

Gloom let out a long, put upon sigh, "If you're just going to waste our time by continuing to lie and show no remorse, then we're done here. Don't worry though, this is far from over. We'll be back tonight to continue our discussion after visiting Hay Steam. I want you to take this time to think about how much worse it's going to be for you if we have to do this the hard way." Gloom told Pebble Mill coldly, making for the door.

"You can only hold somepony for 24 hours, I know that. I read my rights, you can't hold me all the way till tonight unless'n you have something to charge me with." Pebble Mill blurted out.

'Ah, so that's his hope. He thinks he has a way out.' Prey smirked.

"Actually we can. Putting aside the resisting arrest and assault on a Guard, we can still hold any suspect for up to 48 hours in serious cases, or even 72 hours up to a week in extreme cases. I think we can say a riot constitutes an extreme case. Destruction of the telegraph, damage to the rail road, and other government properties. Definitely 'extreme'. So as I said, we'll see you later." Gloom repeated, smiling grimly at the shocked Pebble Mill as he signalled for Minty to unlock the door.

'-I shouldn't taunt a suspect, but Luna knows he's been asking for it-' Gloom thought with satisfaction.

"But-you can't do that!" Pebble Mill almost shouted.

"We will be picking up exactly where we left off tonight." Crimson said by way of response. His emotionless expression and baleful yellow gaze was perfect for reinforcing a sense of inevitability onto Pebble Mill, as if them uncovering his crime was a fore gone conclusion, and they were merely going through the motions before convicting him.

Pebble Mill stared at them dumbly as Minty fumbled the door open, evidently eager to get out of there, '-no no no this ruins everything!-'

"We offered you a chance, but I'm afraid you've wasted it." Gloom said, stepping through the door and turning around to face him.

"We will be seeing you again soon." Crimson told him.

Gloom gave him one last pitiless look from bright Amber eyes, all helpful Night Guard Sargent gone. Crimson's own yellow pair were disturbing and out of place in the pegasus's face, and Prey grinning like a manticore from behind them just added to the atmosphere of 'You're Done For No Matter Where You Turn'.

Pebble Mill was struck with indecision. To talk and give in? Or to hold out and pray for a miracle?

His choice was irrelevant, he was out of time.

'-Oh Celestia, oh Celestia, what do I do now?!-' Prey caught just as the door swung shut on Pebble Mill's panicked gaze, locking the lone prisoner inside the interrogation room with a *ka-click'*.

Gloom wasted no time, "To the train station. The Royal Guard squad will already be there." He ordered. "Thank you for your time." He added to Minty, who smiled nervously but wasn't able to meet the thestrals eyes.

"Yes sir." Crimson said.

Prey sighed, in for another long day of hard walking, "Yes, sir."

And he *still* hadn't gotten that fresh bandage for his ear.

---I---

[[[Concept Art - What runic fire might look like]]]

https://imgur.com/KLMsGvv

Author's Notes:

Another chapter done. Whew. Even so, slightly shorter than the last two.

If you see any mistakes, please point them out.

Big thank you to Sweetolebob18

19.1 Planting Seeds

They arrived at Canterlot train station mere moments before the morning train was set to depart. There, they met up with the Royal Guard unit assigned to travel with them out to Hay Steam.

The pegasus Corporal of the five pony squad wasn't happy to be be there, but he *was* happy to make sure they knew it. In a passive aggressive sort of way. He and his squad had been pulled off searching for Rocky Bed for this trip. Corporal Fleet Glass prioritised rescuing a foal more than some riot, no matter how much damage had been caused.

Then again, he lived in Canterlot and therefore didn't have to put up with said riots.

Nor was he happy about having to work under a Night Guard. And a thestral one instead of one of the few 'normal' Night Guards, well, that was just the barb on the thorn.

None of the five Royal Guard's said it out loud, and were careful to keep it professional as they all sat in the train carriage, but inside they obviously thought; '-it's not one of *them's* place to be giving *us* orders. We know how to do our job without some bat pony getting in our way-'

Prey got his own fair share of looks, although most of them were incredulous rather than guarded. After Topaz Honey, Prey was in a foul mood, and the unicorn in the group did not help calm his taut nerves at all.

"Why've you brought a lamb? Are we taking her back to her flock at Hay Steam or something?" One of the Royal Guards had eventually asked.

They responded in disbelief once Gloom had gone through the usual explanation. "Seriously? A Night Guard?"

"Which bright pony thought up that idea? She-"

"-He."
"-Should still be in school. Do sheep even go to school?"

"It was Her Majesty, Princess Luna, thought it up." Gloom replied flatly.

The Royal Guard's clammed up after that, Corporal Fleet Glass taking it upon himself to give the unicorn member of his squad who'd so badly put his hoof in his mouth a stern word. Prey saw in his thoughts that Fleet Glass was actually secretly relieved that it hadn't been him who had asked the question, as he'd been thinking the exact same thing himself.

Prey sat in the corner, which incidentally was as far from the unicorn as he could get with their current seating arrangement, and avoided everybody's eyes. 'Nothing but a small, shy, demur little sheep over here. No threat whatsoever.'

Gloom sat down opposite Prey and pulled out a roll of paper and a pencil, "Here. Write up that list of ponies from the cells yesterday. You haven't forgotten, have you?"

"Have you?" Prey returned, taking the proffered items.

Gloom made a contemplative sound, "Hmm, so-so. I might have forgotten a few of the details, things like their ages and where they live. We were in a hurry. Can you remember everything we need?" Gloom asked again.

Prey's eyes flicked to the Royal Guard's sitting not far away. They weren't paying more than passing attention. Good.

"I said I could and I can. Just give me a moment and then *you* can give them list so they can make their own copy. Sir."

By the time the train pulled up in the little station of Hay Steam, the list had been compiled, and rather conveniently, the unicorn just so happened to be able to copy the list, using a spell in

combination with his telekinesis to write out everything his eyes read.

'A double spell link.' Prey observed, unnoticed from the back, 'One between the eye and the mind, and one between the mind and the pencil.' He hid a shiver and put a few more bodies between him and the unicorn. 'Only a tier two at most, but he has excellent fine control. That doesn't seem like a common utility spell.'

That observation was more than enough for Prey to want to keep his distance.

It was a bright day outside the train. Their emergence onto the platform drew significantly more eyes from the towns folk than their entrance had yesterday. The bright gold and white of the Royal Guard's was certainly eye catching, but more likely word had simply gotten around, no doubt spread by those ponies they'd released from Turf Apple's custody yesterday. That or a load of inaccurate rumours.

With how skittish ponies could be and the recent troubles in Hay Steam, the odds significantly favoured the second possibility.

Gloom was quick to take control of the situation, "Corporal Fleet Glass, I think it best if our first destination is Seed Apple's farm. It was him who was harbouring Pebble Mill, and denied us entry yesterday. Turf Apple is probably passed out drunk somewhere so we can pick him up at our leisure. He has nowhere to run and he knows it." Gloom instructed, leading the way.

"Did you not try and force an entrance at the farm, sir?" Corporal Glass asked as he and the rest of his squad fell into step behind Gloom, with Crimson smoothly stepping up to trot beside Gloom, leaving Prey to try and keep up. Like always.

"They...refused, and were on the brink of making their refusal violent. I didn't judge it worth it." Gloom answered.

"So we're reinforcements then." Fleet Glass said.

Gloom's leathery wings gave a twitch, "More or less." Gloom said,

making it not quite an admission of needing assistance. Instinctively, Gloom disliked making the Night Guard, and by extension Luna, look incompetent.

"So we're going to be entering and searching the premises, right?" The Corporal enquired as they marched through Hay Steam.

"Yes, that will be your task while we interview Seed Apple, almost certainly followed by arrest and detainment." Gloom answered, eyes fixed on their path as he lead the way.

"Yes sir." Fleet Glass acknowledged, sounding neither approving or annoyed by Gloom's orders which essentially admitted they were only there to act as intimidation to ensured the compliance of Seed Apple and his family. As Prey had already noted, Fleet Glass meant to keep this professional.

Besides, wasn't that what a Guard's job boiled down to in the end? An armed and armoured presence that existed to ensure compliance from the population. That's exactly how the Border Guard operated.

The towns folk moved out of their way, but perhaps unusually, didn't do more an that. In fact, they didn't even look overly perturbed at the Royal Guard's presence, despite the rumours that must've been going around and the general unrest caused by the recent riot.

Maybe after all the riots, the majority of them were simply resigned, or perhaps glad that the Royal Guards were finally here to do something about it.

Indeed, the only one who seemed to be drawing overtly nervous or in some cases fearful looks was Gloom with his thestral heritage. 'Ahh, racism at it's finest. Such a refreshingly defining characteristic of ponies, known world wide to everyone but themselves.' Prey observed cynically as he trailed in their groups wake, using them to avoid drawing attention.

Prey paused as they passed the familiar apothecary from the day before, his stop going unnoticed by the Guard's who continued marching on, more intent in reaching their destination with golden

helmeted heads held high than looking behind them. Honestly, they wouldn't have lasted two days in the Deeper Green. Picking off the rear most member was a favourite of the predators in those dark trees.

Prey thoughtfully touched the bandage around his ear. The apothecary had been a major disappointment yesterday, but perhaps it might prove to have one redeeming quality.

A quick glance at the still moving Guard squad showed him they were pulling ahead. Oh well, if they didn't care enough to see if their magically bound criminal lamb was still with them, then he should be able to afford a few minutes before his absence was noticed.

It only took five minutes. He'd slipped in, taken what he needed, and slipped out.

In fact Prey could have done so in only two minutes and still remained unnoticed by the unobservant shop assistant behind the counter. The extra three minutes were because there was an actual couple in there, browsing the shelves.

Any opinion Prey held of afore mentioned couple was immediately lowered by that mere act itself, and it would've fallen even further, (if it had existed at all), when he saw what they were actually *buying* from this ridiculous shop. Sun patterned place mats and scented candles of all things.

Anyway, he could've snuck straight in and out. The shop's set up meant there were plenty of shelves and rotating racks filled with strange postcards to use for cover.

But then Prey caught a passage of passing thought from one of the couple. It was enough to make him pause for those additional three minutes to see if he could pick up any related follow up information. Unfortunately, the stallion's thoughts didn't stray into that area again, so Prey stole what he'd come in for and left.

"Where have you been, Prey?" Gloom hissed.

The Night Guard Sargent had been pacing back and forth at the entrance to Seed Apple's farm, when Prey had popped out of the tall grass not three yards away from the anxious thestral. Crimson and the Royal Guards were nowhere in sight, meaning they must've already entered the farm to search it.

"I had to waste time and send a Guard to look for you." Gloom admonished angrily.

Prey saw in Gloom's thoughts that the Guard he was referring to was a pegasus from the Royal Guard squad, who he'd sent flying back the way they'd come to scan for Prey. Evidently, Prey's habit of sneaking everywhere meant they'd missed him.

"You're the one who left me behind." Prey returned calmly, seemingly not affected by Gloom's frustration. He was more worried thinking about tonight.

"Don't give me that. You could've called out, not just hung back." Gloom snapped.

"You didn't have any problem with it yesterday." Prey said, glancing past Gloom into the farm, "You sent the rest of your Guard's in to begin the search I take it." He commented. 'Shame, I would've enjoyed being here to see the look on Seed Apple's face when the Royal Guard barged right over his protests and marched in.'

"They're not my Guards Prey, I'm just a Sargent, and in an entirely different chain of command might I add, and you're making excuses. Yesterday was different, today is another matter entirely." Gloom said.

"It's not my fault I'm small, I have trouble keeping up. And might I point out in return that it was you who forgot all about me, again, and left me behind, sir."

"You know perfectly well that you could've spoken up, but you didn't," Gloom repeated in frustration, "Your silence could be

interpreted as a lapse of duty, or an attempt to escape. I shouldn't have to repeat this, but you're on probation, remember Prey."

"I haven't forgotten, I'm still wearing gold manacles in case you hadn't realised," Prey said with a scowl, waving a golden banded foreleg under Gloom's nose, "And you know I wasn't trying to escape."

"That's not the point Prey, you can't just wonder off and expect there not to be consequences. You could have just asked one of us to carry you-"

"-Never going to happen. Sir."

"-We are on duty, on a serious case, working with the Royal Guard. Having to send out a flier to search for you during the middle of an important investigation is both a misuse of resources and a lax in duty." Gloom stated hotly.

Prey backed away, but his glower made it clear he wasn't backing down, "Sir, I am not blind. I can easily see you are just trying to scare me into submission because you're concerned about what the Royal Guards will think of the ISND for being so unprofessional as to have A, brought along a lamb, and B, lost him."

"I'm not trying to scare you Prey, I'm trying to make you stop and think next time." Gloom said, reining in his rapidly building temper.

Gloom took a couple of deep breaths, and when next he addressed Prey, he was much calmer. "And yes I'm concerned, as should you be. We are the Night Guard, representatives of Princess Luna at all times and in all places. And we are currently representing the Night Guard, in public, to the Royal Guard. We cannot afford any slips which might through us reflect badly on Her Majesty."

Prey refrained from spitting at that. This was the first proper confrontation he'd had with Gloom, his unofficial warden, but the cause was hardly his fault. He was halted from giving a response by a commotion behind Gloom on the farm, which made them both stop and look.

It was between two Royal Guard's and someone who looked like Seed Apple's wife, She was protesting loudly about something, the Royal Guard's calmly but firmly pushing her away. Prey looked back to Gloom.

"Seems to be going fine to me, meaning I wasn't needed in the first place. Either don't leave me behind, or don't complain when I have to catch up." Prey said.

'Because I have much bigger worries than merely being late.' Prey silently added.

"Prey," Gloom said warningly, "You know I don't care much for formality, and I don't like reprimanding you, but you're treading it fine to the line. We're a unit, and I'd like to think we're friends too-"

'Friends? Friends?!' Prey thought derisively.

"-But our duty comes first. Okay, I'll admit that we left you behind, but I'll still have to reprimand you." Gloom warned him.

Prey wasn't concerned, firstly because it was a weak threat, and second because he could read the Sargent's thoughts and saw that Gloom didn't actually plan to dish out any real punishment. He was merely saying it to try and give Prey a scare to behave in future.

So Prey made sure to act slightly sullen as he looked away, "As you wish. Sir." He answered.

Internally, Gloom's thoughts showed him to be glad that was over with, as in hindsight the thestral didn't think this was actually anything serious.

"Where's Crimson?" Prey asked after a moment, glossing over the last three minutes. He wasn't going to forget it though.

"Looking for you." Gloom stated.

Prey blinked, realising his assumption had been wrong, "I thought you said you sent the pegasus from Fleet Glass's squad off to do that."

"Nnnoo," Gloom started reluctantly, "I decided it would be better not to break up the Corporal's squad. They know what they're doing and are used to working together."

Prey gave Gloom a sceptical look. It quite clearly conveyed that Prey could see that what Gloom really meant was; "I couldn't send them off chasing a lost child when that's what they should be doing back in Canterlot right now."

Gloom grimaced, silently admitting something to that effect.

A shout of: "Ah already told ya!" Made Gloom's ears swivel back towards the barn, where raised voices were coming from, although it sounded like the Guard's had it under control. The shouts were more angry protests, rather than real outrage. The Apple's knew they were in serious trouble.

"Am I actually needed for anything, or were you just waiting out here to see when I turned up?" Prey asked.

"Fleet Glass and his squad are searching the house and premises. We'll be questioning Seed Apple and his family once they're done." Gloom said by way of answer, his eyes scanning the farmyard.

"Do you think they'll know anything of value?" Prey asked, wanting to see what Gloom already suspected.

"Yes." Gloom said firmly, "My special talent told me to question Pebble Mill, and it also meant we needed to come back here again. Probably." He amended.

'So we're just running off a feeling in your flank.' Prey thought in annoyance.

What was more annoying was that it was actually *working*. Why did ponies get magical inborn assistance from their cutie marks, when all other races had to do without? That was something Prey wanted to study if he ever got the chance. With scalpels and knives. Prey had heard that some zebras had Cutie Marks, but the only zebras *he'd* ever seen didn't. No, Cutie Marks were for ponies only.

His current theory was that Celestia, the literal sun goddess, was

involved somehow. Why else would they only appear for ponies?

Prey stopped and cocked his head to the side, hearing what sounded like the displacement of air. Tilting his head back and squinting his eyes, he scanned the sky, good ear strained to pick up what had sounded like... 'Ah, yes, Crimson.' ...Pegasus wings.

"Crimson's back." Prey said out loud, just as Gloom finally noticed for himself the Pegasus's return, coming down on a steep, looping spiral towards them, pinion feathers splayed.

Crimson flew extremely quietly, considering he was wearing armour. He'd been up quite high, and for a moment Prey briefly wondered how Crimson had intended to spot him from that height. 'Pegasus eyesight.' Prey deduced.

It would be useful if he himself had such eyesight. And perhaps people would take him more seriously if he had glaring yellow eyes rather than these big blue ones.

Prey took an instinctive step back and closed said eyes as the spiky grass billowed and Crimson alighted next to Gloom. He glanced at Prey, then back to Gloom, "You found him already, sir." Crimson commented.

"Yes. Thank you for looking anyway. It seems we left him behind again." Gloom admitted.

Crimson blinked slowly, "Ah. My apologies sir. I should have been paying closer attention."

Then he also looked to Prey, "My apologies." Crimson added to him as well for some reason.

"We could *all* have been paying more attention." Gloom stated, "Now, enough wasting time, we've held up Fleet Glass and his squad long enough. Let's go and do our duty and ask lots of difficult questions."

"Why did you harbour your cousin Pebble Mill from justice?"

"I told ya', I didn't know. Pebble never said."

"You already knew though. Turf Apple told you as much."

"No, listen ta' me, I didn't know! Turf never said what he'd dun' neither."

"So you admit that you knew you were bending, if not outright breaking, the law."

"No! I ain't done nothing wrong, I did what I had ta'."

Gloom groaned and leaned back in his borrowed chair, rubbing his eyes with one fetlock. Across the repurposed kitchen table sat a fidgeting Seed Apple. This scene was becoming quite familiar. Behind Seed Apple stood Crimson, making the stallion even more nervous, while Fleet Glass stood at attention by the kitchen door. Out in the living room, the rest of the Corporal's squad waited with the other detained members of the Apple family.

"Let's try this again," Gloom started patiently, "And we can keep on doing this for as long as it takes. Why did you harbour your cousin Pebble Mill from justice?" He repeated.

Prey, who was sitting unobserved by the food bin where he could keep everyone in his field of view, rolled his eyes at Gloom's persistence. 'Just start threatening him already. It's plain as day to see he's scared and ready to cave.'

Yesterday, Seed Apple had thought he was safe from the Guards.

Now, they'd overrun his farm and taken him prisoner. The reality of his situation was finally sinking in. Ponies didn't seem to realise that they weren't in fact the chosen race and that actions had consequences until they were staring them in the face. To top it all off, it was *Royal* Guard this time, with all its lustrous history and reputation, not just the new and as still yet unrespected Night Guard.

With that said, Seed Apple was rather more unnerved by the thestral sitting in front of him than by Fleet Glass. Much like his cousin Pebble Mill, the farmer hadn't recognised Gloom as pegasus

he'd been confronted with yesterday.

'Xenophobia is alive and well.' Prey thought.

"I didn't know what he'd done. I still don't know. But he asked me an' ma' family, so I had ta' say yes. He's my cousin." Seed Apple said, trying to look Gloom in the eyes, but failing after less than a second.

"What did Turf Apple tell you then? You've admitted you spoke to him, so what did he tell you?"

"Nothing! Really, he didn't say. All he said was that ma' cousin needed ta' stay out of town for ah couple of weeks."

Gloom set his hooves on the table, "What..." He asked slowly, "Did. Pebble. Mill. Do?"

Seed Apple hesitated, his thoughts racing, '-It's not like they don't know it already-'. He cleared his throat, "He's got blamed for helping start the big fight in town."

"Why?" Gloom demanded instantly

"Because..."

"Because what? Nopony feels the need to hide unless he's done something serious. Nopony else in Hay Steam felt the need to run away." Gloom told him.

Prey caught wryly from Fleet Glass; '-because the seedy sheriff actually put those ponies in jail before you ISND fellows went and released them-'

Seed Apple made a face like he'd bitten into a lemon, "Because he put Yellow inta' the hospital." He answered sullenly.

"Yellow Turn?" Crimson asked for confirmation from behind Seed Apple, making the Earth pony jump. The way the farmer had only listed this Yellow Turn's first name without thinking to clarify, he must be fairly well known within the community. It was also the same name mentioned by Willow Pot yesterday.

Crimson so far had kept quiet and acted as no more than a silent observer to the interrogation up until now. Unlike with Gloom, Seed Apple clearly recognised Crimson as one of the pegasi who he had denied access to yesterday. And now that the tables had turned, that knowledge was clearly eating away at him.

"Yeah, that's him." Seed Apple replied hesitantly.

Crimson studied the other stallion, "Why did your cousin want to injure Yellow Turn badly enough to remove him from Hay Steam's daily life?" Crimson asked with unusually sharp insight, cutting to what was likely the heart of the matter.

Seed Apple hesitated for longer this time, "Well, I ain't saying he was wanting ta' hurt Yellow Turn quite that bad, Pebble's just galloping with the wrong crowd, ya' know, some of the more..."

He struggled for the word, "Activey? Activinists? No, activists ponies, yeah, on this side. An' Yellow is with those on the other side. An' when they all start ah' angling for ah' fight, well ah' imagine Pebble saw his chance ta' put Yellow in his place an' took it."

Gloom frowned as he picked through Seed Apple's words, "And which sides are these you're referring to?" He asked.

Seed Apple seemed genuinely surprised, "Ya' mean ya' don't know? The Hold and Share's o' course."

"The Hold and Share's, otherwise known as the Crop Holders or the Crop Sharers. That's essentially just the nick name for the party policies of the two competing candidates for the Hay Steam mayorship." Fleet Glass explained as they marched off the farm, heading back into Hay Steam.

Well, he and his Guards marched. Gloom and Crimson walked like normal ponies. And Prey tried to keep up.

At least they'd checked that they hadn't left him behind this time. Along side them, the tall grass on either side of the worn track

waved and hissed in the light breeze. Prey had never liked tall grass or crops, it limited his view too much. The issue was, to him almost all grass was too tall. Prey hurried his pace. He really didn't want to be at the back of the group.

Because that's where Seed Apple followed, head down, one of the Royal Guard unicorns escorting him, and hoof cuffs on his front legs.

"Who are these two party delegates, Corporal Glass?" Gloom asked.

"Don't know who it is locally for Hay Steam sir, but I do know it's the same up and down the railroad. My father talks about it. Big Fields and Wheat Plow are the big shot leaders of each party, with their own candidates running in each town for the local elections. There's a lot of debate and campaigning going on, you must've seen the posters." Fleet Glass said, a slightly disbelieving look on his face as his words failed to garner any spark of recognition.

"I'm afraid not Corporal. I can't say I'm up to date with either local events or politics. Our reunion with Equestria largely left our clan out of the loop." Gloom answered calmly.

Maybe Gloom didn't see the slight toss of Fleet Glass's tail, or the other small tells that passed around the Corporal's squad, but Prey did because he was looking. It seemed they held doubtful opinions on, if not the thestral clans reintroduction to society, then on the thestrals being the basis for the formation of the Night Guard.

"Well, I'll explain it as best I can," Fleet Glass said as they reached the Hay Steam housing line.

"The Crop Holders want farm land to be privately owned. Their policy is that a pony should own the land they work, and they're pushing for grants and legislation to get that. Crop Sharers want farms to be combined and managed under one big management to better distribute resources and standardise earnings." Fleet Glass paused as he considered his words, then nodded, "Yes. That's more or less it." He summed up confidently.

Prey knew that there had to be more to it than that. The sentiments

and motivation of the candidates and the scope of the policies had to be much broader than that. And if asked, they'd probably zealously drum their methodology into your head at great length too.

Most of Prey's knowledge on politics was skimmed from the thoughts of others, but it wasn't hard to reach his own conclusion. Prey could see where both the Holder's and Sharer's were coming from. He knew the troubles they spoke of from sad personal experience.

Although as previously mentioned, there hadn't been anything like unions and election candidates in Prey's home village.

Oh, there was an election, *theoretically*, but it was a closed off and private affair. It was only ever held by ponies, for ponies. And the rich, land owner earth ponies at that. The villagers never even tried to get a hoof in on the scene. 'Know your place and keep your head down.' Was the unspoken rule.

Making trouble was an easy way to getting kicked off your farm and out of your home. Their landlords were the law. There was no appeal for unfair treatment, although thankfully their lease holders were usually happy to stay out of their tenants lives so long as they were up to date with their payments.

'When it's ponies under the hoof they can get together and protest. Yet when it's those same ponies doing the oppressing, no one bats an eye.' Prey thought sourly.

"So Big Fields and Wheat Plow are trying to get made the boss of this town? How does that work?" Prey asked.

The Royal Guard's all glanced back at him when he unexpectedly spoke up, and Prey made sure to tilt his head curiously up at them. He'd kept quiet in their presence so far, not wanting to draw attention to himself. But asking a question any normal child might ask was fine, especially when he'd deliberately asked the question only half right.

Adults always felt it their duty to help correct a child's

misunderstanding.

"Ah, no, that's not how it works little filly, ah, Prey was it? Big Fields and Wheat Plow are the party *leaders*, think like a big boss. All the ponies in each town are holding elections to vote for who's going to be, let's say... The local *small* boss. These small bosses are part of the big boss's group. Big Fields and Wheat Plow don't stop in one place, because they have lots of candidates, err, small bosses, to do that for them. The big bosses go to Canterlot, where all the real stuff happens. So that's why they can't be the mayor of Hay Steam." Fleet Glass explained, his words and manner unknowingly patronising.

Prey kept up the cute, bemused smile, not a hint of irritation.

None of the Royal Guard squad noticed, but Gloom and Crimson were both giving Prey that disapproving look which said, 'You're doing it again, and I do not approve.'

"So which one is the big boss in Canterlot right now?" Prey asked, still playing the puzzled youngster trying to understand the world of adults.

Fleet Glass paused, "Err, it's neither of them actually."

"So, wait..." Prey frowned as if in deep thought, "Neither of them is actually in charge? Then why is everypony arguing?" He asked, using their pony terminology for once.

'-foals are always so innocent-' A Guard thought with a smile to himself.

"Well, everypony isn't happy with the current big boss, and so they want to elect a *new* big boss. Everypony knows there's no chance of a re-election, so it's either going to be Big Fields or Wheat Plow, since there's no question of any other party winning. Who ever gets the most candidates, that's the small bosses, elected in these towns becomes the new *big* boss. Make sense?" Fleet Glass asked Prey, not unkindly. Prey hoped he had a tragic fatal accident in the near future.

"Um, which one's which? Holders or Shares?" Prey asked quizzically.

"Oh, did I forget to mention that?" Fleet Glass asked looking to Gloom.

The thestral nodded, but his eyes lingered on Prey, "Yes, you did forget." He confirmed.

'-he should stop acting like a kid to get his questions answered... It's working though-', Gloom was forced to privately admit.

"Well, those aren't the official party names, but basically Big Fields is the boss Crop Holder, and Wheat Plow is the boss Crop Sharer." Fleet Glass informed the lamb.

Prey nodded and digested all that information. He smiled brightly up at Fleet Glass, "So who's going to win in this town? The Crop Holders or the Crop Sharers?"

Fleet Glass shrugged and glanced at his squad. They all shrugged as well.

"Don't live here, sir. Haven't a clue." One of them summed up.

"Well, if I knew the answer to that question I'd be a rich pony." Fleet Glass chuckled to Prey.

'-ahh, little foals-' the Corporal thought in amusement, then he sobered, '-he can't be much older than Rocky Bed. We need to hurry back so we can rejoin the search-'

Fleet Glass addressed Gloom formally, "Sargent Gloom, we've searched Seed Apple's premises and arrested him. Do you have any further orders from Captain Nighthawk?"

"I think we still need to talk with this Yellow Turn before our return, and there is still the matter of Turf Apple and all the other ponies from the cells." Gloom answered.

"Sir, we have our own orders to return to Canterlot as soon as reasonably possible. A squad was needed to gain entry to Seed

Apple's farm, and we'll pick up the ex-sheriff before our departure, but Yellow Turn is in hospital. You can reasonably interview him without us. Those other ponies on the list will be fined or prosecuted by the new sheriff once one is appointed." Fleet Glass stated.

Gloom hid an ear twitch, "It would be a poor execution of our duty if we left Hay Steam without a sheriff, especially now." He said. They'd come to a stop in the middle of Hay Steam, townsfolk watching them as they passed or from windows.

"Our duty is back in Canterlot," Fleet Glass replied, "You're right sir, but appointing a new sheriff is outside of our jurisdiction. A Canterlot official will need to decide what needs to be done about this when we report back." He said confidently.

Crimson glanced sideways at Gloom, waiting for their Sargent's answer as the thestral gritted his teeth. Gloom knew he couldn't give any new contradicting orders to override Shining Armour's, and Fleet Glass knew it too.

"Alright then corporal. Can I trust you to take care of your duty to arrest Turf Apple before your return to Canterlot?" Gloom asked, his dry sarcasm well hidden.

"Yes sir." Fleet Glass answered smarty.

"Then you have *my* orders plus your own to follow. Dismissed."

The Corporal and his squad all saluted, and with another smart, "Yes sir." From Fleet Glass, and then they turned and marched off towards the jail house to pick up Turf Apple, dragging Seed Apple with them. Soon he'd be having a wonderful family reunion.

Prey had his doubts they'd find the disgraced sheriff at the jail, more likely unconscious in some bar with an empty bottle in his hoof. But Prey wasn't going to offer any such advice as the three of them watched the Royal Guard's march round the corner. He didn't care about their troubles, and he had his own to worry about. Like whether he was going to survive the night.

There'd only been one point today when Prey's worries had slipped his mind. And that was when he was being assaulted by the mare Honey Topaz with a hug at breakfast. The physical contact had temporarily blinded his mind to all but the instinctive fear and need to escape. It made for a poor distraction.

Gloom was grimacing as he watched the Royal Guards departure and thinking uncharitable thoughts.

"Were they not supposed to be assisting us sir?" Crimson asked, eyes following the Royal Guards, a disproving tilt to his ears. It wasn't really a question, more like Crimson was double checking that the Royal Guards had indeed just walked out on them.

"Yes," Gloom groused, "But they have their orders. It's fine. We will continue on without their assistance." He looked down at Prey, who was shifting subtly on his hooves, eyes and ears twitching about at all of the houses and ponies around them.
"Alright kid, what's on your mind?" Gloom asked resignedly.

"Prey." Prey immediately corrected.

"And?" Gloom answered, not in the mood right now to change his form of address.

"And what? What are we doing next?" Prey asked, stopping his scanning of the area to look up at the thestral.

"No, I'm asking *you* what you've thought of." Gloom said.

"Thought of what?"

"No, I'm asking you *what*?"

"What 'what'?"

"Sir, what are we talking about?" Crimson joined in.

Gloom paused to consider, or perhaps remember the answer. "Right. What are everypony's thoughts?"

"On what sir?" Crimson asked.

"*Oh* not you too. I meant, what do you think about what Seed Apple said?" Gloom elaborated.

"I think..." Crimson began in his usual cautious manner of thinking out each word before speaking it, "That the cause of the recent riot can be attributed to fighting between those who are Holder's, and those who are Sharers." He blinked slowly, "At least, originally sir. It seems to have escalated a bit since then."

"Okay, while the riot was sparked by the fight between Pebble Mill and Yellow Turn, it was just a spark. Ponies would never fight over nothing, so it must be something that goes further than just Pebble and Yellow." Gloom agreed, following along with Crimson's train of thought.

"What about the last two riots in Hay Steam, sir? Were those both also sparked by these two ponies once tempers reached fever pitch do you think?" Crimson asked thoughtfully. That made Gloom stop and reconsider.

"If it was just the two of them...Surely somepony would have put a stop to them after the first riot, so... No, I think it must have been somepony or something else." Gloom said.

"What do you know Prey? I mean, what have you thought of? You're... always thinking. About things." Crimson cleared his throat awkwardly and straightened his wings.

Prey shrugged, "Does no one think it strange-"
"-Nopony."
"-If you don't accept my corrections I'm not going to accept yours." Prey said as he rolled right on.

"Does no one think it strange that this is the third riot? That things have escalated to the point of a riot three times? It's like someone keeps coming back and stirring the pot each time it starts to settle. And what about these two candidates for the Sharers and Holders? What do they gain from causing a riot?"

Gloom looked surprised at that suggestion, but after a moments thought shook his head, "It can't be the political candidates, there's

just nothing for either of them to gain. The riots hurt both of their election chances equally. They're not going to get ponies to vote for them by starting mass fights now are they?"

"Don't measure your potato bushel against a wheat bushel." Prey said simply.

"Pardon?" Crimson asked, Gloom joining in with his confused look.

"Nothing, it's just something some old mule used to say." Prey said waving it off. He waited, knowing one of them would ask.

"And what does it mean?" Gloom asked after a patient moment. Prey smirked internally; just who he'd expected to ask. It was a pointless thing to internally bet on, but it was a small distraction from the impending confrontation coming tonight. There was no getting away from that, but he couldn't give any indication that he was worried about anything.

"Oh, it just means don't assume you're working off the same measurement stick. The way you value something might be the complete opposite to the way another person does." Prey said airily with another shrug.

The old mule who'd said that had been called Mr Barley. His were the charred remains Prey had found amidst the burnt out ruins of the mule's own inn. Of course, he would never tell anyone about that bit.

"It still does not seem likely they would do something like this," Crimson said gravely, "But I suppose it does not have to be them. Their supporters could just as easily have done it, if they felt strongly enough. Fanatics. Ponies like Pebble Mill and Yellow Turn."

"There has to be more to it than just that. These riots can't just have been happening because of ponies taking campaigning too far." Gloom said, ears tilted back as he regarded the buildings of Hay Steam with a thoughtful eye.

"I think Big Fields or Wheat Plow could have a hoof in it." Prey offered.

Gloom dismissed the idea with a snort, "That's ridiculous. Why would they do that? It's against everything they stand for. Their goal is to make ponies lives better, that's precisely the very reason why they're trying to get elected. I could possibly *maybe* accept that one of their candidates is acting on their own, but not the actual party leader."

-I don't think I've really noticed before, but Prey's rather paranoid. Like, *really* paranoid-'

Prey gave Gloom a little smile, like he was forgetting something, "What about all the other towns along the railroad? Remember, they've been having these problems too, Hay Steam is just the most recent in the chain."

That brought Gloom and Crimson up short.

'-horseapples, we've been getting side tracked with Hay Steam, getting in too close and forgetting the bigger picture with trying to fix here-' Gloom berated himself internally, tail flicking angrily. Prey simply waited. He didn't have any further epiphanies or insight to add, merely what he'd already said.

"Even if it's just one town, we can't leave Hay Steam like this sir. Ponies are getting hurt." Crimson said, thoughts having apparently run along similar lines to their Sargent's.

"You're right. We still need to sort out what's happening here first before we go help the rest of them. It is not right for neighbourhoods to be so at odds with one another. Here and now is just as important as the bigger picture." Gloom stated, seeming to regain his mental footing and come to that decision.

Prey 'tsk'd' to himself, 'Just leave them to fend for themselves. It's not your problem if they squabble in the streets over who sits in the mayor's chair.' He thought.

"Alright, before we do anything else, let's stop and review what we know about the situation," Gloom said. He gestured for the two of them to speak, "So, what do we *actually* know?"

"This is the third riot in Hay Steam, and it is one of a series that have been happening up and down in the other railroad towns." Crimson promptly answered.

Gloom nodded and added his own thoughts; "The most recent riot seems to have been between Crop Holders and Sharers. However, it's obvious that was not the sole cause, just the one on the surface."

There was a pause, no one thinking up anything definite that could be added. A cloud drifted overhead.

"How about Seed Apple and Turf Apple? Could they be involved with something deeper?" Crimson cautiously offered.

Gloom thought about it, scratching at his chest. His eyes turning to Prey, "Come on, help out here." He said.

Prey shrugged, "This Apple family seems to have bad blood with some people here. Yellow Turn obviously, but maybe others as well."

"What else do we know?" Gloom pressed, as if merely repeating the question would somehow allow them all to think up something new.

"That we need to help the ponies of Hay Steam." Crimson put in.

"He said that we know, not just wishful thinking." Prey said.

"Prey, stop that. We've already decided that we must help, not just report back." Gloom commanded.

'Speak for yourself. I have other things to do.' Prey thought, twitching an ear.

"Alright," Gloom tried when no one came up with anything further, "Regardless of what we don't know, what should we do next?"

"We need more information." Prey stated immediately.

"Good. Now how are we going to get more information it?" Gloom agreed.

"Go to the hospital and talk with this Yellow Turn." Crimson suggested.

"He's going to be just as biased and tight lipped as Pebble Mill was. I doubt you'll get anything out of him that we don't already know." Prey said. He vaguely wondered what sentence Pebble Mill would end up facing.

"That *we* will get out of him. Team, remember Prey? We spoke about this. And any better ideas?" Gloom asked.

The corners of Prey's mouth turned down at that, "I've *an* idea..." He answered neutrally, "I guess it's up to you as the Sargent to decide whether it's a 'better' idea. Arrest both candidates and interrogate them. See which gets the most upset and who comes to try and get who released. That way, we'll have an idea whether it's either of the candidates themselves who are in on this."

Gloom left out a long, exasperated sigh, "No. No Prey. Just no. Do I even need to explain why that's not okay?"

"Actually, yes. It is a valid method for learning whether either of them is involved. See if another riot starts in their absence. If not, then that could be our answer. If one does start, then we'll be that much closer to knowing where to look next. It would also answer whether the riots are really caused by differences of opinions between Crop Sharers and Holders, and if the answer is no, we'll still be able to gain a better understanding of what is."

Gloom's ears swivelled to focus entirely on Prey as he looked down at the lamb, "And... You see nothing morally wrong with that course of action, so long as it gets results?" He asked carefully. He wasn't the only one of their little trio who was suddenly looking at Prey closely.

"Don't patronise me," Prey scowled, "It'll do no harm to the candidates in the long run if they are innocent, and it's not like the ponies in these towns need another excuse to start a riot. It'll happen regardless, so why not take this opportunity to try and solve it?" Prey responded.

'-By the moon-' Gloom thought in frank surprise, '-he really does think like that. Oh hay, now I've got to accommodate teaching him morals somewhere along the line too-'.

Crimson's wings shifted and refolded themselves as he watched Prey alongside Gloom, signalling the thoughtfulness that his blank face didn't convey.

"Stop that," Prey snapped, tilting his chin back so he could properly scowl up at the two of them, "I can see what you're thinking, and I'm not an idiot. I can understand the concepts of morality and right and wrong just as well as you can. But that's not how whoever is behind this is thinking."

"And that's no justification to act like them. We're better than them Prey. That is why we are the Night Guard, because we know right from wrong. You can only fight wrong with right. Not wrong with wrong." Gloom told Prey firmly and without any room for argument, like he was explaining gravity.

'-who neglected to teach you right from wrong kid? Is this why you were in prison?-' Gloom thought, his slit pupils drifting down to the gold bands around Prey's legs.

Prey wanted to snarl; 'What are *you* looking at? Crimson wears them too you know. Don't think I haven't noticed how you're trying to act as a substitute mentor to him.'

But he didn't say anything and held his peace.

At least Gloom hadn't look at him with pity, just resigned disappointment. If he dared to try that, then things would've gotten ugly. Prey knew he wasn't going to win this argument or prove anything further here, so he just looked away, pretending like he was conceding the point. 'You can't fight wrong with wrong? *Ha*! Shows how much you know.'

Crimson looked to Gloom, waiting for the Sargent to make a decision on whether they should move on or continue belabouring the point.

Gloom tried not to sigh.

'-we're still in Hay Steam, and have a duty to fulfil. Back to the job. But what path should we follow though? How can we solve this?-' Gloom thought. He looked around at the wooden houses about them, peoples homes and businesses, all being put in jeopardy by the riots. '-what is best for them?-'

"We need help," Gloom decided raising his head, "Hay Steam isn't going to solve itself, but neither are we if we don't get help. This problem is big, not confined to just this town. There is no shame in knowing when to ask for assistance." Gloom said, voice gaining confidence as he continued:

"A new sheriff is needed here. Fleet Glass was right about that, and we need to report back and get one commissioned. Yes. We need more ponypower to cover all of these towns. We will go and interview Yellow Turn, then we'll return to Canterlot. From there, we can only see."

"Alright sir." Crimson agreed.

"Prey?" Gloom prompted after a second.

"Yes, sir." Prey sighed.

"Alright, it's decided. Crimson, fly up and find us the hospital please. I'm not sure anypony here want's to speak with us long enough to give us directions." Gloom said, looking meaningfully towards to the passing towns ponies, who were still giving them a wide berth and trying not to catch Gloom's eye.

Crimson spared the towns ponies a flat look, "Right away sir." He answered, opening his wings.

---O---

Prey supposed that Gloom and Crimson must find it very inconvenient to have to walk places instead of simply flying, just because they had wings and he didn't. Well, they weren't the only ones who felt that way. Prey certainly wouldn't have complained if nature had seen fit to gift sheep with wings.

At least both of them were sensible enough not to again suggest carrying Prey.

---O---

Prey did not go into the hospital. Or rather he did, but he didn't stay in there.

After Crimson had guided them to the local hospital on the edge of town, Gloom had rung the desk bell and after the receptionist had turned up, (an earth pony of course) demanded to be taken to Yellow Turn. The receptionist hadn't hidden her fright of Gloom very well, and had made an excuse and hurried away the moment she'd shown to the patient's door.

Nothing new there, everyone in this town was a cowardly racist.

It wasn't a big hospital, and although Prey was no expert on the procedures of medical practice, he judged that the place could've easily been run by about three doctors or nurses most of the time.

Actually, that wasn't strictly true. Prey *was* something of an expert, but not on medical procedures for a clean, well built and plentifully stocked hospital such as this. He was more well versed on things like the inner workings of the equine, goat, deer, and griffon body and emergency surgery. He'd worked and suffered under his zebra mentor Snake's hoof, in holding down, sewing up, or sawing off the limbs of screaming patients under the canopy of the Deeper Green. Those screams still haunted him sometimes.

The hospital backed onto the open grassy plains in the edge of town. The individual patient's rooms were tidy but compact. Sliding screen doors in each opened onto a short, plank decking that allowed the patients beds to be wheeled outside, giving them access to fresh air and sunlight, along with an unrestricted view of the endless grassy sea.

That wooden decking was where Prey was now standing, cast in cool shadow from the hospital building, watching the spiky stems wave and ripple.

A few inches from his hoof tips, the decking ended and the green began, hissing and flowing in the wind. It was a small gap, but an important one. Just a step forwards and down and he would be lost amid the tall grass. His ear twitched as he picked up a strain of conversation from the room behind him, "-in your own words, what happened between you and Pebble Mill to cause the fight which escalated into the riot."

That was Gloom interviewing the bed bound Yellow Turn. The earth pony had two broken front legs, the left one quite badly. A double break, the first a displaced and the other a segmented break. He'd be walking with a limp for the rest of his life.

Crimson was also in there, acting as the Sargent's 'back up', or more appropriately, a spare body to stand as a witness.

Yellow Turn was a bit out of it, Prey didn't know what pain relief they'd given the stallion, but he could name four different plant extracts that could give much the same effect. As Prey had predicted, Yellow Turn was reluctant to speak with the Guard. That Gloom was a thestral probably didn't help either. If Yellow Turn had been less drugged, perhaps that fear might've worked in the Sargent's favour, but alas.

Gloom was patient though, and had pulled up a seat for the long haul. He hadn't objected when Prey had wondered out of the open door, thinking the lamb was; '-simply bored. Luna knows we've been doing a lot of these tiresome interviews today-'

So that was why Prey was no longer inside the hospital, instead standing out here in the open, watching the plains sway, and listening to the faint moaning of the wind every now and then.

It was quiet, just the rasping of grass stems and the wind, the town cut off abruptly. There weren't even any birds out here.

Back in the Deeper Green, there had always been birds and animals chirping or calling. Except when something unseen was moving around in the dark. Then even the insects went quiet.

In some ways, it was strange. He'd spent almost ten times as long

locked away in Dreverton as he had in the jungle. Yet he had far more vivid memories of the Deeper Green than he did of his cell. Things had been harder, scarier, and far more violent under those trees. He hated Dreverton, but he feared the Deeper Green. Feared and respected. Prey'd had to struggle every minute to survive in there, while in Dreverton he'd merely waited. Those violent memories seemed to take up more space in his head. Time was funny when it stretched like that.

Now, it served to remind him just how different this endless grassy plane before him was.

There were many different types of quiet. Prey liked some of them, worried about a couple, and was fearful of a few. This was an empty quiet. Prey felt there should be more noise, but the hospital building behind him that served to cast the cool shadow also acted as a wind break.

He was watching the small copse of trees out in the green sea.

There shouldn't be trees here, exposure should have made it impossible. Yet a lone cluster of them had somehow managed to take root regardless. Bent and close packed together, dark trunks twisted into odd shapes by growing up in the ceaseless winds of the plains. There they stood, way out in the rippling green, the only thing breaking the horizon for miles and miles.

The sharp scrape of the screen door being slid fully open made Prey glance back over his shoulder. Crimson came up beside Prey to join him on the decking, politely giving the lamb plenty of room. Prey returned to looking out on the plains, mind turning over his plans for the night and also what he'd overheard in the apothecary as he watched the trees.

"Sargent Gloom not need you anymore?" Prey asked after a moment, not turning his head.

"No. Yellow Turn will not say much." Another moment passed, broken only by the rustling of grass and restless wind. "What are you looking at?" Crimson asked.

"That."

"The trees. Why?" Crimson asked, perhaps curious, or maybe just bored.

Prey didn't give a straight answer. Instead, he asked Crimson a question, "Have you heard of Wolfing Woods before?"

"I have not." A pause, "Is that what those trees are?"

Again Prey didn't give a straight answer to the question, "A Wolf Wood is where a hungry entity lives. Any lone patches of twisted trees that grow where they shouldn't could be a Wolf Wood, although few know about them. The stories get passed around in farming communities, the name gets mentioned, like a haunted house, and details get changed. It's become just a warning tale for children not to play in the woods really. Still, you hear the stories and when you see the patch of lone trees you can't help but get that pricking in the back of your wool and wonder, 'Wolf Wood?'."

Crimson looked out across the grass at the dark trees, "Ghosts? As in haunted?" He asked flatly.

The side of Prey's mouth quirked up as he watched the twisted trees along with Crimson, "That's what they're calling that copse of trees in town. I overheard someone mention it, and asked more about it," (A half truth), "They hear the wind blowing from the trees at night, carrying what sounds like howls, and someone said they'd seen lights, like yellow eyes amid the dark branches. If you look at it sideways, the swaying tree tops could almost be the shapes of wolves and the tree trunks their legs, no?" Prey asked pleasantly.

"If that's what ponies look for, that's what they'll see." Crimson said shortly. His ears perked and he looked over at Prey, "Do you actually believe that story?" He asked.

Prey looked away from the trees for a moment to give him a strange grin, "What? You mean to tell me you don't?" He asked incredulously.

"No. There is no such thing as ghosts. And I'm sure you don't believe

in such things either." Crimson stated.

Prey shrugged, "Well, I've never seen a ghost, and every ghost story I've heard could easily be explained away as something else." He admitted.

"You didn't actually say if you believed in the Wolf Wood or not." Crimson noted, shifting his weight on the decking.

"Not *the* Wolf Wood, *a* Wolf Wood," Prey corrected with that mock serious tone, "And I never said I thought the woods were haunted, did I?"

Crimson opened his mouth, then waited as a moan of wind passed before continuing, "Wolf Wood, as in more than one? And are you saying that you do in fact believe in them?" He asked. Before, he'd seemed dismissive. Now, he was curious.

Prey offered a small shrug and turned back to the plains, "I said a Wolf Wood holds an entity that hunts. Certainly, some Wolfing Wood's are just normal flesh and blood monsters. But how about the others? Is it all the same entity, or a different one in each Wolf Wood, linked somehow? But why should it exist? Perhaps because The Hunt exists. An endless hunt for those who stray into it's territory, perhaps. Who knows? It's all just hearsay pieced together from old tales. I doubt it's something we could fully comprehend anyway." He added.

Crimson tapped his hoof against the planking, "But do *you* believe it?" He asked seriously.

Prey smiled again, but his eyes were hard, "In Wolfing Woods? Yes, that is something I believe in."

"Oh."

Crimson frowned faintly at Prey in thought, "I have heard that all sheep are terrified of wolves. I had thought it to just be a generalisation." He said. He was a bit blunt, but Prey doubted Crimson was trying to mock him, just asking a question in his own way.

"As far as generalisations go, yes. I think it's an instinctual fear, especially of timber wolves." Prey admitted.

"Timber wolves are hardly the most dangerous beast out there, nor the most plentiful." Crimson told him dismissively.

Again, Crimson probably meant it to be bland reassurance, but this time Prey did feel mocked.

"Maybe to ponies timber wolves aren't much of threat, winged ponies like you can just fly away at your leisure, can't you? A unicorn can conjure the one thing that timber wolves fear; fire, or any number of spells, or even just telekinesis to keep them at a distance. An earth pony is most at risk, but they still have the strength and resilience of their earth magic heritage to shatter a timber wolf in one kick and then gallop off before it reforms. Did you know timber wolves always go for the weakest looking member of the herd? Now look at sheep. What do you see? Now look at me. What do you think a timber wolf sees? " Prey demanded coldly.

Crimson's wings flattened more fully to his armored back, hesitating. "That is... I suppose I understand your point. I apologise that..."

"That what? That I'm a sheep?" Prey let out a huff, "That's the first time someone's ever apologised to me for my birth heritage." He paused and narrowed his eyes at Crimson, not really an intimidating sight coming from him, but the sentiment behind it was there, "Or are you sorry I was born a small, runty, freak?"

Crimson didn't seem to know what to say, his yellow eyes flickering back and forth, even his normally neutral ears folding back in a signal of his uncertainty, "I do not...None of that. I appologise for none of that. I meant, I am sorry that you are afraid of timber wolves. Yes. I meant that."

He straightened his wings and seemed to regain his composure, "That is, if you are afraid of timber wolves? You did not actually say."

Maybe he expected Prey to deny it, offering the lamb a chance to

scoff at the idea and act brave, as a way of apologising for his social blunder. Or maybe he just really thought Prey wasn't the type to be afraid of something like a timber wolf, because of how much he differed from anyone that might be called 'normal'. If so, he was surprised when Prey laughed.

"Oh yes I'm afraid. I'm afraid of a lot of things, so many of them silly and irrational. And yes, I am most certainly afraid of being some wolf's prey. No pun intended." He giggled.

Crimson glanced out over the plains at the far off clump of trees, and then back to Prey, "Then, is that why you are watching this Wolfing Wood? Because you are afraid there might be a monster in there?" He questioned cautiously. Poor Crimson, he was getting a lot of confusing answers today.

"Oh. No. I'm not afraid of those trees."

Another long pause as Crimson thought, or perhaps waited for Prey to elaborate further. "Then, why are you watching them?" He eventually asked.

Prey gave the trees one last long look and turned back to the screen door, "That isn't a Wolf Wood. I was just checking to make sure." He answered casually. "Oh, and I think Sargent Gloom is just finishing up. We should rejoin him."

Prey wasn't sure why he'd bothered to explain all of that to Crimson, as he could tell the pegasus hadn't taken it seriously. He'd taken Prey seriously yes, but not the Wolf Wood. Seeing was believing, and as a pegasus he probably didn't understand the grimness behind the tales about Wolfing Woods anyway. Prey was very glad that the town's gossip had been mistaken on that account.

He never wanted to see a Wolf Wood again.

Oh well, there was no threat here, which made a decidedly pleasant change. At least sharing the story had offered a brief respite from Prey's other coming threat.

They'd made the trek back up through the fine streets of Canterlot to the glittering Palace, and now Prey and Crimson were once again in their now familiar position of waiting outside the Night Guard Captain's door.

There had been only one thing of note as they'd entered back in through the Guard Compound. A note by the name of Turf Apple.

The disgraced ex-sheriff was being taken back to his cell, having just come out of an interrogation. He looked awful. There were dark bags under his eyes, his fur was wild, and his breath stank of alcohol. But there was a hunted look in his eyes, and he didn't even seem to recognise the ISND, the very ones who'd exposed him, as he was force marched past.

When Prey caught his mutterings mixed with the stallions thoughts and he knew why, and it was an intensely uncomfortable reminder to him of his own vulnerable position.

"...Leave ma' alone... Nightmare Luna...",

'-lies lies lies! Nopony's reformed...Is she watching me right now? No! I'm a' sorry, didn' mean it-'

Prey had stared after him as the stallion was half dragged away back to the cells. It seemed Luna had not been patient enough to wait for the courts and judges to get the confession out of Turf Apple. Nighthawk's report must have contained something that incensed the Moon Princess enough that she'd taken matter's into her own hooves.

Not for Seed Apple, or Pebble Mill, or Yellow Turn, or any of the others had Luna taken an active role. Why? Boredom? A sense of vindictive justice? Not having a valid target until now? Prey didn't know why, but he knew one thing.

He did not want that to happen to him, and he shuddered.

"Keep up Prey." Gloom called.

But back to waiting in the corridor.

Crimson was standing at attention while Prey sat, resting his hooves after the long trot. Inside the office, Gloom was making his report. It was just one more thing that they'd been doing repeatedly over the short span of days they'd known one another.

Or at the least, been forced to work with each other.

Prey had his eyes closed, busy trying to meditate on possible outcomes with his mystery stalker tonight. None of them looked good. The subtle message they'd left in his bed with the tulip petal couldn't help but remind Prey of a monster from the Deeper Green. Prey didn't know what it looked like, as it only came out at night. All that was visible was the light of it's lure. Those who followed the angler's light, vanished.

This time however, there was something of a queue to see Nighthawk. Gloom hadn't been inside two minutes when a pair of Night Guards turned up also looking to see the Night Guard Captain. Prey had heard their armoured hooves coming from two corridors away, so he didn't more than glance up when they rounded the corner.

It was a pair of thestrals, "Is Captain Nighthawk in a meeting?" One of them asked.

"Yes. He is in there with Sargent Gloom." Prey heard Crimson answer, voice blank.

"That's fine, we'll wait."

After a moments silence when Crimson didn't give any further indication or acknowledgement, they simply shrugged and moved to stand at attention along side Crimson. A glance at their ears revealed their clan origins, a small stud that looked like a red stone set in the ears edge.

'Not Gloom's clan, and Crimson's clan didn't join Luna. So part of the third thestral clan then.' Prey thought, briefly analysing the pair of them, before returning to his own worries.

"So... You haven't been joined up long, right?" The slightly taller of the two thestrals asked.

"No." Came Crimson's monosyllable answer.

"How do you like Canterlot? I've only been here a month, but the night life is great. You know, when we're not on extra shifts and can go out and enjoy it and all."

"It's fine." Crimson replied.

The two thestrals exchanged a glance, Crimson's reticence marginally perturbing them. Obviously though, they still had something they wanted to ask, "...Is it true what they say about your clan?" They asked, cutting the small talk. Prey paused to listen in too, this could be informative.

"They are not my clan, not any more." Crimson said, his wings bristling just a bit.

"Pardon me. But is the rest of it true?" The smaller one asked, a hint of excitement in his tone at the possibility of intrigue.

Crimson paused, "That's depends on what they are saying." He hedged.

"At the council summit, did they really swear to never again serve under Princess Luna?" The thestral asked, ears perked.

"I was not there at the mountain during the summit, so I do not know." Crimson stated.

"Oh, had they already exiled you by then-?"

The taller thestral cleared his throat, interrupting his companion with a glare.

"Oh. You're right. That was thoughtless. My apologies." The other said with a formal dip of his head.

"I chose to leave before they could exile me in all but name, so I know nothing of their motivations. But they will not be good ones,

whatever they are. That is all there is to it." Crimson said.

They lapsed back into silence as they waited in the corridor.

The shorter of the two thestrals was thinking, '-that clan was always weird anyways, don't need them ruining the hard work we're all putting in here. Double shifts again tonight-'

While his companions thoughts were, '-always putting your hoof in your fangs, Dream. This is such a drag. That creepy lamb is looking at me, I can feel it. Weirdo-'

'So, at minimum that tall one was there when Princess Luna announced that I was going to be working for her.' Prey decided. He also deduced from listening to their thoughts that these three thestral clans he'd been hearing so much about were probably quite small. Probably no more than seven to eight hundred members each, adults and children included. That was next to nothing.

'Thestrals are an endangered species it seems.' Prey noted humorlessly.

It was quite the gamble the clans had taken in rejoining society after so many years in hiding. They'd decided to risk everything when Princess Luna reached out and made her offer to reinstate the Night Guard, with them as its founding members.

Or perhaps they just hadn't been stupid enough to tell her 'No'. How would a Goddess take rejection? Not well, Prey imagined.

So why had Crimson's clan refused? And why had Luna not wiped them out in retaliation? After all, she was the Sun Wolf's sister. That was what alicorns did. If someone thwarts you, destroy them so they can never do it again. Or maybe she had some other plan in store for them.

"That foalnapper, did you track him down yet?" The question came out a bit unexpectedly from the taller thestral.

Crimson looked at him, "The Royal Guard's are still searching the city." He pointed out, as if it were obvious.

The thestral flicked his ears, "Well, if the Royal Guards ever told us anything, then perhaps we might have known that." He defended himself with a shrug.

"You'd think they'd realise we're on the same team already." His shorter companion grumbled. They still hadn't given their names.

The office door was pulled open and Gloom emerged, then stopped when he spotted the other two thestrals:

"Sir, I think they're both already here." Gloom called back into the office.

"Good. Send them in." Came Nighthawk's cold tones from inside the office.

Gloom looked back at the two of them, "Captain Nighthawk said for you to go in." He repeated the order, in case they somehow hadn't heard.

The tall one nodded to Gloom as he passed, "We should catch up sometime, sir." He offered politely.

"Maybe another time, sorry. Too much to do." Gloom replied wryly.

When the office door closed, Gloom turned to the both of them as Prey climbed to his hooves. "Well, we've got the help we wanted. I'll explain in the office, we've still got loads of paper work to sort out in there. Talk while we work." Gloom instructed, leading the way.

Gloom gave his wings a flap and rose off the floorboards for a heart beat, just long enough for him to slot the scroll he was holding onto the top shelf. "Annnnnd that's the last one." He said, dropping back down.

"Yes. The last one in that box sir." Crimson agreed.

Gloom grimaced, "How many boxes left to go?"

"Six. Oh, and a half sir." Crimson answered promptly.

The grimace grew, '-well there goes the next four hours of my life-' Gloom thought, muttering, "When this is all over, I want my sanity back."

He turned to where the lamb sat on a rolled out map of the railroad, corners pinned under files and boxes, "How're you doing with plotting out the best towns to guard, Prey?"

"I finished that ages ago." Prey answered.

"What? Why didn't you come and help us with the filing then?" Gloom demanded.

Prey looked critically up at the high shelves, then all the way down to the hard floor, then at himself. He raised one equally critical eyebrow at Gloom, "And you had to fly to even reach up there." He pointed out.

"Ah, right. My bad." Gloom admitted, thinking; '-going to need to get a ladder-'

"Anyway, you said the map is done?" He asked, coming over.

"See for yourself. Sir." Prey said, getting up and stepping off the map. Gloom looked over the paper. Above each of the small towns that ran along the train line were a set of numbers marked in pencil.

"The negative numbers show the order in which the towns have experienced riots, in descending order. The positive numbers show the order in which I'm predicting that the towns will be stirred up to riot, in ascending order." Prey explained, pointing out the numbering system. There were a lot more negative numbers than positive ones, and sometimes the positive numbers were repeated, showing that Prey was not sure which out of two possible towns it might be.

Gloom frowned and took a step closer to get a better look at the small, neat text, which of course made Prey back off to keep out of hoof's reach. It wasn't anything overt, just maintaining the status quo distance. Gloom and Crimson were already come to accept

Prey's quirk, and indeed even expect it and give him his space.

Gloom sucked in air over his fangs as he studied the map, "Captain Nighthawk said that he can get Captain Amour to contribute a few Royal Guard squads, in addition to the two Night Guard squads. But not for another few days, the shifts are too packed, what with Rocky Bed still missing. He doesn't think it's long before the newspapers get ahold of the foalnapping story either." Gloom said, his eyes tracking over the map, "Good job on making this Prey." He remembered to add.

"How long can the Squads be committed to this plan sir?" Crimson asked, coming over to have a look too. Prey moved to the other side of the map.

"That's the bad news I'm afraid. Only a week. After that, it's just the Night Guard Squads on their own. But any longer than two weeks...?" Gloom shrugged, and rubbed his chin, "How confident are you they will catch this pony, Prey?"

"Not very. I estimate a one in ten chance they succeed, even following the rotating Squad movement set out here." Prey answered.

"Then why did you suggest this?" Gloom demanded, a bit annoyed. '-I was putting a lot of faith in you with letting you come up with this plan-'

"Would you have preferred to have done nothing?" Prey responded. He would've personally preferred doing nothing, but Gloom and Crimson were determined to 'do-their-duty'. "And besides, that's only the Royal Guard I'm talking about." Prey added.

"Are you saying that you don't think they are competent in doing their job?" Gloom asked, looking askance at Prey.

"The Royal Guard are stubborn, brash, narrow minded and blind," Prey said without any particular malice, "Everyone-"

"-Everypony."

"-Everyone knows what the Royal Guard looks like. They stand out

like an albino raven in their shiny gold armour, the paragons of justice, reliable and beloved by all," Prey snorted, ignoring Gloom's tail flick, "And that's just the problem isn't it? *Everyone* recognises them."

"And thus so will the criminals we're after. You're right on that account, the Royal Guard isn't...subtle." Gloom agreed as he realised where Prey was going with this.

"But the Night Guard can be?" Crimson asked.

"If the Night Guard sticks to its name and does the surveillance at night, then yes. Full thestral squads with night vision, hiding on a low lying clouds. No one would ever spot them. The pony we're looking for isn't going to cause trouble when they know the Royal Guard is around, so when they don't think anyone is watching, that's when they'll do so. Have the Royal Guard retire for the day, and then see who comes out of the wood work at night." Prey said.

"I doubt that the Night Guard squads are going to only be thestrals. Almost half the squads had at least some mixed heritage, even if they're all supposed to only be temporary." Gloom cautioned, but Prey could see the Sargent already thinking about finding a way around that.

"We could ask Captain Nighthawk to mix up the squads to get only thestrals sir." Crimson suggested.

"The non-thestral Night Guards won't like that." Gloom reflected, considering.

"So what?" Prey asked, "That's just them being racist again. Get Captain Nighthawk to give the order and they'll have to go along with it whether they like it or not. Besides, you don't need a full squad of thestrals to watch one train. You only need one look out, and spread the rest through the town roof tops. These town's populations are predominantly earth ponies. They rarely look up, and especially not at night." Prey told them.

"Now you're the one being racist Prey." Gloom warned, "And just because you can order somepony around doesn't mean you should

abuse that power. Soldiers have to trust their commanding officer."

That said, Prey could see that the Sargent was slightly pleased inside that someone had complimented the thestrals for once instead of simply insulting or fearing them

"How do you know they never do? Look up, I mean." Crimson asked as well.

"Just an observation I've made. What's the point of looking up at night if you can't see in the dark? Perhaps during the day, when you can see birds and clouds yes, but at night when you'd rather hurry and get inside? No, it's not practical, so most just don't." Prey said simply.

Gloom grimaced slightly, '-too many ponies think like that. Princess Luna goes to all that work and nopony ever even looks up-' He thought, but he accepted Prey's logic.

"I see. That does make sense." Crimson nodded.

"Okay," Gloom said decisively, "I'll take the revised plan to Captain Nighthawk later when he returns and see if he approves. It won't come into affect for another two nights, er, days anyway, so there's time to switch up the squads."

"We cannot attend." Crimson suddenly said.

"Pardon?"

"We cannot attend," Crimson blinked slowly, "Prey cannot fly. Or see in the dark. Or keep up with us sir." He explained.

'-absolutely no tact-' Gloom sighed internally. "Crimson, that's not quite how you should..." he began, but Crimson seemed to have realised his own social blunder this time and made to correct it.

"My apologies Prey. I did not mean that as an insult to you." He quickly apologized. And for the second time, Prey caught the pegasus's mental wall's shifting just enough to let a thought slip through.

'-second time today. My father would be ashamed if he thought I ever insulted somepony for being born the way they were -' And then the walls came down again, locking Crimson's thoughts away.

Prey however just shrugged, ears flopping, "As I've already said, I am aware of my own physical weaknesses and limitations. I'm not going to throw a tantrum if practicality demands that we plan around it. Life isn't fair." He said. 'If you're mocking me or treating me like a child however...' He thought.

"Well... Alright then," Gloom said, looking between Prey and Crimson, checking that there really wasn't any problem, "Okay, so we can't take part in the surveillance. We'll just have to help from the side lines and continue with our investigation."

"Pardon me sir, but did Captain Nighthawk say if the Royal Guard were any closer to rescuing Rocky Bed and catching his foalnapper?" Crimson asked.

Gloom sighed, "He said they haven't found anything. Not a single damned thing." He admitted in frustration.

"How about Tulip Bed sir? I mean, have they found a way to restore her memories or help her yet?"

Gloom's tail started flicking in anger as he thought about the mares fate, "No, they can't do that either. What ever swamp scum did this to her, they did a thorough job. I'm just glad that she's still able to walk and talk. Captain Nighthawk said that the elite Solar Guard was dealing with a similar secret case recently and those victims are still in a mental hospital, nor do they know if they'll ever recover." Gloom said grimly.

Prey felt a touch of vindictive satisfaction as he heard Gloom relate that, 'Good, that's what you get. Captain Valour should've accepted my offer.'

The moment of grim silence continued as Gloom and Crimson thought on that for a minute. '-wait, speaking of injuries-' Gloom thought, his attention shifting to Prey.

"Ah kid-sorry, I mean Prey. I forgot, but you said you needed a new bandage this morning. In the rush I forgot we needed to go and get your ear changed. We'll go and do that right now." Gloom said.

"No need, it can wait." Prey replied.

"Prey, you can't be so cavalier about your health. If you still refuse to see a doctor, then you have to look after yourself. And why didn't you say anything before we left?" Gloom asked, heading for the door.

Prey didn't follow him. "You forgot, and then we left to catch the train. There was no time. And I don't need a new bandage now." He answered.

"Prey, you could've just said or asked us to take a moment to help you." Gloom sighed, '-this again? Refuses to ask for help-'. He stopped, his hoof on the door, "And why don't you need a new bandage?" He asked as he fully processed Prey's answer.

Crimson had been looking at Prey's bandaged ear since the conversation began, "It's changed. That is a fresh one." He announced.

"When did you find time to get that changed? Wait," Gloom said stepping closer to have another look, "That isn't bandage, it looks just like white cloth."

"I found something else to change it with," Prey said shrugging, "It was better than waiting until you remembered."

"Prey, just say something next time. In fact, make that an order. And where did you get time to change it?" Gloom pressed.

Prey met his gaze levelly, "In Hay Steam, when you left me behind. I decided I might as well do something useful with my time." He said calmly.

Gloom breathed in deeply, taking a moment to close his eyes, "Prey, the conversation at Seed Apple's farm we had... Did you steal that bandage?"

Prey didn't even blink, "Yes."

That got a stir out of both Gloom and Crimson, "Why would you do that?", "You stole?" They asked at the same time.

"I needed a fresh bandage. There was a cotton napkins in a pile. You forgot, so I solved the problem without bothering you. Why is that an issue?"

"Because you stole something. As a member of the Night Guard. Not that it would have been acceptable even if your weren't." Gloom said angrily.

"Then perhaps you shouldn't complain when I take actions to maintain my own health when you forget." Prey returned.

"Stop trying to shift the blame. You are my responsibility, but it was you who stole."

"A single napkin-"

"That makes no difference Prey, stealing is still a crime no matter the value."

"It's not something that would even be missed. Just one of many cut from a bolt of cloth en-mass, before being dumped in a pile and forgotten about."

Gloom looked at him, "Prey, you are going to return the napkin and make an apology. That's final." Gloom commanded. Crimson's wing did that dismissive little flick in agreement, like the Sargent's words should have been the final say in the matter.

"They will not want it back now that it has been used, and we are unlikely to return to Hay Steam any time soon." Prey pointed out in annoyance.

"You can send a written one in the post, along with the monetary compensation too." Gloom responded.

"Definitely impossible then. I have no money."

"You get paid at the end of the week. You can do it then, when we have our day off." Gloom said, knocking aside the lambs protests. '-why won't you just admit you're wrong?!-' Gloom thought angrily.

'Because I'm not wrong. My actions were perfectly logical, and if it wasn't for Crimson's sharp eyes, I would have been able to spin a lie and you wouldn't be any the wiser.' Prey thought in answer, but he just kept quiet.

"Is that understood, Prey?" Gloom asked loudly.

"If that's what you want sir." Prey answered calmly, dipping his head in submission.

Gloom scowled, "Are you just saying that because we're telling you to?" He demanded.

Prey tilted his head, "Yes. You're telling me to just agree and do as you say. That's what I'm doing. Isn't that what you wanted?" He asked.

"NO." Crimson spoke up, a tad louder than necessary. He quietened back to normal when Prey winced and turned to look at him, "You stole. Stealing is wrong. You stole when there was no good cause to. You should right your wrong for your own sake, not just because you were told to do so. It is as simple as that." Crimson said.

"You should do it because you want to make amends. You're not stealing because you enjoy stealing, are you?" Gloom asked.

"No, obviously not. I just needed a fresh bandage." Prey responded like it should be obvious.

"Then there's your reason. Do it because you wouldn't want somepony stealing from you, so don't do it in return." Gloom finished seriously. '-I get it now, he felt it was necessary, so he stole. Did you have to steal often back home kid?-'

Prey was growing increasingly irked by this pointless exchange, their annoyance at him fuelling his own, 'I have so many better things I could be doing right now. If only I was free.' This was a pointed reminder that he wasn't. He was bound in service to a moon

Goddess, and these two fools were her willing servants.

Crimson should've been, if not an ally, then a mutual prisoner united in hate against their alicorn jailer. Instead, he was *grateful* for having someone giving him a direction, even if it was those who had chained him and confiscated his fathers wing blades.

"Fine. I shouldn't have stolen. I will do as you say, send reparation money, and an apology letter." Prey said, refraining from the minor temptation to add the snarky 'Will that satisfy you?' that suggested itself. It would be a poor decision to seem rebellious. 'Bow your head and know your place.'

"Good." Gloom said, "And next time, just ask. I keep saying this, but just ask. We could easily have gotten you a proper bandage. There was absolutely no need to steal." Gloom repeated.

Prey looked away mulishly, making a show of feeling a mix of guilt and anger, because that's what they expected of him.

Gloom was wrong. You didn't ask for help. You might need it, and if it was offered, you might even take it. But you should never ask for it. Never show any weakness. Never become dependant on anyone else.

"Right. We're putting this behind us now, okay?" Gloom asked, looking at both of them but more to Prey, "You've made a mistake, but you're going to make up for it. So we move on now and forget about it and get back to work. Understood?"

"Yes sir."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't think this means you're getting out of writing that letter though kid." Gloom warned, pulling the lid off another box of files.

"Yes, sir." Prey repeated. And mentally he moved Gloom up one place on The List.

Gloom assigned Prey to make a written explanation of the map and his theory on the best distribution of the Royal and Night Guards. Gloom seemed confident that Prey wouldn't make a purposeful mistake out of spite just for getting told off, and he was right, although not quite for the reasons he thought.

Gloom thought Prey wouldn't want to lose anymore of their trust. Prey merely judged it not advantageous at this time to provide misinformation to the Night Guard.

Prey wrote out a formal report, using the correct 'Form 3B.7' and the 'space provided' to make the recommendation, while Gloom and Crimson went on with emptying the last of the files from the boxes, and then pining up the bits of reports they thought relevant to the ISND's three main objectives on the cork board, and linking them together with coloured string.

Prey didn't know why the string was necessary, but he supposed it served as a useful visual link for those with less impressive recall than his own.

Prey couldn't judge if Crimson was still off put by his petty theft. As always, it was a bit hard to judge with the pegasus, but it didn't seem like it. Prey sat with his back to them, pressing on the dusty floor to fill out the report. (Still no desk, and their deep clean the other day had only scratched the surface). Prey didn't usually like people at his back, but he could rely on his ears to keep track of the other two's location whilst he worked. In truth, he was hiding the runes he was inscribing into the floor.

It wasn't a fire trap or anything as hideously lethal, just a basic runic array, but leaving off the final completing rune.

That rune was interchangeable, and depending which he finished the array with, would determine what it ended up doing. Prey didn't have any plan that required this array, nor any immediate need for it. But apparently they were going to be spending *a lot* of time in this office, and Prey planned to lay the foundations as they worked.

A rune here, an array there, and slowly he could turn this room into

a potential fortress.

'That is,' Prey thought with that nasty fluttering twist in his stomach, 'If I survive the night.'

Accordingly, Prey didn't spend much energy forming the runes, conserving his strength for whatever was to come. However he did not stop his work. Prey was playing the long game, never ceasing to make back up and contingency plans no matter how rudimentary, even when staring death in the face. *Especially* when staring death in the face. There was no better time to have contingency plans.

Prey was under no illusions. He was in a hostile environment. Canterlot was not safe. He couldn't do anything about the greatest danger, Luna and Celestia, but he could and would make plans to protect himself against the rest.

And hope it was enough. Prey didn't trust hope. It was a bright light to follow. Bait.

---I---

[[[Bonus Picture - Deeper Green: Don't Follow the Lights]]]

https://imgur.com/9FkobZB

Author's Notes:

Editor here: Thank you to him, **Sweetolebob18**
If you see any mistakes, please point them out.
Thanks.
Hope you enjoyed.

20.1 When Life gives you Lemons

There isn't anything miserable in life that can't be made worse by being forced to wait for it. Like the donkey with a rotting limb that knows the bone saw is coming, but until then, can only helplessly stew in fear.

Life does not move to your time scale. One minute will always be exactly one minute long, no matter how hard you stare at the clock.

Tonight, Prey would fight his stalker, but until then, all he could do was wait in terrible anticipation.

The mess hall at dinner was busy. They'd missed the bustle yesterday, what with only returning to Canterlot around midnight. But now they turned up just at the right time, half way though the forty five minutes set aside for meals, to enjoy the experience along with everybody else.

Gloom poked halfheartedly at his dumpling stew with the spoon, reluctant to eat even one of the stodgy balls of dough. '-a slice of mango certainly wouldn't go amiss right now-' He thought.

Crimson had eaten most of his, but to Prey, he still looked a touch hungry. Prey, as usual, had devoured his own with abandon and hadn't left a scrap. After double and triple checking for poison of course.

"Kid, *Imean*Prey, pass the pepper would you?"

Prey stopped watching his surroundings suspiciously to turn to Gloom, "Pepper? Where?" He asked, looking around for a bowl of pepper corns.

"Right there, at the end of the table. The pepper shaker. Pass it

down."

Prey looked, seeing a wooden cylinder, "That's pepper?"

"Yes, that." Gloom said, gesturing impatiently. Prey had seen Guard's using these on other tables to season their food, but hadn't realised it was pepper. He'd assumed they were simply using more common spices, such as rosemary or thyme. In his old village, they'd almost never had pepper, and even then it was in peppercorn form, not ground granules or in a shaker.

'Pepper is widely available. That might be useful. Good for blinding powders and masking your scent.' Prey thought, shuffling along the bench to place the shaker just within hoof's reach of Gloom before moving back.

"Thanks. Maybe now this'll taste of something." Gloom muttered, referring to his stew.

"They are noisy tonight." Crimson said, watching the Royal Guard's, who did seem more upbeat and boisterous than than yesterday.

'Don't you go complaining to me about it being too noisy,' Prey thought, 'You're not developing a headache from being constantly bombarded with all their trivial little thoughts.'

"Yes, something good must've happened. Perhaps they rescued Rocky Bed?" Gloom suggested, looking over at the Royal Guard tables too. '-by Luna, I pray that's the case-'

"Wouldn't we have been told if Rocky Bed had been rescued sir?" Crimson asked.

"Probably-," '-maybe-', "-And we're not on duty during meal times," Gloom reminded Crimson absentmindedly, pursing his lips as he considered the noisy golden armoured Guards, "Why don't you go over and ask?" He suggested.

Crimson's wings stiffened, "That is... I am not sure if that is a good idea sir."

Gloom wasn't pleased or displeased by Crimson's reluctance. The

Sargent was, for the most part, on a stand-offish neutral footing with his day time counterparts. They'd made problems for him on a number of occasions, but he didn't want to hold a grudge. "It would be good to make friends in the Royal Guard." Gloom said, or rather suggested.

Crimson looked at the Royal Guards, who were chatting at their own tables, then back to the surrounding tables on this side of the room. The few thestral Night Guard's sat quietly in small groups, backs straight. The divide was clear.

'Thestral's are a prideful people.' Prey noted, not for the first time.

"Heya'." A cheerful voice called. Approaching their table on long legs was Topaz Honey, flanked by a pair of friends. Topaz seemed to be the kind of pony who called lots of others friend, and actively went out of her way to lay claim to more of them.

"You had a good day?" Topaz asked, sliding onto their bench without a second thought. Her two friends, a unicorn and another Earth pony, also offering their own greetings as they copied Topaz's actions.

"It was productive. Not necessarily pleasant." Gloom replied, pushing aside his bowl.

"Don't worry, it was still probably better 'n my day by the sound of it," The second Earth pony offered, "Name's Smokey, by the by." She added, offering a polite grin and a touch of the helmet.

"Sargent Gloom. Just Gloom while not on duty." Gloom returned.

"Crimson." Crimson said simply.

"Prize. One day I'm going to get made a knight." The unicorn said, joining in on the round of introductions.

"That was a joke by the way." He added, "Because a knight get's the title 'sir', and my dad named me Prize. Sir-*Prize*. Surprise. Get it?" Prize gave a weak chuckle when neither Gloom or Crimson smiled. Already he looked like he was having second thoughts about coming over here with Honey Topaz.

"Ah. That was a joke. My apologies. I'll laugh next time." Crimson said calmly.

While Prize didn't laugh, looking a bit offended instead, Smokey and Topaz did, "Heh ha, good to see you do have a sense of humour. It's so dry I doubt these bats would be able to suck much of a meal out of you even if they tried, heh?" Topaz Honey chuckled.

Crimson blinked blankly in response, just prompting another laugh from the two of them.

Gloom wasn't amused by the vampire joke, but smiled politely anyway, because although distasteful and rude, they hadn't meant anything by it, "We do prefer in when ponies use our proper name, thestrals. 'Bat' or 'batpony' is just plain inaccurate. Although we do share a taste for fruit." Gloom told them lightly.

However, when his polite simile showcased his set of fangs, it did nothing tone down Topaz or Smokey's amusement. Or Prize's unease. It evidently didn't occur to either of the two mares that laughing at a thestrals teeth was also rude, or that an annoyed thestral might just use them. A number of the surroundings thestrals were now secretly watching the conversation happening at the ISND's table.

"So where's your little darling gotten to tonight?" Topaz asked, looking round.

"Pardon?"

"Your lamb, the cutie. Where's he gotten to? He isn't hiding from me, is he?" She asked in amusement.

Gloom looked over at Prey's seat, which was empty, and then at the surrounding tables which showed no sign of the lamb, "Huh. I suppose he must be."

"I don't think he would like to be called that either. His name is Prey." Crimson put in.

"Prey? That's not a very nice name." Smokey commented with a

frown.

"I didn't name him." Gloom shrugged.

"Well that's good to hear." Prize stated, then balked as he realised he'd been caught eyeing Gloom's fangs as he said that, the tips of which could just be seen when the thestral spoke.

"I mean, I thought he belonged to you or something, and that you had to bring him to work or whatever." Prize hastily said, making excuses.

"Prey is his own sheep, or lamb. Don't let him fool you, he's a full member of the ISND." Gloom warned.

"Sure sure." Topaz agreed pleasantly, still looking under the table, no doubt searching for Prey to use as a cuddle pillow. Evidently, none of them took Gloom's words seriously. And why should they have? Prey was obviously a child.

"So, this is the first time I've actually had a chance to talk with a thestral member of the Night Guard. I mean, your command is separate to the Royal Guard command, maybe you could explain the differences a bit more?" Smokey enquired.

She looked at Gloom's helmet when she spoke to him, avoiding the sight of his slit eyes or teeth, but being a lot more tactful about it than Prize. If Gloom noticed, he didn't comment, and Prey's hiding place was out of range of their thoughts, so he couldn't tell if Gloom had.

"We have some time," Gloom said checking the clock, "I can answer a few questions. Nothing personal or confidential though." He added firmly.

"What is it that has you so happy?" Crimson asked.

"Eh?" Smokey paused in her retelling of a fillyhood school experience. Somehow, Gloom had hardly started speaking before the mare had shifted the conversation, seemingly without even

realising it, to her own interests. Gloom had just let her ramble on, probably thinking it was better to pretend to listen than have to do the talking himself.

"What you mean?" She asked.

"The Royal Guards, they are happy about something." Crimson elaborated.

"We are-?"

"*Oh*! That would be Captain Shining Armour's speech I bet. It was a very good one, quite inspiring." Topaz answered, grabbing hold of the conversation.

"A speech." Gloom repeated.

"Yeah," Topaz agreed happily, leaning forwards, "You know, the weekly Guard assembly? The Captain spoke some words. It was good."

Prey somehow doubted Nighthawk would ever give a speech. Only orders.

"It was good," Agreed Smokey, without any hint of sarcasm. It just seemed to be the pony way. To be cheerful and give out compliments. "He also let us in on the news that we're shortly going to be having greenies soon." She added with a grin.

"Greenies. What are those?" Crimson asked.

"She mean's new recruits." Gloom supplied.

"Yeah, and do you know what that means?" Topaz asked with a glint in her eye, "That mean's hazing induction!"

"I am kind of looking forward to getting my own back from when it was my hazing." Prize, who'd mostly been quiet, put in. "My barracks floor could use a good scrub." He added with a laugh.

"Is this where you throw confetti in their face?" Crimson asked slowly.

"That's only the beginning. We wait until they go to bed and then jump out and start the *real* induction. It's a time honoured tradition. Oh, you never got the second half did you?" Topaz said to Crimson, "Sorry about that, but you're in the Night Guard so you don't get to do the Royal Guard one." She apologised blithely, not even realising the divide between the two Guard units she'd just acknowledged, just accepting that was the way things were supposed to be.

"Do you Night Guard's have your own induction?" Smokey asked them.

"Something like that." Gloom allowed.

"Oh? What is it? Shine the officers armour? Put a frog in the Lieutenants desk? Eat a whole chilli? Do a tap dance?"

"No. A one on one spar in the cage at night. Full armour." Gloom said bluntly.

"Oh.. That's... Er, great." Smokey offered weakly. Prize mirrored her concerned look.

"Does Captain Nighthawk know ponies are going to the training room to do that?" Topaz asked.

"Of course. The Night Guard's only been re-instituted recently. The Captain said we need to start it off right and let everypony know what they're really in for." Gloom answered calmly, daring them to disapprove.

Crimson half opened his mouth to say he never got to partake in any such induction, before seeming to remember that he was on probation and not allowed to hold a weapon yet. "Don't worry Crimson, you'll get to have your turn in the cage later." Gloom assured him, noticing the pegasus's motion.

"Thank you sir."

"What, 'thank you for getting me beaten up'?" Prize muttered in amazement to Topaz.

Gloom looked up at the clock again and stood, Crimson

immediately following suit, "Pardon me, but we've got to get back to work."

Crimson gave them both a grave nod, "Thank you for the company, and have a good night."

"No problem, any time," Topaz laughed with a farewell wave of her large hoof, "Make sure to grab your lamb's tail next time before he runs off. I want to say hello to him. Bye bye." She called.

Smokey also waved a hoof, although Prize didn't, just looking a tad relieved now that he thought he was unobserved.

Gloom didn't offer a response, choosing instead to lead them for the mess hall doors via a round about route through the tables, '-don't quite see eye to eye, but in their defence, they mean well-', He thought, thinking over their meeting just now.

"Try and spot Prey will you." He said out loud.

Crimson half closed his eyes and tilted his muzzle back, ears turning about. He stopped after only a few seconds, looking down and to his side, "Here he is sir."

Gloom's ears went up as he glanced around. And there was Prey less than two yards away, coming out from behind a table leg, "Don't wander off, remember?" Gloom said, repeating what he'd warned Prey of at Seed Apple's farm. Although in the Palace, in the middle of the mess hall, surrounded by both Royal and Night Guards, Gloom wasn't actually concerned.

"What are we doing now? Back to sort out the office or to the bunk room?" Prey asked, his stomach twisting.

"No, now we are going to be doing what every Night Guard has to do. Guard shift, which means standing guard." Gloom said as they exited the mess hall.

"Does than not seem like a poor use of the ISND time? We are supposed to be independent and working on solving cases." Prey said.

"Every Guard has to pull shift at some point, and although Captain Nighthawk has been keeping us off the rota because of how busy we are with the job Princess Luna gave us, the Night Guard is still heavily understaffed. We're just going to have to fill in for a few hours. Once again, things will improve once we finally get some new recruits." Gloom said, but without much hope in his tone of that happening any time soon.

"There are new recruits coming in soon. Like Topaz told us. Will some of them be assigned to the Night Guard sir?" Crimson asked, as Gloom lead them through the lower palace corridors, passing by tall arched windows which showed it was late evening outside.

"Unfortunately no," Gloom sighed through his nose, "The Royal Guard and the Night Guard are separate military units. You sign up to the one you want, the recruits don't get reassigned. Princess Celestia gave Princess Luna her support to set up the Night Guard again, but that does mean we operate separately."

Prey saw where this was going. "And so far, it's only been almost exclusively thestrals taking up Princess Luna's offer when she extended the metaphorical hoof, right? Everyone else is reluctant to serve under the reformed Nightmare Moon." He guessed.

"Do not speak about Princess Luna like that," Gloom hissed, glancing around to make sure they hadn't been overheard. The corridor was currently empty.

Prey raised a hoof, backing off a step, "I'm just saying what they're thinking. I'm correct though, aren't I?"

Prey knew he was right, and they both knew it too, so they had no grounds to protest.

Crimson made that flick with his wing, "The Night Guard needs more recruits. But no new ponies will sign up. Only those from the clans want to serve. But few are able to leave the clans to come and serve on such short notice." Crimson said, summing up Captain Nighthawk's dilemma.

He looked to Gloom, "But what about those Royal Guards who

Princess Celestia assigned to the Night Guard when it was set up? Are they not part Night Guard too now sir?"

Gloom checked again to make sure they were still unobserved, "No, I'm afraid not. While some of them might hopefully decide to transfer and stay on, it was originally just an emergency transfer to get the Night Guard up and running. They were told they could return to normal duty once enough recruits were found to fill their posts. The Captain indicated that they're getting a bit impatient." Gloom admitted with a grimace.

"So, brewing internal strife to go along with lack of new recruits to make up for it." Prey commented.

"That could be taken as slander against the Guard in the wrong context," Gloom warned. He hadn't been having a very good day with Prey, '-what with getting himself left behind and then stealing-'

"But, unfortunately, you're right again," Gloom conceded, "Don't go spreading that information around though. Clear?" He ordered.

"Yes sir."

"Yes. Sir."

Guard shift involved doing what the majority of Night Guards probably spent their job doing when not marching in a circle. Standing around, looking dangerous, and doing nothing.

They'd relieved a couple of Night Guard's (neither of them thestrals, so reassigned Royal Guards and not volunteers Prey now knew) standing guard outside what was apparently the second entrance in from the Palace Gardens. Because one wasn't enough apparently.

There'd been a minor slip up from Gloom when they arrived to take the Guard's place, because apparently switching shifts also meant passing over the spears to the next set of guards. Meaning them.

The problem wasn't Prey, who the other two Night Guards didn't more than look twice at before dismissing, because it wasn't like

Prey could have wielded a spear anyway, even if there had been a third spear. The problem was Crimson, who wasn't supposed to be allowed a weapon again yet. Gloom glanced at Crimson, who was patiently waiting for the Sargent's decision and permission. Gloom decided, '-that order's not relevant to this instance anyway-' and nodded for Crimson to take the spear from the impatient Earth pony.

This did however serve as an explanation for the general lack of weaponry Prey had noticed among the Guards. Weaponry was for those standing at their posts, but not for general carry.

Prey stood at the side of the corridor, in the shadow the ornate window sill cast, and out of the way and sight of anyone who might've been looking in. He caught Gloom's eye and half cocked one droopy ear. 'Well? What am I supposed to do?' He silently conveyed.

Gloom looked at the little lamb, then at the spear he was holding, then to the door they were guarding. It was a ridiculous notion that Prey could be guarding anything. If any enemies suddenly decided to invade the palace through this random door, his best chance of contributing was the intruders laughing themselves silly long enough for Crimson or Gloom to run them through with their borrowed spears.

Gloom shrugged expressively, 'Just wait around until our shifts over.' Seemed to be the reply.

Prey was fine with that, he still had whatever was coming tonight to worry about.

Prey was patient.

He'd spent fifty seven years being patient.

So it wasn't any hardship to sit there waiting in silence while Gloom and Crimson stood guard over their door. For four hours.

A grand total of six ponies came past in that time, all of them

servants or maids, none of which had any interest in the the entrance into the gardens. Surprise surprise.

Not a word was spoken between the three of them as the last of the sun light faded and moon light replaced it through the window. An hour in, a pair of gilded lanterns at the end of the corridor had been lit by a maid, but no additional illumination was provided at their post.

Well, it wasn't unexpected. Gloom could see in the dark, and Crimson's eye sight seemed just as good despite lacking the cat pupils, so it wasn't actually an issue. Recruiting more thestrals would probably cut down on the palaces monthly candle expenditure. (Why didn't they use enchanted crystal lights?)

Once again and certainly not for the last time, Prey wished he had such superior night vision like they did.

The biggest problem with posting sentries and look outs was boredom, and the hardest to rectify. It was because ninety nine percent of the time, nothing happened. Just hour after endless hour of boredom, all in the same environment, with no mental stimulation, just watching.

There was almost nothing you could do about it either, because that's what a look out's job entailed; sheer boredom while waiting for a sign of danger that never came, hour after hour, shift after shift, day after day, and if you did miss that one, tiny detail, that shift in the bushes just that one time, well then you were dead.

It was a thankless, tedious, and mentally draining job.

Prey wasn't a normal person though, he had ways of still maintaining awareness of his surroundings while letting his mind wander onto other topics. So he made himself comfortable, closed his eyes, and slipped into meditation to wait, relying on his ears to alert him if anything came along.

The four hours passed slowly.

More stars appeared in the slice of dark night sky they could see through the window.

When a pair of Night Guards came to relieve them, this time a mix between the two recruited types, a thestral and an earth pony. They exchanged the spears, and Gloom paused to exchange a few words with the other thestral, but the regular pony Guard took his post and ignored them, irritation running through his mind at; '-pulling night shift again-'

"Prey?" Crimson called to the still form of the small sheep, almost undetectable as a lump in the shadows under the window sill. The earth pony jumped when the lump's big blue eyes popped open.

Prey stood, stretching his legs while Gloom finished up his hushed conversation.

'This is it. My stalker is coming tonight. No more time to plan.' Prey let out a long, slow breath, and was proud when it didn't catch.

But he was still afraid.

"So what have you learned today Prey?" Gloom asked, drawing the lambs attention as the thestral began to remove and stow his armour in the hoof locker.

They were back to the bunk room. Crimson stood waiting patiently, probably so he could start his martial arts training kata once they were done with their nightly talk.

"What couldn't be achieved with law and order the first time around can be accomplished if you just use a show of force. Sir. Like at Seed Apples farm." Prey added, answering with the first unimportant observation that came to mind. He was sitting quietly on the floor, double checking the invisible flare rune trap.

Gloom and Crimson picked over that for a moment.

"Okaaay, I *guess* that counts as learning something new for the day. Not quite what I had in mind. I will point out that both times we

confronted him, we were acting under the law, and not just because 'Might Makes Right'. Having to force entry into Turf Apple's farm wasn't pleasant for him or his family, but he broke the law. If you're worrying about that, well... Don't I guess." Gloom sighed. "Alright Crimson, what about you?"

'Don't worry, I wasn't.' Prey thought, looking to Crimson to hear what pearls of wisdom he came up with today.

"So far, our work has only been with Earth ponies. Pebble Mill, Seed Apple, Turf Apple, Tulip Bed, Rocky Bed. All Earth ponies. I suppose... that Earth ponies cause us the most trouble." Crimson decided.

Both Gloom and Prey looked to Crimson in tandem, and then both laughed, "Ha! That's one way of looking at our work so far. You know I hadn't thought about it like that, but I don't think that's actually the case, Crimson." Gloom chuckled.

"That just mean that pegasi and unicorns are better at using their talents to hide their crimes." Prey commented, stifling his giggles.

"No Crimson, I doubt this case of affairs is going to last long." Gloom told him.

Crimson's ears actually twitched in embarrassment, "Sir, I think I explained myself poorly. I wasn't being racist. What I was trying to say was, when do you think we will come up against unicorns and pegasi in the course of our duties?"

Gloom stowed the last of his armour away and shut the locker, "Well, it'll happen eventually. Earth ponies only make up one third of the population after all. Let's be glad we haven't had to go on any aerial chases or magical confrontations yet." Gloom shrugged. Prey shivered.

"Anyway," He continued, "Perhaps Lady Luck is smiling. We're still setting up and getting into the swing of things in the ISND. This is a good chance to learn and grow as a team."

'-when some of us aren't out thieving-'

Gloom stopped talking and started trying to snag something caught in his mane. He flicked an ear in distaste when he finally managed to pull out a dirty leaf, '-seriously, how did that even get under my helmet?-'

"And maybe if Lady Luck continues to smile, we might even get the chance for a shower before having to gallop off to some fresh riot or disaster tomorrow." Gloom said, regarding the leaf.

"That would be good sir." Crimson agreed, looking over himself, especially at the dishevelled state of his wings. A shiver of disgust passed through the feathers.

Prey could feel the unpleasant griminess that had worked its way under his wool from tramping through all that long grass, "I would not complain either." He agreed. None of them were very clean, and their sheets certainly weren't going to benefit tonight.

"Nice not to have to fight to get a kid to take a bath." Gloom commented jokingly at Prey's words. Prey didn't deign to respond.

"And what did you learn today sir?" Crimson asked.

"Oh," Gloom scratched as he thought at the fur around his jagged chest scar, now unhindered by his chest plate, "Let's go with, hmm... That I really need to get us a Regulations hoof book so you two can learn it. We can put it on the shelf in the office. And we still need to find a name for that office." Gloom added.

That hadn't really counted as 'learning-something-new-for-the-day', but Prey wasn't going to protest. There was only one thing further that he wanted to know, "Pebble Mill, Turf Apple, and all those others from the cells. What is the decision on what is going to be done with them?" He asked.

Gloom picked up the alarm clock to wind it, the brass mechanisms making a whirring sound as he answered.

"Captain Nighthawk is going to pass off Pebble Mill to the court, they'll sentence him. Jail time followed by community service I'd wager." Gloom snorted, propping up the alarm clock and sitting

back on the bunk, "Seed Apple, he's the most likely to get off easy. Just a warning and a hefty fine. The other ponies from the cells too. But as for Turf Apple," Gloom sucked in air over his fangs, "He's facing extended jail time."

"And when this foalnapper is caught?" Crimson asked flatly, "What will be done with the pony who stole Tulip Bed's memories and her son?"

"As to the mind mage's punishment," Gloom shrugged with a grim smile, "Only the Princesses know."

---{O}---

The room was black.

The only sound the faint '*tick tick tick*' of the alarm clock in the dark.

Gloom had lain down and gone to sleep not long after they'd finished talking with the usual, "Night watch over you", only taking a few minutes to write a quick letter and stuff it in an envelope before hoof.

Crimson hadn't gone straight to sleep, instead first exerted himself by running through his training exercises, honing his movements while still being weighed down by his armour. Finally he'd removed it, returning to his normal deep red colouring and succumbing to sleep.

And now it was just Prey, alone in his bed, wide awake in the dark and eyes fixed on the door for the first crack of light, ears strained for any hint of sound. Because he knew someone was coming, and they were coming and with only one target in mind.

Him.

The kidnapper was coming for him tonight.

The fear hadn't slipped his mind, no not once all day. It was always there, always poking and prodding away with its cold clammy hooves. There was no getting out of this.

When he'd been eating breakfast, he hadn't forgotten.

When sitting in the interrogation room with Pebble Mill, he hadn't forgotten.

Nor later on the train, or when he'd argued with Gloom. Not when examining the false Wolf Woods, hiding from Topaz Honey, or even on the mindless guard duty shift, he still hadn't forgotten.

How could he forget? Someone intelligent, cunning, capable of kidnapping Rocky Bed, meticulously suppressing his mother's memories, tracked down the exact bunk Prey was sleeping in the whole Palace, and then placed a message there, all without even leaving a trace.

Prey wouldn't be able to rely on his mind abilities to give him any sort of edge. His opponent was also a fellow mind leech.

If Prey didn't go into this encounter ready to put his life on the line, he was going to get killed. He was alone in this fight, just like he'd always been. Just him against whomever his adversary was.

Tick-tick-tick went the small alarm clock.

Prey was patient.

Tick-tick-tick.

But waiting in fear of dying is no easy thing. Lesser sheep than Prey had broken before under the fear, nor was he immune. But still Prey remained patient.

Tick-tick-tick

Fifteen minutes crawled agonisingly into twenty... Twenty to thirty... Thirty to forty...

Tick-tick-tic... The alarm clock stopped.

Prey felt something change in the air, and a sharp tingle in the runes on his hooves. 'Magic', it warned.

Everything in the room had gone silent, all noise in the darkness blanketed out.

Prey caught the door handle slowly turning down, and the door was pushed silently open. Someone had snuffed the lights outside the bunk room, plunging the corridor into gloom only a shade brighter than it was in here. Enough to see the outline of the cloaked unicorn that stood in the door, silvery magic glowing along its sharp horn.

---{O}---

A long time ago, cuddled against their mothers wool, the lambs Fleece and Gossamer had learnt about the different races of ponies called pegasi and unicorns, and how they differed from the Earth ponies in the village.

Typically, it had been started by a question from Gossamer.

"Moma, what's the 'horn head' Old Mother Cupboard was talking about?" The runt had asked with big eyes.

So their mother had told them about a city, "Something over a hundred times the size of our village", Over the mountains, a world away to a little lamb, where the golden ruler sat on her afar off throne, and decided how she wanted their lands to be run. And her chosen people were ponies called 'unicorns', who could use something called 'magic'.

At the time, Gossamer had been a child, never knowing to question why that was the way things had to be. He couldn't comprehend the concepts of this strange 'Magic' his mother told them about, so far removed from his everyday life. But he gravely accepted her words in his childlike way as she smiled and Fleece fell asleep next to him.

He hadn't understood what magic was then, and it would be years before he saw it, and learned to fear it.

But he knew now.

---{O}---

Prey saw the sheen of pale violet eyes beneath the hood, as the tall unicorn stepped into the shrouded room, and unknowingly right into the middle of the runic trap laid out on the floor.

Prey's mouth was dry, his heart thumping, and his stomach twisting. He licked his lips, and his hoof on the bed post tensed, "I think," Prey said in a quiet voice, "That's quite far enough."

The cloaked unicorn froze in place, and then without any prelude and completely unexpectedly, knelt on the floor. "We mean no harm and come in peace, master Prey." The unicorn spoke.

'Huh?' *That* gave Prey pause.

The voice had been a mares, but so completely flat and blank it rivalled Crimson's usual tone of address. In his head, a number of possible parallel outcomes immediately started up of how this situation could develop. Prey didn't have time to see them all through to the end, the situation was fluid. Prey seized upon the most promising looking one and committed to it.

"If you're no threat, then release your magic." Prey ordered, taking on the instigator role.

"We are using my magic to maintain the silencing field and help keep those two asleep. Would you like us to stop regardless?" The unicorn asked calmly. The was no challenge in her flat voice, just an enquiry about how Prey wanted to proceed.

The purpose of the unicorn's magic Prey had already more or less deduced, because he could no longer hear the alarm clock's '*tick*' or even Gloom breathing.

"No. You may maintain the spell." Prey slowly permitted. Show that he was the one in control.

Prey didn't give away his ace by threatening the hooded unicorn to, '*Not try anything funny or I'll activate this rune under my hoof and burn you to death*'. If he decided to do that, he didn't wanted her to have any warning.

"I got your little tulip petal message. Explain why." He ordered,

suspicions not dulled in the least.

"We are going to remove our hood. Is that okay?" The mare asked for permission.

"You may." Prey allowed.

Slowly, the unicorn reached up and lowered her hood.

Prey's eyes narrowed fractionally, "Night Watcher."

The Nightmare Moon cultist, who'd masquerading as a stallion mind mage, and had been responsible for the crimes which had prompted the Solar Guard to fetch him from Dreverton.

"Or do you go by your real name now, Lemon Pink?" Prey didn't state the obvious and say, 'You're supposed to be dead.'

"This one is currently nameless. Would you like to assign us a name?" The mare asked.

Now that the hood was gone, Prey could properly see the light pink fur of the mare's face, her mane a three tone yellow, black and white. Also visible were her violet eyes, faintly lit by the silvery light her sharp horn cast. The eyes were not like Prey remembered Night Watcher's at all. Now they were cold, blank, empty. They looked like his own unmasked.

"Lemon Pink will do fine for now. Are you here for revenge?" Prey asked, cutting straight to the chase.

"No, we are here to serve you in any way we can." Lemon Pink answered calmly.

Prey held her eyes, not a mote of emotion on his face. Lifeless blue met empty violet as Prey judged her. His mind skipped ahead, pieces slotting into place. But he wouldn't jump to assumptions, he would work this through, step by step.

"You're going to tell me that I created you, right? In here, I mean." Prey stated, tapping his free hoof to his forehead. He was keeping his mind closed, not willing to risk the unicorn getting anything by

trying to listen in on her thoughts.

"Yes, you made this one." Lemon Pink affirmed, nodding down at herself.

"So, you're saying that when I beat you on the roof top in Vanhoover, I didn't kill you. Instead, after your mind was eaten, I gave your empty body orders and instructions." Prey said, progressing his way through to the next logical conclusion.

"Yes. When Night Watcher was eaten, there were still scraps of her mind left. You used them and pieces of your own memory to create this one." She said.

Prey nodded slowly, never breaking eye contact. Normally, Prey avoided prolonged eye contact, choosing instead to glance around or act distracted, and whenever he did meet someone's eyes, he always made sure to put false emotion into them. Happy, confused, sad, amused, curious, and other normal emotions. Right now they held nothing.

A normal person couldn't have met Prey's eyes just then.

Yet Lemon Pink didn't look away. Another metal check box ticked in Prey's head, "You are an amalgamation of me and Lemon Pink, correct?" Prey clarified.

"Partly. This one does not posses a full mind like you do. It is made of pieces. This one is neither a copy of your mind, nor Night Watcher's mind, but we are still lesser than you are." The unicorn now called Lemon Pink confirmed dissipationetly.

Prey coldly considered the individual before him for a minute longer, "In my cell, long ago, there was a code phrase I decided upon for if an occurrence like this of duplicate minds ever happened." Prey said.

Lemon Pink nodded in understanding of what Prey was asking, "Sand glass of time, running through the hangmares twine." She recited, word for word.

That was the correct code, but Prey still wasn't satisfied, "All these

empty decisions you've helped me break..." He started.

"Just leaves on the mill pond." Lemon Pink finished, bowing her head, correctly completing this second short pass phrase.

She continued on, "We are here to help you escape, but first we must prove we are completely trustworthy to you. It would be best if you examined our mind to check for yourself that our memories are true."

Prey considered for a long moment, feeling the presence of the trigger rune under his hoof. Just one twitch, and the unicorn would be dead. Or at the very least, swiftly dying. But this was a golden opportunity, a completely unexpected windfall that could change so much, if it were true. And it was distinctly looking like it might be.

Lemon Pink had recited all the phrases correctly, and along with her subservient attitude, the likelihood of this being a trap had dropped to less than five percent. But Prey never trusted anyone. There was still the faint possibility that Lemon Pink recognised the rune trap she stood in, and was only faking it to get Prey to let her up and out of the circle she was still kneeling in.

Lemon Pink waited patiently while Prey thought. The only way for him to be sure beyond all doubt was to do as the unicorn suggested and look in her mind. Then he would know the truth of the matter unequivocally. 'I beat her once, I can do it again if it comes down to that. But this opportunity is too good to pass up.'

Prey sighed, and took his hoof off the bed post. "Maintain the silencing and sleep spell. I'm coming over." Prey ordered.

"It shall be done." Lemon Pink agreed flatly.

Prey walked over and stopped in front of the kneeling unicorn, meaning her lowered horn was now directly at his eye level. Prey refused to acknowledge how much the silvery glow of magic around the unusually sharp piece of bone unnerved him.

Prey lifted his hoof to the poll of Lemon Pink's forehead, "Ready?" He asked, and then dived in before she could reply.

In a rush, Prey was in.

There had been no mental walls in place to keep him out, another point in favour of the truthfulness of Lemon Pink's claim.

Twisting and squirming like a snake through Lemon Pink's memories, he dug in his mental hooks to establish a hoof hold. Prey was not being gentle or subtle, but that had never been one of the skills in his repertoire. Prey didn't know *how* to be gentle, his mind was too different to establish smooth link.

Too many twisted things warping how his mind 'felt' when it came into contact with a normal persons.

Prey could feel his body standing in the bunk room, the floor boards under him, the soft fur on Lemon Pink's forehead beneath his small hoof. But at the same time, he was also in both his outer mindscape, and Lemon Pink's inner mindscape. Ashen grey wasteland met a similarly coloured stone courtyard.

'Show me.' Prey mentally ordered.

A rush of foreign memories appeared before him in a swirl. With brutal efficiency, Prey skimmed the memories, lashing out with a harpoon of thought to spear and drag up any that looked important. He could feel the mental shudder that went through Lemon Pink's mindscape, the courtyard warping briefly at the pain. However the unicorn offered no resistance, just let Prey proceed unopposed as he began a vivisection of her memories.

-Blink-

'-who am I? What is going on? Why is it happening?-'

Me, this, it, us, did not know the answer to any of those questions. There was a roof under our hooves, stars in the night sky, a ledge plunging away into darkness, and a manacled lamb lying near our hooves.

'-Me. That's me. No, not us, but also not *not* us-'

A surge of experiences and emotions appeared, building up pressure

as *MeThisUsWe* tried to deal with what was happening, struggling against the mind splitting pain as it built. These memories beating down on us didn't belong to us, yet they did.

'-that lamb is our enemy!-' Part of our mind shouted, but it was just a small part, a tiny scrap left over from the 'old us', and already it's demands to destroy the lamb in front of us were fading. In its place, instructions written in bone and stone formed, creating the very core of our new existence.

'Retreat for now.'
'Go into hiding and lay low.'
'You are no longer Night Watcher.'
'You no longer worship Nightmare Moon.'
'You must find a way to help and or rescue me.'
'Do whatever is necessary, but do not get caught.'
'So not draw undue attention to yourself.'
'You are loyal only to me.'
'You will never betray me.'
'You are a part of me.'
'You belong to me.'

The mounting pain finally overflowed and turned into a numbing fire, which burned through our damaged mind as new knowledge replaced the emptiness.

We saw the lamb's life, '-Prey, once Gossamer-' and we experienced it, lived it, *became* it. And yet, not entirely. We understood, and knew why we must do as we had been told, but we did not become Prey.

Walk a mile in someone else's hooves, and you understand them. Walk a life time in their hooves, and you become them. But this did not occur with us.

The pieces of integrated Night Watcher, '-once Lemon Pink-', changed who were were on a fundamental basis, no matter how slight the change. We were not a copy of Prey, our mind was unique. Similar, but still unique.

'-I am me-' And I, us, we, knew our goal.

We knew who the master was and who the servant was. Who'd created who, and which belonged to which.

'-that is fine. We will serve. There is no further reason required. It is why we have been created-' We thought in understanding, as our mind finally stabilised into something resembling normal coherency.

'-because how could we not save our better selves?-'

-Blink-

Prey let the hooked memory sink, like letting a fish off the line. It seemed he had indeed created this person now known as Lemon Pink. 'Why do I not remember making her though?'

Prey delved back in for answers.

-Blink-

He found a copy of the memory stored neatly away, implanted and just waiting to be found in Lemon Pink's thoughts;

'To the future me. Captain Valour may not buy my comatose act once you is gone. If he finds someone skilled to force their way into my mind while I pretend to be in a coma, I can't risk them finding this memory. I'm paranoid, but whatever. However, if we ever meet again, I will not believe that I created you if you do not have this memory. Remember, sand glass of time, running through the hangmares twine.'

-Blink-

And with that, the Prey in Lemon Pink's memories on the roof ordered the newly recreated unicorn to cast a inertia shield spell, forcibly calling up the memories he'd supplied for the casting sequence. Prey had read a number of stolen magical texts, thus how he knew the spell matrix required. Even if he didn't have a horn himself, to beat your enemy you must know your enemy.

In this case however, that pilfered knowledgeable would be useful in another way. Since Lemon Pink was a unicorn, she did have the

magical means in the horn department, and now possessed the crafting theory too, implanted directly into her head.

The shield spell had been weak, and burned Lemon Pink's magical circuits with the unfamiliar flow of magic she'd never used before.

But it had been enough to survive the jump off the roof to the river far below before the Solar Guard arrived, leaving Prey behind. Looking at the memory, Prey saw that the shield had barely held, and that Lemon Pink had almost drowned anyway, nearly ending his new pawn's life then and there.

As it was, the forced casting of the unpractised spell had left Lemon Pink magically depleted for days afterwards. He'd been right to not try and jump with her. The chains he'd been wearing would've surely dragged him down to his death in the fast flowing river. The tracking spells within the manacles would have made attempting to flee pointless anyway.

Nor could Lemon Pink have handled teleporting them both out. She didn't have the knowledge, power, or reserves to teleport herself, let alone him too. Still didn't actually. That power shortage was something Prey was going to see about getting corrected. That's what dark magic and potions were for after all.

'Corrected with *my* servant.' Prey realised. Lemon Pink belonged to him. He could issue any order he wanted, and she would have to follow through. Possibilities and scenarios began forming in the back of Prey's mind as he continued with his examination.

'What did you do after surviving the fall and recovering?' Prey asked Lemon Pink across their linked mindscape. As he'd already seen proof that he'd created Lemon Pink, Prey was confident in questioning her directly and letting her bring up the relevant memories, rather than digging them out himself.

'We recovered our magic in a small motel room. Once recovered to a acceptable degree, we wiped the landlord's memory and left. We searched for news of what had happened that night to try and locate you, but there were no reports with the local guard, and the Solar Guard had already left Vanhoover by then. We deduced they'd

returned to Canterlot and followed as swiftly as possible. Once here, we decided to mind control a member of the Royal Guard, one Red Kent, a clerk.'

A memory of a red and gold pegasus stallion with a close cropped mane appeared before Prey's mental minds eye.

'We had him search the records. There were no reports in the general files. However, when we had him break into the restricted files one night, we found the Solar Guard reports. We had him alter them, removing your name and saying the recruited prisoner had been returned to Dreverton. We also placed a false paper trail for a common lamb thief in the general reports section. We are sorry but it was the best we could do.'

Well, in conjunction with the memory erasing runes left on the desk, that certainly explained why the Night Guard had no idea who he really was or where he'd come from.

'It's fine. What do you have this Red Kent doing now?' Prey asked.

'Nothing. We had to cut our connection with him. We are not... Strong in magic anymore. A number of Lemon Pink's original memories were lost. It was growing harder to control his mind without erasing it entirely. We could not risk exposing ourselves like that, or else we could not rescue you master. We decided it best to remove his memories of our encounter and let him go.'

'We were making alternate plans to break into prison and recover you. We needed access to the clerical department in the Palace, so we found another Royal Guard to infiltrate for us. But when we entered his mind to give him his instructions, we found this:'

A memory that Lemon Pink had extracted from the Royal Guard in question, a green unicorn this time, floated up.

Prey saw through the Guard's eyes as he sat in a familiar mess hall. The stallion's point of view shifted as he happened to glance up and see a dark dark red pegasus he didn't recognise following in one of those weird bat ponies. '-whatever-'

His attention was just turning back to his squad mate, Gale, when he spotted a small white sheep '-she's called an ewe right?-' trail in behind their hooves. Both the lamb and the strange pegasus had matching gold bands on their fore legs.

'-what in Celestia's name is a foal doing in here?-' He thought in annoyance.

"Hey Gale, get a load of these horseapples. The bat ponies brought a foal to work-"

-Blink-

The memory cut off there. It wasn't like there was anything further that could've been learnt from it, the important information had already been displayed.

'We investigated. Found out you had been stolen by the Night Guard into a new secret division by Princess Luna.'

In Lemon Pink's thoughts there was none of the expected fear like Prey felt at the mention of the alicorn's name. The unicorn mare had so far appeared blank, a slightly stale copy, detached and unemotional about anything.

However, when the mare thought of Princess Luna, something finally emerged.

A touch of awe and gladness that the stories had lied and that the Princess of the Night still lived. No doubt, an effect caused by the left over remnants of the original Lemon Pink that'd been used to create this new one.

Prey didn't like hearing that.

Lemon Pink continued; 'We knew that rescuing you would now be even more difficult. We weighed the odds. Our best chance of success was to meet face to face to confirm our existence to you master. We are sorry for the convoluted message method used, but we did not want to risk your handlers picking up on the message as

well.' Lemon Pink apologised.

'Understandable.' Prey mentally returned, even if her logic in using Rocky Bed had been convoluted and impractical at best, and wholly inefficient at worst.

Prey supposed the effort was better than nothing. He would've preferred to be rescued or contacted sooner, but Lemon Pink was here now. Better late than never. He could easily put together the remaining pieces of the puzzle from here.

'You kidnapped Rocky Bed and tampered with Tulip Bed's memories to gain the attention of the ISND, specifically to get us sent out so I would find the message of the sheep doll.' Prey didn't say it as a question, simply stating the facts.

'Correct master.'

'You tried to contact me that night when I returned to my bed, just as your message had hinted. You must've found the bunk room's location from a Royal Guard's mind too. But when you got here, we were late. If you'd stayed, you would've be caught. You left another message in my bed, and returned again tonight.'

'Correct master.' Lemon Pink repeated again.

Prey's mental state was closed off, the burnt out landscape of his mind giving nothing away as he regarded the play of events that this unicorn, the one he'd created, had put into motion.

She, *it*, was his creation, no doubt about that, and it could be useful. However, its methods and choices when left to think for itself hadn't been quite as optimal as what he would've chosen. It was smart, able to think for itself, but it wasn't him.

Prey did not see Lemon Pink as a 'real' person. It was a person, yes, but not in the same way as him or Crimson or Gloom.

It was a greyed out copy of himself, a drone. He'd seen Lemon Pink's memories. She clearly thought of herself as an individual, albeit one with a joint personality, but she was more or less just a construct of implanted memories. And she'd risked exposure on a

number of occasions already.

'I have a test for you.' Prey stated, and then opened up his mindscape to reveal all the cold observations he'd just made about her.

Prey carefully observed Lemon Pink's reaction to his assertion that she was not a real person. How his creation reacted would determine its fate.

Lemon Pink's consciousness wilted, the stars in the sky of her mindscape sky dimmed as she heard Prey's thoughts, but she did not protest. 'You are correct master. We are not a person, we are just made of memories. We understand. Whatever you decide, we will follow your decision.' She thought submissively.

Prey carefully watched Lemon Pink's mind, paying careful attention to the subtle changes underneath the surface to determine the deeper thoughts and feelings that Lemon Pink may not even have been aware of herself.

He came to the conclusion that he'd hoped for, 'That wasn't a lie. My creation meant every word. She will follow all my orders. She knew that I may have decided to erase her mind and start again, yet she didn't protest or try and defend herself.' Prey thought to himself, his musings once again hidden.

'You pass,' Prey broadcast, letting Lemon Pink hear his decision, 'Your existence will continue. You provide too many potential opportunities to erase you right now, and despite your mistakes, you are completely loyal.'

'Thank you master.'

'What is your current situation?' Prey asked, abruptly switching the topic of his interest.

And just like that, Prey moved on as if he hadn't just been threatening to kill Lemon Pink.

There was no apology, not even any explanation for why Prey felt it could've been necessary. If the situation had been reversed, and it'd

been Lemon Pink judging whether to erased him or not, his hate and fear would've lead swiftly to attempts at revenge and escape.

But Prey didn't consider any of those possibilities, because there could be no such reaction from Lemon Pink. She was *his* creation. As well might've a wolf cub risen up against its sire. Or Gossamer even thinking of betraying his mother.

Lemon Pink gave a mental summary of her situation, 'Staying in the Lower Canterlot district. We are masquerading as a new maid in the Palace, hired three days ago. That is how we gained entry to this bunk room so easily. We are using our old identification papers, of the previous Lemon Pink. We currently have no contact with anyone. We've done nothing to draw the attention of local officials. Bypassing the Guard and smuggling you out of the city will pose no challenge, master.'

That was more or less what Prey had expected, however...

'I can no longer escape. There have been some unfortunate changes.' Prey informed her. He quickly shared the memories of him studying the golden shackles that Luna had enchanted, and how they made escape currently impossible.

'Understood master.' Lemon Pink said, grasping the situation immediately.

There was currently no possibility of escape, at least not without further study and finding a way around the alicorn magic currently sitting on Prey's forelegs. Lemon Pink understood that she couldn't do anything at present to further that goal either, meaning she would wait for further instructions from Prey on how he would like her to proceed.

'Give me your memories of what you have learnt about Canterlot so far, and all your observations and interactions with the Guard.' Prey instructed.

'Understood master.'

Lemon Pink made a copy of the requested memories and gave it to

Prey. The casual exchange of memories and mental self manipulation was a feat that would have been impossible to almost anyone else. What Prey and Lemon Pink had just done with their own minds the equivalent of lying on a gurney and performing invasive, large scale and unassisted surgery on oneself.

Prey gave the packet of memories a cursory investigation, then assimilated them into his mind and stored them away for later study, much like placing a book on a shelf. In the mean time, he formed and gave back a copy of his own memories of what had transpired since that dark roof top in Vanhoover. Within it, Prey also included a set of additional protocols for Lemon Pink to follow from now on.

Now that they were both up to speed, giving Lemon Pink her orders came next. It felt strange, to be the one giving instead of receiving orders. But before that, there were a few things left to confirm with her.

'Are there any people left who personally know the old Lemon Pink? Family, relatives, lovers, children?' Prey asked, going down the check list.

'From the memories we have left, none that we can remember. Orphaned at age eleven. Never knew our father. Our mother had cousins in Maneland, but they were never introduced or came to claim Lemon Pink after her mothers death, master.' Lemon Pink supplied without feeling.

'For future reference, call me Prey.' Prey instructed. The reason why was self evident. Even though they were sharing thoughts and not vocal words, if the time came where they were ever unknowingly observed and Lemon Pink was caught calling Prey 'master', some awkward questions would be raised.

'Understood, Prey.'

'Good. Next, are there any cultists that knew Night Watcher knew who we might utilise? Or who might instead give away your identity?' Prey asked.

'None knew Lemon Pink outside of her Night Watcher disguise, and all of them were captured by the Royal Guard in the raid at Rich Almond's mansion regardless. We alone escaped.' Lemon Pink replied, the feeling of her thoughts once again completely calm and emotionless as she succinctly informed Prey of the failure of her cult and life's work.

'Refer to yourself as 'I' and 'me' from now on,' Prey ordered, 'And what happened to all the gold and magical heirlooms stolen from the mansions? Are those an asset we still available?'

'I am afraid not Prey.' Lemon Pink answered, changing her tone of address to comply with his orders, 'The captured cultists divulged the location of the hidden caches under questioning. By the time I'd recovered and returned to try and retrieve one, the Solar Guards had already reclaimed it all.'

'Shame, a large sum of bits could've been useful.' Prey mused blandly.

Although personally, he didn't actually had any experience with possessing large sums of money. On the farm, they'd always been poor, and when surviving in the Deeper Green, what use was gold? Could you eat it or make a fire with it on a cold night?

However, Prey was sure that he could've found some use for it. Prey didn't care about the money itself, but between the choice of having a resource or not having one, well, more was always better than less.

Looking back at through the memories he'd received, Prey could also see that at the time, Lemon Pink hadn't kept any of the stolen treasure for herself. The majority of the stolen treasure was supposed to be the cultists gift to Nightmare Moon on her triumphant return, and only kept a smaller portion for themselves.

Instead of even retaining that little amount, Lemon Pink had distributed her share among her fellow cultists, at the time saying; "My service to the Night Mistress is all the reward I need."

It was unfortunate that her zealous fervour had gotten in the way of

her siphoning away bits from under the cultists noses, as another pony might've done when splitting such exorbitant profits. Prey himself disdained greed and wealth, but it might have been useful in bribing a Guard or something. And what did he care if the gold had belonged to someone else first? They were nobles who's families had made their fortunes slaving off the backs of others, like the Earth pony land lords from his village. From *Gossamer's* village, he corrected himself.

'No matter,' Prey decided with the mental equivalent of a shrug. If the hoard was gone then it was gone. For now, he'd learned everything Lemon Pink had to offer. As her plan to help him escape was no longer viable, there was not much else that could be done here.

'For now,' Prey instructed, 'Maintain your cover as a maid within the Palace. Continue to observe and keep an eye open for opportunities. I have given you instructions regarding getting in contact with me in an emergency. If possible, start gathering resources of any kind, but I am mainly interested in information. Other than that, report in once a week. Contact is a risk, so keep it to a minimum. You have your instructions for that as well?' Prey asked, referring to the memories he'd given her.

'Yes, Prey.' Lemon Pink answered.

'Good. You understand them?'

'Yes, Prey.'

'Then you know what comes next, don't you?' He asked.

Lemon Pink did know, his intentions for what would happen after their mind meeting was included amongst the memories and instructions he'd given her. The night sky in Lemon Pink's mindscape swirled in unease at what was to come, but she did not protest.

'Yes Prey.' She again repeated, her response just what Prey had expected.

It was the only response she could give.

With a jerk, Prey disentangled their mindscapes and pulled back. A disorientating rush, and then he opened his eyes and was back and fully cognisant in his own body. Prey blinked and lowered his hoof from the kneeling Lemon Pink's forehead, the silvery glow from her horn still casting dim light in a pool around them. Behind him, Crimson and Gloom slept on oblivious.

In real time, their exchange of memories and thoughts had taken as little as two minutes.

Lemon Pink also opened her eyes, a bit slower on the recovery than Prey. "I am ready." She stated.

Prey nodded to her slightly curved horn, "How long?" He asked, referring to how much longer would she be able to maintain the dual casting. Using his voice felt slow and clumsy as he readjusted to actually speaking instead of being able to communicate at the speed of thought.

Lemon Pink didn't need to ask what Prey was asking about, their thoughts were so similar, "I can maintain this level of magic for at least another twenty minutes. I will be able to hold out through the next part." She also said, providing the answer to what Prey wanted to know next without having to be asked.

"Good, because this is going to hurt. Don't loose focus on the casting." Prey ordered unfeelingly. The pain to come wasn't going to be happening to him.

"What way does your mane usually fall?" Prey asked.

"As it is now, on the right hoof side." Lemon Pink answered.

"That's where we'll place it then. It'll keep it mostly hidden." Prey said, stepping around to the correct side. Lemon Pink shifted where she still knelt to be on Prey's level, and brushed her long wispy mane up and off her neck.

Prey breathed deeply, centering his mind. Again he raised his hoof, lightly resting its tip against the patch of exposed neck. Underneath

his opposite hoof, the runic trap he'd originally created as a way to kill Lemon Pink would now serve as a power source for what he intended.

He counted down calmly, feeling her neck muscles tense in anticipation, "Three, two, one, zero."

His hoof tingled unpleasantly and a cold feeling built at the fore front of his mind as he poured his will into creating the rune, lightly tracing out its shape.

As his hoof passed over Lemon Pink's neck, the skin parted as soundlessly and easily as water, red quickly rising to the surface to fill the pattern his tracing left behind. Lemon Pink's muscles quivered and a pained sound escaped her lips, but she held her position and kept casting her magic.

The rune looked something like a jagged figure of eight combined with a couple of triangles. The carved channel of the wound was only shallow, and the blood didn't fall. Instead, it seemed to blacken and turn shiny, almost like oil as it sunk back into the cut. Prey finished and withdrew his hoof. His leg trembled when he returned it to the floor, there was a chill in his bones and he felt worn out. The flare trap he'd spent hours preparing the previous night was also spent, the runes used up and the power gone.

A long sigh of relief hissed from between Lemon Pink's teeth, and there was sweat on her forehead. Prey knew how badly that must've hurt. Placing a rune into a living creature was not an easy or pleasant experience, he'd experienced the same with the runes on his own hooves.

It hurt far worse than any simple cut or branding. It *burned* into your essence.

Actually, a branding was quite an apt term, for that is how the rune now looked. Like an old burn scar, although missing the smell of sizzling flesh as Prey critically examined it. This rune was a back up plan. Now Prey knew he would never have to worry about Lemon Pink ever betraying him, although he knew she would never do so of her own volition. She solely existed to serve him, but now he was

sure.

"Finished," Prey said, his tongue feeling heavy, "You have your instructions. Follow them and report back if you manage to find any of that information I want. Don't drop the spell until you've closed the door."

He didn't need to tell her to check the corridor before leaving. She would already know that.

"Understood Prey." Lemon Pink answered letting her white and black mane drop back down to cover the rune. Her breath was coming much easier now, the pain from the rune having already passed. Now it was just the mundane pain of a bad burn. So still extremely painful. She didn't protest at what Prey had done, just as he did not offer an apology.

Lemon Pink stood and flipped her hood back up, letting the deep cowl of the cloak cover her face, then paused.

"What should be done with the foal?" She asked.

"Rocky Bed? He is still alive and in the city?" Prey asked with mild surprise. He'd assumed that the kidnapped foal had just been a means to an end and hadn't been kept around.

"Sedated and hidden, his memories already erased. No one will find him by chance. Should I dispose of him?" Lemon Pink enquired.

Prey tilted his head contemplatively, "Hmm..." He mused.

What was one foal's life worth? Life wasn't fair, and the strong stepped on the weak if they couldn't defend themselves, that was the way of nature. He felt no guilt for Rocky Bed nor his mothers current condition. Gossamer would've been consumed by it, but he was no longer Gossamer.

But if Rocky Bed was worthless to him, did he really need to dispose of the foal?

"Tie him up and dump him in a refuse pile somewhere. Someone will find him in the morning. You know how to not leave any

traces." Prey said. That should get the Guard to calm down, and take some pressure off of the ISND for not having found the foal themselves.

"Understood Prey." Lemon Pink said, before cracking open the door and looking both ways. She stepped out a moment later and was gone. A few seconds after that, the faint pressure in Prey's sensitive ears disappeared as the spell of silence and deep sleep also vanished.

Prey took a moment to stand in the darkened barracks room and appreciate what'd just happened. This could change everything. The existence of Lemon Pink presented so many future opportunities, so many chances at potential escape, so much safety.

That was the essence of it. The existence of his creation, Lemon Pink, (which he hadn't even known about until just now), provided a measure of safety he'd never had before. Prey never felt safe. Never.

Never.

Never ever never.

Prey was small, vulnerable, weak. Everyone and everything was larger and more inherently dangerous than he was.

Prey felt like he was on guard every moment of his life.

It was exhausting.

He could never trust or rely on anyone but himself. If Prey was in danger and he couldn't save himself, he would die. It was as simple and as brutal as that.

He hadn't felt safe for over sixty two years, not since before the resistance. Whenever Prey did anything, it was either because he had no choice in the matter, or to protect himself, and *only* himself. And recently, what with being press ganged by the princess of the night, trying not to get discovered as a mind leech, being within a hundred miles of the Sun Wolf and surrounded by unicorns, Prey had not been feeling very safe.

Lemon Pink provided a measure of that safety that he had so been lacking. She was a buffer, someone, or rather something, who could do his dangerous work for him. If she was caught, he would not be the one tortured and killed by Celestia. 'For once in my entire life, fate is smiling on my twisted little heart.' He thought.

Prey realised he was grinning. He frowned, 'What is this? Why am I just standing here?'

His frown deepened, 'And what is this unfamiliar feeling?'

Prey didn't like it. He didn't know what it was, and it made him nervous, like he shouldn't be feeling this way, 'Are my instincts trying to warn me of something?' He looked around, studying the shadows of every nook and cranny of the room. Slowly, Prey began backing up towards his bed, ears twitching this way and that.

Prey was half way back to the bunk before he recognised that the unfamiliar, tentative feeling was called hope.

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[[[Bonus picture: Concept art only - New partners in Crime]]]

https://imgur.com/9COw6SM

Author's Notes:

Editor here: Thank you to him again,
Sweetolebob18
And made it to 200,000 words. Woohoo....I think?
Huh, I've written what feels like loads and I'm still not close to done....[image]

21.1 Do Plans ever go as Planned?

'The Wonder that is Equestria' - An old book written by none other than Princess Celestia, Sol Invictus, Day Bringer, Lady of the Sun, and a whole other host of titles. Only about two hundred pages long, but at the time of it's publication 836 A.C. it was avariciously sought by all the nobles and ponies who wished to say that they had read it.

None wanted to be the only pony who hadn't read the book written by their beloved ruler.

However, the book in and of itself ended up containing little of substance. What it amounted to was basically Celestia's personal musings on a short, abridged history of her Equestria. Everyone read it, privately struggled to understand some of the more flowery language, proudly told their friends they'd read it, then put it on the shelf and quietly forgot about it.

It was mostly broad, philosophical notations about events which no one alive remembered anyway. A vague reference to the old Lord of Chaos, the Cliffs of Dove, Old Unicornia, the Crystal Empire, and Cloudsdale creation.

There was not a single mention of her sister or Nightmare Moon.

"You seem...Different this morning Prey." Gloom said, pausing in strapping on his chest plate.

"I do?" Prey asked, pausing in gently checking his still healing ear.

"He looks happy." Crimson stated.

Prey turned a raised eyebrow on the Pegasus, "Really?" He drawled, "Well, how about that. That must mean I've never been happy since

being press ganged into the ISND, doesn't it? Or, you know, that you just never noticed before. One or the other." He added with mock thoughtfulness.

Crimson blinked his slow blink, and didn't comment.

"Well it's obviously the latter." Gloom said, pulling on the last piece of armour, his helmet. '-have I been missing a problem? Not seen him happy. Is that bad? Nah, he's not depressed, he's just Prey. Has a different way of showing than everypony else-'

"Come on team, I set the alarm clock for this early this morning so we could finally get a shower. If today goes anything like *every other single* day so far, we aren't going to have time tonight. Too busy busting criminals." He joked with a fanged grin.

Crimson's comment from earlier had been partially right. Prey didn't do 'happy', as he hadn't had a reason to be happy in a long time, but right now he was pretty close. His step actually felt lighter, and the weight of the world not so heavy this morning. Because something was finally going his way.

Even the slowly accumulating sleep deprivation from the last three short nights didn't feel so bad right now. Although to be fair, all were all in the exact same bed shaped boat on that count.

Eventually they would have to pay back their sleep debt, but it didn't need to be today.

No, today was looking to be a good day. He could plan and scheme all day long while pretending to work, (something that inherently gave Prey a lot of satisfaction), and now he actually had a way to institute his plans instead of them just being grand ideas.

Because now he had Lemon Pink.

Still, Prey wasn't going to let his guard down or become careless, the enchanted gold bands on his forelegs were always prevalent in his thoughts, making him mindful that he couldn't escape from the Night Princess. But with Lemon Pink, the slack in his leash, theoretically speaking, had greatly increased.

Even his ear was feeling a lot better this morning, although that might've just been because he'd been careful not to fall asleep on it when he'd eventually drifted off last night.

Mentioning the night, the palace night staff were just finishing up and waiting for the day staff to replace them in time for sun rise. The whole palace's time table probably worked on Celestia's schedule. When she got up to raise the sun, everyone else in the whole world got the same wake up call.

'Actually, does an alicorn even need to sleep?' Prey wondered.

Gloom opened the door to the large gym area, now silent with no Guards exercising on the idle weight machines or running the circuit track.

They went quickly though into the showers on the other side of the gym, Gloom holding the door open for them, "Right, no more than thirty minutes, and then we've got to get to breakfast." He said, already pulling off his armour and setting it on the wooden slat bench.

Prey didn't know why Crimson and Gloom had bothered putting it on in the first place if they were just coming down here to the showers. It would've been much simpler to just carry it, since the Royal Guard armour all slotted away together into a neat, if heavy, metal bundle.

Well, that was their choice, Prey wasn't going to waste any more time now that they were here. These showers were a truly wonderful pony invention and he was happy to make full use of them.

Undoing the napkin-come-bandage he'd stolen yesterday, he hopped into the communal shower area while Crimson and Gloom were still struggling to get out of their armour and returning to their normal, unenchanted colouration.

The showers designers had been kind enough to install the shower taps at juuuuust the right height so that Prey, if he stood on his hind legs and really strained, could just about reach.

'Almost...Almost.... Got it!'

A *hisss-shroooff* rewarded his efforts, and soon Prey was ducking his head under the stream of hot water.

'Hot water.' That still felt like a novelty. Water gurgled delightfully in his ears as he started to scrub at his wool, getting out all those stubborn pieces of grass that somehow still managed to cling on from their double trip out to Hay Steam yesterday.

Crimson wasted no time in claiming a shower of his own and, surprise surprise, Prey noticed the first thing he immediately began to clean was his feathers. Kind of like how a warrior kept his sword sparkling clean and sharpened.

'A firm believer in the age old saying, look after your tools and they'll look after you, it seems.'

Prey ignored Gloom's juvenile amusement at him once again, '-looking like a drowned rat-' with his wool plastered down, and instead fantasised about; 'If I escape, is there some way that I could replicate a shower in whatever hole I end up hiding in?'

Prey pondered over the technicalities of hot water and runic arrays.

'Actually,' He thought, 'With Lemon Pink, that might only be *when*, and not if.'

Prey passed a very enjoyable ten minutes doing nothing but scrubbing himself clean in the relaxing shower of hot water, the warm steam adding a nice tint to the air.

"Sir, when were the new recruits for the Royal Guard supposed to turn up?" Crimson asked, squeezing water out of his lanky mane.

"Soon, but not till early next week I imagine. Why?" Gloom responded.

"They will all have received their basic training already, right?"

"Most of it. There's a month in boot camp, then once they get assigned to their divisions in the Royal Guard, there'll be additional weekly training for the next three months. Again, why?" Gloom asked, curiosity peaked.

Crimson gave his wings a vigorous shake, sending stray water droplets flying, "Sir, me and Prey have still not received any kind of standardised training. I mean, we know what we're doing yes, but not the procedure for doing so sir." Crimson said, expressing his concern.

'Really? He's still going on about this?' Prey thought.

Gloom paused in towelling down his mane, "You do know that we have a mandatory training day tomorrow, don't you? And by 'we', I mean everypony in the Night Guard."

Prey turned and joined Crimson in staring blankly at their Sargent

"No. You didn't mention it. Must've slipped your mind." Prey said flatly, speaking for the both of them, "You never seem to tell us anything until the second before it happens."

That was true. So far, it was one of the Sargent's more annoying habits. Like how they hadn't known they were going out to Hay Steam or pulling Guard duty last night until the minute before, or about Gloom's meetings with Captain Nighthawk that they were not allowed into. Sure, Prey and Crimson were still technically prisoners, but Gloom was *supposed* to be building a measure of trust between them.

"Ah, sorry about that," Gloom said, tufted ears flattening slightly, "I'll try to remember to keep you guys in the loop." He assured them, towel now draped over his neck.

"Going back to this 'mandatory training day' tomorrow, what exactly does that entail?" Prey asked suspiciously, pausing in reaching for his makeshift napkin bandage.

"T-Day, short for Training Day. It's going to be..." Gloom trailed off, a hit of a smirk curling the corners of his mouth, "Actually, it's

better off as a surprise. Makes the training more effective."

"I am going to point out right now, that if you think I'm going to be swinging around a sword or the like, you're gonna' be sorely disappointed." Prey said. Crimson on the other hoof, from the way his wings flexed, was quite pleased with the prospect of the coming training.

"That certainly would be a sight to see." Gloom agreed, the smile growing an inch as he envisioned the lamb trying to lift a weighted practice battle axe.

Prey narrowed his eyes at his Sargent, "I can tell what you're thinking and you'll be disappointed. I can't even hold a sword." He repeated.

"Don't worrying about that, but don't think you'll be getting out of anything else." Gloom finally agreed, but still thinking of what 'else' T-Day involved. Prey read the Sargent's thoughts, and wasn't impressed.

'Idiot. I'm a runt, there's no way to do something like that.' He thought to himself, but kept quiet, instead reaching for a towel and starting to vigorously give himself a good drying off. It didn't matter. He had Lemon Pink, and things were going his way.

The Royal Guards in the mess hall were subdued. Most would've missed it, as their chatting and conversations on the surface were just the same as every day previously. They were trying not to let themselves worry, and believed that the smiles they wore fooled their friends.

'-no pony else is letting it get to them, so I won't either-'
'-see? Clover's still smiling-'
'-things aren't that bad yet. I'm overreacting-'

Then, one out of the stew of minds within Prey's perception range finally provided the context for their worry.

'-it's the dead line. Poor Rocky Bed-'

Apparently, today was the day that the search parties were escalated, moving out from Canterlot into the surrounding towns.

Why this was seen as a bad thing was apparently because Shining Armour had solemnly informed the Royal Guard that if things got to this stage, then the chances of ever rescuing Rocky Bed dropped to less than half.

So far, the kidnapping by Lemon Pink, (not that anyone else knew her identity), had been kept from the public as the Guard carried out its undercover search and rescue. Their commanders had planned to release the story once they'd successfully rescued Rocky Bed. Now however, things would change.

Missing posters would be placed, newspapers updated with the foal's picture, announcements and a public statement would be made. The Royal Guard didn't like letting anything affect the appearance of a peaceful utopia. Princess Celestia was counting on them, they couldn't let this affect any more ponies than it had already.

Prey almost felt like laughing, 'If I'd known this last night, I would have ordered Lemon Pink to wait a day before dumping off the foal. But now they'll find him this morning and cancel the announcements. The population will be none the wiser and keep their happy little illusions of peace.' Prey thought.

'Huh...' He thought to himself in surprise, 'I really am in a good mood this morning.'

"Prey could you pass the-oh." Gloom stopped when he found that Prey had already placed the pepper shaker in hoof's reach, already predicting the thestral's desire to add some flavour to the mess of an omelette on his plate.

"Thanks."

Prey's droopy ear twitched, but he didn't look up from devouring his own breakfast.

The eggs were bland, and the diced broccoli and potatoes in the omelette somehow completely failed to add any sort of appreciable flavour to it. Prey didn't care, and anyway, he was too busy trying to listen to what was going on in the rest of the mess hall to focus on the taste. Or lack of taste.

Like always, this many individuals all talking and thinking, assaulting both his sensitive physical and mental ears, was slowly giving him a headache.

'It's good experience,' Prey reminded himself, 'Soon I'll be able to mentally filter everything into the background, and then it won't be so bad. I just need to get used to it.' He thought as he gulped down another mouthful.

"You're going to get a stomach ache if you rush your food like that." Gloom commented, taking a mouthful of his own unappetising meal. Another ear twitch was all he got in response.

"Do you not mind the taste?" Crimson asked from across the table, putting down the used pepper to make another gallant attempt at his food.

"Free food is free food. Taste is unimportant." Prey said with his mouth full. Crimson looked slightly leaner in the face than when they'd been introduced at the start of the week. Two meals a day with no time for lunch really wasn't cutting it for the warrior pegasus it seemed.

"Usually kids are much more picky that you. We should see about getting your taste refined a bit. And maybe some manners too. I mean, do you even realise how bad the mess hall food is?" Gloom asked.

Prey chewed quickly and swallowed to speak, "It's *free* food." He reiterated, like it was obvious.

Gloom sighed, "When next we get a night, err, *day* off, we're going to a restaurant or cafe so you can see the difference between free food and real food."

"The clans would be embarrassed to serve this." Crimson agreed, looking down at his tray.

"Then why're you eating it?" Prey pointed out.

"The rules of hospitality demand it. It would insult our hosts if we declined." Crimson said, reciting from memory.

"Our hosts are the palace kitchens, which are serving over four hundred Guards every meal. They're not going to care." Prey responded, pushing his now empty plate away.

"...Because as you say Prey, in the end it is free food. Waste not want not." Crimson finally admitted.

"Free food is free food." Prey agreed with solemn finality.

A cheerful babble rose across the mess hall, a couple of minor cheers rising up as a small squad of Royal Guards entered the mess hall. Prey turned to see what the fuss was about, expecting to see that it was some pony bringing the news of the mysterious recovery of Rocky Bed, but no.

A grinning pegasus seemed to be the centre of attention, handsome featured and tall, laughing easily as he greeted the other Royal Guards by name who'd risen to welcome him back from whatever trip he'd been on. Prey's sharp ears caught snippets of their words.

"-you made it back without getting eaten by quarry eels this time I see." Someone joked.

"Nothing can keep me down." The pegasus laughed back, giving the other Guard a hearty slap in the back with a wing that almost made the Guard face plant in his omelette, which brought another good natured laugh from around the table.

"What was it like out there in 'The Wilds'?" Another asked, making air quotes.

"Sand, stone, tricky cross winds, humid nights, dirt roads, and not enough mares. Couldn't get back to proper Guard duty fast enough." The handsome Guard joked, the rest of his squad joining in on the

rehashing of their trip, which by the sound of it, had been somewhere at least two weeks travel away and across at least one mountain range.

"Who're those Royal Guards?"

Prey looked over, it was Crimson who'd asked, and for once he'd forgotten to tack 'sir' on the end of his address. Or perhaps Gloom's reminders that they weren't on duty during meal times had gotten through.

Gloom looked over at what had their attention, "Huh? That's Nimbus Feather. He's a Staff Sargent in the Royal Guard, been deployed on a long term mission for the last month or so. He's a favourite for promotion to Second lieutenant one day." Gloom said, sounding very indifferent towards the obviously popular Royal Guard.

"He's got a way to go up the ladder to get from Staff Sargent to Second lieutenant. That's a jump of at least five ranks." Prey commented.

Gloom shrugged, "That's just what I heard. He was in the same recruit group as Captain Shining Armour. I don't know him, but he seems nice enough. Hasn't given the Night Guard any grief yet anyhow." Gloom shrugged. That apparently counted for quite a lot in Gloom's opinion, '-enough Royal Guard officers interfering with our business already-'

Nimbus Feather, Prey noted, was one of the few Royal Guards who carried a sword. That privilege either came from his rank or special permission from above. Quite possibly his ties with this officer Shining Armour.

Prey "Tsk'd" and gave the popular Staff Sargent one last disparaging look.

Right now, the brawny pegasus was currently heartily scoffing down a heaped plateful of omelette with gusto in between exchanging jokes. 'Seems he appreciates the value of free food at least, even if his stomach is where his brain ort to be.'

Prey didn't like the pegasus, although that was hardly a surprise. Nimbus Feather was a Royal Guard, a pony, high ranking, popular, respected, strong, good looking, confident, dedicated, friendly, no doubt loyal, and overall an upstanding model of Celestiaism.

'Disgusting.'

Unfortunately, that was just the exact moment that Topaz Honey and another couple of her seemingly endless friends entered the mess hall. By chance, the first thing her eyes fell upon was Prey, and by then it was too late to hide.

It was, however, not too late to run.

Prey saw the mares eyes began to sparkle from all the way across the mess hall. She didn't even join the breakfast queue first, just making a B-line for their table.

Prey was having none that.

He ducked below the table to break line of sight, and then made off at an angle between the table and bench legs.

"Where you going Prey-?" Gloom started, automatically reaching out to block the lamb's retreat, but Prey shimmied around his hoof in an impressive display of agility and hared off between the tables with his head down.

"What-?" Gloom started, half rising to go after him.

"It looks like Honey Topaz has come to say good morning sir." Crimson commented.

Gloom looked over, "Ah, well that explains it." He said, falling back onto the bench.

"Morning all, you night shift lot doing okay on this lovely new day?" Honey cheerily asked, having arrived. The mare's presence seemed to physically brighten the more sombre Night Guard tables as she drew up. That didn't necessarily mean her presence was welcome.

"It seems to be as fine as any other," Gloom answered blandly, "Smokey." He added, nodding a greeting to Honey's Guard companion who had followed her over, the same mare from yesterday. No sign of the unicorn stallion Prize though. Seem's meeting the sharp toothed, yellow eyed bat ponies once was more than enough for him.

"Good morning sir." Smokey replied easily.

"Good morning." Crimson joined in, offering a serious nod.

"Right, I'm off. I've got a sheep to catch!" Honey announced with a big grin.

"Pardon?" Crimson asked.

"It's only polite to let somepony know before you go off to play with their foal," Honey Topaz answered, "I have now fulfilled my obligations." She continued dramatically, "So I am now free to go and find a soft furry lamb in a good need of a hug."

"He's not really a foal..." Gloom began.

"Prey does not like to be touched..." Crimson tried to add.

"Ta' Ta'!~" Honey trilled as she took off amid the rapidly filling up tables, looking for her target.

That left Crimson, Gloom, and Smokey. Smokey awkwardly glanced around at the Night Guards occupying all the tables in the general vicinity, a bit uncomfortable now that it was just him. Her eye's flicked about, searching for inspiration. She was saved in her failing quest by a question from Gloom.

"Was the only reason she came over to try and hug Prey?"

Smokey seized on the proffered conversation starter. Like most ponies, it appeared she grew anxious whenever there was any long pause, even though she was a Guard and should be more self confident than that. "Oh no. Well, yes, mostly I imagine. But Honey definitely came over to say good morning to you two too."

"Hmm." Was Gloom's comment as he watched the tall figure of Honey Topaz making her way around the mess hall amid the crowd.

"I doubt she will catch him. Prey can make himself scarce when he so desires." Crimson told Smokey.

"That's probably why she wants to give him a hug so much. Make's it all the more fun I imagine. I remember I thought I was too cool and grown up for that sort if thing too, and my dad would purposefully do that in public." Smokey laughed.

"Your father?" Crimson asked.

"Yes, my mom's an assistant in a dietary florist shop, but he works off and on in magus Radiant's mage tower. Just in the lower level, but still. They were very proud when I made it into the Royal Guard, got to set a good example for my younger brother and all that." She added with a smile.

"Mage tower?" Crimson blinked.

"Er, yeah. You know, a mage tower?" Smokey said.

Crimson showed not a hint of recognition.

"You don't know of magus Radiant Flame's mage tower? It's like, one of the best there is, she's a relative of the Fell house. Her's is the big red tower with all the gold conductor panels in the North Quarter."

Still nothing from Crimson.

"Do you... Know what a mage tower is?" Smokey hesitantly tried.

"No."

"Oh. Well they're like really big, fancy, magical research towers. Only really important magus ponies have them, and they only get inherited by the most powerful unicorn families down the centuries. You have to either be very very skilled or very very rich to ever get into one otherwise. Did you know that even in Canterlot there's only nine full mage towers?" Smokey exclaimed, as if that number

should convey to Crimson just how special what she was talking about was.

Another slow blink, "Ah."

Apparently the conversation had proceeded beyond Crimson's range of known interactions, and now he didn't know how to proceed. So instead, he just blinked slowly at Smokey and sat there, waiting for something further to be said. The awkward quiet came back and lengthened as Crimson continued to miss his social queue. Gloom wasn't even paying attention, he was trying to peer aver the heads of seated ponies to try and spot the sheep entrusted into his charge.

"So.. how're...?" Smokey coughed.

"I hope you have a nice day too," Gloom said, still not paying attention, "Crimson, I think it's time we find Prey and get back on the case. Give me a hoof would with that, you?" He said, standing up.

Smokey looked slightly offended to be so curtly dismissed.

"Yes sir." Crimson immediately replied. He looked at Smokey, "Oh, and thank you for wishing us a good morning. I wish you the same." Crimson added blankly.

""Err... Okay, well have a nice day too then." Smokey returned, looking only slightly mollified.

"If we head for the exit, I think Prey would probably follow us sir." Crimson suggested as they left.

"Worth a try. Seriously, it's only a friendly hug. He's completely overreacting." Gloom grumbled.

"I don't think he likes hugs sir." Crimson said, stating the obvious.

"He could just say no and politely ask Honey to stop. Honey is a Royal Guard, she knows how to be serious." Gloom continued to grumble, mostly to himself as they made their way between breakfasting Guards.

They reached the mess hall doors and turned about. "Well we're here. See him yet?" Gloom asked, scanning the area.

"Yes sir." Crimson pointed a wing behind Gloom outside. Gloom turned to find an angry Prey glaring round the corner of the mess hall doors at Topaz Honey, who was standing in the middle of the hall scratching her head in bemusement.

"Don't just leave like that Prey." Gloom scolded.

"Then get that mare to stop hunting me and I won't have to. Sir." Prey returned hotly.

"It's my job to keep an eye on the both of you. I can't do that if you're running off every meal time now can I?"

Prey switched from glaring into the mess hall to glaring at Gloom, "You know I wasn't running away. Really, I thought we were past this stage by now."

"So did I," Gloom returned sharply, before sighing.

"Just tell Honey to stop or give her a hug in return Prey. Seriously. It's only as big a deal as you make it." He said, clearly thinking that this was Prey's own problem brought onto himself by play acting a child during breakfast.

"That won't stop her harassing me. She only cares about what she wants to see, a foal. Evidence to the contrary she'll just blindly ignore, same as my protests." Prey argued, having mostly regained his composure but completely unwilling to even contemplate Gloom's ridiculous suggestion.

"Have you even *tried* asking her to stop?" Gloom asked, one eyebrow raised.

"A pointless endeavour if I already know the outcome." Prey snorted.

"Well in that case, it's your own fault and problem." Gloom shrugged, making a conscious decision to leave Prey to deal with his self created problems if he continued to insist on, '-continuing

with this silliness-'

'Good, maybe now you'll stop pulling my wool whenever I have to deal with her then.' Prey thought.

Whatever Crimson thought of the exchange, (that to an outsider would appear as nothing more that a childish temper), he kept his opinion firmly to himself as they headed for the office. However, they were interrupted on their path there.

They passed a couple of Royal Guards in the corridors coming the other way. All seemed upbeat and happy about something. Prey had a good idea of what it was, but just then, Lieutenant Starry Wing round the corner and confirmed it to all three of them.

"Sargent Gloom, great news, they just announced that they found the missing foal this morning." He said, hurrying towards them, fangs unconsciously showing in his wide grin.

Gloom broke into one of his own. He didn't need to ask which foal, there was only one foal he could've been referring to. "That is great news sir. Who was the foalnapper?"

Starry Wing had arrived in front of them by this point, "We didn't catch the foalnapper. Rocky Bed was found abandoned in a trash heap in the early hours this morning. His memories seem to have been removed, same as his mother's." The Lieutenants smile dimmed as he related Rocky Bed's circumstances, and there was a simmering anger in the back of his slit eyes.

"They just abandoned him? After all of that, they just threw him away?" Crimson demanded, wings bristling. He even forgot to add 'sir' in his anger.

"It seems to be that way."

"Whoever they were, they didn't care about him." Gloom almost growled. He coughed and cleared his throat, "Who was it that found him, sir?" He asked much more controlled.

"It was actually a normal Night Guard patrol. They were on their last sweep and Brindle Spike just happened to spot a small red tail

poking out of the trash. Thank Luna for that colt's sharp eyes." Starry Wing answered.

"Is Rocky Bed...okay sir?" Crimson asked.

Starry Wing pursed his lips, "It's too early to say for sure, but he seems to have been fed and looked after. Neither has he been...'abused'." Starry Wing struggled on the last word, his yellow eyes flickering momentarily over Prey, who'd so far just been standing there quietly with a slightly inane smile on his face.

"Thank Luna for that." Gloom agreed seriously. Both of the thestrals thoughts on the matter showed how relieved they were, the very idea that such a thing might ever have even been a possibly was almost inconceivable in its monstrousness.

'-I thank all that is holy under the moon that I have never witnessed such a case in all my life-' These thoughts were Starry Wings.

'-a millennia of her majesty Celestia's loving purview really makes all the difference-' Gloom's own thoughts read.

Prey had his own thoughts on the subject.

'I suspect that a Royal Guard is on their way to the mess hall to make the announcement of Rocky Bed's safe return as we speak. There will be many cheers at the happy ending, while the Night Guards will just be relieved that the worst didn't happen. Or what they imagine 'the worst' to be.'

Out of the two, the thestrals had the far wiser approach. Just because you choose to ignore the chimera doesn't mean it will ignore you.

"Sorry to cut this short Sargent, but I've got a meeting to get to. I thought as it was your case originally, even if only for a morning, that you should know." Starry Wing said, nodding a quick goodbye to the three of them.

"Thank you sir, it's appreciated." Gloom said, giving a quick salute as the Lieutenant left.

"No problem. See you later."

"Well today's looking up already." Gloom said, smiling.

"It was very good news," Crimson agreed, "I'm think I could even say I'm now in a good enough mood to match Prey's."

"Except now we have no chance of catching this kidnapper. At least while they held Rocky Bed, the Guard would've been able to identify who they were once discovered. Now though, they have no evidence tying them to the kidnap." Prey pointed out.

'And I'm all cut up inside about that, aren't I?' Prey thought, laughing internally. It was why he'd been okay with returning Rocky Bed.

"There must be some way to restore Rocky's memories, then we can just ask him." Crimson insisted.

"If there was, they would've done so with his mother already don't you think?" Prey responded.

Gloom's sudden uplift in mood soured again somewhat, "Tulip Bed is going to need help, just like you said Crimson. She doesn't remember her son. Let's hope Rocky Bed at least remembers he has a mother."

"So in the end we only get partial credit for getting Rocky Bed returned. His kidnapper is still on the loose." Prey summed up. He was purposefully raising these concerns because it would be out of character for him not to see the glass as half empty. Besides, he was confident they wouldn't catch Lemon Pink even if they had a lead.

"We can worry about that another time. Perhaps the foalnapper even had a change of heart, and that's why they released Rocky Bed again. For now, there is nothing further we can do. I'm just happy that we found him safe." Gloom said with finality.

A cheer arose from down the corridors, faint but obviously quite loud if they'd heard it all the way out here.

"Sounds like someone delivered the good news to the Royal Guards

in the mess hall." Prey commented blandly.

"I think they have the right idea. Rocky Bed is safe. I am perfectly willing to accept that ending if it means a happy one." Crimson said.

"Took the words right out of my mouth." Gloom smirked, but the sentiment behind it was honest. He was relieved that Rocky was safe. '-and as an added bonus, the first case ISND worked on has been solved-'

"Sure," Prey agreed, all polite smiling mask again, "Let's go with that."

"Nope. Not a chance sir." Prey stated, sitting down right there on the floor boards and crossing his forelegs. "You give the presentation."

"It's just delivering the report to the officers Prey. And anyway, it's your formation idea." Gloom said, exasperation leaking into his voice.

"And I'm not the Sargent, you are. I'm not speaking in front of all those people-"

"-Ponies."

"-*People*. You understand the formation set up just as well as me, but they won't take me seriously anyway because I'm a lamb, sir." Prey told him firmly.

"Prey, they're not going to disbelieve you just because you're small. We're the Night Guard. Princess Luna gave you this post in the ISND. They'll listen to you." Gloom insisted, trying a different approach. Prey wasn't fooled.

They were in the ISND's office, empty boxes stacked against one wall and a map on the floor between them, (still no desk or chairs). They we're currently arguing over who was going to present the plan to catch the riot instigator to an assembly of Night Guard officers.

"Sir, be honest. You're scared to speak in front of them." Prey said flatly.

"No I'm not." Gloom defended himself, rather unconvincingly, '-I'm not scared. Alright, maybe I am if I'm trying to get a kid to do it in my place-'

Who would've thought it? Sargent Gloom was nervous about having to speak in front of his peers.

Captain Nighthawk had already approved the idea, but had asked, (ordered really), Gloom to present and explain the idea tonight to the thestral squads who'd be taking part. Gloom had of course agreed, since Nighthawk was the captain, but now he was having second thoughts.

Not about the plan, just about the speaking bit.

If it'd just been the normal non-thestral pony Night Guards Gloom, he would've been totally fine with presenting. Most of them didn't want to be in the Night Guard anyway. But almost all of the thestral officers in the Night Guard were originally Gloom's elders and peers in the clans.

So although Gloom would be addressing them as fellow Night Guards, they were still essentially people he'd grown up under, people he respected. And respecting your elders was a big thing in the clans. Not to mention they were also of higher rank.

Now he was supposed to give them instructions? That was a bit nerve racking, even for Gloom.

'-Shrike's going to be there for Luna's sake. I used to steal fruit from his cave vines. I hope he's forgotten about that-', Gloom thought.

"Crimson, how about you? Are you prepared to give the presentation?" Gloom asked, turning quickly to the pegasus.

Crimson's wings went rigid, and for a moment he couldn't speak, "Must I sir?" He asked cautiously.

"Would you mind?" Gloom asked.

"Yes sir, I would mind." Crimson answered with blunt honesty.

"Ah..." Gloom trailed off.

"You're the Sargent, you do it." Prey told him, forelegs still crossed.

Gloom couldn't help but look at their situation and laugh, "Listen to us, arguing over who has to talk in front of them like we're foals again." He laughed.

"One of us still is." Crimson pointed out.

"Lamb, not a foal," Prey corrected coolly, "And there's only one of us arguing."

"I guess it's still me giving the presentation then." Gloom sighed, but still with some amusement at himself for how he'd even been trying to shift the responsibility. '-what am I, five again?-' He thought, shaking his head.

Prey thoughtfully considered Gloom and Crimson's reluctance to give orders to those of higher rank than them. "Hmm, hierarchy and standing within the clans is much more important than in normal pony culture, isn't it?" He commented.

"Woah. That's a lot of fancy words there Prey." Gloom lightly teased, but he didn't give Prey a reply.

Prey "Hmph'd." And didn't let himself be deterred.

Like they always did whenever Prey asked anything about the thestral clans, Gloom and Crimson double checked themselves. They didn't clam up, but they did became much more mindful of their words.

"I take it clan standing is partly determined by family, partly by personal merit, and partly by age or experience, like these elders you've mentioned." He probed. Prey already secretly knew far more about the clans than they would be comfortable with, but he wasn't above learning a bit more.

"The individual serves the clan, and the clan comes first. If we don't

work together, we will die alone." Crimson said seriously, once again obviously reciting some clan motto or creed.

"So that's a yes then." Prey said.

Gloom scratched at his scar under the corner of his chest plate, "I'd like to think of it more as we're just closer knit in the clans. Make no mistake Prey, it can be a tough life flying up there, so you've got to support and trust one another. We don't go in for ranks or titles, aside from elder, but we stick together."

That wasn't really related to the question Prey had asked. 'Well since you're not giving me a straight answer...'

"In the clans, there is no physical measure of your standing. Honour comes from your peers quiet acknowledgement, whereas their equally quiet disdain means you have no self worth and are essentially an exile. Close enough?" Prey asked, looking directly at Crimson. The corners of the pegasus's mouth turned down, but he didn't look away.

Gloom scowled, "Prey, that's not really your business and hardly true anyways. Please don't insult our way of life."

"I get it, I get it," Prey waved him off, "It's not as simple as that, and by over simplifying it I'm misrepresenting your clan. I can't understand it without having lived it for myself and all that. Besides, I'm sure that sort of thing doesn't happen in your clan anyway sir." Prey shrugged, but he didn't break eye contact with Crimson the whole time he was speaking.

Prey's words had been clear, 'In your clan,' meaning Gloom's clan. He'd made no mention of Crimson's, and the outcast pegasus had not denied it.

Gloom started to nod, pleased that Prey admitted that he didn't really understand the secretive clans, before realising the unspoken words that had been directed at Crimson. "*Prey*." Gloom snapped.

"No sir, Prey is right. Your clan was far better than mine was sir." Crimson said.

"I'm sure that's not true-" Gloom automatically started.

"They are worthless and are no longer my clan. They lied, cast me out, betrayed Princess Luna, and killed my father sir. I owe them nothing." Crimson said, voice low.

Gloom bowed his head, "I wasn't thinking. My apologies."

"It's fine sir. I'm in the Night Guard now. Hopefully, I won't ever see them again." Crimson replied calmly, eyes still in Prey, "Kindly do not mention them again, Prey." He said.

Prey held the stare for a moment and then bobbed his head in agreement and also apology, "Okay. I'm also sorry, but I was merely-"
"-Merely nothing Prey." Gloom interrupted, "Don't offer an excuse, you're sharp enough to know what you were saying. Just admit you were wrong, give your apology, ask for forgiveness, and then leave it at that." He lectured.

'-how did we even end up on this serious topic? Never mind, I'm putting an end to it-'

Prey closed his mouth with a click of teeth, giving Gloom a look for having interceded when he was apologising to Crimson, not to Gloom. "I'm sorry Crimson. I will not ask about your clan again unless it is of great importance. Will you please forgive me?" Prey asked politely, regurgitating Gloom's formula.

"Did you mean any of that?" Crimson asked. He actually seemed less offended than Gloom had been with how Prey had been speaking about the thestral clans. He'd been far angrier when Prey had brought up his father's death at the hooves of his former clan that first night. Perhaps that was the difference.

"Yes." Prey lied with a straight face.

Crimson blinked, "Okay then." After a moment he added, "I accept. I mean." And just like that, Crimson was back to his normal, verbally awkward self.

Prey gave the atmosphere a moment to settle down, then asked,

"So, you're still giving the presentation, right sir?"

"Moon curse it!" Gloom exclaimed. '-why'd you have to go and remind me kid?!-'

They spent another couple of hours in the ISND office, letting the atmosphere acclimatise back to a neutral level after the unexpected side track that Prey had thrown it down. Methodically, they worked their way through even more reports on the riots, searching for any further clue they might've missed.

It was boring, and largely pointless work.

They already had their plan of action to catch their target, and any important details in these reports had already been covered elsewhere. Looking at useless specifics like; 'Market stalls damaged', or 'rebuilding street lamp plan' wasn't going to help.

Prey placed some more runes about the office as they worked. Now that he didn't need to fear about conserving his energy for fighting some obsessed stalker, he could instead spend it on creating runes. Which he placed as he walked back and forth between the shelves and the work space in the middle of the floor, which had unofficially become the 'work table', minus the table. Because still no table.

'No crazy kidnapper, no Solar Guards, no Captain Valour, no unicorns, no dream invading moon goddess to stop me, just me, myself, and I to plan and think while I work.' Prey thought, smiling as he fixed another rune unseen to the base of one of the wooden support beams.

His smile faded as his gaze fell on the gold band on his outstretched leg, 'Except this.' He corrected.

"Prey, you doing anything important over there?" Gloom called.

"No, just taking a break." Prey answered, coming back over.

"Well good," Gloom said, slapping down his report and standing up

with a groan, "Because it's my turn for two minutes. Here, you see if you can get anything out of this." He ordered, stretching his limbs under the armour to relieve the stiffness. '-by the moon, I need to stretch my wings soon-'

"Yes sir." Prey said, plopping down in Gloom's spot once the thestral moved out of hoof's reach. As Gloom went for a brisk jog once around the room to, '-keep the blood flowing-', Prey picked up the report.

"...Weather conditions were cloudy but fine at 2:00. Weather conditions were cloudy but fine at 3:00. Weather conditions were cloudy at 4:00. Weather team flew over at 4:35. Weather conditions were cloudy but fine at..."

It was, Prey reflected, a disagreeable fact about paper work that for every one useful report that someone wrote, at least ten more worthless reports were also written. Prey had been here a week, and already he could recognise just how far the bureaucracy of paper work had encroached into every aspect of Caterlot life. Hell, to escape, all he'd need to do would be cause as much mess as possible as he ran off, and in the time they spent filling out all the correct reports he'd get clean away.

Well, clean away from the Royal Guards. The Night Guard or the Solar Guard seemed more like the sort who acted first and made up the paper work later.

Prey also knew that Gloom still owed Taffy a whole heap of reports because of all the ruckus they'd been raising in Hay Steam. According to regulations, Gloom should've filed the reports within twenty four hours of the event.

Prey hummed in thought to himself, one hoof tip idly running through the fur of his ear while leafing through the report with the other. Across the 'work table' from Prey, Crimson took a moment to crick his neck and rub his eyes. Having to constantly bend his head to look at the reports lining the floor was no doubt a literal pain in the neck.

For Prey, with his small stature, it was almost the perfect set up.

Prey stopped humming and looked up as Gloom approached, a stack of fresh papers under one leathery wing, "Here you go Prey." He said, dropping the stack in front of the lamb, who as always, shimmied back to maintain his distance.

Prey looked at the top report. The lines were blank and the category fields empty, "What's this?" He asked suspiciously, although he already had a feeling.

"You seem to have a knack for paper work. This swamp of other reports doesn't seem to even phase you, so from now on, you're on ISND report writing duty." Gloom announced, grinning. '-if I've got to give the presentation, you've got to do the paperwork-'

"So you want me to write all the reports you haven't written yet for Taffy." Prey summarised flatly. It seems Gloom *hadn't* forgotten about all those unwritten reports after all.

"Don't say it like that. You're the best at it." Gloom said with false praise.

"Your conclusion is based off circumstantial and very limited evidence, out of a small testing pool of only us three. That's hardly an achievement. Sir." Prey said.

"It builds character," Gloom told him, "Do it."

Sigh "Yes. Sir."

"Sargent Gloom, it's been too long," Taffy enthused the moment the thestral knocked on and pushed open her door, "You have all my paperwork, yes?" She immediately added without missing a beat.

"Yours?"

"Yep, all that paperwork you owe me belongs to me and I want it given back." Taffy confirmed brightly.

Gloom gave himself a small shake, brushing off Taffy's strangeness in claiming paperwork as personal property, although considering

the sheer amount of it in her office, perhaps it wasn't so strange.

"Yes ma'am, I do in fact have the out standing reports. I did, *ehem*, *we* did them earlier. Here you go." Gloom said, taking the thick sheaf of papers from under his wing and laying them on table. Actually, to be more accurate, he balanced them precariously on the only free corner on the whole table.

Taffy was looking suspiciously at the stack, as if doubting its genuineness, "You really did all of it?" She asked.

"Yes ma'am." '-well, *one* of us did-'

"I'm not buying it. Who are you and what have you done with Sargent Gloom?" Taffy demanded.

"Your wit is as sharp as ever ma'am." Gloom dead panned.

"I know, right? Anyway, as long as it's all correct, who am I to complain? In fact, I think this is cause for a celebration, don't you think?" She asked their group with a happy smile.

Gloom glanced at Crimson, as if the silent pegasus somehow knew what strangeness she was talking about, "Taffy, we're a bit busy..." Gloom said, dropping the formalities as the mare pulled open a draw in her desk.

"Toffee fudge, caramel blend with marigold petals." Taffy announced, plonking a tray of neatly cut rich brown squares in front of them.

"One piece each. Except for Crimson, because I like him, he gets two. And an extra one for me, because I made them. Oh, and your little friend, because he's the youngest. Don't be shy, have a piece Prey." Taffy said. '-they're both too skinny. Put some fat on those skinny ma'linky bones-'

Prey backed off a step. He'd hoped to stay mostly unnoticed and ignored for this meeting. In fact he'd even asked if he could just wait outside the unicorn mares office instead, but Gloom had said no.

"So I'm the only pony who only gets one?" Gloom asked drily.

"Yep. Next time, bring the paperwork on time and I might let you have another piece," Taffy told him with mock seriousness, "Come on Prey, I promise these are good. Just try a bite. See? Crimson likes them." She added.

Crimson blinked at her misdemeanour, as he hadn't moved from his spot next to Gloom nor eaten one of Taffy's proffered treats. He glanced at Gloom, who rolled his eyes and gave him a nod, before he stepped forwards and took one of the toffees with a polite, "Thank you ma'am."

"Well, what so you think? Huh? Huh? Good isn't it?" Taffy grinned.

Crimson slowly chewed, "It is very sweet. And sugary. And sweet." He said again. "It's good." He added blankly after a moment and around a mouth full of toffee.

"See? It's great, now your turn Prey." Taffy breezed past Crimson, tray held in her telekinesis and almost thrust it under Prey's nose as he scrambled backwards, "Have a piece." She ordered cheerily, popping one into her own mouth.

Prey's eyes flicked left then right, but didn't find any escape. There was no choice, so Prey gingerly took a toffee, the treat very large in his small hoof. At least he'd seen Taffy eat one first, so they wasn't likely to be poisoned, nor was there any notion of poison in her fore thoughts. Prey took a quick sniff, and then resignedly ate the piece of toffee.

Prey almost coughed at the taste, 'What is this?'

Sweet. Sweet was the only word that came to mind. He'd never tasted anything like this. It was different from the half a cup cake the Solar Guard Sunshine had given him, this was far sweeter, almost enough to make him spit it out in surprise. The toffee fudge crumbled in his mouth and melted on his tongue. 'Sweet.'

"Good isn't it? I made it myself, have another." Taffy encouraged.

Prey backed off further, "No thanks, I'm fine." The sweet taste was

still thick in his mouth. It wasn't nasty, but he'd never experienced sweetness like this before.

"Come on sweetie, don't be shy, there's plenty more."

Prey flinched. He flinched so badly that he almost knocked the tray out of Taffy's magical grip. Taffy paused, "Ah?"

"Prey?" Gloom enquired.

"Don't call me sweetie," Prey said, no, *ordered*. "It's not yours to call me." Only Gossamer's mother had ever called him that.

"Aww, but it fits you so well." Taffy joked.

"My name is Prey. Don't call me sweetie. Ever. Please." Prey said.

"Prey only likes to go by Prey, Taffy." Gloom added, sounding mildly amused.

'-Bleugh. Prey's such a nasty name though. 'Prey', like being hunted-' Taffy thought, her thoughts flitting about like a bird.

"Meh. But okay." She shrugged, "But have another toffee." Taffy insisted, right back to her normal happy go lucky self.

"No thank you ma'am." Prey said, straining to stay cordial and keep the mix of anger and fear from leaking into his tone.

"What's da' matter, you no like it?" Taffy huffed playfully.

"It was nice ma'am. Thank you, but I don't want another one." Prey replied. 'Another one from *you*.'

In his head, Taffy was added to The List.

Taffy seemed to lose interest, and jumped back to Crimson, "How about you, you want another one? I'll be making some different flavours next time, so we can work on finding your favourite type of fudge." She said, not giving Crimson any time to respond.

Crimson politely took another one and ate it, "I like this one better

ma'am." He said after chewing. Obviously, he'd misunderstood.

"These were all the same flavour." Gloom told him.

"No sir, I liked the second flavour better." Crimson said.

"What?" Taffy asked.

"Pardon?"

"No, what what?"

"Pardon what?" Crimson asked in confusion.

"That's what I'm asking you." Taffy said, equally baffled.

"I like the second type better."

"Second type of what?"

"The toffee."

"What second type?"

Crimson stalled for a moment, "The second type you just gave me ma'am." He managed to answer.

"What second type? I've only made the one." Taffy said in puzzlement, lifting the tray up and looking underneath it as if that would somehow answer her question.

Crimson's feathers were staring to look a bit ruffled around the edges, "No, the second type was different to the first. I liked the second type more." He insisted.

"Oh, good. What're we talking about again?" Taffy asked.

"Your toffee. The second piece of the first type." Crimson said, a hint of desperation leaking into his tone.

"My toffee?"

"Yes."

"You liked it?"

"Yes."

"But you liked the second piece more?"

"Yes!" Crimson exclaimed, having finally gotten his point across.

"They're both the same type, caramel with marigold petals."

Crimson's wings sagged, "Yes ma'am."

Taffy blinked at him, then down at the tray. She lifted up a square of toffee, scrutinised it, then popped it in her mouth with a shrug, "Tastes fine to me. Want another to see if you like the first or second piece more?" Taffy offered.

Gloom managed to get his muffled laughter under control long enough to intervene, "Thank you Taffy, but I don't think we'll ever finish if we stay for a a third piece. By your leave ma'am?" He asked, making a motion towards the door.

"Oh, right, yes. That's fine, see you again next time. And don't forget to bring my paper work!" Taffy called out as the door closed behind them, cutting them off from the eccentric mare.

"So, you liked the second toffee better?" Gloom smirked out in the corridor.

Crimson's feathers drooped noticeably, "Sir, I'm not even sure anymore."

The presentation was held in Lieutenant Starry Wing's office latter that evening. It wasn't a large office, and quite reminiscent of Captain Nighthawk's, in that it was over stocked with a variety of Night Guard equipment that for some reason couldn't been stored elsewhere.

Never the less, all the thestral officers in the Night Guard participating, (meaning those of the rank Sargent and above), could

fit into the office with room to spare. Because there really weren't that many of them.

'-need more recruits from the clans back home-', Prey heard Lieutenant Starry Wing think as he looked around at the small selection of gathered thestrals.

He wasn't the only one, a Master Sargent was thinking along similar lines, '-depressingly few of us able to serve her majesty Princess Luna-'

'-what a drag. This is going to end up offending the Day Guards in our ranks even more, I can just feel it-', A third thestral missing a chunk of her ear thought. It was beyond easy to work out what she meant.

The Royal Guards assigned to the Night Guard were going to take their exclusion from this operation personally, because they couldn't see in the dark whereas thestrals could. However, this operation was based on practicality, not some fool's sense of superiority and pride.

Mentioning non-thestrals, Crimson and Prey were getting some evaluating looks as the Night Guard officers studied them.

The officers had seen the two of them before yes, but this was the first time seeing each other up close for both sides. However, unlike the Royal Guard, they at least kept their expressions neutral and their thoughts private. Well, their thoughts *would've* been private if Prey couldn't hear them.

Starry Wing decided it was about time they kicked things off.

"Ponies," He called, making them all come to attention, "Captain Nighthawk and 2nd Lieutenant Screech will not be joining us. He has however given the go ahead to Sargent Gloom's proposed plan of action. Sargent Gloom, could you please explain and answer questions?" Starry Wing said, waving a wing for Gloom to step up.

Gloom fired off a quick salute, "Yes sir." He cleared his throat to stall for a minute to ready himself, '-it's simple, just keep it short

and to the point-' He reassured himself. Prey rolled his eyes from where he stood against the wall next to Crimson.

"You all know about the riots happening along the railroads, and the recent work the Night Guard has put into stopping them. At first, it was thought each town had its own different trouble makers causing it, since we couldn't ever find a deeper underlying cause. The trouble makers were arrested or punished, and we thought that was that." Gloom paused to clear the rasp from his voice, or at least return it to normal levels of raspiness.

"However, not too long after this, more riots began appearing, set off by different ponies to the first. This was the case in every town, and left us no clue to the real reasons why." Gloom explained. The assembled Night Guards listened carefully, quiet and focused.

Gloom continued, "However it has been determined, through careful study, that there's a pattern nopony has previously noticed. These riots are actually a string of occurrences caused by an individual, or group of individuals, who travel from town to town, setting up the populace for a riot in the background before moving on, all without the town's residents ever becoming aware they're being manipulated. It's an external influence, not an internal one."

"Which pony figured this out?" A thestral in the audience asked.

Gloom almost answered honestly by naming Prey, but he looked over and saw Prey rapidly shaking his head. Prey didn't want to draw any more attention to himself than he could help.

'-why won't he just accept that we're all on the same side here?-' Gloom thought in exasperation.

It obviously went against the thestral's principles to claim credit for someone else's work, but Prey wanted to stay unnoticed. The Sargent deliberated for what only took a second in real time, but to Prey, who was glaring at Gloom, felt longer.

"It was a combined effort of the ISND sir," Gloom answered, settling for joint credit, before glossing over it all together and moving on. "Captain Nighthawk has approved a suggested plan to try and catch

this pony or ponies." Again, Gloom's eyes briefly flicked to Prey.

"The plan is as follows; Royal Guards will be present in the three towns of Cartwright, Home Stead, and Coal Clack during the day to act as decoys."

The mare with the torn ear from earlier tapped her hoof on the floor thrice, interrupting Gloom's explanation, and everyone looked expectantly at her. Apparently this was an accepted means of politely interrupting someone to ask a question in the thestral clans.

"Yes ma'am?" Gloom asked.

"Two questions if you would." She said formally.

"Of course ma'am. Please."

"Has the Royal Guard already agreed to this, or do we need to convince them?"

It was Starry Wing who provided the answer, "Yes, Captain Nighthawk has already spoken and gotten an agreement from Captain Shinning Armour."

"Thank you. Second question, why those three particular towns?" She asked. Starry Wing looked back to Gloom and signalled for him to continue with his explanation.

"Ma'am, those three towns are the ones that are most likely to be next targeted for a riot, if they follow the pattern we've noticed." Gloom explained.

No one questioned if this pattern was accurate or not. This plan had already been pre-approved by the Night Guard Captain, a well respected and trusted superior. Even if he ended up being wrong, Nighthawk would not be blamed. A lesser thestral would lose respect, but not Nighthawk. If the plan failed, then that meant none of them could've done any better in his place. Circular logic.

"These ponies will likely arrive in one of these three towns in the next few days. They'll try to set up a riot, then skip town before it actually takes place. The plan is for the Royal Guards presence to

act as a deterrence during the day. During the night, the Royal Guard will be resting, so that's when our suspects will come out to work. We can see in the dark, they can't. Following them will be easy." Gloom summed up, not needing to explain what would happen once they confirmed their target.

The plan sounded simple and basic, but only because someone else had already done all the thinking. These thestrals weren't arrogant, (alright, Prey actually thought they were highly arrogant, just in in their own way), but they could clearly recognise that this plan hadn't just been pulled out of a hat.

'-somepony worked very hard and found the patterns that nopony else could-', One acknowledged to himself.

'-credit is due to Gloom and his team-', Another officer thought, nodding in Gloom's direction.

One of the more senior assembled thestrals tapped his hoof three times, "The difficulty will be in following all the ponies we suspect. We can rule some out yes, such as ones with young foals, ponies with established families already in town, those who come in for regular work, etcetera, but that still leaves a surplus of suspects."

The other officers didn't nod or verbally agree, but there was a sense that they all agreed by some silent signal that wasn't immediately apparent to any non-thestral participant in the room. Meaning Prey. The lamb was very much on his own in here. Even Crimson was more aware of the unspoken social rules than he was.

"Is there a proposed solution to this problem?" The senior thestral asked.

They were all waiting for an answer from Gloom, who found he didn't have one, '-did we talk about this? Did Prey explain something I forgot?-' He glanced quickly at Prey, hoping for some help. All the officers were waiting for an answer.

'You can recall the answer for yourself Gloom. It's not exactly a trick question.' Prey thought. No way was he going to step forwards in front of all these officers and draw extra attention to himself. So he

just offered Gloom a bland shrug and a 'Get-on-with-it' gesture.

Gloom licked his lips, "The plan. Right. The plan is to split up thestrals into pairs, not squads, to maximise the number of available surveillance teams, so we can monitor twice as many suspects." Gloom managed to remember.

More silent agreement from the officers, as they continued to wait and give Gloom the opportunity to explain or offer further reasons.

Gloom however, was now stumped.

Really, what he'd said so far should've been enough for the officers. This was a military organisation and they'd have to follow Nighthawk's orders to execute the plan anyway, but in front of his peers, Gloom felt the need to add some further justification. Or perhaps it was just the Sargent's nerves finally getting to him.

Good intentions aside however, and nervous or not, Gloom couldn't think up anything further. And why should he? The plan was already good enough, there were always going to be aspects they couldn't foresee or control. This senior officer
was just playing devils advocate in Prey's opinion.

'Old people,' Prey snorted to himself, 'They're always interfering and implying you could do better.'

That's probably why at thousands of years old, Celestia felt it her right to interfere and meddle with the entire world.

Gloom was forced to concede he couldn't think of anything further to satisfy his peers. He dipped his head, "I'm afraid we will just have to do rely on intuition for which suspects to follow, that's all." He said.

Then Prey got to see another interesting aspect of thestral hierarchy and society. All the gathered officers who'd been standing in judgement of Gloom looked at each other, nodded in agreement, and didn't offer any further objections, like Gloom had met their expectations.

It was like Gloom had been taking a test, one without any pass or

fail mark, but definitely one where you were being graded.

'-the colt has grown a tad-', '-didn't stutter this time-', '-did well-', '-we must all serve Luna's pleasure-'

"Thank you Sargent Gloom, is there anything else anypony would like to further add?" Starry Wing asked, drawing Gloom's presentation to a close and opening up the floor.

Gloom hid a sigh of relief now that the attention was off him and quietly made his way over to Prey and Crimson, who still stood by the office wall, as the Night Guard officers began to discuss logistics.

"Sir." Crimson greeted him.

"That was the easy part. Now comes the hard part, getting the plan to work." Gloom said. He couldn't help but glance to Prey and ask again, "You sure this'll work?"

"I'm sure it has a *chance* to work." Prey corrected, but he did so quietly so he wouldn't be overheard.

'I could've made a plan that would've *definitely* worked, but that would involve blood, screaming, and lots of runes.' He added mentally.

"Well a chance is better than no chance. Let's hope anyway. Oh, and good work for coming up with a plan at all." Gloom added, trying for a lopsided smile that was supposed to be encouraging. Apparently though, he was still running high from nerves so it didn't really work out. The fangs and all that.

Actually that was an understatement. The smile was nearly as bad as one of Crimson's.

The Night Guard officers involved in the meeting managed to come to a decision with remarkable rapidity. Aside from the one senior officer who'd questioned Gloom, they didn't spend any more time arguing over trivial concerns, like 'Who was going to be partnered

with whom', or 'What if the weather team don't have any clouds to use'?

Those points weren't insignificant, (the small details were the downfall of many a carefully laid plan), but they stuck to the important points and let the minor ones take care of themselves. Staying hidden, identifying possible suspects, and communication were what they focused on.

To Prey, nothing was more important than that last point.

Knowledge and communication were critical. Time was the currency of life, and knowledge was power. From his experience, accurate information at the correct time was just as dangerous as a whole squad of unicorns. They couldn't kill you if you weren't where they thought you were, because you were setting up a bone rot trap mine back in their unguarded camp.

Alternatively, if a warning arrived too late, it was the same as if the message had not been sent at all.

Gloom and Crimson, who didn't feel they were qualified to add anything to the issue, were merely listening, Gloom periodically murmuring comments to Crimson.

"If they're so concerned about communication, why not just give them all enchanted crystals?" Prey asked no one in particular, remembering the crystal the Solar Guard had used on the roof. He asked not to be helpful, but because he was keen to discover more about those crystals. It might be useful if and when he came up against the Solar Guard again. Prey hadn't forgotten the name 'Captain Valour' on his list.

'I have a silk noose made from a ribbon with your name on it Valour.' Prey thought darkly.

Gloom tilted his head in thought, "Enchanted crystals? I haven't heard of those. What are they Prey?"

Prey blinked and affected surprise like he'd only been talking to himself, "I thought the Royal Guard had enchanted communication

crystals they used in case of emergencies."

"I've certainly never heard of them. Are you sure about that Prey?" Gloom asked.

"Not really, it's just something I heard about from one of the officers. I may be wrong." Prey shrugged.

'So Knowledge of these is not wide spread. Is it a tool restricted to the Solar Guard only then?' Prey thought to himself.

"The idea sounds very useful. How would such crystals be made?" Crimson asked.

"No idea, it's just something I half overheard." Prey repeated.

"Well they involve magic, so they'd have to be made by unicorns," Gloom observed, "Wait here a minute, I'm going to go ask if that's a real thing and if so, you can suggest-"
Gloom caught Prey's look, carefully constructed to say 'coward' and changed his sentence, "-Fine, I'll suggest we use them."

'Good. Just as I wanted.' Prey thought in satisfaction as Gloom start towards Starry Wing. Gloom would ask the officers for him without Prey having to reveal anything about where his knowledge came from.

A minute later Gloom was back, "That idea's a no go." Gloom told them, settling back into his place along the wall. Prey personally thought Gloom should be over there discussing the upcoming operation with the other officers. The ISND was responsible for this case after all, but evidently Gloom felt his opinion wasn't needed anymore.

Well, the three of them weren't actually taking part in the surveillance part of the operation, so Gloom had a point.

"Why not sir? Do they not have them or did Prey mishear and they don't actually exist?" Crimson asked.

"Actually, apparently something like what Prey said does exist. It's been around for years, some unicorn invented it. But it's of no use

to us. Too expensive, and it doesn't actually help with this situation anyway. It's got a limited range, can only send a signal, something like a flag pin, to a pre-prepared enchanted map of the area the crystal is used in. Which we don't have. Oh, and it's one use only." Gloom explained, filling Crimson in on what Starry Wing said.

Prey, having listened in mentally to Gloom and the Lieutenant while the conversation was going on, had heard the more detailed explanation, (even if it had only been explained in depth within Starry Wing's thoughts), and which'd naturally come to the forefront of the lieutenant's mind when Gloom asked about; "Magic communication crystals."

The crystals were actually originally one crystal split in half, or even into many pieces, after an enchantment had been placed upon it, somehow linking all the pieces together. A signal was sent when one of these pieces were crushed to the remaining pieces.

'It must be an energy conservation based enchantment.' Prey thought, 'When one piece is destroyed, the magical energy stored inside it is transferred to the remaining pieces. It's a smart idea. If an agreed upon event happens, crush your piece and send the signal that whatever that event was has come to pass. In the Solar Guards case, the predetermined event was, 'Emergency!'

'However, the more pieces exist, the less noticeable the transfer will be, therefore there's a limit on how many pieces one map can support. And again, that function is almost certainly limited in range. Too far, and the signal will dissipate before it arrives. The spell itself is likely to only last about a month too, before fading by dint of the fact that it's original cast point was broken into pieces. Hmm.' Prey analysed, his interest piqued.

To Prey's understanding, such spells didn't last if their anchor point was disrupted or altered.

'Still, as a silent distress flare, it's pretty useful while the enchantment lasts.' Prey thought. He would like to get his hooves on a set of crystals to have a look at himself.

Prey blinked. Someone was addressing him.

He gave his head a shake, ears swishing, and turned to Gloom who had broken him from his thought process, "Yes sir?" He asked, using the correct title because of all the other Night Guard officers in Starry Wing's office.

"I think First Sargent Eclipse wants to speak with you two." Gloom told him, nodding politely towards the thestral mare from earlier with the missing chunk from her ear.

When Prey and Crimson looked up, Eclipse nodded back and made a motion with her wing, one which apparently meant they were supposed meant to go over. Eclipse was on the other side of the office and therefore more than five meters away, meaning,Prey couldn't hear her mind. 'What does she want?'

Prey raised a questioning eyebrow at Crimson, who merely raised one back. Clearly he didn't know ever.

Prey shrugged, "Alright, sir." He answered Gloom, then to Crimson, "After you."

Eclipse was a First Sargent. Prey and Crimson might technically be outside the rankings because of the ISND being a special division, but they could hardly refuse Eclipse's summons.

She was an officer. It was as simple as that. The golden bands around their legs clearly marked their status difference, at least to those who knew what the bands were, and didn't mistakenly think them a fashion accessory.

The drew up in front of Eclipse, and Crimson saluted, which Prey thought it best to emulate too, "Ma'am."

"At ease." Eclipse automatically returned, even though they hadn't been standing at attention, they'd merely saluted. She didn't say anything for a minute, just studied them with her bright, slitted eyes. Because Prey could hear her thoughts, he knew what was coming.

'Here we go again.' He sighed internally, but he kept his face straight and waited for her to speak first.

"How old are you, little ewe? Prey, wasn't it?" Eclipse asked, addressing the lamb.

Prey gave the age he'd given to Gloom and Crimson, "Fourteen, I'm a runt and small for my age. I'm also not a ewe, ma'am."

Eclipse had to actually pause for a second to readjust her view point, '-she's not a filly? Wait no, *he's* not a filly. And a stunted runt, why're you in the Night Guard? We can't make foals fight our battles for us-'

It occurred to Prey, when he thought back, that he didn't remember seeing this thestral in the hall when Luna had him conscripted him. This Eclipse obviously knew he was part of the new ISND unit, but not that he was an actual contributing member, and not just a child being babysat by Gloom for some obscure reason.

"You're in the ISND, correct?" Eclipse double checked.

"Yes ma'am." Prey answered. He thought he was being very patient and polite here.

"Why?" Eclipse asked.

Prey blinked, "Because Princess Luna put me here."

"No, I understand that. What I mean is...*Why* are you here?" She emphasised, yellow eyes flicking to Crimson for a heartbeat. She probably thought Prey had missed it or that he wouldn't understand the implications in her look; '-is he an exile or a lawbreaker too? Surely not at such a tender age-'

"I'm here because this is where her majesty, Princess Luna, put me after she decided that she had a use for me. It's better than prison anyway." Prey added with another inane smile, deciding to not waste anymore time and just cut her off from dancing around the question. 'This is five minutes of my life that I'll never get back.' He thought morosely.

His answer didn't make Eclipse a happy mare.

'-should I ask? No, it can't have been a major crime. Just a foal, too

young to have done anything serious. But why is he here and not back with his family-?' Eclipse wondered, pursing her lips as she now had her answer, and found she didn't like it.

"What happened to your ear? If there is any fighting to be done, you shouldn't have to be in the line of fire." She asked, a touch of guilt in her demeanour.

'You're one to talk.' Prey thought, looking at the mare's own ear. Giving Eclipse an honest answer wasn't going to make her shut up and let them go, so he gave an indirect one.

"Oh this doesn't really even hurt anymore ma'am, and it was just an accident. It's almost better now anyway." Prey said, giving his ear a twitch to prove it.

"I'm sorry to hear that happened, but it sounds like you are well on the flight path to recovery." Eclipse said.

However, that didn't seem to be enough to assuage her conscience. She evidently felt compelled to say something else, if only to salve her own unease, "You're young Prey, and Night Guard life is hard. If you need to, please go speak with Captain Nighthawk, Sargent Gloom can assist you with that if you ask politely, and he can help you get a message to Her Majesty."

'-and I'm going to keep an eye on you Prey, make sure Gloom is keeping his wing over you-', She added to herself.

Her guilty concern mildly made Prey want to spit on her hooves, but of course all he did was smile cutely and dip his head, "Thank you very much ma'am. But you don't need to worry, I'll be fine. Sargent Gloom is very good at looking out for me, and Princess Luna chose this position for me specifically."

Crimson's wings twitched, but Eclipse didn't notice his disapproving reaction to Prey's honeyed words. Being able to read her thoughts, Prey had intentionally picked his words to head off the mare's concern before it became an issue, because he didn't want her trying to watch out for him. The less ponies watching him, the better.

Anyway, Prey's reassurances seemed to have mollified Eclipse somewhat, "Yes, Sargent Gloom is new, but it's clear he will make a good officer one night, so you are in good hooves Prey." She agreed, although it was obvious to Prey she was saying the words as much to herself as to him. Her considering gaze switched to Crimson.

"Did you know Prey before you were brought here?" She asked.

Crimson came to attention, "No ma'am. The first we'd first seen of each other when we were brought here." The implication being, 'We came from different prisons.'

Crimson's answer seemed to further reassure Eclipse, '-good, that means Prey only came from one of those juvenile detention centres Celestia's made then-'.

Completely inaccurate, but that meant whatever Crimson had done constituted of a more serious punishment than petty theft. Annoyingly, the mare only had guesses herself as to what Crimson might've done.

Eclipse gave Crimson an examining look, "What is your weapon of choice?" She abruptly asked.

Crimson, who remained at attention the whole time, answered without hesitation, "My father's wing blades ma'am."

"Hmm, thought so. Non-standard Guard carry though. Is that why you don't carry your father's heritage, or is it something else?" Eclipse inquired.

"They have been locked away ma'am. I have Sargent Gloom's word that they are being kept safe. That is why I do not carry them right now." Crimson answered, probably not even noticing how his own feathers bristled.

"Your heritage is your right, as they came down to you from your father. However you must still earn the trust to wear them." Eclipse informed him.

Prey noticed how Crimson's mental walls started to shift in anger at Eclipse's judgement of him, but Crimson did what Prey had done

earlier and kept himself calm and his tone polite, "My father's blades belong to me. I will take them up again." Crimson answered.

He left the response open, letting Eclipse take his answer to either mean he was agreeing to regaining whatever honour she seemed to think he had lost, or a blunt statement that he would get his blades back one way or another.

Eclipse was sharp, she heard both what Crimson said and what he was implying, but she chose to hear the best.

"Then work hard for her majesty Princess Luna. We are all in her service and indebted to her. There is a long flight path ahead of us all on that cloud front." Eclipse opinioned, stepping back and moving to rejoin her fellow thestral officers still discussing the plan, her previous questions now satisfied.

"Night watch over you. And talk to Sargent Gloom, Prey." She added to the meekly acting lamb. '-something I can't put my hoof on-'

Prey nodded and smiled innocently up at her again, while Crimson just did the nodding bit, both of them strangely united in their private disdain of Eclipse's words to them.

'At least she's not going to be a problem for me in the future.' Prey thought. He'd successfully deterred the First Sargent from taking too keen an interest in his already unstable future here in Canterlot, where he was trying to stay unnoticed by those powerful individuals who might suspect something.

But as Prey was congratulating himself and following Crimson back over to where Gloom waited, Eclipse realised something, just as she was about to leave his mental perception range.

'-*that's* what I couldn't put my hoof on. That lamb looked right at me, he didn't look away. He wasn't intimidated by our eyes. Didn't judge us as unnatural. That's not something normal in a foal-'

"Sir, what did Crimson do to be imprisoned?" Prey asked Gloom,

standing at the foot of his bunk.

Dinner and another long stint in the office had come and gone, the elder alicorns evening having eventually giving way to the younger one's night.

Gloom stopped undoing the strap on his chest plate and straightened to face Prey, "You know I'm not going to tell you that. If you want to know, you can ask Crimson himself instead of going behind his back."

The red pegasus in question was currently in the toilet down the corridor. Gloom did at least trust them enough to do that without fearing they would run away. Although with these gold tracker bands, running would have been an exercise in futility anyway.

"Okay, never mind." Prey said simply, and let it drop as if that was that. However he'd just been given his answer, because when he'd asked the question, Gloom's thoughts had automatically jumped to the reason. And the answer wasn't even a surprise, it was one of the likely scenarios Prey had envisioned.

Gloom however, wasn't willing to let it drop.

These last few days had raised a number of small conflicts between the Sargent and Prey. They weren't big ones, in fact if they had happened between a normal Sargent and a member of his squad, they would've likely already been forgotten.

But this wasn't a normal squad, and, to put it in Gloom's own words, '-my cutie mark is tingling that something, somewhere, somehow or in someway, the kid is doing something funny-'

"Not so fast. You purposefully waited until Crimson was out of the room, then went behind his back. So when Crimson comes back in, you're going to ask him exactly what you just asked me to his face." Gloom told Prey.

Prey had absolutely no intention of doing that.

"I only asked because it might've been something that was important for me to know. Whatever Crimson did might have an

effect on me because I'm in his team, so if that's the case then I think I have a right to know." Prey responded, easily picking out a rational lie.

"Normally, you might be right. We have to have each other's backs. But this isn't one of those times. It's private to Crimson and has nothing to do with you. If Crimson wanted you to know, he would've told you. But you are still going to ask Crimson when he comes back in." Gloom repeated, his rasping tone firm.

Prey shook his head, "You misunderstand, that's precisely why I asked you, because you're the Sargent. But you won't tell me, and that means it's okay. Because if it was something that posed a risk to me, you would've told me. But you didn't, so I don't need to worry. It had nothing to do with wanting to pry into Crimson's personal life." He explained.

Gloom paused as he comprehended Prey's logic, '-oh, I didn't think about it like that-'

"Fine, okay Prey. If it's really like that, then let's forget about it." Gloom said.

Prey didn't offer Gloom one of his innocent smiles, because Gloom already knew Prey well enough to realise that when Prey did that, he was actually privately mocking the recipient. Normally, that would have been an ideal reason to smile at Gloom, but this time Prey wanted to appear genuine.

So Prey merely offered a bored shrug and a cynical "Yes, sir." And left it at that.

When Crimson re-entered their bunk room, Gloom wasted no time in clapping his hooves together and getting their attention.

"Alright, share and tell time," He announced, "We're getting up early tomorrow before T-Day even starts, because we've been assigned last minute to cover the last couple of hours of some ponies' night shift. So without further delay, what have you learnt today?"

Prey was getting sick and tired of doing this every night. At first it

had been amusing, but now it was annoying.

"Well let's not stand on ceremony, or sit in my case," Prey spoke up, jokingly patting the bed where he sat, "I'll start. I confirmed beyond a doubt that I was correct about the thestral clans unspoken policy of honour. That policy being, don't speak about it. Because if you do, you're already doing it wrong. Treat it like a skittish rabbit that will flee if you even look at it too hard." Prey said, pulling his pillow over. The pillow was only marginally smaller than he was.

'-this again? Well I see your game, and we're not going to play it-'

"Humph," Gloom huffed, "Well I learnt that everypony, clan or individual has their secrets. And it's not your right to pry."

He gave Prey a very obvious stare in case their was any doubt as to whom the comment was directed at. And accompanying the stare came the thought; '-I'm getting tired of having to corral you all the time-'

Prey pretended he didn't have a clue that Gloom was talking about him and pretended to be plumping his pillow instead.

Gloom sighed, "How about you Crimson?" He asked, deciding he'd had enough for one day and giving up.

Crimson spent a long time considering, his face its' usual blank slate self. "I think..." He eventually decided, "That I am getting better at paperwork."

They waited.

Nothing else was forth coming after that enlightening statement.

"Okay... Well, the thestral teams will be deploying tomorrow night over Coal Clack and the other two towns. That's when you think these riot instigators could start arriving, right Prey?" Gloom asked to double check.

"That's what I predict. It could end up being earlier, but it'll probably be somewhere in the next four to five days. Or nights." Prey confirmed.

'-you'd better be right, there's a lot gliding on this cloud-' Gloom thought, but he didn't say it out loud as it might've sounded aggressive.

Instead, Gloom just said, "Let's hope to Luna that the plan pays off." He picked up the alarm clock and started to wind it, missing the glare Prey gave the brass device, "Anypony got anything further to add or ask?"

"No." Prey answered, pulling back the blanket and climbing under.

Gloom wished them both a good and told Crimson to blow out the candle when he was finished.

It was almost a pre-requisite by now, but Prey did his usual sleeping act and waited until Crimson had finished and gone to bed.

Once satisfied the pegasus was asleep, Prey sat up and got to work on building more runic arrays on his blanket. If one wanted an edge, one needed to be prepared to make sacrifices. In this case, resisting the soft lullaby of his pillow.

Tonight however, it wouldn't be working on studying the gold tracer bands trapping him. It'd occurred to Prey that if some maid came in and took away the bedding for cleaning, he would lose all his hard work.

He wasn't worried about anyone discovering the runic arrays themselves, because even if put through a scanning spell, nothing more than a normal blanket would be revealed. It would take a powerful mage to detect anything, and why would a mage be scanning a blanket?

That just left the problem of the cleaning staff.

So once Crimson blew out the lantern and retired for the night, Prey worked a number of minor memory runes and illusionary arrays into the blanket. Prey wasn't great at illusionary runes, but he had the know how. And he *was* great at memory runes.

These arrays would make anyone who touched the blanket distracted and forget about it, hopefully to move on. They'd probably think the bedding had already been replaced or something similar. Unless someone was purposefully looking for this blanket, their eyes would just pass over it, as if it were a piece of the background.

That done, Prey lay looking up at the slats of the bunk above him.

'All things considered, today wasn't such a bad day.' He admitted to himself.

He still had Lemon Pink, nothing life threatening or dangerous had happened, no one had tried to use magic on him, or make him run up and down cobble streets, or touch him.

So, all things considered, today really hadn't been such a bad day.

---I---

22.1 First we Train, then we Fight

Yesterday might not have been so bad, but that of course didn't give any assurance as to the quality of the coming day.

Your apple might be fine one day, but on the next you bite into it and get a mouth full of mush and worms.

Prey had been woken by the ear gratingly loud alarm clock a few hours before the normal wake up time, (making it about about four am in the morning), for the three of them to blearily go and cover half a guard shift.

Because of the lack of Night Guard recruits, combined with some being off sick after overworking, and another hoof full sent off by the Night Princess to answer the concerns of one of the very few Night Court petitioners, that left a shortage of Night Guards to cover this one shift. Meaning they had to cover it. Simply wonderful.

So another three hours were spent standing in a dark corridor outside the silent nobles wing, blinking and trying not to yawn, before servants started filtering in with the rise of the sun.

They were just in time to catch the tail end of breakfast, which wasn't a bad thing in Prey's opinion. It meant most of the Royal Guard's, Honey Topaz included, had already left the mess hall. Many of the few Night Guards (a misnomer in itself for their numbers truly weren't many), seemed to have the same preference, waiting until near the end before attending breakfast.

But after the tasteless meal came the Night Guards training day, or T-Day, as it was so jokingly called.

Prey carefully looked around at the assembled thestrals and hoof full of regular pony Night Guards in the gym, the social division between the two parties clear by the way they congregated into their own groups. 'Yep, the cultural differences and inherent racism didn't disappear overnight.'

Gloom stood waiting, a little off to the side, their own little group further split off from all the others again. As Gloom seemed to be waiting for something to happen, Crimson and Prey copied his example. Prey was not looking forward to this. It was bound to be a pointless exercise which just further lowered his already sub zero level of appreciation for the Guard.

Five minutes later, Starry Wing, a large unicorn in steel grey Prey hadn't seen before, and Quartermaster Carrot of all people walked in and snapped them to attention.

Everything went down hill from there.

"Fly you lily livered, bat brained, scum sucking, Prench ponces!" The unicorn, named Cracker Smiles (a misleading name even by pony standards), bellowed up at the thestrals practising above him, flying through hoops and around obstacles suspended on cables from the ceiling.

Cracker Smiles was apparently one of those iron hoofed drill Sargents you heard about in stories. Prey hadn't thought that someone as dumb as this actually existed.

Yelling and screaming insults at you and your entire lineage accomplished very little, nor was it motivating.

Well, maybe it worked on normal pony recruits in weeding out the mewling weaklings who'd run back home once they realised that being a Royal Guard wasn't all about saving damsels in distress and meeting Celestia. Or something to that effect. It wouldn't have surprised Prey. Ponies were stupid like that, stupid and soft and naive and blind.

"You'll never be anything if you can't get those wings up! By the sun, I don't have wings and even I can see what you're doing wrong you bald winged reptiles, get those weights back on and keep flying! You can give up and crawl home to your caves in shame only once I say you can!"

"And you," Cracker Smiles rounded on the thestrals running and working the ground portion of the gym, still fully plated up in armour as they sweated and grunted, "Don't think I don't see you slacking off! Are you trying to fail, is that it? My grandmare can lift heavier weights than that!"

It was probably Royal Guard tradition to get shouted at by some drill instructor, a way to feel like you'd passed some tough test and were now all brothers in arms serving the princess.

However if that were the case, it wasn't doing anything for the thestrals, although it clearly made them quietly angry.

They weren't recruits, they were already trained fighters. They didn't join because of some misguided hope of proving themselves or earning acceptance from pony society. They were here because of Princess Luna, and that was the only reason. They only cared about not being a disgrace to her, not whatever Cracker Smiles or anypony else thought.

They remained grimly quiet as they worked, aside from pants and grunts, not exchanging even a single word between themselves, in a sort of united silent denouncement of Cracker Smiles.

'-the Royal Guard can go chew a fire fruit-'
'-horn heads think they're so special-'
'-they know nothing. I will not stoop to their level-'

And so the thestral portion of the Night Guard sweated and groaned as they lifted weights and strained against each other in practice spars, silently simmering as they punched and kicked away at the training dummies. They would not bend, nor would they break. To snap back at him or demand Cracker Smiles stop was beneath them.

Starry Wing was actually here to take part in the training day,

running, flying, lifting weights, and grappling along with the rest of them. Whatever Carrot had come in here for at the beginning, he'd left not long after they all started getting yelled at and running laps. It was sort of fitting that such an abrasive stallion as the Quartermaster had come in with a kindred spirit like Cracker Smiles.

"Come on Prey, you didn't even try on that one." Gloom sighed, breathing rapidly as he let the bar weight he'd been lifting with his wings clank back into place.

"That's because I can't do it." Prey panted for the twentieth time, lying slumped on the floor.

Prey was growing increasing aggravated with Gloom, who kept telling him to "Try harder," and, "You're not doing your best." But what did Gloom expect? Prey was a small weak runt with spindly limbs, who's body mass was mainly made up of wool.

Did he suddenly expect Prey to be able to keep up with the full grown ponies running around the track or lift the same weight they could? That thestral over there was lifting weights that were heavier than Prey's entire body with *one* hoof.

In Gloom's defence, he didn't actually know the first thing about training a non-adult, let alone a runt lamb. Perhaps Gloom's mental perceptions of Prey had been thrown off by his advanced mental capabilities, he'd subconsciously expected the lamb to be able to... Well, not match the rest of them, but somehow keep up in his own way or something.

'Incompetent, foolish, moronic X'ausa'mak.' Prey angrily thought, breathing heavily.

He'd told Gloom yesterday he couldn't do this 'T-day' nonsense. He'd *told* Gloom he was going to be disappointed, but the thestral just hadn't listened had he?

Prey was a runt. It was that simple.

A runt in a cursed body to be more precise, but a runt all the same.

It wasn't a matter of training, or building up muscle endurance, or any such idiocy. Such things were a physical impossibility.

In weight carrying, (backpacks filled with stones), Prey couldn't even waddle along with anything heavier than 130 pounds. Impressive for a runt lamb, but considering the average Night Guard could carry 400 pounds and jog laps around the track in full armour, (courtesy of their quadruple legged frame), it wasn't even a noteworthy achievement.

Running circuits around the track while Cracker Smiles yelled at them, Prey was lapped multiple times by everybody.

In the stop-start sprint, Prey came in dead last.

Weight lifting was more of the same.

He couldn't even reach the training dummy to punch or kick it.

Nature had not seen fit to gift sheep wings, so the air track was also out.

And Prey refused point blank to do the bench press.

There was a magical training range next door, and that's where the few drafted Royal Guard unicorns left for half way through the session. No one missed them. But the only magic Prey had was runic, and walking up and announcing he could use that to get out of this exercise was asking to get thrown back in Dreverton.

Inversely compared to Prey, Crimson, who was partaking in every exercises with the main herd of Night Guards, was doing quite well despite his wiry frame. He was keeping up easily enough, and even excelling in some exercises.

After two hours of physical exertion, Cracker Smiles finally seemed to calm down and ordered them all to form up into ranks. Prey hung near the back, avoiding being noticed, although it wasn't really seem necessary. Cracker had already spotted Prey during the course of the exercises, and hadn't had a clue why Prey was there.

Cracker's solution to the problem? Just ignore Prey and pretend he

didn't exist.

A welcome change from what Prey had been expecting.

In the resistance, Prey had been one of Torment's favourite scratching posts during 'training' to demonstrate with. Most of the scars from her talons had faded over the years, but he still had a knot of scar tissue under his chin to remember her by.

"Right you bat winged freaks, now that you're all nicely warmed up, next is weapons practice. Grab a dummy sword, spear, whatever and partner up. And I want to see actual practice, hear me?" Cracker Smiles shouted, as if he were talking to unruly children.

"No hitting other ponies in the head, neck, from behind or in the guts. If I have to break it up because you couldn't fight cleanly, you'll be cleaning out the toilets using nothing but your tails as scrubbing brushes." Cracker threatened.

'Pathetic,' Prey thought, 'Just like Valour and the Solar Guards. They don't believe in hitting bellow-the-belt. The Resistance would eat you alive and spit out your bones.'

Prey wasn't the only one with a dim view of Cracker Smiles. The thestrals didn't show it openly, but their furious dislike of the drill Sargent and his constant belittlement and disregard for the fact that they were already warriors was increasingly dominant in many of their thoughts.

But Prey still didn't catch any real death threats in amongst there, even in the privacy of their own minds.

Oh there were plenty of wishes for bloody vengeance against Cracker Smiles, and the average non-thestral pony would've been horrified to learn that they could even *think* that about another pony, but there was nothing real in any of their private wishes. If Cracker Smiles was dangling off the edge of a cliff, they would still help him up rather than stomp on his hoof. In their hearts, they wouldn't see him dead.

It was the complete opposite of Prey's experience in the Resistance.

If Cracker Smiles had insulted someone in the Resistance like this, unless that person was very far below Cracker Smiles on the ladder like Prey had been, Cracker would've been waking up with a knife in his gut.

The only people who got away with spewing vulgar insults like that were the ones everybody feared. People like Snake, Razor, Stinger or Torment. No one dared challenged them. No one was that crazy. Alright, that wasn't *quite* true. A few new recruits had been crazy enough, but the instant and fatal retribution that fell upon them had been more than enough to discourage anyone else from making the same mistake.

"Come on Prey," Gloom said grabbing him, not physically of course as Prey wouldn't have allowed that, and pointed him in Crimson's direction.

"Go check with Crimson and see what you can do." Gloom ordered as the rest of the Night Guard started to partner up in silence. Some fetched the normal practice swords, wing blades, or spears from the racks, but others pulled out hammer hooves or a type of claw like weapon attached to the fetlock with short, retractable blades, which extended when you twisted your hoof just so.

'-griffin claws-'

Prey learned their name after quickly scouring some nearby thestral's thoughts. Aside from the fact that Griffins had four claws, not two, the name was certainly fitting for the hooked blades.

Crimson had a practice wing blade on, just the one, and was taking a few practice swipes with it. The easy way he could swish the dull metal blade around gave an idea as to how proficient he would be with the real article.

Prey plonked himself tiredly onto the floor beside Crimson, and just waited while Gloom went and got his own practice weapon, a spear. He came back with it gripped under one wing.

Gloom got that kind of look as he looked down at Prey which said, '-should I really be doing this?-'

He opened his mouth to tell Prey to stop sitting around and to go find a practice weapon, but Prey just looked at him, then at the heavy spear Gloom held, then down at his own small hooves. Then he slowly raised one eyebrow.

"Good point." Gloom conceded.

"Prey, do you wish me to show you how to fight?" Crimson offered hesitantly, evidently not sure if that was even a valid possibility.

"No."

Prey didn't know how to fight, and didn't want to. Prey knew how to *kill*. There was a huge difference in the mindset of that approach. Fighting implied fairness and equal footing, and such a thing didn't exist on the battlefield. Prey would lose a fight with a particularly aggressive toddler. However give him a knife and turn your head for a second, and he'd cut your throat and bleed you out before you could react. Although he'd prefer to use poisoned blowpipe and never even get close.

But as stated, that was a very different mindset to what T-Day required. They were here to fight, not to kill.

And Prey was a lousy fighter.

'-follow the rules. Rules say everypony has to participate in T-days-', Gloom thought, but he couldn't really apply that to Prey. He'd tried to get the lamb to participate in the rest of the exercises and drills, and to Prey's credit, he'd only refused some of them. But it had been made clear to Gloom that getting Prey into anything even resembling fighting shape was an impossibility.

It doesn't matter how many times you teach a rabbit how to pounce, it'll never be a wolf.

'-actually, why am I even trying to get a foal into fighting shape? Doesn't that make me a bad pony?-', Gloom wondered.

Other Night Guards had seen Gloom's dilemma, but they didn't really have any helpful ideas either, so they kept quiet, giving Gloom a few sympathetic looks. They wouldn't have overstepped

their bounds by making a suggestion about a Guard under Gloom's authority anyway, but in this case, they couldn't have even if they'd wanted to.

The rules said everyone must complete combat training, yes, but those rules were for full grown ponies. Prey was neither. That was the general consensus, so it was left up to Gloom to decide what he wanted to do with his runt lamb.

"Crimson, you can go find another partner. I'll just...stay and see what I can do. Even if Prey can't pull off any of the moves himself, he can still learn the theory and about weapons. Might be he'll even learn something to defend himself with." Gloom eventually decided.

'-that's a bad joke. A blind, half crippled thestral could hold Prey down with both wings tied behind their back while singing Old Yon' Farrow-', Gloom thought, already accepting defeat.

"Alright Prey, you heard what I said. Even if you aren't going to use this, you still need to know the theory." Gloom paused, as if expecting objections.

Prey did have objections, mainly because this was a pathetic excuse for fighting and anything he was 'taught' he wouldn't have used even if he could, as it would get him killed in a real fight. But if he objected, Gloom might order him back to running laps instead, so it was better to stay silent and pretend to listen to Gloom's explanation.

"Right, first off, this is a spear. Can you name its components?"

T-Day finally finished for lunch at two thirty. Everyone was tired and sore, having worked themselves hard, even in the face of Cracker Smiles. T-Day was supposed to be a weekly affair, but since the Night Guard was so understaffed, they really didn't have the numbers to cover the shifts while the other half trained. Nighthawk'd apparently had to juggle things very skilfully to get today to even happen.

Prey was not complaining about this reduction in T-Days. One was more than enough, thank you.

Speaking of a first time for everything, this was also the first time the ISND actually had time for lunch. But everyone was ravenous after the training day, so Starry Wing made it an order that they were to; "Make sure you actually eat something before going back to your shift. You're no use to Princess Luna if you can't even trot in a straight line."

Before that though, came showers for everyone. They were all sweaty and smelly, so showers were more or less mandatory, even if it was still the middle of the day.

Luckily, the gyms communal showers were just next door, and big enough for them all, as long as they weren't picky and squashed in.

Prey found the furthest white tiled corner he could out of the way of flapping leathery wings and sullen thestrals rinsing themselves off, all of which were in a hurry to get out of the gym and eat something before returning to their posts.

Prey only half succeeded in taking his own shower unnoticed, the sheer number of showers in use and all that hot water provided quite a bit of cover steam to hide in. But it only took one thestral to notice Prey, with his wool and ears plastered down under the stream of hot water, and then they were nudging the thestral next to them, mouths turning up in amusement.

Prey's shoulders tensed up all by themselves, 'If one of them *dares* to start laughing...'

Prey didn't like being the centre of attention, and he hated being the source of other people's amusement, but there was nothing he could do about it. So he pretended not to notice, secretly glaring at them all from beneath his soaked fringe of wool.

'-like a cat-', '-that took a dip in the pond-', '-and just as angry-', '-almost makes up for this T-Day-', '-Gloom may Luna-', '-watch over you-', '-having to mentor such-', '-a young and amusing looking-', '-little foal, or lamb-', '-by the moon he's-', '-drying herself off, ah ha

ha, all that wool-', '-looks like a giant dandy lion-', '-cream puff-'.

Prey was very relieved when Gloom and Crimson finished up and they could leave. Not run away, just *leave*.

Prey pointed up at the cork board, "No, the paper on the left with the number eleven on its corner, yes, that's the one. The pony there is linked to the one over *there* on the scrap of *yellow* scroll. Pin the string between them." He instructed Crimson, who was much taller than him and could actually reach.

Crimson reached up to the high position on the board (so about normal eye level for the pegasus), and stuck the pin in, "How do you know?" He asked once his mouth was clear to talk.

"Know what?" Prey responded.

"That this pony, Weaver Harp, is linked to the other one."

"Because his profession is in procuring cotton cloth for shops, which means he would have met this other Dipper Star character." Prey said, as if it were obvious.

Crimson looked from one end of the red string to the other, trying to see the link. Gloom joined him in searching for it.

"I don't see it." Crimson admitted after a minute.

"They're not in the same profession, and I doubt they're relatives either, unlike with Turf Apple and Apple Seed. So where's the link?" Gloom asked.

"Dipper Star is a unicorn of middle upper birth, second son of Lord Himeler. Himeler recently filed a complaint with the Guard about his windows being vandalised. Weaver supplies curtains. Himeler probably told his son to get the damage fixed. Dipper Star either got the staff to get in contact with a supplier, or did it himself. Weaver could have easily met Dipper Star." Prey explained.

They both had to stop and think about that for a minute to get it all

in order.

"That's quite a long shot..." Gloom said dubiously, "Why's it important anyway?"

"And how did you know about the vandalism?" Crimson also asked in interest.

"The vandalism report was one of those reports in that pile," Prey answered, waving his hoof distractedly at one of the shelves, "And it's not actually important. Not unless Weaver is also a dealer for salt."

That was what they were currently working on, the second major task the ISND had been given at its creation.

Namely, tracking down and stopping the salt drug trade taking place in Canterlot. It may have seemed like the ISND were skipping out on solving the riot problem, but they weren't. They'd done all they could on that front, and a plan was already in motion to put a permanent stop to that.

There wasn't anything further they could do at this point, aside from waiting to see if the thestral teams managed to catch the riot instigators when they arrived in Coal Clack. So in the mean time, Gloom had started them working on the next case.

Moon knew this one didn't look any easier to solve.

"If Weaver were such an obvious salt dealer, I'm sure he would have already been arrested by now." Crimson said, but he was still considering the link on the cork board.

Prey shrugged, droopy ears lifting and falling with the motion, "Perhaps, but that's why where doing this, because we don't know. I just saw a potential link and thought it best to put it up on the board so we don't forget. It might be important, although it probably won't be. But it *might*."

"And that's the crux of it, isn't it?" Gloom muttered, "It might be important or it might not. We literally have nothing better to go on. All we've got is 'if's' and 'might's' and 'maybe's'."

The Sargent wasn't exaggerating. The task they'd been given was absolutely huge. Stopping the illegal selling and distribution of unrefined salt didn't sound easy on paper, and the reality was proving that it was even more difficult than that.

There were only three of them, how were they supposed to bring down this drug trade?

"We've got nothing," Gloom said, starting to pace, "There's no suspects. No high level dealers have been arrested. We don't even know if there *are* any high level dealers because we don't know if it's all organised or individual. We don't know how they're bring the salt in, we don't know their distribution methods, we don't even have a clue about how many ponies are involved, or anything of any real importance."

That wasn't Gloom just being pessimistic either, they *literally* had no leads.

"We could question the convicted dealers again sir." Crimson suggested.

"That won't lead anywhere." Prey said.

"They were interrogated when they were first caught. All the information and tip offs they revealed have already been followed, not that it ever amounted to anything big. Maybe they knew a dealer, or gave their client's names, but after the Royal Guard followed up on those, that was it. It didn't lead anywhere further." Gloom said, or more accurately complained, still pacing back and forth.

Prey didn't know where he got the energy to pace after T-Day. Prey himself was sitting on the floor resting his tired legs, (still no desks or chairs from the Requisitions Department).

"The latest arrest was also more than a month and a half ago. Any information that Northern Light might give us is unlikely to be still relevant anyway. The situation is fluid and fast changing." Prey agreed.

"Who is Northern Light again?" Crimson asked.

"The convict who was arrested months ago." Prey answered him.

"Oh. So he is unlikely to be able to tell us anything then." Crimson agreed.

"If things continue like this, we might have to try visiting him in jail to interrogate him again anyways. We're a bit short on ideas here." Gloom sighed, coming to a stop and glumly reviewing the cork board again.

Prey rubbed his ear as he thought about the task in front of them. Personally he didn't care if ponies poisoned themselves with unrefined salt. If they were stupid enough to take the stuff, then they could suffer the consequences. It wasn't even like the salt made addicts violent or dangerous. The only ones they were actively harming was themselves.

Although it might count as being harmful to those around them. Salt drove addicts to steal or take money away from their families to support their addiction. The populace of Canterlot seemed to be aware of this salt existence, but in an abstract, far off sort of way. They all denounced the stuff, but that was about it, because no one really saw it as a threat.

'Surely not in *our* Canterlot!' Maybe out in those little mud towns, but not inside the peak city of Equestrian society.

Prey was willing to bet there were many nobles and high class Canterlot ponies who were actually salt users themselves. Bored and jaded, they might easily be drawn in by the new and excitingly forbidden experience. 'Maybe just once', they thought, but then they were hooked. He said as much out loud to Gloom and Crimson.

"Any signs we think we see are only the surface of the mire. Break the crust, and I guarantee it's a whole lot deeper and fouler than you thought. The Royal Guard only caught those who got careless. The careful ones are the real danger here." Prey said.

Both of them considered Prey's words and agreed.

"If this problem had been caught earlier, perhaps it wouldn't have developed this far." Gloom lamented sourly. '-the clans never had this sort of problem-'

"Once evil establishes a hoof hold, it's almost impossible to rid yourself of it." Crimson quoted from somewhere.

'The clans seem to have a multitude of readily available philosophical mumbo jumbo for every occasion.' Prey noted bemusedly.

"True Crimson, buts that's why the Guard's here. If it were an easy job, somepony else would have already done it." Gloom said, eyes still roaming over the cork board and its contents, looking for some small, infinitesimal clue that might suddenly give them some insight into this situation where they were essentially groping around in the dark.

"I fear this will not be nearly as fast as the last case was sir." Crimson said quietly.

"That case is still going on you know," Gloom commented drily, "We only arrested Turf Apple and Pebble Mill, there's still the problem of the riots."

"The plan will work and they will be caught, it is only a matter of time sir," Crimson responded confidently, "But I fear this one won't be so easy." He finished dully, back to his usual tone.

"We're merely stating the obvious here." Prey pointed out. He was going to say '*You're*', but changed it to '*We're*' at the last moment, because teamwork and all that.

"Actually, let's do that," Gloom said, tufted ears perking up, "Let's do what we did with the last case and start from the beginning. Let's review what we know, and what we can do. What do we know about the salt trade?"

Crimson jumped straight in, "Somepony is secretly bringing salt into Canterlot, and so far the Royal Guard have not been able to find the distributors."

"Yes, a couple of small incompetent dealers are all we've been able to catch so far. And in the grand scheme of things, they're not important. So the question is, who are the big dealers?" Gloom said. He started pacing again as he continued sharing his thoughts out loud:

"We have no leads. Surely this is unusual? Such a wide spread net work should be easier to track, shouldn't it? They have to sell it to make bits, so ponies are obviously buying it. These customers should be the weak link and the easiest to find. But they're not. Why?"

"Perhaps it's like a pyramid. The distributors at the top only sell the salt to the dealers in the middle, and the dealers only sell to the customers at the bottom. And wear a mask, so the dealers never know how big the organisation actually, is or who they're really buying from sir." Crimson offered.

Prey blinked. Surely this wasn't occurring to Crimson just now? All of that should've been obvious in Prey's opinion, it was basic common sense to hide your identity, so of course these salt distributors would've thought of it.

"How big is this organisation likely to be? Any estimates Prey?" Gloom asked as he turned around for another pass.

"Supply follows demand, and there wouldn't be a high demand unless there were enough ponies hooked on it and wanting more. So it's probably fairly big. But no ones really offered enough opposition to the salt boss in charge of this underground market, so for now they're content to keep it low profile and silently rake in the gold." Prey suggested, shrugging.

"Underground market? Are they diamond dogs?" Crimson asked.

"No, this is Canterlot. How would they tunnel through a city that is literally suspended off the side of a mountain by magic? There's no earth for them to work with." Prey told him. Although Prey supposed it was possible they were using the underground sewers, but it seemed unlikely.

"It's just an expression Crimson. It means the same as saying; 'the Black Market'." Gloom supplied.

"Oh. I understand now sir."

Prey nodded, "I doubt they use a secret tunnel or anything like that. This salt distributor, or distributors, are probably just smuggling it in on every day items through the front gates. It's hardly like new comers are searched on arrival." He shrugged.

Gloom turned on his heels and came to a halt in front of the map of Canterlot. The thestral studied it and all it represented. "So the big question is... What do we do?"

'If I cared,' Prey thought, 'Which I *don't*, you could just let me loose with one of the imprisoned addicts and I could read their minds to find out who sold the salt to them, and then work backwards from there up the chain of command. *If* I cared. And if I wouldn't be killed or imprisoned for using mind magic. Which I *would* be. So I won't.'

"We could...go on patrol in the known areas. Don't go in armour, and you could wear a dusk pony amulet sir." Crimson suggested after thinking about it.

Prey sighed, they were missing the glaring obvious approach here; "Why don't you just pretend to be addicts and get in with the dealers yourselves? Then come back, arrest them, interrogate them, find out where they came from, and then work your way up from there?"

"That's...not a bad idea." Gloom conceded after a minutes contemplation.

"Won't they know we're Guard's? They must have some method of avoiding the Guard." Crimson said.

"Oh, almost certainly," Prey agreed cheerfully, "They certainly have some way of remaining undetected, so I'm sure they have some method for avoiding the Guard."

"You don't have to sound so happy about it Prey." Gloom groused.

"Does that mean we don't actually have a plan then sir?" Crimson asked.

Gloom sighed, "It certainly seems that way doesn't it? But keep your minds open, perhaps we'll think of something later. Or maybe some new evidence will be found. Or possibly the Royal Guard will catch a dealer, or any number of other lucky breaks might occur. We will catch these ponies, it's just a matter of time and patience." Gloom said, firm in his conviction.

'-an end must be brought to the spreading of this sickness. We will stop you, who ever you are-', Gloom told himself.

Prey had his own thoughts. 'So, our grand plan for now is wait-and-see. Surprisingly intelligent actually.' They were lacking a focal starting point, so waiting patiently while gathering more information was a valid idea, and probably what Prey would've chosen himself at this stage if he was in the Sargent's hooves.

"Prey, cut another length of red string will you? This board still needs a lot of work."

"Someone's coming." Prey said, looking up from a scroll.

"It's 'somepony', not-"

There was a brisk knock at the office door. Prey raised an expectant eyebrow at Gloom, Crimson also looking up from his seat on the floor, surrounded by the slowly spreading stacks of paper.

Gloom flicked an ear, "Come in." He called out.

The door opened and Gloom snapped to attention as lieutenant Starry Wing trotted in, Crimson and Prey jumping to their hooves, "Sir."

"At ease." Starry Wing ordered, letting the door swing shut behind him.

"Yes sir. What can we do for you sir?" Gloom asked.

Starry Wing trotted over and had a look at the cork board they'd erected rather than answering immediately, yellow eyes roving around the office, spying the pile of old rubbish that still filled the third alcove and the stacks of reports that they'd been working on the floor.

"Why's there no furniture or desks? All Guard offices are supposed to be properly outfitted." Starry Wing asked.

"My apologies sir, but we don't have any yet. I spoke to some of the Palace staff, but it still hasn't happened. I will rectify the problem straight away sir." Gloom quickly assured the lieutenant.

"That's not your fault. I'll have a word with the supply depot and see if I can't get them to pull their hooves out and get to it."

"Thank you sir."

"Don't worry about it Sargent," Starry Wing said, waving it away, "That's not what I came to speak with the ISND about."

Across from Prey, Crimson's wings perked. Starry Wing had said he was here for the ISND, not just Gloom. Their Sargent also caught on that this might be something a bit more serious, '-something that involves Prey and Crimson too this time?-'

Starry Wing turned to fully face them all, putting his back to the cork board, "You spoke well yesterday Sargent Gloom. It doesn't really matter but I have to ask, who was it that devised your plan?"

Gloom barely hesitated, "It was Prey sir." He answered honestly.

'-sorry kid, but you should have been taking the credit in the first place-'

'Traitor.' Prey thought, but without much spite. It was annoying, but that was about it. It'd only been a matter of time anyway.

"Prey huh?" Starry Wing said, his slitted eyes turning to the lamb. Prey didn't make the same mistake he'd made with Eclipse, and looked away and pretended he had trouble meeting the lieutenants yellow eyes.

"Yes sir. We worked on it as a team, but credit for the idea has to go to Prey." Gloom affirmed.

'-captain Nighthawk said the lamb wasn't just a normal foal. I thought I understood, but perhaps not enough-', Starry Wing mused. "Well done then Prey. I'm confident that your plan will bring results." He complimented Prey.

"It was nothing sir, just a lucky idea that just popped into my head." Prey quickly said, trying to play it down.

"Well it was a good lucky idea. Sometimes they work out, sometimes they don't, but keep sharing them." Starry Wing insisted.

What could Prey do but politely say; "Thank you, I will sir."

"Good," Starry Wing nodded, going back to Gloom, "There were actually a few other things I came for. The first is this."

He unfolded one wing to reveal a brown paper folder he'd been keeping underneath and passed it to Gloom.

"It's another possible case. Nothing substantial yet, but the situation might develop if it isn't just an isolated incident. Have a read of it, but it's unlikely to be anything." Starry Wing explained as Gloom flicked the folder open and read the front page.

'-case reports, unconfirmed sightings...let's see, no victims or injuries, possible restricted magic, small farming village near the Everfree...but that's about it-', Prey gleaned from Gloom's thoughts as the Sargent skim read.

"No problem sir," Gloom said snapping the folder closed, "I'll add it to the pile."

That brought a chuckle from Starry Wing as he regarded the multiple stacks of papers set on the floor, "I take that to mean you have a never-shall-I-ever pile then?" He asked.

Gloom blinked, then hastily corrected himself, "I'm sorry sir, that's not what I meant-"

"It's fine Sargent, I know what you meant. Moon knows we're all busy enough already." Starry Wing waved him off good naturedly with a wing.

"What with all the rush, things get forgotten. Which brings up something that needs to be corrected, Crimson Trace?" He called.

"Yes sir." Crimson immediately answered, standing up straighter.

Starry Wing pulled out a little square box, and from inside removed a small metal pin, crescent in shape and silver in colour.

"It's come to my attention that in all the rush when you joined, you weren't given your proper rank of Private. You're not a recruit, so you should have one of these." Starry Wing said, stepping over and attaching the pin to the left shoulder plate on Crimson's shoulder. There was a small 'click' as it slotted into place.

"Thank you sir." Crimson said, although it seemed more like an automatic response rather than genuine thanks.

'When he joined? Obviously Starry Wing's memory is faulty. No one *joined* anything, we were both forcefully press ganged.' Prey thought. At least Starry Wing had forgotten about him and didn't want to pin a rank onto his nonexistent armour. But Prey knew that wasn't all the lieutenant had come to the office for.

"There's just couple more things and then I'll get out of your way and you can get back to work."

"It's no trouble sir." Gloom assured Starry Wing.

"Thank you Sargent, but perhaps Crimson should be the one to decide that or not. See, the question I've got relates to him." The Lieutenant said.

Crimson and Gloom blinked in unison, then Gloom glanced at his pegasus subordinate and stepped aside, "By all means sir." He said.

"How may I assist you sir?" Crimson asked, perhaps a bit perplexed as to what the Night Guard Lieutenant could want.

Prey refrained from rolling his eyes, 'Obviously, it must be something to do with your ex-clan.'

"Private Crimson," Starry Wing began formally, "I ask on behalf of Captain Nighthawk, who is working on behalf of Her Majesty, Princess Luna. As the only pony in Canterlot who's a member of clan Myrrdon-" Crimson's wing twitched, "-Exiled member," Starry Wing corrected himself, "You might have the best insight into what their response would be."

"I can only do my best sir," Crimson stated stoically, "And their response to what sir?"

"Princess Luna wants to meet with them in pony at the next clan summit on neutral grounds. They've left and gone into hiding, but if we extended an invitation to discuss their grievances, would they come?" Starry Wing asked.

'Called it.' Prey thought.

Crimson opened his mouth, then closed it again, his tail twitching restlessly behind his back.

"Sir..." Crimson began slowly, "I'm not sure that would be a good idea to expose Princess Luna to..."

He trailed off, muscles in his jaw working as his hate of his clan warred with the desire to give the Lieutenant an honest answer. Starry Wing patiently waited.

"Sir, I don't think the clan would attend. But if Princess Luna wanted to discuss a treaty with them personally... Then it's possible that they would at least send a representative, but only to speak with Her Majesty, nopony else." Crimson eventually answered.

Starry Wing nodded, not looking surprised, '-that's unfortunate, but it seems like Nighthawk was right that they want nothing to do with us-'.

Only then did it occur to the thestral that perhaps that might've been a bit of a personal question to ask Crimson with an audience present. Even if there were only two other witnesses, one of whom

already knew everything, but the other was Prey.

'-ahh, the lamb's still just a child, so he probably doesn't get the context. Anyway, they're all in the same squad-', Starry Wing thought, foolishly dismissing it.

Starry Wing knew Prey wasn't just a lamb, in fact he'd thought as much not five minutes ago, but in the passing moment he'd forgotten about that. Which was perfectly alright with Prey. He didn't like the Lieutenant, too nice and good at his job as second in command. The less Starry Wing noticed, the better.

"I hope we won't have to call on you in this regard again in the future Crimson, but I hope if there is a need I can consult with you?" Starry Wing asked.

Starry Wing was a superior officer for one, and perhaps more importantly, a senior *clan* member for another, "Of course sir. I will serve Princess Luna in any way I can." Crimson answered simply.

Starry Wing nodded firmly, just once, "Good." His attention shifted to Gloom, and the pleasant smile came back.

"I have some news that you might find quite a pleasant surprise after all the hard work the ISND's been putting in recently, Sargent."

Prey wondered if thestrals had to practice smiling without showing off any fangs before they rejoined pony society. It was probably a habit they had to quickly adopt. Prey had practiced smiling himself, but not in the mirror of course. A smile was a useful tool, and there are so many things that could be hidden behind a good smile.

"There has been an unexpected change in our cross Guard schedule with the Royal Guard. A duo of squads who were supposed to be out of Canterlot tomorrow no longer need to go. Meaning there's some extra breathing room to go around, so two squads get a day off tomorrow. Congratulations, yours is one of them, Sargent." Starry Wing announced.

"Thank you sir, but we don't mind staying to help. Everypony is under a lot of pressure at the moment-"

"And we're going to be under a lot of pressure for the foreseeable future," Starry Wing cut Gloom off, "Which is why we're sending squads for their days off whenever we get the chance." He explained, thinking;

'-Tarturus, the Royal Guard only usually work four twelve hour days a week, the Night Guard is supposed to at least get *one* day off. It's only fair-'

Gloom hesitated for a moment, but he realised that Starry Wing wasn't doing this out of any favouritism. The Night Guard was supposed to have a mandatory day off every week, but so far since its creation, they'd had very little opportunity to do so.

'-actually, I don't think I've had more than one day off since I came here from my clan-', Gloom realised.

"Okay sir, thank you sir." He accepted.

"It'll do you good," The lieutenant said with a tired smile, then his eyes switched to the other two, and when next he spoke, it wasn't as Lieutenant Starry Wing, but as Starry Wing from the clans, "Crimson and Prey haven't seen how Canterlot lives yet. It would be a good idea to show them and to learn a bit yourself. We are all still newcomers here."

Gloom bowed his head, "Yes sir. We will talk about it later." He said, acknowledging Starry Wing's order.

"Then I'll take my leave. As you were." Starry Wing said, back to Lieutenant mode.

Prey hid the scowl he wanted to direct at Starry Wing's back as the Lieutenant left. 'He's trying to use positive reinforcement on us. He entered on a high and he leaves on a high, trying to influence us to subconsciously be happier next time he's in our presence.'

Starry Wing had started with good news, praising Gloom, then given them more work, the other case file. Then he'd shown Crimson kindness, promoting him, followed by asking Crimson a difficult question about his clan, then told them all good news, (the

day off tomorrow), before leaving.

Starry Wing hadn't needed to be nice. Crimson would have been promoted to the correct rank eventually, and Starry Wing would've given them the case file and asked his questions regardless. Yet he'd done it this way to purposefully not appear domineering despite his higher rank.

'Sneaky,' Prey thought as the door closed. The Lieutenant might not even have been doing any of it on purpose, maybe that's just the way he was, but Prey was still going to hold it against him.

"Well..." Gloom said after a pause, "That's some good news. Unexpected yes, but hardly unwelcome."

"Sir, I... We, that is to say, me and Prey, don't know anything about Canterlot." Crimson said.

"Then this'll be a great opportunity for all three of us, because I don't really know anything about how ponies live here either, outside of the Guard of course. So don't worry about it, this isn't some sort of test, it's just a day off." Gloom told him.

"Yes. One thestral, one runt lamb, and one exiled pegasus, all wondering around the capital of Equestria, seat of unicorn power, full of nobles and elitists. I'm sure it'll be wonderful." Prey commented cynically.

"*Prey*. Canterlot is not like whatever it is you seem to think. Princess Celestia has ruled here for millennia, it's the city of equality." Gloom snapped at Prey, quite sick of the lambs attitude, '-I thought we were getting past this-'

"You said you haven't been in Canterlot outside of guard duty either, sir," Prey pointed it out, "So how would you know?"

"And neither have you," Gloom responded curtly, "So expecting the worst will only mean you see the worst."

'You're in for a big disappoint,' Prey thought, 'Ponies are racist. They follow their Sun Tyrant in that regard, and we're in the middle her capital city, Canterlot. To top it off, Canterlot's filled by her chosen

of chosen, the cream of the crop, the new Unicornia, unicorns. There will be nothing but disdain for us tomorrow if we venture into the city.'

"How about going to some other town outside of Canterlot?" Prey suggested, looking for an alternative. He'd only been into Canterlot when either passing through to the train station, or going to Tulip Bed's house, but that was more than enough to make him despise the place.

For a brief moment, Prey could read that Gloom was half tempted. The Sargent wasn't blind to the public perception of Luna and her Night Guard despite he himself being far removed from having any interaction with the average civilian. (Arresting people didn't count as interaction).

"No, the Lieutenant suggested Canterlot, so we'll stay in Canterlot." Gloom decided.

Gloom sighed and poked his food tray, "Pass the pepper would you?" He said.

"To your left." Prey said.

Gloom blinked and looked down at the pepper shaker placed just beside his hoof, "Oh."

'-again? He's done that twice in a row now. Sneaky lamb is sneaky-', Gloom thought. "Then again, it's hardly a surprise given what we eat." Gloom mumbled to himself as he started to liberally grind pepper over his plate.

It was pasta kernels, the type that could be boiled by the pot full, before being sloshed out onto serving trays with grated cheese and hay tossed over it.

The pasta wasn't cooked all the way through, and hadn't been drained properly for that matter either. Is was probably one of the worse meals that the mess hall had served up since Prey'd gotten here. Actually, the surrounding ponies thoughts showed that this

meal was one of the less desirable meals served full stop.

Prey, after the customary pause to sniff and triple check his food for poison, started wolfing it down without complaint.

The surrounding thestral Night Guards in their corner of the mess hall picked half heartedly at their own trays. Crimson himself looked like he was struggling to summon up the motivation to eat more than a few forkfuls. 'Well he's going to get even thinner if he doesn't.' Prey snorted to himself.

If the pegasus wasn't going to finish his food, Prey wondered if he'd let him have it.

Gloom looked at Prey eating with something like resignation, '-like the kid said, food is food, heh?-' He thought, sighing and taking a mouthful, '-at least the pepper helps it go down, even if I now feel like I've got to sneeze-'

Prey abruptly shoved his meal away and ducked under the table.

'-what's he? Oh, Topaz Honey-', Gloom realised, looking up.

Sure enough, the overly friendly Earth pony mare was halfway to their table, the same familiar cheery smile brightening her features. "I don't think Prey likes her very much." Crimson opinioned, quietly enough that it didn't carry.

"I don't think Prey likes anyone." Gloom said tiredly, although he did chuckle a bit.

"Prey likes his family. Even if he never says it sir." Crimson said.

Gloom hadn't been expecting that as a response, "Huh...Alright, I'll rephrase that. I don't think Prey likes anyone who *isn't* family." Gloom agreed, standing to politely greet Topaz.

"Topaz Honey. Are you well?"

"Good evening Gloom and Crimson, and why yes, I don't think I could be better."

"That is good." Gloom agreed distractedly, obviously still caught up in his thoughts.

'-wait-', Gloom winced, '-the kid's father died. Maybe that's why he's so angry. How could I forget? I should cut him some more slack-', Gloom reprimanded himself.

He winced again as his eyes alighted on Crimson, who was exchanging a gravely serious greeting with a grinning Topaz.

'-and Crimson. Geez, I haven't been helping either of them deal with that-', Gloom thought, '-...ponyfeathers. I'm not the right pony for this job-'

"Aww, again? You sure he's not hiding under your wing?" Topaz Honey joked to Crimson.

"Prey may be small, but he would not fit under my wing." Crimson answered seriously.

"Hmm," Topaz humphed, seemingly a bit put out that her plans had been foiled again, '-I'm going to enlist help next time. That foal is in desperate need of a good hugging-'

"It was nice to chat, but I should go and eat something now before I need to get back," Topaz made a face, "Even if it does taste like a wet sponge. Do you think that's Cook's secret ingredient? Wet sponge?" She asked in a conspiratorial whisper.

"I have found no sponge as of yet in my pasta," Crimson said with a slow blink, "And little pasta either for that matter." He added after a second thinking about it.

Topaz laughed uproariously, and probably would've slapped Crimson on the back if they'd been sitting on the same side of the table, so instead she just wished them a good evening and a promise to catch, "That lamb next time." And waved them a goodbye.

"Great, now we've got to catch Prey again." Gloom sighed to himself. '-ha! Catch prey, like some kind of hunter-'

"I'll save you the trouble." Prey grumbled, appearing from nowhere and sitting back down, grabbing hold of his half finished plate of pasta.

"Oh. Well never mind then." Gloom shrugged, mind still thinking about what he should've been doing, and unthinkingly taking a forkful of pepper laden pasta.

"Gha!" Gloom coughed hoarsely, hastily making a grab for his cup.

That night, back in the lantern lit bunk room, Gloom decided they were going to do something a bit different from the usual 'show-and-tell'. Gloom announced as much outloud.

"I've decided we're going to something different tonight from the usual show and tell."

His grand decision was met with two pairs of eyes that merely blinked slowly at him. Not to be deterred, Gloom forged on, "The last few nights talking about something we learned each day hasn't really been working out, so we're going to mix it up a bit. Tonight, let's try sharing a riddle each."

"A riddle? I am not good at riddles sir." Crimson said dubiously.

"That's fine, I doubt any of us are," Gloom shrugged, "But lets give it a go anyway. It's just for a bit of fun."

"Then how about we just go to sleep instead? That's also fun." Prey suggested.

Gloom ignored him, '-I'm too tired after T-Day to think of anything else, so this is what we are going to do-'.

Gloom wasn't the only one with sore muscles left over from Cracker Smiles training day. Prey doubted getting up tomorrow was going to be a fun experience for any of them. He really didn't want to wake up with cramp.

"I can't think of one. A riddle I mean." Crimson stated.

"I'll go first then," Gloom decided, "Just let me think...Umm..."

When the silence started to drag, Prey muffled a cough.

"Hey, it isn't as easy as you'd think, just give me a minute." Gloom protested, scratching at his chest scar. '-I suggested we do this, so why can't I think of any? Think, think, I must have heard one before that I can share-'

"Since you're having trouble finding a riddle intellectually challenging enough for us, sir, why don't I go first with something simple?" Prey suggested sweetly.

Gloom didn't rise to the bait, "If you can think of a good riddle, then by all means go ahead." He said, waving for Prey to proceed.

"As you wish, answer this; what flies when it’s born, lies when it’s alive, and runs when it’s dead?"

"That's tough." Gloom told him.

"Giving up already? Or would you like a hint?" Prey asked innocently.

"Let us have a chance to think." Crimson objected.

Gloom and Crimson both sat quietly on their bunks, or in Crimson's case on the bottom bunk under his top bunk, and tried to think up an answer to Prey's riddle.

"I don't even have a clue." Crimson was eventually forced to concede.

"Is it a... type of bird?" Gloom guessed.

"No."

"How about a letter sent by magic?"

"Still no."

"Err...A bee, no wait, a fallen leaf?" Gloom tried.

"Nope."

"Then I have no idea. Your riddle is too difficult Prey, how about something easier?" Gloom asked, a tad frustrated at his failure.

Prey rolled his eyes, but didn't protest and just launched into the next, *easier*, riddle, "What has two ends but no start?"

"Wait, aren't you going to tell us the answer to the first riddle?" Crimson protested.

"Doesn't that take the fun out of it?" Prey asked, "What's the use of a puzzle if someone else gives you the answer?"

"Somepony." Gloom automatically corrected.

"Not a pony."

"Alright, fair in this instance." Gloom conceded.

"What was the answer?" Crimson asked again.

Prey tossed one ear over his shoulder in a show of open disdain for Crimson's want to be given the answer, "The point of a riddle is to figure it out for yourself. Even if you can't figure it out immediately, you save it for later." Prey told him.

"I think we're starting to take this a bit too seriously, we're only sharing riddles." Gloom put in, '-kid takes his puzzles very seriously it seems-'

"Well it's your loss," Prey shrugged, "What flies when it’s born, lies when it’s alive, and runs when it’s dead? The answer is a snow flake." He explained. Crimson and Gloom both thought for a moment as they examined the riddle again now that they had the key.

"I wouldn't have gotten that." Crimson decided.

"I don't think I would've either, that was a hard one. What was that second riddle you had?" Gloom asked.

"It wasn't a very good one, I think someone else should have a turn." Prey waved it off.

"No, come on, I'm interested now." Gloom insisted.

Prey held back for a second, then shrugged, "Okay. What has two ends but no start?" He repeated.

The other two both went silent again as they pondered on his riddle. Prey could of course see all the possible answers that Gloom was thinking through, and Crimson's mental walls even thinned, enough that Prey was able to actually hear a thought from the Pegasus; '-string...?-'

"Rope." Gloom suddenly guessed.

"Yes," Prey told him, "Although I suppose string would've also been correct." He added. He didn't look at Crimson, but he caught the Pegasus's wing twitch out of the corner of his eye with satisfaction.

"That wasn't too hard, better than the last one. How about you Crimson, can you think of a riddle?" Gloom asked.

Crimson blinked slowly as he considered it, "There is one I have heard before. One good riddle, I mean. Here it is; what eats forests and and drinks rivers, gnaws mountains to stubs and can devour the mightiest warrior and spit out naught but dust?"

Crimson's words jarred in Prey's ears, catching him completely off guard, "A Hungry Thing." Prey gasped, not realising he'd spoken until both Gloom and Crimson looked at him questioningly.

"A what?" Gloom asked.

Prey's jaw snapped shut and he quickly schooled his features into boredom, "Nothing, wrong answer. The correct answer is supposed to be time, isn't it?"

"Correct. That didn't take you very long." Crimson said.

A faint frown appeared on Gloom's brow, "Is there something the matter Prey?" He asked.

Prey realised he was nervously tapping at his bed covers and stilled his hoof. Normally he would never have let such an obvious tell slip through, but Crimson's riddle had thrown him off kilter. Unfortunately, Gloom just so happened to be looking at Prey's hoof when he stopped tapping, thus creating another obvious give away he should've noticed.

"Is something the matter?" Gloom repeated, but more insistent this time.

Prey knew he had to give the Sargent something or else Gloom's slight concern might grow into bothersome genuine concern, "It's nothing that you need to worry about, Crimson just caught me off guard and I thought of something else."

"Oh?" Gloom commented.

"A wolf," Crimson blurted out. Gloom quirked an ear at Crimson, "Pardon?"

"Prey's scared of wolves. He think he thought I meant a wolf, I think. With the riddle, I mean." Crimson awkwardly explained. He blinked and only then seemed to realise that he perhaps shouldn't have shared what he thought Prey's fear was out loud, "I...shouldn't have said that."

"Forget about it." Prey scowled, secretly grateful for Crimson's unintentional save. He hadn't even needed to come up with an excuse himself, Crimson had already dived in and made a mess of it for him.

Crimson really was like a young child when it came to interpersonal relationships. Thinking, or rather hoping, he had something figured out, and then making a social blunder with what he thought he knew, without realising until it was too late.

Crimson looked relieved at Prey's dismissal of his mistake, or as relieved as Crimson ever looked, "My apologies Prey." He said.

"No no, Prey is scared of wolves?" Gloom asked with interest, and perhaps a touch of amusement too. Maybe because the lamb who

always acted so tough and complicated was actually had a mundane phobia. Actually, that's *exactly* what Gloom was thinking, Prey was uniquely qualified to testify to that fact.

"Timberwolves." Crimson emphasised, with a glance to Prey, obviously unsure how to proceed in this situation. Should he explain on Prey's behalf since it was he who'd let it slip, or should he shut up and keep quiet?

"Timberwolves," Gloom repeated, "Okay, I can see how those things could be scary. They're creepy and vicious, but if you know what you're doing they're not really dangerous."

Prey had been looking to quit the conversation as soon as possible, but Gloom's words were almost offensive in their inaccuracy, "Not dangerous? Are you sure we're talking about the same monsters here? Magically animated wooden husks, green eyes, night vision, the ability to reassemble themselves, travels in packs?" He asked flatly.

"I can promise you Prey that they're not as dangerous as you think." Gloom told him in a misguided attempt to reassure the lamb, secretly a bit amused but still doing the right thing.

"If my memory's correct, clan Childara haven't lost a single pony to Timberwolves in living memory, and we've had to fight a lot of monsters. As long as you're careful Prey, Timberwolves aren't dangerous. Scary maybe, but not dangerous." Gloom insisted.

"Sir, they are dangerous. Prey explained his fear to me. It was quite rational." Crimson spoke up.

Prey didn't remember ever saying he was specifically 'afraid' of Timberwolves, he'd only commented that there were lots of things that scared him.

"What do you mean?" Gloom asked, "They're really not. They're not that fast, and all you need to do is fly up out of reach and you'll be fine..." Gloom trailed off as he seemed to finally remember he wasn't talking to another thestral.

Prey said flatly to Gloom, forcing the thestral to meet his eyes as he spoke each word, "I've already had this exact conversation with Crimson. I'm small, weak, don't have any wings or magic, and am probably very tasty. Timberwolves are a serious threat to me. Maybe not to you, with your nice pair of wings, but from my vertically challenged point of view, Timberwolves are definitely dangerous."

The mood had turned sour. Gloom's ears didn't exactly lower, as from his point of view it had been an honest mistake, but he still bowed his head and apologised, "I'm sorry Prey. I didn't think about how it might be for you."

Prey sniffed and turned away on his bed, "I'm going to sleep now." He announced, daring Gloom to contradict him.

Gloom didn't, he just awkwardly told Crimson that, "There's no point in continuing anything further tonight." And wound the alarm clock before wishing them, (or rather Crimson), a good night.

Prey wasn't actually really annoyed, but since Crimson had started the facade about Prey being frightened of wolves, Prey'd just gone along with it to change the topic. Besides, it'd provided a convenient excuse to pretend to be offended so he could cut the nights pointless activities short so they could go to sleep.

Actually, so the other *two* could go to sleep.

Prey was tired and sore from the training day, yes, and Crimson delayed them further by running through his warrior kata, (albeit a bit less vigorously than usual by dint of the aftereffects from T-Day), but eventually it was just Prey left awake, feigning sleep in the darkened bunk room.

Carefully, Prey let himself down off the side of his bunk onto the floorboards, letting his weight evenly settle.

He paused to listen, then silently began sneaking towards the bunk room door, picking his way between the dark outlines of bunk beds.

Upon reaching the door, Prey double checked Gloom and Crimson were both asleep, then reached into his wool and slid out a tightly folded length of paper that'd been hidden up tight against his skin.

It was the list for Lemon Pink. It'd been a chore to write it unobserved in the office, but not too difficult. It was safer and less conspicuous than meeting face to face again with his servant. Carefully, Prey slid the note under the door crack, so just the edge poked out on the far side.

Lemon Pink knew what to look for, and during her nightly rounds as a palace maid would pick it up before morning.

He wasn't worried about someone else reading the note even if it was found. It was written in code, one he'd created himself during the mindless years of Dreverton. He doubted anyone but one of the two alicorn goddesses could crack it. That's how confident he was in it.

It was an entirely made up language, which wasn't even based off Equoish, or Zebrican, or Griffonian, or any language or alphabet that he knew of, something Prey was quite proud of it.

It didn't read the standard left to right, or even right to left, but started in the middle of the page and spiralled. In place of letters or numbers were just tiny symbols, all of which had at least one interchangeable partner character, and many fakes ones meant to mislead.

As it stood, there were only two people in the world who could read this language. Prey and Lemon Pink. He was confident that if anyone else did find it by accident, they'd just throw it away as the mad scribblings of a child. Satisfied that the strip of paper was securely placed, Prey snuck back to his bunk.

However, Prey still didn't turn in for the night, despite his tiredness. He didn't have time for sleep, the runic array wasn't going to study these gold bands itself. The comforts of pillow and blanket, however delightful and tempting, would have to wait.

Prey still had work to do.

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Author's Notes:

My Editor is here: Thanks to him:, **Sweetolebob18**
If you notice any story indistinctness or spelling mistakes, please do point them out, it is appreciated.
Hope you enjoyed.

23.1 A Day at the Market

---The Past---

Floating in the ocean depths, a dream memory swirled past...

"*-Sour Pickle raised the ghoul from the poor remains of his recently expired father. How Sour Pickle performed this foul act of sorcery is still unclear. The most likely method is a twisted spell of intent fuelled by his own dark desires. Likely even Sour Pickle would've been unable replicate his black magic a second time. In an act of jealousy, Sour Pickle set his creation on Black Berry and her new fiancé; Hay Hammer. In the tragedy that ensued, Hay Hammer was murdered as he valiantly defended Black Berry."*

"Sour Pickle attempted to flee into the Everfree to escape justice. The Royal Guard found the remains of a unicorn matching Sour Pickle's description, half buried under the extinguished ghoul's corpse. It was concluded that his foul creation had turned on its creator. The remains were later positively identified by a distraught Black Berry. May Hay Hammer rest in peace - 15th May."

Prey tossed the crumpled page away. It had been one of a number of loose pages clumsily bound into a makeshift book he'd stolen, "Worthless." He hissed.

There was nothing in there that could help him kill Border Guards. Why was that even counted as forbidden knowledge? Simply because it mentioned death and violence? Ponies were cowards, pathetic cowards, they thought if they hid from the cruel reality, the world would change to match their perspective. Anything that didn't fit into their ideals was forbidden, ostracised, or destroyed.

Like him. Well, not if he destroyed them first.

Prey pulled on his mask and snuck out from the thorn bush that hid the entrance to his tiny cave. He sniffed the wild air of the Deeper Green, alert for danger.

"I'll get you yet Captain Fire Strike. Just be patient." He whispered to himself.

---The Present---

As Celestia's sun rose over her capital city, with the warm early morning light chasing away the night's shadowy chill, Canterlot began to resume its normal life. Servants could be seen exiting various noble's mansions onto the pristine streets. Their destinations were the bakeries and fresh produce stores in the lower city, where the door signs had just been flipped to 'Open'.

Fruits and vegetables which had arrived on the night train were barely put on display by sleepy shop owners before their wares were being sampled by these early birds. Pegasi couriers flitted overhead with their urgent deliveries as the enchanted crystal street lamps smoothly dimmed themselves, now unneeded. Spires and towers began to glisten and shine as the sun reached just the right height in the sky.

To anyone who knew anything about this fine city, this was all the norm. It would still be some hours before the normal Canterlot population arose and everyday business began, but it already looked like the start of another perfect day in the heart of Equestria.

What would have gone unnoticed to the casual observer were the Night Guard patrols finishing their shift and slipping back in through the Guard Compound entrance, their nightly job having been carried out and accomplished unobserved. Royal Guard patrols would soon replace them for the day shift, their well known and resplendent gold armour easily recognised and respected by all.

At the Palace's gilded gates, fresh Royal Guards unlocked the golden gates and prepared to receive the early Day Court petitioners who were hoping to beat the rush for a chance to meet their princess.

What also might've gone unobserved was the exit of three individuals from the Guard Compound entrance. It was a bit unusual for these individuals to be leaving from this gate, as none wore Guard armour. But then again, they were an unusual group.

A red pegasus, a thestral *disguised* as a grey pegasus, and perhaps most out of place, a small lamb.

"We should have stayed for breakfast." Prey protested.

"No. It's always disgusting." Gloom said, adjusting the saddle bag on his flank.

"It's free. Never pass up free food." Prey insisted.

"Just because it's free doesn't mean it's worth eating."

"When the alternative is not eating, then yes it is."

"Then you've no need to worry, we're still going to get breakfast to fill that little hungry belly of yours." Gloom responded with an eye roll. Under the effects of the dusk pony amulet, his eyes just appeared yellow instead of additionally slitted, now matched Crimson's. He also wore a lanky black scarf draped over his neck and down his chest to cover the scar tissue.

"Breakfast in the mess hall is free. Food in Canterlot is not free. We have no money, therefore, we cannot buy food. Sir." Prey pointed out.

"I'm just Dusky Gloom today," Gloom corrected Prey absentmindedly, stopping at a intersection to check the sign for directions, "And you do have money. Did you forget you get paid for working in the ISND?"

"That as it may be, but there is no money in that saddle bag of yours. We can't buy food with what we don't have."

Gloom paused and looked back at his well worn saddle bag, "How did you know that?" He asked.

"We were all in the same room when you packed it." Prey shrugged.

"Ah, of course. Anyway, that's not quite right. Here, let's stop for a second." Gloom said, stepping to the side of the marble street, under

a potted tree.

He pulled open his saddle bag with a wing and fished around inside. Because of the dusk pony amulet, the illusionary wing seemed to impossibly hook the flap open, as the blunt claw on the end of the thestral's wing joint was hidden under the illusion. Luckily, there was hardly anyone out on this small street yet, not that anyone would've been watching that closely anyway.

"Here you go." Gloom said, distributing a brown envelope each to Prey and Crimson.

"What is this sir?" Crimson asked, examining the clerical office's seal stamped on the back.

"Not sir, just Gloom today Crimson, and these are your payslips," Gloom explained, "First stop is the bank and getting you each set up with an account. Then they'll deposit this money into that account."

"Bank sir? Err-Gloom sir?" Crimson asked blankly.

"Just Gloom. And the Royal Canterlot Bank is an institute that was set up Princess Celestia, in the last hundred years I understand. It's a place where they hold and store your money for you, it's like..." Gloom hesitated, a bit unsure himself, '-how do you explain a bank?-' He wondered. Evidently, the clans didn't have banks.

"See, so a bank works like this..."

"So this bank keeps your money, and then you have to go and ask them when you want it back? And this bank is only in Canterlot, so everyone-"

"-Every*pony*."

"-Has to either make payments to other people-"

"-Ponies."

"-within the same bank, or else has to go in and withdraw the

money themselves first. Is that correct?"

A pause.

"I think that's more or less how it works, yes."

"....Just so you know, I can think of at least three ways to defraud the bank off the top of my head."

Sigh "*Prey*."

"Sir, I mean no offence, but why is this a good idea?"

'-Tarturus if I know-' "It's how all of the Guard is paid. Just fly with the wind and don't question the craziness of it."

Pause, "And it's just Gloom."

So here they were, inside the Royal Canterlot Bank.

The bank's solid ebony doors had barely been unlocked for more than fifteen minutes when they'd arrived. Only one of the marble counters had been open for service this early, but they hadn't even needed to queue in the designated braided gold rope line because there were no other non-staff here yet.

Now they were sitting in a bank clerk's office, setting up accounts for Crimson and Prey. Technically, since there were only two free seats available, Gloom was standing. Prey's height had necessitated him having one of the chairs so he could actually see the confused clerk over the desk, and Gloom had insisted Crimson take the other. It was a bit cramped with all three of them in here plus the clerk.

Gloom already had his bank account that had been set up when he first arrived, as did the rest of the thestrals joining Luna's service (it hadn't made much sense to the clanners then either), so now Gloom was taking them through the arduous process of setting up an account for themselves.

The thin clerk cleared his throat, "Well, this is a bit irregular, but-"

He looked down at the two payslips, "-It can be done."

His eyes darted to Gloom, who he'd been informed was an off duty Sargent in the Night Guard, which had also prompted the clerk into being much more helpful. '-reassuring to see that it's not all run by those bat ponies-'

"But, um, the foal, err, lamb is a minor Mr. Dusky Gloom. She needs a legal parent or guardian to be present and sign for-"

"I'll do it. There's no problem with that, is there?" Gloom asked. He kept his tone polite, but the nervous clerk didn't take it that way and swallowed.

"No no, that'll be fine, you don't have to worry about it. Ehem, I just need to take down a few details and then we'll be able to issue these two fine ponies, err, pony and sheep, with their bank account details and you can be on your way." The clerk hurriedly assured Gloom. Prey was doing his 'innocent little lamb' act, and wasn't contributing to the conversation, and Crimson evidently wasn't completely sure what was going on.

The clerk shuffled his papers, "Right, may I please ask the name you wish to start the account under?" He asked, addressing the question to Gloom.

"They're in front of you, ask them." Gloom shrugged.

"Oh, right." The clerk blinked, shifting his posture, "Name please?" He asked.

"Crimson Trace."

"Thank you. And yours young miss?"

"Prey."

"P-Prey?" The clerk stuttered for a moment at the unfortunate name, "Ehem, excuse me, um, Prey...?"

"Just Prey."

"Umm...A second name is usually a necessary step in-"

"It's just Prey. Also, I'm a Mr."

"Ahh...err...*cough* Would you excuse me one minute while I go and double check if that's acceptable-"

"What? You mean I have to be a ewe?" Prey asked in pretend puzzlement, tilting his head quizzically, making sure to get the wide eyed confusion just right.

"No no, I mean, that's not... *Ehem* No, I meant a second name is usually necessary for our policies..."

"Prey, don't play with the poor clerk," Gloom chastised. "Sir," He said, speaking to the clerk now, "If you could please just set up some normal accounts, that'll be fine. As long as they can both withdraw money, I doubt they'll care about the investment stuff and all that."

"Actually Gloom sir, I would like to hear everything explained in full before I give my word to anything." Crimson spoke up, blowing a strand of mane out of his face so he could more fully fix his bright yellow gaze on the unfortunate clerk.

"My word is my bond. I want to make sure I know what I am swearing to." Crimson said.

'-and it was looking like the start to such a perfect day-', The clerk thought to himself unhappily.

Surprisingly enough, they were out of the clerk's mane within ten minutes, Crimson and Prey both with brand new bank accounts in their names, a sheaf of official papers, and a bank book to go along with it.

Thankfully, Gloom offered to put it all in his saddle bag for now. Prey didn't own a thing to his name and thus hadn't ever needed a bag to carry anything in before now. He planned to throw all those papers off the side of Canterlot later anyway. Everything he needed

to get money out of the bank he could recall without even having to try. His own name, the account name, account number, and password.

Really, it was a wonder someone hadn't robbed this place bank already. There were so many loop holes that Prey could see in their system, and he hadn't held his account for more than ten minutes.

'The Royal Canterlot Bank...' Prey looked back to consider the tall, ornate building as they left.

'Just another way of Celestia keeping everyone in line.' He decided.

From his understanding, the Royal Bank had been instituted by the Sun Princess, combining many tasks that the former common mint and treasury used to oversee. Prey *did* notice that despite its name of the Canterlot *Royal* Bank, the Royal Treasury funds were still kept private and separate.

By instituting the law to make all her Guards receive their pay through the bank, Celestia was effectively enforcing the use and support of said bank. The Royal Guards usage wasn't enough to keep the bank running by itself, but Celestia also now routed most of her official policies that involved money through the bank too, and the citizens of Canterlot were slowly following suit. In their minds, if Princess Celestia thought it was a good idea, then it must be.

They didn't seem to realise it meant that the bank held all their wealth, and if something went wrong, then they would lose everything.

It also meant they could now tax you more easily. As Prey understood it, if they wanted to, the tax pony had the power to go to the bank and withdraw gold from your account to pay the tax. That could so easily be abused by any unscrupulous tax pony.

Mentioning tax, it had already been deducted on what Prey had earned, with the bank taking another small fee for itself, because why not? If Prey cared more about the money, he might've been a lot more vocal about paying tax to the Sun Wolf. He despised

Celestia and everything she stood for. She wasn't his princess, and she'd never done anything for him, so why should he pay her tax? But since money didn't hold any real value to Prey, he didn't make a fuss.

Prey currently had one hundred and forty three bits in his bank account after the tax pony took his cut. He still found it incredible that he, a conscripted criminal, was getting paid. Incredibly naive and idiotic that is. But if that's how they wanted to play it, who was Prey to argue?

Even if he didn't place much stock in money, it was better to have it than to not.

Gloom cleared his throat, a bit stuck for how to say his next point, "Prey, Crimson, not to tell you how to spend your own money, but you need to leave one hundred bits in your account, and a hundred in following weeks too."

Prey's eyes went wide, 'What? You mean this is just *one* week's pay?'

He'd thought that this was at least a month's payment , probably several, paid in advance. But it was just one week?

"Why sir? I mean, that's fine, but what's the reason?" Crimson asked. Prey already knew the reason, because he could read people's thoughts, but there hadn't been any mention of the size of the sums of money involved, which was why he was so surprised.

"You're going to need it for a deposit on a flat. Eventually." Gloom said.

"A flat?" Crimson blinked.

"Yes, you didn't think you were going to be stuck bunking in the barracks forever, did you?" Gloom answered, giving them that lopsided grin. It wasn't quite the same without the fangs though.

"What I think Crimson means is; why are you letting us out of your sight? Because of, you know, this and all that?" Prey asked, pointedly lifting one foreleg to show off the golden tracer band.

"Prey, this isn't going to be like some prison or community sentence. You don't want that, and I hope you know that I don't either. You were given a second chance by Princess Luna, and as you prove you can responsibly be granted freedom, more will be given to you. Not quite yet I'm afraid, but you're working towards it. The time when you can walk freely by yourself isn't as far away as you think." Gloom told them both.

"What, completely freely?" Prey asked, shocked.

Gloom's yellow gaze looked sympathetic, but he was resolute, "Within reason, and with some restrictions still in place. Just to be safe, you understand." He answered, looking at the golden bands on their legs.

'Of course not, it could never be that simple.' Prey thought bitterly.

For a moment, Gloom's words had wildly raised his hopes of such a simple solution. Just play along and be obedient for long enough, and you'll be set free. But that would be too easy, wouldn't it?

Gloom was still speaking, "-But eventually, you'll need to each get your own flat. I'm told rent for a single bedroom is about 50 to 60 bits a week, but apparently you'll also need a deposit. A deposit is sort of like a lump payment up front. Saving a hundred bits each week is getting ready for that."

Fifty to sixty each week? Prey sucked in a breath. That sounded extortionate. On the farm, Gossamer, Fleece and their mother had barely earned about three hundred bits a year from selling all their crops, and almost every single coin of that went to taxes, paying off the lease, or seed crop for the next season.

Evidently, the value of money vastly differed on this side of the mountain range, since he was fairly certain that the value of gold hadn't suddenly dropped *that* much in fifty seven years. That and he had one hundred and fifty three bits from just one week's work.

It made Prey realise just how poor they'd really been. Not Green Fields and the other Earth pony landowners, but him and the other villagers who'd had to survive under their hooves.

"Why will a flat be necessary, would it not be better to sleep in the bunk rooms to be closer to our posts?" Crimson asked.

Gloom gave his head a half shake, "You could do that," He allowed, "But I feel it would be bad for you, for your development let's say, in the long run. Do you not want your independence?"

"I... if that's what you think would be best sir."

"No, it's Gloom. I'm giving you this advice as your friend, not as Sargent Gloom. It's..." Gloom waved a hoof about as he looked for the right words, "I mean, I *am* doing this because it's my duty, but I'm doing it *more* because I think it'll be good for you. For all of us, actually."

'-we are a team, and need to develop together. It's a tough decision to split us up, but my cutie mark feels we'll develop more if we do it this way. Probably. At least it's not for a while yet-'

Gloom was looking at Prey. "What?" Prey demanded.

"No protests?" Gloom asked.

"Why would I protest?" Prey asked.

Gloom looked up at the sky instead of meeting Prey's eye, then winced as the sun light struck him and looked back down instead. "Because you're stingy. You keep saying free food is better and all that. So I'm waiting for your protests about not needing to pay for a flat when there's a perfectly good bunkhouse." Gloom said, deciding just to give the blunt answer.

'Shows how much you know.' Prey thought.

Being allowed to escape from under anyone else's watchful eye for any length of time was a win in Prey's book, so he could work and scheme in secret. It would make life so much easier if he could spend the nights unmonitored, there were still so many secret tests he needed to run. And now Gloom was naively offering him that chance? Of course he wasn't going to protest.

"A flat to myself sounds great. Why would I protest that?" Prey

asked.

"Oh, well, good then." Gloom said, a bit caught of guard. '-am I missing something? Wait, does that mean the kid can't wait to get away from me?-'

"Actually, I've just realized that it might be a bit difficult for you to get a flat Prey, because, well..." Gloom cast a meaningful eye over Prey.

"Because I'm a child runt, and a lamb to hoof in a city full of ponies?" Prey guessed sarcastically.

Gloom pulled a face and nodded.

"Just do what you did at the bank and order them to do it. Yes, yes, I know we have no authority over civilians, but just throw your weight around a bit, mention you're a Sargent in the Night Guard, take off the dusk pony amulet, and I'll bet the landlord will be falling over him or herself to give us, me, the room." Prey suggested, already knowing the Sargent would not approve.

"This is a conversation we can have closer to the time. It's not a problem for now." Gloom said, putting it off. Although secretly he was considering Prey's suggestion, if only because it sounded much easier than having to try and find the correct paperwork.

Gloom cleared his throat briskly, "I believe the point of getting sidetracked to the bank was so that we could finally get something decent to eat, for at least one morning this week. Let's go and do that, shall we?"

Crimson looked around where they stood on the street corner, "Where would we be allowed to go?" He asked, considering the upscale and posh buildings all about them.

"We're allowed to go anywhere, you know. There's no law saying, 'rich ponies only'." Gloom told him.

"Yes si-Gloom. Where should we go then?"

Gloom checked out the street too, looking at some of the fine

restaurants, '-I bet they cost a fortune. Don't feel comfortable anyway-'

"Not here." Gloom decided.

"Then to lower Canterlot we go. That's where you planned to go all along anyway, right?" Prey put in.

"How did you know that?" Gloom asked, but without much surprise that Prey would somehow know. '-just seems normal by this point-'

Prey gave Gloom a bored look and explained, "This place is only for pony elite and nobility. None of us live in Canterlot, we don't know the social rules, and since we don't want to make a scene, lower Canterlot is the only alternative. We may be walking out here with everypony else, but we're still nothing but outsiders."

Prey had a point, but Gloom still felt the need to try and improve the lambs negative attitude.

"They're all still just normal ponies like you and me with their own lives. There's nothing wrong with that." He chastised Prey.

Prey raised an eyebrow up at Gloom, then looked pointedly at the dusk pony amulet around the thestrals neck.

'Oh really? Then why do you feel it necessary to wear that then?' His look clearly said.

Since Prey didn't say anything out loud, Gloom copied him back and didn't either, choosing to take the moral high ground and move on. He cleared his throat and looked forwards into the city again.

"Anyway, breakfast. There's a small all day and night...cafe? I think that's what such places are called. Anyway, a few Night Guards have been there before. I say we go try it." Gloom paused, "And *yes*, it just so happens to be in lower Canterlot."

Prey and Crimson both stood waiting.

"Well?" Gloom asked them after a pause.

"Well? Well what?" Crimson repeated blankly.

"Do you want to try it?" Gloom asked.

"We're just following your lead. You're the one carrying the bits." Prey pointed out.

"If you don't want to go, just say and we'll go somewhere else." Gloom said.

"Go where else?" Crimson asked.

"Is there some reason you know of for we shouldn't want to? Did you have any alternatives in mind if that's the case?" Prey joined in.

Gloom threw up his hooves, the normally easy going but firm thestral moved to wordless exasperation. He was hungry, he'd already dealt with one annoying clerk this morning, he wasn't on duty, and he just wanted to get some breakfast, "Never mind, let's just go to the cafe."

The cafe that Gloom had heard about from another of the few Night Guards who'd ventured out into Canterlot was called, rather drolly, The Happy Customer.

Prey didn't approve of the place, but he supposed it could've been worse.

The cafe wasn't on the main street. The outside dining area was actually in a small courtyard, with chairs and tables set out with sunflower patterned table cloths. 'Courtyard' was perhaps a bit of a strong word. Think more an open square of paved slate, that just so happened to be formed by interconnecting buildings on three sides.

The only real redeeming quality of The Happy Customer (as far as Prey was concerned), was that it allowed guests to sit so they could watch the street and entrance to the impromptu courtyard, while keeping a solid wall to their back.

Being some of the first customers of the day, they had the small

dining courtyard all to themselves. The Happy Customer only seemed to have two staff, a cook and a waiter, both Earth ponies, which Prey supposed counted for another point in the eatery's favour. It made them less of a potential threat.

Plus, he'd been within five meters of both of ponies, and seen that they weren't thinking about poisoning the three of them.

He wasn't being paranoid.

Prey hated a lot of things, but he was actually very easy to please. Just leave him alone, and don't try to kill him. That was an honest desire, just to be left alone and be safe. That was all he wanted. There was no grand scheme of world domination or the like. His biggest desire in life was to be safely left alone.

It was kind of pathetic, when you thought about it like that.

"Tomato and cheese grill with the zucchini salad please." Gloom informed the blue Earth pony waiter mare.

"I will have that too please miss." Crimson said tonelessly. He was sitting straight and correctly postured in his chair, and hadn't even picked up the battered menu. Evidently he'd planned to order whatever Gloom ordered from the start. He certainly looked like he could use the food after skipping breakfast in the mess hall.

"Certainly." The mare said, making a quick scribble on her note pad, "And what would you like for her?" She asked, nodding and smiling at Prey. The Earth ponies had been thrown by a sheep in Canterlot, but had smiled and greeted their new customers anyway, even if privately they thought it was very out of place for a non-pony to be in Canterlot. Not so private with Prey around.

"Her?" Gloom asked blankly.

"Your ah, lamb?" She asked Gloom after a second's uncertainty.

Gloom took a moment to catch on, "You can just ask him." He shrugged

The blue mare blinked, '-oh, right, duh. I'll make a suggestion from the foal's menu if she can't read, wait, she's a *he*? Oops-',

"Well little colt, ah, ram, do you need more time to decide or some help choosing?" She asked, smiling again.

Prey smiled back with his 'number two angelic innocence' smile while thinking, 'I could make you cry. All I would need to do is start asking questions.' But he wasn't seriously considering doing it. Gloom and Crimson were both present, and it would be nothing more than petty vindictiveness on his part.

So he just kept up the sweet smile and answered her in a voice filled with childish happiness, "Can I please have the leek and potato salad? It sounds great."

"Of course, coming right up." The mare chirped, bobbing a quick acknowledgement and heading back for The Happy Customer's kitchen. The moment her back was turned, Prey's smile dropped.

Gloom didn't offer one of his usual comments.

'-it's my day off, I'll deal with the kids behavioural problems after breakfast-' He decided. Crimson just flicked his wing and sniffed at Prey.

That left the three of them sitting in the courtyard amid the empty tables, waiting for breakfast to arrive as the sunlight continued to strengthen.

The courtyard walls provided some limited shade, and it wasn't in direct sunlight either, but Gloom was noticeably having to squint. Crimson too, to a lesser extent.

When ten minutes had passed in discomfort, Gloom finally stood up, "Let's move tables." He said, gesturing to one in the far corner of the courtyard and the most shielded from the sun. As a matter of fact, the chosen corner would've been dim to a normal pony, and certainly not a desirable spot to sit and eat breakfast on such a perfect morning.

It suited one thestral and one thestral clan exile just fine.

Prey didn't want to move, this seat provided a good seat to surreptitiously watch anyone coming or going, but he couldn't just state his reasons to Gloom, because that would upset the Sargent. So he just sighed and hopped down off his chair.

"Much better." Gloom mumbled once they were in the shade.

When the waitress came back out a minute later with their food balanced on her back, she was surprised they weren't sitting where she'd left them, but over in the corner instead.

"Was there a problem with the other seats or the table?" She asked.

"Not at all, we just wanted to sit over here." Gloom assured her.

"Are you sure? It's much nicer over there in the sun, and if the seats were uncomfortable or something I'm sure I can-"

"No really, it wasn't a problem. We just want to sit here, thank you.

"Oh I understand. But these really aren't the best seats, you should sit over there if you want, it's no trouble-"

"Thank you, but we want to sit here."

"But I could always-"

"-Here is fine. Thank you." Gloom interrupted, finally succeeding in getting the mare to leave them alone. '-moon send me strength, why must she be so pushy?-'

The problem was, that was how ponies behaved. They felt it was their right, and in many cases their Celestia given duty, to ask questions and try to be helpful to their fellow pony. However, that open and helpful nature only extended to other ponies and those who fit in. Prey was 99 percent certain that if Gloom hadn't been wearing the dusk pony amulet, they would've struggled to get the mare to even serve them.

"Finally, something not ruined by Cookie." Gloom sighed, taking a deep whiff of his grilled cheese and tomato. It certainly looked like it tasted good, and Prey's potato and leek salad did too.

This was the first time in his life Prey had eaten at any establishment. The Deeper Green and Dreverton had been distinctly lacking in cafes. As a result, it was a bit of a surreal experience to sit at a posh table, and pay someone to cook and present his meal to him, like some sort of lord.

'Is this what Canterlot ponies do everyday? Is this is what is considered normal?' He wondered.

He snuck a glance at Crimson, knowing the red pegasus wouldn't have experienced any of this before either. Crimson was just blinking down at his steaming food, his thoughts obviously miles away.

"There's no need to wait," Gloom said, having already taken a large bite of his toasted sandwich, "*Hoooh*, still hot." He gasped.

Prey checked his food for poison (as always), while Gloom continued to eat despite having just said his food was too hot. Crimson was also almost gingerly considering his own food. Evidently, it wasn't what he'd been expecting.

"This is...normal food for a citizen in Canterlot?" Crimson asked.

"Not too sure. Maybe? Perhaps when eating at a cafe? Food is much more diverse and readily available than it was back in the clans, and especially in Canterlot. Trade comes in from all over Equestria, things like mango too." Gloom took another large bite.

"Mango?" Crimson asked, sounding vaguely interested.

"Haven't seen any yet I'm afraid. This is good though, eat up." Gloom answered through his mouthful.

With Gloom's encouragement, Crimson did so, digging into his toasted sandwich with at first reluctance, then increased willingness as he discovered it tasted far better than the mess hall meals.

Prey's potato salad wasn't bad either. He wasn't concerned about taste, only that his food wasn't poisoned and that there was plenty of it. Originally that is.

Prey hadn't had a potato leek salad before. In fact, he'd never eaten a leek in his life. Some of the herbs in the salad he wasn't so sure about, but they hadn't tasted bad. It was...tasty actually. Tasty. Enjoyable. Not just eating for the sake of survival.

Prey looked down at his empty bowl, all but licked clean, 'I've never really had that privilege before.' He thought. He remembered the cupcake that the Solar Guard Sunshine had shared with him. To have such choice and luxury available...

Gloom fished the bits out of his saddle bag, removing an equal amount from each of the three bags to pay for their meals, '-that was completely worth sitting in the sun for-' Gloom thought, looking satisfied, '-but then, eating grass is preferable to Cookie's witch brews-'

"That was certainly good." Crimson opinioned.

"So, would you say it was worth it Prey?" Gloom asked.

"Food is food. The taste is appreciable certainly, but as long as I am not starving to death, I shan't complain." Prey shrugged.

Gloom sighed, "I give up." He said, leaning back leisurely in his seat.

"What happens now?" Crimson asked after a moment, looking around the dining courtyard.

"Now? Now it's our day off." Gloom answered.

"Oh. So what do we do?" Crimson asked.

Gloom shrugged, looking unhurried, "It's our day off. That means we can do whatever we want, within reason of course. The day's only just begun."

A moment of silence passed as they all looked around again. Prey spotted the waitress through the window of The Happy Customer waiting for them to make a sign that they were finished so she could come out and take the money.

"What now?" Crimson eventually asked, watching a pony couple walk past the courtyard entrance.

"Now we go and do our stuff for the day." Gloom answered simply.

"What stuff would that be?"

"Stuff we need to do. A day off is a respite period to get your affairs in order so you can more effectively perform your duty during the rest of the week." Gloom said.

"Ah, that is wise. Duty comes first." Crimson nodded.

"True, but this is still a day off. There will be time to relax after we're done. That's important as well." Gloom told him.

Crimson digested those words, "Relax?" He asked.

"That's what I said." Gloom agreed, still seemingly quite content after the good food.

"I'm not....This is not the clans. What do ponies do in Canterlot to relax?" Crimson asked.

"You know, stuff. Whatever they want." Gloom answered vaguely.

Crimson paused, "And what are we allowed to do?" He asked.

"We're not- We are *allowed* to do what everypony can, we're all citizens." Gloom said, then remembered he was talking to two people who could be considered ex-convicts in many ways. "You're free by law. Nopony's going to stop you or forbid you from going somewhere everypony else is also allowed to go." He assured them.

"So...What shall we do?" Crimson asked, bringing up the important question, "Once we have seen to our other tasks, that is."

Gloom realised he didn't have an answer, '-how should I know? I just brought us out into Canterlot because that's what you're supposed to do on your day off-'

Prey gave Gloom a shrewd look, "You don't know Canterlot life, do

you? You're like both of us. We're all outsiders, trying to act normal and fit in, unsure of just how the average pony lives in Canterlot." He said, waving at the city outside of the courtyard.

Over the course of their meal, many more ponies had emerged as the morning started to progress, and were now trotting happily up and down the open street. Despite this being the lower middle class area, the ponies walking past still all appeared well off. Almost everyone of them wore articles of clothing anyway.

Prey's words were true. None of them fitted in, or even vaguely felt like they fitted in. They were part of the Night Guard, serving under the recently returned Princess Luna, and officially citizens of Canterlot. That didn't make the blindest bit of difference, they were still; '-all outsiders-'. However, only one of them was willing to admit that.

"You're choosing to only see the negative and giving up too quickly Prey. Not everything is against us you know." Gloom criticised him, sliding off his seat and standing up, "And I'll prove it. Come, we'll do what we have to, and then you are going to go and find something fun to do. I don't care what, but we're not going back until we've each done something fun."

Once they'd paid the bill, Gloom made a list of what they needed to do today. There was quite a lot of it. All those things that couldn't be done while constantly working overtime in the ISND had started to stack up.

Of course, there was a big difference between what Prey would class as essential and what Gloom classed as essential. However, there was an even bigger difference between what the three of them would call a necessity, and what the citizens of Canterlot called a necessity

Having each come from an austere life style, living with very little and often in some real form of danger of one kind or another, Prey, Gloom, and Crimson all had very little regard for the trappings of life that they passed on the marble streets.

For instance, the latest hat fashion was of zero concern to them, even if the hat store they passed aggressively advertising their wares obviously thought differently. Frilled hats, gold, silver or ribbon laced, cocked hats, wide brimmed, peaked, peacock feathered, russet red, topaz blue, and emerald green to name a few. Who cared?

Apparently, the 'fashionable' ponies of Canterlot did.

All three of them gave the hat stand a wide berth, but it was just one of many such stores. Fashion, paintings, silverware, jewellery, rich cloaks, mosaics, plush furniture, silks, exotic foods, wines, it was everywhere, and the ponies of Canterlot were happily partaking of the abundance of choice provided.

"...and let me tell you dear, I told him I absolutely, positively could not appear at his party if Goldie was going to be in attendance..."

"...and do you know what he said? Well, let me tell you dear..."

"...this is outrageous, I mean, look at this. See what Photo Finish has done again..."

Prey had some very choice thoughts about what they saw and heard, but he kept them private. Such things were not for 'polite' company.

Canterlot city was well known for its many statues and monuments, which they got to see ample evidence of first hoof.

The things seemed to be set up on every street corner, sometimes with flower beds planted around them, in materials ranging from brass to stone, all the way to gold plated in some cases. They passed one of a unicorn, cast in a scholarly pose with a scroll made of marble, and set in the middle of a tinkling, crystal clear water fountain.

Prey got a look at the plaque as they passed, 'Dancing Sunlight - Founder of The Unicorn Society of Chairs.'

Prey took it that it didn't meant *actual* chairs. A mare and stallion were pointing it out to their two young foals as the ISND went past in the background. Prey saw Crimson's eyes resting long on the young family even once they'd passed.

Prey silently copied him, peering through the legs of the crowd at the two happy foals. He was glad when Gloom turned the corner and they were lost from sight.

Gloom took them off the more main streets and away from the "Shopping district of Canterlot", as it was called. None of them had been comfortable there. It went without saying that they didn't hold any plans for venturing into upper Canterlot either.

Which just left the lower district levels of Canterlot, more commonly known as just 'Lower Canterlot'. As long as you were walking away from the Palace, you'd eventually find it near the city's vaulted edges over open sky.

Said levels were the same as where Jumping Jack and Holly Berry's house resided, the ones who'd been taking care of Tulip Bed. While their house was certainly beyond extravagant compared to Prey's old cabin, when held up against the mansions and big houses they'd passed on their way here, such an ordinary house could almost be called shabby.

A daisy is a perfectly nice flower, but it can hardly be compared to a rose, could it?

Prey supposed that by Canterlot's snobbish standards, this really was the back end of town, albeit a very large back end of town, a whole third of Canterlot at a rough estimate. And every single house here was of better make and finer construct than any he'd seen in Hay Steam.

Still, in the lower district, the pomp and fluttering banners were gone, replaced with more normal terracotta tiled roofs, narrower but still perfectly cleaned streets, less trees but more window flower boxes, and that sort of thing. The statues that'd been scattered everywhere in Upper Canterlot like a pox were mercifully absent too.

Who needed another garish statue of some long dead mayor or archmage anyway?

Canterlot was commonly acknowledged to be unofficially split into four sections, North, South, East and West. Not exactly creative, but it got the point across. Some disagreed or had their own terminology for how neighbourhoods and districts were divided, but if you thought of it in those four basic directional terms, you couldn't go far wrong.

In the middle of the lower district in the East quadrant, or there abouts, the trio of them came upon the 'lower shopping district'. When compared to the opulence of the upper district they'd recently vacated, it was more akin to a village market day, but only if it was a market day being held in somewhere like the richest capital city of Equestria. Oh wait.

So while it was a step down from the Upper Canterlot's market, it was still five steps up from anywhere else.

There were still many high end good's being sold down here, but there were also stalls more styled after the traditional market stalls set up in the square, brightly painted signs advertising their wares to the passing crowds.

Gloom looked around the bustling market square and nodded.

"I knew I had a good feeling about coming this way." He declared. '-this is much better-'

'Or in other words, your special talent hinted to bring us this way.' Prey thought, eyes darting about as he tried to be constantly watching for potential threats or opportunities. He wasn't looking forward to stepping into the square, his physical ears were already getting enough abuse from the noisy crowds without adding mental noise to the mix.

Mentioning ears, Prey was confident that his left ear would be back to full working order by tomorrow.

"What is it that we need to do here sir? I mean Gloom." Crimson asked, eyeing the crowd with much the same expression as Prey.

'-oh right, I'm supposed to be leading us to do something productive-', Gloom gave himself a mental slap on the forehead.

"Well, how about we get some cloud steel horseshoes for you Crimson? Remember we spoke about that?" Gloom suggested.

"If you think getting a set would benefit me, then I agree." Crimson answered.

"They're expensive, but well worth investing in. Especially if we're going to be travelling around a lot more on hoof with Prey. Or getting into fights. Not with Prey, but the walking bit." Gloom clarified.

Horseshoes would definitely help reduce the wear and tear on Crimson's hooves, especially in places with solid stone streets like Canterlot. Too bad for Prey he had cloven hooves then.

"I know there's at least one pegasus farrier who works cloud steel in lower Canterlot, we've just got to find his shop." Gloom said, looking around. "There's a metalworking and blacksmithy street somewhere here. I'll bet they'd be able to point us on the right flight path."

"I would very much like to stretch my wings today," Crimson said, "Very, very, much."

"Me too." Gloom agreed wholeheartedly. As winged ponies used to the freedom of the sky, being confined to the ground all the time was no doubt miserable. Both fliers had gone an entire week almost completely flightless, so now that it was their day off, they meant to reacquaint themselves with the joys their respective pony species granted them.

'-wish I could be out on night patrol over Hay Steam with the other thestrals tonight. Never any time for a proper night flight anymore-', Gloom thought wistfully, a gleam of anticipation in his eyes.

When Prey looked over and up at Crimson, he caught the same gleam there. Prey would dearly have loved to have wings like them, almost as much as he wished he had a horn so he could cast magic. It was a dark, personal little wish, one that originated in the hopeless misery of the Deeper Green, when survival was the only thing on his mind. He would never have admitted it to Crimson or Gloom, but he was jealous of their wings.

With wings, he could've been free.

Prey easily spotted the moment of annoyed realisation as they both remembered that he, the flightless sheep runt, was with them.

Prey gave a dramatic sigh at their reaction, "Oh, woe is me, I am forever bound to the cruel earth. Would that I might soar on Eagle's wings with you amongst the clouds." He rolled his eyes, "Just go flying already if you want to go flying."

Prey wasn't saying this to be nice or cooperative, but because if they flew off, then they'd have to leave him to his own devices for a while. He couldn't escape, but some time unobserved was the next best thing.

"We'll go flying later, once we're all done here." Gloom said to Crimson, not sure what he should answer to Prey, who couldn't fly, and so deciding it was best to not answer at all.

'-what would I say anyway? Thank you for letting us fly? Sorry that you can't fly?-'

"Who will stay with Prey then? If we are off on a flight, I mean. Because he cannot fly." Crimson wasn't as polite and asked the obvious question.

'-I should really talk to Crimson about tact soon-', Gloom thought, '-but who is going to stay with Prey? Take turns flying? No, that's just stupid-'

What option was there that Gloom could choose that wouldn't leave Prey unattended?

'-it would only be for a little bit though. But it's my duty to watch

over him at all times. Him *and* Crimson-', Gloom corrected himself. He tapped his hoof on the pavement, caught up in thought.

'-him and Crimson. I have to look after them both. My duty is to watch them and their development, those are my orders. Make sure they don't waste their second chance, not that I think they will. Hmm, so the real question is, will Prey will be alright if we leave him for a little while?-', Gloom thought, looking out at the lower district market.

Gloom became aware that he'd been standing there for two minutes in silence in the shade of the alleyway. Neither Prey nor Crimson had moved or interrupted his chain of thought, both were just quietly waiting to hear his decision.

Gloom sighed to himself, '-even off duty, they still see me as somepony they have to follow orders from-'

'Oh yes, I'm sure it's all out of respect,' Prey thought, his patient mask on, 'And not because your thought chain is leading you to the exact outcome I want.'

Gloom decided to test the waters before he made any decision, "Prey, how would you feel if we left you alone while we took a flight?"

"Didn't I say if you want to go flying, you should just go flying?" Prey pointed out.

"Would you be fine by yourself though?"

Prey looked over the bustling market district, "Is there some hidden danger around here that I'm not aware of?"

Gloom flicked his ears, "No."

"Then I'll be fine. I imagine that I can survive without adult supervision for an hour or so." Prey said airily.

"Hold your hooves, we're not going anywhere just yet. We still have stuff to do, remember?" Gloom reminded him. Unnecessarily. Prey's memory was far superior to Gloom's, so if anyone needed the

reminder, it wasn't Prey.

"Right, find the metalworks street, find a blacksmith, and then find a farrier to get cloud steel horseshoes for Crimson." Gloom said, leading the way out of their little alleyway.

"Where should we start looking?" Crimson asked, following.

"It's got to be close by. This is the market district after all, it should be easy to find." Gloom answered confidently.

"So you've no actual idea then?" Prey sighed as the three of them entered the bustle of ponies. He had to fight not to grimace in discomfort as he stepped into the crush of thoughts.

"I'll have you know that I have a very good idea which path to follow," Gloom replied, having to raise his voice slightly to be heard over the babble of voices, "It's this way." He announced confidently.

Gloom's cutie mark had directed them to an information board.

Technically, Gloom hadn't been wrong. His special talent had indeed pointed them in the direction they needed to go. But only to get further directions to where they actually *wanted* to go.

Gloom didn't say a word as they stopped to read over the map with its list of streets and 'You Are Here' marker.

The map was set a bit too high for Prey to see the outlined street routes, so he instead joined Crimson in reading the facilities and services listed lower down on the sign post. It would be a good idea to know what was in the area, as it might turn out to be exploitable. If there was somewhere dealing in magical texts or the components to mix bone rot, he would very much like to know. He could pass it on to Lemon Pink later.

Tuppence clock tower, Baker's Street, a foal nursery, a few jewellers, Hardy's Roof Repairs, a news agent, varied grocery stores, flower shops, even the city morgue listed in small, unassuming letters right near the bottom. No fancy name or title for that place,

just 'The Morgue'. Ponies liked to keep any reminders of grim reality out of sight and mind as much as possible. Prey bet the morgue was probably understaffed and overworked too. People died. That's life. Or rather, death.

"There," Prey said pointing, pulling Crimson's gaze up to the correct spot in the list, "Iron street. Metalcrafts and artisans. An unimaginative name for the street, but at least it's informative."

"Ah, well spotted. Let's get moving." Gloom said, double checking the map before setting off at a brisk pace. He didn't mind the crowds quite as much as Prey, but still...

'-far too noisy-'

They managed to find Iron Street with little effort, despite the lower Canterlot district only having 'brass' street signs instead of 'gold' ones like in upper Canterlot. Seriously, the nobles and rich really went the whole nine yards to emphasise the difference between them and the 'lower classes'. Was there some local myth about gold street signs somehow being easier to read or something?

The signs were almost certainly just gold leaf anyway, since solid gold street signs would've just been plain impractical. So why bother trying to show off in the first place?

But never mind, that point was neither here nor there. Once they found Iron street, it was much like the information board had described. Metalcrafts and artisans, meaning a lot of decorative and curly metalwork sculptures on display in the shop fronts, fence post samples, black smithies and just what they were looking for, farriers.

Finding one which dealt in cloud steel horseshoes was a bit more difficult, but they managed to track down a pegasus one in the end.

Prey hadn't seen many pegasi in Canterlot, outside of the Royal Guard that is. He'd seen them flying messages and out shopping, but few that actually *lived* here. More likely, they chose to live in cloud

houses. The dark blue pegasus who worked this forge didn't really have a choice in the matter, at least not if wanted to pursue his career in metalwork.

Anvils didn't do too well with only clouds for support, Prey imagined.

Prey waited outside, taking the opportunity to sit and rest his hooves while Gloom and Crimson talked to the farrier inside. To be accurate, Prey'd been told to wait outside, but that was fine. Trying to keep up with Gloom and Crimson over Canterlot's hard streets wasn't an easy endeavour for him. Crimson had again offered Prey a ride, which Prey had paid all the due consideration such an offer deserved. Meaning none.

There was a cheerful newspaper seller across the road on the corner of the street, trying, and succeeding for the most part, in attracting passerby's attention. Prey of course couldn't read the article from this distance, but he could make out the headline and the big, black and white front photo.

'Princess Celestia in Fillydelphia: Quells Parasprite Invasion!' and the picture was of a posh city square, presumably this poorly named Fillydelphia, full of cheering ponies, ridiculous flags, glitter, pomp, and ceremony.

Prey knew parasprites. They'd been everybody's fear back in the village. That a sufficiently big enough plague of them would descend and devour the crops before enough people could be gathered to sing and make enough noise to drive them off.

Here in Equestria, that would be a set back to any farming community. Out there, a parasprite swarm could mean starvaion for the whole village and death.

A yellow unicorn mare wearing saddle bags and a ridiculous sun hat went past close by, her head turning to regard the lamb in interest, but she didn't say anything and merely smiled at him as she passed. Prey stopped fiddling with the gold band on his foreleg and thinking about parasprites to nod politely back, playing the sweet little lamb.

Much like in upper Canterlot, Prey drew a lot of curiosity from those ponies who noticed him (not necessarily many. Prey was good at remaining unnoticed). Really, the only difference Prey could see between upper and lower class ponies was how much money they had to waste and how big it made their heads. On every other level, they were exactly the same.

Just as proud, blind, racist, and annoyingly cheerful as each other.

Much as Prey already knew, cloud steel was expensive.

It took a lightning forge and someone skilled in its use to create the metal with the correct cloud walking capabilities. Obviously, it was less useful to someone like Crimson who could already do that, but the real value lay in its incredible light weight durability. Unfortunately, (for Crimson), not just anyone could craft with lightning without frying their insides, so the price of a blacksmith who could was relatively high.

Seeing as how Gloom had instructed them to set aside a hundred bits out of their weekly earnings towards a flat deposit, his previous insistence that Crimson invest in a set of these horseshoes came across as a bit contradictory.

Fortunately, it was the farrier's policy not to accept payment until you were satisfied with his work, and seeing as how he wouldn't be making the shoes today anyway (needed the correct storm clouds for the lighting forge apparently), the problem of payment could be put aside until next time. After taking Crimson's hoof measurements and agreeing a price, they bid farewell to the farrier and left his establishment.

Prey looked up as the two of them emerged, their eyes narrowed against the sun.

"You know," Prey began, " I imagine that cloud steel, although difficult to make, isn't a high demand good. If he doesn't take payment in advance, it must also mean he sometimes ends up with spare horseshoes lying around that no one's ever paid for."

Obviously, his sharp ears had picked up the whole conversation.

Crimson tilted his head at Prey, not seeing where this was going, "Okay, that might be the case. But what of it?"

"I think you could have gotten a better deal is all." Prey commented blandly, pushing his ears back as he stood up.

Gloom shook his head in disagreement. "Twenty five bits per horseshoe is a fair price. That's more or less what my own cost, although they were from a different farrier." He said.

'-although, he didn't know I was a thestral then, but then, neither did this one-'

"I don't know much of the currency value in Canterlot, but I thought one hundred bits was a fair and balanced offer." Crimson said.

"You could probably have gotten him down to seventy bits total." Prey said.

"The price was fair on him as well Prey. Cloud steel can't be made by just anypony after all. We don't try to cheat ponies, Prey." Gloom remanded him.

"Sure, if you say so. You and Crimson going off for your flight now?" Prey asked, shifting the conversation.

"Play can come after work. There's still a number of things we've left to do, and we need to be back at the Guard compound by six don't forget."

'Doesn't really count as a day off if you still need to get back in time to cover a guard shift.' Prey thought. With the thestral teams starting their observation of Hay Steam tonight, everyone else in the Night Guard was no doubt working double time to cover their shifts.

"Alright then, off-duty Sargent Gloom sir, what's next on our agenda?" Prey asked, smiling up at the disguised thestral.

"I'm glad you asked."

Preys smile slipped a couple of millimetres.

It came as a great annoyance to Prey, that Gloom remembered his theft of that pathetic napkin, and was following through on his insistence that Prey write the shop a letter of apology, as well as send them the money. Prey had taken the cloth napkin to use as a bandage for his ear, and from his perspective, no apology was necessary. But Gloom was insisting, and his tone brooked no argument.

So it was that Prey found himself perched on a table top, in the back of a small post office, a quill in his hoof, writing the letter. He was sitting on top of the table because there were no chairs, and he couldn't have reached otherwise.

"There," Prey said, slotting the quill back into the inkwell and pushing the letter towards Gloom, "Does that satisfy you?"

His words might've sounded petulant, but in reality he didn't care about being forced to apologise like a real child might've been. However, some petulance was expected of him. What was annoying was the waste of his time.

"If you hand't broken the law and stolen, then you wouldn't be having to do this now would you?" Gloom returned, unmoved.

Prey didn't deign to answer.

Gloom hid a sigh of frustration and quickly read over the letter to make sure Prey had actually written an apology. If he was hoping to catch Prey in making a halfhearted apology, or perhaps a sarcastic one, he was in for a surprise.

The letter was a short, but heart felt apology, openly admitting to stealing from the store for selfish reasons. Included was regret at having done so, a promise to not do it again, and a hope that the bits enclosed would go some way towards making up for the transgression. Prey'd kept the language basic, to match with what would've been expected from a child.

Gloom read it and blinked, "Huh."

'-he actually wrote a proper apology. Thought for sure it would've been condescending or at least a bit sarcastic-'

Gloom obviously still failed to grasp a basic principle about Prey; which was that his sense of pride was his own.

Prey was willing to lay down in the mud and let people walk all over him, and even thank them for it, if it meant emerging otherwise unharmed. He'd *literally* been forced to do exactly that once before in the Resistance.

Making a fuss would only spark conflict between him and Gloom, something he wanted to avoid. Making sarcastic remarks between just the three of them was fine, Gloom was prepared to let that go. In fact, it was almost expected of Prey by now, and thus a requirement of the perceived personality he'd established. It wasn't far off his true one anyway, or what he thought was his true one at least. Wear a mask long enough and it becomes your real face.

But anyway, the point was that Prey could see Gloom wouldn't let this apology letter go so easily, so he didn't fight it.

"Do you know where to send this letter?" Gloom asked, unawares of Prey's musings.

"Bunt's and Burn's apothecary, seventh street off the main street, in Hay Steam." Prey promptly answered.

"You remember that? Even for a place we were just walking past?" Gloom asked, eyebrow going up.

"Will that be close enough for the mail pony to deliver do you think?" Prey asked in response.

It was Prey's understanding (from his five minute observance of the small post office), that as long as you got the general destination right, a description of the desired house was good enough for delivery, although he might be wrong. He'd never actually used the equestrian postal services before.

For some reason, it hadn't been one of the two privileges on offer in Dreverton. Those had been breathing, and the right to go insane.

"It should be good enough I think," Gloom said, already folding up the letter and tucking it into the envelope for Prey, "And without sounding patronising, owning up is the right thing to do Prey. Well done."

'Owning up was the stupid thing to do.' Prey mentally corrected.

He was annoyed by this waste of time, and the longer they spent in this small post office with ponies coming in and out, combined with the nosy worker behind the desk who was trying to listen in on the strange conversation happening between the small lamb and two pegasi (one of whom had yet to display any facial emotion), at the back of the store, the more annoyed Prey got.

"Now where are we on to? What's next?" Prey asked impatiently.

Gloom made to hoof the envelope back to Prey, and then paused midway as Prey's question started him down a parallel avenue of thought.

Gloom looked down at Prey's letter he had in his hoof, and had an idea, '-I should have done this already. It's unfair that they've had to wait this long-'

"Actually," Gloom started, placing the envelope back on the table top instead of hoofing it to Prey, "I think you should take the time to each write a letter to your family."

'No.' Prey thought, anger stirring in his thin chest. '*No*.'

Crimson's jaw also clenched momentarily, "Sir, I have no family left." He stated, completely falling back on using Gloom's title in his moment of upset.

Gloom's ears went flat and he face hooved at his own thoughtlessness.

"I'm sorry Crimson, I... Forgot for a moment. That was a very poorly thought out suggestion on my part and I apologise. Will you please

accept my apology?" Gloom said, actually bowing his head and holding it there as he waited for Crimson's response.

"Yes I accept. It was just a mistake. I mean, I know you didn't mean any offence by it." Crimson quickly said, wings ruffling up on his back. It seemed he wasn't used to getting apologies, or likely compliments either for that matter.

"Thank you Crimson, I should've only spoken to Prey. Will you excuse me while I continue to speak with him about sending a letter to his family?" Gloom asked politely and quite formally.

"Yes of course sir. I mean, that's only fair."

"Thank you."

Formal exchange done, Gloom finally turned back to Prey, "So, what would you like to write about to your family? It can be anything you want." He prompted.

Prey didn't move or give any indication he'd heard the thestral. Gloom misinterpreted Prey's silence as something else, because he moved closer and lowered his raspy voice.

"Come'n Prey, you know you should write to them. You don't have to be scared, your mother and brother still love you too, and they'll want to hear from you, no matter what you've done. Now's your chance to start over again and say sorry. Then you won't have this hanging over you head anymore, and, if nothing else, you'll at least know you tried. Won't that be worth it?" Gloom cajoled.

Prey had no words. He just continued to stare blankly up at Gloom.

And Gloom mistook that for vulnerability, and saw only what he thought he knew; A lamb, isolated from an early age because he didn't fit in, and so grew up too fast without having the proper moral grounding, yet underneath it all was still sometimes very much just a young child.

'-that makes it even more important he writes this letter. It's an opportunity that he cannot afford to miss-', Gloom thought, growing that much more determined in his misguided resolution.

"Come on Prey. Here, I'll write my own letter while you do yours. I won't ask or read it if that's what you're worrying. You can say whatever you need to them. Here, start writing it." Gloom urged, forcing the quill back onto Prey.

What else could Prey do? Slowly, he picked up the quill.

Gloom and Crimson still firmly believed that he'd recently lost his father, but still had a mother and a brother living somewhere in a village beyond the Ridgeback mountain range. And now Gloom wanted him to write them a letter.

Luna had been deceived by the dream he'd shown her. She'd obviously thought he'd been unawares of her presence in his dream, and along with whatever misleading reports the Night Guard had dug up, it had mislead her to this conclusion. Prey needed them to stay ignorant. If not, they might start asking questions. Or worse, *Luna* might start asking questions. If that happened, Prey was dead.

So he wrote the letter.

He didn't stop or pause until he'd finished.

When Prey was done he blew the ink, then folded it up and stuffed it into an envelope without letting Gloom or Crimson catch a glimpse of its contents. He wrote a false address on the back, and sealed it. If anyone intercepted or read the letter, they would only find a quiet apology to 'Dear Mother' and 'Big Brother', along best wishes for an upcoming birthday that didn't exist, and a hope to see them soon. No names, dates, or verifiable details.

Prey was calm. It was just a fake letter. It wasn't like he was writing to Gossamer's *real* mother or *real* brother.

He still wanted to rip the letter to shreds.

Gloom had also finished writing his letter to someone back in his clan, some stallion named Sharp Tooth, who from Gloom's thoughts sounded like a blood relative of some kind back in his clan. Crimson was meanwhile reading some poster on the notice board about an under attended astronomy club.

"Are we done now?" Prey asked calmly.

Gloom looked both over, taking in Prey sitting out of reach, just looking back at him with a closed expression.

'-that's enough progress for today-', Gloom decided.

"Alright, I think we can leave the rest of our tasks until later. Now seems like a good time for that flight before midday and it gets too bright and hot to fly."

"And me?" Prey asked.

"Hmm. How'd you feel if we left you in the shopping district while we're gone? You'll be safe enough there, and we should be gone no longer than an hour at most."

"I'll be fine."

"Great. See if you can't find something in the shops you like, provided it's small. Just, just don't wonder off or something."

Gloom wasn't entirely satisfied with leaving Prey alone, in lower Canterlot too, but this wasn't Westfallow Hollows or the wilds. Nor was Prey a typical foal who'd get lost or wonder off, and besides, he still wore the unremovable tracker bands if it came down to that. And the idea that the ponies of Canterlot themselves might pose a problem was almost inconceivable.

A normal citizen of Canterlot wouldn't have dreamed of leaving their child unattended, but Gloom didn't have any children, and in the thestral clans they did things a little differently.

The thought did occur to Gloom that, '-there's still the foalnapper who took Rocky Bed out there somewhere-', but again, Prey wore the bands, and he was going to be in a public place at all times. It would be fine.

"Sure, whatever. I can do that." Prey shrugged. He just wanted them to leave him alone for a while.

Prey held up an ear above his eyes as a sort of sun shade, and squinted to avoid any dust as Gloom and Crimson took a running start and jumped into the air. One pair of feathered wings, and one freshly un-illusioned leathery set powerfully beat the air as they gained height and rose up above the open shopping distinct.

The two of them had easily been able to gain enough space for take off by dint of the fact that Gloom had ducked into an alley and removed the dusk pony amulet. The thestrals wanted to keep the amulets a secret, hence removing it out of view, and the illusion wouldn't have held up under observation once Gloom was in flight.

With Gloom's normal slit eyes and leathery wings restored, everyone had given them plenty of room, like a pike swimming through a shoal of minnows. It wasn't hard to spot the laughably horrified glances that were shot at Gloom's back when ponies thought they weren't looking.

Not many of them noticed Prey, the lamb's small stature letting him mostly stay under everyone's line of sight, and Gloom had served to draw most of the attention anyway.

Prey let his ear flop back down and weighed the small draw string bag in his other hoof. Gloom had given it to him before they'd flown off. Prey estimated from its weight that it held about thirty bits. He emotionlessly watched the two dwindling figures settle into their flight, a long loop that would take them around Canterlot.

'Good riddance.'

Wrapping the bag up tightly to prevent any clinking, Prey held it in his mouth and slipped away.

'This place disgusts me.' Prey thought as he snuck past the shops and stores. He watched ponies milling about, talking, haggling, laughing, and gossiping. For them, just another average day. This was the norm in their safe little lives, and Prey was an outside observer.

The lamb Gossamer used to really enjoy doing this sort of thing, going around the village watching other people live their lives and wondering what made them tick. They all had their own stories, motivations, worries, and joys.

Prey did neither. He didn't wonder nor enjoy it. Besides, he already knew the answer. He could hear it all their thoughts, see it in their actions, read it in their body language. They were just...normal Canterlot citizens. Normal ponies. So completely different from his own sphere of life and experiences.

'Like chalk and cheese.' He thought, ducking into the narrow alley way behind some superfluous clothing store.

Prey double checked his surroundings as he proceeded down the short alleyway, before taking a seat against an empty wooden crate that looked like it had been sitting there for months, making himself comfortable on the cobbles. Even the alleyways in Canterlot were properly paved it seemed.

Inside the alley it wasn't that dark, Gloom and Crimson would have probably found it perfect actually, but the difference would still serve to temporarily sun dazzle anyone who stepped in out of the sunlight. A useful feature.

A shadow fell over the crate. There'd been no clatter of approaching hooves on the cobbles. The yellow unicorn mare from earlier with the ridiculous sun hat and saddle bags stood there.

Prey nodded up at her, "Lemon Pink. You can take off the hat." He said.

The mare removed the floppy sun hat, revealing the sharp horn of Lemon Pink, which was aglow, "Master Prey." She greeted him blankly.

"Just Prey," Prey reminded her, feeling a lot like Sargent Gloom just then, "How difficult is that illusion to maintain?" He asked, back to business.

"Reasonably difficult. Maintaining it is quite a drain on my magic

more than anything else." Lemon Pink answered, just the tiniest bit of strain in her voice.

"Stop then for now, save your magic for later. There's no one else here who might see us." Prey ordered. Having created the being known as Lemon Pink and trawled through her memories, Prey knew where Lemon Pink's magical talents lay. Illusions were not one of them, but neither was it on a completely opposite branch of magic.

Magic came in many flavours and types. Many unicorns only used telekinesis and spells from their attribute, or alternatively magic that was tied to whatever form their special talent took during their whole life. Spells too different to their normal attribute were far more difficult to learn and use, not to mention more magically taxing than those they were good at or granted special skill with by their cutie mark.

A simplified explanation would be those who knew ice magic would find it very difficult to learn or use fire magic, and vice versa.

Wordlessly, Lemon Pink let the magic drop, returning her appearance to that of her real pink coat and wispy three tone mane. Her stance immediately looked less tense, although her illusion had been doing a good job of hiding that stress in the first place.

Lemon Pink's magical strength lay in mind magic. Illusion wasn't too dissimilar, but that didn't mean it was easy for her to use.

Actually, the illusion spell Lemon Pink had been using had originally come from Prey's own memory, which he'd imprinted into hers. Prey'd never cast a magical spell in his life, but he'd read and memorised the spell matrixs and casting sequences for quite a number.

Most of the magical spells Prey knew came from texts he'd raided from the Border Guard. That meant the books had been under lock and key, which also meant those magical texts had almost all been outlawed or forbidden in some way. And now he'd given all them to Lemon Pink to learn and practice. Unfortunately, the powerful spells (and indeed even many of the middle tier ones), would be

outside of her capabilities.

Following her creation, Lemon Pink's magical reserves and talent were now below average, but Prey was eager for Lemon Pink to master the spells that were still inside her capabilities.

"What do you have to report?" Prey asked.

He didn't question how Lemon knew he'd be here, since he'd been the one to write it on the note after all. As for finding them amid the crowds and streets, that was hardly an issue for someone with a copy of Prey's memories. This face to face meeting wasn't strictly necessary, but the opportunity had presented itself yesterday when Gloom told him they'd be having a day off today.

"Little progress has yet been made with the the list of tasks you gave me. I have not had enough time yet." Lemon Pink answered. She didn't say it as an excuse, just a statement of the facts.

Prey waved it off, "It's only been a few days, and progress will be slow regardless. The tasks on that list are not easy ones, but continue following it to the best of your abilities. Prioritise from the top down. As for the names, I don't expect much to come of it, but if you do come across one of them, you know how to proceed."

"Have you learned anything more about the Mistress of the Night's gifts?" Lemon Pink asked, motioning to the gold bands on Prey's legs. There it was once again, the one thing that Prey didn't like about his new creation. Her respect for Luna.

"Nothing new. I will continue to create different runic arrays to help study them. If or when the time comes, a place sufficiently prepared to remove the bands will be required." Prey said, turning his foreleg this way and that to examine the alicorn made gold band. It still made his skin crawl if he thought about what he was wearing too hard.

"Fourth on the list." Lemon Pink agreed simply.

"There will be other..." Prey went quiet and cocked his head, listening, "...Hoof steps nearing the corners, two sets, separate

directions."

Nabbing up the drawstring purse, he and Lemon Pink both stepped closer to the wall, and Lemon's horn started to glow as she cast an illusion over them. No orders were necessary, they both knew what to do.

Without a sound, both of them vanished from view, leaving the alley looking exactly as it had before they arrived.

As long as they didn't step out from the illusionary veil separating this end of the alley from the next, they should remain unnoticed. As long as they refrained from making any noise, and the alleyway was out of direct sunlight so they wouldn't cast any tell tale shadows.

Prey and Lemon Pink watched as the two ponies came into view. The word, 'shady', or the phrase, 'up to no good' came to mind without much effort.

The two ponies, both unicorns, were making it painfully obvious by the way they kept looking over their shoulders and trying to move stealthily that their business was less than savoury. Key word being tried. Prey had seen stealthier inanimate plants.

The one approaching from the left, a coal furred stallion wearing a long coat, spotted the other unicorn first. Out of the two, he was the less conspicuous one.

"You're here?" The stallion asked in a low voice, making the other one jump and glance around wildly before settling down once he spotted who'd spoken. Prey and Lemon weren't too close by, but there was little other noise and Prey's hearing was excellent, so he could hear the two dodgy characters just fine.

"Oh, good, it's just you. Celestia, you made me jump there for a second." The stallion sighed, a nervous twitch in his ear as he tried to smile. This unicorn was a light red colour, with a snub horn on his forehead.

"Sorry about that, but you're here now, so it's all good." Coated

unicorn answered.

The illusion separating Prey and Lemon Pink from the two unicorns didn't make them individually invisible. Thus, when Prey raised a questioning eyebrow up at Lemon Pink, who was squashed in beside him, she saw the gesture.

Lemon swivelled her eyes up to look at her horn and then nodded, indicating she was fine with maintaining the illusion for now. Then her eyes turned back to the two stallions talking in low voices, and made a tiny motion that could've been a shrug, signalling she didn't know either.

Prey was standing closer to Lemon Pink than he was willing to do with anyone else, and definitely any other unicorn, but there was none of the usual irrational fear that plagued him. And even if there had been, Prey wouldn't have risked moving anyway. He might have no fear of Lemon Pink, but there were two unicorns just down the alley who looked like they would react poorly if they became aware they were being observed.

So he and Lemon stayed completely still and silent as the unicorns continued their exchange. After a few minutes quiet but intense looking talking, with the red unicorns jitters not going away, they finally reached the reason for their meeting.

Red unicorn hurriedly whisked out a bag of bits and magically passed it over.

Coal stallion wasn't in nearly as much of a hurry and patiently counted through the money as the other unicorn kept shifting nervously and looking every which way.

"Relax junior, nopony's going to come this way." Coal told him, putting the bits away in his long coat and taking out a sealed brown paper bag. By this point, Prey would've had to have been mentally impaired not to realise what he was watching. The red pony's eyes snapped onto the bag.

"Uh uh, first we need to talk, pony to pony." The coat wearing stallion said, floating the paper bag out of reach when the other

unicorn eagerly reached for it.

"I've already paid you." He protested.

"Yes, and you'll get what's yours, don't worry. I'm just trying to do you a favour here and warn you about next time before you take off." The darker unicorn reassured him.

"What warning?" The other demanded, eyes flicking back and forth between the bag and the pony levitating it.

"Don't worry, the price of salt isn't going up if that's what you're thinking. We're friends, you know I wouldn't do that to you. But demand *is* going up, but my supplier can't get it in any faster. I got other ponies depending on me too you know, junior. Just to warn you, you might want to think about getting some more soon before somepony else does. You know, so you have an emergency stash." Coal coat warned, finally passing over the paper bag of drugs.

The red unicorn stuffed it away into his saddle bag without even checking its contents, "Thanks...But, do you have any more on you right now?" He asked, restlessly shifting from hoof to hoof.

Coated stallion tapped his chin and waggled his ears back and forth and pretended to think.

"Hmm...I got that one, and another for her...oh, and two for them...Hmm, I think I got another bag to spare on me actually. Want it?" He asked.

The other unicorn hesitated briefly, tail swishing nervously, "Well if it's like that...and its going to be hard to get more any time soon...okay then, I'll take it." He decided, pulling out another bag of bits and started to count out the correct amount into the other stallion's waiting hoof.

'This is mildly amusing.' Prey thought as he watched.

Here he was, a member of the ISND, and there was a salt deal going on not fifteen paces away. And he didn't care.

Another questioning look at Lemon Pink, and she confirmed that

she was still good to hold the veil, despite the light sweat that'd begun to bead her brow.

She would know her own limits though, so Prey trusted her judgement. The two of them continued to wait as the other unicorns concluded their business and exchanged goods, before the light red furred one made a hasty exit. That just left the drug dealer.

Now that it was just one of them, Prey and Lemon could've made a move on him, but what would be the point?

Their drug trade didn't affect or threaten Prey, so why potentially put himself in danger trying to stop just this one instance if it? Crimson and Gloom definitely would have, no doubt about it, but he wasn't a fool like them.

The coated stallion double checked he was alone, then removed his coat and flipped it inside out, turning it from carkey to a much more fashionable and smooth green colour. He then pulled out a pair of wire rimmed spectacles and pushed them onto his muzzle.

Disguise complete, the stallion left in the opposite direction to the one he'd arrived.

Prey was mildly impressed, but only mildly. The disguise only rated as second best at most, and wasn't the stallion a unicorn anyway? Why not learn the magic necessary and invest the energy for a proper disguise? 'Lazy, sloppy, and amateurish.' Prey thought, passing his judgement.

"You can drop the veil now." Prey said, glancing up at Lemon Pink who'd been waiting for his order.

The magical illusion over them winked out of existence without any fanfare, making it look like they'd just appeared back in the alleyway, not that there was to anyone around to see the effect.

Lemon Pink took a moment to catch her breath. Maintaining a veil was harder than just an illusion covering herself. Having to project on a larger, non-solid surface area, and not one that was already circulating with her own familiar magic, was quite difficult Prey

understood. He didn't offer any praise or thanks, Lemon had just done what needed to be done. Both of them understood that, and so there was no point in mentioning it.

"There will be other lists and instructions left in the place I showed you," Prey started, picking up from where they'd left off before the drug dealer and his client had interrupted them, continuing on as if nothing of consequence had happened.

"And at some point, Gloom has determined that I and the pegasus Crimson are to hire rooms outside of Canterlot Palace. That will be an excellent opportunity, but it's not going to happen right away. It will take at least another two weeks as it currently stands, with a three out of four chance it's actually three weeks. But be ready." Prey instructed.

"Yes, Prey." Lemon Pink acknowledged.

"Good. Next contact will be the same as last time."

"Yes, Prey."

"You may go now." Prey didn't need to ask whether there was anything Lemon wanted to say. If it was important, then she would've already brought it up.

No goodbyes were exchanged.

Lemon Pink just put the floppy sunhat back on, recast her disguise, and departed without delay. It was just Prey left, standing next to an old crate in the empty alley way.

Prey looked back towards the alley's far end, opening back into the shopping district. He still had the bits that Gloom had given him, and he had no real use or want for them. He could go find something random to spend it on. He'd never had spending money before. There had never been enough back on the farm.

'Back on the farm.'

Gloom had made him write a letter to a farm that no longer existed. To a family that was dead. It hadn't been done maliciously, nor had

it done him any physical harm, but it still rankled.

'Nothing to be done about it.' Prey thought. Gloom and Crimson would be gone for a little while longer. He should take this opportunity to continue to look around.

Picking up the little draw string bag, Prey left the alleyway.

"...perfect day to go up, I'll be taking my two colts to show them the new..."
"...twenty two bits? Which pony would pay twenty two bits for..."
"...one copy of the Canterlot Times please. Thank you."

Prey wove his way through the crowd, passing unnoticed through all the clamour of and conversations taking place. But as usual, that was only half the noise.

'-Trotites need to win their next hoofball match. Should I bet on it?-'
'-all that Crop Sharer nonsense in the papers. Glad they live outside of Canterlot-'
'-pick up some lemon sherbets for Gumdrop on my way through-'

The mention of 'lemon' made Prey back tracked for a moment to catch that last thought again, but found out that the thinker had just been referring to a type of hard candy with a fizzy sour filling. Prey obviously couldn't listen to and process the multitude of thoughts he overheard from the crowd, so instead he listened out for key words or phrases. Lemon could have meant Lemon Pink, but no, it had just been a stray thought about some sweets.

Prey wondered what lemon sherbets tasted like. He'd never had one before. There'd never been the chance before.

Prey remembered that vanilla cupcake the Solar Guard, Sunshine, had split with him. It'd been really good, deliciously sweet and wonderful, so unlike anything he'd ever gotten to eat before. Maybe lemon sherbets also tasted like that? Should he acquire some?

'Well, they're not likely to be poisoned, Gloom did tell me to find something to buy, and it's unlikely there will be a hostile

confrontation I might be caught up in inside a candy shop, and I don't particularly care about this money... So there's probably no harm if I try one for myself.' Prey thought, completely over analysing the simple decision to sample sweet confectionery.

'First step, find a shop or store which sells lemon sherbets.' Prey decided.

Prey carefully undid the twist of paper and popped another lemon sherbet into his mouth. He'd eaten eleven already, and the colourful paper bag next to him on the steps was now only half full.

The taste was...not anything that he could have predicted.

Candy simply hadn't existed in the village. Actually, the Earth pony land lords foals might've had candy, but certainly none of the actual villagers had ever tasted the brightly coloured sweets.

Prey liked them, these lemon sherbets. He wished Gossamer and Fleece could have enjoyed them together, that sharp, fizzy sweet and sour taste you got to once you broke through to the candies interior and the sherbet bubbled out onto your tongue. Absentmindedly, Prey neatly folded up the twist of grease paper the candy had been wrapped with into a small square, before putting it back in the bag.

It wasn't that he didn't want to litter, but leaving no trace was second nature to him.

Prey was sitting on a disused step at the far end if the shopping district where few would notice him, in the shade and out of the way. No one was going to come by and want to use these steps, because they didn't lead anywhere. Just up to a decorative stone alcove in which a statue had been erected, the display area overshadowed by the buildings around it.

The sweet shop he'd bought the lemon sherbets from had been one of four, named Candy Canes n' Sweet Stuff, and the only one run by an Earth pony, which was why Prey had gone in there.

The Earth pony was a mare, called Sweet Stuff. Easy to see where the sweet stores name came from. Anyway, she'd been quite shocked to see a sheep in Canterlot. Prey'd had to address her three times before she snapped out of just staring stupidly.

Following that, he'd had to convince her, (by pre-emptively answering the unvoiced questions he read in her thoughts), that there wasn't anything amiss.

It was the same concerns as always, she just saw a little ewe by herself, out of place, not where she was supposed to be, and thought that somepony (meaning herself), had a duty to stick her muzzle in and try and sort out what she thought was 'a problem.'

Prey had gritted his teeth, smiled brightly with number seven, bright bubbly innocence, and wasted the two minutes necessary to convince her:

"No miss, there's nothing wrong, don't worry, my daddy's gonna' be back in five minutes. Oh he's not my real dad, dads over at nanny's, I mean Daddy Uncle, and I really like him cauz' he's nice to me and let's me buy treats and brings me to Canterlot on his week off. Isn't Uncle Daddy great?"

With her sense of propriety and civic duty satisfied, Sweet Stuff had finally gotten over herself and done as Prey had wanted and sold him a bag of lemon sherbets. Five bits for the bag of sweets. Decadent.

Prey now wondered if he should've bought more.

'There were many other candies in there. Strawberry drops and ginger snaps sound nice. Perhaps I should try some of those next time. If there is a next time.' Prey thought, switching the lemon sherbet from one cheek to the other.

Prey wasn't sure how he felt about this. Buying candies and enjoying them was out of place, unnatural, wrong.

Nice things like this didn't happen. War criminals didn't sit on the steps and eat lemon sherbets. At least they shouldn't.

'But hey,' Prey thought with a mental shrug, 'This is the heart of the pony kingdom. Where privilege and entitlement go hoof in hoof with weakness and naivety. It's hardly the strangest thing that's happened in my life.'

This was...nice, in a way, even if it was only going to be for a brief while. Not being in Canterlot, or around ponies, that wasn't nice. Sitting by himself, with no one trying to assert their authority over him, just eating sweets, that was nice.

It was a shame that the statue behind him spoiled it a bit, giving the feeling it was staring imperiously down at him while his back was turned. If he'd come across something like that out in the Deeper Green, he would've run a mile. A statue that was looking at you wasn't something to be laughed at. You might wake up in the middle of the night and find that fire had gone out and the statue had followed you back to your camp.

But this was Canterlot. It was ruled by the Sun Goddess, who jealously safeguarded her little ponies from reality. There was no way the Sun Wolf would let something dangerous like a monster disgusted as a statue inside her capital city. She would know straight away, and like a mother wolf, would reek swift retribution on the unfortunate creature suicidal enough to set claw inside her den.

That, and Prey doubted the statue of Luna behind him was secretly the petrified remains of Nightmare Moon waiting to resurrect. That being said, the statue over his shoulder was still of his second most hated alicorn in existence.

Prey pulled another sherbet from the paper bag, and shot a glance over his shoulder at the statute. It was the only one in the whole city of Canterlot that he'd seen so far of the Moon Goddess.

Just passing through upper Canterlot on the way down here, Prey had counted twenty three different statues depicting Celestia in some fashion. Just another way to subconsciously influence her citizens and inspire loyalty.

But there was only one statue of Luna, set here in the lower district,

off to the side in this alcove. It was unattended too. Prey'd been sitting her for the last fifteen minutes, and no one had even given it more than a passing glance. For Celestia's statues, many had looked, even if they didn't stop, up at the Sun Wolf's carved likeness with smiles.

'She certainly likes to keep them blindly loyal. They never see the fangs she turns on the outside world, all wrapped up safe under her wing' Prey condemned.

True, Luna had only recently returned, and hadn't had a millennia present in the city to have scores of memorials dedicated to her, but this still reeked of a very half hearted effort to even the scales at best.

The graffiti on the base of the statue hadn't gone unnoticed by Prey either. It wasn't obvious, but someone had still scratched on there; 'Nightmare's Pet'.

That no one had removed the graffiti also told a story.

Prey noticed Gloom's gently sloping approach coming in from above the streets, and stood up. It wasn't a surprise, he'd been watching the sky, and the bat wings made it easy to identify the thestral. Prey hadn't been hiding either, or rather he'd only been avoiding ponies at ground level. Didn't want Gloom thinking he was trying to run away or something. Gloom's special talent probably gave him a clue which way to fly anyway.

That did leave the question, where was Crimson? Which was exactly the question Prey asked once Gloom had landed.

"He wasn't quite done with flying yet. He wanted to stretch his wings a bit further." Gloom filled Prey in. "What'd you get?" He asked, looking at the bright paper bag.

"Lemon sherbets. It's a kind of candy." Prey said challengingly, waiting to see what Gloom would do.

"Oh. Never heard of them." Gloom shrugged blithely. He was looking at Luna's statue and contemplating how much had changed

in the last three months.

'-it's still unbelievable that the Lady of the Night has been returned to us after all these years-'

Prey gave himself a mental slap, his mental expectations had slipped back into the time of the Resistance. Why would Gloom care if he ate sweets? He'd probably never tried a lemon sherbet in his life either. That didn't mean Prey was going to share. These were his.

"I take it Crimson will be returning soon then? Fifteen to twenty minutes?" Prey checked.

"Yes, he asked if he could take this chance to make up for all the flying he's missed." Gloom answered half listening, thoughts still on the past and the changes Luna had brought to the clans.

"And you didn't join him because the sun was growing too bright for your eyes." Prey guessed, although it was hardly a guess.

"Right." Gloom rasped in reply, still not really listening. Something had put the Sargent in a contemplative mood, and in the shade of Luna's alcove was apparently a good a place as any to reminisce while waiting for Crimson to finish his solo flight.

Prey returned to his step and sat back down. He had a bag of lemon sherbets to work his way through.

He wondered when Gloom would notice the graffiti on his goddesses statue and how well that would go down.

The answer was, seven minutes and forty two seconds. It probably should have been sooner, but Gloom wasn't looking for any graffiti, so he didn't notice it until now. Then, he silently fumed about the defacement.

Prey sat on his step and ate his candy, completely oblivious to Gloom's outrage. On the outside anyway. Privately, Prey was laughing at him.

When Crimson finally swooped down to rejoin them, Gloom didn't say anything about the graffiti either, although he resolved to, '-speak with somepony responsible and have them do something about this disrespect-'

Crimson had a strange look on his face, staring right through Prey without seeing him, his tufted ears back. His mental walls were in an odd state too, locked down tighter than Prey had ever seen from the red pegasus before, and his expression looked like he was trying to suppress a grimace. Or possibly heaving.

"Enjoy your flight?" Prey asked, smiling.

Crimson didn't even notice he'd been addressed, eyes still focused a million miles away.

"Enjoy your flight?" Prey repeated, this time waving a hoof in front of him.

Crimson finally blinked and turned to see what Prey wanted, "Pardon?"

"I take it you enjoyed your chance to take an extended flight after all this time confined to the ground yes? And nothing went wrong it seems." Prey said, easy smile still in place.

Crimson's wings spasamed, but only for a second. He turned to fully face Prey and Gloom, "I crossed flight paths with the Royal Guard, Feather Nimbus, on the way back here. He was off duty." He told them.

Gloom's ears went up, "Did something happen?" He asked.

Crimson gave a slow nod, "Yes." He answered distantly.

"What happened?" Gloom asked, frowning now.

Crimson finally seemed to fully return to himself, and he gave his head a shake, lanky mane mussing up.

"I have been invited to play hoofball," Crimson said blankly. He turned his gaze to Gloom, "What is hoofball?"

---I---

Author's Notes:

Now fully edited by the wonderfully helpful: Sweetolebob18

This chapter was a mess before that. Say thank you to him.

Also, some people have asked about the length. Well, uh, to put it bluntly, this story isn't going to get any shorter. [image] Since, well, you know, it's written this far, why stop there?
Hope you enjoy.

Edit 15/02/2020 Note Here is a cool piece of art someone submitted again! By GreatSpaceBeaver. It's a funny one to do with Prey and Candy. ➡**Here**⬅ Go have a look at it if you have the time. [image]

24.1 Market Day comes to an End

As it turned out, Gloom was not too sure what 'hoofball' entailed either.

Yes, he understood it was a game for grown ponies that involved teams, a ball, and a field with white marker lines, but beyond that? He was almost as clueless as Crimson was to just what Feather Nimbus had invited him, seemingly at random, to participate in.

Never the less, Gloom wasn't dismissive of the idea.

"If there's ever a point where the Night Guard gets regular free time, it might be a hobby you should take up." He said, while thinking, '-might also make some acquaintances outside of the Night Guard. It's a good opportunity for him-'

Crimson seemed sceptical, but didn't protest. Or maybe he was still distracted by whatever it was that had unnerved him. It was likely to be months before any opportunity came to accept Feather Nimbus's offer anyway. Because none of this affected Prey, he didn't comment and just sat and sucked on his lemon sherbets. Sadly, he was down to his last one.

"Let's go have a look around." Gloom announced, deciding to get them moving.

"Look around? What do you think it is we've been doing for the last hour?" Prey responded.

"Correction, *you've* been looking around this market district. *We've* been flying." Gloom pointed out.

'Yes, and I've been patiently waiting here like a good little dog for your return, master.' Prey thought sarcastically.

Gloom making him write that letter was still not forgiven. In fact it would never be, not that anyone but Prey would ever know of his grudge.

"Fine, so you and Crimson want a chance to go shopping too. I've already had a look around the place, so where does that leave me?" Prey asked, hoping it would leave him right here and comfortably alone again.

"Good. That means you know where the good places are and can be our guide. We've plenty of time to kill, so let's get going. Lead on Prey." Gloom ordered brightly, starting down the steps.

'-you're not getting out of it this easy kid-', Gloom thought, '-besides, it'll do us all some good to mingle-'

'Ah, of course,' Prey thought with contempt, 'I'd forgotten. Canterlot citizens are supposed to be our role models. How will we ever emulate them unless we wander around soaking up their daily foray into the mundane pursuit of gossip and drivel?'

An hour later, they were still in the lower shopping district. Despite Gloom saying Prey should show them around, that wasn't what happened. Instead, Prey and Crimson had followed the thestral's lead as they wondered about.

With the reapplication of his dusk pony amulet, Gloom had become just another pony in the crowd, same as Crimson, albeit two pegasi who seemed to be squinting a lot more than normal in the sun.

And now, Prey and Crimson were standing in a quiet pocket of space that'd opened up between a couple of street vendors stalls, eyeing each other and wondering what to do.

With instructions to: "Meet up at Princess Luna's monument in an hour's time," Gloom had given the two of them free rein to browse and look around as they wished, and hoofed them some of their allowance before disappearing into the crowd.

Prey knew Gloom had been conducting a little test on them earlier,

leaving each of them alone for a short period of time in an open environment to see if they would try to run. And now, for some reason, the results of Gloom's trust building experiment meant the Sargent thought they could be trusted enough to be left on their own a second time.

Gloom was far too trusting. He'd reprimanded Prey for getting separated in Hay Steam, but now he thought it was fine because it was on his terms? Foolish. There was a lot of damage they could do without running away. Just because Gloom couldn't think of a reason for why they would, didn't mean they wouldn't. Don't measure your wheat sheaf by someone else's potato bushel.

Or perhaps Gloom was just so tired of having to keep watch over them all the time, that at the first opportunity to catch a break, he had grabbed it with all four hooves. This was supposed to be his day off too, after all.

But what ever Gloom's motivations, that still left Prey and Crimson standing here unsupervised, looking at each other.

'Well, I'm not going to complain.' Prey thought, and turned around to go and enjoy his extra hour of free time. Perhaps find another candy store?

Prey stopped and brushed his ear aside to look back over his shoulder, "Why're you following me?"

"Is there a reason I shouldn't be?" Crimson asked.

"Because you should go and do your own thing?" Prey suggested quizzically.

Crimson looked around, regarding the crowds coolly, "I think it would be better if we remained together. It will make it easier to rejoin Sarg- I mean Gloom, later."

"I don't think you quite get it. This is your chance to go look around and do what ever you want. Why do you think Gloom gave us each some bits? He wants to get us out of his wool for an hour." Prey explained with forced patience.

"Ah...But we've been through the market already. Twice even. We've already seen all the shops. There is no reason to split up if there isn't anything new we haven't seen yet." Crimson said.

Wrong, they had only seen about a third, but the fact that his statement was incorrect was beside the point, because Prey saw another motivation in Crimson's words.

Crimson obviously thought it would be easier for him to fit in if he could just follow Prey around. That would not do.

'How can he not have realised the obvious yet?' Prey thought, but he didn't say that. Instead, he studied Crimson for a minute, head tilted to the side and blue eyes considering. 'How to nip this in the bud?'

"You might think you're special, but you're not." Prey said abruptly.

Crimson appeared thrown by Prey's sudden shift in topic, but Prey wasn't finished speaking, "No one's special, because everyone's special, so it cancels out. But sometimes, someone stands out of the background they've been cast against so extremely, that others can't help but notice."

"What are you trying to say? What has any of that to do with this market?" Crimson asked, looking around.

Prey shrugged and hummed noncommittally, "Not much I guess. Just remarking on how much you stand out."

Crimson checked himself over, then the crowd again, "I would say..." He pondered after a moment, "That you stand out more Prey. You are the only non-pony I have seen in Canterlot yet."

"Missing the point~", Prey sing-songed, "Look, what happens when something stands out?"

Crimson thought for a minute. "It just...stands out. That's what it does." He answered, cautious about where this conversation was going.

Prey grinned at him, "Come on, you know better than that. Don't

pretend you don't."

Crimson didn't answer, but that didn't mean it was because he didn't know. His whole life, the pegasus had been ostracised by his clan for being different. The tallest tree gets felled first. It was impossible that Crimson didn't know this lesson.

Prey's grin faded, "You..." He pointed one small hoof, "You stand out." He accused, and turned to go without further ado.

"And what of it?" Crimson demanded, coming up swiftly from behind, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Prey jumped backwards, putting some space between them, "Don't touch me." He snapped, although Crimson had been no where close to doing that.

"You're not listening to what I'm saying. You stand out. That's bad. I stand out too, and so does Gloom. And together, we'd just stand out more. We're both different yes, but there's no common bond, understand? We are not friends. I don't want a target on my back."

Crimson's expression didn't change, but his wings did, looking like they wanted to flare open at Prey's aggressive words.

"If you wanted to be left alone, you could've just said. Why not just say, 'go away'? That's what you really meant in the end." Crimson said, voice toneless.

Prey threw up his hooves in a show of frustration, "Because it was so obvious. We're forced to work together because Princess Luna told us to, but see this?"

Prey held up a fetlock to display the golden tracer bracelet, "Don't forget, you've got a pair too. We're not friends, just two unfortunates who stood out too much. We're *not* friends." Prey stressed, "Our leash is just held by the same master."

Both of them stood looking at each other, exactly like they'd been doing a few minutes ago. But now it was different.

None of the blithely ignorant crowd had noticed their little

discussion, but that didn't matter. Neither of them were part of the ignorant Canterlot crowd, and never would be. They stood out too much. And Prey had made it clear he had no intentions of standing out by standing together.

In short, he was telling Crimson we're only allies, not friends. 'So stop following me around.'

Prey's words had been rude and abrasive, but he didn't want any uncertainty about where they stood. Prey couldn't afford Crimson discovering one of his secrets by accident. Like what would've happened if he'd followed Prey earlier and stumbled across him talking with Lemon Pink.

Crimson's face was a blank mask of stone.

'Oh, think that's impressive? I can match that.' Prey thought mockingly, and killed his own expression, meeting the pegasus limpet eye for limpet eye.

Crimson spoke slowly, "You said you were afraid of wolves. That time at the hospital, when we talked. And we've all been working together so well. We successfully apprehended Pebble Mill and Turf Apple, and Rocky Bed has been liberated too. Your actions speak louder than words... I think you're just scared to open up, like Gloom-like *I* thought." Crimson said, correcting himself at the end.

"Oh? Gloom decided to exchange theories with you while flying, did he?" Prey asked, unimpressed, "And what makes you think I'm scared?"

"Not afraid, that's not...Wrong word again. Doesn't matter, you just don't know how to interact with other..." Crimson trailed off and clammed up.

"Oh, don't stop there, do tell." Prey said sweetly.

Crimson didn't react to Prey's mocking. Instead, he just shook his head and turned away with a snort. And just like that, it was over, as if Crimson simply couldn't be bothered to argue to issue any further with Prey. He was definitely exuding the feeling of; 'My time

would be better spent elsewhere'.

"I'm going to go look in some of these shops," Crimson announced blankly, all anger forgotten, "That is what Sargent Gloom wanted us to do, isn't it?" He asked, considering his drawstring bag of bits.

'You're asking me? I was just rude to your face and you don't seem like you even noticed.' Prey thought, equal parts surprised and frustrated at Crimson's nonsensical attitude.

It was obvious that Gloom had shared some misconstrued theory about him, (probably that he was raised without a proper understanding of right and wrong) but frankly Prey didn't care. Gloom was just going to make a fool out of himself, and for now it would actually work in Prey's favour, because it might mean they ended up being more lenient with Prey. Like just now when Prey told Crimson to shove off. Still, Crimson was one weird pony.

Prey sighed, "Yes, that's what Gloom wanted us to do." He answered, giving up. He couldn't find the energy to argue further with the pegasus.

Prey blamed the shopping district for getting to him. He didn't belong here. Prey's neck muscles ached from being tensed and on a swivel all the time. He was sick of his stomach jumping unpleasently every time a unicorn glanced in his direction. 'Zoma'Gricka on all horn heads.'

Prey blinked. The spot on the cobbles was empty. He realised that Crimson had already walked away to fulfil Gloom's instructions. The pegasus didn't look very certain about where he was going, but he was still going.

'By chance he might even find somewhere that sells common sense.' Prey thought vindictively, but at least Crimson had done him the courtesy of finally taking the hint and leaving him alone again.

Turning round, Prey slipped away in the opposite direction.

'This place really is disgustingly narrow minded.' Prey thought,

reading the heading on a newspaper stand he passed named; "Canterlot Celebrities". Everything about Canterlot was self absorbed like that really. The spires, the gold, the statues, the terminology, the phrasing, everything. And the longer you stayed, the more unpalatable the self aggrandisement became.

'I'm glad I'm not part of this culture. If I wasn't stranded in it, the whole city of Canterlot could fall off the mountain face and kill every single pony in it for all I care.' Prey thought. He was in a dark mood as he continued walking through the shopping district in the same fashion he'd been an hour before.

That is to say, avoiding all attention.

Gloom making him write that letter had gotten under his skin, *deeply*, and he couldn't shake it off. Gloom was going to regret that, one way or another. Prey didn't take orders from Gloom willingly, or anyone else for that matter. And then Crimson had to go and annoy him too.

Prey didn't even notice he was grinding his teeth loudly enough to be audible.

'I don't belong to you. I don't belong to anyone. I am no slave. They think they're in charge. They tell me what to do and Stinger whips me when I don't. They burned us out and thought they could just win and walk away. They all started this war, but I'm going to finish-'

Prey stopped. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

He felt the flag stones beneath his hooves, not the dank earth and leaf mould of the Deeper Green.

Prey breathing calming, 'It's been a long time since I've had to ground myself like this.'

Opening his eyes, Prey found he just so happened to be looking in through the glass shop front of a colourful clothing store, silk ribbons and party dresses on display. When he saw the outline of his reflection in the window, Prey hurriedly averted his eyes. Then

he looked back.

As he looked at the colourful ribbons looping around the displays, an old memory began poking at him to be remembered.

---The Past---

"Come here little Prey, I've got a present for you." Lance leered, strolling into camp and casting about for Prey. At the sound of his call, a number of resting Resistance fighters perked up at the possibility of entertainment.

Prey on the other hoof had to stifle a whimper.

Snake had no need of him today, so he'd been told to dig out a new fire pit. He hadn't eaten properly in two days, and he had a weeping insect bite on his leg that stung every time he took another stab at the earth with his digging stick. Sweat mercilessly prickled his eyes and his underbelly wool was matted with dirt.

He felt like he might collapse at any second.

And now the donkey Lance was going to make things even worse. Things could always get worse. Prey wondered in dread what new form of cruel entertainment he was about to be subjected to.

"Oh Prey, I've got a gift for a cute little filly here. Why don't you come over and I'll give it to you?" Lance laughed. Lance laughed a lot, and it wasn't the nice kind of laughter.

Lance's insult wasn't a new one. Everyone mockingly called Prey a filly, a mare, a doe, a ewe, or the like because of his feeble appearance. He hated how it was true too. Big blue eyes and soft droopy ears did him no favours.

'Why, why, why me?' Prey thought miserably, climbing from his hole. It was distressingly easy. After all his painful efforts, the fire pit was only half done. If he didn't finish it by tonight, he would be punished. Again.

"There you are little filly." Lance crooned, standing over Prey with gleaming eyes, mask pushed back.

"W-what do you w-want, Lance?" Prey managed to ask. He didn't even have the energy to properly cower. He hoped Lance wouldn't hit him for not showing the proper amount of fear.

"Bad filly, weren't you listening? Uncle Lance went out of his way just to get a gift for you. Doesn't a good little filly deserve presents?" Lance asked, then laughed at his own words.

Prey in turn wanted to cry. He could feel the hotness building up behind his eyes, and it wasn't just the prickling sweat. Being called a filly was hardly the issue. In fact, if all the resistance did was call him a filly for the rest of his short, miserable life, Prey could count himself the luckiest sheep alive.

No, it was everything else crushing him. Despair, hopelessness, hunger, fear, exhaustion, pain. The potent cocktail was drowning everything else out.

But he wouldn't cry. Crying would make Lance happy. And then he would just be called his second most common nick name, crybaby.

A juvenile insult to be sure, but it hurt so much more than coward, wretch, or filly.

It hurt because it was so impersonal. If they were using such a weak insult, it meant they were barely bothering to even acknowledge his existence. 'Filly', or 'ewe', those were just descriptions with some accuracy. But crybaby? They couldn't even waste the two seconds it took to come up with a more inventive insult. He wasn't a person, just an object that belonged to Snake and was occasionally useful.

Lance reached under his grimly cloak, "What does every filly need? A daddy to cry to? A doll house to play dress up with? A mommy to cuddle? Ah, I know! A ribbon for their mane!" Lance brayed.

He dangled a tattered blue ribbon in front of Prey's face.

Prey didn't know where he'd gotten it from. The unfortunate family of a farm they'd raided maybe. A family with a filly who'd had a ribbon. Did the Resistance kill them? Prey felt sick.

"Here you go, put it on, put it on." Lance encouraged, shoving it

repeatedly in Prey's face, "A little filly needs to look pretty, and a filly like you needs all the help she can get." Quite a number of other resistance members were grinning or laughing too. It wasn't funny, but they didn't care. They lived with the threat of death hanging over their heads every day. It didn't have to be funny, just distracting.

Prey had been too slow in responding, Lance wasn't a patient donkey, and he had a crowd to please, "Put it on!" He shouted.

What could Prey do? Fight them? Say no? He could, but that would just annoy them, and then they would hurt him. Prey took the ribbon in a trembling hoof. He stared at the ground in shame, not looking at any of the laughing resistance as he tied the ribbon loosely behind one ear.

"Doesn't the filly look precious? So precious!" Lance brayed, gesturing at the others to join in.

"The resistance is no place for a filly. Stay in camp and wash the linen."
"Going to see your sweet heart! Dance for him perhaps?"
"Yes, dance little filly, dance for us."
"Yes, dance." Another joined in.
"Dance filly."

"Dance!" They ordered, mocking words liable to turn into blows any second if he didn't comply.

So Prey danced to the best of his ability. Humiliation burned him, but it burned dully. Compared to everything else, what was this further shame? He shuffled and hopped awkwardly about, doing clumsy twirls until finally the last goat lost interest and someone threw a rock at him.

Dismissed, Prey crawled away, a fresh graze to add to his pains. He was so tired. But he couldn't sleep. The fire pit had to be finished, or he would be punished.

Only when Prey had awoken the following day, with back muscles cramping under the whip scars in the morning chill, did Prey find he still had the stupid ribbon tied to his ear.

He went to angrily tear it off, then stopped. A feeling of rebellion bubbled up in Prey's heart, a reaction to all the helpless shame. When Prey limped through the camp that morning, he still had the ribbon in place.

When Lance noticed, he laughed, "This runt horseapple's head whacked. Now she really does think she's a pretty little filly with her ribbon." Lance jeered from where he lounged. A few others looked up.

"I do like it. Thank you very much for it." Prey answered.

Lance scowled, "What?"

Prey licked his lips, "Thank you for getting me a present." He repeated.

Lance got up, "Give me that stupid ribbon." He snapped.

"But you gave it to me as a gift. You mean you want to wear it now?" Prey asked, eyes going wide. 'What am I doing?' He could scarcely believe the words coming out of his own mouth.

"Did mommy smash you over your ugly little head as a babe?" Lance snarled, stalking closer. Prey's hooves shook, but he didn't back down. At this point he was too scared to run, but his mouth kept moving.

"So it wasn't a gift? But you told me to wear it." Prey protested. Sniggers came from around the camp.

Lance'd had enough of this stupidity, "Come here, I'm gonna'-"

Lance became aware that the resistance was laughing at him. Yesterday, they'd laughed at Prey. Now that Prey had turned the vindictive joke back on Lance, they also laughed. None of them were Lance's friends, they were just here to watch this amusing distraction, their eyes cold. Lance's eye twitched as he realised what

was happening.

A lamb was getting the best of him, and everyone could see it. If he did anything, he'd only be proving Prey right.

"Like I care. If you're sick enough to want to be a filly, whatever, it means nothing to me." Lance humph'd and backed down. He strolled away with his best attempt at nonchalance, pretending like he didn't care despite the way his tail was bristling.

But every day after that, until the ribbon was nothing but a scrawny twist of torn silk, Prey still wore it, just because he knew it aggravated Lance ever time the donkey saw it, because there was nothing he could do about it. Lance wasn't anyone important, he was just a recruit that was a bit more noisy and cruel than the rest of the pack. Tearing the ribbon off Prey would be admitting to everyone that the lamb, the lowest of the low in the whole camp, had gotten to him.

Prey wore that ribbon for months and months. In fact, the ribbon outlived Lance in the end.

---The Present---

Prey spent five long minutes looking in through the window. Then he went in and bought a silk ribbon, sky blue just like the last one, and tied it behind his ear.

Crimson was already waiting at Luna's statue when Prey got back.

Somehow, he noticed Prey sneaking closer through the crowds while he was more than twenty paces away, his yellow eyes turning unerringly in the lamb's direction. How did he do that? Perhaps it was Crimson's cutie mark. The pegasus never had said what his unfairly granted talent was, something most unusual for a pony. Normally they were all too keen to shove it in your face.

But then, Crimson was an unusual pony, from an unusual clan of unusual thestrals.

Crimson didn't quite do a double take when he saw Prey with a ribbon tied behind his ear, but his eyes clearly showed his utter disbelief. However, it was clear he still remembered Prey's earlier accusations, even if he'd brushed them off, because he didn't immediately comment.

Prey walked up and sat on the far side of the steps, smiling slightly and not looking at anything in particular.

Three times Crimson started to speak before thinking better of it, but his stare was still drawn back to the ridiculous blue ribbon every time.

One open glance, a pause with mouth open, then a, 'not-my-business' shake of the head.

A minute later of sidelong staring, Crimson opened his mouth, then shut it again.

A minute and a half after that, the same thing again, this time with a more openly incredulous head shake.

And Prey just kept up that little smile, daring Crimson to speak.

Apparently though, the oddity was so out of place on Prey, that it even made someone like Crimson feel like he had to ask. Whatever had been troubling the pegasus, it evidently wasn't as distracting as Prey was, because finally, Crimson decided he just had to know what weirdness this was.

"You have a... a bow, here." Crimson said, gesturing vaguely to his own ear.

"It's a ribbon, not a bow." Prey corrected him without looking.

"Ah...Right."

Crimson was left at a loss where to go next. Was he allowed to ask Prey why, or would he get chewed out by the runt if he did? He'd been told in no uncertain terms just an hour ago "we're not friends". The socially inept Crimson didn't know how he was supposed to proceed.

Crimson's dilemma was part of the reason why Prey was smiling. Nothing helped a spiteful mood like spreading it around.

Crimson cleared his throat and tried again, "It's a nice...ribbon?" He suggested.

"Why thank you, that's very kind."

"You were unhappy that time, when Sargent Gloom thought you were a ewe. When we first met, I mean." Crimson stated, not quite asking the real question here.

"It's just Gloom today, again, and since he was wrong, why shouldn't I have been annoyed?" Prey responded brightly.

Crimson looked at the small box next to his side. Prey wasn't the only one who'd been shopping, "But you went out of your way and bought a ribbon. That you're now wearing." Crimson pointed out.

Prey smiled and played dumb, "Yes I did and yes I am."

Crimson was left struggling for how to correctly verbalise his befuddled incredulity. Unfortunately, wordcraft wasn't Crimson's strong point. Eventually, he just threw caution to the wind and came right out with it.

"You don't want to get called a filly but you bought a ribbon. You do this all the time, looking for an excuse to pick a fight. Trying to deceive everypony we meet doesn't make you smart, it makes you a liar." He told Prey, finally being open with his disdain.

Prey kept the smile up and motioned Crimson to lean in close, not close enough to reach, but close enough.

"You know," Prey whispered conversationally, "It's really none of your business, but since we're work partners, I guess I can tell you... That I don't give a flying toss, and if you try and take my ribbon, I'll kill you."

Crimson jerked back, then snorted at the ridiculousness of Prey's threat, then realised Prey had been smiling so he was obviously joking, but now how was he supposed to proceed, because what did

someone say in reply to that?

Prey giggled at him, which only increased the Pegasus's confusion, "...What?" He eventually asked.

Prey only laughed.

Gloom was a lot less circumspect on his return than even Crimson had been.

"You look like a little filly going to a sleep over party. Where did you even get that thing and why're you wearing it?"

Prey's smile didn't slip even a single notch, in fact it only got wider, "You told us to buy something nice, so I did. You know, with bits and everything, no stealing this time whatsoever. And to your second question, I wasn't aware there was a law against wearing blue ribbons on Saturday."

Gloom blinked, his initial bluntness fading as he realised there might be more to this seemingly insane fashion choice than he'd assumed.

'-am I missing something here? There's no way Prey doesn't realise how stupid he looks, so there must be a reason-', Gloom considered, '-perhaps I should refrain from laughing then?-'

"Right. So... You bought yourself a ribbon. Very...nice. But *why've* you bought yourself a ribbon? Did you used to wear one back home?" Gloom asked in confusion. It was the only explanation the Sargent could think of for this strange flight of fancy.

Prey's eye twitched, "No. I didn't." He answered coolly.

"You do know that wearing ribbons is considered to be something that only mares and fillies do in Equestria, right?" Gloom double checked, '-he might honestly not know-'

"I'm aware. Social norms of ponykind prohibits items of clothing or jewellery to be worn by members of the opposite gender from

whom the item was designed for. One such item; ribbons. Mainly associated with little fillies and their playmates." Prey elaborated with an affected posh accent, twirling the loose end of the ribbon around a hoof.

'-ahh, so it's just an act of plain old rebellion. That makes much more sense-', Gloom nodded to himself. Gloom was half right there. But as a thestral, he was a bit of a pot calling the kettle black under these circumstance.

"If you want, I can show you the shop and you can get yourself one to go with that necklace and earring," Prey suggested, nodding at the dusk pony amulet and obsidian clan stud, "Perhaps Crimson would like a ribbon too? He can get one to match his gold tracer bracelets." He joked.

"You've got them too." Crimson retorted.

"We can get a matching set then. Yellow will also go nicely with your eyes when tied up in your mane." Prey mocked.

"Prey, can you just not." Gloom interrupted, "And you know what? If you want to wear that, fine, it's no skin off my nose. You can deal with ponies calling you a filly without getting angry though. You've no excuses now."

Prey shrugged, "It never stopped them in the first place."

Without knowing it, Gloom had repeated almost exactly the same excuse Lance had uttered all those years ago. 'So it does annoy you. Good.' Prey thought.

It was upon their return, having trekked all the way through the elitist snobbery of upper Canterlot, and back into the Palace, that Prey first spotted it.

How to describe it? How do you convey in words the unprecedented magnificence and awe inspiring grandeur of what he saw? It was beautiful, it was stunning, it was aligned with perfection itself.

In this disgusting swill of racism and blind ignorance that made up Canterlot, that such a place could exist only served to throw into stark contrast just how special the place which appeared before him really was. It was as unexpected as finding a moon rose in the middle of a swamp, or something equally as poetic.

Prey felt his breath hitch as he looked in through the double doors and saw the cathedral like set up inside, and to him, it was far more holy.

"Keep up Prey, no dawdling." Gloom called back, having just walked on past without caring what they were seeing.

Prey's legs didn't move, "What is that?" He almost whispered.

"What? Speak up." Gloom said, turning around in annoyance. Prey's earlier rudeness had not been forgiven.

"What is that?" Prey asked again, pointing with big eyes as a couple of unicorns walked out from the open doors, chatting quietly.

"That's the Canterlot Royal Library," Gloom answered, "Now come on."

"But, but, it's not even guarded." Prey protested, waving at the front doors. Inside and behind the reception desk, the rows of book shelves went on and on. It had a whole extra floor above, and Prey couldn't even see the end of the ground one!

"That's because it's open to everypony," Gloom said, "Well, everypony who's allowed in through the palace gates." He amended.

"So anyone could just walk in and take any book they want at anytime?" Prey asked incredulously.

"No, not just anypony." Gloom sighed as he realized they weren't going anywhere just yet, tail swishing in annoyance. He sent an apologetic look at Crimson, who was standing patiently carrying his box, 'Got to deal with the kid here.' The look said.

"Look, if you want to go into the Library, now isn't the time."

"So that means anyone *can* go in there then?" Prey pressed.

"Well no, you couldn't just walk in off the streets. As I already aid, you have to be allowed in through the palace gates first. And no, you can't just take the books away. There's only some that can be taken out, and you need to register for that, and most of the library is restricted anyway."

"Restricted? What do you have to do to get permission?" Prey was quick to ask.

"I don't know, probably be a scholar or something like that. We aren't assigned to go into the library, so it was only briefly covered in the induction. Most pony visiting are researchers, and you need to get a written recommendation from a professor or something like that for access to any books above grade one."

"How many grades are there?"

"I don't exactly remember, it was over two months ago Prey. Six or seven levels maybe? Why're you so interested?" Gloom frowned.

Prey stared at him like he was mentally deficient, then back at the library, "That place, it's full of knowledge! Learning, magic, spells, theories, how are you not interested?" He asked, voice an octave higher than normal in his excitement. Prey had *literally* killed ponies for a half burnt page of magical knowledge, and now before him was a whole library, holding more books than he'd ever thought existed.

Prey wanted to go in. He wanted to read it all. He wanted access to that knowledge. Fifty seven years he'd been mentally starved, but now he found a room the size of a mansion, no, ten mansions full of books to feed his greed.

"I thought you said you never went to school." Crimson said, reminding them that yes, he was still there.

"We had no schools in the village, it's not that I didn't go, but why does that matter? That's more books than I could ever read in there." Prey said, eyes still glued to the libraries doors.

Crimson blinked, "I would not have thought...Well, academia does sound like you actually." He commented.

Gloom had forgotten about his impatience, and was now paying close attention to Prey.

'-first thing Prey has shown a healthy interest in-', Gloom observed, '-it's sort of reassuring, perhaps we can work with this somehow to improve his behaviour?-'

Prey liked the sound of Gloom's thoughts right now. He needed to find a way to play along to get Gloom implement his idea. If Prey needed to sacrifice something in return, so what? It would be more than worth it.

"I always wished I could have gone to a school. Is there anyway I can get a pass into the library?" Prey asked. 'Come on, I'm giving you a big, obvious, bargaining chip here.' He silently urged.

"Well, the worst they can do is say no, but not today. We've still got stuff to do before we restart our shift." Gloom said, already thinking of when they might next be free.

"But that's a yes then?" Prey asked, head turning back to the library, "There's so much we could learn in there. Cultural diversity, history from across Equestria, astrology, geography, Canterlot's foundation, they might even have texts that survive from when Princess Luna used to rule." He listed, purposefully suggesting topics that he knew Gloom would approve of.

"It'll have to be some other time I'm afraid. Come, let's go, but you can come back later." Gloom reassured Prey.

Prey wasn't prepared to leave it at that. He'd practically straight up told Gloom that he was prepared to make almost any concession to get access to that library. Improve his attitude, be politer, increased obedience, solving the case, but Gloom didn't seem to have taken the hint. Prey needed to do something to resolve this. Thinking quickly, he spoke.

"Or...or maybe I shouldn't go in. Crimson's right, I've never even

been to school. There's probably a rule that you can't go in if you don't have a library pass. I don't think they would let us in. Yeah, they wouldn't let us in anyway." Prey said, completely backtracking with an apparent onset of sudden nerves.

He'd chosen his words carefully. Gloom, who wasn't a bad person, would now feel guilty if he felt he was the one denying Prey this opportunity.

"I'm sure there's no rule like that Prey, it's open to everypony, remember? We just can't go in right now." Gloom told him. As a thestral, who's culture held a deep respect for the past, Gloom was automatically approving of Prey's desire to study Equestria's history.

"You sure?" Prey asked.

"I can't think of any reason why we wouldn't be allowed in." Gloom shrugged, "But some other time, understand? Crimson can go in with you next time we have a day off."

Crimson blinked, "I am? I mean, I will be?"

"If you want to."

“Oh. Thank you sir.”

sigh “Still off duty. It’s just Gloom.”

'Success.' Prey thought gleefully, still not quite able to believe it had been that simple. Already he had plans to see if Lemon Pink could gain access to the library. He wanted to know what lay in those restricted sections.

Their unexpected day off had unfortunately come to an end.

It had been... An 'interesting' experience for both Prey and Crimson.

It'd been a remarkably profitable day too, by Prey's reckoning. He'd been given an account of money (however uninteresting, it was still useful), Lemon Pink had checked in, he'd experienced lemon

sherbets, obtained a replacement ribbon, made a number of plans for the future, and to top it all off, he'd been promised access (at some point), to the library.

And not just any library, the Royal Canterlot Library.

However, all good things come to an end, and the more unprecedented the period of relief, the sooner life found a way to end it.

That meant that they were back in their armour, well two of them anyway, in their office, trying to find a lead in the mini mountain of reports related to the salt trade.

Since there was still no furniture for the office, they were stuck working off the floor again. No real surprise there. Starry Wing had probably been fed a pat of placating lies by the requisitions department about how the "paper work was still being processed", Prey bet.

Idly, he flicked over another file, taking his time and making it look like he was busy. Almost all these reports were utter hogsweed. The giant, stinging, painful, skin blistering kind. The only way the ISND would ever make a break through into this underground salt operation was either by pure dumb luck, or some new discovery. Everything in these reports was already weeks old at best.

Gloom, who was trying to find the report he'd placed down only a minute ago, (it was under the blue folder) knew it too. But with only three of them, there wasn't much they could do to go out and gather the needed information themselves. By necessity of its small size, the ISND was a reactionary unit. This was proved all the more by the stakeout operation taking place in the three towns Prey had identified; Cartwright, Homestead and Coal Clack.

The ISND weren't numerous enough to do it themselves, so Night Guards had to have been drafted in from other places in the already strained Guard roster.

"Has anypony seen what I did with Hemming's report?" Gloom asked, finally giving up on finding it by himself.

"Which one was that sir?"

"The one about that unicorn who they thought was secretly using on the train, but there was no evidence." Gloom said, as if the reports contents would somehow help them find the misplaced papers.

To Crimson's credit, he at least attempted the futile endeavour before giving up. "Sorry sir, I can't see it."

Gloom cast about again, "Prey, did you see where it went?"

"Did you put it under another file?" Prey suggested, to jolt his memory.

"N-Yes, I think I did actually, but where-aha!" Gloom pulled out the report from under the blue file as he finally remembered.

"A bit distracted are we sir?" Prey asked sweetly.

Gloom as always let the minor rule infraction of mocking an officer pass. Prey never did it in front of other officers, or anyone else really, so whatever. Sticks n' stones, and all that.

"Will they catch the riot instigators tonight do you think sir?" Crimson asked, voicing what was distracting Gloom. He didn't ask 'if', just when, complete faith in his fellow Night Guards.

"Doesn't seem likely. It'll probably have to be a full week of stakeout before we can spot a pattern." Gloom said, sharing his conclusion.

"Telling you, it's the Share Cropper and Holder campaign leaders." Prey said, not looking up.

His hoof rested under the report, supporting the open file, and also incidentally hidden as he drew a rune on the floorboards.

The final rune,' *Jhin'at*', rolled off his hoof and slotted into place, and Prey felt the array 'Click'.

It wasn't visible, but the whole work space they were standing on was actually now one big runic array. It wasn't the only array

either.

The whole office was littered with runes, but only Prey knew they were there. Over the past week, he'd been slowly adding them, one painstaking rune at a time. Gloom and Crimson hadn't a clue what danger lay under their hooves as they clopped around the office.

For now, the runes would simply remain passive and accumulate energy. But when the time came, they would only need a touch.

'And then, ponies will die.'

Gloom's prediction that it would take at least a week before anything was found in the staked out towns was completely inaccurate.

How did Prey know that?

Lieutenant Screech kicked in their bunk room door at three in the morning and shouted, "We've caught one! Captain Nighthawk says you're to interrogate them, right now."

Gloom struggled from his bunk, kicking the covers aside and fumbling for his armour, "Yes sir! We're coming right away! Crimson, stand down. Prey, get out from under that bed and hurry up."

Crimson's shape lowered his wings and uncrouched from a fighting stance, "Oh. Yes sir." He said, tone still muddled with adrenaline and sleep.

Prey, not being a thestral or having been blessed with good night vision like Crimson, was lucky he didn't have any armour to put on in the dark.

'Haven't you ever heard of knocking?' He thought venomously as he crawled out from under the bed where he'd hidden on instinct at having someone yelling and smashing through the door in the middle of the night.

Captain Nighthawk was waiting for them outside the holding cells. Prey wondered if the coin flipping warden was still on shift at this time or not.

Nighthawk didn't waste time and got straight to the point.

"We've arrested somepony who we marked as new in Coal Clack, and was spotted leaving their rented room earlier tonight. We trailed them to a secret meeting between a small group of ponies. When confronted, they all tried to scatter. We still got our target though, he's inside the cell. Find out everything the stallion's hiding. I want this done before he gets his lawyer in the morning." Nighthawk summed up.

Nighthawk didn't explain *why* he'd roused Gloom to carry out the interrogation instead of using someone else more capable or even just better rested, but the reason was fairly self explanatory to anyone who had a basic understanding of thestral culture.

This stakeout was Gloom's plan, and it had yielded results on the very first night. Success spoke for itself. Therefore it was Gloom's right to try his hoof first. Not exactly standard protocol, but this was how the thestrals did things.

"Yes sir, right away." Gloom said saluting. What the Night Guard captain didn't know that the entire plan had actually been suggested by Prey, not Gloom, which meant Gloom wasn't nearly as confident as his answer indicated.

"Good. Starry Wing is still in Coal Clack seeing if he can't round up any of the other ponies that got away. If necessary, you can interrogate them later." Nighthawk said, stepping aside so that they could fully enter the warden's office. Prey brought up the rear as usual, hoping to go unnoticed.

Nighthawk did notice, and the three of them were treated to the rare sight of the Night Guard Captain's expression looking surprised.

"Why is the lamb wearing a ribbon?" Nighthawk asked in

bewilderment. '-playing dress up?-'

"Er, I don't rightly know sir. He just does. It's not important though." Gloom answered.

"That's not regulation uniform," Nighthawk said, making Gloom secretly panic for a moment before he went on, "But that doesn't matter right now. Get this interrogation done."

"Yes sir. Prey, Crimson, come."

'What are we, dogs?' Prey thought, although that was a fairly accurate description. Dogs on a leash.

The integration room was the very same one they'd used when interrogating Pebble Mill along with Minty, the legal council representative. Captain Nighthawk had no interest in following procedure in letting the stallion inside have access to such legal advice. He wanted to strike while the iron was hot and their prisoner was still reeling from their sudden arrest by spooky glowing eyed thestrals in the middle of the night.

Gloom took thirty seconds before entering to address Crimson and Prey.

"The set up from last time worked fine, so let's stick with it. I'll do the talking, you two chip in when you notice something. Prey... you just do your thing." Gloom ordered, double checking his helmet was on straight for the last time before unlocking the door.

'-listen to my talent, intimidation is key here. Prey wearing that stupid ribbon isn't really helping-', But it was too late for Gloom to do anything about it at this point.

Pulling open the door, the three of them entered.

Whether it was just because the thestrals who'd arrested the beige Earth pony didn't have the same need for light, or if they'd purposefully provided only a single candle to keep the room dark and intimidating, it was.

However, it didn't seem to overly affect their guest, who looked up on their entry.

"Hello there. Are you here to take me back home?" He asked, squinting to make out who'd entered. No answer. Behind them, Nighthawk locked the door.

"Ah, hello?" The prisoner suggested again, like he was politely waiting for them to introduce themselves and they were being rude by not doing so.

Prey wouldn't be surprised if the stallion's name was Silver Speech. His voice was smooth and pleasant to the ear, lending even just his simple question an air of gravity. Other than his voice though, he looked like a completely ordinary Earth pony, nothing else standing out. If you passed him by in the street, you'd never recognise him a second time.

Gloom stuck to the interrogator protocol and ignored the question, instead pointedly taking his time pulling out the seat opposite and sitting, Crimson standing at attention behind his left shoulder, looming in the dim light, his features obscured.

If Crimson had meant to do that on purpose, it was cleverly done Prey thought.

The Night Guard had caught the correct pony, and on their first try too. The stallion's thought's gave him away, '-this must be the interrogator. It's all happening so fast, the situation is fluid, but was it luck or skill they found me? Need to get a message to Marble to get me out-'

"Right," Gloom started without introducing himself, "Let's not waste each other's time. You've been caught, pleading guilty and coming clean is your best option here, and it's definitely the easier way."

'-trying to scare me into revealing myself because you don't have any evidence? And right off the bat too? How arrogant-' The stallion thought, but his face only showed confusion.

"What? I don't- What we talking about? I'm drawing a blank. I don't

think we're quite singing from the same hymn sheet here officer." The stallion said, affecting a nervous chuckle to relieve the tension. His words were reasonable, but it was all an act.

"Hard way it is then," Gloom rasped, face stony, "Your refusal to cooperate will be held against you later at your trial. But you have that to look forward to later. Let's start simple, what's your name?"

"Trial? I think that's a tad extreme of a reaction, I was only going out to meet with the local astronomy club." Their prisoner protested.

"Name?" Gloom repeated, unphased.

"I'm Copper Pot, passed down from my great grandfather, who founded Howling Mine." Copper answered, '-so they have nothing on me, not even my name. This will be easier than I thought, hardly the first time I've had to talk my way out-'

Copper Pot wasn't lying about his name, Prey could see that. In fact, Copper Pot wanted them to look him up, because he knew his record was spotless, '-Marble's ponies do good work-'

Gloom grunted, "I didn't ask about your names origins. Why were you in Coal Clack?"

"Have you been to Coal Clack yourself officer?"

"Answer the question."

"It's a lovely town with a lot going for it, with rich ponies looking to invest in it I heard. I went there looking for work. It would be wonderful if I could find permanent employment there, but..." Here Copper Pot shrugged, "Harmony guides everypony's destinies as she sees fit. We must work hard to realise those destinies."

"Less useless talk, more information." Gloom broke in, voice cold. If he hadn't, it was likely Copper Pot would've kept going.

Copper Pot made a disappointed sound. Disappointed with Gloom, like the thestral really ought to know better. "Everypony should think for themselves, you know. If you dismiss everypony's opinion

that doesn't agree with your own, you'll never learn to see." He said.

"I'm not interested in your philosophy. Who were the ponies you met with, and how did they get in contact with you?" Gloom asked.

Copper Pot shrugged, "I have answered that already. They claimed to be the local astronomy club. I've always had an appreciation for the beauty of the stars, and since her Royal majesty's Princess Luna's return, they have only grown more so. All ponies would be better off if they took a moment to appreciate the grander of the night canvas-"

"-How did they get in contact with you?" Gloom cut him off before the stallion could wax too poetic.

'Trying to build common ground by pretending he admires Luna's domain. Could you get more obvious?' Prey thought. Luckily Gloom wasn't buying any of it.

Copper Pot pursed his lips in annoyance at being interrupted, and made they sure they knew it. He was remarkably well collected for a pony in his situation, "I've only met one of them before, earlier today in town actually. We bumped into each other and got talking. One thing lead to another, and he kindly extended an invite for me to attend their stargazing trip that was supposed to take place tonight."

'-plausible deniability. It'll be easy to claim that they lied to me-', Copper thought as he gave his answer to Gloom.

He was right too. Even if the Night Guard caught and questioned the other ponies and they admitted to being conspirators to start a riot, Copper Pot had only just arrived in Coal Clack. He could pretend he knew nothing of their motives, that they'd lied and mislead him into attending tonight by pretending to be an astronomy club.

'Clever, playing the victim.' Prey thought.

"Why'd you run if you had nothing to hide?" Crimson challenged, actively joining the interrogation. Copper Pot peered at him, but

wasn't quite able to make out Crimson's features in the lone candle light. Copper Pot "Humph'd."

"I will confess that you Night Guards gave me quite a turn when you swooped out of the dark. I just saw glowing cat eyes come flying at me and did what any sane, rational pony would've done." Copper answered. Again, a very reasonable excuse.

"You're not fooling any pony Copper Pot," Gloom said, "We know what you were really doing in Coal Clack with the riots." He sat back and waited to see how Copper would react to that.

"Officer, I don't know what end of the stick you've got, but I can't see how I can help you either." Copper said helplessly, "I don't know what you're hinting at, nor am I going to take the blame for a crime some pony else has obviously committed."

'-he won't give a straight answer, nor is he easily intimated-', Gloom thought, not pleased. '-Time to switch my approach up-'

"So then you wouldn't happen to be planning on going to Homestead or Cartwright anytime soon, would you?"

'-how did? Homestead was where I was going to go-', Copper thought quickly.

"I go where there's a chance for employment. Times are tough. I've been town hopping on the train looking for jobs for a while." Copper said, quickly deciding to establish his excuse now, so his travel patterns couldn't be used as evidence against him later.

The reflective yellow of Gloom's eyes narrowed in the shadows, '-that's not the correct path in some way, I can feel it. That mean's he's lying-'

Gloom leaned forwards in his seat, bringing his face fully into the candle light, "There was recently a riot in Hay Steam. A month ago, there was one before that, but you already knew that, didn't you? This pattern has been repeated up and down the railroad line. Do you know what we found when we started to study this pattern? You. So if there anything you'd like to tell us while you still have

the chance?"

To his credit, Copper didn't even look ruffled, "Those deplorable riots have nothing to do with me officer. I detest violence as any civilised pony should, and I have no hoof in this rabble rousing. I can't be held accountable for your failings." Copper returned heatedly, gesturing.

"I don't know why you've singled me out, but I'm innocent. I will swear before Celestia herself. It doesn't matter how many times you ask, my answer will not change. An innocent stallion cannot change his answer. You've abducted me without cause or provocation, held me at fear for my own safety, and now think to try and scare me into allowing myself to be framed? Well this free stallion says no. Not now, not ever."

It was a good performance. If Prey was easily swayed, he might've even believed it, so genuine was the conviction in Copper's voice. It was easy to see why the stallion hadn't been caught yet with a talent like that. And how he might've started all those riots from the background.

Prey could read the doubts creeping into Gloom's head that they might've got the wrong stallion. Despite his own cutie mark, Captain Nighthawk, and the pattern all telling him otherwise, such was Copper Pot's powers of persuasion, it enough to make Gloom think twice. But far from enough to convince him.

"I'm threatening you because you should be afraid. You're facing dire charges and this is your one chance to come clean. We don't have to offer you this chance, by the Moon, I could still be enjoying my bed rather than sitting here talking with somepony like you and listening to all your sordid excuses." Gloom shot back.

Prey could let them continue on with this back and forth for however long it took, but he'd rather not. He got little enough sleep a night as it was, so when he was resting, he'd prefer it to remain uninterrupted. 'But n*ooooo*, they had to wake me up for this farce instead.'

Prey spoke up, making Copper, who hadn't even realised Prey was

even in the room, jump. "Sir, I don't think Copper Pot quite understands who's holding all the cards here."

"Perhaps," Prey continued brightly, "It would help dissuade him from bluffing if we were to show him our hoof of aces, so he folds and stops keep raising the bid, so to speak."

"Who is-? You've brought a lamb in here?" Copper protested, '-opportunity!-', He thought in glee.

"You were right officer, this is a farce and I'm not going to be a part of it. I don't want a child spreading foals tales-"

"Be quiet." Gloom snapped.

"No, this is ridiculous. I am being imprisoned on false charges and you're treating it as a joke. You've denied me my legal rights and now you're bringing in foals-"

"I said be quiet!"

"I will not! I have a right to be heard, as do all good ponies with a conscience."

"Sit back down." Crimson warned Copper quietly.

Copper snorted angrily, "Sitting or standing, I will stand up for myself. Do you think just because somepony who abuses their authority tells me do something, I have to do it? Your father would be ashamed of you."

Copper couldn't have known the details, but somehow he'd guessed. Something said, or some expression during the interrogation had tipped him off that his father was a weak spot for Crimson.

"Be silent!" Gloom shouted, fangs flashing in real anger as he came to Crimson's defence.

Copper instinctively recoiled, as anybody would've when snarled at, especially a pony. It was only for a moment though, then he retaliated, knocking his seat back and banging his hoof down on the table, "You can't threaten me! Your totalitarian approach of might

makes right does not-"

Copper was interrupted for the third time, but in this case it was was because of the wing edge he suddenly found pressing across his windpipe.

"Sargent Gloom told you to sit down." Crimson said. If Crimson had been wearing wing blades and at that angle, he would've been able to slit the artery in Copper's throat with a mere flick.

Crimson appeared very calm, not letting Copper's insult get to him. And if his wing trembled with the strain of not finishing the strike? Well, only Prey and Gloom were there to notice.

"Sit down. Now." Gloom joined in. His gaze was locked on Copper, but his attention was on his subordinate, Crimson.

Copper didn't really have a choice in the matter, but his glare of righteous indignation didn't falter as he was forced to pull his chair back up and sit.

Gloom made a motion with his wing to Crimson, who nodded back. Satisfied that Crimson was okay, Gloom himself stood, "Good. Keep Mister Copper Pot there for a minute, I want to talk with Prey. Oh, and make sure he stays quiet too." He added.

"Gladly sir." Crimson acknowledged. Prey and Gloom retreated to a dark corner while Crimson stood sentinel over Copper.

Prey didn't stand too near to Gloom, but although they hadn't moved more than three yards away, Prey knew how to pitch his words so that they didn't carry.

Prey said something to Gloom, who then asked a question and Prey nodded. Apparently satisfied, Gloom returned to retake his seat.

As he did, Crimson smoothly removed his wing and stepped back to his position at the Sargent's shoulder. Regrettably, left Copper was free to pick up where he'd left off, which he wasted no time in doing. "This isn't right and you know it. Bullies, that's what you are. Do you really think this is upholding the virtues of harmony?"

Prey knew the stallion wasn't stupid. If he was purposefully playing the antagonist here, ignoring Gloom's order to be quiet despite how it would get him into more trouble, there must be a reason.

Therefore his bluster must all part of some plan.

Gloom didn't give him the chance to finish it however.

"You have instigated the riots across over a dozen towns over for more than a year." Gloom stated, silencing Copper. Gloom continued to speak carefully as he listed everything out, slowly gaining steam.

"As a direct result of your provocation, multiple livelihoods have been destroyed. Minor and serious injury of multiple ponies has occurred. Indirect grievous bodily harm to multiple victims. Months of civil unrest. Disruption and destruction of public services. Untold counts of private property damage, public property damage, *royal* property damage, and all done with malicious intent. You've caused *so much* damage that I don't even know the exact figures."

Gloom stopped to take a breath, "Copper Pot, for your crimes you're going to be in prison until you're old and grey. There is no action you can take to change this. I'm not threatening you here, I'm telling you the facts."

"How am I supposed to justly defend myself when you've already convinced yourselves I'm guilty-"

"*Look at me Copper*. This isn't a joke, or a lie, or a bluff. I speak with the authority of Princess Luna here. You are going to prison. Look me in the eyes and call me a liar."

Copper Pot did meet Gloom's eyes, and he met them with another protest hot on his lips. But whatever he saw in the thestral's eyes finally convinced him that Gloom wasn't bluffing, and the protests withered on his tongue.

'-no way, impossible! He knows, no, he can't possibly know, but how? When? Where?-'

Finally Copper seemed to remember what he'd been doing. He

couldn't just sit here dumbly, he had to defend himself!

"What kind of due process of law is this? You haven't listened to any of my explanations, you aren't even conducting an interview here. You're just accusing me with whatever slander you can make up."

Gloom, Crimson and Prey didn't respond. They just stood and waited for Copper to realise the hole he was in, and that there was no rope long enough for him to climb out with.

Copper's denial of the facts was perfectly understandable. He simply couldn't afford to believe Gloom's words, because *if* they were true, then he was going to prison for the rest of the foreseeable future. At this point, Copper had nothing to gain by admitting guilt, and the more they pressed, the more vehemently he would deny it. Even if Copper knew it was pointless, he was too afraid to give in by this point.

That was why Prey had told Gloom if they wanted to get Copper to confess, they had to offer him a way out. That or torture. Gloom of course had gone for the non-Resistance option.

"You are going to prison," Gloom repeated, "Accept that. The only question now is; will it be for fifty years, or forty years with the chance of parole at the end of it? It's your choice."

It was obvious what Gloom was talking about. A plea bargain. Would Copper seize upon it though? Copper didn't say anything for a full minute as he sat there, eye's slightly too wide and not looking at anything as it began to sink in. More than anything, it was their silence that was convincing him they knew he was guilty.

'-no, I can't go to jail, I can't! What if-? No, they're too strong-', Copper was beginning to truly panic.

'Perfect. My turn.' Prey thought. Now Copper just needed a little bit more convincing, and he'd do almost anything.

"At this point, it's fairly obvious that you're out of options Copper Pot. Prison or prison. They're going to snap a pair of shackles on your hooves, and they're never going to take them off. Clink, clink,

clank every time you move. Can you imagine that for me?" Prey asked cheerfully.

"Take a second to think about that. You're going to spend every minute of every day shuffling around in chains. You're never going to run again, even after you're released in five decades time. Your legs will have shrivelled away, your muscles wasted. You'll need a cane to even get to the bathroom. Even morning for the next eighteen thousand, two hundred and fifty days, you're going to wake up, and the first thing you'll see are the shackles on your legs. Clink, clink, clank. That's the noise I want you to remember. Clink clink clank. And you're going to remember the choice you made."

By the end, Prey had lost all of his fake cheer. He didn't even seem to be speaking to Copper anymore, but rather through him. It wasn't what any lamb should've been saying. And that got inside Copper's head. Worse, the Earth pony had a good imagination and could picture Prey's words all too clearly.

Copper opened his mouth, but Prey beat him to it, "But despite *all* of that, I can see you're still not sure about taking our deal. Why? Because you're afraid. Afraid what your employers will do. Their influence runs deep, and they play for keeps."

Prey shrugged. "Don't say anything, that's fine. We don't need you. Rot in prison for an extra decade, those politicians you're so afraid of will be joining you before the month is out anyway."

Copper's ears went flat, '-politicians? They really do already know. Oh Celestia, they already know-'

Of course they didn't actually know. Well, the Night Guard didn't know. As far as Gloom was concerned, this was merely a bluff he'd agreed upon at Prey's suggestion. They didn't say any names, but they said enough for the scared Copper Pot to think they knew.

'-they already know, is there any point not saying? I don't want to go to jail, oh Celestia help me, fifty years, no no no, but, but it could be forty, yes, no! They'll get me. But the Guard already knows, so it's not like it'll matter-', Copper's expression was a picture as hope warred with fear on his face.

'There.' Prey thought. That was the look he'd waited to see after their bluff. Hope.

Because hope can be such a cruel thing.

Prey shook his head to himself. He didn't think Copper understood yet what was coming. The years of insanity inducing monotony ahead, with nothing and no one to grasp onto. They were not sentencing him to death, they were sentencing him to a *slow* death. Copper couldn't imagine it. Not yet. He had no idea what was coming. After a year, with no end in sight, then maybe he might begin to grasp it. Would he commit suicide? Prey could only wonder.

"I..." Copper swallowed, "I don't want... What are you offering?" He finally asked.

"No more than what we've already said. If you give us something useful and testify in court." Gloom said.

Copper flinched, "I can't testify in court, that's not possible."

"This isn't a negotiation. You will be testifying in court. Either your take the offer, or you rot in prison for an additional decade." Gloom told him.

"But, but if I do that, they'll see me. They'll know it was me who talked." Copper protested, a scared whinny working its way into his voice right at the end.

Already Copper had completely forsaken his earlier assertions of his innocence and 'Swearing before Celestia' now that he believed it was useless. Now, he was having to face the cold harsh hoof of reality head on. Gloom and Crimson were not sympathetic in the slightest, not after all the harm Copper had done.

"You don't have a choice, not if you want this deal. If you'd led a good life, it wouldn't have come to this. You reap what you sow." Gloom said, folding his hooves condemningly.

"No, I can't! I want anonymity. If I talk, I want it to be kept a secret." Copper said.

"No. You'll stand up and testify in court."

"But they'll kill me!" Copper pleaded.

Whether he meant that literally or figuratively wasn't clear, but Gloom remained stoic, "The trial will be carried out under Her Royal Majesties authority, as it falls within the Night Guard's jurisdiction. The hearing won't go to the Supreme Court, but the Royal Court. You will be testifying before Princess Luna directly. There is no higher authority or power in the land. You and your employers will both be sentenced at the same time, and sent to prison. But you'll be safe from them."

"I want anonymity." Copper still insisted.

"Tell you what, you confess right now and I won't push for your sentence to be extended to sixty years instead." Gloom suggested, completely merciless. Prey approved of his approach.

"You can't do that!"

"Of course I can. All I need to do is speak to the Captain."

"No no no! I'm taking the deal, stop being hasty."

"No deal until after you answer our questions. Then, if your information measures up, then we'll think about it." Gloom said.

Copper was backed into a corner and he knew it. He shrank down in his seat, breathing erratically. Was this really the stallion that had orchestrated months of riots and civil unrest secretly without any of the towns even being aware they were dancing to his tune, now cowering before them?

"What, what do you want to know?" Copper asked weakly.

"Names. Who put you up to this? Did they approach you, or did you approach them? When? What did you agree to do for them? How or what were you paid, and how much?"

"When and where you're next scheduled to meet with them, and how do you communicate?" Prey put in.

"Your choices have hurt many ponies. We also want a list of which towns you caused riots in, and which ponies you worked with in secret while there." Crimson also added.

Copper had gone a bit glassy eyed at the barrage of demands leveled against him, "I don't have the answers to all of those..."

"Then you'd best try harder." Gloom retorted.

Prey reached up and slid a piece of paper he'd gotten from somewhere across the table, "Write it down one thing at a time and sign it." He said. If not Copper, Prey knew who'd be writing this all out later from memory, and frankly he'd rather not.

It wasn't like they cared about the written confession. A verbal one was good enough for them and probably Nighthawk too. But the Night Guard had regulations, and the courts and Royal Guard would certainly demand to see one. Paperwork, the one reliable constant of Canterlot.

Gloom and Crimson loomed over Copper while he dejectedly wrote by candle light, like a pair of yellow eyed vultures around the carcass. Copper Pot knew it was over for him. Everything that happened next, he would have no control over, '-I'm just going to be a puppet dancing on strings. Oh why oh why wasn't I more careful?-' He thought miserably.

Copper finally finished crossing the last 't' of his name and put the pencil down. "Read it." Gloom ordered. With lowered ears, Copper picked it up and began to read out loud.

"Wheat contacted me eleven months ago in April. He sent me a letter saying he had a service I could perform for him. We only ever met in private hotel rooms, and he always had his personal aid remain outside. He told me he wanted me to create civil unrest in the railroad towns. He offered 1,000 bits per town, another 10,000 after the elections, and 400 acres of land with a large house if he won the vote."

"In each town I visited, I spent time mingling to find the correct place to spread rumours. It took a lot of time and effort, but after

the first two riots the process began to speed up as the chain effects spread from one town to the next. My work changed from starting civil unrest to maintaining the momentum. Wheat Plow agreed progress was good, and pushed me to ramp up the disturbances."

"We didn't meet in pony often. Contact was mostly done via sealed letters. We just used the normal post, but he never wrote down anything sensitive. Only places and dates. I was to write a check in letter every week or whenever I got into a new town. I never worked with anypony else. I joined local political talk groups if I thought they could be used to achieve my goals and stirred them up. I didn't give them my real name. Wheat Plow hasn't arranged a time to next meet. I sent my check in letter yesterday afternoon."

"Signed, Copper Pot."

Captain Nighthawk finished reading and put the confession down. "Do you have any thoughts Sargent?"

"I don't think he was lying sir. Or if he was, it was only in part. We have what we need to lock both him and his master away. I didn't expect it to be the leader of the Crop Sharer's himself though." Gloom said. '-how did Prey guess that?-'

Nighthawk's face remained expressionless as he thought, but it was clear his mind was racing with the implications. The three of them stood in front of his desk, waiting.

"Wheat Plow. This will completely change the elections when it gets out. Big Fields will take the election by storm instead." Nighthawk went silent for a minute again. "The Crop Holder's are the only ponies who are going to benefit from this. Are you sure there is no possibility that this was all a set up?"

Gloom gave the suggestion some serious consideration before he shook his head, "No, I'm afraid not sir."

Nighthawk grunted, and stood up. He went over and opened the door, "Get the Lieutenant on duty here. Tell him to bring their

Sergeant Major too for an immediate briefing. Five minutes." He ordered the Night Guard sentry outside.

Closing the door, Nighthawk moved back around his desk. "Wheat Plow, huh?" He commented to no one in particular.

As the Captain of the Night Guard, of course Nighthawk would be well informed about the political going's on of the country, and be keeping a close eye on the big names. Nighthawk wore a thoughtful scowl, eyeing Copper Pot's confession, still not satisfied with something.

It was Crimson who voiced it though; "It doesn't make sense sir. Why do this?"

Nighthawk's scowl shifted to Crimson, "Precisely. Why do this? Give me your opinion."

Crimson thought for a moment, shuffling his wings. "Well sir... Why would Wheat Plow hire Copper Pot to start these riots on his behalf? He doesn't stand to gain anything. Starting riot's won't get his candidates votes. I mean, Copper Pot started riots with the Crop Sharer's and the Crop Holder's both."

Gloom nodded and joined in, "That is why Copper was so hard to catch. He wasn't targeting just one political group, so there wasn't a pattern. None of this creates any benefit for either side."

"Then we obviously do not have the whole picture." Nighthawk stated. '-Wheat Plow must have some other objective-'

"Then perhaps none of this is about winning local seats for the election at all sir." Gloom suggested.

"It doesn't matter either way. We'll learn everything from the stallion himself when we kick in his door tonight." Nighthawk decided. By the sound of it, kicking in Wheat Plow's teeth might also be on the agenda.

"Yes sir." Gloom answered, extremely pleased to hear it.

"Not you Sargent. Sorry, but you're sitting this one out. Your unit

isn't suited for a raid." Nighthawk said, looking towards the one person (sheep), in the room who had so far been quiet.

Gloom was disappointed, having been the ones assigned to solve this case, but Captain Nighthawk's reasoning was obvious, "Yes sir." He answered.

Wheat Plow wasn't living in Canterlot, he had a country mansion outside of the city. Thus, a night flight and sky chariots were the fastest way to travel. Bringing a non-combatant or non-magic user like Prey who couldn't even fly was a complete waste. To top it off, the ISND had all been woken up to be here. It was far more sensible to take Night Guards who were on shift right now and were therefore still fresh.

Silent contemplation descended onto the darkened office, each person thinking about what bringing in Wheat Plow would mean. However, despite the ISND not having any immediate part in the coming night raid, Nighthawk didn't dismiss them. Prey wished he would. He wanted to go back to his bunk and sleep.

Shortly, Starry Wing and his Sargent major arrived. Nighthawk wasn't one to mince words and gave them their orders straight away.

"The suspect was indeed the culprit. He confessed. The Crop Sharer leader Wheat Plow is behind the plot. Get three full units of Night Guards kitted up and ready to fly immediately. One for house breach, one to cordon off the surrounding area, and one for back up. Four accompanying sky chariots. Leave two of them free for prisoners. I want at least two tier four unicorns brought along. It's an hour's hard flight. I want to be there in an hour and twenty. You have fifteen minutes. Go."

Nighthawk was decisive. He knew what he wanted, and he knew how he was going to achieve it. Having been part of the meeting two days ago, Starry Wing and his Sargent Major had enough of an idea to catch on quickly, "Yes sir!" The saluted, before wheeling around and back out the door.

Nighthawk's sharp gaze returned back to the ISND, "Go inform the

most senior Royal Guard officer on duty tonight of what has occurred, and that I am deploying three Night Guard units. But wait ten minutes first. I don't want to have to waste time arguing about it with them."

'-ah, so that's why he didn't dismiss us-', Gloom thought as he nodded his understanding, "Yes sir."

"I need to go and inform Her Majesty of this development before we leave." Nighthawk said trotting for the door. He paused just before he opened it, "You did good work Sargent Gloom." He added, then he was gone.

That left the three of them alone, standing there in the office.

"So... that's that, sir? Our part is over?" Crimson questioned.

Gloom rubbed at his scar, "For tonight? Yes. Or rather, it will be once we've informed the Royal Guard stationed on stand by. But there's going to be a lot of clean up after this, believe you me. We'll probably have to give testimony in court too." He added gloomily. '-it's going to take an entire week of filling out the same forms over and over before those pencil pushers will be satisfied-'

"Still... We did it." Gloom said simply.

"We worked everything out, but we're not finishing the fight. I mean, we're not the ones bringing in Wheat Plow. Just like with Tulip Bed, and Rocky Bed. We don't seem to see things through to the end is what I mean sir." Crimson said, for once having more to say than his Sargent.

Despite being so tired, Gloom still raised an amused eyebrow at Crimson, "Oh? Wanted to be the one to stop them by your own hoof?"

"No sir, as long as Wheat Plow is stopped, I do not care. It is... I am not used to having some pony else there to help is all." Crimson answered.

"That's the Night Guard. Think of it as just one big team. All of our work is to benefit each other and honour Princess Luna."

Then, after a moment, Gloom spoke again, "You were right about it being the Crop Holder's and Sharer's all along Prey. How did you know?"

"Six minutes." Prey said.

"Pardon?"

"It's been six minutes. Captain Night hawk said to tell the Royal Guard in ten. It's a four minute walk without hurrying. That's ten minutes total." Prey said.

"Prey, please, just answer the question. I'm not accusing you or anything-"

"It just made sense to me that it would be the Crop Holder's and Sharer's. I had no evidence though." Prey shrugged.

"Oh. Well, it could save a lot of time in future if you share feelings like that in the future." Gloom said, but smiled wryly to show it wasn't a reprimand.

"Seven minutes. A fast walk now." Prey reminded him.

"Right right, we're going Mr. Tick Tock Clock."

---I---

It was unfortunate (for both sides), that the Royal Guard officer stationed on night duty happened to be Twining Ivy, the one who'd been rude to them back when they were trying to find Rocky Bed. Unfortunate for the ISND, because they disliked him. Unfortunate for Twining Ivy, because of the news they dumped in his lap and then left him to sort out.

As for the ISND, they went back to the bunk room to catch up on some well earned rest. They'd just have to wait and see what the morning would bring.

[[[Random funny sketch]]]

https://imgur.com/pAj2p7u

[End of Arc 1 - Next time, Arc 2]

Author's Notes:

So did I just write in that bit just to match with this funny sketch? (amusing to me anyway) Well, Er, you see... [image] Anyway, I thought it was funny.

NOTE: Capter now edited, again thanks to Sweetolebob18

25.2 Rock Candy is bad for your Teeth

[Beginning of Arc 2]

Morning came *far* too early for Prey.

Some nights, Prey didn't get enough sleep because of nightmares. Other times it was because of guilt. And sometimes it was because an annoying thestral woke him up in the middle of the night to interrogate the grand riot instigator named after a chamber pot.

Prey sat on his bed and stared balefully at Gloom's alarm clock. He hated waking every morning to the ear splittingly shrill shriek of that torture device. It was probably only him who found it so offensive to the ear too.

That made it doubly irritating.

But it definitely wasn't only him who still wished they were asleep. Even Crimson's normally unchanging visage had bags under its eyes. Prey was able to claim a few extra minutes of rest as they got ready, because he had no armour to put on, so pro gratis for being a runt for once. The notion that Gloom had wanted to outfit a lamb in armour was still ridiculous.

Never the less, eventually Prey had to sit himself up. Rubbing his eyes, he saw that Crimson had alighted down from his bunk and was opening the small box he'd bought in the lower Canterlot market yesterday.

There were two things inside. The first was a small earthen ware plant pot, with what looked like a nearly dead twig in it, and the second was a set of metal rings, plain and unadorned. The strange sizing and dull thickness didn't give a hint as to what they were for.

Crimson saw Prey looking and held a ring up, "Mane tie." He said.

Prey arched an eyebrow. Whatever those metal rings had originally been designed for, it was not for tying back a pony's mane. Crimson proved to know what he was talking about though, bunching up and looping his lanky mane into the rings and knotting it off. Well, improvisation also worked, and Gloom had told Crimson to think about getting it cut to avoid a fighting liability, but this also solved the problem.

Thestrals didn't hold the same social perceptions of long manes and tails being solely mare traits. Prey had learnt that in the clans, a long mane was the symbol of a warrior. Prey had yet to see a thestral do anything with their mane aside from simply braid or knot it back, regardless of which gender, unlike so many of the foppish Canterlotian's he'd seen out on the streets.

Thestrals were strange. Then again, Prey was hardly the best person to be judging others by their looks. So he moved on.

Prey pointed to the second item in the box, "What's that?"

"It's a fern. Or it will be." Crimson answered, starting to pull on his armour.

"It seems to be dead. Do you know how to tend a plant?" Prey asked.

"I know what I am doing."

Prey hopped off the bed to get a closer look at the pot plant. There wasn't even enough left of the sorry thing for him to identify what fern it was supposed to be, and Prey knew a *lot* about plants. Especially poisonous ones. Snake had seen to that. Why would Crimson want to buy a pot plant though?

"Do you at least know what type of fern it is?" Prey asked.

Crimson gave him a slow blink, "Yes. We have them back in the clans. It's called a Blood Fern."

Prey instantly recognised that name. Or at least, he thought he did, if it was the same thing as a 'sanguine fern' or a 'rusted weed'. It was interesting that Crimson should both have recognised the plant, and

bought the fern with the intent of growing it.

A sanguine fern, or Blood Fern as Crimson called it, was a small, slow growing plant that could thrive in almost any condition that didn't drop below freezing. It's dark red leaves made it obvious how it'd gotten it's nick name. It wasn't a commonly found plant though, because of its unique nutritional requirements. A few drops of blood every now and then.

Whomever Crimson had bought it from obviously hadn't a clue of the ferns special needs. They'd probably just supplanted an eye catchingly red fern to sell, but without knowing about its growing requirements, it'd started to die. They'd probably been very surprised when Crimson had asked to buy the withered stem.

'Meaning they obviously both had these plants and tended these ferns back in Crimson's clan. That's mildly interesting.'

Prey didn't give any visible sign he'd recognised the name and merely shrugged, loosing interest, "A little piece of home then." He commented.

"I suppose so." Crimson said, carefully putting the pot on the sill of the bunk room's lone window.

"Let's go." Gloom called, drawing Crimson's attention away from his Blood Fern, "I want to find out if it all went smoothly last night."

They didn't find out the answer to that question until long after breakfast, when Captain Nighthawk called in everyone who'd been involved with the operation for a meeting. Until then, they were left to gnaw their hooves anxiously. Gloom was particularly anxious to hear the answer.

Prey was only too glad when Nighthawk's summons had arrived, because it finally brought the Sargent's circle of worrying thoughts to an end, which'd been starting to give him a headache.

Prey, of course, knew the answer the moment they walked into the meeting room, but even for those who weren't mind leeches, from

the triumphant smirk sitting on the corners of Nighthawk's lips, the answer was clear. Still, they had to wait for everyone to turn up before Nighthawk confirmed the good news. Which, because it was thestrals and it was their superior who'd summoned them, took less than five minutes.

"For those of you who haven't been filled in, our surveillance efforts paid off last night. We found the criminal, apprehended him, and obtained a confession. This pony is called Copper Pot, who was working for Wheat Plow. For those of you who don't know, Wheat Plow is a major politician and chair of the Crop Sharer party." Nighthawk informed them. He then nodded to the ISND.

"Sargent Gloom was the one to obtain this information," Nighthawk said, which was his way of giving credit, thestral style, before moving on. "Wheat Plow is now in our custody, along with his secretary and campaign manager."

Nighthawk obviously didn't think they needed the details of the raid, if there'd been a fight, any resistance, or attempts at escape. He was back, so obviously that was all the evidence needed. None of the thestral officers cheered, or offered any congratulations, or even expressed their happiness at this successful outcome like any pony would've. Instead, aside from some smiles of satisfaction, they all remained very calm and waited for Nighthawk to instruct them further.

Celebrations would come later, when they were finished.

"This is only the start. We have Wheat Plow, but that's not enough. I want his place thoroughly investigated, and any other properties he owns. I want his records checked and double checked. Review everypony he's worked with, find out who else is in on this. Interrogations, names, cutie marks, faces, dates, facts, reports, I want everything proven and recorded for when we throw him before Princess Luna. She wants this done by the books." Nighthawk told them.

No congratulations or stirring words to go along with his declaration that they needed to work harder. Just statements of fact. No wonder every thestral Prey had come across so far was a

fanatical supporter of Luna. All the normal ones who knew what the word 'moderation' meant hadn't been crazy enough to sign up.

The only two non-thestral officers in the Night Guard were both present, a unicorn corporal and a pegasus staff Sargent, being used to the encouraging atmosphere of the Royal Guard, we're both visibly disheartened by Nighthawk's approach. 'You'd have thought that after two months they'd have gotten used to it.'

"Let's get to it." Nighthawk said.

With that out of the way, Nighthawk started assigning out roles and jobs, splitting up the work load for this case. He gave the ISND the 'write up' side of it. Basically, it meant everyone would bring them their own reports, and it was the ISND's job to compile them all while also adding in their own interrogations of Copper Pot, Pebble Mill, and the Apple family.

'-I'm going under in paperwork-', Gloom thought, but orders were orders and everyone had their part to play and he was proud to play his.

Just as Nighthawk was finishing up, the door was shoved open and the Royal Guard Captain stormed into the room. Technically, he marched in, and while his posture and expression were completely professional, he couldn't hide the spark of anger in his eyes as he made a B-Line for Nighthawk. Incidentally, the moods of the two non-thestral Night Guard officers from earlier picked up on seeing their old captain.

By his thoughts and in comparison, Nighthawk wasn't nearly as happy to see his fellow Guard Captain, '-I'd wondered what was taking the career soldier so long-'

"Captain Shining Armour."

"Captain Nighthawk. An explanation is in order." Shining Armour stated, coming to a stop in front of Nighthawk, seemingly uncaring of the rest of the officers present.

Nighthawk didn't seem bothered by the Royal Guard Captain's

thinly concealed annoyance. Personally, Prey had put as many bodies and legs as he could between himself and Shining Armour the moment the unicorn had entered. Prey had nothing to base his assumption on, but he got the gut feeling Shining Armour was a particularly powerful unicorn, tier six at least.

"What do you need clarification on? The arrest of Wheat Plow went without a hitch." Nighthawk said.

"Precisely that. The sudden arrest of Wheat Plow and raid last night. Please explain." Shining Armour said, teeth not quite gritted, but not far off either.

"Wheat Plow's been accused of, and substantial evidence has been found, for his direct involvement in a plot to cause wide spread riots. You should have been informed of the details this morning. His arrest was an urgent necessity." Nighthawk stated.

"Yes, *urgent*. However, we have procedures for that. A warrant is needed, especially for something of this size. Co-operation, a plan, backup. Going straight in with a night raid is not the way to do things." Shining Armour didn't seem to care about arguing with Nighthawk in front of the rest of the Night Guard command structure.

It made sense to Prey. The only authority Shining Armour was undermining right here was Nighthawk's.

'-so you just wanted in on the action, to take the accomplishment like with finding the foal-', Nighthawk thought. He looked over Shining Armour's head and gave the assembled officers a sharp nod, "See to your tasks. Dismissed."

Unsaid was, 'I'll stay here and finish up dealing with this fool'.

None of the thestrals questioned their captain or even looked sideways at the intruder, Shining Amour, instead all saluting and filing out the door promptly with a, "Yes sir."

Gloom and the ISND were the last to leave, but seeing as Shining Amour hadn't waited for everyone to leave before he started in on

Nighthawk, Prey heard some of it before the door closed.

"Rushing in could have cost us big if it'd gone wrong or Wheat Plow had gotten away. You should've waited for morning and joint swept in with the Royal Guard. Or just woken the Guard if it really couldn't have waited. Celestia, do you know what the press is going to do with this? Midnight thestral raids? If you'd brought this to Her majesty, she would've approved it anyway so why didn't you take the time-"

"-The Royal Guard was informed, as was Her Majesty."

"-Princess Celestia did not mention-"

"-Her Majesty, Princess Luna."

The door shut.

After all that hype, the rest of their day was spent in the office doing the 'write up'.

Did they get anywhere even close to finishing it? Oh don't be absurd, of course not!

In the beginning, it didn't seem like it might be so bad, '-perhaps I overestimated it-', Gloom had thought.

Four hours later, he was thinking, '-no I didn't-'

Compiling a full report started out okay, if a bit slow, but then as the other thestral units did their bit, more and more paperwork kept getting delivered to the ISND. That meant they had to reshuffle and factor in this new information, as well for building up the full picture of Wheat Plow's activities.

Then those same Night Guard units came back later with *more*.

The ISND then had to back track, change, or add things all over

again. There just didn't seem to be any end in sight, because the list of what Nighthawk wanted scrutinised down to the finest detail was just so exhaustive. It went:

Wheat Plow's diary and personal calendar, (sadly, no secret meetings conveniently marked down).

Interviewing the ponies listed in said diary, (mostly politicians, and thus circumstanitial evidence at best).

His personal bank account, (no one knew if he had more hidden elsewhere).

His Crop Sharers' accounts', (what they could get of them).

Wheat Plow's employment history both before his political career, (Farming. Unsurprising).

His secretary's history, (worked in Canterlot most of her life, so was probably a racist).

His campaign manager's history, (varied, but still painfully boring).

His properties and deeds, (for being an advocate of sharing, Wheat Plow was holding quite a lot of capital close to his chest).

His purchase and sales ledgers, (it would take awhile and delving into the joys of debits and credits to verify those).

Statements from Wheat Plow himself, (all useless bluster).

Statements from his secretary, (didn't know anything, so about as useful as a one winged pegasus).

Statements from his campaign manager, (same as above).

Statements from the Crop Sharers' cabinet members, (mostly demands for an explanation, which were ignored).

Interviews from Wheat Plow's parents, (both in old ponies homes, rarely visited, and going senile).

Interviews from his family, (a dead end. His only other sibling was deceased).

A look into their death, (cause confirmed by coroner thirty years ago to be accidental drowning, age six).

And so on... and so on..... and so on.....

The long and the short of it was that if this report took less than a full week of paperwork by every Night Guard involved, Gloom would eat his cloud steel horseshoes. Without any pepper.

Mentioning seasoning...

Salt. They'd gotten nowhere with reviewing the old reports about the drug trade. As Prey had noted earlier, they were at a dead end unless new information was brought to light. Well, Prey had watched that one drug deal go down yesterday in lower Canterlot, but he wasn't going to be mentioning that.

Gloom wasn't willing to put aside everything for Wheat Plow's case however, so he split his time working on that while Crimson and Prey worked exclusively on report compiling.

It still seemed a bit sudden, like everyone wasn't quite convinced yet it could possibly be as simple as arresting Wheat Plow.

All that work, and it was essentially over. Well, Wheat Plow would still have to go to trial and a whole load of investigation had yet to be done, but at this point, the outcome was already known. Perhaps to fully understand the impact and uproar of this arrest, one had to be a civilian looking in, with no clue any of this had been happening.

Gloom's canine teeth were visible in an unconscious snarl as he read through the evening newspaper, spread across their mess hall table.

"Night Guard attacks Crop Sharers?" He muttered, "Wheat Plow assaulted in his house without a warrant...Night Guard Captain refuses to answer any questions...Yellow Pages says the Night Guard

Captain must make a statement by tomorrow or else?" Gloom contemptuously swatted the page with a wing tip, "What is this cloud drizzle?"

"It's the popular opinion of ponykind's elite." Prey said through a mouth of potato and broccoli.

"Then perhaps their opinion is not worth much." Crimson blankly suggested.

It would be fair to say that none of them were in a good mood after a log day spent slogging through paperwork in a dusty office until they all had a crick in the neck, all with very little sleep. Not that Prey was ever in a good mood. And Crimson was a taciturn blank wall most of the time anyway.

The Royal Guards, over on their unofficial side of the mess hall, were also not the Night Guard's biggest fans at the moment. But then, when had they ever been?

The reasons varied from Royal Guard to Royal Guard, but the most common reason for today's negative attitude was the sentiment that the Night Guard had deliberately rushed in to arrest Wheat Plow so the Royal Guard wouldn't get any credit.

'-as if we'd be that shallow-'
'-want to play vamponies in the night do they?-'
'-Captain Armour even had to go and reprimand them for it-'

"Quote, 'How can I live in peace when even our best and brightest aren't safe?' Says Iridescent Flower," Gloom repeated with a growl, still reading;

"'Will Her Royal Highness Princess Celestia reprimand her sister?' Yellow Page wonders. This is a blatant indirect attack on Princess Luna! How did this even get published so fast?!"

Prey pushed aside an ear that was threatening to dangle into his plate as he ate, "The Crop Sharer party probably had a hoof in it."

Gloom snorted. Prey saw that Gloom had hardly touched his own food. If he wasn't going to eat it, Prey wondered if he'd let him have

it.

Crimson was resolutely making his slow way through his own dinner, one tasteless mouthful at a time. "Sarg-Gloom I mean, what do you think will-?"

"Sargent Gloom."

They all looked up to see Sargent Major Sharp Tang calling.

"Sir." Gloom answered, quickly standing. Sharp Tang had addressed him by his rank despite it being dinner, so it meant he was acting in his official capacity.

"Sorry to interrupt your meal, but it couldn't wait."

"It's no problem sir. What is it?"

"Princess Luna wants to speak with you and your team. Night Court is just about to begin, and you can find Her Majesty there." Sharp Tang informed them, like it was good news.

"We're on our way sir." Gloom said straight away, Crimson right behind him. He hadn't gone more than three steps when he seemed to realise they were missing someone.

"Come on Prey, didn't you hear?"

Prey was frozen in his seat.

"We mustn't keep her majesty waiting." Gloom said impatiently, jerking a wing for Prey to hurry up.

Prey swallowed drily, his hunger vanished. His heart beat had spiked to a staccato within the last dozen seconds after Sharp Tang made his horrible announcement. 'Zoma'Gricka, what does the Moon Wolf want? Was I caught? Does she know?!'

Gloom had little patience for this though, "Hurry up." He snapped, anxious not to keep his Princess waiting. Jerkily, and with lowered head, Prey got down from the bench.

Gloom gave Sharp Tang another quick nod, "Sorry for the delay sir. We'll be on our way right now."

The walk through the Palace to Luna's Night Court was brief. There was no waiting line outside either. The trip could not have been long enough for Prey.

Prey was scared. He could admit that, but only to himself. Not as scared as the first time he'd been brought before the moon alicorn, but that's because he'd thought it was the Sun Wolf instead.

Prey reassured himself it was unlikely Luna had called the ISND here to kill him. It was much more likely that it was about Wheat Plow's arrest.

'Yes, yes that'll be it. That *must* be it. There's no reason to be afraid.' Prey told himself, 'She just wants to speak to Gloom, not me. I'm fine, this is fine, I'll be fine.'

Prey remembered the strange, predatory feline aura the night alicorn had given off last time. The way she'd cracked his crystal manacles like it was nothing. The golden shackles with spell craft so advanced he couldn't even understand it she'd replaced them with. How she'd blown out his ear with just her voice, by complete accident. The fact that she was an ageless deity recently returned from genocidal madness.

'No, I have my ribbon, and Lemon Pink! I still have my tool, she can help me.'

Scarcely a moment later Prey was mocking himself for such a desperate thought. What was Lemon Pink going to do against a goddess? Lemon didn't even know this meeting was happening.

Prey told himself to breathe, 'No, I'll be fine. See? Still alive, still breathing. I'll be fine.'

Prey's self reassurance didn't help the trembling in his legs. If he was being perfectly honest, he was only making it worse.

The torches and lamps had been lit outside the Night Court's impressive double doors, and the pair of glowing eyed thestrals standing guard didn't help encourage petitioners.

They were evidently expecting the ISND, because at Gloom's approach, the two Guards put their shoulders to the doors and pushed. A creak would've been fitting, but the hinges swung open silently. Prey had no choice but to follow Gloom and Crimson inside.

Prey had not seen the dimly lit audience chamber that served as the Night Court before, where ponies could come to petition Luna. Once again the general assumption seeming to have been that only thestrals and the Night Goddess herself should be able to see anything clearly inside the hall.

The lack of decent lighting didn't hide the spaciousness of the audience room though. Nor the mandatory requirements for any room in Canterlot Palace. Meaning polished marble, silk tapestries, rich centre carpets, broad columns, and high arch windows, through which the first stars of night glittered.

"Welcome, we hath been expecting thee." Came the booming voice of Luna. The alicorn was seated on a distinctly night themed throne, elevated on a dias above the eye level of a normal pony. Just another reminder that you were only ever allowed to look up to an alicorn.

Aside from the two Night Guards flanking Luna's throne, it was just them, and the way the carpet muffled their hoof steps on approach made the room feel even more eerily empty, like a cave.

They came to the bottom of the dias and Gloom bowed low, Crimson joining him in paying respects, and Prey just joining them and desperately hoping the only one Luna was interested in tonight was Gloom.

"Princess Luna, you summoned us?" Gloom asked humbly, holding the bow and waiting to be acknowledged first.

Luna looked down at them, as languid as a tiger on her throne, but no tiger had ever held that tint of cold 'otherness' that emanated from her that only Prey seemed to notice, "Indeed we did, Sargent Gloom. It pleases us that thee were most timely in thy response to our summons. Thou mayest raise thine heads."

Prey was within the five meter range of Luna, far too close for his comfort, but he didn't dare to try and look into the alicorn's thoughts. Usually he didn't have a choice in the matter, but in this case, Prey couldn't have even if he'd wanted to. In place of Luna's thoughts was a void.

Not a defence or a mental wall, but a complete black hole.

Usually that would mean that the person in front of him was either dead or an illusion. But such conventional logic didn't apply to something like Luna. An alicorn. Power incarnate. A deity.

"We serve at your command Princess Luna. What can we do for you?" Gloom asked, finally straightening up.

"Tis' not a task we have to set before thee, no, rather we wish to talk with thee."

Gloom blinked, '-this wasn't what I expected-', "Of course princess. What do you want to talk about?" He responded.

"About thy recent success of course Sargent, thou hast been doing most well in thy new role. Nare two weeks, and thou hast already succeeded in bringing a traitorous knave to light. Tis' merely another mark against these politics mine sister is so fond of, but we digress. We art here to speak of thine accomplishments."

"Er-I mean, thank you your majesty." Gloom said, sounding like Crimson for a moment.

"Come, tell us more!" Luna said/shouted enthusiastically. Prey winced but didn't dare cover his ears in case he offended her.

"We, well, we first went to Hay Steam your majesty, because that was where the latest riot took place. From there..." Gloom proceeded to give Luna a run down of what had happened, starting

in Hay Steam with Turf Apple, on to Seed Apple and his family, the capture of Pebble Mill, the suggested surveillance plan, into the discovery of Copper Pot and his confession, accumulating with Wheat Plow's capture last night.

Gloom was not a good story teller, and his retelling of the events was rather dry. It was doubtful whether Luna was taken with his tale, but the ISND was her creation, and their success belonged by extension to her, so of course she would be proud.

"Thou art not a bard from our day, but thy rendition was quite adequate. Tell us, how dids't thou find it, striking for justice and brining down these swine?"

"It was, I mean, we were only doing our duty your majesty. We're proud to have been able to serve."

"But how dids't thou feel when thy duty called thee forth to combat?" Luna pressed, leaning forwards in anticipation.

"We didn't participate in the raid your majesty. The only pony we fought, well, me and Crimson fought, was Pebble Mill when he resisted arrest, but that could hardly be called a fight really. We mainly just investigated things." Gloom answered, a tad uncomfortable at saying anything that contradicted Luna's view of events, but it was his duty to be accurate.

"Ah yes, of course. Thou art correct of course Sargent. But thou hast done well by anypony's standards. Our good Captain has spoken highly of thine effectiveness. Hard work is worthy of reward, for thy efforts on our Royal behalf, we here by promote thee Sargent Gloom, to the post of Staff Sargent, pending probation." Luna declared.

"Your majesty, thank you, but I'm fine where I am. I don't think it would be-"

"Humility is a worthy trait, one we all have cause to learn. Would that ponies would learn the lesson before tis' forced upon them. But in this, thou hast earned thy dues." Luna said. She looked amused by Gloom's protest.

"I...Thank you, your majesty." Gloom said a bit faintly.

It was a rather unprecedented advancement. Just because Gloom had done well this week didn't mean automatic promotion, that wasn't how the Guard worked. There was seniority to take into account, open positions, training, recommendations, experience and need. Promotion for the sake of promotion wasn't how things worked.

But Luna had spoken, and who was going to gainsay an alicorn? She says 'Jump' and you ask 'How high?' As members of the Night Guard, the two sentries in the room had their own opinions on Gloom's sudden promotion, but they were keeping it to themselves.

"We now have words for Crimson." Luna stated.

Crimson blinked once, "Yes your majesty?"

Luna made a beckoning motion with her hoof, gesturing Crimson up closer to the foot of the dias, "Crimson Trace, hast thou carried out the instructions we gavest thee?" She asked seriously, ethereal made wafting across her eye for a moment in some unfelt wind.

The tips of Crimson's pinion feathers shifted, "My pardon, but to what, Princess Luna?"

"To turn aside from thy vengeance. Hast thou followed our words in thine heart?" Luna clarified.

'What kind of nonsensical question is that?' Prey thought. The Myrrdon clan was in hiding. How would Crimson even try to go about getting revenge?

Crimson raised his gaze so he could look Luna in the eye, "I have...not entirely managed to do so. I am sorry, your highness, but I think it will take me time." He answered, voice calm.

Luna was not outraged by Crimson daring to look her in the eyes, or him answering in the negative. Instead of breaking Crimson like Prey expected, she nodded in *acceptance*! Rather, his daring to be truthful seemed to have pleased her.

"Thou wilt manage it in time. If harmony smiles on thee, thou wilt not have to test thine self control in the near future."

"Princess, does that mean you still want to try and get the Myrrdon clan to rejoin Equestria?" Crimson asked. Now his wing feathers were twitching.

"Time changes many things. We art patient, and will wait for them to return to the fold." Luna stated, as if the fact were already predetermined. It was also telling Crimson that his opinion held no sway in face of her own, although it was a biased contest to start with. An alicorn's opinion always held the most weight no matter the circumstances.

Plus, Luna literally had all the time in the world to wait. Someone not amendable to your designs? Just wait for them to die and try again with the new generation.

"...I will do my best Princess Luna." Was all Crimson could eventually say, bowing his head.

"Do so," Luna ordered imperiously, "Now," She announced loudly, "We wish to speak with thy youngest member, Prey."

Prey's spiked heart almost missed a beat, and for a moment he wasn't able to breathe. 'NonoNo, what does she want with me? Why now?'

"Prey," Luna repeated in a commanding tone, "We wish to speak with thee."

Prey's drooping ears felt like they'd been transmuted into lead, dragging his head down as he was reluctantly forced to look up. His pulse was pounding in his head. "Yes-Imean- Yes, Princess Luna?" He whispered.

"Speak up Prey, we hath not forgotten thee so far as to dismiss thee. It was us who selected thee from prison, was it not?" Luna asked rhetorically.

Prey couldn't look any higher than Luna's silver horse shoe regalia so he didn't know what expression she bore, and he wasn't willing

to risk looking into her eyes to find out. Many forms of mind magic required direct eye contact. "Yes princess Luna?" He repeated, forcing himself to speak louder. He hated being so scared.

"Art thou afraid?"

'She knows, she knows!' Mentioning pulling him from prison, then asking if he was afraid, Luna was threatening to send him back. The shivers spread, running up and down his spine. You never stop carrying your fear. It's like a scar. But Luna was still waiting and he had to give her an answer.

"Yes. Princess Luna." Prey forced out. He didn't dare lie.

"Ahh..."

A deep silence settled. Gloom and the two other Night Guards thoughts showed their surprise, quickly turning to anger on hearing his answer. And Luna was an empty void.

"We understand, and must ask for thou forgiveness in this although t'was merely but an accident. Never the less, as Princess, it still behooves us to offer thee an apology, so thou mayest put thy fear to rest."

'Wha-?' Prey thought in confusion, everyone else caught off guard as well. What was Luna saying?

"Yes, we offer thee an apology. Be not shocked, we canst be wrong too on occasion." Luna told them. "We speakest of our last audience with thee, how thou wast not able to bear our Royal Canterlot voice, which lead to an injury on thine behalf. It was merely an accident, but we art sorry." Prey heard no real emotion in Luna's apology, just the tone of someone who knew the concept of remorse, but did not understand it.

'Sorry? You're sorry?! Oh, sorry I destroyed your ear drum, oh well it was a mistake, no harm done. Not sorry for enslaving you or breaking into your dreams though.'

"Thou shouldest have made thy ear injury known," Luna continued with a casual shrug into the shocked silence, "It would have been

but mere moments to heal it. But fear not, we shall do so now instead." She announced.

"No no." Prey instantly backed away, "No it's fine. Almost completely healed and back to new. See? No bandage even. I'm completely fine Princess Luna. Better than fine."

For a horrible moment, Prey thought Luna was going to go ahead and use magic on him anyway, but thankfully whatever concept of altruism Luna had been entertaining seemed to have lost her interest. "If thee feel there is no longer a need, then so be it. Thy still hast our apology for thine accidental injury regardless."

"That's, it's, it's fine." Prey lied, bowing his head. *Anything* to stop Luna taking any more interest in him or using magic on him. "Please just forget about it your majesty."

"Very well." And just like that, the Princess's magically amplified sound assault on him was brushed under the rug and forgotten.

Luna's graceful neck twisted to the left, her vision fixing on some point outside in the night that none of them could see, "Our duty calls us away. There is a nightmare plaguing an unfortunate filly that we must vanquish." She announced, "Thou art dismissed. Night watch over thee, probationary Staff Sargent Gloom." The corners of her mouth turned up as she listed out Gloom's full title.

Gloom bowed again, making a motion with his wing to encourage Crimson and Prey to copy him, "Thank you for your time Princess Luna." He said as they backed politely away.

There was no response from the dark alicorn, and the carpet dampening their hoof steps as they left the audience chamber with its empty feeling and motionless occupants. The doors silently closed after them.

Back out in the hall, Gloom looked at Crimson, then Prey, then back to Crimson. "Good work team?" He offered.

"Congratulations on your promotion sir."

"I, yes. It's a bit sudden...and it's probationary. I'm not an actual full

Staff Sargent yet." Gloom added.

"Congratulations on your probationary promotion sir." Crimson stated in exactly the same tone.

Gloom was sure Crimson was messing with him, but that was good. Things were good at the moment, "Why thank you, Private Crimson." He answered back.

'-is a promotion even official if Nighthawk hasn't approved it? No, of course it's official. Princess Luna issued it so it's even more official-'

The two Night Guard sentries outside the audience chamber doors shared a look at overhearing about Gloom's sudden, even if probationary, promotion and shrugged to each other. '-the princess does as the princess wants-'

Prey didn't join in on the congratulations. Unconsciously, he touched his left ear, feeling the ribbon in place of where the bandage had once been.

'Just an accident. Luna literally just spoke too loudly, and that happened. If she ever catches me and has a real reason to get angry...' Prey's eyes were drawn to the gold on his raised fore leg. The shivers came back.

'Still *so* weak.' Prey hated how when faced with danger, he was forced to remember he'd never change. Inside, he was still just a scared little cry baby runt.

Back in the office, Prey was too distracted by coming out of his second meeting with the younger alicorn sister alive to focus.

Actually, 'couldn't focus' was a relative term.

Prey continued with assembling the myriad required forms on Wheat Plow, but he lacked the required focus to multitask enough to place runes or scheme at the same time. The left over jitters in his legs, the need to blink rapidly even in the low lamp light, and

the remnants of dead butterflies in his stomach made it too difficult.

Eventually, *eventually*, Gloom called it a night and they returned to the bunk room. They were all tired from a long day filled with seemingly endless hours of paperwork and all too few hours of sleep.

While Crimson went through his kata and Gloom removed his armour in preparation for sleep, Prey mainly just sat on his bed and idly rubbed at the runic array blanket. The runes were of course invisible, but he could feel the tingle under his hoof that told him what type they were. It was a small comfort.

Gloom finished winding the alarm clock and leaned back on his bunk with the weary but contented sigh of 'a-hard-days-work-well-done'.

'-by the Night, I'm sounding like my grand stallion sighing like that, and I'm not even half his age-'

"Well..." Gloom reflected, "Today was a good day."

"Gloom, how did Princess Luna return from the moon?" Prey abruptly asked.

Gloom stopped plumping his pillow in surprise, "You don't know how Nightmare Moon was defeated?" He didn't wait for Prey to answer before launching into the story of the Elements of Harmony. Prey didn't interrupt or ask questions, and Crimson also looked like he was listening in even while still running through his exercise routine.

Once the story was done, Prey nodded to himself, 'So he doesn't know the truth of what happened either.'

Gloom's tale had matched with what Prey'd overheard in the Palace, and Gloom's thoughts showed he believed he was recounting the true story.

'As if.' Prey thought derisively.

The official story was obviously a fabrication, put out there by

Celestia. And for some reason, all the ponies believed it.

Six mares, all complete strangers, with no military experience or training of any kind, (excluding Celestia's personal prodigy). All of whom happened to be in the same tiny town where nothing important ever happened but the Sun Celebration was conveniently scheduled to take place in? And with only two of the six being unicorns to boot, they somehow stumbled upon supposedly ancient magical artefacts no one knew anything about, that just so happened to be in a nearby abandoned ruin?

And then these six mares somehow went on to defeat Nightmare Moon? A mad, immortal demon who Celestia wasn't able to defeat one thousand years ago, who wielded magics beyond imagining, devoured souls, and they some how won?

Impossible.

Prey would've had to be deaf, dumb, and blind to believe such a tale. It was a blatant ploy, but a good one too, as no one had seen how Nightmare Moon was really defeated, aside from the supposed six mares in the tale, and Celestia herself.

No one could prove otherwise, so this story would be the only one in circulation, and the real weapon or magic Celestia had used to defeat Nightmare Moon would remain a secret. It would be the height of folly to go around publicising the strengths and weaknesses of your weapon after all. The element bearers were obviously just a diversion, bait to draw out more hidden enemies.

What made it such a clever move was that even if the enemies of Equestria saw through the ploy, there was little they could do about it. If they acted preemptively by killing one or even all of these so called element bearers, they would expose themselves, and since it was obvious to Prey that Celestia must be hiding her real weapon, said enemy would accomplish nothing anyway.

Not that an all powerful alicorn who could control the sun needed to hide her power. She was the Sun Wolf. She was enough of an unstoppable threat on her own.

Hence using the Element Barer's as bait, giving her enemies a weaker target they thought they could stand a chance against. Prey wondered if the six mares were getting paid to act as living bullseyes. Perhaps they were just zealously devout fanatics who'd volunteered. Or the Sun Wolf simply said, 'Obey or die', just like she'd done over the Ridgeback mountain range sixty one years ago.

Time would tell if anyone was dumb enough to take the proffered bait.

Prey shook it off and dismissed the tale. None of that had any impact on him, he had no intention of doing anything that might draw Celestia's ire. He wanted to live, and he wanted to live not screaming in agony.

Prey politely thanked Gloom for telling him the story, tucked his ribbon under the pillow, and then crawled under the blanket.

Gloom yawned massively and lay down, *Wauuuuuugh* "G'night 'Rey. Good'ight Crimson." He mumbled.

"Goodnight."

"Night watch over you sir."

"..'Off 'uty...Iz' just 'Loom."

Prey had a dream that night.

He was half in the deeper blue, half out the twilight zone of his mind ocean, and not scheming about much for once.

It wasn't a pleasant dream, (Prey's dreams never were), but it wasn't all the way to a true nightmare either. Or even just a regular nightmare.

Just a mildly disturbing one about some giant moon spider laying eggs in Gloom's eyes, and then the Sargent going mad when they hatched and ate his face, followed by the spider's new thestral skin puppet trying to drag Prey off to feed to the mother spider.

Scary yes, but highly unrealistic, even to Prey's sleeping consciousness.

Still, it was enough to leave a present for him when he woke up.

Prey woke to fiery cramp savagely biting into his back.

The old whip scars had decided to reassert their existence.

Biting his tongue, Prey let out a silent hiss of fury as he frantically tried to work his seized up muscles back to normal, '*Stinger*. I hope you rot in hell.'

This was all that stupid dream's fault.

Usually Prey slept motionless, a necessary survival habit picked up from the Deeper Green, but on disturbed nights, well, this was the result. Sometime during the restless night, he'd kicked off his blanket and shifted into an awkward sleeping position on his back. It'd happened before, and no doubt would again. If the night where such happened also held a chill, then this happened.

It was just another way his runt body loved to mock him. 'Didn't sleep well? Still tired? Had a bad night? Well here you go, a lovely wake up call in the morning just for you!'

The last time he'd been tired and restless enough for this to happen had been... 'Four months, three weeks and five days ago, when I was still back in Dreverton. So it could be worse then.'

Prey rolled onto his stomach, hunching up and mashing his face into the pillow so he could properly knead at his back, 'But Zoma'Gricka, do I hate pain!' He thought angrily.

Finally, after what felt like an hour but was only about thirty seconds, his quivering muscles relaxed and Prey slumped with a muffled groan. Twisting his head around, Prey could tell by the light just starting to brighten the window that it was early morning, and almost time for the ISND to get up. Convenient timing.

At least he wouldn't technically be awakened by that hated alarm clock this morning.

Two minutes later, as predicted, said obnoxious alarm clock went off, waking the other two.

"Good morning." Gloom groaned, rolling out of bed and silencing the alarm clock.

"If you slept well, then I image it is." Prey responded.

Crimson was already down and going straight to double check his Blood Fern. Prey hadn't noticed him bleed himself to water the plant, but he must've done so at some point.

'No visible cuts on Crimson. Perhaps the clans have another way of growing Blood Ferns?' Not that it was important.

"Come on, armour up, breakfast and then to the office. We've got tons to do."

That should've been a simple goal to accomplish. It was hardly an ambitious quest Gloom had set them; breakfast, and then go do paperwork.

Yet they didn't manage to make that last milestone. Mess hall, check. Office, check. Continue the reports? Fail.

And now Prey was backed against the scroll shelf while Gloom shouted angrily at him.

Perhaps some context was needed.

The problem had started upon their arrival for breakfast. Crimson had fetched him his breakfast tray as usual, and Prey had exchanged a few sickly sweet words with Cookie to keep up appearances, and they'd sat down to eat. No problem so far.

And then Topaz Honey and a couple of her friends had turned up to say good morning. And of course, Topaz had seen it as her Celestia

appointed duty to give Prey a big hug.

Things had gone badly from there.

The ISND had missed the overly friendly Royal Guard mare the last few days because of how the shifts in the Palace worked.

Royal Guards worked the standard four days on twelve hour shifts. Night Guard's were working six, usually seven days a week, averaging between fourteen to sixteen hours every day. Or night, depending how you counted such things. As a result, the two Guard companies shifts mostly didn't overlap.

But that was besides the point.

Usually when Topaz Honey purposefully came around to try and grab him, Prey hid. Hiding was something Prey was good at, and so far it'd worked. Unfortunately, this time Topaz had roped in her friends to lend her a hoof. To them, Prey was just a young foal, not an actual ISND recruit, so there was no harm in playing a simple game of catch with a foal, was there?

Topaz was sneaky. She sent her helpers round the side before making her own approach, correctly guessing that Prey had marked her the moment she entered the mess hall and was watching her.

Prey'd noticed both her enlisted helpers when they got within his perception range, and had hurriedly tried to slip away beneath the table before they could corral him. Unfortunately, it was too late and one of them saw which way he went.

Topaz hadn't taken the fairly obvious hint that he wanted to be left alone. Maybe if she had, the scene that followed in the middle of the mess hall wouldn't have played out.

Topaz had pounced on Prey with a gleeful "A*ha*!", whisking him up into her legs despite his squeaky shout of, "Don't touch me!"

"You've been avoiding me, haven't you? Aww, that's not very nice." Topaz cooed, snuggling Prey. She didn't even seem to feel him

struggling against her. Armour, even the impractical Royal Guard armour, would be worse than useless if it couldn't even block the wild flailings of a runt lamb.

"Let me go let me go! I'm warning you-"

"Ohh just look at you with this ribbon, so cute! Hey, Sargent Gloom, how'd you get this cutie? You never did say." Topaz said, looking over Prey's head to the table where the only other two ISND members sat.

Prey had not had a good day yesterday, what with almost having a heart attack (which should've been a physical impossibility for him), on being brought before Luna. He'd slept poorly, woken to cramp, and now he was panicking because of Topaz grabbing him.

In retrospect, (not that anyone else would ever know), Topaz was very lucky that Prey didn't kill her. He'd held off from destroying her mind before yes, but today was a particularly bad day for her to pull this stunt on him.

"So as I waAAAaaaHH!" Topaz let out a shout as Prey buried his teeth in her foreleg.

Prey didn't have fangs like Gloom, nor were his jaws big, but he caught Topaz's flesh on the edge of her leg and bit down for everything he was worth. Prey tasted the horrible metal tang of blood as his teeth squished together.

Sufficed to say, Topaz had let go of him speedily.

However, as it was in the middle of the mess hall, with both Royal and Night Guards present to witness the scene when Topaz yelled, the aftermath of Prey's escape was less than pretty.

'-that thestral should keep his foal under better control-'

'-disgraceful, I would never let a any filly of mine do that-'

'-this isn't foal kindergarten, what's the Guard coming to?-'

Gloom'd been forced to hurriedly make a bunch of placating excuses

to the audience, and apologise profusely to the shocked Topaz Honey, before grabbing both Prey and Crimson and beating a hasty exit. Many a "tsk tsk" followed them.

And now Prey was back in the office, getting shouted at by Gloom.

"What do you think you were doing!? No, scratch that, *why* did you do that? There was absolutely no justification to bite Topaz Honey."

Prey had yet to offer any excuses. He just was glaring stonily straight ahead of him.

"Am I raising a dog here? Is that why you bit a Royal Guard? Well? I'm waiting Prey. Speak!"

Prey of course didn't.

Gloom fought to keep his wings under control, Prey's rudeness was infuriating him. "Nothing? No excuse? No clever justification?"

Prey could have argued back or spun a clever tale, but currently that would only make Gloom even more angry, so he'd just wait until he judged the situation stable enough before doing so.

"Do you realise that this is a disciplinary offence? You attacked and drew blood from a Royal Guard. And in full view of everypony too! Even if I wanted to, which I don't, I couldn't let this pass."

No excuse was necessary as far as Prey was concerned. He'd warned Topaz, but she hadn't listened. She should consider herself lucky Prey hadn't mind killed her for touching him. As a mildly interesting side note, much like Prey's voice which became squeaky when angry, Gloom's rasp came even more into force. 'I wonder how hoarse he'd go if I told him that last little fact about nearly destroying her mind?'

"Prey, are you even listening?" Gloom demanded.

Prey dangled one floppy ear up by a hoof, "Yes, these hear everything you're saying perfectly."

"*Why* did you bite Topaz?"

"I told her not to touch me repeatedly, on separate occasions, over many days. She didn't listen." Prey said.

"Do you think that is a justifiable excuse? Your reaction was completely out of proportion, and it's your own fault for acting like a foal wearing that stupid ribbon and you know it. Luna's mane, why do I keep having to tell you this? Didn't you stop and think? You're going to ruin the Night Guard's reputation." Gloom seethed.

"Now you're the one who's over reacting-"

"Stop trying to shift the blame!" Gloom shouted, getting in Prey's face.

"Don't touch me!" Prey yelled/squeaked right back at him, jumping away.

In his frustration, for a moment the temptation to do just that and grab Prey flashed in Gloom's thoughts, as retaliation for his ridiculous aversion to being touched. However a moment later Gloom got a hold of himself and realised what a poor decision that would be.

'-I don't know why this stupid fear is so big for Prey, but I've got to work around it-', He thought, gritting his teeth.

Prey was watching Gloom warily in case the Sargent suddenly changed his mind, "I'm warning you, don't touch me. I mean it." Prey warned. And he did.

They were standing in the ISND office, and although Gloom and Crimson didn't know it, the room was littered with runes. He wouldn't kill Gloom, because he wouldn't get away with it, but he was prepared stun Gloom and wipe his memory if he had to. Crimson too, because he was a witness.

"Prey. I'm ordering you to answer me this; Do you know what you did was wrong this time? And don't give me any horseapples, a straight yes or no." Gloom said, the unexpected profanity clearly showing how 'Not in the Mood' he was.

'This again? Why does he always revert to speculating about how I wasn't raised properly?' Prey thought in exasperation, "Of course I do." He said, intentionally not sticking to Gloom's instructions.

Gloom stomped a hoof in frustration, "So then why did you do it?! I don't get it, if you know it's wrong, why do you keep doing things like this?"

Now Gloom was just asking the blatantly obvious, "Because I need to, obviously."

Gloom had not been expecting that as an answer, '-what does that even mean?-'

"What?" He demanded.

"Because whatever actions I take solves my problem. If I didn't need to, then obviously I wouldn't do it. You think I bite people on a regular basis?" Prey sounded flippant, but Gloom was actually starting to make him seriously angry with the way he kept fixating on Prey apparently not knowing 'right and wrong'.

Gloom took a moment to rub a wing across his face and get himself under control, '-is just going to make things worse at this rate-,' He told himself.

"Crimson, can you step outside for a minute?" Gloom asked.

"Yes sir."

"Why do you think it's necessary to kick Crimson out?" Prey quickly challenged as Crimson went to open the door.

Crimson hesitated in the door way, glancing back to Prey and then Gloom, "Sir?" He questioned.

"If you would please, thank you Crimson." Gloom repeated.

"Yes sir." Crimson acknowledged and fully left this time.

Gloom looked back at Prey once the door had closed, considering what he should say.

"This is going on your record Prey."

'So what? Is that supposed to scare me?' Prey thought.

"-And," Gloom continued, "You are going to apologise to Topaz Honey. Properly, face to face, back in the middle of the mess hall where you caused a scene."

"No, not happening." Prey stated without a moment's hesitation.

"You apologised last time you did wrong, you're going to apologise this time, and every time in the future-"

"Is she going to apologise to me?" Prey interrupted.

"You're the one who bit her-"

"She attacked me too! What would you do if some strange person kept grabbing you every day in the mess hall after you repeatedly told her not to?"

"If you're even suggesting my first instinct would be to bite them because I'm a thestral-"

"-No, you're big enough to hold your own, but you never did anything to help me. She didn't listen to me, but you could've ordered Topaz to leave me alone, but instead you just laughed along with the rest of them. Like all of them. You just laughed at me!" Prey accused.

In retrospect, Gloom couldn't deny that it had been glaringly obvious how strongly adverse Prey was to physical contact from Topaz Honey.

'-or anypony for that matter. Sure, ponies are much more touchy feely here than the clans, but so what? That's no excuse for not listening to me-', Gloom's thoughts faltered as he realised that by that reasoning, he was trying to excuse himself for the same thing Topaz had done; not listening to Prey.

'-nopony would reasonably expect me to foresee this situation. I'm hardly to blame...-' Gloom derailed again as he realised what path

he was going down again.

'-actually? No. I'm better than that. I knew that both Crimson and Prey would have needs and problems going into this. It's my duty to be better than them-'. If Gloom was going to blame himself, well, all the better Prey thought.

"Alright," Gloom said after a long moment of silence, "Here's what's going to happen. This is still going on your record, and there'll probably be an official punishment. But you don't need to apologise to Topaz anymore. This is also partly my fault. As the officer, I'm responsible for the actions of the Guards in my unit."

'-I will lead by example, just like Princess Luna wants me to. This is the best path forward-'

Prey felt the need to spit on Gloom's hooves he seemed to think were oh-so clean.

'Think you're so much better than me because you have morals? When you've done what I have to survive in the Resistance, *then* you can talk to me about morals.' Prey internally seethed. But of course he didn't say that. He couldn't.

"I'll be speaking to Topaz. She won't do that again, nor will anypony else. If they do, tell me and I will tell them to leave you alone." Gloom said.

Prey's instincts immediately warned him it was a trap, but a scan of Gloom's surface thoughts showed the thestral was being sincere. Well, Prey certainly wasn't going to reject such a good offer, even if there was no good reason why Gloom was offering it. Anything that kept him safe or decreased the potential danger to himself, he was going to grab with both hooves.

"Alright then." Prey cautiously agreed.

Gloom maintained his composure, merely nodding, "I'll say it again though, I don't have eyes in the back of my head. I can only help if you ask."

'I don't need your help. But I suppose I'll still take it.'

Prey wasn't prideful. Pride couldn't fill your belly or keep you warm. You've got to be pragmatic about these things. "Thank you sir." He politely said.

Gloom eyed him for a moment. "Alright." He repeated, before raising his voice, "Crimson, come back in now."

Crimson came back into the room slowly, as if waiting for another flare up. The way he looked between Prey and Gloom said it all even if he didn't ask the question.

"It's been resolved for now. Sort of." Gloom said, "That's not to say it's all fine, but it's been dealt with."

It was all very well saying it was all fine now, but those were just words. Almost no one could go straight from angry to completely calm, and Gloom was not an exception. He was in control, but that didn't mean he wasn't still upset with Prey. '-in fact...-'

"Prey, please take a turn waiting outside. I want to speak with Crimson now." Gloom said. He wasn't really asking. Crimson looked surprised that Gloom wanted to speak with him alone, but he didn't verbalise any protest.

Prey saw no benefit to acting stubborn and trying to stay, Gloom had already bent as far as he was going to on this matter.

"Okay." Prey said, and left the room.

Prey stepped into the corridor and closed the office door behind him. He wanted to immediately turn and listen in on what was being said inside, but there was a supply clerk coming down the corridor. So he had to patiently sit and wait for the stallion to pass.

The clerk for his part was definitely surprised at seeing a lamb, '-and in this restricted section of the palace too-'

Prey simply wore a blank, inane smile as the clerk dithered whether he should tell someone, his neck turning to track Prey as he trotted passed. In the end, the pony decided that, '-a foal's not going to be in here unless somepony brought them here, so there's obviously a good reason and it's not my problem-'

'Smart stallion.'

Prey waited until the clerk's tail had fully rounded the corner, and then a second longer in case he changed his mind, before quickly pressing his ear up against the door.

'I should've put in a runic array so I could secretly listen in from outside.' Prey thought, because if anyone came round the corner, it would be obvious what he was up to. Unfortunately, he hadn't had enough time.

Concentrating, Prey closed his eyes to better focus. His hearing was excellent, but it seemed like Gloom and Crimson were standing on the far side of the room on top of talking quietly. Prey was still able to pick out some of it though.

"..... just not sure how to proceed with your squad mate ..... is not your job to have to deal with Prey ..... let me handle him, okay?"

"Yes sir."

What sounded like Gloom sighing in frustration, "..... am open to suggestions however. Perhaps something I've missed?"

A silence, but likely one caused by people not talking as opposed to Prey simply not hearing them.

"He isn't disciplined. Doesn't listen to authority. Prey is smart, but doesn't apply himself in an honest way. It's ..... I think sir."

"....got that much. But what about you, Crimson?"

"Sir?"

"..... both of you here. There's also something I think I need to talk about with you, it's about ..... clans were never on the best of terms, not that you ....."

"..... my father's clan-"

"Crimson, things happen. That's life. They've not got anything to do

with you anymore, you owe them nothing ..... only here to assist you. Not help. But assist. Do you know the difference .....?"

"..... to do it myself."

"No, here, look at me. See? This is up to you yes, but ....."

Prey listened as the conversation took place. He could hear enough to deduce what he couldn't. And anything he wasn't sure about, he could merely scan for in Gloom's thoughts later. Typically, any serious conversation lingered in a persons mind for some time afterwards. And this definitely qualified as a serious conversation.

A few more words were exchanged, but Prey missed all of it. Likely, they'd changed positions again. Whatever Gloom was saying to Crimson, it was likely personal. Prey listened util he heard hooves on floor boards approaching the door, then quickly pulled away.

Gloom opened the door, then looked around and down to find Prey sitting unobtrusively against the wall. Prey stopped idly twirling the ribbon around his hoof and looked up, "Done?" He asked, looking up.

"Yes," Gloom said. After a moment, he stepped back, purposefully giving Prey plenty of room, "Come back inside."

Crimson stopped considering the wall long enough to give Prey a blank look as he returned. The pegasus's walls felt changed, somehow...'introspective', if that was the right word.

Gloom shut the door and turned to address them both, "Prey, you know what you did wrong. Don't do it again. And I'm serious. You're still on probation you know. This isn't over, but it is for today. Remember what I said to both of you. Is that going to be a problem for anypony?" Gloom asked in a no-nonsense tone. "If so, let's sort it out now. We still have a duty to do."

'In order to survive, I've worked with sadistic murderers who killed my family and brutalised, degraded, and tormented me on a regular basis. This doesn't even comes close.' Prey thought. "I think I can manage it." He answered.

"There will be no problem sir." Crimson said firmly.

Gloom nodded, "Then let's get back to work."

The final punishment dished out to Prey for his disruptive actions and attack on a fellow member of the Royal Guard was assigned later that evening. As a non-major personnel detail, it ended up being routed through Taffy's department, which meant they were summoned to the happy-go-lucky unicorn's office to sign the paperwork.

Prey's signature, as the offending party, was needed, along with Gloom's as Prey's superior officer. Taffy found the whole report on the incident quite hilarious.

"I'm going to send Topaz one of those joke sets of false teeth, you know, the ones that walk around when you wind them up?" Taffy grinned, while simultaneously shoving an aura full of other paperwork at Gloom, "Say, since you're already here, you may as well do this too."

"Taffy, we really don't have the time. The Night Guard is in the middle of a huge investigation-"

"You think I have the time then? Listen, I've got every officer in both Guards to chase for paperwork. You think I'm not busy? Stop complaining and take your paperwork like a stallion." Taffy cheerfully ordered, completely unrelenting.

"Oh and Crimson, a question occurred to me, like, just now," Taffy said, turning to the greyed out pegasus as Gloom reluctantly took the paperwork, "You come from a thestral clan, but none of the others ever say anything about it. As a foal, did you guys have rubber duckies for your baths?"

Crimson didn't seem able to answer that one.

Prey's official punishment ended up as a mark on his record, a

warning, a small fine to be paid to the Royal Guard (not Topaz personally for some reason), a signature that he understood and accepted these charges, and a formal written apology. (That one *was* to Topaz Honey).

In other words, no punishment whatsoever. What did Prey care about a fine or a warning?

If there'd been a threat of physical punishment, or anything that might've affected his chances for eventual escape, then he might've cared. But as for this very 'ponyish' punishment? *Laughable*.

Gloom didn't find it funny.

In fact, he was clearly worried he'd have to fight with Prey again when the punishment called for a written apology, after he'd already agreed that Prey wouldn't have to appologise to Topaz. Prey didn't say a word in protest though, and wrote out the letter without delay.

Gloom was glad that Prey was finally submitting to authority, but couldn't help but wonder why. After a an internal debate of some length, (which got to Prey listen in on), Gloom decided to risk asking.

"Why?"

"Because I'm not apologising in person. There's no way I'm doing that. She shouldn't have touched me. Plus, this is just following official orders. You were different." Prey dismissed.

Gloom's first reaction was anger, '-you think because you know me you can get away with ignoring my orders?-'

Then he stopped and thought about Prey's answer. '-the kid doesn't respect authority, so orders to apologise don't make him care enough to fight back-', Gloom thought, working his logic through.

'-but he stood up for himself when it was me. He cares more about what I say than what command says-', Gloom realised as he read between the lines.

'-I...don't know how to feel about that-'

In the end, Gloom decided not to say anything further and let things lie as they were for now. He needed to think on how to improve Prey's attitude before revisiting the topic

Unseen, Prey smiled to himself. 'It's not *what* you say, but *how* you say it.'

That should help repair the breech in trust Prey's fight had caused, at least for a while. Prey wanted Gloom unawares and complacent. Prey didn't have a plan for escape, not yet. But he would find a way. It may take years, but Prey was not going to wear these golden shackles for the rest of his life.

'Someday, I will be free.'

The work load in the office continued to stack up. All the files they kept being given on Wheat Plow were forming a huge backlog. Even with all three of them working non-stop on compiling the relevant data, they couldn't keep up.

At least twice an hour, some Night Guard would come in with more work. The problem was, each section of this investigation was working just as hard as they were, but because it was all getting delivered to only the three of them, it was creating a bottleneck.

Put simply, there was only one ISND, but eleven other units working this case.

Gloom was determined, but Prey could see he was slowly becoming overwhelmed. Wheat Plow, the salt trade, reporting to Nighthawk, running the ISND, the newspapers still continuing to harshly critique the Night Guard, little sleep, working days instead of nights, and perhaps most worrying of all, Princess Luna's expectations of him. The mental weight on Gloom was starting to add up.

'-it'll just be for a week. A week until the trial. We can manage that-', Gloom glanced at his two subordinates, sitting amid stacks of

reports on the floor, (Still. No. Furniture). Gloom was conscious that out of the three of them, it was actually Prey who was making the most progress.

The lamb frustratingly seemed able to, '-skim read everything and somehow magically pick out the important-'

Prey noticed, even if Gloom hadn't yet, that Crimson was actually struggling the most. He was a young warrior, not a clerk, and research did not come naturally to him. This difficulty was becoming an increasing source of frustration for the pegasus. He obviously felt he was failing in his duties and dragging the team down, especially after whatever Gloom said to him earlier.

'Not my problem.' Prey thought, moving onto the newest file that'd been delivered only ten minutes ago. 'Evaluation of property damage caused: Homestead: Part 4A continued. How riveting.'

They ended up working so late that they more or less missed dinner. By the time they finally made it down to the mess hall, Cookie and the other kitchen staff were already cleaning up.

However, all it took was a smile and a few sweet words from Prey, and Cookie was more than willing to give them dinner rather than throwing the leftovers out. She was very relived to see that Prey was fine after the incident this morning too, and told him to, "Come to me if something like that ever happens again."

She also Gloom a filthy look for; '-not taking proper care of a foal-', and, '-daring to waste my time at this time of night-'.

Gloom had to ask multiple times, in a very polite manner, if Cookie would also please fetch him and Crimson the Grape Wine from the clans. Prey saw that Cookie very much wanted to pour it down the drain instead, but apparently the Grape Wine stock was independent property of the clans, not the kitchen. As part of their job, the cooks had to store and provide it to thestrals only, by strict order of Captain Nighthawk. Interesting.

All in all, it was an unpleasant mood that reigned when they returned to the bunk room. None of them were feeling particularly motivated knowing they would have to get up and repeat all this tomorrow.

Gloom silently put away his armour and wound the alarm clock up, while Prey and Crimson did the usual. Meaning Prey sat on his pillow, and Crimson ran through his exercise kata until he was sweating.

There'd been no recent chance to use the wonderful showers in the gym room, something that Prey wasn't the only one regretting

'-a hot bath would feel really good about now. Or a shower. Or a night flight under the cool stars-', Gloom thought, shoving the hoof locker shut forcefully.

Prey didn't know about the third one, but he certainly would've agreed with the first two, if they'd been options. But Prey was used to not getting what he wanted. Life went on. The weak worked or they suffered.

Prey waited for an hour in the dark, pinching himself to stay awake, until he was sure the other two were really asleep. Once he was sure, he crawled out of bed. Tip-toeing over to the window to make use of the faint moon light, he was able to make out the symbols on the note Lemon Pink had hidden under his pillow.

Prey had no problem reading it, as it was the code he'd invented, and he quickly found the 'shifting cipher' for next time. Part of how this code worked was that it was progressive. He found the two indicated symbols, one old and one new, that showed which symbols would be replaced in the next note. When he wrote a return note, if he didn't correctly use the new symbol while also including his own new 'shifting cipher', Lemon Pink would assume the note was a fake and discard it, and visa versa.

It was an additional safety measure to double check no one was intercepting and/or replacing their messages.

Squinting to make out the tiny spidery script, Prey read the note. Once decoded, it read;

>'Initial search for areas of interest in Canterlot city completed. List complied. Contact required.'

>'Access to Royal Library restricted section denied. Chance of success of forced access: 5%. Chances of relevant information on tracer bands being found if break in successful: 10%. Further investigation placed on hold. Plan required. Contact required.'

>'Objective 8 completed. Progress on objectives 9, 11 and 14 estimated at 50%. Objective 6B found. On standby. Plan required. Contact required.'

>'Continued search on Objective 19 will require travel beyond Ridgeback mountain range. Search on hold. Proceed anyway? Y/N'

>'Position within Palace staff remains uncompromised.'

Prey crumpled the note up into a tiny ball, and swallowed it. He'd write a return note tomorrow and leave it under his pillow, as the notice-me-not runes on his blanket made it the best place to leave notes. Lemon Pink would come by at some point tomorrow during her maid duties to retrieve it.

He needed to set a time and contact place to meet. That's what 'contact required' meant. Further in depth planning needed to be done in person, preferably over a mind share where there was no danger of being overheard.

Delving into anothers mind or exchanging memories was always dangerous, but a mind share didn't have the same requirements. Meeting half way between two respective outer mind scapes was essentially just holding a conversation, albeit one at the speed of thought. Neither side ventured into the others mind proper.

Prey needed to do some planning before that meeting though. Like deciding what was worth risking and what wasn't. The restricted section in the Royal Library was a bust, and he'd have to order Lemon Pink to abandon it for now, but 6B had been located.

His tool had given him a lot to think about. 'How should I proceed?' Prey asked himself. He didn't know yet. Much of what Lemon was looking into was dangerous, and not all of the risk was confined exclusively to herself.

Prey returned to his bunk. He would work on the problem while he slept. Hopefully the morning would provide an answer.

All the morning provided was a headache as the shrill peals of the alarm clock forced their way into Prey's abused ears.

One day soon, he was going to destroy that thing. It never ceased to amaze Prey how whomever had designed that clock had gotten the pitch *just* right so as to make tired eyes ache.

Getting up, Gloom grimaced as he pulled on his armour, '-my fur's really starting to feel matted-', He thought, making a mental note to get them all to the showers tonight come what may.

They could all use a brush, and for that matter, their armour needed some care too. Those of them with armour. Gloom knew that Crimson hadn't had an opportunity to preen his wings in two days, and if he remembered correctly, that was supposed to be quite important for a pegasus's health or something.

Aside from eating and sleeping, no one had time to do anything for themselves. Prey got to listen to Gloom mentally cursing out Wheat Plow as he got ready and Crimson checked on his fern.

All as ready as they were going to get, they headed for, (where else?), the mess hall. The prospect of a tasteless breakfast before another full day of paperwork wasn't appealing, but it would be even worse doing it on an empty stomach. Prey started to slow down as they approached the mess hall open doors.

Gloom noticed Prey's hesitation, "Feeling any regret now?" He asked, only half sarcastic.

"I regret many things sir. Yesterday is not one of them." Prey quipped back.

Gloom sniffed. But he also slowed as they got closer.

"Something seems different sir." Crimson offered. He was right, there was definitely something different about the mess this morning.

They poked their heads around the corner to see if they could spot what. It wasn't hard. Royal Guards were packed inside the mess hall, far more than usually chose to eat here. Half of the present Royal Guards seemed to be buzzing in anticipation of something, and the other half looked just as up beat, if more verbally restrained.

Because of this, it made the Night Guard's over in their corner stand out even more, as they sat there in silence, eating their meal, and eyeing the boisterous Royal Guards.

What was the reason though? Hadn't they been so aggravated by the Night Guard stealing their perceived glory with Wheat Plow despite the Royal Guard having done nothing on the investigation?

Prey was the first to work it out, "Induction day. Those new Royal Guard recruits must be arriving today."

It took a moment for Gloom to catch up, "Hang on what?"

"The Royal Guards were all happy about new recruits coming in, remember? That must be today." Prey stated.

"Oh, right, that." Gloom realised.

Prey spotted Topaz Honey in the middle, happily chatting away. She didn't even look like she remembered yesterday's events. A small bandage on her foreleg was the only indication of what had happened. Prey estimated the chances of the bite turning septic and killing the mare at less than one percent.

'Unfortunate'.

"But none of the recruits are going to be Night Guards." Gloom said with resignation, commenting on the upcoming recruits.

"How do you know sir?" Crimson asked.

"Captain Nighthawk would've told us if there were any coming, since they get some different training than the Royal Guard recruits." Gloom explained.

Such was the anticipation of the Royal Guards, that they didn't even notice the ISND joining the breakfast line. After the scene Prey caused yesterday, it would've been expected, but it seemed like they'd already been forgotten. More Royal Guard's were turning up by the minute, not wanting to miss out on what was coming next.

Prey was certain Captain Shining Armour had rearranged the schedules to allow as many Royal Guards to be present here this morning as possible. No Solar Guards though, so that was a small mercy. And no Valour.

Prey wasted no time on getting to their seats to start shovelling his breakfast down. By now, Gloom and Crimson were past commenting. Both of them joined in with the rest of the Night Guard, watching he Royal Guard, who were watching the door. It was like the thestrals were performing a social study.

Some Royal Guard officer came through the door, (Prey's eyesight wasn't good enough to see what rank by the pins on his shoulder), and barked an order, "Atten'hut!"

The Royal Guard may have been off duty at the moment, but when an officer gives an order you jump to it. Immediately the chatter ceased and they returned to professionalism. Helmets that had been removed to eat were swiftly donned, backs straightened and seriousness descended.

It seems the Royal Guard wanted to make a good impression on their newest members.

Satisfied, the officer stood aside barked out another set of curt orders. "To the parade ground. First table, single file, fall out in order!"

The table closest to the door rose as one, turned smartly and began

marching out the door. One by one the other tables also marched out in sequence.

Huh.

From the way the Royal Guards had been acting, it'd seemed like the recruits were going to be joining them at breakfast. But apparently they would instead be introduced on the parade ground.

'Makes more sense I suppose.' Prey thought dismissively, shrugging and going back to eating.

He had no interest in seeing new, fresh faced, deluded ponies, all blinded by their Sun Princess's idea of equality and justice.

"Come on." Gloom said abruptly, getting up, "Let's go too."

Prey raised an eyebrow. Gloom hadn't been planning to follow the Royal Guard, it had been a spontaneous decision. The desire for something different mixed with interest to see the new recruits having sparked it.

The closest thestrals who heard Gloom exchanged looks, then wordlessly rose too. Technically, they hadn't begun their day yet and were still on break, or had just finished their night shift and were now free. Usually, they wouldn't have the time or energy to spare, but this morning, something compelled them all to want to go and see too.

The Royal Guard assembled under the bright morning sun, on Parade Ground One of the Guard compound. Gold armour and alabaster fur shone in ranks, as the officers strutted up to the front of their units and stood at attention. Every head was held high, and the collective pride was so thick you could've cut it out of the air and served it with a side salad of patriotism.

The Night Guard stood silently on the outer edge of the parade ground to watch, standing in the only shade available. The sun wasn't high enough to blind them, but the Royal Guards armour had all of them squinting, Prey included.

Everyone was watching the Guard Compound entrance gates.

Five minutes ticked by, then ten. Lieutenant Swift Arrow arrived and took his place at the head of the Royal Guards. Then came the *stamp, stamp, stamp* of many hooves hitting paving stones in unison, steadily getting louder from outside the gates.

When the recruits rounded the corner, it was a bit of an anticlimax. They were just young looking Royal Guards. A fast count revealed there to be exactly forty of them as they marched in behind an officer. "Abouuut face! Aten'hut!"

The recruits wheeled in place and came to attention facing the true Royal Guard. The recruits kept their eyes locked straight ahead, but there was a strong current of emotion in the air as they came face to face with what they'd been working so hard to achieve. 'Disgustingly sentimental ponies.'

Into the convening space between the two groups, Captain Shining Amour walked. He came to a stop right in the middle and faced the recruits.

"To those of you who have made it to this parade ground, today you will no longer be recruits." Shining Armour spoke, strong voice carrying. "Today you become Royal Guards. Everypony who makes it this far only does so on their own merits, hard work, perseverance, and dedication. You did not wash out when your class mates did. You stuck it when the going got tough. You can be proud of that, and today you can be even prouder. Today you join the ranks of the Royal Guard."

Shining Armour gave a grin then, abruptly looking much more personable.

"I'm sure you don't need me to tell you all how much of an honour this is. But I want all of you, both those in front of me and those behind me, to join me for a moment. I want you all to take a step back and look at where you are now."

"Many of you didn't think you'd get this far, but believe me, you don't stop here. Remember yourself now. Where will you be in a

year's time? Five years? Ten years? Know this, once a Royal Guard, always a Royal Guard. No matter where life takes you, you can look back at yourself during this moment and know who you are."

Although Prey thought his words were utter tripe, he would admit that Shining Armour was a good motivational speaker. It wasn't the words, anyone could say them, but when Shining Armour said them, you could tell he meant every single one. Nighthawk certainly couldn't have pulled off the same down to earth, impassioned speech Shining Armour was.

He continued; "You've all already received your official posting, and had your graduation. But now it's time to make it proper."

Shining Armour turned as Swift Arrow passed him a box, taking it in a blue aura. Walking to the start of the recruit line, he opened it, "Your private rank bar." He announced.

One by one, Shining Armour went up the line, pinning the star to the right shoulder of each recruits armour, announcing each pony by name as he did so, "Proud Flag." "Butternut Candy." "Willow Pike."

He must have personally read and memorised each of the recruits files. It was easy to see why he was so well liked and respected as an officer.

Prey was sure he saw tears in at least one of the recruits eyes as he received his bar pin.

When he was done, Shining Armour stood back, "Royal Guard!" He shouted, "Salute!" Every single Royal Guard on the parade ground, new and old, proudly snapped their hooves up, eyes blazing with fervour.

The Night Guard silent watched from the shade as the Royal Guard filed off, unit by unit, some of them to start their normal shift, and some to start their first shift.

"They really do do things differently." Crimson unexpectedly commented into the quiet.

Thestrals nodded, but didn't speak. Everything they might've wanted to say was communicated between them with just a look or a shrug. At the heart of it, they were still outsiders in Equestria, throwbacks to a different time. What they'd just watched was a reminder of that.

A minute later, on some unvoiced command, they all dispersed from the cool shadow and went their separate ways. For the ISND, that meant going back to the office.

"What do you make of this?" Gloom asked, reading a report.

"Don't know, which report are you looking at? Sir." Prey responded, not looking up from what he was writing.

"Stop that and come have a look then." Gloom ordered.

Prey put aside his work and got up, Crimson joining him to see what it was. What Gloom wanted to show them was a copy of some of the pages seized from Wheat Plow's house.

"It's about Big Fields. His competitor." Crimson said, stating the obvious.

"I would expect him to have researched the opposing party leader, that's only common sense. But this isn't campaign or party related stuff. Here, look." Gloom passed around a few of the pages.

A quick read gave the general gist of what the pages detailed, "This is about the personal lives of the top three ponies in the Crop Holder movement." Crimson said.

"Yes. Most suspicious. This isn't something just anypony could've found out either." Gloom said, still reading.

Whomever had been supposed to analyse this information before passing it onto the ISND to compile it, seemed to have overlooked this strangeness.

Prey nabbed one of the pages and moved back so he could more

comfortably study them. It was mainly written in bullet points, with certain things like dates or places underlined.

The information in front of him seemed to have been copied from multiple other sources, because the sentence structure and phrasing changed between paragraphs. 'So someone else was doing their own compiling.' Prey thought.

"This seems... almost like Wheat Plow was planning on targeting these Crop Holder ponies sir." Crimson observed.

"It does, doesn't it? How and why though?" Gloom asked. Then he realised something and looked up, "Prey, you?"

"Yes?"

"You seeing anything we're missing? Any hunches?" Gloom asked.

"It seems simple enough." Prey shrugged, "Wheat Plow had people-"

"-Ponies." Gloom corrected without thinking.

"-*People*, spying on Big Fields and his two party co-leaders. Look, these pages were all copied out by the same person..." Prey waited with a raised eyebrow, but Gloom didn't interrupt this time. "...Using other people's words. Namely, other people's reports. Spy reports."

"Spies? That seems a little..." Gloom searched for the word, "Fantastical."

"Isn't that exact fear why Princess Luna made this ISND group?" Prey asked rhetorically. "Regardless, spy implies a professional. This-", He waved his page, "-Is just some ponies that Wheat Plow hired to secretly watch and report back. Reading it, it's nothing you couldn't get by having a pegasus sit on a cloud above Big Fields house."

"These things are still private. To Big Fields, I mean." Crimson said.

"Wheat Plow is a criminal. Having illegal stuff is to be expected. Why though? What did he aim to gain? None of this information

could really help Wheat Plow in his campaign." Gloom wondered, leafing through the papers, trying to find an answer.

"To blackmail him with sir?" Crimson suggested.

"None of this is really suitable blackmail material though. It's private yes, but nothing here is stuff that Big Fields would be desperate to cover up."

Prey put his page down and slid it back across the floor so he didn't have to scoot closer, "So what? Why does it have to be anything real? I think Wheat Plow was just planning to frame Big Fields for something and let the scandal destroy his credibility."

Gloom straightened in realisation, "*That's* why he hired Copper Pot. That's the whole reason for all the riots. He wasn't hurting both their chances equally, because at the end of it all he was going to have Big Fields framed. Wheat Plow would've come out the only winner in the end."

Crimson slowly raised a hoof, "Why cause riots at all sir? He could've just framed Big Fields from the beginning."

"No... No think about it. His goal was to destabilise the political situations in the rail road towns by sparking riots between the two sides. Prey, who was forecast to win the election?" Gloom asked. '-Prey remembers pointless things like that-'

"Before the riots started? Those poll things they use showed the Crop Holders were favoured to win more seats."

"So Wheat Plow was set to lose from the beginning. But by doing this, he could shake things up. Then, when he framed Big Fields, every pony would be outraged and many of them would either change to vote for him, or at the very least, vote for anypony *but* the Crop Holders." Gloom explained, growing animated as he started to see the bigger picture.

"But sir, the Crop Holders are going to win now. I mean, the Night Guard have affected the results, right?" Crimson asked.

That stopped Gloom for a moment as he considered that, "It does

seem that way. However, we only did our duty. It is not our fault the Crop Sharers' are now going to lose, it's Wheat Plow's. Nopony forced him to break the law or betray his party. Unfortunately, it's not just him who's going to suffer the consequences but all the Crop Sharers' who believed in him." Gloom sighed.

After a moment of silence, Gloom added; "It's not very fair, is it?"

There was no need to further add that life isn't fair. All of them knew that lesson already.

Prey leaned back with mock contemplation, "Hmm, that brings up another point. The Night Guard isn't going to win many friends with this arrest. With hindsight, Captain Shining Armour is probably thanking his lucky stars the Royal Guard weren't the ones to solve this case." He said with a smirk.

"Prey, stop it." Gloom said.

"Well, on the other hoof, we might win a few powerful friends even if we make a lot of enemies." Prey shrugged.

"I don't think I follow..." Gloom frowned.

"Well, Big Fields is going to like us a lot, yes? Along with all his big, rich, land owners buddies, the ones we basically just won the election for by arresting Wheat Plow."

"I thought the land barons were at odds with both the Crop Holders' and Sharers'." Crimson said.

"Kind of," Prey shrugged, "But out of the two of them, Crop Sharers' threatened their position the most. Anyway, now that Wheat Plow and his party are set for probable collapse by the end of the week, those land barons are actually back in the runnings. Did you forget they've been campaigning since the beginning too?"

"They were never going to win though. Even before the riots." Crimson said.

"Originally yes. But now? Maybe they'll have a chance. Ponies don't like change and are easily panicked. Even if Wheat Plow started it,

both sides were involved in the riots. The general public might become disillusioned with both Holders' and Sharers' alike. They might easily revert back to where they feel safe, even if it isn't in their best interests. Ponies are blind like that." Prey said uncaringly, skimming through all of the pages Wheat Plows had collected on Big Fields.

"Prey, stop it." Gloom repeated wearily, despite thinking, '-unfortunately there's some truth in that-'.

"We need to go and inform Captain Nighthawk. I don't think this latest development can wait until the end of the day." He said, going towards the office door.

"I don't think that's going to be necessary sir." Prey called, not get up.

"Why not?"

Prey held up the page that'd been on the bottom of the pile. It was written on a different page size, and thus had been missed.

"Seems which ever unit delivered these already speculated on all this and reported it. The attached note just got misplaced at the bottom of the pile by accident." Prey said with a bright smile.

"Oh... Well that's good too." Gloom said with a cough.

"They already found this out?" Crimson asked blankly.

"Yep."

"Well... that's that then I guess. Back to cutting our way through this jungle of paperwork."

Late that night, Prey hid a message for Lemon Pink under his pillow. It was longer than he'd originally been planning to write, but he'd had to add in an extra line.

'Contact required. Objective 6Q.1 found. Identity confirmed; Big

Fields. Add to The List.'

---I---

Author's Notes:

Editor here: Again, much thanks to Sweetolebob18
So, this story is getting kind of long(ish) now. So that's going great I guess? That was always my biggest gripe with FiMfiction. I often find a great story, and then it goes and finishes far too soon!
[image]

26.2 If you want Something Done, Do it Yourself

The List. Prey's list. What was it?

It was a list of objectives Prey badly wanted to achieve, or for Lemon Pink to achieve in his stead. Items Prey wanted to replicate. Information he wanted to find. Answers to questions he didn't know.

Things like the myriad magical artifacts in stories that granted their wearer incredible strength, dark magic or not. Or maps of lands surrounding Equestria where Prey might one day flee. Or where cutie marks really came from.

Things, items, agendas.

And a list of names. Prey kept very careful tally of that list.

Near the very top, right under Razor, Snake, Torment, Yarn and Stinger, was the name Fire Strike. It had a double line scoured through it.

As it turned out, the Night Guard didn't need to wait until the upcoming trial for Wheat Plow's crimes to become known to the pony population.

Someone, most definitely a some*pony*, had spoken to the press last night, because it was all over the front page this morning.

The number of people who could've spoken were limited, so it was someone within the Guard too. Whom though, was not clear. Almost all the officers knew, all of the Night Guard definitely knew, and quite a few regular Royal Guards probably knew too.

The reactions in the newspapers were about what Prey expected.

Outrage and panic blown out of all proportion, ridiculous demands for the Night Guard to 'fix it', and completely uninformed opinions of random ponies being treated as fact. That same journalist, Yellow Pages, was one of the most vocal critics again. From his writing, you'd think the Night Guard had personally insulted his mother or something.

Gloom was so disgusted with the writing he had to stop reading half way through lest he tear the paper up.

That meant there wasn't much for the Sargent to do during breakfast but join in what most of the rest of the Night Guard were doing. Namely, watching the new Royal Guards trying out the mess hall food for the first time. And it looked like most were regretting it and wishing they'd eaten breakfast elsewhere.

It was also the first opportunity the newly commissioned Royal Guards had received to properly see their fellow Night Guards in return. It wasn't like they didn't know the Night Guard existed, the thestral clans return was hardly treated as a secret. More an unpleasant fact.

Prey didn't even need his mind reading capabilities to overhear what the newcomers thought of the silent Night Guards. Just his sensitive ears.

"So that's what bat ponies look like? Freaky looking things." One murmured to his friend.

"Noponies joined up for them yet. Remember that empty barracks on the training ground? Yeah, that was supposed to be for any Night Guard recruits." His friend answered back just as quietly.

"I'm not letting my guard down around any of them. The Royal Guard's got to look out for each other."

"Ponyfeathers, I think one of them just looked at our table."

"Keep your voice down. Do you want them to mark you?"

'Annnnnd there's the racism. Rather mild, but since they signed up for the Royal Guard, they must have *some* back bone.' Prey thought.

Given time, they'd probably calm down and just ignore the thestrals for the most part, like the other Royal Guards did. Some might even learn to see past the ends of their own fat muzzles.

Although that was a small 'might'.

Prey knew he wasn't the only Night Guard who'd noticed the freshly promoted recruits looks and mutterings. But really, was it any different to how the thestrals were usually viewed? Actually, on average, this was slightly better.

Nevertheless, good or bad, the thestrals didn't react. They weren't here to win any popularity contests. They were here to serve their Princess of the Night. Besides, they weren't going to be the center of attention for much longer anyway.

Prey had spotted the buckets of confetti hidden under the tables the moment he'd entered the mess hall, and pointed them out to Gloom and Crimson. Now, they were just waiting for the Royal Guards to do their little induction ceremony.

They didn't have long to wait.

Nimbus Feather, the one who'd apparently invited Crimson to play hoofball sometime, stood up and got everyone's attention. While the new Royal Guards were distracted, the rest of the Royal Guards quietly pulled out the buckets and got ready.

"Morning everypony! In case there's anypony I didn't get the chance to say hello to yesterday, I'm Nimbus Feather, the best hoofball player this side of Trottingham." He announced with an exaggerated flexing pose, getting a few laughs.

"We're happy to see all of you survived your first night of hazing. Congratulations! You can now count yourselves as proper Guard material, able to tough it out with the best of us." Nimbus grinned, teeth dazzlingly white, "So let me be the first to unofficially say; Welcome to the Royal Guard!"

Apparently that was the signal, because a moment later the air was filled with cheers and flying confetti as the new Royal Guard's were

doused with the buckets contents.

"Welcome to the Royal Guard!"

While the more enthusiastic greeting of the Royal Guard went on, quite different from the professional detachment displayed yesterday now they were off duty, Corporal Moon Glimmer came over to their table.

"Sargent Gloom, Captain Nighthawk asked me to pass on the message. He wants to speak with you."

"Thank you, we'll leave now." Gloom acknowledged. "Come Prey, Crimson." He called, picking up his tray to drop off on the way out, Crimson doing the same with his and Prey's own empty tray. At least they'd gotten to finish eating this morning before the inevitable 'something' happened.

Bad food was better than spending the day hungry. '-huh, I guess Prey did have a point there. Free food is free food. Even if it should actually be food that pays you to eat it-'

It was just a brief meeting Nighthawk wanted. Mainly he just wanted to be updated how compiling the reports was proceeding for the upcoming trial, and to inform them that they would need to attend said trial.

"The ISND were assigned this case. You need to be there at the end to see it through."

Also, as key witnesses to almost all the interrogations that'd taken place, (and the ones who'd come up with the surveillance plan), their testimony would be required.

"You need to sign this, and then you can go." Nighthawk said bluntly at the end of the short meeting.

"What is it sir?" Gloom asked, picking up the quill.

"Your probationary promotion paperwork." Nighthawk answered,

"It's required from the Night Guard Captain to be official." His tone clearly said he thought such a requirement was a waste of both of their's time.

'-Princess Luna gave the order. Paperwork to back up that order is insulting-'

"Oh. Thank you sir." Gloom said, swiftly signing it.

Nighthawk grunted and shoved the completed form in a tray. "Well and good." He leaned over the desk, so he could fully look down at Prey.

His eyes went to Prey's blue ribbon, then snorted as he dismissed it as unimportant. "There will be no more disruptions like yesterday in the mess hall. Am I clear?" He rasped.

Prey subtly changed his stance and expression to look more innocent, "Clear sir." He said.

"Good. Dismissed."

They made good progress in the office that day, some subtle inspiration from Gloom's cutie mark indicating what to work on. Unfortunately, the term 'good progress' was relative. They completed a lot of work, but when compared against how much more they still had to do, it wasn't nearly enough.

The information and reports about Wheat Plow (most of them irrelevant) just kept piling up on the ISND's floor. Now included in this, (because it was related to Wheat Plow and indirectly to the case), were newspapers.

So Gloom got to read all those sensational dramatisations he'd been so keen to avoid anyway.

The Equestrian population had seized upon this scandal with startling ferocity. It seemed Wheat Plow's actions had sparked horrified outrage from every single pony who heard about it. They just couldn't believe that a pony, especially such an upstanding

citizen like Wheat Plow, could possibly do something so heinous. It'd only been one day since the arrest was announced, and yet it was in every newspaper.

The name 'Wheat Plow' was on everyone's lips, and anyone who hadn't read a newspaper was quick to hear the name from those who had.

Where the Night Guards praised in any of these newspapers? No. The newspapers mostly portrayed them as little better than thugs taking down another thug, although not in those words.

There were also the distraught Crop Sharers'. Even if the stars aligned and Wheat Plow somehow ended up being declared innocent, it was still going to ruin his reputation. There was no way for the Crop Sharers' to win enough seats in the election now. All that campaigning, hard work, and effort, wasted.

Reading what the newspapers had to say just made Gloom angry.

Crimson didn't appear overly impressed with the news articles either.

Prey silently laughed in scorn at the ponies.

Dinner in the mess hall. The ISND's daily cycle could actually be measured by two areas of the Palace. Their bunk room, and the mess hall.

So here they where, back in the mess hall, eating dinner. They hadn't done a day filled with physical exercise, but they were all still hungry. Lunches were a luxury which the ISND did not have time for. Same for the rest of the Night Guard. Thestrals coats were almost exclusively dark in colour, but even that couldn't hide the developing circles under all of their eyes.

It was obvious to Prey that the Night Guard was slowly running itself into the ground. They just didn't have the numbers. It wouldn't normally be his problem, but he was one of those Night Guards.

'I estimate Nighthawk could run the Night Guard at this pace for another month before it's structure starts to seriously collapse. Thestrals are tough.' Prey thought, speedily devouring his soggy potato bake.

Gloom unenthusiastically ate another fork full of his own food, "I can't decide whether it's worth adding pepper or not. Which would make it worse? Mush, or mush that burns your tongue?" He mused.

"I have eaten worse." Crimson said emotionlessly. "That is not to say I wouldn't gladly fly at the chance of anything else."

"Food is food."

Gloom sighed, "Yes Prey. You've made that point already. Multiple times."

"You keep saying that whenever we have to eat this. Are you trying to convince us, or yourself Prey?" Crimson enquired blankly.

"It's better than going hungry. Besides, I've eaten worse too, but I'm still alive." Prey said, lifting another heaped forkful, "For instance, there was breakfast this morning."

Gloom snorted in amusement, cheered up for a moment. Then he went to take another bite and remembered why he was unhappy. "It'll ease off after the trial is done. Just one week." Gloom repeated his mantra to himself.

With his luck and the way things were going, Prey judged Gloom's hope unlikely.

While thus considering the fickle whims of fate, and how it hated anyone not pony shaped and gifted with a magical mark on their flank, Prey was also keeping an ear open to he goings on around them in the mess hall. Topaz Honey had hopefully taken the hint, but you could never be sure.

Over on their side of the mess hall, Royal Guards seemed to be frustrated about something, mainly the more senior guards. Rubbing eyes, a few yawns, discontent mutterings, and the like. Strange. They'd been so sickeningly enthusiastic about the fresh

recruits yesterday.

Prey tilted an ear more strategically and slowed his chewing to see what he could overhear.

"I still don't know how that stuffed parrot could've gotten out. Her cage was locked and everything."

"You know it's not a parrot you mush." The grumpy Royal Guard mare next to him corrected.

"Overgrown pretentious preening songbird then. It's Her Majesty's property, who do you think is going to take the flak if it's not recaptured soon?" The first snapped, clearly agitated. Squinting, Prey identified him as a Master Sargent by the bars on his shoulder. Not an insignificant rank.

"Lieutenant Swift Arrow said it's all in hoof. I also distinctly remember him telling you to stop so disrespectfully referring to Princess Celestia's property like that Peanut." A third unicorn across from them remarked.

"Hey, I wasn't." The first protested.

"It's just typical that this happens when the greenies join. It better not have been somepony putting one of 'em up to it for their hazing because they didn't know any better." The mare sighed, or at least that's what Prey thought she said.

"They'll be fired and arrested on the spot if it turns out anypony did." Unicorn Guard answered her.

"Nopony would dare. It must've just escaped by itself. Trust me, that thing's got a mind of its own believe you me. You guys haven't had to stand guard on its cage when that bird's in a mood."

"It's a disgrace how none of us could find it in the first place. And unless it's found soon, that disgrace is going to be the permanent kind that gets a pony demoted."

"Maybe you didn't get the memo, but the Captain said we'll be launching searches throughout Canterlot airspace the moment

breakfast's done." The pegasus mare responded.

The unicorn gave a sigh of relief, "Thank the sun that Captain Shining Armour's got a plan then. As Peanut said, I'm not going to be the one who takes the flak for this."

"With all the patrols we've got out and scanning spells, it's all but guaranteed that it'll-"

A thestral on the table next to Prey's spoke, speaking to her companion, "One of the new ones. He's coming this way." She commented. Prey refocused on his own table and glanced over.

The thestral hasn't been speaking to the ISND, but Prey overheard her anyways. He followed her line of sight to see a Royal Guard, one of the newly promoted recruits, coming over towards the Night Guards corner.

The rest of the seated thestrals gave no indication they'd even noticed the stallion, but Prey wouldn't believe for a second that they hadn't all marked his approach. This Royal Guard was obviously coming over specifically towards them. That was unusual.

By that wordless communication that all the thestrals seemed to have, Gloom, although he was facing in completely the opposite direction, noticed him coming too and looked out of the corner of his eye. The Royal Guard was an Earth pony, but who knew what colour he was under his enchanted armour.

After he'd taken another three steps closer, it became clear his destination was the ISND's table.

'Why is it we're always the target of these ponies?' Prey thought, scowling. He slid away along the bench, pulling his dinner tray with him. Gloom and Crimson could deal with whatever the crazy pony wanted. At least it was only an Earth pony.

If you looked, it was clear that a fair number of the Royal Guards were watching this pony too, perhaps secretly betting on the outcome.

Crimson and Gloom turned, almost in sync, when the Royal Guard

was a few paces away, and right as he was opening his mouth to say "Hello." It made him falter for a second as two pairs of yellow eyes coolly evaluated him, but he was not deterred for more than a moment.

"Hello," He said cheerfully, "Are you a new Night Guard recruit? I don't think I saw any at boot camp." He asked Crimson.

"Oh, excuse me, I'm Scenic Paint." He added, offering a hoof.

"Yes I am new. No I was not sent to any boot camp." Crimson answered. He looked down at the hovering hoof for a long moment. "My name is Crimson Trace." He decided to add, reaching out and giving their hooves a quick *clop* together.

"Oh, that's why I didn't recognise you then I guess. How'd you join up? Oh, excuse me sir, Scenic Paint." Scenic said, offering his hoof to Gloom too as he finally spotted the two bars and star on Gloom's shoulder plate. As per usual for a non-thestral pony, he couldn't meet Gloom's gaze for more than a second before his eyes skittered off.

Gloom wasn't bothered. He wasn't antagonistic towards the Royal Guard, despite their clear shunning of the Night Guard. As a whole, he was just indifferent towards them.

"It's just Gloom, during dinner Guards are considered off duty." Gloom said, politely clopping hooves. He was polite, but there was no interest in his voice.

"Nice to meet you Gloom. Oh, and most ponies just call me Paint Spot, or just Spot." Scenic said.

'Then why'd you introduce yourself as Scenic Paint?' Prey thought.

Scenic turned back to Crimson, "So how'd you join up to the Night Guard? Were you in the Royal Guard when Princess Luna returned?"

"No. I come from the clans."

Scenic Paint cocked an ear, "The clans? What clans?" He asked.

Crimson regarded him, "The thestral clans of course."

"Oh, how many clans are there?"

"Three."

Scenic looked around the seated thestral's, not realising that they were actually covertly watching him. "So how'd you end up in a thestral clan? I didn't know you guys were working with other ponies before Princess Luna returned."

"I was born there." Crimson answered flatly.

"Oh, right." Scenic Paint at least had the mental awareness to realise that was not a subject he was welcome to continue asking about. '-quick, need a different conversation starter-', He thought.

"What's life like back home? I'm from Canterlot myself, bit of a towns' colt despite my Earth pony roots, so I don't know what it's like out in the country. Do you go back home to visit often?"

'Poor choice.' Prey thought to himself, smirking.

Thestrals did not give outsiders any details about their clans. Asking Crimson was *especially* awkward, since the pegasus was an exile and all.

Scenic didn't realise he'd asked something inappropriate, and was waiting for an answer.

Gloom decided it was best if he stepped in, "The clans are isolated. There is little chance for anypony to return and visit. With all that needs to be done in the Night Guard, the circumstances do not allow for leave either. Sending letters is good enough." Gloom said, ending the topic.

"That's, uh, unlucky. Well, it's not like I visit home much either, not much practical point." Scenic shrugged. He was making an effort to keep this conversation going, trying to ignore the rest of the silent thestrals around them.

'-nope, not weird, just different cultures, not weird at all-'

"Hey, last day in boot camp, I read about that pony's arrest, Wheat Plow. It was you guys, the Night Guard, right? They told me that your Captain went in himself, pretty impressive. I wanted to ask, which pony was it that caught Wheat Plow? I thought I'd congratulate them and say hi." Scenic said to them, internally starting to sweat.

'-oops, I started rambling. Why they looking at me like that? It's getting awkward-'

"It was the ISND." Crimson answered, just as bluntly as before.

"ISND? What does that stand for?"

"Intelligence and Secrecy Night Guard Division."

"Nice," Scenic looked around at the tables occupied with the other Night Guards, "Soooo, which ponies are they?"

Gloom scrutinised Scenic Paint, trying to figure out whether the stallion was mocking them or not. One of the older Royal Guards could've put him up to it, but it seemed like Scenic was just ignorant, not intentionally trying to provoke them.

"You're looking at them. Us." Gloom said.

Scenic grinned sheepishly, ears lowering, "Oh, ah, pardon me, I didn't realise. I'm new around here."

"We know." Crimson stated.

"But congratulations, well done and thank you." Scenic quickly complemented them. "*Eherm.*" He coughed.

"How did you catch Plow? What tipped you off?" Scenic followed up, trying not to make anymore slip ups. '-stupid Paint Spot, now they all think you're dumb-'

"We did not catch Wheat Plow. Captain Nighthawk lead the raid that captured him. We were not part of the raid." Crimson corrected him tonelessly.

Scenic' ears lowered further as once again Crimson killed his attempt to revive the conversation stone dead. Gloom didn't seem inclined to assist the struggling Earth pony either. Thus, Scenic Paint was left trying to carry out a one sided conversation by himself. But for some odd reason he persisted instead of just going away.

"Well you guys probably helped, right? They said it was the ISND, so you, uh, must've still helped quite a lot, right?" Scenic tried.

'-c'mon, I'm just trying to be friendly here-', He was thinking desperately.

Crimson considered, "That would be more accurate." He decided.

Gloom nodded, "Pre-We merely suggested the plan, but it was Captain Nighthawk who carried it out." He said, remembering that Prey didn't want any recognition at the last moment. Unfortunately, Gloom had also started to wave towards Prey as he answered. Cancelling the gesture half way through just drew Scenic Paint's attention even more effectively.

Scenic looked over to see the lamb sitting at the end of the table, chin barely clearing the table top, devouring a plate of potato bake.

How Scenic had not noticed Prey before was unclear. '-how did I not notice her? She's sitting like right there-'.

"Did you know there's a lamb at the end of your table?" Scenic asked stupidly.

Gloom's look matched Crimson's deadpan one perfectly. "Yes. I'd noticed. That's Prey."

Scenic's eyes widened, "Wha-*Hunting*? What do you mean? Sheep aren't prey, she's not an animal, you can't-"

"-His name is Prey." Gloom interrupted in annoyance, "Refrain from insulting thestrals like that again in future."

Scenic Paint's ears pressed themselves against his helmeted head. He knew he was no longer welcome here, he'd essentially just

accused Gloom of cannibalising sheep, or perhaps drinking their blood at the least. It'd slipped out before Scenic had thought, and he hadn't meant it. He'd said without meaning to, but it was too late now.

Even if it was intellectually wrong, it did serve as a clear example of hows thestrals were still viewed on an instinctive level because of their fangs. As monsters or vamponies of the night.

"Sorry," Was all Scenic could say, lowering his head and shuffling back, "I'm really sorry, I didn't mean that. I'll, uh, I'll stop bothering you now." He apologised.

Gloom gave a small sigh and pushed his annoyance away. '-shouting at him does nothing to improve how they'll see thestrals. He's new, no bias from the older Royal Guards yet. Is it worth alienating all of the new recruits?-'

Prey scowled and sped up eating as he saw where Gloom's thoughts where going.

Gloom held up a hoof to forestall Scenic's departure, "You're forgiven. You made a mistake, but you don't have to leave. Just don't do it again. If you want to question the why, you can ask Prey himself."

Scenic dithered, trying to decide which would be more impolite; Staying after his accidental insult, or still going leaving after Gloom's magnanimous pardon.

"Alright, thank you. And uh, sorry again." Scenic said, deciding to stay for a little bit longer, glancing between Prey and Gloom.

'Fool. Didn't you learn *anything* from Topaz Honey?' Prey thought angrily at Gloom.

Gloom was giving him a look right back and thinking, '-don't mess this up again Prey-'

Scenic sat down opposite Prey, eyes flicking cautiously back to Gloom and Crimson to see if he was somehow doing anything else wrong.

"Hello there. What's your name? I'm Paint Spot, but I think you heard that bit already." Scenic said, smiling at Prey.

Prey blinked at him, not returning the smile, "I'm Prey, but I think you heard bit that already."

"Oh, of course, duh." Scenic said, slapping his forehead. '-I'm really not with it today-'

"Well, it's nice to meet you anyway, um, Prey. Is that a nick name or your, uh, real name?"

Prey intentionally took a large bite of his meal, making Scenic wait while he chewed. Only once he was done did he give his one word answer, "Yes."

"Uh, yes Prey is your real name?"

Another big bite while Scenic had to wait. "Yes."

"So uh, do you live in the Palace somewhere? Are your parents visiting dignitaries maybe?" Scenic suggested, searching for an explanation.

Prey had finished his food, that bite had been the last. Too bad. Scenic's patience seemed to have won out, "No, I'm part of the ISND. Sargent Gloom said that earlier already, too."

"Oh," Scenic had gotten that answer before yes, he just hadn't believed it. He glanced around, voice lowering slightly, "Do you mean that you're an *actual* Night Guard? That's...I'm pretty sure that's child labour. I didn't think that's allowed."

"Really? Why not?" Prey inquired innocently.

"You're, um, eight? Nine? That's far too young to sign up. Don't you want to be back with your herd?"

"Oh really? I didn't know that," Prey said, eyes big, "I guess it's a good thing Princess Luna gave the order then, right?"

"Princess Luna ordered-?" Scenic gaped for a moment, "But why?"

Prey shrugged, "Opportunity knocks but once. So does death. Make sure which is which before answering the door."

Scenic had no clue what Prey was talking about, all he knew was that the longer he sat here at the Night Guards table, the more freaked out he got. '-maybe this was a bad idea just like they all said-'

"What do you do here, uh, Prey?" He eventually asked. '-what does a child do in the Guard?-'

Prey thoughtfully tapped his chin, "That's a good question. What do I do here?" He brightened, "Oh yes, I make the tea."

Scenic blinked as Prey just sat there, smiling away at him with a bright blue ribbon behind his ear. With silent, brooding thestrals seated all around, it made the lamb seem even more out of place. Prey could see this wasn't going at all how Scenic had hoped. The Earth pony'd had good intentions, merely wanting to get to know the Night Guard a bit more, but now? Now he was not so sure.

'-one last try-', Scenic thought.

Unfortunately, the only one who seemed approachable from Scenic's view point was the misplaced lamb in front of him, misguided though his view may have been. Gathering his courage, Scenic gave it one last go.

"Uh, do you like art? What medium do you like best?"

'Art? Seriously, *art*? When would I have time to paint while running for my life?' Prey scorned.

Prey pretended to consider, "Hmm...nope! I've always seemed to be a bit too busy." He answered flippantly.

Scenic sat bolt upright, "You've never drawn or painted anything? No sculpture, no nothing?" He sounded horrified.

Prey didn't even have the chance to respond before the Earth pony launched into a detailed description of all Prey was missing about art.

"Art washes from the soul the dust of everyday life, it's how a pony expresses themselves most fully to another pony. When you create art, you are exploring what makes you, well, *you* and me *me*." Scenic stressed, pointing between himself and Prey.

"We are all born with an innate desire to express ourselves, and art encompasses a wider range of emotions than you could ever imagine. It doesn't matter if you think you're any good or not, anypony can get good with practice. There's fine art, leads and graphite's, coal, pastels, water colours, oil paints, collage, clay, sculpture, wood carvings, pottery, weaving, tapestry, all that and much more. And the best part, the best part is, no style is any higher than the next! All art forms are just as important and precious as each other."

All three of the ISND were staring at Scenic by the time he finished speaking. Scenic however didn't appear embarrassed in the slightest. He obviously felt very strongly about art, and Prey was willing to bet that under that armour, that's what his cutie mark was about too. Scenic was still lecturing Prey though, even tacking on a confident smile to get the point across.

"You really need to try it for yourself Prey. Experiment around, find out what art style suits you best, I promise you won't regret it. Everypony loves to create."

Scenic's smile started to slip however, when after a long minute of silence, all the three of them did was just look at him. It was only then that he realised most of the other thestrals were doing the same thing.

Prey had been going to mock Scenic by continuing his child's act, but then Scenic had gone and made himself the centre of attention so now there was no point. And with this many feral yellow eyes fixed upon him, Scenic's previously blasé confidence crumbled like a sand castle in a rain storm.

"Er, heh he," Scenic chuckled nervously, thinking about how to make a quick exit, "Sorry. Uh, I uh... Got a bit carried away there, um..."

Scenic mistook the Night Guards attention for annoyance. An easy misunderstanding, considering how they were all just staring at him, but he'd caught their attention. It was only good manners. If a senior or respected clan member had spoken up like this in public, you were expected to stop and listen.

Scenic Paint wasn't either of those things, but Prey could read that most of the watching thestrals, (those within his perception range at least), had decided to withhold judgement and listen anyway, since Scenic had proved he was brave enough to come over. Few other Royal Guards would do the same.

It didn't mean they agreed with Scenic's point of view, but they were prepared to politely listen.

However that seemed to have been the extent of Scenic's confidence. He continued to back up from their table, "I, uh, I'll just, I'll just go."

Scenic beat a hasty retreat back to his table, metaphorical tail between his legs. He didn't even say goodbye. His Royal Guard squad mates welcomed him back, quickly sitting him down so they could ask what had happened.

Because of his retreat, Scenic's personal estimation fell in the Night Guards eyes, although none of them said anything about it as they returned to their meals. He was just one Royal Guard after all, still green under the wings.

Prey exaggeratedly glanced left, then right at the Night Guards around them, "And I thought I got a chilly reception." He remarked, but pitched so only Gloom and Crimson would hear.

"You were a criminal." Gloom pointed out, finally eating the forkful of food that he'd been hovering for the last three minutes. "And anyway, it wasn't that cold. For you or him." He added.

"Many warriors say that combat is an art form, and he was honest. Maybe he will do well for himself. Even in the Royal Guard." Was Crimson's verdict.

Showers.

Showers showers showers.

Hot water, what a luxury.

Gloom finally came good on his promise to himself and took the time off from their busy schedule to meet this basic necessity of life. Actually, only 'normal' ponies from around here thought this privilege was a necessity. Prey thought it a wonderful luxury, and since thestrals were used to cold showers taken under rain clouds, it was one for them too.

'Another one? Seriously, how?'

It amazed Prey. Fifty seven years spent locked away, and as soon as he was released, his wool seemed to start picking up briars as if trying to make up for lost time. He hadn't even been outside, and yet somehow these aggravating seeds still ended up tangled in his wool.

How? He hadn't even been outside recently?

'Do they spontaneously sprout from any doorways we walk through?' Prey wondered, having to contort all the way around to reach one stuck on his back. It was something of a minor accomplishment to be able to pull off such a corkscrewed position, especially without straining the whip scars.

That was not the only impressive thing this shower brought on. Prey also got to see the rare sight of Crimson looking worried about something, tufted ears lowered and mane dripping as he anxiously checked over his wings.

"What's wrong?" Gloom asked, also noticing Crimson's distress. '-is he injured or something?-'

Crimson hesitated, before splaying his wing out so each individual

feather was clearly displayed, "See for yourselves." He told them, beginning to check over his other wing with concern.

Gloom and Prey tried to spot what was wrong, but because one of them didn't have wings and the other didn't have feathers, they couldn't really see what the problem was.

"How bad is it?" Gloom eventually asked.

"Bad enough." Crimson answered, obviously not liking what he'd found out about his own wings.

"What, you find fleas?" Prey asked bluntly.

Crimson's head whipped around, "I would *never* let myself become infested with things like that." He retorted frostily, a shudder transmitting up and down his feathers at the mere suggestion.

Prey held up his hooves defensively, "Well then I don't know what else could be wrong, because, you know, sheep have lot's of experience with looking after their own wings. No wait, that's right. Other way around."

That'd been a fairly extreme reaction from Crimson, (by the pegasus's standards). Prey knew Crimson held a special dislike for being dirty, but he'd been asking a genuine question. Parasites were a reality when surviving in the Deeper Green. Leeches, fleas and ticks got into everything and could make you desperately sick if you weren't careful. Many a Resistance fighter had been brought low by tick fever.

"Okay, are your feathers falling out then?" Gloom tried.

Crimson's wet tail flicked irritably, splattering drops, very unusual for him, "No, look. See? My feathers, on the edge of the vane, the barbules on ends of the barbs are damaged."

Gloom's thoughts showed he had absolutely no idea what Crimson was talking about, and neither did Prey. The two exchanged a sideways glance.

"...Right. So what does that mean?" Gloom asked.

Crimson finally seemed to remember he was talking to 'feather illiterates' and deigned to explain.

"It's the small fluff on each individual barb. It's damaged. I should have been more careful. My father will... my father would never have made this mistake." Crimson berated himself.

"We've hardly had time to eat and sleep, it's not your fault." Gloom told him.

"Second best is no good, sir. There is only one winner in a fight." Crimson said. Well, that explained what Crimson's seemingly over the top worries were about.

To Crimson, his wings were his weapons. Like any blade, they had to be carefully maintained and cared for. And the sharper the blade the more delicate care it required. Same for wings, and Crimson obviously demanded the highest levels of perfection from himself. They were his livelihood as a warrior, and being a warrior was the only thing he knew.

"Is this going to affect your ability to fly?" Gloom asked, now concerned.

"Of course it will sir. I would not mention it otherwise. It is to my shame."

"Okay, how *much* will it affect your flight?" Gloom tried.

Crimson thought about it, "Perhaps only a tiny amount." He admitted, "But it should have been not at all. The barbs may end up ruffling at a crucial second corkscrew or twist. What if those lost millimeters make all the difference?" Crimson said.

Personally, Prey couldn't even see these 'barbules' Crimson was talking about, and he certainly wasn't going any closer to try and spot them. Crimson was overreacting, so Prey went back to enjoying himself under the lovely hot water.

'-well, everyponies got something that get's to them-', Gloom thought to himself, vaguely amused.

"I don't think it'll come down to an aerial sky battle at the trial Crimson, so you don't need to worry about it too much. Er, how about you fix your feathers and then this won't be an issue?" Gloom suggested encouragingly, not actually knowing if that were possible.

Prey left the thestral to try and comfort Crimson and got on with his own thing.

After finally deciding that Crimson should just buy himself a brush the next time they had a free day, (which would be never at the rate paperwork kept piling up). Plus an extra stiff wire bristle one for Prey while they were at it. Because apparently, his wool looked, "as tangled as a birds nest," And that, quote; "wasn't healthy."

Prey had given Gloom a look, and responded, "My coat's perfectly fine and that's none of your business," and, "Why're we even having this conversation?"

Gloom had firmly ignored his retort as he strode off ahead, saying; "I am *not* dealing with something like this *ever* again. Get yourself a brush and stay out of my mane with it. Especially if you get fleas. I swear to the moon, if you do I'm *not* getting involved!"

They past pairs of Royal Guards hurrying through the Palace on their way back to the office, seemingly still looking high and low for a, '-large red bird-', that somehow, '-still hasn't been recaptured yet-', belonging to, '-Her Royal Majesty-'.

However, since it wasn't the Night Guards' task, it didn't concern them.

They spent another three tediously long hours working in the dusty office by lamp light, during which the last damp in Prey's wool fully dried off.

Only when Gloom was literally nodding off where he sat, did the Sargent decide it was finally time to call it a day. Or night. Same

difference.

Gradually, Prey became aware that magic was leaking into the room. He lay still in the dark, not moving until he sensed it just about to take effect.

Prey sat up on his bunk, and looked towards the door.

Soundlessly, it swung opened just far enough to allow Lemon Pink to slip inside, sharp horn glowing silver. Gloom and Crimson slept on obliviously in a deep slumber as Prey got up and approached her. At three paces away, Prey breached the bubble of silence Lemon was casting and stepped inside. It made his hooves tingle unpleasantly as he stepped through.

Now inside the invisible bubble, his sensitive ears could hear both Lemon's breathing, and Gloom and Crimson's.

Prey approved. This was a a rather more advanced sound bubble spell. It stopped sound from getting out, but still allowed outside sound to be heard by those within. Quite a bit more advanced.

Lemon Pink nodded to him and held out a hoof. Taking the invitation, Prey placed his own small hoof in the middle of hers and linked their minds. Now no one could over hear them, even if they had a spell to penetrate the bubble.

Lemon pushed the thoughts she wanted to share to the edge of her ashen courtyard mindscape, 'I have brought the list and the required data to go along with it. Would you like it now?' She mentally asked, offering to bring up the memories for review straight away.

'In a moment. First, I have an updated quantifying threat ranking to transfer to you.' Prey said, already pulling up the correct packet of memories himself. In the packet was about ten minutes worth of memory, where he'd spent planning the new threat rankings and contingencies out in his head. Forming a firm link between their two minds, Prey sent it across.

He waited for Lemon Pink to absorb the copy and take a quick look. 'Taking into account this new criteria, is there anything that now classify's as urgent to report?' Prey asked.

'No, only minor or lesser problems. Most of them are only possible threats, not active ones.' Lemon replied. Prey didn't need to ask whether she would need assistance to solve them. That was why she'd been created.

'Good. Give me the list.' Prey ordered.

Lemon Pink did just that, copying what Prey'd just done.

Careful to make sure they were maintaining a strong link between their minds first, she pushed a copy of the relevant memories to the edge of her mindscape for Prey to absorb. Prey would take time to review, or rather relive the memories later. It wasn't as simple as just absorbing information and then suddenly knowing it. Prey would still have to spend time recalling everything for himself for the first time.

It was more akin to being given a book. Someone could tell you what it contained, but you'd still have to read it to know the exact details for yourself.

Usually, absorbing memories was incredibly dangerous. It could make you lose who you were, especially if the absorbed memories contained a lot of emotion. But with Prey and Lemon, there was no emotion in the memories they transferred, because mainly they just consisted of memorised lists.

Lists were not something that would typically cause an individual to have a mental break down.

Secondly, Prey and Lemon were both experienced, and would only send across memories which would not prove harmful to the others mental physique.

Prey took a moment to have a quick look at what he'd gotten. The list was of places in Canterlot. Shops, buildings, routes and houses which might prove of interest in the future. Lemon Pink had gone

around the city, specifically looking for unusual things as per his orders.

'So there *is* a small black market, even here in Canterlot. That's good to know. Might be they have something worth stealing in the future.' Prey thought.

'I judge it to be unlikely. None of the identified vendors deal in anything serious from what I have observed.'

'What's the likelihood of anything useful showing up?' Prey asked.

'I estimate the possibility at about five percent.'

'Hmm, not worth the time investment to constantly keep an eye on the black market then.' Prey decided, dismissing the option and moving on. Prey brought up another set of memories for them both to review, which was again different from giving them to Lemon Pink to absorb.

Continuing with the book analogy, it was like them both reading from the same page, but it was Prey who was holding the book open and decided upon which page they viewed.

Lemon studied the memory, then asked, 'How do you wish me to proceed?'

Prey 'looked' down at the memories he was displaying, spread out on the ashen sky of his half of the shared mindscape.

There, lay the notes Wheat Plow had collected from his spies on the life of Big Fields.

Big Fields. A name that had made its unfortunate way onto Prey's list.

'At the moment, Big Fields is too high profile of a target, what with being the Crop Holder leader, but eventually the focus on him will die down. Maintain a light hoof in your surveillance of him until then. The Guard will be on the look out for other people prying into Big Fields past, so the option of hiring others to do it for us is out for now.' Prey thought to Lemon.

Lemon Pink did not need to ask what would happen when that 'for now' just became 'now'.

'Suggestion; in the future, more time will be required on overseeing objectives as they near completion. Scouting will limit my time. This work could be given out to hired ponies.' Lemon said.

What Lemon Pink mean by 'hiring ponies' was find people who were either willing to take 'debatable' work for the promise of gold, or who could easily be manipulated, controlled, and/or blackmailed.

It went without saying that anyone selected would not know the real reason for their tasks, having been fed a cover story. Nor would they know who was actually hiring them, or if anyone else was independently working on the same job as them. Afterwards, Lemon Pink could wipe their memories clean if it were feasible. If it wasn't, since she would've only communicated with them while in disguise, it wouldn't matter anyway. An acceptable risk.

'If you can find individuals who meet my requirements, then feel free to do so,' Prey allowed, 'But never more than four individuals at any one time. Three to carry out the job, and one to act as a handler for the first three. Keep them in the dark and guessing about whether they're the only handler, or if there is someone else reporting to you too.'

Even if this somehow all went wrong and was traced back to Lemon Pink, there would still be no evidence of Prey's involvement. Which was the only reason he was willing to let Lemon try this.

The world wasn't fair and no one could be trusted. If desperate enough, anyone could betray you. But Lemon Pink couldn't. Not with the permanent self destruct rune on her neck.

'Suggestion; obtain a cash fund that cannot be traced.' Lemon suggested, 'In most cases, promise of payment will likely not be enough and payment will have to be made in advance. The money could likely be recovered seven out of ten times after the job is complete and their memories wiped. Other times memory wipes will not be feasible, which will necessitate a sizeable fund to cover these inevitable losses.'

Prey understood the problem there.

Memory wipes were not always a valid solution. The longer someone had a memory, especially an important one, the more likely they were to take actions based off said experience. Like a tree growing from a seed. If that first memory was removed, those linked memories would still be there.

If you uprooted a sapping before it could grow, fine. However if you suddenly removed the roots of a fully grown tree, the trunk would still be left conspicuously behind. As a basic example, imagine waking up and wondering why it was Thursday instead of Monday? Kind of an obvious give away. And there were other problems.

Like what if someone didn't keep the memory private and told someone else? Then you'd have to try and track that person down too, and anyone that person told, and so on, and so on.

Additionally, what if some physical representation of the memory was left behind in the real world? Like if the victim had stayed in an inn on the job, and the inn sent them a bill a month later that they couldn't remember ever visiting? Or worse, what if they kept a diary?

Prey's rule was that the moment someone left your sight, their memories were out there for the whole world. If you still went ahead and wiped their memory later anyway, it would leaves blanks that someone, some*where*, some*how*, would find. Sometimes that didn't matter and the risk could be taken, but on other occasions it couldn't.

As to Lemon Pink's suggestion on obtaining a lot of bits?

It was a little different to what Prey had been focused on.

Not unexpected, just different. It again showed that tiny difference between the two of them. The left over traces of Night Watcher changed how Lemon viewed an objective just that tiny bit. Whereas Prey saw money as a hammer, Lemon saw it as a mallet. Almost no difference in functionality except where it mattered.

'That is an acceptable suggestion.' Prey decided.

Where to obtain the money from though? Robbing nobles like Lemon Pink had done when she was still Night Watcher would draw a lot attention. Nor did she have a team of cultists to help her pull off her heists anymore.

Stealing from and then wiping a noble's memory was also a poor idea. Again, there would be records, ledgers, accountants, and family who remembered the money. And now, most recently, banks too. Not to mention, the Solar Guard would come down like a sack of bricks if such memory crimes started popping up again. Prey wasn't ready to face Captain Valour again. Not yet.

The simplest and safest way to steal enough money without being detected was to take it from those who couldn't report the theft and kept no records.

Criminals.

And which criminal group did Prey have the most information on right now that he knew also had plenty of bits?

The salt drug dealers of course.

Lemon Pink could of course see all of this in Prey's thoughts, and thus knew what he wanted done on the matter. She sent across a feeling of acknowledgement, 'I will begin tracking them to discover their method for storing money at once.'

Prey sent back a thought of affirmation, and brought up all the relevant memories of all the ISND salt reports he'd read for her to use.

'Here. A good starting point would be to find that pony we saw conducting the drug sale in lower Canterlot-', A scene of the coal coloured, long coat wearing stallion flashed past, '-and steal his memories. Work your way backwards up the chain of command from there.'

'Yes, Prey.' Lemon answered, completely unbothered about the potential danger of the task Prey had given her.

'On a side note, do you know anything about a missing red song bird from Celestia's personal garden?' Prey asked. It was certainly nothing, but anything linked to the Sun Wolf might be dangerous in some fashion.

'No, Prey.'

'Never mind, it's probably of little consequence. Leave now while your magic reserves are still high. You have your tasks. The Royal Library is also out for now.' Prey ordered, abruptly bringing their meeting to an end. The longer they spent talking, even if only mentally, was longer for someone to potentially discover them. Prey had runes set up around the door frame just in case, but both of them understood it better to take no chances.

'Yes, Prey.' Lemon prepared to break the mind share. Prey almost let it go, but an afterthought occurred to him.

'Oh,' Prey paused to add, 'And if there is enough time, check in on Tulip Bed and her foal. Make sure they haven't remembered anything.'

Princess Celestia made a public address early the next morning.

It was given primary to the newspaper reporters who were selected to attend, mainly from the more reputable newspapers. It was on short notice, and it'd been made clear beforehoof there would be no questions afterwards.

Wheat Plow's trial was set for the day after tomorrow, or rather, night after tomorrow. Princess Luna would be the one conducting the trial during Night Court, and all the judges and jury would just have to stay awake and attend. But before any of that, Princess Celestia wanted to say something.

Obviously, the ISND didn't get to hear her words directly. The Night Guard had no place in attending Princess Celestia's public address, something that Prey would've cried in relief over if he'd known attending was even a possibility.

The newspapers pulled out every stop, and even then, it must've been a huge rush for the newspapers to get all edited up and printed in time for the morning addition barely an hour later. But it was done, hot off the printing press and distributed throughout Canterlot. Just as Celestia had wanted.

However the ISND didn't even have to wait one hour to hear the news. What Celestia said had already filtered back to all of the Guard by then.

The Royal Guards on duty at the venue told their fellows, who passed it on to the rest of the Royal Guard, and which the Night Guard then overheard come the morning shift as they retired for their 'night'. Or in the ISND's case, rose to start their day.

What Celestia wanted to say to her subjects, as reported in the Canterlot Express, was this;

"I urge each and every one of my ponies not to let the actions of one pony destroy your trust in one another. Wheat Plow has done wrong, but it is not him I want you to focus on. I hope that you can see beyond him, to the future."

"I call on everypony to vote at the coming elections, and to vote with their hearts. Abstaining is not the correct choice to make. Honesty and fairness, these are the principles of our elections, our government, and Equestria. Do not let one pony's failure influence your judgement. My sincere wish is for everypony to vote for what they truly believe in."

Short, sharp, and to the point. In other words, Celestia had stepped out and basically said that she wanted the upcoming elections to go ahead, but that she didn't want the Crop Sharer supporters to change their vote even after Wheat Plow.

Wasn't Celestia asking them to do what she just said they shouldn't? Letting someone else, namely her, influence their voting decision?

Yet that's exactly what Celestia was doing.

Her word was law, but more than that, any opinion she held was

immediately treated as the right opinion. This would throw the elections even further into chaos as people changed who they were going to vote for yet again. She didn't name any party, but it was obvious she didn't want the Crop Sharers' to be eliminated on Wheat Plows' misdeeds.

Prey couldn't understand why she did this. Every single thing he knew of the Sun Wolf was second hoof, but Prey felt he could understand her decisions as a tyrant, (for all the good that did him), but why did she announce something like this?

Why did Celestia care who won the most seats? It would make no difference to Celestia, she would still be in supreme control, still loved, adored and worshipped by her pony followers no matter the outcome. But here she was, purposefully change the upcoming results by exerting her influence.

Perhaps it simply amused her, to mess with the petty power struggles of her servants.

Their lives were meaningless, but still they worked and sweated to win an election that, in the end, was meaningless. She was probably laughing at all the little ponies, running around like ants as she poked their ant hill.

'Do alicorns play their games across life times? Setting things in motion to change what might happen in fifty or a hundred years time?'

Celestia had ruled solo for a millennia. She was the architect of Equestria's face, influencing every direction it ever took. Any ideas or developments she didn't like were either carefully strangled, or, if she felt like it, simply destroyed outright. Like she'd had done with the Resistance and the villagers.

'Just toys in her doll house, and she decides who gets to play with who.' Prey thought bitterly.

Prey had no appetite after seeing the front page of the newspaper Gloom was reading, but that didn't stop him from eating everything on his plate. Going hungry would improve nothing, and besides,

he'd already checked his food for poison.

The newspapers that Gloom had taken to reading while the ISND ate their breakfasts were the ones delivered to the mess hall every morning. Prey judged them only fit for fire kindling.

'-well I guess the elections *are* going to be fair again then-', Gloom thought. He flipped the paper around and pushed it across to Crimson, "Here. Have a quick read. It'll put your fears about us having destroyed the Crop Sharers' to rest."

Gloom had only being doing his job, and he wouldn't regret doing it, but this did help erase those feelings of guilt which'd been playing around in the back of his mind about their unintentional role in destroying the Crop Sharers' chances for victory.

"Her majesty has called for an even vote?" Crimson questioned after reading it.

"More or less." Gloom confirmed around a mouthful.

"Oh. That is good to hear. Wheat Plow's party should not have to pay for his mistakes." Crimson said. He offered the article to Prey, "See for yourself."

'I didn't ask to see that stupid drivel.' Prey thought, ignoring Crimson's offer. "No need. I already read what it has to say."

"You did? When?" Gloom asked in surprise.

"Just now. I read it upside down while you were reading it."

Gloom blinked a couple of times, then shrugged to himself, taking the paper back and folding it neatly. "You both done? If you are, let's go." He said.

Prey was done, so he jumped off the bench, and Crimson put aside his own tray and got up. Gloom picked up his helmet as they turned to go, but all stopped on bearing witness to a most unusual sight.

One of the Night Guard thestrals, who'd just finished his night shift, had left his table and was walking towards the Royal Guards tables.

This was very unusual.

The thestrals had so far been content to sit on their side of the hall and not bother anyone else. It was an unspoken rule. But now, despite that, one of them was purposefully making their way over to the Royal Guards all by themselves.

The three of them weren't the only ones to notice. All of the Night Guard were watching, and the Royal Guards on the table he was approaching quiet ended down as they finally noticed too.

The thestral walked right up to that Royal Guard from yesterday, Scenic Paint.

Scenic looked up in surprise, "Yes? Can I help you?" He asked cautiously, stopping listening to one of the more senior Royal Guards worrying over what would happen if they didn't find Celestia's pet bird by today.

"I would like to ask you some questions on art. May I do so?" The thestral stallion politely asked, ignoring the rest of the Royal Guards sitting at the table.

Prey saw Scenic glance around his table of friends, not sure what to say. "I guess so? What do you want to know?" He settled on.

"Thank you. My first question, you spoke of pastels the day before. What type of paint are pastels?"

Again, Scenic looked surprised. If he saw the sideways looks the surrounding tables of Royal Guards were giving his table, he bravely ignored them and jumped straight into an explanation. "No no, pastels aren't a type of paint. You don't need a brush, you can hold them in your mouth or hoof band. They're great fun to use, because they go everywhere. Nice and bold. Now, there's different types of pastels, oil based ones, chalk based ones..."

The thestral stood attentively while Scenic continued to ramble on.

It was a complete reversal from yesterday. A Night Guard had approached one of the new Royal Guards, instead of the other way around.

Prey glanced up at Gloom out of the corner of his eye. The thestral looked happy. '-reaching out. Perhaps this small act is what it'll take to end the unofficial hostility between us all-'

'Did all the thestrals decide to send up a representative like this? Does that one even care about art or is he just the spokes person to try and forge a bond with the new Guards?' Prey wondered.

None of the thestral minds in his perception range were thinking on that answer however. They were all watching (without making it obvious they were looking), how the meeting with Scenic Paint and his unconvinced friends was going.

Prey decided it probably wasn't premeditated. If it was, they would've been better served by asking Crimson to go up instead. He was the one Scenic Paint had approached yesterday after all, and despite everything, Crimson was still a pegasus at the end of the day. Or night.

Prey considered the idea of sending the laconic, monotone Crimson over to try and continue a conversation with the Royal Guard.

'Hmm, actually perhaps not.'

They left the Night and Royal Guard to it, and headed to the office.

They found out later that Celestia's pet bird, which turned out to be a legendary immortal phoenix of all things, had been recovered. Apparently, some pegasus mare supermodel had just wondered in past the Guards, and made off with the bird.

The squad of Royal Guards who'd been on duty were all summarily fired, and their Sargent demoted for their lapse of duty. It was no where near as harsh as the Sun Wolf could've been, but even so, to the four ponies, it was no doubt devastating. Both at the loss of the job they'd devoted so much time and effort into, but also at failing their Princess.

The mare got away with absolutely no charges levelled against her.

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Author's Notes:

Credit for Editor and helper: Sweetolebob18
If you notice any mistakes or just have any questions, please point them out or ask. Thanks!

27.2 Everyone has their Own Trials

Wheat Plow's trial was fast approaching.

Which meant of course it weighed heavily upon Gloom's mind. They only had today and tomorrow to finish all the reports and prosecution documentation, but *unlike* usual, it wasn't only Prey who was privy to the Sargent's thoughts. Reason being, Gloom had shared his concerns.

"We're running out of time." Gloom had fretted aloud.

Most of Wheat Plow's operation had been exposed by now, with the ISND more or less successfully compiling it all down. The problem was, the deadline was rushing up to meet them on the way. Plus, Nighthawk would obviously want to pre-read the reports before the trial actually began.

Gloom had removed his helmet as he worked, Crimson following suit. Working in armour, even if it wasn't physical labour, couldn't have been comfortable. That did mean Gloom was having to flick his mane from his eye's every few minutes, as it was no longer contained by his helmet. He should've followed Crimson's example and gotten one of those rings to tie it back with.

'Or he could get a mane cut.' Prey thought. The Royal Guards had the right idea in that regard, having a standard close cropped mane. It was one of the few thestral examples of pride trumping practicality Prey'd actually come across.

Also, still no desk had materialised from the mysterious and zealously guarded depths of the requisitions department, so they were still working off the floorboards.

Hours slipped by unnoticed, but eventually they had to take a

break, even if just for five minutes to let their brains cool off.

Gloom spent it with his head almost straight back, futilely attempting to work the kink out of his neck. '-if we have to work in here without a table for another week, my neck's going get stuck in this position-'

"Prey," Crimson asked in the quiet moment, "Do you not sleep at night? I mean, did you not sleep well last night?"

Prey didn't give any visible sign of being caught off guard. Instead, he looked quizzically at Crimson, "Pardon?"

"You got up. In the night, I mean. Do you have trouble sleeping?"

'Ish'Kugnar 'und DuPlessi!' Prey thought in panic, 'Did he somehow wake up despite Lemon's spell?'

Prey didn't try and deny it though, that would only be suspicious. "How did you know that?" He challenged instead.

"I have...I just do." Crimson answered evasively. His eye's seemed to slide over to Gloom for a moment.

Not answering or stalling would just make it look like Prey was hiding something. How much did Crimson suspect? It just *had* to be Crimson too, because the pegasus's mental walls gave nothing away.

Prey put on a slightly annoyed expression, but not at anything in particular, "Sometimes I just can't sleep, no matter how tired I am. It's annoying, since we're all getting so little sleep on top of that."

"You do not leave the room." Crimson stated. It wasn't a question.

Prey raised one foreleg, gold tracer clearly on display, "That's a stupid question."

"No that's not- I didn't mean that I thought you were trying to escape, I mean, that's not..." Crimson stopped talking. He could obviously see Prey was just waiting with a big sarcastic comment all prepared.

"Never mind." Crimson gave up, mental walls tightening in frustration.

Prey gave him a bemused smile, "If you say so." He shrugged, making his ears and ribbon flop.

Inside, Prey was letting out a long sigh, momentary panic over. Whatever Crimson knew, he didn't know about Lemon Pink's visit. He only knew that Prey had arisen during the night, and instead of being suspicious like Prey would've been in his place, Crimson was just mildly concerned he wasn't sleeping alright.

'He really is remarkably perceptive and yet blind at times.' Prey thought, moving his hoof off a blank spot on the floorboards. Looks like there was no need to trigger the stun runes.

Nevertheless, from now on, he would not be meeting Lemon Pink in the bunk room at night. Coded messages only until he found some other way to covertly meet and share reports safely.

The day ground on as all the unpleasantly necessary reports slowly neared completion. Midday turned into afternoon, afternoon turned into evening, evening became dusk, dusk became nighttime, and still the three of them worked on in the office.

Gloom had estimated how much they had left to do, and with a bit of mental calculation help from Prey, figured out how long it would take. And the depressing answer was; there was only one way they'd finish before the trial tomorrow night. And that was by buckling down and doing a minimum of fourteen hours straight today. It couldn't be said Gloom was very pleased about the answer Prey had reached, and even less when his own calculations agreed.

So they ignored the grumblings of stomachs and the complaining of tired eyes, and kept going.

By the time they finally stopped, Prey's hoof ached from gripping the quill in it's cleft and he was famished. Which was different from

starving. Prey had starved before, and this was not that.

He hated how ponies always said they were starving at meal times. They didn't know the meaning of the word. But that was neither here nor there. The point was, they'd worked up a healthy appetite.

Gloom was left very unsatisfied as he led them towards the mess hall to scavenge for some dinner. There was almost no one else around in the darkened Palace, but that was not the reason for Gloom's dissatisfaction.

Gloom was unsatisfied because he was feeling guilty. As a Sargent, Gloom saw himself as responsible for the condition of those under his command. They'd gotten one night's full rest in the last five, and, not to put too fine a point on it, the last five days had been fairly miserable working non-stop from sun up to sun down. That was no cause for complaint, life in the Guard wasn't meant to be easy, but Gloom felt bad because Prey and Crimson felt bad. At least, in his head they felt bad.

'-Crimson's never had to do this much paper manure in his life. Luna's mane, neither have I! And Prey-', Gloom looked back over his shoulder, '-even if it's Prey, it still seems wrong to make a child do all this-'

Prey privately scorned Gloom's weak thinking, but it would definitely make his plan tomorrow easier to execute.

They ended up raiding the kitchens again for dinner. This was probably becoming quite a common occurrence, because Cookie had now taken to locking the Palace kitchen's cupboards.

Gloom was suspiciously good at unlocking them, inserting the tip of his wing claw and jiggling it about until the lock unclicked.

Only one sentence was spoken of their late night dinner by Gloom.

"The week's almost over. Just got to get through the trial tomorrow, and then this'll be over." He tiredly reassured them. Or maybe himself.

Finished eating, they trudged upstairs to the bunk room and almost

collapsed into bed. Even Crimson only did a half kata tonight before also giving in.

'-wow. First time for everything-', Gloom thought, eyelids already drifting shut. "Blow out...lamp." Was all he managed to say before he was gone.

Under his pillow, Prey grasped the small twist of paper Lemon Pink had left for him. He was going to need it.

---The next Morning---

The alarm clock went off, gaining a mental curse from Gloom as he struggled into wakefulness, '-I demand a recount-'.

Prey didn't arise, instead pulling the blanket up over his head and huddling down. Gloom decided to leave him for a couple extra minutes as he and Crimson got ready for the day.

From under the blanket, Prey heard Gloom stop moving as he remembered, '-the trial is tonight. That's tonight! Today is the last day and then we're finally done-'

"Let's go you two. Today's the day." Gloom called briskly, suddenly sounding much more awake.

"Yes sir." Came Crimson's voice from over by the window. 'Probably checking his blood Fern.' Prey thought. With visible effort, Prey kicked back the covers and stumbled out of bed. He stood, eyes drooping and sniffed a couple of times.

"Prey, you ready to go? We've got a deadline to meet before the trial." Gloom reminded him, hastily buckling on his last shin guard.

"Hmmrrph." Prey mumbled, not his usual self as he sluggishly tied the ribbon around his ear. Couldn't start the day without his secret mockery to the whole world attached.

Gloom decided to take his grunt as an affirmative, "Good. Come on, there's just enough time for a lightning fast breakfast tonight. Er, today."

Sniffing, Prey followed Gloom and Crimson down to the mess hall and tried to keep up. Tucked away under his wool, the twist of paper with the little green berry it contained sat safely hidden.

Prey made sure to slow down his usual eating pace at breakfast, only just finishing before Gloom did. Practically record slowness. He would have definitely lost his meal if he'd still been in the Resistance for eating at that speed. Prey didn't pay any visible attention to his surroundings and acted half asleep, sniffing occasionally.

Gloom in comparison seemed to be filled with nervous energy.

To Gloom, the ISND just had to finish the last of the data compiling today, present it at the trial before Princess Luna, and then this case would *finally* be over. The guilty would be punished, the victims reimbursed, and maybe he could even get a full night's sleep. Crimson seemed to catch some of his Sargent's anticipation, because he too seemed more invigorated than his usual unresponsive self.

Or it might've just been that he was glad the finish line was finally in sight. Paperwork was not Crimson's strong point.

They left the mess hall before almost anyone else had even arrived, hurrying to the office and getting straight down to it. The work they had left before them today consisted of tying everything else together, and making sure all of Wheat Plow's crimes had been accounted for.

On trial tonight in the Night Court would be Copper Pot, Pebble Mill, and of course the guest of honour, Wheat Plow. In addition, there would also be one of Wheat Plow's accountants, for a lesser charge of fraud. Also present would be their lawyers of course, but honestly, there wasn't much point in them even turning up.

It would be a brave lawyer who tried to defend someone, guilty or not, against the only recently reformed Nightmare Moon.

As the morning progressed, Prey continued to sniff frequently,

rubbing his eyes and acting lethargic. It wasn't anything big, but as midday approached and the final documents and supporting evidence were assembled, Prey's symptoms became more pronounced. Eventually, Gloom had to ask.

"Prey, are you alright?" He asked, pausing in paper clipping the pages he was holding. Laid out in neat piles were the compiled reports they were going to be giving to Nighthawk, Princess Luna, and the rest of the court present at the trial.

Prey made an irritable noise and waved at him to go away, "M' fine." He muttered, not even looking up.

Gloom hesitated, '-does that mean Prey's really fine or is he getting sick? I sure hope not, we don't have time for him to get sick-'.

Gloom decided to not press and simply hope it wasn't serious. If Prey said he was fine, then (hopefully), he was fine, or could at least keep going. It wasn't ideal, but they had a deadline and only a few more hours before it arrived.

'-I'll just keep an eye on him. He'll probably feel better soon-', Gloom decided.

The symptoms Prey was exhibiting didn't get better. As the trial continued to approach, they steadily worsened instead, and Prey started to make simple mistakes. Putting pages in the wrong order, realising it and trying to remember which pile should have which, almost forgetting to add in the proof of all of Wheat Plow's spying, and such. Small things like that.

Gloom belatedly realised he'd been taking it for granted how Prey never seemed to make any mistakes. However, Gloom had other, more urgent things to focus on and soon got distracted.

But within another two hours, Crimson sidled over to speak with Gloom. Prey could still overhear them clearly of course.

"Sir, I have a concern about Prey. Something is not right today."

Gloom considered, '-if even Crimson is noticing...-'

"Yes, I think Prey's caught a cold or something."

"Oh. Yes, that makes sense." Crimson acknowledged blankly, and returned to his work.

Gloom started to do the same, but not before glancing over to where Prey sat, still working away. '-nah, it's nothing-', He told himself.

But a few minutes later he still asked, "You feeling any better Prey?"

"I never said I wasn't feeling fine in the first place." Prey muttered, rubbing at his ear.

"So you're-"

"I'm *fine*."

Prey pretended not to notice Gloom's suppressed annoyance at his shortness. 'Good. He's reacting like he's supposed to.' Prey thought.

The next stage of Prey's act would come at dinner. That's what the green berry hidden under his wool was for.

Prey would not be attending the trial. No way. Luna was going to be there. He was going nowhere near the alicorn. To avoid having to attend, he was going to use the simplest trick in the book children had been pulling for decades: "But I'm siiiiiick."

Compared to what Prey was prepared to do to avoid another meeting with the terrifying Night Princess, this was almost insultingly mundane. 'But the best plans are often the simplest.'

Making himself sick by eating the poisoned berry Lemon Pink had provided him with was a small price to pay. She'd had a day to find a berry which met the requirements, and she hadn't disappointed. The one she'd found was from a Coif's Ear plant, getting it's name for how it's cone shaped leaves looked slightly like donkey ear's.

The berry had a fast acting poison that caused rather violent

rejection, but was ultimately harmless and the effects would pass in an hour. All the build up with acting sick previously was in preparation for when Prey really would be sick at dinner.

It wasn't going to be *pleasant*, but once again, it was a small price to pay.

Prey could have just faked being sick, and very convincingly too, but he didn't know if that would be enough to fool Gloom.

Gloom was sure to have Prey checked to see how unwell he really was. Plus, there was the thestral's strange cutie mark that somehow occasionally told Gloom if there was something not quite right. For that reason, Prey wasn't going to just try and fake it.

He could've played up being ill more over the course of the day, but that wouldn't have fitted with his image. Prey was not unawares how he appeared to others. In fact, he was unique in being able to tell *exactly* what others thought of him.

Once you put aside all the nonsense about him being repressed and secretly touch starved of course.

Gloom and Crimson expected Prey to say he was fine and wave it off earlier, and then get annoyed when they asked him if he was feeling alright. In their view, Prey hated to show weakness, and that was because he had trouble trusting anyone's intentions. Well they weren't wrong there, but they were wrong about the why. Ridiculously, they thought it was because Prey was a runt and felt like he constantly had a point to prove about not being underestimated.

Which was exactly why Gloom wouldn't suspect him of faking. Prey had no pride. There was nothing he would not do if he had to.

Any shame and humiliation he felt was secondary to success.

Finally, '-*finally*-', they were finished and all the reports prepared. The trial wasn't over just yet, but Gloom still let out a long sigh of relief, sounding like he was letting out a weekss worth of troubles

all in that one breath.

"Well done everypony." Gloom congratulated them, looking over their work.

"Should we take these now sir? And deliver them, I mean." Crimson questioned. No one really wanted to leave their work all unattended right before the trial. After all that effort, Gloom and Crimson were understandably apprehensive to just leave it laid out like this. While no one was going to steal it, someone might come in and mess it up by accident.

"No one ever comes in here. Just lock the door or something if you're so worried." Prey said in exasperation. His eyes were red and watery from all the blinking he'd been doing.

"We, er, don't actually have the key yet. It got misplaced by the supply depo somewhere. Probably the same place they 'misplaced' our desks too." Gloom added with a snort.

"Oh my goodness," Prey hissed, massaging his head, "Are we going to get dinner or just stand here while you lamenting over missing tables?" He demanded. If he was really had been feeling unwell, then after a long day this kind of irritability would be expected of him.

Gloom paused, "You're right, we'll come back after dinner."

"Good." Prey said darkly, sniffing.

Gloom and Crimson were both watching Prey. Pretending that they weren't every time he looked up from his tray, but definitely keeping an eye on him as they ate.

While they did so, Gloom was sharing what he knew about how the trial would work. Having never actually attended one himself, let alone been one of the key witnesses, he only knew what Nighthawk and Lieutenant Screech had explained.

"Princess Luna is the judge, and decides when to move onto the

next stage of the trial. We, the ISND, are more or less going to be the prosecution, because we wrote all the documents and can answer any questions. But it's still going to be Captain Nighthawk who does the real prosecution." Gloom explained, speaking quickly between bites.

Crimson nodded his understanding. "Sir, about Copper Pot. Will he get forty years and chance for parole like we offered?" He asked.

Gloom shrugged, "It's not up to us, it's up to Princess Luna. But personally, I doubt it, even if he keeps his word and testifies against Wheat Plow tonight. And I don't feel guilty about that in the least. Not after all the suffering he's caused."

"Good." Crimson said bluntly. "It is only what he deserves. I don't think lying to somepony like him can even be a sin."

With the trial happening tonight, Gloom and Crimson weren't the only ones anxious to see it finally over and done with. The rest of the Night Guard obviously felt the same, even if they didn't get up and prance around and sing about it like 'normal' ponies would've done. This was a big step out of the dark and into the limelight for the Night Guard. After tonight, there would be a lot of exposure for them, and their Princess. Three main newspapers had been given permission to sit in on the trial, Luna having given her approval.

The Night Guards weren't naive enough to think there wouldn't also be repercussions for tonight, but that would not stop them. Those whose thoughts Prey overheard went something like this:

'-normal ponies don't like us-', '-they're scared of thestrals-'. '-that's not going to change overnight-', '-but now they'll have no choice but to admit-', '-we know what we're doing-', '-perhaps we'll even finally gain some new recruits-', '-and the Royal Guard will have to start giving us some real respect now-'

Yes, Wheat Plow's downfall was a boon for the Night Guards' renown, and by extension, Princess Luna.

"The trial's in just two hours," Gloom said, finishing up the last of his hay and beans, "Let's get our files and get them delivered. Come,

the night is waiting." He said, rather upbeat.

"Yes sir."

"Oh yes, Crimson, do you think you're up to presenting the file on Copper Pot in court or do you want me to do it?" Gloom asked, getting off the bench. '-he needs to do some public speaking. Builds outgoingness-'

Crimson hesitated for a second, but still nodded in the end, "Alright sir."

"You'll do fine." Gloom assured him, "Prey, how about you? Think you can do the Hay Steam file-?"

That was when Prey threw up all over his dinner tray.

Now Gloom was panicking, just ever *so* slightly.

Night Court officially opened in fifteen minutes, and Wheat Plow's trial began in just fifty after that. They were supposed to have been there to hoof over all the reports ten minutes ago.

"Prey sit still would you?! The nurse just wants to take your temperature." Gloom snapped.

"Don't touch me." Prey squirmed further into the corner of the examination bed, away from the concerned nurse's hoof. He then turned an accusing look on Gloom, "You promised you would help me if anyone tried."

That was right.

'-I did promise, but...-', But this was slightly different. They were going to be late and Princess Luna was expecting them.

"C'mon Prey, she's just taking your temperature."

Mentally Gloom was begging; '-you'd better not bite her Prey-', And trying to convey the same warning with his eyes.

Crimson was wisely standing outside the small examination room's door, and not getting involved in any way, shape, or form.

"I can take my own temperature thank you very much. Give that here." Prey said hoarsely. He'd never seen a 'thermometer' before, but he could read the nurses thoughts and see he was supposed to hold it under his tongue.

The nurse, a light red pegasus who so far had been very patient and understanding, tried again. "It's nothing scary, it's just to take your temperature. We need to see how sick you are so we can help." She said, speaking calmly and simply for talking to a foal.

'-sheep have the same core temperatures as ponies, right? Medical school said-'

"I'll do it if you just give it here." Prey repeated, holding out a hoof for the thermometer.

Gloom was running high on worry about being late and worry for Prey, "Would you just give it to him, please?"

Happy Healing, (that was the nurse), decided in the interest of helping the sick filly in front of her, to forgo usual procedures, "Okay, be careful. Just hold it under your tongue, yes that's it, until I say take it out." She said in a soothing tone, letting Prey snatch it from her hoof.

Happy Healing's shift was technically over for the night, but the ISND had caught her just as she was getting ready to go home, so of course she chose to stay and help. There was a sick filly, what kind of mare would she be if she didn't stay to help? She was also feeling quite brave for standing this close to a thestral, Prey saw.

While Prey's temperature was being taken, the nurse took the opportunity to ask Gloom a few more questions to try and figure out what was wrong with her newest patient.

"Has she been like this all day?"

"She? What-you mean Prey? He's not a filly, he's a colt. Er, ram." Gloom answered, mind trying to figure out what he should do in

this situation.

'-leave Prey and go to the trial? Bring him along anyway? Stay or go?-'

Happy blinked, adjusting her nurses cap as she processed that, "Are you sure?" She asked dubiously, not quite believing Gloom over her own first professional impressions.

"Yes I'm sure, just ask him if you don't believe me. Look, how long is this going to take? We have to get to the trial." Gloom said.

"It'll take as long as it takes," Happy Healing said calmly, not letting herself back away. '-just don't look in the yellow eyes. Marmalade said they can hypnotise you-', She told herself.

"And I'm afraid I don't think your foal-"

"-He's not mine!"

"-But you are looking after him sir. I don't think it's a good idea to take somepony as young as him who's sick to any trial. Not until we're sure what's wrong with him. Now, how long has he been like this?" She repeated.

"Since this morning, but he said he was fine. Look miss Healing, if I leave him here with you and-what was her name? Miss Current Bush? Can you keep an eye on Prey until after the trial and we come and pick him up?" Gloom asked hurriedly, making his decision.

Current Bush was the other nurse on duty, who was currently waiting in the other room so her and Happy Healing could walk home. "You need to answer my questions first about Prey first, it's him who's sick here." Happy Healing insisted patiently.

Gloom's wings were twitching like he wanted to take flight, thinking loudly about how Princess Luna was being kept waiting, "Okay okay, but quickly, we don't have time."

"I'll try to hurry. So he's been like this all day?"

"Yes."

"Did that not make you think it might be something serious?"

"No, Prey said he was fine and we were too busy anyway."

"Busy? What activities has he taken part in recently?"

"Same as always, we've all been in the office." Gloom said, glancing towards the door and shifting from hoof to hoof.

"Doing what?" Happy asked, not letting herself be rushed in the slightest.

Gloom gave her a look like it should be obvious, "Paperwork." He answered with distaste.

"Just paperwork? Why was a foal doing paperwork with you?" Happy Healing asked, nonplussed.

"Because that's our job right now, to do the paperwork for the trial, which we *really* need to get to."

"No, sorry, I don't think I'm following you. Prey is doing the Guards' paperwork?"

"Yes."

"Um, why?"

Gloom looked like he wanted to throw up his hooves or kick something in frustration, "Because we're in the Night Guard, and that's our job! We've been stuck in our office all week, all day every day, doing Moon damned paperwork."

Happy Healing gaped at him like a fish out of water, "You're recruiting *foals*?"

Gloom couldn't find anything to say for a second, and Prey silently laughed at him. "No of course we're not. Prey's just a special case, he's not doing any fighting, only thinking." Was the excuse Gloom managed to come out with.

"To do your paperwork?" Happy asked incredulously.

'-enough is enough-', Gloom decided. "I'm not at liberty to tell you. It's Night Guard business. Now please just tell me, what is wrong with Prey?"

"Well what have you been doing with him? A foal this young shouldn't be stuck in an office all day." Happy returned, not willing to let this go.

"Miss Healing," Gloom said with strained politeness, "I've already said. We have been in an office, all day, for the last week. The only times we've left have been to eat, or sleep."

"What?! You can't just do that. What about his schooling? That's not healthy for a foal. Is he at least getting eight hours of sleep?" Happy exclaimed.

"I wish. We're lucky if we get six at the moment, the Night Guard is much too busy." Gloom retorted.

Happy Healing now looked shocked that there were ponies out there who would subject a growing foal to an inadequate sleep schedule.

'Oh the outrage.' Prey thought, rolling his eyes. The nurse and Gloom seemed to have forgotten he was actually present in the room for this conversation.

"That's-You...Do you at least make sure he eats enough?" Happy demanded.

"Prey has a very healthy appetite I assure you. Like a starving Timber Wolf."

"Starving?" Happy demanded sharply, all previous apprehension of the thestral forgotten in her rising indignation.

"Of course he's not starving, we all eat together in the mess hall twice a day." Gloom retorted.

"Only two meals a day?!" Happy whinnied loudly.

"That's what I just said, same as us..." Gloom slowed down as he became aware he might've said something wrong if he wanted to get out of the nurses office any time soon.

'-oops. We've been skipping midday meal all the time. That probably doesn't help stay healthy-', Gloom sent a guilty look Prey's way, '-I've had us too focused, there's never any time to do things properly. It's a wonder none of us have gotten ill before now, especially a foal like Prey-'

"What's wrong Happy?" Current Bush, the second nurse stuck her head in, drawn by her colleagues raised voice.

"I'll tell you what's wrong," Happy Healing said crossly, "This Sargent here's been half starving this lamb and skimping on a sleep schedule, and then doesn't understand why he got sick." With her friend now here to back her up, Happy was perfectly willing to confront any thestral ever born.

And back her up Current Bush did.

"Oh he did, did he?" Current exclaimed, quickly jumping to angry indignation on behalf of her friend, as ponies are want to do. "Don't you have any idea what that can do to a growing foal, mister?"

Gloom was caught between defending himself and trying to leave so they could get to the trial. He didn't have time for this. Unfortunately for Gloom, the two mares weren't letting up their joint assault.

"You're lucky nothing has happened to your squad before if this is how you treat them."

"This is not an acceptable work schedule. You're going to have to change it."

"And change it now."

"No excuses, you hear?"

"Um, excuse me please," Prey spoke up from behind them, voice muffled by the forgotten thermometer in his mouth, "I 'dink I'm

going to be 'ick again."

Both nurses immediately broke off harassing Gloom in favour of doing their jobs. Current Bush rushed to grab a basin while Happy Healing quickly snagged the thermometer and began trying to calm the lamb down. "There there, I know it's unpleasant, but you'll be okay. You'll feel a lot better soon, better out than in." She soothed.

Over her head, Prey rolled his eyes at Gloom and subtlety nodded at the door, 'Go on, get out of here.' Prey didn't want the Sargent here. The whole point of acting sick was so he didn't have to attend the trial with the other two.

Gloom realised what Prey was doing and took the hint. He gave a thankful nod and a 'stay here' gesture before slipping quickly out the door. Neither nurse noticed his departure, something they'd no doubt be livid about later.

It was good that Gloom left when he did. Prey estimated Gloom and Crimson had just enough time to pick up the papers from the office and make it to Night Court. It wouldn't do for them to get there late. That might annoy Luna, and she would demand an explanation.

Prey definitely *didn't* want his name mentioned in any excuse given to the alicorn, hence why he was helping Gloom and Crimson escape.

As an added bonus, he'd also earned himself some good will with Gloom by acting like he was 'taking-one-for-the-team' here.

At first, he'd found it mild satisfying how upset Happy Healing was getting on his behalf. It was some minor revenge against Gloom, watching him get berated like that. But then the nurse kept going and Prey's amusement turned sour as she continued to ignorantly defend him. Firstly, Prey didn't need help, and secondly, definitely not from someone like her. A pony who had no idea what she was talking about, only seeing perceived 'hardships' without any clue about what people suffered out there in real life.

"Your temperature is normal, that's very good. That means you don't

have a fever and hopefully will feel better soon. Won't that be nice?" Happy assured Prey as she checked the thermometer, continuing to make soothing platitudes.

Hunched over the basin Current Bush had pushed into his hooves, Prey groaned in disgust at the two hovering mares. 'They're so soft and pathetic.'

The nurses mistook his groan to be one of pain and increased their words of sympathy.

Their sympathy towards Gloom's position however, when they finally realised he'd skipped out the door thus forcing them to remain here late into the night until the ISND's return, was another matter entirely.

Current Bush and Happy Healing continued to hover around Prey for the next hour, as he slowly 'got better'. They kept up a constant stream of chatter, sometimes aimed at Prey in what was supposed to be an attempt to make him feel better, like complimenting him on his "nice gold bracelets". But mainly in was just gossip between themselves.

Ponies don't like silences, always feeling the need to fill them with pointless ramblings. Neither nurse was an exception, and chatted away quite happily, complaining about Gloom and the Night Guard, sharing their plans for the weekend, discussing friends and family, and all the other inane detritus that sprang to their minds.

Prey wished they would just shut up, but that wasn't going to happen any time soon, nor was he going to tell them to. He was a 'good little lamb'.

So instead, he put his time to good use. There was a limit to how many questions he could ask the nurses without them cottoning onto the fact that he wasn't mentally a lamb, but he asked what he could innocently get away with.

"What's in that bottle Mrs. Healing? Pills? What kind of pills? Oh?

What do those do? That's cool, what about that one over there? It helps reduce inflammation? What's inflammation? Ooo, that sounds nasty. Is that medicine dangerous? Only if you use it wrong? Like what? Ah, I get it. Mixing pain pills together is bad. How about that one?"

Prey listened carefully to their answers. Not the answers they gave out loud, those were mostly useless, geared towards what the nurses thought a lamb could understand. What they thought in their heads, the *real* answers, were much more useful, and he filed them away in case he ever had need of them later.

Prey's droopy ear twitched towards the door, but he didn't look. He turned to Current Bush and put on a weak smile, "Could I have some water, please?"

"Of course, I'll go get you a glass right away." She assured him, breaking off her chatter with Happy Healing and hurrying out of the room.

She'd barely been gone a few seconds when Prey's face went white and he made a grab for the basin.

"Oh it's okay, don't worry." Happy comforted him, quickly leaning forwards in concern.

Prey made another sound of distress, face buried in the basin. "You'll feel all better soon, don't worry....."

Silence

Prey pushed the unneeded basin aside and sat up. Happy Healing sat slouched in her chair, head bowed forwards on her slack neck. Her eyes were open and unseeing, but her chest gently rose and fell, indicating life. Behind her, the illusionary veil flickered like a ponds surface and fell away. Behind it, stood a pink unicorn in the Palace maids uniform.

"The other nurse will be back in about twenty seconds." Prey informed Lemon Pink softly, voice only carrying far enough to reach her ears. He didn't ask why she was here, explanations could

wait until they were unobserved.

Lemon nodded and stepped silently up next to the door into the other room, hidden from Current Bush's return.

"Here we go, I've got you some water." Current Bush called, coming back into the room. She didn't even have time to notice the slumped form of Happy before Lemon's horn flashed silver and Current too slumped. Lemon caught the nurse, not the glass of water, and the glass hit the floor with a clatter, but didn't break, just spilled water all across the tiles.

Prey cocked an eyebrow, "What spell?" He simply questioned.

"The mind blank one." Lemon supplied, ignoring the two nurses now that they were taken care of and trotting over to Prey. Prey nodded in understanding. The 'Mind Blank' spell she was talking about was a theoretical stunning spell Prey himself had thought up while in Dreverton.

It more or less kept wiping someone's memories in a loop for a period of time, meaning they were essentially 'stunned' for the duration of the spell. The down side was that the effect could be fought off by the mentally disciplined, and it was easy enough to snap someone out of. Just give them a good shake or shout loudly.

A simple stunning spell would've been far more reliable, and it definitely took less spell crafting skill to pull off. The upside to the Memory Blank spell was it took quite a bit less magic to use, theoretically had no side effects, and should be almost impossible to detect afterwards.

Creating Lemon Pink from what was left of Night Watcher had come at a cost. Her magical strength and reserves had been severely reduced.

"What is the problem?" Prey asked, getting straight to the point. This wasn't a safe meeting place. The area had not been secured, nor had Prey ordered Lemon to come find him. Therefore, something must have gone wrong for her to seek him out like this.

"I made a mistake." Lemon stated. No excuses or attempt to down play the issue. There was no need. Whatever actions Lemon took were always made in Prey's best interests, so any mistakes were unintentional.

"I found the drug dealer stallion. Street name of Smokey. Real name, Quartz Geode. As expected, he is only at the bottom of the salt dealer chain. I read his mind and traced back his contacts to a more private selling venue, for more valued clientele, such as nobles. I disguised myself and went in pretending to be a potential buyer, but I unintentionally came in at the wrong time. At the moment, it seems they are having issues with someone inside their organization who keeps making mistakes."

Prey could figure out what happened next easily enough, but he waited for Lemon Pink to confirm his prediction.

"Four individuals were present. My arrival made them all suspicious. I memorised their faces and voice tone." Lemon Pink raised her hoof, offering it to Prey so he could see her memories of the four ponies.

"Later. Continue." Prey ordered, waving her hoof down.

Lemon continued; "They don't trust one another, and each secretly feared someone else was talking to the Guard. Due to the delicacy of their meeting, suspicions were raised that I might have been an undercover Guard, or a competitor. They made efforts to avoid saying anything incriminating or to confirm anything." Lemon recalled, laying out the bones of what had happened.

'So because of some internal conflict, Lemon poked the hornets nest.' Prey summed up.

"What is the issue?" Prey asked. If it were just that, Lemon wouldn't have needed to contact him in this manner. She would merely have left, changed disguises, and continued her investigations in another manner.

"They are afraid." Lemon explained tonelessly.

"Ahhh." Prey understood. Fear changed things. It made people dangerous.

Right now was either the perfect time or the worst time to try and steal from the salt dealers. Unfortunately, Lemon had come in at the wrong moment and shaken up things even more.

"Your impression is that there is something larger going on with more at stake?" Prey double checked with Lemon.

"Yes, Prey." She confirmed.

Prey considered what Lemon had told him for a couple of seconds, then held out his hoof, wordlessly ordering her to go ahead and show him the memories now.

Lemon complied, and their mind spaces met. Prey could have done this from the start, it certainly would've prevented anyone overhearing anything incriminating. The issue was, while they were mind linked, they were vulnerable. This area wasn't secure. There were two stunned mares who might wake up while they were unawares. Thus, he wanted to spend as little time mind linked as possible.

The memory of Lemon Pink's meeting quickly came into focus, shown from Lemon's perspective. A shady room with a low ceiling, flat pack crates stacked in the background. Four ponies paused around a table in the middle of the room. Two were obviously unicorns, the other two might've been Pegasi or Earth ponies. It was hard to tell if the cloaks and long jackets they wore hid wings.

Prey automatically noted their faces, builds, heights, colouring, visible mane lengths, and any other identifiable features for possible future use.

After a few moments of reviewing the memory and observing the body language and how secretive the four ponies were acting, Prey came to a conclusion.

'They're scared of something they know is coming. Whomever is

next up in the chain of command is applying pressure and threatening repercussions if the issue isn't fixed by the time he or she arrives.'

It was an easy deduction. The four ponies looked like people trapped in a cave by a chimera, each secretly eyeing up the others to see who they could push out of the cave first. The only thing that stayed their hoof was fear that the others were planning the same thing as themselves. They were afraid.

And scared people did stupid things.

'Orders on how I should proceed?' Lemon asked across the mind link, deferring to whatever Prey decided.

'For now, do not make contact again. Only continue observation from a distance. Do nothing that will incite the salt dealers further. When this storm blows over, we can resume tracking down and stealing their funds from scratch.' Prey decided. It was not worth risking his best asset, Lemon Pink, over.

'Yes, Prey.' Lemon acknowledged, then broke hoof contact and let their mind scapes separate back to normal.

Prey opened his eyes back in the nurses office and checked his surroundings.

No one had barged into the room while they were telepathically chatting. Good.

Prey flicked a hoof at the two nurses, "Veil yourself, then wake them both up at the same time." He said, picking the sick basin back up and leaning back over it in the exact same position he'd been in before Happy Healing had been stunned.

"Yes, Prey." Lemon said, already using her silver aura to prop Happy back up in her chair.

Next came carefully lifting up Current bush. But only just far enough so that when she returned to consciousness and Lemon let

go, Current would experience the brief feeling of falling before she landed on the tiles. The mare would think she'd slipped and dropped the glass of water, which was still spilled everywhere.

A bead of sweat appeared on Lemon's brow as she concentrated, and the veil slowly swam into existence around her and she conversely faded. Holding her illusion spell matrix active plus suspending Current Bush's form off the ground was obviously very difficult. Using magic on a fellow unicorn was supposed to be a sure fire way of emptying ones reserves, Prey knew.

Probably the only reason Lemon Pink managed it was that Current Bush wasn't magically saturated or conscious to fight back.

"On three," Prey muttered. "One, two, three."

"Whaa-? Ooops!" *__splash__*

"Wh-? Oh Current Bush, are you alright?"

"Fine fine, I just tripped. Silly me."

Prey let out a groan.

"Prey, can you hold on for a moment? I'll just quickly lend Current a hoof then I'll come back, okay? Everything's fine."

"Wow, clumsy me. He he, ehem, excuse me, I'll get some paper towels."

Amidst the embarrassed confusion, neither unobservant nurse noticed the door silently closing behind them as an invisible Lemon Pink slipped out.

"You should have been there Prey. You missed the honour of seeing Princess Luna work." Gloom enthused, looking happier than Prey had seen him all week.

"It is unfortunate. You could have seen these criminals finally brought to justice. Her majesty does not waste time on mincing

words." Crimson also said, joining in on praising the duo's moon goddess.

He then added, "Wheat Plow has had all his ill gotten gains and position stripped. His properties will be sold, and the bits will be split between supporting his parents in their old age, and the Canterlot orphanage." The Pegasus sounded very pleased to see retribution rendered.

Why they weren't using the money to help repair damage caused by the riots instead wasn't answered.

"Copper Pot?" Prey asked, still sounding rough but looking a lot better. He was sitting on the edge of the examination bed, and they were just waiting for the two nurses to finish closing up before they could leave.

It had taken five minutes of the nurses chewing out Gloom for running away and leaving Prey in their care before they'd even let Gloom back in the room, but he was in such a good mood it hadn't even affect the thestral. Prey had also been so "polite and well mannered", as Current put it, that they weren't too angry about being forced to stay and help look after Prey.

"Copper Pot was sentenced at the same time as Wheat Plow. Copper got the full fifty years, his property seized by the crown, and deported. You should've seen Wheat Plow's face when Copper stood up in the docks to testify against him. His lawyer stopped providing even a token effort after that point." Gloom recounted.

"Copper Pot wept with self pity in the end. When they fastened the chains on his hooves to took him away, I mean." Crimson emotionlessly added. There was no pity from either of the Night Guards, and there certainly wouldn't have been any from Luna. Actually, this probably *was* her being merciful.

"And Wheat Plow himself?" Prey prompted.

Gloom smiled grimly, "Princess Luna told him exactly what she thought of him. He abused his position, his power, the rights of others, their trust, and betrayed everypony's hopes. His crimes have

caused the misery and suffering of thousands who've been caught up in his riots. He's responsible for crippling ponies." Gloom's lip curled up in contempt, "The coward even abandoned all honour and got down on his knees and begged. Of course, Her Majesty couldn't be fooled."

"For everything he's done, for everything he might've done, and for everything it was in his power to do, Princess Luna sentenced him to life in prison with no parole." Crimson recited.

"For how long does that really mean?" Prey asked.

"She didn't specify." Gloom said darkly. Prey bet that a sentence for 'life' from Luna, really meant the full '*for life*'.

It was also clear how thestral clans societal culture lent towards the ideals of justice over mercy. They took after their Mistress of the Night in that respect. Actually, normal ponies could be exactly the same when pushed to the edge, or worse, if they thought they were doing it for a righteous cause. Just like the Border Guard and Captain Fire Strike had done. He quickly tossed those thoughts back into the recesses of his mind.

"Where is Wheat Plow going to be sent? Deported as well?" Prey asked. He had a feeling what the answer was going to be.

Gloom checked Happy and Current were out of hear shot before he answered. "This is restricted information that wasn't announced at the trial, okay? But as members of the ISND, we get to know some of it, but you are forbidden from telling anypony else."

Gloom then lowed his voice further, "There is a high security Equestrian prison, called Dreverton. The prison's location is restricted, and I don't know any details about it, but that's where Wheat Plow's being sent. It's where the Crown sends the worst of the absolute worst. It's safe to say we'll never hear from Wheat Plow again." He finished solemnly.

Prey's hunch had been right, Luna really had sentenced Wheat Plow to Dreverton. But why he'd been sent there instead of some lesser prison, Prey didn't know. Surely Wheat Plow's crimes didn't warrant

banishment to that extinct volcano? That was where they sent murderers, dark magic users, cannibals, and the like. Despite all the riots, fights, and civil unrest, still not even one person was dead. Many injured yes, but somehow not even one killed. Yet he was still sent to Dreverton.

'He'll only be an inmate on the upper level then.' Prey decided. Perhaps alicorns judged the severity of a crime based off the monetary damage it inflicted and the setbacks it caused?

To an immortal, life must be cheap. Impeding the progress of their empire with widespread, (if superficial), damages however? Apparently unforgivable.

Gloom completely misinterpreted Prey's silence, "This isn't some secret execution station, because there's no such thing." Gloom hastily told Prey. "You didn't actually think that, did you?"

Prey blinked in surprise at him, "What? No, of course not. Ponies don't do that." Neither Gloom or Crimson seemed to pick up on his use of the definition 'ponies' instead of 'people'.

"Oh good, just checking." Gloom said, snapping the mood back to happy, relieved his momentary fear had been groundless.

Prey thought it strange that thestrals, who from his understanding still practised ritual combat, would think the death penalty was so outrageous. Sure, it was strictly forbidden for them to try and kill their opponent in the arena, but that didn't mean accidents didn't happen. Crimson's father had died in one of these duels Prey knew. That seemed to be one of the unspoken reason's for clan Myrrdon's pseudo-exile, but none of the other thestrals ever talked about it.

"We may also now rest during the day." Crimson spoke up. When Prey looked at him quizzically he realised he needed to further explain.

"I mean, Captain Nighthawk wants us to return to what our normal schedule should've been in the ISND. We can carry out our duties in the evening and night like the rest of the Night Guard, and rest during the day instead. Which is good."

"I certainly won't mind the change back to normal." Gloom agreed.

"Great." Prey echoed unenthusiastically. Normal for thestrals was the exact opposite for anyone without night vision.

"Captain Nighthawk told us the good news after the trial." Crimson added, like there could've been any other meeting with the Captain where Prey wasn't present in the last few hours.

'Oh well, it's not like I was fond of the sun anyway.' Prey thought.

"Better yet, since we're gonna' be starting that tomorrow, that mean's we actually get a full *eight* hours sleep tonight. Even more actually, we get to sleep in tomorrow." Gloom grinned. He rolled his eyes towards the nurses in the other room, "Your guardian angels will be pleased, Prey." He added sarcastically.

"I do not think they will be as forgiving if they knew we will now be working all night instead of all day sir." Crimson commented.

Gloom paused in surprise, "You're right."

He shot a look at Prey, "Don't you dare." He said with mock seriousness.

Gloom really was in an exceptionally good mood after the trial if he could joke, all stress from the week forgotten.

Prey didn't get the chance to offer a reply back, because Happy Healing and Current Bush returned just then, having finally finished, and kicked them out.

"And don't you dare ever do this again." Happy snapped at Gloom, as she and Current herded them out the door.

It was a quiet feeling of contemplation that prevailed in the bunk room, the kind that came after long anticipated success.

The trial was finally over! The deadline was dead, the cut-off date was axed, and the sentence of doom had been passed.

Passed on Wheat Plow, that is.

They'd only been preparing for it non-stop for a week, but it had been an intense week that'd felt longer. Prey hadn't been there to witness the ISND's accomplishment (thank Unholy Gods for that), but he could still appreciate the feeling.

'Wait, no I don't.' Prey caught himself.

For a moment there he'd been slipping into the teamwork mentality trap. This were merely false positive feelings generated when someone felt like they were fulfilling a responsibility. In reality, their work was unnecessary and their position of responsibility was pointless.

Prey wasn't part of any team, he was a prisoner. Feelings of job satisfaction and self worth were merely tools whereby others could be manipulated into working hard. Prey had seen their mother pull the exact same trick when he was small.

There used to be a certain type of thorny weed used to grew around their well, and always caught their wool when they went to haul water. One day, their mother had given Fleece and Gossamer the job of making sure those weeds were cleared. "It's an important job, and I need both of you to do it. You think you're both up to it?" From then on, Fleece and Gossamer had been proud every time they pulled up one of those weeds.

This situation was no different to back then, just on a bigger scale. He wasn't going to be fooled by any happy clappy achievement trappy.

'Gloom and Crimson can feel satisfied if they wanted. I'll be satisfied when I'm free.' Prey thought to himself, silently judging the other two for falling for this 'teamwork bonding'.

Gloom and Crimson were just sitting, thinking on what they'd accomplished and contemplating sweet success.

It was late. Midnight would take place above the Palace soon actually, but none of the three of them made any move to blow out

the lamp just yet. There was no rush, they had a whole day of sleep and rest ahead of them, now that the ISND's work days had changed to work nights. They were taking a minute to savour the moment. Prey thought they both looked like they'd just been knocked for a loop.

"Well..." Gloom commented into the restful quiet.

"It is nice. That things have worked out finally." Crimson said, summing up all that their Sargent hadn't needed to say.

"Don't jinx it. Karma'll take notice if you go and say that." Prey told him.

"Now who's the one jinxing it?" Gloom returned. '-must really be feeling much better-'

"Who is karma and why does it matter if they hear about the trial?" Crimson asked blankly, looking up from watering his spindly Blood Fern.

"Karma? You know, the figurative representation for balance, fairness, and equality?" Gloom asked.

"The superstition that if you do good works good things will happen to you. Conversely, if you have good luck it's got to balance out later with bad luck. So now that we've tasted success, something's certain to go wrong later." Prey also answered.

"What did I just say about not jinxing it Prey?" Gloom asked.

"You're just superstitious." Prey told him.

"You're the one who believes in karma." Crimson told him.

"No I don't. When did I say that?"

"But you said karma would take notice. That's superstitious."

Prey pretended he was also partaking in the good mood and mock pretended to flounce his ears in outrage, "And now you've truly gone and jinxed it. All my efforts, for what?"

Crimson thought seriously about that for a minute. "It's fine. I don't believe in a karma to jinx." He decided.

Prey had just been untying his ribbon when Crimson said that. He dropped his head into his hooves, "Well, no hope left for us now. May as well end it all and save karma the trouble." He announced morosely, and mimed making a noose with the blue ribbon to hang himself with.

Gloom smiled, content with the world, before finally getting up and getting undressed from his armour.

'-today was a good day. We did good in front of our Princess. The ISND can only get better from here-', He thought. A thought occurred to the Sargent. Something, '-Captain Nighthawk told me-'.

Gloom cleared his thought, "Crimson, Prey, I think it should be said, you both did well. This case wasn't easy. Actually, this whole week has been a massive drag. The reports and the paperwork and the compiling and the-ehem* Getting sidetracked. Prey, thank you for your work. Crimson, thank you for your work." Gloom thanked each of them formally.

'-ponies need to know when they do well. Especially these two, who're not used to thanks-', Gloom thought, reflecting on what Nighthawk had reminded him of.

Crimson shuffled his wings, "That is fine sir. It's just my duty now."

"It was Wheat Plow's duty to serve his party. It doesn't mean he did it. Actually, that's an awful example," Gloom admitted, "Anyway, look, we all will do our duty, and even if nopony else aside from us knows it, it doesn't have to be thankless."

Crimson didn't protest further, he just sort of half nodded, half bowed and started slowly checking through his feathers.

Gloom looked to Prey expectantly. Prey looked back innocently, "Mhmm?"

There didn't seem to be much Gloom could say to that angelic smile, even though he was certain Prey was teasing him. "Right,

never mind then. But thank you too Prey, and I'm glad that you're better now."

Prey made some noncommittal noises and got into his bunk. Gloom wasn't the only one looking forward to an extended sleep tonight.

That night, swimming through his lower mindscape, Prey dreamed of fields of wheat growing on an extinct volcano's surface.

Sadly, the long anticipated rest was not be. Someone came knocking on their door early in the morning.

---I---

Author's Notes:

Wooh, nearly at 300,000 words. That's good maybe? Definitely if you like long stories.
This chapter was once again kindly edited by:
Sweetolebob18

28.2 Salt, Smoke and Streets

They never got their long promised rest.

Instead of being allowed to sleep in until the evening, like their new schedule was supposed to allow, the ISND were rudely woken up by someone banging on the bunk room door.

Cracking open an eye, Prey briefly entertained the notion of triggering the explosive runes he'd placed on the door.

"...That's not fair." The figure of Gloom mumbled from his bunk. The curtains were drawn across the lone window, but enough light still filtered in to add definition to the shadowy shape of the Sargent fumbling for the alarm clock.

"That was... *only* six hours." Gloom protested to nobody in particular. Prey didn't blame him, even he was having trouble waking up as the loud knocking came again. Six hours would usually be plenty, but they'd been getting six hours and under for the last week. All that sleep deprivation caught up to you.

Prey sat up and tried to rub sleep from his eyes, the hated gold bands bumping uncomfortably across his face. He gave the door and whomever was on the other side of it a dark glower.

'There's going to be no day of promised rest is there? The Night Guard have managed to mess up something else and now want us to fix it.' He thought in resignation.

Even Crimson was reluctant to get up, putting a wing over his head in what was probably a vain hope the person outside would just get bored and go away.

The knocking came a third time, even louder. Gloom raised his voice and struggled from under his blanket, "Alright alright, I'm coming. Keep your wings on."

The insistent banging was just starting up for the fourth time when Gloom pulled the door open. He didn't quite shout "What?!" But his dishevelled mane, squinted slit eyes, rumpled fur and unarmoured appearance probably said it all.

Too bad it was a Night Guard at the door so Gloom couldn't tell them to get lost.

"Yes private?" Gloom asked thickly.

The thestral saluted, "Lieutenant Starry Wing says sorry, but Captain Nighthawk wants to speak with the ISND."

Gloom blinked, having to take a full second to catch up, "Oh. Alright, we'll be in his office in five minutes." He yawned.

"Actually, you're to report to Lieutenant Starry Wing. He and the Night Guard are all assembling in the Guard Hall."

'Something a bit bigger than just messing up is happening.' Prey thought, waking up quickly. If Nighthawk was summoning all the Night Guard, despite them not supposed to be on duty, whatever was happening wasn't likely to be a surprise training day. Prey was already pulling his ribbon out from under the pillow in preparation to go.

"Okay, we'll be in the Guard Hall in five minutes then." Gloom told the Guard at the door. The Night Guard saluted Gloom again and hurried away up the corridor.

Crimson had also gotten the hint, and had glided down from his bunk and started to swiftly unpack his armour, trying to juggle that while attempting to bind his mane back into a tight warriors braid with the makeshift metal 'mane ring'.

Prey heard Gloom sigh loudly as he went over to his locker, his thoughts coming back into perception range. '-if it's not one thing it's another. I hope it's not more riots or something-'

"Do you know what this could be sir?" Crimson asked, pulling his chest plate over his head.

"No idea. Prey, you up yet?" Gloom grumbled.

"Yes, sir." '*Unfortunately*.' He thought, with a wistful look back at the bunk.

It also seemed unlikely that they were going to get anything to eat this morning. Nothing really had changed.

'-horseapples, if Prey get's sick again because of this I'm gonna'...gonna'...something or other...-', Gloom took ten precious seconds out to massage his head, '-I'm not awake enough to deal with this yet-'

They hadn't even reached the Guard Hall and it was already obvious something serious going on. The Night Guard weren't the only ones en route either, Royal Guard's were hurrying in the same direction as them. Prey combed their thoughts as they passed each other, listening for the cause of concern. But none of them knew anything outside of the reason that the, '-sky is filling up with smoke outside-'.

'A fire in the city? No, they have unicorn magic and pegasi weather control to smother any fire.'

Unless it was a firestorm. However, there was no where near enough blind panic for it to be a firestorm.

Plus, if there was a blaze of that size, they wouldn't be wasting time assembling the Guard. 'No, it cannot be a fire.' Prey thought to himself, pulse calming down a bit. But that left the question; what was it then?

In the Guard Hall, the Guards of both night and day were swiftly gathering.

Sargents and corporals were organizing them into their respective formations with much hullabaloo. As always, the Royal Guards dominated the hall, taking up most of the available space, with the

Night Guard having been sort of shoved to the side to form up over there in the corner.

Prey hurried to keep up as Gloom made a B-line for Lieutenant Starry Wing, standing at the head of the Night Guard ranks. "Sir." Gloom said, snapping a salute. Time was pressing,so he didn't give a full address.

Starry Wing was a bit busy, but he quickly turned around, "Sargent Gloom, good, you came quickly."

"Yes sir. What can we do?" Gloom asked. No complaint about all three of them being dog tired. If they'd been summoned, it was because they were needed for something.

"The Guard Captains will be here any minute, they've had an emergency meeting with Princess Celestia. They'll know what's going on. Captain Nighthawk will want to speak with you specifically I think." Starry Wing told them. Obviously, he was as much in the dark, or blinding light in the thestral's case, as them as to the reason for this sudden Guard muster.

"Yes sir, we'll wait for him then." Gloom answered, stepping back into line with the rest of the silent Night Guard. There was nothing else that could be done until the Captain arrived, so the ISND fell in.

Prey shot a look at the thestral on his right in the line, shying away as she got too close to his personal space. He didn't like this, having rows of Night Guards all around him. His height made the gap in the line where he stood exceptionally obvious to anyone who might've casually glanced along the line. Not that his pale white wool didn't already stand out against the uniform dark grey of the Night Guards like, well, like white on black.

Just then, Captain Nighthawk and Shining Armour marched into the hall at double time, Lieutenants Screech and Swift Arrow hot on their tails. Everyone came swiftly to attention.

Shining Armour took the initiative and spoke first for the both of them, "You have all been assembled this morning because of the

smog blanketing the sky above Canterlot. There has been a situation. As we speak, a dragon elder has taken up residence in an old cave in the mountains close by. The beasts intention is to hibernate, something we cannot allow."

Nighthawk had broken off to join his Night Guards, leaving Shining Armour to continue his address. The Royal Guard Captain surveyed the assembled Guards, quite a few only days into their new job, all of their attention riveted on him. If anyone hadn't been paying attention, the word 'dragon' had definitely fixed that.

"Dragons can hibernate from anywhere to a few months to a few decades. This is an adult dragon, the smoke he or she is producing as they sleep is what is darkening our sky outside of Canterlot. And it's not just Canterlot. All the towns and villages unlucky enough to be near by are also suffering the same effects. If this continues, it won't be long before crops start to die. Small birds are already dying in this smoke." Shining Armour informed them seriously, like they should care about small animal life.

"If the wind only came down off the mountains the in the other direction, or the elevation was a little different..." He broke off and shook his head, "But that's neither here nor there."

"All of the Guard has been called out. We have to stop this dragon before it enters deep hibernation. Princess Celestia has decided we will try a diplomatic approach first, and is sending an envoy." Prey saw something flash in Shining Armour's eyes, but he was too far away to see what it was.

Shining Armour continued, his voice carrying; "The Guard is to make sure that if this dragon elder does not leave our mountain by choice, we are to force it. Princess Celestia is confident it will not come to that, but four companies of both Royal Guards and Night Guards will be deployed just in case."

Four companies was four hundred Guards. That was four hundred ponies to deal with one dragon. It was slowly starting to dawn on the Guards just what this meant.

"This is just like training," Shining Armour encouraged them, "Stick

together, trust in each other, and stand strong."

His encouragement worked too, that was the worst bit. The fools in the Royal Guard actually believed the nonsense their Captain was spouting. They chose to listen to comforting words rather than to see reality, deluded enough to believe their Royal Guard training would somehow help them against a dragon.

What could shiny armour, training how to march in sync, and the correct procedure to arrest a pony do against a dragon?

Prey had never seen a dragon before. He doubted whether anyone here had seen a dragon before, (Whatever that story was about an adopted baby dragon hanging around the Palace didn't count). However unlike them, Prey had more knowledge than merely stories about the giant winged reptiles.

One of those few precious books Prey had managed to steal back before Dreverton had been on dragons. And not one which only talked about them for a few pages as abstract, fire breathers from the far away and unexplored dragon lands.

Dragon's were few and far between, mysterious beasts that lived for centuries. They didn't come near civilisation, and if they were ever spotted, it was almost exclusively as distant silhouettes so high up in the sky they were mere dots. And for most normal people, that was the extent of what they'd ever see of a dragon.

But what Prey knew was already enough for him to treat dragons as a threat only slightly below that of a natural disaster.

The Royal Guard knew that dragons were dangerous, hell, they were actually apprehensive instead of arrogantly overconfident for once. Who wouldn't be cautious about facing a giant, flying, fire breathing monster?

But they weren't scared enough. Not even close.

The stolen book had not minced any words. The author, one of the few ever to travel to the borders of the dragon lands, plainly and bluntly referring to them as 'The Sky Terrors'. A lot of what the

book contained was only theory and conjecture, because no one had ever been in a position to perform tests to obtain accurate results, but what it said was more than enough to instill fear in Prey.

Prey tried to catch Gloom's eye, trying to signal to him how dangerous this dragon was, but Gloom's eyes were forwards along with everyone else's. Prey closed his own eyes and took a slow breath to calm himself. It allowed him to check the thoughts of the surrounding Night Guards, and he was deeply relieved to see they were not taking this as well as the Royal Guards were.

'-if we get close, we will be roasted-', '-a dragon elder? One of the largest? Luna help us-', '-my spear won't even go through that monster's scales-', '-we only have numbers going for us-', '-I can't fight a dragon, it can also fly-', '-Moon preserve us, this diplomat better succeed-'

The Night Guard were still suicidally prepared to carry out their duty to try and drive the dragon off, but they at least had some idea of what they were being ordered to do.

But they still didn't even know the half of it.

As dragons got older, they got stronger. The older, the larger and more dangerous. Their scales could take crash landings into jagged mountains without leaving a mark. Their teeth could sheer through diamond like an apple, making all armour of any kind completely useless.

Worse, dragons were highly magical beasts. Their bodies were filled with natural magic, making them almost impervious to any magical assault. And their main weapon, their fire, was not simple flames. If it were hot enough to melt rock that would be enough, but it was a kind of raw, primordial spell fire. It burned straight through shield spells like paper, any enchantments or magic subjected to their flames would crumble in mere moments.

The book speculated there was nothing in nature, and likely nothing Equestrian-made, that dragon fire could not destroy.

But worst of all, what scared Prey more than any of that? Dragons

were sentient.

In Prey's mind, that was what truly set dragons above every other monster.

The only reason Prey was not panicking right now was because he was sure Captain Nighthawk had a different mission for the ISND. He'd specified to Starry Wing that he wanted to speak with them separately. The only way the dragon would pose an active threat to Prey was if the Royal Guards completely failed, and the dragon was angry enough to chase the survivors all the way back to Canterlot. No one else jumped straight to assuming this worst case scenario like Prey, but to him, it was second nature.

However, if that happened, the the Sun Wolf would finally stir herself and defend her den. Prey had no doubt who would win between a dragon and an alicorn. As long as Prey was inside the city when that happened, Prey would be safe in Canterlot.

Prey's mind screeched to a halt. 'Safe in Canterlot?'

Celestia's presence was defending him. Her might was protecting him in Canterlot.

'Is this how ponies feel? Knowing that whatever they get themselves into, Celestia will dig them out of it?' He thought angrily.

Prey's jaw tightened, disgust welling in his chest. 'I hate her, I hate her I *Hate* her.'

After all these years, after the complete annihilation of the Resistance, his village, and all those lives, he finally got to see what it was like enjoying protection from the other side. Like how the Border Guards were supposed to defend the villagers from the start.

Shining Armour was still talking, Prey missing the first half of whatever he'd said, so deafened was he by the suicidal stupidity he was hearing. You couldn't fight a dragon. You could only run or hide.

"-The weather pegasi will be removing the smoke from the skies in shifts, short term for now. At least until we can rid ourselves of this

dragon. To the Guards who are staying, you will be out on the streets. Your duty is to keep everypony calm, Lieutenant Swift Arrow will be overseeing that. Assure them that we are fixing everything, and above all, keep them from panicking."

'How many of them are going to die in this insane venture?' Prey wondered, feeling blank. And all because Celestia couldn't be bothered to go and destroy the dragon herself.

"Prey."

Prey twitched, hearing his name whispered. It was Gloom, turning his head back to give Prey an encouraging look, "Don't worry. You aren't going to fight any dragon." He whispered. Prey resisted snorting, he'd figured that out already, however Gloom's deduction was different from Prey's.

Prey knew Nighthawk obviously had a different task for the ISND, while Gloom just had no intention of letting Prey go anywhere near the dragon.

'-foals do not fight monsters. That is the duty of adults-'

The Royal Guard Captain continued to give out more instructions, explaining their time frame and route they would take to the mountain. He kept it as short as possible, before dismissing them all to their posts, finishing with; " And may Celestia watch over us."

The Royal Guards got to it with vigour. Somehow, over the course of Shining Armour's address, all their lingering doubts had been eliminated. Prey saw it in their eyes. Those weren't the eyes of people afraid for their lives. Their eyes held confidence, bravado, and the optimistic self belief so inherent to pony Guards he'd come across.

These ponies knew this was dangerous, yes, it was a dragon after all. But they all emphatically knew they'd be returning home at the end of it. There was no possibility for any other outcome in their heads, and, '-won't this be a story to tell everypony?-'

The Night Guard hadn't broken formation yet, still waiting for the

order to move from their officers. There was a lot more dread in their collective thoughts.

"Sargent Gloom." Nighthawk barked up front, grabbing the ISND's attention.

"Yes sir." Gloom saluted.

Nighthawk jerked his head, indicating he wanted to speak off to the side of the hall, "Come." He ordered curtly.

An order to Gloom was an order to Crimson and Prey as well, and all three of them left their line to do as Nighthawk ordered.

Nighthawk got straight to the point, "There has been a report of a disturbance last night in lower Canterlot. The pony who reported it said he thought he heard sounds of violence, but was too afraid to leave his flat to report it until early this morning. Right as this dragon incident was happening." Nighthawk's eyes smouldered with frustration, "But that's just an unhappy coincidence. You will be going to investigate the reported disturbance."

"Yes sir." It wasn't like Gloom could have refused.

"Lieutenant Screech is staying behind and in charge. He has the reported disturbance location, get it from him. Any questions?" Nighthawk summed up, ready to leave and get back to the larger, dragon shaped issue now that he'd passed on this smaller one to them.

Gloom couldn't help but glance behind Nighthawk to where the Night Guards were filing out under Starry Wing's lead. They could be off to possibly fight and die against a dragon.

'-what if I won't ever see some of them again?-', Gloom couldn't help but wonder.

"Sir, why us?" Gloom asked.

"The ISND cannot help against a dragon," Nighthawk said bluntly, pointing a wing claw at Prey to clearly illustrate why.

"The ISND is available. Everypony else is busy."

Nighthawk's logic was irrefutable.

"Any other questions?"

Prey could see Gloom knew there wasn't time for him to say anything further, despite how much he really wanted to. "No sir. We'll go find Lieutenant Screech straight away." He acknowledged with a salute.

Nighthawk didn't waste any time on goodbyes. Evidently, he had things to be doing. Like getting ready to face a dragon.

The Guard Hall was emptying at a steady flow now, the individual Guard units being divided up and told where they were assigned. The three of them exchanged glances, and headed towards Screech to ask for the location.

The second Lieutenant was just as busy as the other officers, even if he was going to be staying behind to manage the skeleton crew of Night Guards. That just meant he had more areas to cover while Nighthawk and the rest were gone, and less Night Guards to do it with.

The ISND had to wait until they were almost the last ones left in the hall before Screech finally had a spare minute to tell them about the incident they were supposed to be investigating.

"Sargent Gloom, good." Screech acknowledged, already looking harried, '-and today was supposed to be easy after all the excitement of the trial-'

"Captain Nighthawk filled you in?" He asked.

"Just that there was a report of a disturbance in Lower Canterlot from last night sir." Gloom said.

"If it were just that, it wouldn't be a problem. But the place noises were reported to come from is a shady area. I doubt you would've heard, but there was a pony found beaten up in that neighbourhood two nights ago. The stallion says he doesn't remember his attacker's

faces, but the Night Guard who spoke to him is sure he's not telling us something."

"How badly was he beaten?" Gloom asked.

"Badly bruised. Nothing broken, and he can walk." Screech answered.

"Will we find him at the hospital sir?"

"You won't. He's been discharged, although that's not relevant to your investigation. But it does prove the area is unsafe. I need you to investigate this disturbance. It's unlikely you'll find anything now, but we have to look anyway. The report happened during the night, so it's our jurisdiction." Screech said.

"Yes sir."

"And you're going to be going with some of the Royal Guards too." Screech added.

Gloom blinked, "Pardon sir?"

"You know we get at least five reports like this every week, but this one could be more serious. The pony said he thought he heard a scream in his report. That's why you're working with the Royal Guard on this one." Screech informed them seriously.

'Five reports? That's it? Your streets are that safe but you think this could be more serious? How about the dragon for instance?' Prey thought in derision.

Perhaps the Lieutenant realised how silly all this sounded in the light, or rather shadow, a the far more serious issue, because he went on. "This dragon and smog might be a bigger problem, but we can't let law and order dissolve just because of one threat. Even if he heard nothing more than alley cats fighting, back up never hurt. It'll be a lot faster and easier to interview all the residents with more of you too."

Screech looked towards the hall's doors, where the Royal Guards had exited from. His frown deepened, '-young fools marching into

the manticore's den-'. He thought, letting out a small sigh.

"I doubt you're going to find anything Sargent, but we can't have anymore panic going on right now. Take the assignment of Royal Guards with you, go look, make sure all of the residents are safe, then report back."

'-and if this helps keep a couple young Royal Guard idiots from getting themselves killed, then all the better-', Screech also thought.

Gloom seemed to understand Screech's real motivation here, because he gave the Lieutenant a small nod, "I understand sir, we'll do our best."

"Of course you will," Screech dug around the inside of his armour, finally finding the square of paper he was after. "Here's the street address. Report back if you do find anything."

"Yes sir." Gloom quickly checked the address.

'-don't know it. I'll have to check a map, but that'll waste time. Or...-', Gloom held the paper out to Prey.

Prey read it at a glance, '2nd Poppy Street, Western Quarter, Left Avenue'. It didn't take more than a moment for Prey to place it on the mental map of Canterlot he'd memorised.

Prey nodded, "I know where it is."

"Good. We'll leave straight away sir." Gloom told Screech.

"Don't forget you need to pick up the Royal Guards first." Screech reminded them, "Lieutenant Swift Arrow said the volunteers would be sent to wait at the Guard Compound gate."

"Yes sir. Luna watch over you."

"It's not us who needs Luna's protection right now Sargent Gloom." Screech sighed softly.

Gloom had to take a moment to adjust himself once they stepped out of the Palace and into the sunlight. Being so tired didn't lend Prey well to the bright light either, nor Crimson by the look of his squinted eyes.

Except there wasn't any blinding morning sunlight...

The three of them looked up to find the blanket of smoke that had Shining Armour so worked up.

Clouds of thick, grey-black smoke sat in the sky, hiding the sun's face, that's how much of it there was. On the horizon, the sky was as bright and blue as ever, but over here, the only sunlight came from occasional beams which broke through as the smoke constantly drifted. With Canterlot being so high up on the side of a mountain, the thick smog was quite a lot closer than one would've wished to see.

That didn't delay for the three of them for long, as they had a job, or in Crimson and Gloom's case, a 'duty' to do.

When they got down to the Guard Compound, they found it busy. It was made so by all the Royal Guards marching through and preparing for their journey to the dragon's chosen mountain.

Off to the side and out of the way of all of the busy Guards, the ISND found who they were supposed to be picking up and taking with them.

Scenic Paint, (or Paint Spot as he'd asked to be called), was waiting for them, head craned back. Beside him was another fresh faced Royal Guard, also staring up at the thick smoke blotting out most of the sky. Neither of them even noticed the ISND coming towards them.

'Slack and unobservant. Wouldn't last ten minutes in the Deeper Green.' Prey thought judgingly.

He wasn't the only one unimpressed.

'-just *perfect*-', Gloom thought, '-green recruits-'

Gloom coughed to get the two's attention, then when they didn't notice over the rest of the hustle and bustle, coughed louder.

Scenic and his companion, unfortunately a unicorn, jumped and snapped to attention, "Sir!" They both shouted automatically.

"There's no need to shout in my face." Gloom said blandly, behind him Prey removed his hooves from his ears.

"Sorry sir." The unicorn said sheepishly.

"You two are the ones assigned to assist the Night Guard unit going to check the disturbance report, yes?" Gloom double checked.

"Yep, that's us. We volunteered sir." Scenic answered with a proud smile.

Gloom looked at him for a long moment, making Scenic's ears start to dip, "Why did you volunteer for this specific task?" Gloom asked.

"Oh, that's easy. Our Sargent asked for a couple of volunteers from those staying to partner with the Night Guard, and he said if anypony did, they should meet Sargent Gloom here. So I thought, since I've already met you guys it would be best if I volunteered." Scenic said, sounding confident.

Inside, the Earth stallion was a lot less sure of himself, '-they don't hate me, right? I mean, I was a bit stupid, but then that thestral came and said hi at breakfast, soooo-'

Gloom made a non-committal noise, "Alright, well you're here now. I know Scenic Paint's name, what about you?" He asked the unicorn.

"My name is Quick Draw sir." The unicorn mentally braced himself, '-here comes the arbitrary joke-' He thought.

After a moment where Gloom just continued looking him up and down, that changed to wishing that the, '-creepy thestral would just, make the darn joke, make *any* joke like a normal pony-'

"Quick Draw and I know each other from boot camp, we were in the same training squad sir." Scenic Paint chimed in just as the

moment was starting to drag into awkward.

Gloom blinked, giving himself a small shake, "I have not worked with a unicorn before. If you can think of something with your magic that might be helpful, please suggest it. I'm Sargent Gloom, this is Crimson, and this is Prey."

Quick Draw only stared a little bit at Prey, (who was pretending not to notice the unicorn's attention), meaning Scenic had no doubt already mentioned the strange lamb to his unicorn friend.

"Let's go. The address is is in Lower Canterlot, to get there should take...Prey? How long?" Gloom asked, already turning to lead them away.

"Half an hour?" Prey shrugged. He didn't give a more accurate estimate, because Scenic Paint and Quick Draw were here.

"That's if there are no crowds in the way. Caused by the dragon smoke, I mean." Crimson added.

"Right, Quick Draw, Paint Spot, if we need to split up, the meeting point is Canterlot Main Square. Now let's go."

"Sir, what if we pass ponies who need help on our way there?" Scenic asked.

"If they need help, we'll help, simple as that. Now let's go." Gloom repeated firmly.

They squeezed out of the Guard Compound entrance, all the Royal Guard traffic in and out at the moment making it difficult. Prey had estimated it at about a fifty-fifty chance whether the spoilt rich ponies of Canterlot would've either been out panicking in force on the streets, or holed up in their houses.

It was the latter.

Outside of the gate, the pristine streets were almost deserted under the smoke filled sky. Perhaps these nobles had a better sense of self

preservation than Prey had first credited them with.

"It all looks so different without the sun. Darker." Prey heard Quick Draw mumble to Scenic as they set off, eye's flicking to the sky every few seconds.

"To produce all this smoke, in just one day..." Scenic mumbled back, '-the dragon must be ginormous-'

Gloom looked to Prey as they approached the first junction on the main street, "Which way?"

"Straight on until Narrow Avenue. Then right, third left, straight to the end, take Sparking Office Row. Two more rights, fourth left, second left, straight on, then right onto Poppy Street." Prey answered, just quiet enough so the two Royal Guards at the back wouldn't hear but not so quiet Gloom would realise he was doing so on purpose.

"You can remember all that just fine, right?" Gloom questioned.

Nod.

"Good, because I can't. Just tell me when we need to take a turn."

"Yes, sir." Prey said, already slightly out of breath from keeping up with their longer strides. They were very lucky the smoke was only on the sky line, not filling the streets or they wouldn't be able to breathe at all right now.

'One or two breaths is all it takes.' Prey thought grimly.

The capital city of Equestria looked a very different place with the streets almost deserted. Prey deeply despised Canterlot and all its inhabitants, but with smoke blotting out the sky except in shifting patches, it brought up unpleasant memories of a familiar scene.

The village deserted and smoldering, the firestorm rolling down the hill onto the Resistance, the sky filled with ash over the desolate forest.

'But that's not going to happen to Canterlot.' Prey thought, gesturing to Gloom that they needed to take this right turn. Deep down, he wished it would. Not while he was *in* Canterlot obviously, but he would love to watch it burn from the base of the mountain. At least, he thought he would.

Not that would ever happen. Celestia ruled here, and the unicorns capital city was certainly heavily warded with magic against the possibility of an inferno.

The world was unfair like that.

"This is Lower Canterlot sir?" Quick Draw asked, looking around as the district changed from large and spacious, to small and compact.

Gloom glanced back, "Yes. Did you notice something?"

"Um, no, it was nothing sir." Quick said, shaking his head.

Prey could of course hear what his thoughts were saying, '-this place looks dodgy. Since I'm a Royal Guard now, I'll be coming here a lot in the future. Better get used to it-'

Prey looked where Quick Draw was looking. Neat, red tile roofs, narrow but well maintained cobble streets, white curtains drawn behind clean windows. The only thing that made this area possibly seem shady was the literal shade being cast over everything by the dragon smoke. 'Yes, *definitely* dodgy according to the privileged unicorn.'

Gloom stopped. They'd come to the street sign, Poppy Street.

"This is the place." Gloom said. On this street, the houses had given way to what looked like old office buildings, and further past that, large warehouses loomed up.

"So, uh, where do we start sir?" Scenic asked, looking around judgingly just like Quick Draw had.

"Haven't you done any guard training for this?" Gloom replied.

Scenic and Quick looked around them, "Not like this sir." They admitted.

Gloom suppressed a sigh, '-I think I know why Swift Arrow was happy to let his new Guards volunteer-'

"We'll be knocking on every door to see if anypony heard or saw anything suspicious last night. You two take that side of the street, we'll take this side." Gloom instructed.

"Yes sir." The two Royal Guards chorused, relieved to have clear orders to follow.

"Crimson, fly around and have a look from above. Check for fresh damages, disturbances, anything out of place. You know what to do."

"Yes sir." Crimson said, already backing up to get a small running start. Prey instinctively covered his eyes and turned away against any dust kick-up.

"Prey, I guess you just come with me-Hey, are you listening-? Oh right, just dust. Come on." Gloom said, leading them for the closest building, leaving Scenic and Quick to finish rubbing blindly at their eyes.

Twenty minutes later, after having to explain multiple times who they where and what they were doing, they finally reached the last office building on their side of the street.

"Yes sir, I am a Guard. No, the Night Guard. Yes, for Princess Luna. Yes, I'm sure. No, I can't do anything about the smoke. No, not personally, but it is being taken care of as we speak, so please don't worry. No, that's not it. Sir, please just answer the question. Nothing? How about around this building, or would anyone else in here know? You all only work here during the day? Please think hard. Nothing at all? Alright, thank you for your time."

The last door was hurriedly closed, the pony on the other side all too keen to put a slab of wood between himself and the sharp

toothed thestral trailing a lamb around with him like a weirdo.

Scenic Paint and Quick Draw hadn't been as quick as them, and were still only half way down their side of the street. The ponies whose houses they were knocking on, or who worked there, were all a lot more willing to talk with members of the Royal Guard on the door step. In fact they were eager to talk, or rather seek reassurance that the 'smoke problem' was going to be dealt with.

Gloom peered up at the dragon smoke above them while the two of them waited.

"Stay here Prey, I'm going to go ask Crimson if he's found anything before we move onto the next street." He said, stretching out his bat wings and giving them a few warm up flaps. Prey hopped off the step to give Gloom some space for take off, and five seconds later Gloom was winging his way up above the buildings.

Prey watched him set a course for the circling figure of Crimson, slowly making low passes over the roof tops. 'Wings are so convenient.'

Prey scuffed the cement under his hoof, checking to see if any fine ash had yet filtered down from the sky. The reason he checked was that the faint smell of smoke had finally started to drift into the streets, but his hoof came away clean. Well, clean of ash anyway. He imagined by the end of the day the whole of Canterlot would stink of smoke.

'Whatever is in this dragon's smoke is strange. Lighter than air, since it hasn't drifted down yet. No ash, so the dragon isn't even burning anything to make this smoke. Magical fire smoke?' Prey wondered.

He heard the sound of leathery wings flapping closer, and closed his eyes as Gloom landed, cloud steel shoes clacking loudly on paving slabs. "Crimson can't find anything. We'll move onto the next street. If there is anything, it's got to be within this area." Gloom said.

Gloom turned and called across the street to the two Royal Guards, "We're going on to the next street up. When you're done on that side

do the same."

Scenic and Quick both stopped to give a full salute and, "Yes sir!" to show they'd heard, rather than just a simple wave of acknowledgement.

'-unnecessary, but oh well. It's just for today-', Gloom thought grouchily. None of the ISND had gotten enough sleep or any breakfast, which was just the icing on the cake to this dragon smog incident really.

Stepping onto the next street over and closer to the warehouses, Prey got the impression that something about it looked familiar.

He peered more closely at the lone scaffolding on one of the roofs, the way that paving slab sat an inch askew in front of the green door. 'I have not been here before. I would remember straight away. So why-Ah, Lemon Pink.'

He hadn't been here before, but Lemon Pink had.

This was the area Lemon had come to the secret meeting with those four salt drug dealers. Prey only had a vague impression of the route she had gone, which was why he hadn't immediately recognised it, since it wasn't an important memory to share.

Prey looked towards the end of the street. The secret house was that one there on the end, by the smallest warehouse. 'And this is the area that the disturbance report came in from...' Prey thought. It probably wasn't a coincidence, even if the report had come from the next street over.

Prey of course didn't mention a word of this to Gloom, just followed along as the Sargent started up his door routine down this street. However this still yielded nothing as they, or more accurately Gloom, moved down the row knocking doors.

Eventually, they got to the final house on the end, the one in which Lemon Pink had met those four drug dealers.

The building looked completely abandoned, and the notice nailed to the door said, 'Warning: Condemned. Do Not Enter' indicated to that

fact.

The windows were completely boarded up and it didn't look like the frames had seen a lick of paint this decade. The salt dealers had chosen this hideout well, it didn't look like anyone had been here in years. There was even dust on the door knocker.

Gloom tried knocking anyway, but it was obvious there was no one inside. Prey watched him as he shrugged and stepped back into the street, looking over the fence to the next door warehouse. The dividing fence ran all all the way around the warehouse's perimeter, with the locked gate on the far side. He seemed content to wait until Crimson and the others finished their tasks.

Prey tilted his head back towards the sky, watching the smoke.

Prey was debating with himself.

Should he 'suggest' to Gloom that there was something off about this house or not, thereby exposing this salt den? There were pro's and con's to each choice.

'I could gain more trust, and improve my standing in the ISND. That'll make it easier to manipulate Gloom in the future. It could also help create an opportunity for Lemon Pink to capitalize on.'

The downsides were a little more extreme. These drug dealers would certainly not appreciate the ISND sticking their noses where they didn't belong. Curiosity killed the cat after all that. Plus, now was also definitely a bad time with what Lemon Pink had found out. The salt boss, whomever they were, was coming to town.

'No, I won't say anything. The possible rewards are too small and uncertain to take the risk' Prey decided.

"Sir, something feels off about this area. Maybe this house." Crimson said, swooping down to hover in front of them.

Prey hid a sigh, 'Or that.'

Gloom looked at the abandoned house, "This one? Why?"

Crimson slowly alighted, taking a moment to carefully fold his wings and re-aline his feathers. "Well, no sir. I mean, maybe not this particular one, but this is the last house on the street, so it's probably this one."

That wasn't exactly foolproof logic, but Gloom stepped up to the door and knocked again. Then tried the door handle. Locked. "Quick and Scenic have yet to finish checking their side of the street. Let's see if that turns up anything first." Gloom decided. The two new and much slower Royal Guards were just starting at the far end of the street.

Crimson nodded, "Yes sir." But he was still looking at the door, eyeing it from different angles.

"We could go help them." Prey suggested, motioning to Quick and Scenic. He was trying to draw attention away from this house. It was a valid suggestion so he couldn't be accused of anything.

"Alright, let's do that. Hopefully somepony here might remember something this time." Gloom agreed.

Five minutes later and the five of them were back to square one. Scenic and Quick's enthusiasm had diminished somewhat as they stood, considering their next move.

'-I don't want to have to assure any more old grandmare that her cats will be fine in this smoke-', Quick Draw was thinking.

"We couldn't find anything sir." Scenic Paint reported unnecessarily.

Gloom nodded, now almost convinced that this disturbance report really was a dud. They should return to help out at the Palace instead of wasting anymore time here. However, because of what Crimson had said, he was still considering giving, '-that condemned house one more look over-'.

"How about trying that big warehouse?" Prey suggested. Again, valid, and again, a distraction.

"The other warehouses are bigger actually." Quick Draw corrected him. Prey smiled sweetly back.

'-the warehouse is actually a good idea. That would be a perfect place to hide something after all-', Gloom thought, attention turning to the warehouse. He took a single step in the locked gates direction and stopped.

He looked between the warehouse and the secret drug dealers house, '-hang on...my cutie mark's telling me something here-'

'Oh come *on*,' Prey thought, 'That's just cheating.'

"Let's split up. You two go and check around the warehouse, I want to have another look around here. If we still find nothing we'll, knock one more street and then return to the Palace." Gloom said to Quick and Scenic.

"But sir, the fence, and the gate's locked too." Quick Draw said.

"Then just see if there's any sign of anypony trying to climb over or break through." Gloom ordered.

'-really, these two-', Gloom thought, exasperated.

"Okay sir. Don't worry, you can count on us sir." Scenic Paint saluted.

All three of the ISND looked at him, like there was some joke they were missing. Luckily, Scenic had learnt from last time and moved to beat a hasty retreat, "We'll just get right on that then sir." He said, dragging Quick Draw with him as they left.

With the two greenies gone, Prey, Crimson, and Gloom went back to the condemned house for the third time and stood before it.

"It certainly looks abandoned. But it doesn't feel correct somehow." Gloom mused.

"How about trying to see if any of the boarded up windows have a crack to peek in through?" Prey suggested. Crimson and Gloom had already figured out there was something off about this house.

Further attempts at distraction would be suspicious now that Gloom had clearly stated his doubts.

Since the decision had been taken out of Prey's hooves, it would be better to fully commit himself and go along with it.

Gloom and Crimson didn't appear enamored with his suggestion, as it was a bit beneath them as representatives of the Night Guard to be seen 'peeking' in through windows.

"Crimson, go see if there's anything on the roof. I'll go around this side, Prey you take that side. See if anything catches your attention." Gloom said, brushing his annoyance away. '-I'm tired, Prey was just making a helpful suggestion-'

Crimson took off and Gloom went to the left. Prey shrugged to himself and started off around the right hoof side. He wasn't tall enough to take his own suggestion about peering through any cracks in the boarded up windows, but it didn't seem likely he could have managed it even if he wasn't a runt. The windows were so tightly boarded up as a noble's family vault.

The faint, drifting whiffs of smoke where catching Prey's nose more frequently now as the smog settled in. The taint of sulphur was not a pleasant one.

One minute later, the three of them met up at the back of the building. Gloom pointed with a hoof, "There's a back door." He said, stating the obvious.

"You couldn't see the door from the air sir. Do you think it's hidden like this on purpose?" Crimson asked.

Prey cautiously approached the old door from the side, checking to see if he could spot anything off about it. He didn't feel any magic tingle in his hooves to indicate any enchantment, but that didn't mean it couldn't still be magically trapped. Or ordinarily trapped for that matter.

"What are you doing Prey?" Gloom asked, a bit thrown by Prey's obvious over-caution.

Instead of answering, Prey brushed his ear back and grabbed the trailing end of his ribbon, gripped between the hoof cleft. He slipped the silk's end between the gap in the door frame and ran it up and down as high as he was able to reach.

He retracted the ribbon and held it up for both Gloom and Crimson to see, "No cobwebs or dust on it."

Gloom caught on immediately, "This door's been opened, and recently too."

"The owners?" Crimson asked, then shook his head answering his own question, "No, Prey is right. This house is condemned. Who would be going in and out?"

Gloom considered the door afresh, "Alright, give me your opinions. Do you think this is relevant to the disturbance report or not?"

Prey shrugged, "Logically speaking, no it shouldn't be related."

Prey was certain it *was*, but he wasn't going to admit anything.

"No sir, not to this. But it's related to something suspicious." Crimson said.

Gloom tried the door handle, not noticing Prey flinch away from the door as he did so. Also locked.

"Alright, let me put it another way," Gloom nodded up at the smoked shrouded sky, "Do you think it's worth our time right now with everything else that's going on?"

"Lieutenant Screech will probably want help back at the palace." Prey answered, again seeing an opportunity to get them out of here without making it seem like he was trying to avoid this house.

"Sir..." Crimson said slowly, "I think, no, I'm almost certain we should go in." He'd brought his face very close to the door, like he was trying to stare a hole through it.

Gloom looked at him sharply, "Can you...?" He asked in concern.

"No, not quite. It may be nothing sir." Crimson's yellow eye's flicked to the sky, "There's a lot of smoke."

"We're going in then." Gloom decided. He gave the door handle a solid shake, then a shove, "Step back."

Prey and Crimson did so as Gloom turned around and lined up the door.

"This is the Night Guard! Any ponies on this property are commanded to open this door. Failure to comply will lead to forced entry." Gloom shouted.

He didn't wait more than five seconds for the response which they all knew wasn't coming, before he crouched and let loose and double back hoof buck to the door. It was a powerful strike, despite it's deceptive quickness, and hit just below the door handle. There was a very solid sounding *'**Thonk**'* as horseshoes met wood.

The door vibrated, but didn't otherwise budge.

Gloom adjusted his position and let loose another buck, *'**Thonk**'*

Same result again.

*'**Thonk**'*
*'**Thonk**'*
*'**Thonk**'*

Gloom stopped and turned to examine the door. The wood beneath the door handle was bruised and imprinted multiple times with the shape of cloud steel horse shoes, but the lock had held firm.

"Huh. Well that proves it, something is definitely suspicious about this house. It's supposed to be old. Any lock should've broken under that." Gloom said, scrutinising the door even more closely.

"Either we need an axe, or the key to get in through this entrance." Prey observed.

"How about we try the windows instead sir?" Crimson suggested, pointing to the closest boarded up square.

Gloom considered the window, '-there's nopony waiting inside to take us off guard, so it won't matter if we have to crawl through-', He thought.

"Alright, good idea. Come give me a hoof Crimson."

The window's had been boarded up from the inside. While that meant the planks couldn't be pried off, it did mean they were weak to blows from the outside which would force the nails back out. The window's were too high up for anyone to connect with a kick, at least with any power because of the angle. However, that only held true if the pony in question was kicking from a standing position on the ground.

Gloom and Crimson could fly.

Both of them took to the air, hovering maybe half a pace off the ground. Gloom gave a powerful flap of his wings and shot forwards, and just before he would've struck the window muzzle first, arched sharply up and whipped his back legs forwards.

*'*Crack*'*

The boards juddered and bent. No normal random pegasus could've pulled off such a tight turn without either mistiming it or loosing all momentum.

Crimson came in next, somehow going faster and putting even more power into his kick. *'**Crack**!'*

Gloom was up again, then Crimson, *'*Crack*'*, *'**Crack**!'*

The tough wood was beginning to splinter, but it really should've caved already under such powerful kicks.

"It is not breaking like it should sir."

Gloom agreed with a snort of frustration, "It's too solid. There should be more give in the planks."

Prey was peering closely up at the window they'd been striking. A sliver of wood at the edge of a board had splintered off. Prey

squinted, blue eyes trying to see what lay behind through the crack.

"Well, it's no wonder you can't kick it in." Prey announced with false cheer, "The window's been bricked up from the inside behind those boards."

Gloom's ears laid back in annoyance, "Tarturus. We're going to need to get somepony with proper tools."

"Or Crimson could fly up and break in through the roof, fly down, and unlock the door from the inside." Prey pointed out. "Sir." He added.

'-oh. That could work too-'. Gloom thought. He looked at Crimson, "Do you think that's doable?"

"Yes sir." Crimson was already backing up to get some room for another take off. A flash of feathers later and then Crimson was on top of the roof and out of sight. There came the sound of terracotta tiles being being shifted, then *'clicking'* as they were neatly stacked to the side.

Prey and Gloom patiently waited by the door. There wasn't much else they could do. Well, Gloom could fly up and help, but there wasn't much *Prey* could do.

'-what's hidden inside? This place is built like a mini fortress-'

"I'm in sir." Came crimson's muffled voice from up on the roof, followed by scuffling as the pegasus pushed his way in between the slats and rafters.

With his sharp hearing, Prey heard the sound of breaking wood inside, even if Gloom couldn't. There must've been a thin ceiling to get through also.

But even Gloom could hear the sound of the lock being worked on the other side of the door, then one, two, three, *four* different dead bolts being drawn back.

Crimson's reserved expression greeted them as he pulled the door open, "I'm in sir."

"Yes I can see that, thank you." Gloom commented, stepping in. Seeing as no traps had been triggered by either Gloom or Crimson, Prey followed, leaving the smell of smoke outside.

It was just one large room, which was almost completely unilluminated. Only the open door and brand new hole in the ceiling let any of the dim light from outside in.

Prey looked around. The buildings contents almost exactly matched Lemon Pink's memory. A wooden table in the middle, some chairs, and crates stacked in the background. The difference was, those crates were now empty. Prey could see that much, even in the near darkness.

"How about now? Can you sense anything?" Gloom asked Crimson, already starting to search the place.

Crimson started to push the door shut, "I'm...not sure sir. Maybe. Perhaps... something muted?" He answered cautiously.

"Hey, don't close the door." Prey protested.

Crimson blinked yellow eyes at him, "It will keep the smell of smoke out." He said, features obscured in the gloom.

"Yes, but I can't see in the dark like you two, can I?"

Both Gloom and Crimson seemed to have forgotten that little point. Gloom looked around, "Good point. Whichever ponies used this place probably couldn't either. That means there's got to be a lamp in here somewhere."

And there was, a crystal glow lantern, set neatly on a shelf.

Gloom hooked it down with a wing claw, and the enchantment flickered to life, casting an even white glow over the room. Why did they use oil lamps and candles in the Palace instead of these?

"I don't see anything, and all these crates seem to be empty. But they've only been emptied recently, because there's almost no dust

in the bottoms." Gloom said, checking the crates one by one.

The three of them began to comb through the room, starting at the door and moving outwards.

It didn't take long for Prey to spot something off, "The crates, tables, chairs, they've all been pushed about and rearranged, then put back. Possibly to make space to empty whatever was in these crates. There's little scrape marks on the floor varnish, under those crates with the roughest corners." He said, pointing it out so they could see.

"Good. What does that tell us though?" Gloom wondered, checking the underside of the table to be thorough.

"This place looks like it has been abandoned sir. Recently and in a hurry, I mean." Crimson said, casting around the room, obviously searching for whatever it was that was throwing him off. However that was occurring.

"There's nothing left in these crates at all, not even scraps." Gloom said, leaning in to sniff the wood. "Paper maybe? Or fabric? I can't tell. There's got to be a trace left in at least one of these, there's stacks of them. Help me look." Gloom ordered.

Prey jumped atop a low stack and looked around, searching for anything that drew his attention in the lamp light. 'Walls, floor, ceiling, table, crates.' His eyes went to the densest stack of crates, set against a wall. It was nothing obvious, but...

'Their placement is forced.' Prey realised.

"There's something under those crates." Prey declared. The other two immediately stopped their own searches to look.

"You sure?" Gloom asked, but he'd already put the lantern down to start unstacking the indicated crates.

"Almost ninety percent." Prey said. He didn't go over to help, Crimson and Gloom could work a lot faster without a runt getting in their way.

But when the crates had all been moved, there was nothing there, just blank floorboards. Prey frowned.

Gloom struck the floor with a hoof, but it produced exactly the same solid sound as everywhere else in the room. "It doesn't seem to be hollow." He said dubiously.

Prey had hopped down and came over. He closed his eyes and ran his hoof across the bare floorboards, trying to feel any changes or inequalities.

"Perhaps we might come back with a unicorn to scan this place. Quick Draw maybe could." Prey heard Crimson suggest from off to the side.

"Scanning spells are quite advanced, I think. Quick Draw probably doesn't know any." Gloom told him, but he sounded a bit uncertain about whether that was actually the case. Not being a unicorn or having lived with any in his clan, he wouldn't know.

"Should I go and get him anyway sir?" Crimson offered.

'You won't find anything even if you do.' Prey thought. Whatever was hidden here wasn't hidden with any magic, as Prey could detect any such in his hooves. That didn't mean there wasn't any magic, but if Prey couldn't find anything, then a unicorn at Quick Draw's tier certainly couldn't. This required fineness, not the brute magical force all unicorns were born wielding.

Prey stopped and moved his hoof back along the same sweep, slower this time. Was that a tiny ridge?

"Got it. It's a trap door." Prey declared, opening his eyes.

He traced the tiny ridge all the way along to the wall, then across and found the parallel line on the other side.

"The hinges must be set under the edge of the wall. Very clever. But how to open it?" He mused, ignoring the other two as they leaned in close to try and find the outline for themselves. Both of them still kept out of hoof's reach, so Prey was fine with it.

"There," Prey pointed at a knot in the wood where the front edge of the trapdoor must lie, "That. We need a lever or stick of some kind to lever it up with."

"I can see it now." Gloom said, stepping back and tilting his head, "Yes, there is indeed a door."

Whomever had made this door had done an expert job, and without enchantments too. It was practically invisible and flush with the rest of the floor.

"Find a stick of some kind," Gloom ordered, "See if they keep the lever around here somewhere for easy use."

A search of the room didn't reveal any pole of lever like stick, "They must've taken it with them when they left, same as the key for the door." Gloom said, frustrated.

"Hold on sir, I have an idea." Crimson said. He flapped back up to the hole in the roof and with some effort managed to extract one of the slats he had kicked in earlier to enter. It hadn't been broken off evenly so it came to a point, "Do you think this will do?"

"Only one way to find out." Gloom jabbed the pointed end into the knot on the floor, wedging it tight. Then he started to push.

Whatever lever was originally used, it must have been longer than this one for better leverage. The slat started to bend and splinter alarmingly, but the trap door which had so far been nearly invisible jerked up an inch, now clearly revealing it's shape, "It's going to break." Gloom warned.

"Higher, we just need to wedge this in." Prey told him quickly, holding out a sliver of broken crate. Gloom grunted and pushed the slat harder, the thick trap door levering up. A crack of darkness came into view and quick as a snake Prey shoved the piece under.

"I've got it sir." Crimson lowered himself and somehow managing to find enough purchase to help push the trap door up higher.

"Good," Gloom grunted, "Okay. Switching in three, two, one."

Gloom let go of the slat, darting in to get his hooves under the edge along with Crimson. Prey thought for a moment the heavy trap door would thump shut and half crush their hooves, but the two Night Guards actually managed to lift the door up, and once it cleared a hoof's width of darkness into the space below, it was almost too easy.

The door swung silently up on greased hinges, and locked into place by some unseen mechanism. There was a moment as they all looked in. Nothing could be seen down there apart from the first step down, but Prey could heard something in the uninviting blackness.

A tiny scratching sound.

Prey took a breath. 'Oh,' He thought as the smell welled up, 'Oh so that's how it is.'

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[[[Bonus Sketch - Concept art idea only]]]

https://imgur.com/sa3VrZ7

Author's Notes:

300K Words! Woohoo! (This story is getting a lot longer than I had planned) Hope you enjoyed anyway.

Thanks to my editor, same guy as last time. If you don't know who that is, go back and read the last chapter and see the notes!
Next time, things get a bit *d*A**r***k*e**R** [image]

29.2 Life is only ever Moments away from being Not

Author's Notes:

Darker chapter starts here. You have been warned.
[image]
Seriously though, if after reading you think this story should go from T rating to M, please let me know, thanks? I don't think it needs to, but then, I am the writer, soooo....

Thank you for a patient editor who's always happy to help: **Sweetolebob18**

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Crimson had gone rigid. He didn't seem to be breathing. The pegasus's jaw moved, but whatever he croaked out was too quiet for even Prey to catch. Prey wasn't looking at Crimson though. His eye's were drawn down. There was a numb tingle in the back of Prey's wool.

'Even here in Canterlot huh?... Somehow I never doubted.'

Gloom had the lantern. Even thestrals couldn't see in total blackness. He took the first step down the hole, his nose wrinkling, '-this is familiar. But what...?-'

"Sir-" Crimson managed to cough out, but by then Gloom had already reached the bottom of the rickety steps and a small sea of

reflective little eyes eyes turned to look at him.

"Just rats." Gloom snorted in disgust. Prey went down the steps after him before Crimson could stop him.

"Shoo! Get!" Gloom snapped, raising the lantern high and many fearful squeaks rang out, and the rats scattered to the darkened corners with a skitter of claws.

Gloom sniffed with distaste. He wasn't scared of rats. Then Gloom froze, the light from the lantern washing over the secret cellar. '-...I know that smell-'

"Blood." Prey declared simply.

Prey heard Gloom's breath get stuck in his throat, but it was just background noise really.

Dull, stagnant pools of something almost black were splashed around four twisted objects. 'Four dead bodies. The same ones Lemon Pink saw.' Prey's mind told him, as his eyes flickered over the sickening scene.

The rats had been busy. Prey had seen half eaten corpses before. He'd survived the Deeper Green. And it was just as awful and raw-glistening-shredded-*disgusting* as the first time.

But that wasn't how the four ponies died. Rats don't kill people, they're just scavengers. Tearing wounds had been clawed across the bodies, and puncture wounds filled with congealed scabs of what'd once been blood. The horrible smell billowed out from the corpses and tried to get into Prey's lungs.

"Sir, there's-Don't! I know this scent-", Came Crimson's voice, half way down the stairs and far too late. It cut off as he too saw the scene for himself.

"Murder." Gloom said, not even seeming to realise the word had slipped out. "Who... who could do this?" In the corners of the cellar, beady little eyes watched the three invaders.

'It never changes,' Prey thought, 'There's always killing.'

He'd known it all along. The war never ends. Canterlot was no exception, all its glitter and gold meant nothing.

"A griffin. Or griffins." Prey said, finally answering Gloom's question.

Gloom jumped and whirled around in horror at hearing Prey's voice.

"What-?! You can't be in here!" He shouted, jumping in front of Prey. "Get out! You can't see this!" He tried to block Prey's view with his wings, the lantern swinging wildly, shadows dancing over the gore.

Prey leapt away from Gloom, "*Don't* touch me."

"Get out, out out out! You're a child Prey, you can't be seeing this." Gloom attempted to crowd Prey back up the stairs, something, *anything* to stop Prey from seeing what was behind him.

'-just a lamb, just a foal, he can't be allowed to see. Oh Luna, why did they die? Blood, there's guts, guts on the floor-', Gloom thought desperately.

There was the sound of Crimson's hooves dancing on the steps as he staggered. The pegasus' eyes were tight shut and he was only breathing through his mouth. His mental walls were down, the shock and stress having destroyed Crimson's self control.

'-I wasn't ready, oh the stink, no no, don't be sick, you can do this. You have done this. Stop being so weak. Never get's easier-', He thought with an audible gulp.

Gloom's eyes had jumped to Crimson, freezing up all over again, '-Crimson...He's down here too-'

"Crimson, go back." He ordered.

"I can do this sir, I can do this." Crimson said, voice very faint. His eye's were still squeezed shut as he tried to psyche himself up to opening them again. '-horrible flesh, all exposed, rots going to set in, oh I hate this, fur matted and sticky, I hate this. No, control

yourself. Remember your training, I am a stone in a pond-'

"Crimson, go back up. Take Prey and go back up, hear me? We have to report this, get the Captain. Somepony has murdered these ponies."

"Four murders. And some*body*. A griffon, or griffons." Prey repeated, voice eerily calm.

Gloom jerked around, to his horror finding Prey standing right in front of one of the mutilated corpses, just outside of the pool of blood. "Get away from there Prey! You don't, I, you don't want to see this."

"Of course I don't want to. But-"

"Prey, get upstairs. Please! This isn't something a foal should ever see." Gloom cut across, almost high pitched. '-oh Luna! I've let a child into a murder scene-'

Prey didn't seem to hear him, his soft blue eyes never leaving the shredded face of the dead unicorn. The horn had been wrenched off, one eye was half glop, the rest eaten by the rats, and the tongue was swollen and protruding.

"Nine, ten hours maybe?" Prey murmured, "The blood has settled in the bottom of the body. Flesh is bruising purple."

Gloom's thoughts went blank as Prey stuck his hoof into the crusted pool of blood.

The lambs face didn't even twitch as he worked his hoof back and forth. "Maybe only eight actually." He said, holding up his hoof to critically examine the sludge stuck to the bottom of it. Crimson's eyes snapped back shut, and his wings started jerking about all on their own.

"Prey-! You! You can't just do that!" Gloom cried, not even able to think of anything else to say.

Prey's eyes snapped back into focus and turned to Gloom, "Why not?"

He looked down at the body, blinking like he couldn't understand something, then back at Gloom, wings still standing frozen at the base of the stairs. "This dead body? Wait, is it because of this? " Prey demanded, rubbing the blood between the cleft in his hooves.

"Don't pretend you've never seen blood before, I know you guys drink this stuff all the time." He said, making Gloom and Crimson gape at him.

"How...?" Was all Gloom could manage in horrified fascination at the scene unfolding before him.

"I'm not stupid. That clan wine? That's blood enchanted in those bottles to look and smell like grape. Really, could you have been any more obvious about it? I know Crimson ate some, drank, consumed, whatever you call it, in the doctor's room that first night. But why does this even matter?"

"It does matter! This isn't-", Gloom dropped the lantern and gripped the sides of his head with his wings, "By the moon, how did it come to this?" He moaned.

"Prey, you don't understa- You can't, *don't* stick your hoof- you can't tell anypony- This isn't right. Look, don't...Just *stop*! Okay? Just stop and come away from there." Gloom exclaimed helplessly.

Crimson was staring at Prey too, completely at a loss of how it had come to this or how to stop it. "Prey, you... It isn't right, to do...that." He managed, weakly gesturing to Prey's dirtied hoof.

Prey lowered his hoof. He didn't understand. Not fully.

'I've seen all this before. Why? Why do they care? Why does someone only care now?'

It didn't make sense. Wasn't this what the ISND was also supposed to do? This was part of why Luna had enslaved him, yes? So why were they both so horrified?

His eye's went down to the corpse. It was indeed horrifying. Horrifying and terrifying and sickening and horrible horrible horrible *horrible*.

A child should not see this. No one should see this. But here he was, seeing it. It wasn't like he wanted to be down here, with rats someone had let loose to eat the evidence. But here they were. Hadn't they realised something like this was always going to happen?

'It was always going to happen. Murder lives forever just like war. So why...?' Prey wondered, staring at Gloom.

Gloom stared right back. Now, out of all times, it occurred to Gloom that Prey smiled a lot. Prey was smiling right now in the lantern light. Just a small smile, like a reflex almost. But for the first time, Gloom saw how it didn't reach his eyes. Not really. Not when he really looked.

Gloom didn't see any emotion in those soft blue orbs. Not horror, not fear, not even shock. What, if anything, Prey was really feeling at that moment was completely opaque.

'-the damage has already been done long before now-', Gloom thought, suddenly feeling tired.

Gloom wished he could just go to sleep, '-why couldn't this all be a bad dream? Princess Luna, wake me up now please. No, I have a duty to do. To Her, to Prey, and to Crimson-'

"Prey," Gloom said calmly, far more calmly than he felt, "We're getting out if here, right now. Go back upstairs."

Meanwhile as he spoke, Gloom's thoughts kept jumping back to the exact same thing, '-four ponies were murdered, they're dead and *oh Luna there's bit's everywhere*-'

Prey squinted at Gloom's pale face in the shadows of the lantern light, searching the thestral's expression for some clue. But all he saw was what he already knew, not the unknown answer he was looking for. "Okay..." He said slowly, wiping his hoof on an unspattered bit of the floor.

The horrible grainy crust on his hoof brought on the familiar urge to scream and run around until he could find water to wash himself

clean. But despite that feeling, he'd still done checked the blood to be sure of the time of death. And Prey was no stranger to feeling like filth.

He started back for the stairs, ignoring the way rats skittered outside the pool of light, acutely aware of his stained hoof every time he brought it down.

And then there was the sound of the door being pushed open in the building above them. Crimson whirled around on the steps, a very impressive move for a quadruple, danger flashing in his and Gloom's thoughts.

'- they've returned-', '-the murderer!-'

"Sargent Gloom? It's dark, are you in here?"

It wasn't the salt dealers, it was Quick Draw and Scenic Paint.

In the face of this horror, both the Royal Guards had been completely forgotten. Now however, their presence only brought relief for a brief moment to Gloom before it was replaced with panic.

"Stay where you are! Don't come any closer!" Gloom bellowed up the stairs.

The hooves above instead of stopping speed up, "We're coming sir."

"Don't come down here!" Gloom shouted again, "Crimson stop them." He ordered.

Crimson flared his wings, blocking the light coming up from the cellar as he barrelled up the stairs even as Scenic called out again "Sir? What's going on, should we-?"

"Back up and don't come down here. This is a murder scene!" Gloom shouted up again. He perhaps shouldn't have added that last bit.

"Murder? Did you say murder? He said murder!" Quick Draw's voice went high pitched.

"Sir, sir-!"

"-Wait up there! We are closing this place and reporting it straight away. Crimson, let us up." Gloom said, shouting over the sounds of panic from the two Royal Guards sounds.

"Murder, they killed somepony! There's, you, but, but I, I, I..." Quick Draw moaned, "I'm going to be sick."

Gloom forced his way past Crimson, then had to stop, "Oh Luna, the rats. We can't leave." He said without thinking.

"Rats? You mean-!"

"-Rats were, were eating..eat....*'huUgggGGHH'* There was the sound of someone throwing up all over the floorboards. Crimson shied in disgust and backed into Gloom, almost making him drop the lantern on Prey who was coming up behind them both, not wanting to get left behind in the dark.

"I need to sit down for a while." Came the faint voice of Scenic Paint.

"Both of you, be quiet and listen to me, that's an order." Gloom growled. He cast a torn glance back at Prey behind him, then turned back, "Quick Draw, can you send- hey, pay attention! Can you send a message via magic?"

"No, no sir. I can't. I'm sorry, I never took, I mean I'm not strong enough for that-"

"Stop rambling. Go stand guard outside the door. Here's what we're going to do. Crimson, you're the fastest. Fly back to the Palace. Tell them what's happened here. Get them to send ponies to close this street off. Understand?"

"Yes sir."

"Go. You, Scenic Paint... Scenic, are you listening to me?"

"Yes sir." Came the shaky response. Prey realised it had actually been Scenic who'd thrown up.

"Good. Go stand guard with Quick Draw. Can you do that?"

"Yes sir." There was the clop of hooves as Crimson and Scenic hurried out.

Gloom found Prey patiently waiting behind him at the bottom of the stairs, looking up. Gloom wanted to bash own his head against a wall in shame for having forgotten that Prey was behind him in all that panic, '-behind me down there-'

"Come and wait up here Prey, okay?" He asked, voice strained.

Prey look at him, "Yes, sir." He answered simply.

"Good. Come up and don't go anywhere. Scenic and Quick Draw will be just outside if you, if you need anything, okay? I'll be..." Gloom swallowed and visibly steeled himself, "...I'll wait down here with the lantern, and keep the rats off the... Keep the rats away from the evidence." He said.

"There's no need-"

"No Prey! You don't, you just don't get... You shouldn't have to be down there." Gloom sighed. His words felt hollow.

'-a bit late now, isn't it?-'

Prey bobbed his head, "You misunderstood me. You don't have to wait down here alone. There's another exit." Prey pointed to the shadowy far wall. There, set into the cellar stone above the floor, was another door, tightly shut. It'd gone completely missed in the distraction of this grisly horror.

"The rats were sealed down here to eat the evidence on purpose," Prey explained quietly, "You can simply open the door and chase them out. Sir."

Lieutenant Screech came himself as soon as he heard Crimson's message, bringing along every other available Night Guard he could get his hooves on. It was a depressingly small number, only six. The

rest had been taken by Nighthawk to go confront the dragon.

This just had to happen today, didn't it?

Screech stepped into the building, yellow eyes quickly casting about and passing over Prey to settle on Gloom. Screech seemed to sigh and quietly went over, "Sargent Gloom. I got the message." He said simply.

Gloom didn't know what to say for a moment. What did one say in these circumstances? "Yes sir."

Screech's eyes flicked to the open trap door. The lantern had been removed and there was no light below, but something invisible seemed to emanate from the hole which whispered what was hidden by the dark down there. Screech didn't go any closer, and his gaze returned to Gloom.

"You did well Sargent. That was all anypony could ask of you under these circumstances." He told Gloom quietly.

"Yes sir. It's...not pretty down there sir. There is... I mean there were rats."

Screech sighed again, not at Gloom or even the news, just at the world in general. "We can- Wait, you said *were*?"

Gloom nodded, looking and feeling so tired, "Yes sir, were. Prey said, or rather he thinks that the rats were released down there to...", Gloom closed his eyes and breathed, "...To eat the evidence sir."

"Somepony dared to- Prey was..." Screech's pupil's widened, "You sent him down there?"

"No sir of course I didn't! I didn't, we didn't realise in time what was down there, I didn't know-"

"I'm sorry Sargent, please forgive me. I spoke before I thought. "

Gloom bowed his head, "No, I'm sorry sir. I, of course you didn't. I over reacted."

Screech tried to catch Prey's eye, but Prey was staring out the door and purposefully avoiding any such eye contact. '-oh Gloom, things just don't get any easier for you-', Screech thought wearily.

He placed a hoof on Gloom's shoulder plate, "I can take it from here Sargent. We're going to cordon off the house and start more thoroughly questioning the ponies in residence around here. Go back to Palace and write this up. I'm afraid I'm going to need statements from all three of you. We're going to...Well, I'm not to sure. Get somepony here from the morgue and have the bodies removed. Try and get them identified. Check the registry to see if we can find who owns this place."

"Photographs."

Screech and Gloom turned to Prey, "Pardon?"

"Photographs from cameras. Those could be used to create a picture, lots of pictures of what's down there. In case there's any evidence on the bodies before you remove them." He explained.

"Yes. I suppose that might work." Screech said. Camera's were something that'd only recently been invented in Equestria, and not something that would naturally occur to a clan member.

'-but that means we have to put somepony down there to photograph that-', Both of the thestrals thought.

Prey didn't care about any mental scarring some random photographer pony was going to receive. The only reason he even suggest it was because he knew the ISND was going to be thrown this case to solve. Gloom was not going to allow him back down there to investigate, but he was still going to expect Prey to solve this quadruple murder.

'Completely illogical.'

But photographs would alleviate that problem. In theory.

It would also mean he didn't have to go back down the hole with those disfigured corpses. Just because Prey would do whatever was necessary, didn't mean he enjoyed it.

"Prey are you... ready to go?" Gloom asked hesitantly. He didn't know if you were supposed to ask in these circumstances, or just give Prey the order. Gloom's eyes kept getting drawn down to Prey's hoof.

Prey got up and looked to Gloom expectantly, eyes soft, bright and blue, "I'm ready whenever you are, sir."

Gloom turned his head away.

Quick Draw and Scenic Paint had already been sent back ahead of them. Prey doubted they would ever speak with those two particular Royal Guards again. They might even quit. Ponies were not used to violence in any shape or form. As for something as big and terrible as murder, it was almost beyond pony comprehension.

Those two ponies would close up, try and pretend it never happened, and hide from reality. Prey was sure of it.

"Prey."

His name came from Crimson.

Prey looked up from the cobbles passing beneath his hooves to find the red pegasus watching him with an unreadable expression. His mental walls were back in place, but oh-so fragile feeling.

"I...You...Never mind. It doesn't matter, forget it." Crimson said, returning his eyes to staring resolutely ahead.

Prey made a note of how Crimson's mental defences crumbled in the face of shock and stress. He may need that in the future.

Aside from Crimson's failed words, they were all silent. The streets were still deserted, the smog still hung above, the smell of smoke still drifted past, the threat of the dragon still there, but that just didn't seem so dire right now.

'-never going to forget those rats. Who would do this? Why, what were they trying to hide?-'

Anger was finally starting to work it's way into the Sargent's thoughts as the shock faded, '-whichever pony did this is going to *pay*-'

Then, half way back to the Palace, the smog started to dissipate.

"The dragon has been driven off!"

"The diplomats succeeded, good on them."

"Barely got out of Canterlot and we're back already."

"That dragon got off easy."

"I was *so* ready for that scaly lizard."

"Ha! Wouldn't have stood a chance against all of us."

Upon their return, this was what they found. The Guard Compound was full of the returning Royal and Night Guard sections, the former all celebrating.

No one paid any attention to the blank faced thestral, pegasus and sheep plodding past. The Royal Guard had better things to do, like celebrate and boast of their bravado.

They were strong. They were the Royal Guard! They could never be defeated.

Nor did they notice an ashen faced Quick Draw and a blank eyed Scenic Paint with a thousand yard stare reporting to Captain Shining Armour.

And why would they? They were celebrating the triumph of ponies over a dragon elder!

The ISND went to Nighthawk's office, but he wasn't there. He hadn't been in the Guard Compound courtyard either, which meant he was

probably reporting to Princess Luna right now.

Gloom wordlessly turned them around and lead them first to a bathroom, silently waiting for Prey to thoroughly wash and rewash his hoof, and then to the office. Prey knew what was coming, but he stepped inside anyway when Gloom held the door open. Shaken people could do stupid, sometimes dangerous things, but Prey wasn't any more afraid than normal. He could see how drained Gloom and Crimson were.

And the office was full of his runes if it came down to it. Thus, he went inside.

Gloom shut the door and sat himself down in front of it, like he was scared they would try and bolt if he didn't. Or perhaps he didn't have the energy to move any further inside. Prey looked sideways at Crimson. The Pegasus didn't look any better than Gloom did.

"...So." Gloom said after a long while.

"So." Prey agreed.

"Here we are." Crimson said simply.

Gloom took a deep, slow breath. He closed his eyes and let it out again.

"Whatever you have to say, please say it now and get it out there. Both of you. Because I'm going to start speaking myself in a minute." Gloom said without opening his eyes.

What was there to say? Prey didn't have anything. He would've thought it was all pretty obvious.

There'd been a quadruple murder, they'd discovered it, they would be the ones ordered to solve it. Anything further than that was unnecessary, just personal feelings and fears. So Prey shrugged and sat himself down on the floor, fiddling with the end of his ribbon.

Crimson was slow to speak up, but in the end he did decide to say something.

"Somepony murdered those ponies. They must be caught. They need to face justice. If they don't... That won't be right. Nopony can't ever be allowed to get away with this." Crimson said, a slow kind of anger burning in his words.

Gloom nodded but didn't speak, letting Crimson continue.

"Sir, you saw it...I, I don't think I could go back- No, I can go back there. I will do my duty." Crimson straightened his neck back to it's familiar rigid posture, "I'm sorry, I was weak there for a moment. I can do this sir. I can do this. That's what I want to say. You don't have to worry about me. I *can* do this."

Gloom nodded again, finally opening his eyes. He looked so tired. "Is there anything else? Something else you want to say maybe Crimson?"

Crimson caught Gloom's hint. Slowly, he turned to face Prey. "I think...I mean, I have something to explain."

"We both do," Gloom joined it, "Something important that we need you to listen to very carefully Prey."

Crimson took a deep breath, "I can...My special talent is to smell blood. I mean, more than just smell it. I can track even a trace of blood almost anywhere. If I walk into a room, I can immediately smell it somepony has even the tinest cut." Crimson's gaze shifted away. Was that shame?

"That was why with the trap door, when it opened...It was overpowering. I'm sorry I did not warn you in time not to go down there Prey."

"If your sense of smell is so strong, why couldn't you tell until the trap door was opened? There was a lot of blood down there. Or does it have to be fresh?" Prey asked.

"It was too well made. The trap door, I mean. It was almost air tight. And the smell of smoke kept obscuring what little I could scent."

"That's not all though is it?" Prey asked, "You can track a familiar

scent of blood far better than an unknown one, yes? Even if that person's not bleeding anymore."

Crimson looked back in surprise, "How did you know?"

"Because you're too good at finding me. That time when Luna, I mean when *I* hurt my ear, you got my scent didn't you? That's how you always seem to know where I am, like hiding in the mess hall."

"I, that is to say, yes Prey. I'm sorry, it's just what my talent is."

Prey scowled. That was most annoying to have his suspicion confirmed. He did not want some 'blood hound' able to sniff him out. Gloom and Crimson misinterpreted the look for something else.

"Prey, listen, I know what you're thinking, but we are not vamponies I promise you." Gloom hurried to reassure Prey.

"You have nothing to fear from me. From us, I mean." Crimson quickly tacked on.

Gloom sat forwards, "Prey, I need to explain this to you before you make any rash decisions. You can't go telling anypony about this, okay?"

"Was that a threat?" Prey asked.

"Wha-? No no, of course not, but-We don't want you to tell anypony, but we won't stop you. But listen to me first, okay? We're not threatening you. Not at all. No clan is. There isn't any danger to you, understand?" Gloom asked.

Prey understood the words the Sargent was saying, but there were plenty more thestrals out there who could be upset about Prey knowing this, "Well, as Crimson said, here we are. I'm a captive audience, so explain away."

Gloom sighed and scratched at the edge of his chest scar, "You said you already knew that we, that is, most thestrals need blood. Why didn't you say anything before? Is it... because you were scared we would do something if we found out?" Gloom asked hesitantly.

No, that wasn't what Prey had thought, but he didn't make any move to confirm or deny it either way. It was incredibly cruel to let Gloom stew in his guilt like this, what with the cellar still fresh in everyone's thoughts, but, well, so what? Prey didn't feel like talking.

"We wouldn't, I mean we won't do anything even if you do tell somepony about this. We do drink blood yes, you already know that, but we're *not* vamponies like all the stories say. These?" Gloom drew back his lips, revealing the sharp upper and lower canines, "We don't go around biting ponies and sucking their blood. We don't eat meat, we don't even really know why we have these. They're just hereditary as far as we can tell."

"But not all thestrals are blood drinkers, as you said. Lieutenant Screech for example, he declined your offer that night for a glass. What's the ratio in the clans?" Prey asked.

Gloom had to take a moment to catch up to where Prey was, "How-? Never mind. But you're right. Yes, about seven in ten thestrals are born with the need to drink blood. It manifests about the time a foal is weened." Gloom explained. He was talking to Prey, but in his head the cellar was going round and around. The way Crimson's gaze kept slipping away to nothing indicated it was the same for him.

"Your words seem to indicate that the blood drinkers can't drink from other blood drinkers, which means the clans subsist or subsisted entirely on the blood of those three in ten." Prey said.

Gloom was past caring or being surprised at this point, "Yes. For some reason, the blood from other blood drinkers doesn't satisfy. The three in ten, donors, we owe a lot to them. There's no pattern that we can see for why a foal is born one way or the other. It doesn't matter what their parents are, the foal can be something completely different."

"How much blood and how often?" Prey asked.

Since Gloom was being so open, Prey wanted to get as much information as he could, even if Gloom thought he was being callous by asking this right after the four murders. Gloom still

wasn't sure what to think on that front. He hadn't fully moved on from the cellar yet. Seeing a body in that state tended to have that effect.

"A cup, or two cups a week," Gloom shrugged bleakly, "It depends on how much you exert yourself." Something occurred to him, making him jerk upright.

"Thestral's don't turn into blood thirsty monsters if they don't get enough blood, that's just a stupid myth." Gloom hurriedly added.

Prey held up his hoof, "I never said they did, and that's a fairly obvious point regardless."

"Oh, sorry. But all the vampony stories are portrayed that way. The tales have been around for centuries. Even if most ponies don't believe in them, if they learnt of our dietary needs, well..." Gloom didn't have to finish that sentence. "Which is why this can't get out to ponykind, alright? We've only just rejoined society, they're not ready for this. If they found out..."

"They'll react with racial fear and thestrals will be driven back into exile for another thousand years?" Prey suggested.

"Something like that." Crimson muttered.

"Yes, something like that." Gloom sighed, "Their Majesties and some other ponies in high authority already know all this anyway. If we don't get regular blood we just...waste away, grow weak, get sick, and eventually, we'd die. But we're always ourselves. We don't loose control or anything like in all those stories, okay?"

Prey had already worked that much out for himself. It was just how if someone just ate fruit and didn't get all the minerals they needed. Eventually, they'd wither and die. They might be physically full, eating three meals everyday, but their body would still starve to death.

Crimson took a deep breath, "I, I am different."

Gloom gave him an encouraging nod to go on. Crimson held his head up high and spoke clearly, "I am a pegasus, but I was born to

thestral parents. I am the same as Sargent Gloom. Inside, my body is still like a thestral, a drinker. I too need blood. That's just how it is."

Gloom was watching Crimson, obviously waiting for him to go on, but the pegasus stopped speaking there.

Gloom's brows drew together, and he made a motion with his wing to Crimson, but Crimson either didn't understand it or pretended he didn't.

'-well if you won't, I will. It's not fair that you shouldn't be recognised-', Gloom thought.

"Crimson hasn't told you it all. Crimson is a special case, he drew the short straw. His tongue is different to a normal thestrals. He needs blood yes, but to him it tastes like, well like it would taste to you Prey."

Gloom calmly met Crimson's accusing stare, "Prey should realise how hard you work. You should be proud of yourself."

Gloom's words were obviously meant as encouragement, but now really was not the time. Crimson looked away, tail swishing.

Prey watched it all, eyes missing nothing. He saw how Gloom was working himself up to address Prey. This conversation about the thestral blood needs would've been horrifying to an ordinary pony, but right now it was just a precursor to what was to come next.

'-what *must* come next. Moon knows, I wish this would go away. The skittering rats*No*. Pull yourself together Dusky Gloom-', Gloom wanted to take the cowards way out and not say anything, just let the damage done fester and hope it would go away if he ignored it. But he was a thestral, and thestrals did not shirk their duty.

Gloom couldn't seem to stop glancing back at Prey's hoof, the one he'd tested the congealed blood with. The Sargent shuddered. "Prey, do you know what I want to talk to you about?"

The mask was back over Prey's eyes, glassy and opaque. "Yes. And no."

"Yes and no?" Gloom repeated, waiting for Prey to expand.

"Yes, because you're outraged that I was down in the cellar with you. That I tested the bloods age. You think a child shouldn't-"

"-A child shouldn't! No child should!" Gloom exploded with pent up fury, startling Prey. Not fury at Prey, just fury in general at the unfairness of a world that allowed four ponies to be murdered.

"You shouldn't have been down there! You should have left when I told you to! That was a murder. A murder! Four ponies dead. Do you think I want you seeing something like that? But nooo*ooo*, all I could manage was to stop Paint Spot and his friend from seeing it." Gloom's wings and hooves gesticulated wildly, "I'm your Sargent, no, I'm your leader! Luna told me to help you two. And you, and you, you just, you-"

Gloom's wings flopped and all the energy went out of him.

Prey was watching the thestral warily, like he was ready to jump back at any moment.

"And you don't understand why I'm angry. Don't you get it? No, you obviously don't." Gloom accused, but with no energy.

"Okay, I don't understand." Prey cautiously agreed.

Gloom looked helplessly to Crimson, "You understand, don't you?" He asked, desperately hoping that at least one other person got it.

Crimson nodded to show that he did, but... '-but does Crimson really? Do I have two Preys that I've got to try and sort out?-'

"Crimson, are you sure you understand what-?"

"Yes I understand. I already told you, didn't I? Didn't I already say?" Crimson snapped in a rare show of temper. A moment later though he was bowing his head and apologising, "I'm sorry sir, I shouldn't have said that."

"No, no I'm the one who shouldn't have asked. I know you didn't misunderstand, you've seen..." Gloom didn't finish that sentence. He

swallowed.

'-Prey stuck his hoof into that pool like it was nothing. Like he didn't understand it was a dead body. No, he did, but, but like he didn't comprehend...-', Gloom was struck with sudden insight. '-he might be suppressing it in shock. That explains it all!-'

"Prey, when you stuck your hoof in the... When you tested the blood, what did you feel? Inside."

Prey glared at Gloom.

"Really? Really? This again? After everything I keep telling you over and over, you still think I don't have a concept of morality? Fine, you want to know what I felt? Disgust, loathing, like filth, like a freak. I can almost still feel the blood on my hoof. Do you think I don't realise what happened down there? Well let me describe it to you." He said with sickly sweet calm.

"There were four ponies, all murdered by a griffon. The left most pegasus had sixteen claw slashes across his chest, and his right ear had been torn off. He had a stab wound in his side, just above his kidneys and another at the base of his neck, off center by about an inch. The knife was hooked, and tore-"

"-Stop!" Gloom shouted, aghast. He swallowed, "You can remember all that?"

"All the time." Prey confirmed, then realised he perhaps shouldn't have. Oh well. By this point, they already more or less knew about his memorisation talent.

"You've seen this before, haven't you? This isn't the first time." Crimson suddenly said, "I'm right, aren't I?"

"Well so have you two. I know you both have." Prey shot back, getting defensive.

"This isn't anypony's fault. Life isn't clean, and ponies die. Sometimes, it's violent and somepony sees it. It's not your fault whatever happened. Yes, I admit it, I've seen death." Gloom said freely. "I don't talk about it, I try not to think about it, but I do

acknowledge it. It is not my fault. And it's not yours, either of yours"

"Prey, whom did you see killed?" Crimson asked.

Prey narrowed his eyes, "My father...Died to raiders." He answered slowly. Only a half truth, but it was the only one he could give them without raising suspicions.

"It was your father too?" Crimson asked emptily.

Prey didn't know what to do aside from nod.

Guilt was running heavy laden through Gloom's mind at the moment, and he was trying to find something to say to comfort both of them, "Crimson, I am sorry... And Prey, that you..." He stopped.

'-what can I say? Sorry you saw your fathers murdered? That sound so shallow-', Gloom knew there was nothing he could say to that, or to what they'd seen today.

'-it's so unfair the Royal Guards all get to celebrate while we're stuck with this mess-', Gloom thought, pettiness working it's way into the Sargent's thoughts, not something Prey was accustomed to hearing in there.

But Gloom wasn't naive enough to believe life was fair.

Someone knocked on the door. "Sargent Gloom." Came the muffled call.

Gloom was still sitting in front of the door, and made no attempt to move, but somehow he dredged up the strength to answer back, "What is it?"

"Captain Nighthawk wants to speak with you in his office."

"We'll be there in five minutes." Gloom called. '-the captain can wait for once-', They hadn't written up their reports yet, and the idea of even putting quill to paper to record what they'd seen made Gloom feel sick.

The Night Guard outside left, leaving them in silence.

How had it all gone so wrong? Everything had all been going so well. The trial was over and done with, Wheat Plow was in jail, and the Night Guard was all set to move forwards into the spot light. Then the dragon came along and this happened.

Gloom made no move to get up, and Crimson nor Prey made any attempt to prompt him.

It took almost the full five minutes before Gloom finally mustered the motivation to get up. He spoke, "We've got to go see the Captain." He stated. He paused.

"Are you both...ready for that?" Gloom asked, thinking, '-I don't feel ready-'

Crimson gave a funny twitch, like he was trying to shrug without shrugging, "No. But I will do my duty sir."

It was inappropriate to smile, but Prey didn't know what else to do, and Gloom wanted a response, *any* response from him to prove he wasn't comatosed or something. Prey had no other mask he knew how to wear, so he put on a smile and gave the answer he thought Gloom wanted to hear. "No. But here we are. Are you ready, sir?"

It was a mistake.

Gloom couldn't stomach looking at that smile anymore, or else he would get angry again, "No. Lets go." He said turning away.

"Lieutenant Screech left this message for me." Nighthawk held up a scroll, a broken black seal hanging off it. "He said you found a murder."

"Yes sir. We did." Gloom said.

Nighthawk didn't do anything for a minute. His only sign of life was the methodical 'tap tap tapping' of his hoof on the crowded desk. The ISND stood arrayed in front of him, unmoving.

"Tell me." Nighthawk finally ordered.

Gloom didn't want to. A sun blinded thestral could have seen that much, but Nighthawk's tone brooked no delay. "Yes sir. I found, Crimson found, well, we all found a suspicious house..."

Gloom proceeded to give the Captain a run down of events, delivering the report in a monotone with his eyes fixed straight ahead.

He only stumbled when he came to mentioning how the rats had fled in the lantern light, but he recovered admirably and plowed on ahead. Prey made a show of only looking at the floor, but he was listening with great attention to the Captain's thoughts. Gloom had been upset, even angry with Prey for his behaviour at the drug den. Would Nighthawk be the same? If so, Prey was prepared to defend his actions.

Prey could understand Gloom and Crimson's anger on the surface. But, deeper than that, he just wasn't sure. Prey couldn't read peoples emotions, only their thoughts. True, he could predict and work out what they were feeling most of the time by examining their thoughts, but not always. Like now.

Nighthawk's thoughts only stayed on the details of what Gloom told him. The number of bodies, how they were found, the way the'd located the trapdoor, the other entrance in the cellar Gloom had chased the rats out from. That was what Nighthawk listened to; the implications and possible links. Not the horror.

But those were only the Night Guard Captain's surface thoughts. His sharp yellow gaze regarded each of them in turn, the shapes of other things working away underneath his surface thoughts.

Gloom's retelling came to the end, finishing with saying they'd only just returned to the office when they got Captain Nighthawk's summons. There was no mention made of what had been said or that Prey knew about the thestrals need for blood. Parts of that discussion had been private yes, but some of it related to the clans as a whole. But Gloom said nothing.

With Gloom finished talking, they returned to silently waiting while Nighthawk's hoof 'tap tap tapped' away, each caught up in their own wandering thoughts. Idly Prey wished the Night Guards would improve the lighting in their offices for the non-thestrals who had to try and see in them.

'Is now really the time to be thinking about lighting?' Prey asked himself.

No, but there was no point in wishing that they hadn't found the murder scene either. What had happened had happened. There was no changing that.

Towards the four murdered ponies... Prey was apathetic.

Gloom and Crimson were taking it far too personally, being horrified and outraged at whomever this griffin murderer was. Prey only cared about avoiding meeting said griffin himself.

'They should learn to wear a mask. Like me.' It was better than choosing to feel guilty. Prey knew he was indirectly responsible for these deaths.

If Lemon Pink hadn't gone in under his orders and unintentionally escalated the situation, perhaps the boss of those four ponies wouldn't have felt it necessary to take drastic measures and kill them. Lemon had merely been following his orders. Unintentional or not, Prey had a hoof in their deaths, but even knowing that, he didn't feel guilty. Or rather, no more guilt than he always felt.

Prey wondered what Gloom and Crimson would do if they knew about his part in this. 'There's a thought to keep me up thinking at night.' Prey thought, morbidly amused.

"Sargent Gloom," Nighthawk started, having finally reached a conclusion. The all looked up.

"I want you to take Prey and Crimson back to your office and write that incident report. You aren't to give copies to anypony but me, the Lieutenants, or Princess Luna. If the Royal Guard wants to know anything, direct them to us.

Prey caught his thoughts, '-there are traitors in the Royal Guard. I don't trust anypony not in my Night Guard-'.

To Prey, that fact should've readily been apparent. The unrefined salt trade had been avoiding attention far too cleverly for it not to be getting inside help of some regard.

"Yes sir."

"I'm not done Sargent. Tonight, the ISND is to return to the murder scene. Yes, I know what I'm asking," Nighthawk cut Gloom off, gruff voice unyielding, "But you have to go back. You are to investigate that house, and I want whatever you can find, found. Get a lead, I don't care how. Follow it, and catch these ponies. They cannot be allowed to fly loose in Her Majesty's city."

'It's a griffon, not a pony.' Prey thought.

Once again, there was nothing Gloom could say but, "Yes sir."

"Anything you need, you'll get. Any resources or warrants, just ask. Any help or additional hooves you need, we can reassign."

"Yes sir."

"Now go write that report, then all of you are to get three hours sleep." Nighthawk ordered. '-or try to-'

"Er, sir yes?"

Now was not the time for Gloom to be quickly adjusting to orders, and for a moment he floundered in confusion.

"Get some sleep. You are no good as you are right now. Did you even eat breakfast?" Nighthawk challenged.

"Uh, no, with the dragon- I mean, no sir." The thought of food right now made Gloom feel sick.

Nighthawk grunted, like that explained it all. "I didn't think so. Go do that and come back when you're fit for duty again, all of you. Dismissed."

Gloom looked ready to sag, "Yes sir. Thank you, sir."

'-don't thank me yet Sargent-'

They walked back to their office and did what Nighthawk had ordered; writing out their personal statements. It promised to be a tedious, mentally painful task. Prey began writing out the bare minimum of details he thought he could get away with, not wanting to commit too much to paper in case it set off Gloom again. He still wasn't sure what'd triggered the thestral's anger earlier.

As he wrote, Prey watched Gloom and Crimson from the corner of his eye as they too reluctantly set quill to paper.

Writing this out as a report made the murder seem so... The word was probably 'fake' or 'undervalued'.

Whomever read this wouldn't understand. They'd read the words and think they understood the horror, but they'd have no idea what it'd really looked like down in the cellar.

Prey wrote slowly, thinking about how he should proceed from here.

Should he try and drag this case out and delay it? Or try and speed it along using the information only he knew?

Plans. Always it came down to Prey trying to make plans, and then back up plans for when it all went wrong. Sometimes he wished everything could just be simple.

Prey paused to dip the quill, before continuing writing; '...unicorn's horn destroyed and detached from forehead. Likely cause: loosened by blunt impact then wrenched off by a claw...'

Should he try and get Lemon Pink involved? The ISND had been ordered to solve this case, which meant *he* had to solve it. If he didn't, then Luna would have no further use for him.

Solving this might be easier with outside help, even if Gloom and

Crimson were unawares someone was secretly helping them along. But it would put Lemon at greater risk. These drug dealers were trying to avoid the Guard's notice, but Lemon Pink wasn't a Guard and could be silenced if she was caught. Lemon Pink might have his cunning and experience, so it was unlikely she would get caught, but there was still a fifteen percent chance of capture, and that calculation had a wide margin of error.

Prey's first step should be to clearly establish the connection between the murders and the salt trade for Gloom and Crimson to see, and then work from there.

He didn't have enough information about how this drug boss thought and worked. But Prey already knew they were efficient and ruthless, the disposal of four of his own people proved that. They seemed to have the same mentality as the Resistance. And that was dangerous. Prey needed more information.

'More information, you always needing more information.' Prey mocked himself, but it was true. He was not prepared to commit until he knew more.

Prey did not want to risk Lemon Pink by sending her in. There was still so much he needed his valuable servant for after all.

By the time they'd finished writing, Prey was still undecided about which path, if any, he should take. None of the ISND had spoken, each setting their own personal grim thoughts to paper without being influenced or distracted.

They gathered the three reports together and delivered them to Starry Wing, who wordlessly nodded and accepted them. Nighthawk must've filled the Lieutenant in on what had happened, because he briefly placed his wing on Gloom's shoulder before he disappeared, leaving the three of them to follow the second half of Nighthawk's orders;

Go and get some sleep.

'-sleep? Sleep? Like I can sleep now. It'll just be nightmares about rats. Oh Luna, that's going to be stuck in my head for the rest of my life-', Gloom realised.

The bunk room had never felt less inviting.

Prey had thought it very unlikely they'd be able to get any sleep, but upon reaching his bed, his body reminded him just how tired it really was. He'd lasted longer without sleep before, but that didn't mean he didn't feel exhausted right now. His eyes felt grainy and he could barely keep them open when they fell upon his soft pillow. He knew from bitter experience how these experiences exhausted you, but somehow it never ceased to surprise him.

Gloom stripped off most of his armour and slumped down on his bunk, staring blankly at the wall. The Sargent didn't show it, but Prey knew he was upset at Captain Nighthawk right now.

'-sleep? *Sleep*? How can I be sleeping at a time like this?-'

Prey wasn't the only one exhausted however.

Within minutes, despite everything, both Gloom and Crimson had drifted into an uneasy slumber. Prey could see them shifting about restlessly on their bunks as drowsiness dragged his own heavy eyelids shut.

'Your captain's more intelligent than you realise.' Was Prey's last muzzy thought before he too drifted off.

Three hours of fitful sleep passed quicker than expected, but it didn't leave them feeling any better. In fact, Prey's body felt worse for those three hours it felt it'd been tricked into, but he knew it would do him good. What he actually needed was a full night's sleep, not this half rest the ISND had been snatching whenever they could.

Gloom and Crimson looked worse for wear too. On waking from

what could only charitably be called "sleep", Gloom's first despairing thought was, '-moon blight, it really did happen. And we have to solve it...-'

"Prey, Crimson, you awake?" Was all Gloom felt he could manage, hauling himself off his bunk.

Prey made a noise of confirmation that he too was awake. It sounded like a humming bird clearing it's throat, so he made it again louder to make sure Gloom heard him. He'd fallen asleep on top of his ear and now it'd gone to sleep. Just perfect.

"Crimson?" Gloom tried again, fumbling for the helmet which'd rolled under the bunk from where he'd dropped it.

Crimson slowly sat upright, "My neck hurts." He commented to nobody. Prey saw he hadn't untied the metal ring bunching up his mane, so that probably explained it.

"Leaving now." Gloom muttered.

It took a minute for Gloom and Crimson to reattach the bits of armour they'd shed to sleep. They'd only removed the minimum, anything more would've been too much effort in their funk. Prey spent that extra minute trying to more fully wake himself up, stretching and rubbing some life back into his numb ear.

He sighed, thinking about all the work lay ahead, 'Murder murder on the wall, most vile sin of them all.'

For the second time today, it was not a cheerful procession which made its way once more out from the Guard Compound's gate.

It was still early in the evening, but all the dragon smoke from earlier was gone, all lingering traces having been cleared away by the weather pegasi. Which meant the high streets were now thronging with happy ponies, all keen to make up for the morning spent hiding away now that their beloved Princess has dealt with

their problem. Who was the ambassador Celestia sent? Actually, had she gone herself? Was she or Luna the aforementioned diplomat? That would explain a lot. The newspapers would have it covered tomorrow morning, Prey was sure.

Would this quadruple murder be reported in there too? Or would the Princesses have the information suppressed?

Prey hated all these ponies they were moving past, and today he imagined even Gloom and Crimson felt the same way. To see the happy, privileged, rich snobs going about their lives as if nothing was wrong. It wasn't their fault that they didn't know about the murders, but it *was* their fault they wouldn't want to know either if given the choice.

It would be fair to say they were all in a foul mood as they came towards the Poppy Street intersection and found the street cordoned off.

The area had been blocked off with some flimsy cones and '*Crime Scene - No Entry*' signs, like that would be enough to stop anyone who wanted to get in. However, there was also a lone Night Guard standing sentry on the other side of the cones, the thestral a far more effective deterrent.

Prey noted the sentry wasn't the only Night Guard there. There was another one hidden in the shadows up on a roof, watching the sky and alley ways. Prey was willing to bet he wasn't the only hidden one either, the Guard on the street was just acting as a decoy. The Night Guard were certainly not the Royal Guard.

Prey wondered what the residents of this street had been told, if anything, or if they'd just been confined to their homes until further notice.

'Unlikely, most of these are small office buildings. They were probably ordered to leave and go home instead.' Prey judged.

Crimson breathed deeply as the old drug den came into view, likely mentally preparing himself. There was a lot more activity going on around it than the last time they'd been here, just five hours ago.

Two covered Guard wagons had been pulled up outside to block off access, with more cones and signs set up all around in case the message wasn't clear enough, and of course more Night Guards. They found Lieutenant Screech next to one of the carts, listening to a Private giving a short routine patrol report.

The thestral had found nothing suspicious to report and was already leaving as the three of them got there. Screech looked tired, in fact all of the Night Guard command Prey'd seen today looked tired. Having murder shoved under your muzzle will do that to a pony. To most races actually.

"Sir." Gloom said.

"Sargent Gloom. Captain Nighthawk sent word that you would be back to start the investigation." Screech said. No more comforting words of reassurances like this morning. They'd been given time to pull themselves together, so by now Screech expected them to be able to do their duty.

They were the Night Guard, and proud of it. They'd deal with whatever came their way like true thestrals. Or sheep.

Gloom looked towards the front door, which had now been propped open along with the back door. To help preserve the crime scene, a tarp had also been spread over the hole Crimson had made in the roof. "What's been done in there sir?" Gloom asked.

"We've been searching the top room. We found coat hairs from multiple ponies, which proves nothing. The place has been thoroughly cleared out, just like you said. No papers, receipts, old food, coffee mugs, nothing. Just empty crates which seemed to have held cloth at some point."

"But nothing useful sir?" Gloom asked.

"Nothing yet." Screech confirmed with a sigh.

"And...In the cellar? Has anypony gone down there sir?" Gloom asked.

Screech's fangs stood out as he unconsciously drew his lip back in a

grimace as he answered;

"Only me. I covered them with a sheet, but otherwise, nopony. Out of the four photographers we could find in Canterlot on such short notice, none would lend their photography equipment to the Night Guard, at least without an explanation. And that's not an option. It was a good idea though Prey. I'll recommend to the Captain that the Night Guard gets the equipment for itself next time."

"I pray there isn't a next time sir." Gloom said bleakly.

"Me too Sargent, me too." Screech said, his loudly thoughts returning to what he himself had seen down there. '-may they find rest in the stars of Luna's mane-'

Gloom looked back at the cordoned off house, "That door down in the cellar, did we find out where it lead?"

'You're stalling,' Prey thought, 'Go in and seeing for yourself.'

"We did. It doesn't go far. There's a tunnel that comes up in the warehouse right there." The Lieutenant answered, pointing to the small warehouse on the other side of the fence.

'See? Now that's actual useful information.' Prey thought. He cleared his throat and spoke up;

"What's stored in the warehouse right now? What goods are bought and sold from there and in what quantities? Food or materials? Do the goods come in from one supplier or is it used by multiple people? Who owns the warehouse and who has access?" Prey asked, then quickly adding, "Sir." And lowering his eyes when Screech looked at him in suspicious surprise.

Screech's eyes moved to Gloom questioningly, but Gloom had no explanations for his ribbon wearing runt subordinate. And he was too tired to care right now about what weirdness Prey was cooking up either. Gloom just shrugged.

"Corporal Humming is looking into the records at the Guild department," Screech answered Prey slowly, "She hasn't gotten back to me yet, but I expect she'll have all a full report by tonight."

Well that put an end to those questions for now, and Prey was now keeping his mouth shut and refraining from asking anything further. Screech's look had been too suspicious for his tastes just now.

With no answers immediately forth coming, that only left the cellar scene which had remained undisturbed, waiting for the ISND. Gloom took a moment to steel himself for what was to come, ignoring the defeatist thoughts flashing through his head about having no idea how to investigate a murder.

'-nopony in Canterlot knows how to investigate a murder like this-', Gloom realised, '-but somepony has to do it-'

The worst the Guard could've run into before was accidental killings or spell casting gone wrong, although those were rare enough. Celestia’s presence (and Royal Guards), seemed to have an inhibiting effect on any serious violence.

"Alright. We're going down there now to investigate sir." Gloom said. "Prey you... you wait up in the house while we go down there. That's an order."

"No sir, it's not. How else am I supposed to help solve this case?" Prey immediately responded.

"You won't be. Not for this bit."

Prey's voice lowered to a whisper, "I've already seen it all. Trying to protect my innocence further or whatever it is you're doing is useless. Luna-"

-Princess Luna!" Gloom snapped.

"-Alright, Princess Luna, she won't let me sit by and do nothing. I don't have a choice in this and neither do you." Prey told him.

"There is a choice, and it's *my* choice. You're staying up here." Gloom said hotly.

Gloom seemed to have forgotten about Lieutenant Screech standing right there beside them. Screech was Gloom's senior, both in their

clan and in the Night Guard, however he didn't say a word. It wasn't his place. The ISND was under Gloom's command, and on top of that;

'-what would I even say? I don't know the right choice here either-', Screech thought.

Prey continued to ignore Screech, talking only to Gloom, "This is ridiculous, sir. Do you think it'll just go away? That I can forget? It's too late for that. You should be maximising your available resources here, not telling them to sit by. You need all the help you can get. Sir. So just say yes, and we can all get on with trying to do our job."

"I don't need to know what to do to know what's wrong." Gloom retorted.

Prey tried changing tact, "Why are only you and Crimson allowed to catch this griffin? Do I just have to sit by and do nothing? I found this murder scene too, why shouldn't I get to help? I want to catch him or her just as much as you."

Which was true, but not for any ideal of justice. Prey just couldn't afford to look useless in front of Luna.

"Besides," He reasoned, "It's too late to keep me from seeing the murder scene. It's not moral to force someone else to go down there now. And so what if Crimson is older than me, we've got a lot of the same experiences."

Gloom knew Prey was wrong. He knew it was definitely not the moral choice. But right now, Prey's reasoning was tempting.

'-isn't this why Princess Luna made the ISND? To take unpleasant choices?-'

Gloom's heart told him it was wrong, but Prey was also right. If not the lamb, then somepony else would have to go down there. He couldn't do this with just him and Crimson. But he just couldn't get the image of Prey sticking his hoof in the blood out of his head.

His cutie mark was also keeping silent, no guiding help from harmony today. Screech wouldn't make this choice for him either,

this was all Gloom's responsibility. Whatever he did, the Lieutenant would back him up on.

Gloom started for the house, wings slack, "Let's get this over with. Both of you."

Inside his head, his thoughts loudly condemned him for taking the easy choice.

Silently, Prey and Crimson followed, Prey ignoring the Pegasus's eyes in the back of his neck.

The trap door into the cellar was still open, but the blackness from below had been banished by more glow lanterns. Even thestrals did not want to be down there without light, something primal making them bring illumination to banish the darkness.

They all paused around the opening in the floor, looking down and taking a silent moment before they descended. There were four shapes covered in white sheets below. Splotches stained the sheets, the outlines giving unwelcome impressions as to what they hid.

Gloom closed his eyes for a second, then quickly descended before he could change his mind.

Prey smiled politely at Crimson, "After you."

Crimson looked sideways at Prey for a long moment before following after Gloom. Was that disgust flickering in those blank eyes, or just disappointment? Prey noticed how the Pegasus had only breathing through his mouth since they'd entered, so it might've just been the smell.

'Like I care.'

Prey glanced over at the lone Night Guard in the room, who was looking back. Prey smiled at him too and started down the steps.

The steps were just as awkwardly steep as last time, but Prey found the decent much easier with the three glow lamps which had been set on the floor. The unoccupied bits of the floor.

Gloom breathed shallowly as he reluctantly went up to the closest sheet, and gingerly grasped the top corners. Down here and this close, the sheets really didn't do anything aside from fuel your imagination.

"Okay. Okay are you two ready?" He asked quietly. There was no real reason to be quiet, there was no one left down here to disturb.

Crimson nodded, still only breathing through his mouth. Prey didn't blame him, the smell of old viscera reeked, and it was only going to get worse.

"Ready?" Prey answered quizzically.

Apparently Gloom was too distracted to notice it was a question and not a confirmation, because he proceeded.

Gritting his teeth, Gloom carefully pulled back the sheet, revealing the screwed up face of the Earth pony. The face was strangely untouched by the rats, but so very pale under the fur. Then the sheet stuck where something black had seeped through, and Gloom had to pull it free with a horrible slurping noise, completely destroying any respect for the dead he'd been trying to maintain.

Prey didn't know why he was bothering in the first place.

There is no such thing as a clean death. That rotten stench in the air? That was from the corpses voiding their bowels. There was no respect in death.

Gloom seemed to realise he was only going to make things worse doing it slowly. He braced himself and with a wrench, pulled the whole sheet off in one go, refusing to stop despite the way it clung.

Below the neck line, the corpse was far less untouched than the face.

Prey's nose scrunched up as the wave of dead gases which'd been

trapped under the sheet were released, but he didn't look away. Muscles in Crimson's neck twitched, as if repressing a gag, but he too remained strong.

Gloom just kind of... Stared at the body.

'-now what am I supposed to do?-', He was thinking.

Prey saw how Gloom's gaze travelled over the corpse and his thoughts turned towards anger once again. '-when I get my hooves on whoever did this...-'

"Okay," Gloom said. "Okay, okay." He repeated. "Okay, this is, er, the first body."

Prey looked at it. They all looked at it.

"It doesn't tell us anything." Prey said.

"...What are you saying?" Gloom asked.

"Looking at this corpse won't tell us anything we don't already know, so why are we looking at it?"

Gloom almost exploded.

"You convince me to let you come down here and then you say there was no point?!"

Prey raised his hooves and backed away, Gloom was angry, tired, and stressed right now. It was a bad time to say what he really thought, so Prey went for being diplomatic. "No sir, you misunderstood me. We already know *how* these ponies died, that's not in question. The claw marks are consistent with a griffin, and there are knife wounds. But this doesn't tell us anything. It doesn't help us catch the griffin and whoever helped him or her."

"What do you mean? And how would you know if he had help or not?"

"We don't know if it's a him or her yet." Prey corrected calmly, "And what I mean is; this griffin has snuck into the city. Even if we learn

his or her claw size, feather colour, height, anything like that, it still isn't going to help us find them since they're obviously hiding. Do you know how many griffins are registered to live in Canterlot, sir?"

Prey waited for a beat before providing the answer, "None. Not a single one. Out of over forty thousand residents, there are none. It's not a question of evidence to identify this griffin. It's question of *catching* the griffin first."

"What about Cloudsdale? There are definitely griffins living in the cloud city." Crimson interjected. His eyes were locked at a point just above the corpses head as he asked.

"Yes there are griffins there, but that still doesn't help us. There's no record of who goes in and out of Canterlot, a census is only taken if they're transporting goods to sell. But that's beside the point. This griffin certainly wouldn't have entered the city through ordinary channels if they came down here to commit murder. They could still be laying low in the city for all we know. Or have already left. Again, the issue is finding them to catch them." Prey said, laying out the problem before them.

Gloom's anger had left him, and he now saw and understood what Prey was trying to say.

It didn't matter what they learnt from these bodies. This wasn't an investigation trying to discover if someone was murdered, they already *knew* it was murder. None of it mattered if they couldn't actually catch the griffin.

"You could have said so before-No, forget it. I don't want to hear your excuse. It's not important to right now. What did you mean by others helping the griffin?" Gloom asked.

"Whoever this griffin is, they must've had help. How else would they get four ponies down here? The griffin did the killing, but others helped him trap them down here first. Two of these ponies were unicorns, there's no way they wouldn't have fought back." Prey gave a small shrug, "Four verses one, odds wouldn't have been in the griffin's favour if that were the case."

"So we have multiple murderers, not just one." Gloom said grimly. "No, that's not correct. The helpers are accomplices. The griffin was the only pony who did any murdering."

"He took pleasure in it too, sir." Crimson said flatly.

Crimson was right. These ponies hadn't just been killed, they'd been brutalized before they'd died. Gloom looked at the sheets covered in seeping stains. '-this is disgusting-'

"We may not be able to learn anything about this griffin, but we can still find something out about the ponies who helped him. There may be no griffins in Canterlot, but there are plenty of ponies." Gloom said.

"The Lieutenant already said they've found many traces of different coat fur. But that doesn't help us find the exact blue, white, pink, or whatever colour pony the hair came from." Prey said. He was shooting down the Sargent's ideas one by one, and he hoped Gloom wouldn't get angry at him again just for being practical.

"We might still find something on the bodies that could help us identify any pony suspects." Gloom said.

"Well, unless it was unicorns." Prey said. Telekinesis or stunning spells wouldn't leave anything that could be tracked back to anyone for certain.

"Magic leaves traces. We could get another unicorn to scan for it can't we sir?" Crimson suggested.

"Unfortunately not." Gloom sighed. He drew the sheet back up over the corpse, as it seemed examining them would serve no purpose except helping them all loose sleep. "A unicorn could scan this cellar yes, but they wouldn't find anything. I'm told unless it's really powerful, complex, or dark magic, the spell signature will have faded into untraceable within a few minutes."

Crimson looked at the bodies around them, the stench of death filling the air. It was like standing in raw sewerage, the longer you did the more familiar it got but the worse it also became. "What are

we doing down here then sir?"

'-that's the question and I don't know. I haven't a clue what to do next. I haven't had a clue since I took this post-', Gloom thought. "Our duty. Looking for clues."

"Yes sir, but..." Crimson hesitated, "*How* sir? If I may ask."

It was Prey who answered, come to Gloom's rescue, "The bodies won't tell us anything we don't already know. But this cellar and the tunnel to the warehouse could tell us a lot."

It was obvious neither Crimson or Gloom had thought of that. A dead body was the center of attention in any room, and four of them all the more so.

"Yes," Gloom realised, relief evident in his posture, "We can search the room for other clues."

'-and not have a child prod dead bodies for them instead-'

Probably for the first time, Gloom and Crimson both turned to properly look around the hidden cellar without getting stuck on the four bodies and puddles of hardened blood in the middle.

The cellar's walls were thick stone blocks, much like the grey floor. The door on the far wall which Gloom had chased the rats out of was just a wooden plank construct, tightly fitted. It was set above floor height, and was only secured by a single dead bolt, likely there only for convenience sake. If someone had gotten in this far, locks weren't going to stop them.

Also in the corners of the room where two stacks of those same flat crates from upstairs, although these stacks were far shorter. Only five crates in one and seven in the other, and all just as empty.

"There's a lot of dust in the corners. Spider webs near the ceiling too." Crimson said. He'd stepped away from the bodies the moment Gloom had made the alternate suggestion of checking the room instead, and was now looking anywhere but behind him for clues.

"Any tracks in the dust? Marks maybe?" Gloom asked.

"No sir. I mean, no identifiable pony marks. All I can find is rat tracks and droppings." Crimson answered.

"Oh. Keep looking."

Prey started checking the crates carefully. They really were the exact same make as those upstairs. Nothing fancy, likely some lumber yard mass-produced nothing but these cheap crates. Hmm.

"It would be good if we could find out who supplies these crates and to whom. If there are only a few companies in Canterlot who use them, we could maybe narrow it down." Prey mused.

"Narrow it down to what?" Gloom asked.

"Probably nothing. But we think the crates held fabric, yes?"

Gloom looked at the empty crates, "That's what I thought and what Lieutenant Screech seemed to think too." He agreed.

"Likely yes then. Where did all the fabric go though? What was so important about cloth that four ponies were killed over it?" Prey asked, prodding a hoof into the crevices of the crates.

Gloom thought about that. "Are you saying you think somepony-no, this griffin, killed them over fabrics?" Gloom asked disbelievingly.

"When you say it like that, no. But then why did the griffin kill them? What was this hideout used for? Why has it now been abandoned? Do they not need it anymore?" Prey said, posing one question after another.

"I don't know. Why do you think?" Gloom asked, frustration colouring his tone.

Prey glanced back reproachfully, ribbon trailing over his shoulder. "I don't know either, sir. I'm just voicing it out loud so we can all think about it."

Gloom mentally slapped himself, '-get a grip. Prey shouldn't be down here but he's still trying to help. At least he isn't looking at the bodies any more-', Gloom thought with guilty relief.

Crimson's yellow eyes scanned the crate stack, "I think they left because they were finished here. And the four weren't killed over fabrics. That's the only thing that makes any sense sir."

"What?" Gloom asked, having been distracted by his own grim thoughts.

"What Prey asked. About why they would abandon this hideout. I think it's because they had no more use for it. They weren't expecting anypony else to ever come along. It was only luck we found this place when we did sir." Crimson said, explaining himself.

Gloom looked between Crimson and Prey, who shrugged back. "That seems to make sense." He agreed. Prey had already figured that much out, but he couldn't seem like he was the one with all the answers. Well he could, but eventually it would make Gloom suspicious that he knew more than he should.

"The reason also was not this fabric. There aren't any fabrics which are so valuable that somepony would be willing to kill over. Are there sir?" Crimson asked, double checking.

"No. Who would kill over some piece of cloth?" Gloom said confidently, seeing what Crimson meant but not seeing the way Prey's hoof twitched towards the ribbon behind his ear, or rather towards the memory of a different ribbon.

"Or if there is such a cloth, I don't think they would be transported in rough crates like these." Gloom amended, running a hoof across the crude grain of the wood.

Prey gave a hum of agreement, "So we're pretty sure that whatever they were doing here was not because of cloth goods. So what where they really smuggling in or out?"

"You think it's smuggling?" Gloom asked.

"Can you think of anything else that fits this, sir?" Prey asked, sweeping his gaze meaningfully around the cellar.

"So it was simple greed," Crimson stated quietly, "For greed these ponies were murdered. How atrocious."

Gloom was in complete agreement. Prey kept quiet and looked away. He'd played a minor role in all these deaths too.

"Is there anything else down here?" Gloom asked, looking slowly around, eyes lingering heavily on the four 'things' in the middle of the floor. The cellar had nothing in it aside from the crates, dust, the recently placed glow lamps, the bodies, and the three of them.

"I...have nothing further sir I don't think." Crimson said. His eyes were drawn inexorably back like a load stone to the same four things Gloom's had been.

"Prey?" Gloom prompted after a moment when he heard no agreement from the lamb.

"One second." Prey said without turning. He was poking around in the crates again.

Gloom waited for ten, then prompted him again, "Can we leave and go check the warehouse next?"

'-and get us out of this Tartarus hole-', He added.

"One second." Prey repeated, closely scrutinising one of the bottom crates from a distance of about two inches.

"Prey, if you've found something, good. If not, can we please get out of here?"

"Just a moment," Prey insisted, worming a hoof into the bottom crate, reaching for something in the back. "Almost-Got it." He said, pulling his hoof out.

"Got what? What is it?" Gloom asked starting forwards. Prey's hoof didn't hold anything he could see.

Prey squinted at his hoof, then delicately gave it a lick. "Hnng." He commented, sticking out his tongue.

'-was that the hoof he dipped into...?-', Gloom quickly cut that thought off. "What are you doing Prey?"

"That was a few grains of salt." Prey answered.

Gloom forgot about trying to get out of here as soon as possible. "Salt? Are you certain it's salt?" He asked, trotting over.

"*Was* salt yes. Didn't taste like normal salt, so unrefined drug salt." Prey answered.

"Why did you eat it then?"

"To see if it really was salt."

"It's a drug, you shouldn't have eaten it."

"A few grains isn't going to do anything, sir."

"What if it hadn't been salt, but something else?" Gloom challenged him, pulling crates down from the stack to get to the one Prey had found the salt in.

"Well it wasn't, and I had a hunch it was salt. I was just testing it."

"Well don't, that was evidence. And there's no more in here either." Gloom said, jabbing a hoof at the now uncovered crate.

True to the Sargent's words, there really was nothing on the wood, not even a single grain of white.

Prey peered over the top. "Huh. Did I really get the only few grains in the whole box? That's unfortunate."

"Unfortunate? Unfortunate? You don't say?" Gloom asked loudly, wing waving around the whole cellar, "Four murders which now look to be linked to the smuggling salt drug trade, and it's unfortunate?"

Prey backed off and gave Gloom a minute to calm down. He knew the Sargent was still angry about him coming down here again, along with how he'd acted on their first trip. Prey hadn't done anything wrong, so he still didn't get why everyone was so angry, but he knew not to escalate it if he didn't have to.

"So this is somehow part of the drug trade we've been investigating." Gloom said after taking a minute.

"This is not the kind of breakthrough I was hoping for sir." Crimson said. He was still trying to only breathe through his mouth in the stench. Prey and Gloom weren't as affected by it, or maybe they were better at ignoring it. Considering what Crimson's special talent was, it was probably the first.

"At least we found something more before we left." Gloom said, still examining the empty crate. "All those boxes upstairs, do you think they used to hold salt too?"

"I don't think so sir. Lieutenant Screech said they couldn't find anything in those crates, and there were a lot more crates up there than down here. Plus, they've had longer to check those ones over. I think they would've found at least one trace of salt if there were any to find, sir." Crimson said.

'-he has a point-'

Those were unlikely odds. For half a second, Gloom even considered if Prey might be lying, but; '-why would he even do that?-'

"Just luck or coincidence there was a trace left in this one then?" Prey suggested, shrugging to show he didn't know either.

"It must be. Smuggling unrefined salt... I didn't expect to stumble onto a drug den so soon," Gloom said shaking his head, "Alright, now let's *please* get out of here and over to the warehouse."

They got to the warehouse by taking the door which lead into the secret tunnel. Unlike the cellar, the passageway was roughly cut stone blocks, with bracing support beams set every yard or so. It wasn't far, Prey counted it as only about thirty yards until they came to the steps up at the other end.

This second trap door was already open, letting in light from the warehouse above to provide some illumination. If not, Prey

would've been completely reliant on his ears to follow the path Gloom and Crimson took.

"You chased the rats down here sir, didn't you?" Crimson asked as they got to the end.

'-skittering rats, little teeth chewing on flesh-', Gloom pushed the thought away. "That's right."

"Well they're all gone now sir." Crimson said.

Gloom frowned, peering back to where the shadows were thickest in the middle of the tunnel, but obviously didn't see any movement of little bodies back there, "Perhaps they all ran out when this trapdoor was opened?" He suggested.

"Or there's a hole to the outside somewhere. There's no water in here, so they must have found some way out." Prey said. The who and where for the rats was unimportant. The how and why were all that might matter.

"We should ask around if someone's bought a lot of rats recently. Find out if anyone offered to buy rats alive from the rat catchers rather than disposing of them." Prey said as they started up the steps.

"It's somepony. And I don't think they kill the rats. I think they just trap them and then take them somewhere outside Canterlot and release them." Gloom said.

'-but this time, they were released to eat the evidence by some psychopath-', Gloom thought, visibly swallowing.

"What?" Prey asked in surprise, "They don't just kill-? No, of course they don't. Not even vermin." He muttered.

The three of them emerged up into the warehouse. There was a Night Guard thestral standing at the half open warehouse's side door, who turned to look as they came up. On seeing it was the ISND, he nodded and went back to watching the approach from outside.

Crimson took a deep breath of the warehouse air. It was stale, with a tinge of mould, and a thousand times better than the stink of dead flesh.

They looked around. The warehouse looked like a fairly flimsy structure, almost entirely made of light weight wood, with a number of tall supporting pillars rising from the floor to support the flat roof and rafters.

The large pane windows did let in quite a lot of the evening light, so it wasn't difficult to see that there was not much in the warehouse. Comparatively anyway. The stacks of boxes only took up about one fifth of the available floor space.

"I thought it would be fuller." Crimson said, looking around.

"None of those are the same type of crates from the cellar." Gloom said. It was the first thing all three of them had looked for, even if it was unlikely they'd find any. Screech would surely have already mentioned such an obvious clue when he gave the warehouse a once over.

These crates and boxes around them were of a different make to the flat, open topped type they were looking for.

"What's in these crates then?" Gloom asked, stepping up to a selection of boxes that were about twice the size of Prey. They were nailed shut, so it wasn't immediately obvious. Prey read the brand stamped into the side of the crate. "Sanders and Partners inc." He read aloud.

"Who's that supposed to be when they're at home?" Gloom asked.

"No idea, sir." Prey said, moving onto the next crate.

"Crimson?" Gloom tried.

"No sir. No idea either."

"Well, I'm sure this Corporal Humming will have a full list of everyone who stores and sells from this warehouse. We can check all the businesses when she comes back with the list." Prey said.

Gloom wasn't even trying to correct him for his use of every*body* this time.

"We'll need to investigate all of them then. Starting with which ever ponies uses those flat crates from the cellar. If they're not supplied here... I'm not sure what. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it." Gloom said with a quiet sigh.

Prey perched himself on a crate, legs dangling. "How about you get some other Night Guards to go and investigate what each of the companies using this warehouse supply? Order them to poke around and try and find if any of them are suspicious. Captain Nighthawk said we could have all the help and any resources we need, remember?"

It looked like Gloom had indeed forgotten that.

The ISND was young, but they were already used to doing all the work alone. Like with Wheat Plow's trial, their reports were the only ones used in the prosecution. Sure, there'd been lots of Night Guards bringing them the information, but it had still very much been the ISND pulling their weight. The Night Guard was too small and overworked for it to be any other way.

"I think by this point it's fairly obvious this griffin is either part of the salt drug trade, or a rival trader. He, or she, killed the ponies who were smuggling in salt hidden in crates, which were brought into this warehouse. They then came through the passage at night, and took the crates full of hidden salt back into the cellar. And now for some reason, they've shut down this part of their operation, and disappeared." Prey said, summing up the basics of what they knew, or at least suspected.

Now that Prey had put it all out there in one go, Gloom had to stop and clearly think about what to do next. However Gloom's thoughts couldn't help but keep going back to cellar across the street. But Gloom did recognise how he was getting side tracked.

'-c'mon Dusky, you need to think beyond that-', Gloom told himself. '-if you can't, this could happen again-'

Prey pretended not to notice as Gloom's eyes flicked to his hoof once again, and shuddered.

'-but how does it all join together? What's the path that'll lead to solving these murders?-', Gloom asked himself, looking around the warehouse.

The unrefined salt, the secret passage way, the dragon, this griffin, the bodies, the cellar, the crates, the disturbance report, the rats, the warehouse, the condemned building, all of it.

'-how do I solve this?-'

'Come on, you need to get over yourself and harden up. I'm not going back to prison because Luna no longer finds me useful.' Prey thought.

'-no-', Gloom thought, angry at himself for forgetting this once again, '-no how do *we* solve this?-'

"We," Gloom began, "Need a plan."

---I---

30.2 Gloom settles on us

"We," Gloom began, "Need a plan."

Gloom rapped his hoof sharply on the house door.

Thack-Thack-Thack

"This is the Night Guard. We're here to speak with Mr. Prime Miles."

The three of them waited on the porch steps. They were in Lower Canterlot, and it was approaching six in the evening. They still had a good couple of hours before Celestia lowered the sun. Not that it would make any difference to Gloom and Crimson. Prey's stomach was complaining it had not gotten breakfast, and his legs were telling him they'd done far too much running around trying to keep up, and his head was topping them all, whining that it wanted to sleep.

Too bad none of that was going to happen any time soon.

'Well, at least Gloom and Crimson likely feel almost as bad.' Prey thought. Or even worse. It was only this morning they'd discovered the mangled remains of the quadruple murders. That kind of thing tended to stay with you. Like a scar.

Gloom knocked loudly again, "Open up, this is the Night Guard."

Prey glanced sideways past Crimson up and down the narrow street. There were still a few ponies going about, but not half so many as there had been only an hour ago.

"This is the correct address sir." Crimson reaffirmed, looking at the house number.

"Yes, thank you. But perhaps he's out." Gloom said.

"No, he's definitely in. The curtains aren't drawn, and someone's recently watered the lavender." Prey said, nodding to the lone pot

plant which could be seen on the window sill. "He's just being slow in answering the door."

Gloom and Crimson looked at where Prey'd indicated, seeing what he'd pointed out. Gloom knocked a third time, even louder. "Mr. Prime Miles, this is the Night Guard. Open up."

Gloom was usually a very patient person. With what had happened to day, being polite and patient were the last things on his mind. However it became apparent why it'd taken the house's sole occupant so long to answer their front door when he finally opened it.

The unicorn Prime Miles, the one who'd been beaten up two, now three days ago and who hadn't been able to identify his attackers, stood before them in the doorway.

He had two black eyes, the right already turning yellow under marine blue fur, and a split lip. The attackers hadn't stopped with roughing up his face, he had wrappings around each of his legs to help brace them, and horseshoe shaped bruises decorated Prime Miles barrel and flanks. He stood bracing a leg against the door, hunched over in a way to no doubt alleviate one pain or another.

Prey ran an experienced eye over Prime Miles.

'No bones broken, at most a cracked rib. No lasting harm inflicted. No deep tissue damage either it seems. I estimate full recovery time at three weeks if he takes it slow.' And currently, he was was staring wide eyed (well, as wide as you could with two black eyes), at Gloom.

That was not what Prey was currently interested in. The fear normal ponies held for their thestral brethren was old news. The ISND were here because they thought Prime Miles might be able to provide them a tip off about the salt dealers, but the answers Prime Miles might provide wasn't the cause of Prey's attention either.

What Prey was *very* interested in knowing, was how Prime Miles had been overpowered and systematically given this warning beating. Prime Miles was a unicorn.

"Yes?" Prime Miles tried, then cleared his throat and tried again, "Yes?" He repeated nervously, sounding as rough as he looked. Prime Miles hadn't noticed Prey yet, as the lamb had angled himself behind Crimson for precisely that reason. In return however, Prey was studying him very closely.

'He's a unicorn. How did he end up in this state?'

It made absolutely no sense to Prey, for a very simple reason. Unicorns had magic.

Defending himself should've been child's play for Prime Miles.

There were a variety of stunning spells that could be learnt by any unicorn with practice, plenty of which weren't even attribute restricted. Prey could not conceive that someone given such a powerful gift like magic would not learn such offensive spells. It would be the very first thing Prey'd do if he had a horn.

"You are Mr. Prime Miles, who was assaulted and hospitalized in the Canterlot General Hospital and released two days ago, correct?" Gloom asked, getting the formalities out of the way, even if the answer was plain for them all to see.

"Yes. That's me." Prime Miles answered, ears flattening.

Prey was still privately considering the unicorn, like he would a puzzle piece that didn't fit.

'His horn's intact, nor is he a magical cripple, because he used magic to open the door.' Even if there were a retarded unicorn who'd delayed learning any offensive spells, or who'd been taken by surprise and didn't have the time to cast one, every unicorn had telekinesis. That alone should've been sufficient for Prime Miles to defend himself with.

'Ah, that's why. I'm being stupid,' Prey realised, 'The group that beat him up obviously had a unicorn too.'

That explained it all. One unicorn to counter another. That's how they must've overpowered Prime Miles. Unicorns were dangerous, so of course they would've brought one of their own.

"May we come in? We have some questions that you need to answer for us. I don't think on the doorstep is appropriate." Gloom said briskly.

Prime looked very reluctant at the idea, but he could hardly say no to a Guard, "If, if we must." He said, shuffling aside.

'-why're they sending another vampony to me? Disgusting cat eyes make my fur crawl-', Prime Miles thought, shuddering. None of the ISND moved to step inside however.

Gloom stood there on the doorstep until it dawned on Prime that they were waiting for him to lead the way into his house, so they could follow him in. They weren't letting an unknown get behind them, and they would close the door after themselves, not him. It wasn't a declaration of mistrust, but more just another one of those thestral precautions.

Prime however was from a completely different society, and he interpreted it as one. His ears drooped further, "Ah, er, do come in then. Follow me." He said, limping backwards.

Gloom gave a single nod, "Thank you. Prey, shut the door behind you."

Prime Miles nearly fell over as he spun around, eyes bulging.

"What?" He cried, having completely misheard. '-he's here to drink my blood, he even said it!-'

Prime found three pairs of eyes blinking at him, two yellow and one sky blue, halfway through the door. "Ah, a sheep?" Prime Miles mumbled as everyone else looked at him quizzically.

"This is Prey," Gloom said slowly, "That's his name. He's with us."

"Uh, I, was just, uh..." Prime Miles mumbled and shuffled his hooves in embarrassment, before he gave up trying to find an excuse and just led them into his sitting room.

The room was a mess.

Crumpled newspapers, marine blue coat fur on the floor cushions, discarded blankets. It was evident that Prime Miles lived alone and had a bad habit of leaving everything right where he dropped it. "Er, just push whatever off and take a seat." Prime said, not looking anyone in the eye.

"We'll stand." Gloom said.

"Oh um, sorry about, about the mess then." Prime Miles apologised, now not even sure if he was allowed to sit down in his own house, or if he was supposed to now stand too.

"Take a seat." Gloom told him.

Prime Miles ears fell again, "Right, right. Sorry." He said, lowering himself onto the only unlittered cushion seat with a stifled groan of pain.

The stallion was laughably scared of offending the thestral by saying the wrong thing, but then again, he'd been beaten a few days ago. He had the right to be skittish.

"I'm, er, I'm assuming that this is a follow up interview?" Prime asked, not meeting either of the other ponies yellow eyes, and trying not to stare at the completely out of place lamb either for that matter.

"No actually, it's not." Gloom said bluntly. He was not being the 'good Guard' today.

Prey could practically hear the unicorns heart speed up at Gloom's words, which made Prey very alarmed. Scared people were liable to lash out. Prey focused all his attention onto Prime Miles horn. If the unicorn showed any hint of planning to attack, Prey was out of here.

"So, so what's this about then?"

"My name is Sargent Gloom. You have something the Night Guard needs. You're going to give it to us. Sound simple enough?"

Prime Miles gulped at Gloom's flat tone, his mind going unbidden to

the fact that, '-these vamponies serve Nightmare Moon-'.

"What do you mean?" He asked, trying (and failing), to put on a brave face.

"We want the name, location, and contact method for your salt supplier." Gloom said bluntly.

Prime Miles jerked, "I-I, I don't know any drug dealers. And I'm not a salt user." He protested.

"Don't lie. You've all the obvious tells. Skittishness, thin stature, twitches, unkept appearance, untidiness and loss of hygiene. Need I go on?" Gloom asked, casting a judgemental eye over the living room full of its clutter and unwashed dishes.

"No no, that's not it, I'm hurt, that's all. This is just a general state of things until I get better and get back to cleaning." Prime hastily said.

"You don't need to bother lying Prime Miles. You're broke, and you've no bits. You spent it all on your salt drug habit. Look at all this mess, do you even have any food in the house?" Gloom asked.

"I just haven't been out shopping recently, that's all it is." Prime Miles felt the need to protest, despite the fact none of the ISND had actually been around to check his cupboards and prove the validity of Gloom's claim.

"Let's try something else then. You were beaten by the drug dealers because you couldn't pay. I want to know who."

"I don't know, I already told the you guys. I have no idea who they where. I've never seen the ponies who attacked me before in my life." Prime Miles said.

"Then they were merely thugs from some other part of the salt operation." Gloom shrugged, "Give us your dealer's name instead."

Prime Miles almost slipped up and answered on reflex, but he managed to stop himself. "A-I'm not buying salt from anypony. I don't know anypony like that either." He said instead.

"You're wasting our time. We put the evidence together and it's obvious. You were given a warning beating because you couldn't pay your debts to fund your salt habit. There is a far bigger crime going on, and frankly, I don't have the time to deal with you. Just admit it, so we can get on with doing our job." Gloom said impatiently.

"But I don't know any-"

"Shut it. Look, I'll be straight with you. I haven't slept more than thirty hours in a week. I have just finished convicting the leader of the Crop Sharers, I've had to deal with idiots getting in the Night Guard's way on a nightly basis, stubborn farmers, corrupt sheriffs, riots, and many other things which I am not at liberty to discuss, but if you knew the details of, you'd cry. I am not in a patient mood. Let's skip the bit where you try to deny your guilt and I'll skip the bit where I prove it." Gloom said flatly.

Prime Miles ears went flat. It looked like he was agonising over giving in, but then he winced and rubbed the bruises across his barrel, "I don't know anypony." He said, looking at the dirty carpet at his hooves.

"Don't lie!" Gloom stamped a hoof, hard, and Prime Miles jumped.

"I'm going to give you one more chance. If you lie to me again, we're going to arrest you and take you before Princess Luna. Let's see you try and lie to her face. And yes, it's that serious. You'll be going before the Princess." Gloom bluffed at the horrified look on Prime Miles face.

Seems Gloom had somehow picked up on the unicorns fear of the Night Guard and the recently reformed Nightmare Moon, and was using it to his advantage. Although really? It wasn't much of a deduction. Almost all ponies were scared of Luna and the Night Guard. It just varied to what extent from pony to pony.

"N-no, I'm sorry but I can't help you. I don't know anything."

"He's lying sir. I hate liars." Crimson said, face blank of any emotion.

"I know. Alright, arrest him. Her majesty's Night Court starts in an hour and a half. We can put him first in line." Gloom ordered.

"Yes sir." Crimson stepped forwards, just as expressionless as ever. Prime Miles gaped.

"W-what?"

"Did you think I was bluffing? I gave you your chance, and you wasted it." Gloom said coldly, unmoving as Crimson roughly pulled Prime Miles to his hooves with no consideration to his injuries.

"Ahh, Ow! No, you can't do this."

"Prey, get the door." Gloom ordered, turning to leave, "It's a long walk back to the Palace. If he collapses halfway there, you and I can drag him between us Crimson."

That more than anything else convinced Prime Miles this wasn't a bluff, that Gloom really was going to follow through, and that this really was indeed happening to him. Prey listened as Prime Miles thought about how far it was to the Palace. How bad his legs were. How Gloom and Crimson would drag him if he collapsed. How much it hurt to even stand. And who he was going to have to face at the end of the road.

Prime Miles was not a brave person. Perhaps he had been before the beating, but not anymore.

Prey had already pointed out the opportunity this presented before they'd knocked. If Prime Miles was a salt addict, he likely had next to no will power to begin with, and second, he was very unlikely to be brave enough to call any bluff.

They knew this was the first time Prime Miles had been beaten, because he hadn't ended up in hospital before. So before this, Prime Miles had thought he could continue to get away with defaulting on his debt, naively believing that the people he was dealing with wouldn't follow through on their threats. No one believes it'll happen to them.

And then he'd been cornered and beaten.

A beating did one of two things to a person. Either it made them more stubborn and rebellious, or it broke them and made them give in.

A beating was painful, the bruises lingered visibly for weeks where all could see. Prime Miles most likely pissed blood when he went to the toilet. He probably couldn't sleep or lie down properly either. Any false self-image of invulnerability Prime Miles had held was destroyed two nights ago.

Prime Miles would likely never be the same stallion again. He wasn't someone who could mentally shrug off what had happened to him. The mental effects of being so helpless would linger for the rest of his life.

Beating was a crude but very effective strategy. Whether Prime Miles had tried to cheat the drug dealers, or simply been unable to pay, the results of their warning would be the same. Next time the salt dealers came knocking, Prime Miles would be much more humble and willing to deliver.

Prey had summed it up quite simply. "Right now, Prime Miles is shaken and scared. Any threats or intimidation we use will be incredibly effective on him."

Gloom's face hadn't changed, but he'd been so angry at Prey's logic that he'd punched the closest warehouse support beam hard enough to make it vibrate. Prey had kept his head down on the trip here, and not complained even once about the fast pace.

'I'm not the one who beat this guy up, why's Gloom so angry at me?' Prey had silently fumed the whole way.

At least Crimson had understood his point without overreacting, even if Gloom hadn't. Well, actually, now that he thought about it, Crimson still hadn't looked at Prey since the warehouse.

But now, Gloom had gone ahead and acted on his advice anyway.

'So what was the big fuss even about? Hypocrite.' Prey thought, as Prime Miles began to panic.

"No, I'll-wait, listen, I'll talk I'll talk!" Prime Miles knew he was condemning himself, but he was convinced there was no way out. He bowed his head in shame, "There's a pony, his name's Amber Beach. He, he sells salt."

Crimson stopped pulling Prime Miles towards the door as Gloom waved him down.

"Who is Amber Beach and where do you meet him? Earth Pony, unicorn, or pegasus? What coat colour and cutie mark?" Gloom demanded. He didn't act surprised that Prime Miles had confessed, like he'd known all along he would.

"There's a meeting place. If, if you go there at four o'clock, on Fridays and Saturdays. He's only there for ten minutes if you want to f-find him."

Prime Miles still hadn't yet been able to bring himself to verbalising an admission of his own personal involvement. Prime said '*he* sells salt' and 'there's *a* meeting place', not '*I* buy salt' or 'where *I* meet him'. The shame was too much to admit it seemed, even after he'd been caught.

"What type of pony is Amber Beach and what does he look like?" Gloom pressed.

"I, I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know!?"

Prime Miles cringed, "He's always wearing a long coat and hat! He could be an Earth pony or pegasus or even a unicorn, but I'm not sure. His cutie mark is always covered too, but I do know his coat colour, he's yellow. Like a pale yellow. And his mane's brown. And and, his eyes are also brown, I think." He hastily said.

"How old is he?" Gloom asked.

"Uh, I don't know." Prime Miles looked at the floor again.

"Then take an educated guess."

"T-thirtyish maybe?"

Gloom grunted, "That's very little to go on. We don't know if Amber Beach is even his real name. Friday and Saturday are too far away to wait for, and no way to find him before then." He said, mostly speaking to himself. Gloom glanced up sharply, "Do you know any other salt dealers or have a way to get in contact, or is there anypony else you know who uses salt?"

"I, um, I don't. It's just me. I'm sorry." Prime admitted in a small voice.

Gloom and Crimson shared a look. It said, 'This gives us nothing'.

"What about the people who administered the beating? We might yet be able to find them, sir." Prey spoke up. Making helpful suggestions would hopefully get Gloom's off his back.

Prey suggestion was a good idea. If this Amber Beach wasn't going to turn up until Friday, four days from now, then perhaps they could identify someone else instead.

"Good point. Prime Miles," Gloom asked, turning back to the hunched unicorn, "What do you remember of the ponies who attacked you?"

If Prime Miles had been nervous about informing on his salt supplier, he was now doubly so about identifying his attackers.

'A reasonable, if misguided fear.' Prey thought.

Out of the two parties, Amber Beach was not the one who'd beaten Prime Miles. As a result, Miles was more scared of the thugs. He somehow hadn't drawn the connection that it'd been Amber Beach who'd likely gotten the beating arranged in the first place.

"I, I don't, I don't know who they were. It was dark, and they wore masks." Prime answered, eyes darting away.

"Oh come now, they must've told you something." Prey said, smiling innocently at Prime. He didn't want to speak to the unicorn, but it seems he had no choice. Best to not seem like any type of threat

while he did so then.

"...Uhhh."

Not for the first time since they'd gotten here, Prey heard Prime Miles wondering, '-what in Equestria is a little filly being lead around by these Nightmare Guards for?-'

How he'd forgotten Prey was a ram, not an ewe, in less than ten minutes was beyond Prey. Perhaps the beating had done more damage than the doctors had realised?

Prey increased the width of his smile, "They said something, didn't they?" He asked again. Gloom stopped what he was thinking about to pay close attention to whatever Prime Miles was about to answer.

Prime Miles glanced uncertainly at the Gloom and Crimson, but found them both watching him intently for his answer. He ducked his head again rather than face their yellow eyes. "...Yes, they did say some stuff. But why's that important?"

Prey tapped his hooves innocently together and looked up off towards the ceiling as if thinking how best to explain something complicated. "Well, I don't think they'd just silently beat you up. That wouldn't make any sense. They were there to serve as a warning to pay on time in the future. Otherwise, there'd be no point if you didn't know why they'd been sent."

Prime Miles gaped for the second time. Gloom's muzzle twisted and Crimson's own wings twitched at Prey's performance. Once, they would've simply dismissed it as harmless mockery, if snide. Now they saw his performance as a mask and were wary of what it covered.

'Who do they think they are to judge me? They're covering secrets with their own masks too.' Prey thought.

"So, what did the thugs say?" Prey asked brightly, not getting distracted.

"They, I mean when I was, when they..." Prime Miles voice dropped

with shame, "...Beat me up, they said that I should think twice before I try to tell them no. I even said I would have the money, and they still kept beating me!" Prime Miles protested at the unfairness of it all.

"What were the exact words they used?" Gloom asked.

"I, it's a bit hard to remember. I think, I think what he said was; 'We don't like ponies who don't keep their promises. This is a just a warning, you don't want us to come back if'n you don't have Beach's gold next time.' That's what he said." Prime recalled with a shiver.

'-oh Celestia, how am I going to get that many bits by Saturday?-'

"Was this pony the only one who spoke?" Gloom asked him.

"No, just...they said a few things to each other when they were..." Primes voice dropped again, "Beating me. I don't remember clearly. It's hard to, to... Yeah."

"How many attackers where there?" Crimson stepped in to ask.

"Three. But I think there was another one at the end of the street as a lookout. I think."

"So four total. Please describe everything about them you can remember." Gloom said.

"It was dark. But they were big, and strong, I know that."

"How about a lisp or accent? Any defining features you can remember?" Gloom asked.

"Yes, actually, now that you say that. One of them had a strong Trottingham accent." Prime Miles admitted reluctantly.

"Where they all stallions?" Gloom asked.

"Um, yes?" Prime said uncertainly.

"Any idea what pony race where they?"

Prime Miles actually had to stop and think about that one for a second. Prey would've thought it'd be one of the easiest details to remember. "I don't know about the look out. If he was a look out, I don't know if he actually was-"

"The three that you did know then." Gloom broke in impatiently.

"Uh, one was an Earth pony, he's the one that spoke, with the Trottingham accent. The other two were unicorns." Prime Miles answered.

'I knew it! They *did* bring unicorn back up.' Prey thought, vindicated.

"Good. Anything else you can tell us? This could deeply affect the next few days of your future. I advise you to think carefully." Gloom warned him.

Prime Miles' face screwed up, his bruised black eyes standing out as he tried to find something else to satisfy Gloom with. But he was eventually forced to admit; "No. I can't think of anything else."

'-this trip was a complete waste of time-', Gloom thought. It wasn't really, they'd gotten a tip off about this Amber Beach, but understandably that time frame wasn't soon enough for Gloom.

"Come on Prey, Crimson. We're leaving. There's nothing more we can learn here." Gloom said.

"Wait, what about me?" Prime Miles protested, staggering upright on wobbly legs.

Gloom regarded him as Prey and Crimson continued moving towards the door, "What about you?"

"W-what am I going to do? I told you all that, s-so what's going to happen to me?" Prime asked, desperation in his tone.

"That's not our problem. Now that you've confessed, the Guard will be over early tomorrow morning to pick you up. For your sake, you'd better be here." Gloom said coldly.

The unicorns legs gave out and he sagged back onto the floor cushion, "But, but..."

"Did we promise you anything? No. You made this storm cloud and now you've got to ride it." Gloom said, looking down at him. Prey approved of Gloom's words. They didn't have time to be wasting on this pony.

"But..." Miles protested weakly one more time as the ISND got ready to leave.

Gloom let out a long groan and rubbed his eyes, his conscience digging at him.

"Seriously, if you know what's good for you, be here tomorrow. This is an opportunity to turn over a new leaf, don't waste it. Clean this place up, get better, and get clean. If you have family or friends, tell them what's going on. Join a recovery program. If you have any salt, throw it out tonight. You can do it if really try. You have a chance, but nopony but you can take that first step." Gloom told him.

"But I don't know if I can-"

"Tough. Stallion up. Nopony else is going to do it for you."

They left Prime Miles scared, bewildered and possibly feeling like he wanted to cry, but Gloom hoped that they'd also left behind at least a, '-small chance he'll take the plunge and fix himself. There's not much else good that can come out of all this-'

For the second time that day, they made the trip back to the Palace in grim silence as dusk approached. En-route, they went past a number of both Lower and Upper class bars which were exceptionally full. The pony occupants of Canterlot were out in force, celebrating the "Glorious defeat of the dragon".

What defeat? There'd been no battle.

Again, Prey felt nothing but contempt for these ponies who hadn't

done a thing to defend themselves. They'd merely been saved by their Sun Queen's existence. How had the dragon been driven off? No one had seen fit to tell the ISND yet.

The walk back did nothing for Gloom or Crimson's temperament either. It just gave them time to dwell on the cellar again and let the murder scene darken their thoughts. It even dragged heavily enough upon Crimson's mind to lower his mental walls briefly once again, although Prey didn't overhear anything deeply insightful.

'-was that only this morning we found the trap door? Already it feels days have passed-'

Gloom's own thoughts were rather predictably back on; '-little eyes in lamp light. I hate rats-'

From inside the hall, came the rowdy sound of Royal Guards laughing over the dragon.

Gloom looked at the mess hall doors.

"I don't know if I can do this." He muttered to himself, thinking of all the ponies they would have to face inside.

"We need to eat sometime." Prey pointed out.

Gloom's teeth clenched, then relaxed. Prey's words were merely practical, and, '-what else did I honestly expect Prey to say?-'

It may seem heartless, but he knew Prey was right about the ISND needing to eat. Captain Nighthawk had even said as much himself.

'-if not Prey might get sick again. It was only yesterday the trial happened-', He thought. Guilt settled in Gloom's thoughts on top of the anger, exhaustion, hunger and stress of the day. '-sick one day then I'm dragging him off to a murder scene the next. Luna's mane, how did I get us all into this?-'

Prey was right. Not eating would just make them all feel worse.

"In we go then. No point stalling." Gloom said heavily.

If the Royal Guards prideful attitude had been obnoxious from outside the mess hall, it was all the louder and more unpleasant once inside. Their attitude was an exact copy of the citizens inhabiting the bars the ISND had passed on their return.

Looking, Prey saw no sign of Scenic Paint or Quick Draw among their ranks.

Those two must've been sworn to silence though, or else the Royal Guards probably wouldn't all be celebrating like this. 'It's only a matter of time until it leaks out though. Ponies are appalling at keeping their mouths shut.'

Crimson only managed to clear half his plate, and Gloom hardly touched his own food. Prey ignored Gloom's sick look as he continued to wolf down his own food as fast as possible. 'Starving yourself isn't going to bring them back. Life continues on, and we all have to cross the river some day.'

Gloom abruptly pushed his tray away and stood, "Enough. Captain Nighthawk and the Lieutenants are waiting."

Captain Nighthawk was tapping his hoof on the desk again. *Tap. Tap. Tap*

Screech, Starry Wing, Gloom and Crimson stood silently around the crowded table, silently waiting for their captain to speak. Prey stood a little further back, on top of a stool so he could see. His head still only just poked up above the table top. The honour it was to be included in such a high profile, secret meeting with the three highest ranking Night Guard officers was rather lost on this occasion.

Nighthawk's hoof finally came to a rest with a final *_**Tap**_* as he broke the silence.

"We need some way into this salt trade. Without inside information, the best we're doing is taking shots in the fog. And there are traitors in the Royal Guard."

Four pairs of reflective yellow eyes and one sky blue watched the Night Guard Captain in the light cast by the single lamp. No one responded. It hadn't been a question. When Nighthawk wanted their opinion, he'd ask for it.

"Sargent Gloom, you said the beating victim couldn't tell us anything further. How likely is this Amber Beach to be a real pony, or just an alias?" Nighthawk asked.

Gloom stirred himself, pulling his mind back to the present. "The dealer exists, certainly. I doubt that's his real name though. The name doesn't match anypony with a criminal record we know of, and his physical description is too limited to go off of."

"Same for the thugs profiles who attacked Prime Miles." Nighthawk finished with distaste, "Even so, we will be on the look out for any large Earth ponies with a Trottingham accent."

The Captain looked to Screech next, "What did Corporal Humming turn up?"

'Yes, what did she turn up?' Prey thought leaning forwards precariously on his stool, since this was an answer he was interested in hearing. He would've preferred to go straight to the source and rip the information directly from Humming's mind, but this would have to do.

Screech double checked the sheet of paper he had in front of him, "The warehouse is named Warehouse 7B. It's one of a number owned by a company called Simple Storage Solutions who rent the properties out to other businesses. They own warehouses in Fillidelphia and Manehatton too."

Nighthawk looked to Gloom. The ISND were the ones heading this murder investigation, so Nighthawk was ceding the initiative to Gloom to ask the questions. It took a moment for Gloom to recall himself and catch on, but only after a long moment of the Captain

looking at him. Hurriedly he asked, "And who rents out Warehouse 7B here in Canterlot?"

Screech checked his sheet again, "From the records Corporal Humming seized, it has been rented out by a lot of different businesses importing or exporting goods. Right now, space is currently being rented by three different companies. A company dealing in refined copper, one for piping and plumbing, and one which sells bathroom towels."

"Towels. That's fabric." Starry Wing said.

"Like we suspect were in all those crates we found, yes." Screech nodded.

"How long has that company, what's their name? Been renting at this warehouse?" Gloom asked, before Prey had to.

Again Screech checked the summary he held, "Luxury Linen. And for roughly two and a half years."

Gloom had already explained to the assembled officers about how Prey had 'found' some salt in one of the crates, and how the ISND were almost certain this was how the drug dealers had been smuggling salt in.

Prey had found no such thing, he'd merely been pretending to get Gloom and Crimson on the right track, because the best chance of success came if they were working off the same page. Thus why Prey'd made an act of tasting salt on his hoof.

However that wasn't what Nighthawk and the others were interested in. The salt trade was a problem yes, but it was completely secondary to these murders. That was the real focus of this meeting.

"It seems that to catch this griffin, we will have to first bring down the whole salt trade." Starry Wing said summed up, a grim tone in his voice at the prospect.

"That sounds like our best, and possibly *only* chance." Screech agreed, "Sargent Gloom, how do you want me to proceed that'll best

support the ISND?" He asked, shifting the attention back to Gloom.

"Oh, uh," Gloom shot a quick glance to Prey and Crimson. "Uh, well, obviously somepony in this Luxury Linen is working with the salt dealer to smuggle the salt in on these crates. I think that should be our next avenue of attack."

"Prey? Crimson? What else?" He asked, searching for advice from his subordinates.

Prey didn't let his nervousness show as all the officers attention turned to them. Lieutenant Screech was looking at him with particular focus, currently thinking about what he'd seen Prey argue with Gloom about earlier today.

'-he argued to be let down into the murder cellar to help. A girly ribbon wearing foal shouldn't be able to convince you to allow that-', Screech thought, brow furrowing.

'Well that's just *perfect*.' Prey thought. Now Starry Wing was the only person here he somehow hadn't disturbed. People didn't trust what they thought unnatural.

Prey purposefully didn't meet any of the yellow thestral eyes as he answered, trying to seem demur.

"I think the salt dealers will shortly be abandoning Luxury Linen and starting a new smuggling route in to Canterlot, if they haven't already. The operation we found had clearly been shut down. Those four were killed either because they were loose ends, or were no longer trusted. Or both."

"And what does that mean for us?" Nighthawk asked gruffly.

Prey hesitated on how knowledgeable he should appear. 'Oh well, in for a tooth, in for a claw.' He thought. They didn't trust him, and never would anyway. They already knew Luna had pulled him from prison.

"The salt dealer boss is tightening up their operation. He or she is smart, they've been avoiding getting caught or loosing any major subordinates up until now. It's only recently that you-I mean we,

have become aware of how wide spread the salt trade is. This boss is not becoming complacent. They've carefully controlled their growth and not been greedy."

Screech and Starry Wing's ears were focused forwards in interest as they listened to a lamb analyse the situation.

"And what do you think this means for us?" Nighthawk asked again.

"Not much." Prey said with a small shrug, "We still need a way in. Catching this griffin and his helpers isn't going to happen until after this salt smuggling ring is cracked open. This boss gave them the kill order, and if they're loyal enough to kill for their boss, then they're also important enough for him or her to protect them. I don't think we'll find anything on the griffin until after we're inside."

"You're saying we should abandon the murder investigation, and focus entirely on the drug dealers solely." Starry Wing said pointedly.

'Yes you idiot, that's your only hope of getting anywhere.' Prey thought. He debated whether he should further defend his reasoning.

"Unless we can get more information, that is the only way forwards I see." Prey settled on reiterating.

'It'll also hopefully keep me safe and out of this murderous griffin's way. If it's a choice between the thugs who beat Prime Miles, and the ones who slaughtered four ponies, I know which one I'm taking.' Prey thought.

"Unfortunately," Prey then added, clearing his throat, "I think it's at best a fifty fifty chance whether this Amber Beach will even be there on Friday. If the salt dealers are smart and keeping an eye open, they'll know about Prime Miles being arrested tomorrow. They'll guess he told us everything he knows, and stop Amber Beach from going in Friday."

Prey raised another good point there, and the Night Guard officers

around the table took a minute to consider it.

"We have not yet arrested Prime Miles, correct?" Nighthawk checked.

"No sir. There was no immediate need to." Screech answered.

"Then we will not arrest him straight away. Send a Guard around first thing and tell him he's been granted a reprieve, but is forbidden to leave Canterlot. Tell him he has a week to prove himself through good behaviour and to not cause trouble. We can arrest him after Friday either way."

All of the Night Guard officers nodded, not in agreement but to show they'd received Nighthawk's ruling. It meant more or less the same thing in the end. "Moving on. The salt smuggling. Who has any ideas?" Nighthawk asked.

Crimson spoke up for the first time, "They may have moved their operation out of Luxury Linen, but it's not soon enough. I mean, we can still probably still catch somepony if we go there after them, sir. They didn't predict we would find out about Luxury Linen this quickly."

"You're right, this was a just lucky tip off. They won't be expecting us to be investigating Luxury Linen. They thought they could just quietly close down this avenue of their operation and nopony would notice. But we did." Screech agreed, canines showing in a sharp grin.

'-they don't know it yet but it's their first step towards ruin-'

"How do you want to proceed Sargent?" Nighthawk asked Gloom again.

Gloom was feeling the mounting pressure. His wings kept shuffling, and he also kept half raising a hoof to scratch his chest scar, before remembering he was wearing armour. Nevertheless, he squared his shoulders and spoke clearly, "I think...The ISND should try and catch the mole inside of Luxury Linen. There's a definite chance there. Somepony working there is in on the salt smuggling. It might

even be the owners of the business."

"Could it not be the warehouse owners, Simple Storage Solutions?" Screech questioned.

"Maybe, but I don't think so sir. If that were the case, why transport the salt in the Luxury Linen crates at all? They could cut out the middle pony and bring it in themselves. No, this linen towel company is probably it." Gloom said, sounding much more confident than he felt. His logic was sound though. He continued;

"And, if you approve sir, I'd like for the Night Guard to start combing through any more old or condemned houses near warehouses in Canterlot. It's unlikely it'll turn up anything, but it's worked once, so if nothing else, it could at least rule those out. Also, start pulling any records from the Trade Guild department's about who rents the warehouses and if anypony new has hired the buildings out. Will that be okay sir?" Gloom asked.

"Your last plan worked fine, I am confident this time will be the same. It will be done Sargent." Nighthawk said. Prey saw how that additional pressure settled in Gloom's thoughts like a toad in a hole.

'-something's going to go wrong, and it's all going to be my fault-', Gloom thought discordantly, but there was nothing he could do but give it his best shot. "Thank you sir."

"That just leaves the question of these traitors in the Royal Guard." Starry Wing said.

Out of all the Night Guard officers, Starry Wing was probably the best 'people's person' Prey had observed. The Lieutenant was quite adept at directing conversation and generating good will, putting on a smile and getting goals to align. This also made Starry Wing the officer Prey liked the least out of those present.

Now though, there was no trace kindness in the thestral's eyes. '-traitors are unworthy of their families name-'

"I will decide the approach on this one," Nighthawk said, "It is my duty as Captain, and I will bear any responsibility for this choice."

All ponies present dipped their heads to their Captain. Prey did the same, but only when Nighthawk's eyes moved to his seat.

"There are to be no Royal Guards involved in this investigation. Tell them nothing. As far as they are to know, we have no leads. It's unfortunate those two Royal Guards were present at the murder scene, but there's no helping it now. Shining Armour has reluctantly sworn them to silence." Nighthawk snorted, "Those milk teeth will keep quiet for a week at best."

"Sir, if I might ask a question?" Screech spoke up.

"Go ahead Lieutenant." Nighthawk allowed.

"What does Captain Armour intend to do about the traitors in his ranks?"

Again Nighthawk snorted, "Nothing. Mayhaps he does not believe me, or just feels there is nothing he can do. No, it will be up to the Night Guard to uncover these traitors and force Shining Armour to face the facts."

Prey didn't think Nighthawk was viewing things clearly. Prey despised Shining Armour, but he knew Celestia wouldn't have appointed a fool with no backbone as the Captain. Under that outgoing and professional appearance, Shining Armour could no doubt be as cruel and ruthless as Fire Strike when the situation demanded it.

It was far more likely that the Royal Guard Captain simply had no leads to go on. The Royal Guard was far bigger and more diverse than the Night Guard, with members from unknown backgrounds. Which raised another point. Prey wasn't going to raise it himself though, as it wouldn't be well received. He could however get someone else to ask it for him. He just needed to give them the right prompt.

Prey looked around the table and considered. Who should he get to ask? It wasn't a hard choice.

Although the Sargent had distanced himself from Prey today, Prey

still felt he knew how Gloom thought the best. Prey delicately cleared his throat, catching Gloom's eye.

"The Royal Guard may be compromised, but their assistance could still be useful. Getting a couple of unicorn Guards on loan who know scanning spells might be worth it, sir." He suggested.

Gloom blinked tiredly and thought about that, '-scan for salt. But then we've got to trust Royal Guards to work alongside us without them letting slip what it is we're doing...hang on-',

Gloom stopped as he realised the obvious point Prey had been prompting him towards.

'-ahh... How am I supposed to say this to the Captain?-'

Nighthawk was just getting ready to call this meeting to a close when Gloom decided to bite the arrow. "Captain, there are the Royal Guards who were transferred into the Night Guard when we first set up. How are we to treat them?"

It was not an easy thing to tell a Captain that his Guard might already be compromised. Admittedly, the ponies in question weren't thestrals, so Nighthawk probably didn't care as much, but they were still *his* Night Guard, and so he might not take well to the suggestion.

Much as Prey had expected, Nighthawk didn't, but his displeasure had nothing to do with Gloom.

"Yes, I had almost forgotten about them. I did not trust them to begin with, they were never prepared to stick it out. Now I am certain they are untrustworthy." Nighthawk said, his eyes narrowing as he thought of his non-thestral Night Guards.

'Oh, how surprising. The discriminated pony race in the minority is racist against the majority. Horseshoes on the other hoof now, isn't it?' Prey thought.

The thestral officers looked to their Captain, waiting for him to make a decision on the matter. "For now, I'll change the shifts and schedules to ensure the transferred Royal Guards won't be

anywhere near this investigation. Do not let them get involved either. Do not trust them."

Screech wasn't one hundred percent comfortable with that decision, but; '-Nighthawk is the captain-'

Starry Wing however had no issues with Nighthawk's decision. From where he sat on his stool, Prey found it interesting to observe the difference when you bore in mind their clan origins. Starry Wing and Nighthawk came from the same clan, while Gloom and Screech came from the second. And Crimson of course, the only person from clan Myrrdon in the whole city. Not that Prey knew what he was thinking.

But regardless of what they all thought; "Yes sir." "Yes sir." "Yes Captain."

Nighthawk rapped his hoof decisively on the table, bringing the meeting to an end, "You have your orders. We infiltrate the salt drug ring first. Keep the Royal Guard out of this. If Luna wills it, Gloom will uncover who the traitors are at the same time we bring this salt trade down. Come Friday, we will also capture Amber Beach if possible. Night Guard patrols will start combing Lower Canterlot tonight for anything."

They all stood up, or in Prey's case, got down.

"Dismissed."

As always happened, once you no longer had anything to distract you and you finally stopped running, the reality of death caught up.

Whether you chose to look back over your shoulder it or not, its shadow still stretched out ahead of you.

Crimson sat, staring unseeingly at his Blood Fern pot between his hooves. He'd been sitting there for the last ten minutes. Prey looked over from the low burning lamp to check the red pegasus. 'No, still

unmoving.' He thought, slowly folding up his ribbon and tucking it under his pillow.

Prey didn't begrudge Crimson that. It was something he'd learnt, surviving the Resistance back in the Deeper Green.

Sometimes you needed to sit, sometimes you needed to move. Sometimes you needed to laugh, sometimes you needed to scream. Everyone dealt with death differently. Seeing it as opposed to dealing it out was better, but only slightly.

Whatever personal rituals someone held to get through it was up to them. Prey turned his head slightly, just enough to see what Gloom was doing in the silence.

The thestral was simply lying unarmored on his bunk, every so often scratching the ropy scar covering his chest, eyes heavily ringed.

For just a moment, Prey felt like spitting on them.

It was pathetic. Why did they feel they had a right to such melancholy when they hadn't even known the victims or done the deed? Then Prey smothered the anger and went back to grooming his ears. Death was something horrible to see. 'They do have a right to feel this way.'

Then Prey remembered Gloom's earlier anger. 'Actually you know what? *No*, no they don't. Why should they get to be angry at me?'

Why had Gloom gotten so angry with him? He hadn't done anything wrong. He hadn't exposed the thestral clans secret or broken any rules. Gloom could take his misguided anger and eat it. Those dead ponies only had themselves to blame.

Prey stopped smoothing the fur of his ear out, frowning at his own hoof like it'd betrayed him somehow.

'What am I doing? I'm not guilty either. At most I indirectly influenced those ponies to make a stupid choice, but they still got themselves killed in the end.' Prey thought, letting his ear flop.

That was nowhere near the same level of culpability as killing someone himself.

Prey lay down and rolled over, putting the lamp and the other two to his back.

There would be no conversation of any kind tonight. Good. He felt heavy and itchy with tiredness, and there was nothing he wanted to hear from Gloom or Crimson anyway. If they knew what was good for them, they would quickly re-center themselves and get some sleep.

'Four murders is nothing.' Fifty seven years had changed nothing. It was still exactly the same story. Just one more mental scar to toss onto the pile.

'Really...that cellar doesn't even rate a four on the scale.' Prey thought, closing his eyes.

Nevertheless, that night, Prey dreamt of Torment gutting a Border Guard with her bare talons as the Resistance held the pony down.

---The Past---

The ponies screams had gone so high pitched they were silent to even Prey's ears. The angry hissing of Torment as she worked and the grunts of the goats and deer holding the thrashing Border Guard down made up for it. The humid air was gritty, heavy, angry.

There were no hard laughs or jeers as Torment took out her fury on the Guard. Not now. Not after they'd just lost a patrol of four Resistance fighters and all they'd gotten in return was this one Earth Pony. The firestorm on the hill had burnt their camp out. And the Resistance was losing ground every day.

'Rats fighting for scraps.'

Blood soaked into the churned up leaf mould under their hooves, making a sticky pitch of foulness. Prey felt sick. His eyes hurt they were so wide behind his crude mask. But it was okay. This was

okay. He was okay.

Because this wasn't him. This was the mask.

He wasn't Prey behind the mask. He had to watch this, this horrible torture, he had no choice or Torment might-

A tingling of a far off presence swiftly approaching, like a fast blown cloud across the night. Approaching? Approaching where? Here? What was this presence which he didn't know? But he did know, it was alien and he'd felt it before. Twice before. This was...

Prey's consciousnesses roused itself as cold fear flooded his mind. This wasn't real, nor was it a dream. This was a memory. And Luna was coming.

'But she promised!' Prey thought in panic as he suddenly came into existence in his lower mindscape, deep blue water everywhere, 'She promised to stay out of my head unless-!'

Unless she detected him having a nightmare she'd said. This wasn't a nightmare. This wasn't even close to one of Prey's real nightmares. 'No no no no! This is just a memory, not a nightmare!'

But it was shortly about to become one. If Luna learned this was actually a memory, it would be worse than any nightmare.

'*No*!'

Mere dream moments before Luna's unseen presence arrived, Prey awoke, eyes snapping open back into the real world. His blanket felt too heavy and blood pounded under his skull, exhaustion washed away in panic.

Prey had seen four bodies mangled and chewed upon by rats today. He'd sat and coldly discussed murderers and drugs. He'd woken to the sky blotted out in dragon smoke. But none of that'd left him lying shivering in fear. That didn't mean he hadn't been afraid or horrified, because he had. But this...

Now Prey did shiver. The threat of Luna directly invading his mind scared him like nothing else could. What if he hadn't woken in time? What if she'd gotten inside? What if she'd found out?

Prey's head jerked around as he heard movement. A pair of yellow slitted eyes blinked at him through the darkness.

"Prey...?" Gloom asked thickly, barely understandable. Prey stared back, his mind blank.

"Oh..." The eyes blinked again as Gloom gained some measure of awareness, "*Oh*..."

"So you had the nightmare too?" Gloom whispered. He didn't clarify *what* nightmare he thought they were both referring to.

Prey couldn't see any of Gloom's features aside from the thestral eyes in the dark. "I'm fine..." Prey finally managed to mutter, bringing a hoof up to rub his throbbing head.

The eyes took on a knowing look of realisation, "I see. I see it now. Under it all, you're still there..." Gloom mumbled to himself.

Prey glared, "What's still where?" He hissed.

Gloom's head gave a small shake, "That's good... It's still in there." The yellow orbs narrowed, "Deep, *deep* down there. Even if you yourself don't realise it."

'What's he blathering about?'

Gloom sighed in the dark, "Never mind. Try and go back to sleep. Princess Luna will help with the nightmares."

Prey gritted his teeth rather than spit out how that's exactly why he was afraid, instead just rolling over.

"And...Sorry Prey. I was not fair on you today. It wasn't your fault something like this... Never mind. I should've apologised before we slept, should never sleep on anger. I was being too harsh."

Prey heard a huge but almost silent yawn behind him.

"Try and get some sleep..." Gloom muttered, now barely audible. "...I'm trying to do the same..."

Prey felt like Gloom's anger at him was diminished. Not gone, but diminished. Something in the last thirty seconds had affected the Sargent enough to change his attitude, even if Prey didn't know the reason why. Gloom really had been a walking contradiction of mysteries today. Oh well. Gloom's change of heart would help get through tomorrow.

Prey pulled the blanket tighter in a vain effort to try and sooth his tiredness generated headache, waiting for sleep to come back.

'This time however,' He thought, 'I won't let it drag me so far under that I can't notice the approach of an alicorn until it's almost too late.'

Prey shivered again.

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The Canterlot Express - Afternoon Edition:
Rake Wake reports:

On the morn of this very day, the stalwart citizens of Canterlot were subject to a blatant, if indirect, attack from a dragon elder. This incident came hot on the hooves of the shocking and scandalous trial of the leader of the Crop Sharer movement, Wheat Plow. All who were there will recall the choking smoke that coiled through the streets of our fair city while weather teams fought valiantly against the smog. As a humble reporter, I cannot but speculate about what the state of affairs might've been if Her Royal Majesty, Princess Celestia of the Rising Sun, had not taken swift and decisive action in dispatching ambassadors to the dragon's stolen mountain.

And who could possibly be better than the six brave mares who put a stop to the villianess, Nightmare Moon, the Elements of Harmony themselves? Under the lead of Princess Celestia's personal student, these courageous six confronted the dragon without hesitation. Through the efforts of well reasoned persuasion, wit, and the
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assistance of a highly trained and skilled pegasus veterinarian, the dragon elder was left without a hoof to stand on and was successfully driven off.

Was this an unprovoked incursion by the ruler of the mysterious Dragon Lands? Or a lone incident? Many are calling for new and immediate sanctions to be made against the dragon who so callously endangered ponies, but with the beast fleeing the scene, justice, for the moment, but *only* the moment, has been stalled.

One thing is clear however, Princess Celestia has guided the Elements of Harmony to save the day once again!

Rake Wake reporting.

~~~{{#{#}#}}~~~

Prey wouldn't read the newspaper article until some time tomorrow, but when he did, he gave it a long hard look.

Celestia really was pushing this whole deception about the Elements of Harmony, wasn't she? Was she laughing at the whole world behind her hoof? Is that what painting a target on these six mares to act as bait was all about?

The Sun Wolf was cruel, and cunning. Prey could only guess at the deeper games she played at on the board of centuries.

Prey would stop reading the newspaper at that point and toss it aside. He'd have other things to worry about.

---I---

Author's Notes:

Editor and Helper. Thankyou to him: 🍎
Sweetolebob18 🍏
Notice any mistakes, please point them out thanks!
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31.2 Spinning Lies into Cotton

Extract taken from - Griffionia: A Brief History

939 A.C. ~ "Of note, a minor plague afflicted a hoof full of towns and villages in the Northern most provinces of the Low King's lands. Occurring during the winter months, and lingered into the spring, this resulted in a lower trade revenue than previous years for the Low King."

A '*minor plague*'. That was the whole extent of the summary for the year 939, recorded in the ponies history book. A minor plague in the Low Kingdom. Most ponies didn't even realise that Griffiona was split into two kingdoms, and even fewer would remember the 'minor' plague that never came to Equestria. And those who did hear of it in later years assumed it had been nothing major. Surely if it had been major, it would be taught in history in school?

Out of sight and out of mind for ponies. A minor plague they wrote in their history books. Ha. Minor.

The griffins did not call it minor. They called it the Blood Feather Plague, and it flew through the Low Kingdom on wings as red as its name. Fatal in three out of ten cases, it destroyed lives and families.

And what no pony, scholar or otherwise, seemed to realise was that the Blood Feather Plague was still around to this day. Not as wide spread now, but still lurking there. And while there were treatments, there still existed no cure.

But the Blood Feather Plague was only contagious in griffins. An equine could not catch it. Thus, it passed completely by the ponies' notice.

Ever opened your eyes and remembered you found four gruesomely murdered ponies yesterday? Ever experienced the weight settling on your chest like a hopeless blanket, followed by trying to summon up the will power to take first step out of bed?

Well, Gloom and Crimson could now join Prey in the club saying they had.

The ISND only spoke with two people on their way out to the Luxury Linen offices that morning. The first conversation was actually initiated by Prey, as completely unexpected as that was. It was to Cookie, the cook, as she dished out this mornings meal. It'd been so early that the breakfast line had been basically non-existent, thus the three of them were able to get their food without delay.

The 'conversation' was actually just an exchange of cheerful pleasantries from Prey, acting the lamb again. Prey's smiles and laughs were more than enough to distract Cookie from noticing the glassy look in the eyes of the two ponies following Prey.

Cookie just smiled back, chided Prey for missing breakfast yesterday, waved him goodbye as Crimson carried their trays away, and noticed nothing amiss.

The second person they spoke to was Lieutenant Screech, to update him on what they were doing, and when they were expecting to be back from investigating the Luxury Linen store.

Beyond the sparking white walls of the Palace, it was still early morning, with most shops and stores not even yet opened when the ISND first knocked on the Luxury Linen's office door.

The office was actually the building above the much larger Luxury Linen store below, stacked on top of one another. The store itself had a purple and white decorated store front, and stylised plaster edgings made to look like golden tassels.

If warehouse 7B had been in 'Lower' Canterlot, and the Palace was 'Upper' Canterlot, then the Luxury Linen store was firmly situated in what could reasonably be called 'Middle Canterlot.'

The research Corporal Humming had done showed that the Luxury

Linen store here in Canterlot was one of two. The other was situated up in Manehatton, with both stores being supplied by the main production factory based outside the second city, so as to be closer to the cotton farms.

The store in Canterlot may have only been Luxury Linen's second expansion, but it seemed they were aiming for the top, since their initial success in Manehatton had given them enough confidence to try here in the capital city of Equestria.

And that was where the ISND found themselves early this Tuesday morning, having pushed opened the stairwell gate and walked up the stairs to the office.

Prey wasn't quite sure of the logic behind a gate if you didn't lock it. Or perhaps they'd realised the futility of such a gesture for something so flimsily made. The gate only came to pony chest height. You could simply climb over it. And one third of the pony population could avoid it all together with a single flap of their wings. In fact, there was no real point to the gate at all.

'It's just to convey the message you should keep out. Not that it will keep you out.'

Gloom checked the office opening times on the sign beside the door. According to the brass notice and what Corporal Humming had confirmed, Luxury Linen should've opened five minutes ago.

Not that any of them had a clock on them, but Prey's internal clock was almost always right to the minute, and besides, he'd double checked against one of the many ornate clock towers they'd passed on the way here.

"Closed, day off, or just late?" Prey suggested.

"We'll wait and see." Gloom said. His voice held the same lack of emotion that was usually reserved for Crimson's dull tones. Prey already knew the Sargent had suffered from nightmares last night, which meant Crimson probably had too.

Prey turned and looked down the steps as his ears caught the far off approaching of hooves, "Here comes someone."

"Somepony." Gloom corrected dully without feeling, as he and Crimson automatically turned to see.

A bookish looking unicorn mare with her grass green mane done up in a bun, wearing a neat blouse, and currently fishing around in her hoofbag for her keys came towards the bottom of the stairs. She reached the gate, opened it, closed it, and started up the steps all without stopping her rummaging.

"Where did they get to this time?" She muttered to herself, frowning as she gave her bag a vigorous shake with her green aura.

"Aha, got'cha!" She announced to nobody as she finally succeed in retrieving a ring of keys.

Only as she was levitating the keys over to the lock did she look up, and found the ISND silently regarding her. And Prey, but she didn't notice him.

She blinked at them, "Eh?"

Then her brain caught up with her, "Ah!" She exclaimed in surprise and not a little fear, shying back.

'-stalkers, night pony stalking Night Guards, wait, *Guards*-', She realised what that meant and came to a halt.

"Pardon me. Do you work here in the Luxury Linen administrative office?" Gloom asked.

Prey could practically hear the mares heart rate kick up a notch at Gloom's question, '-Night Guards are here at our office. What did we do wrong?-'

No doubt she'd also heard all the usual gossip about how Luna's pet monsters roamed the streets at night devouring foals or some such nonsense.

Usually Gloom didn't let ponies fear of his thestral status bother

him. But today was different, in that today Gloom didn't even notice. The ISND all had far more important things on their minds. Things like salt, murder, rats, crates, warehouses, and Prey hiding behind Crimson from unobservant but potentially lethally dangerous unicorn mares.

The mare did manage to keep her cool enough to answer the question though, if barely.

"Yes, this is Luxury Linen, and my name is Leaflet Spring. I'm the secretary at the offices here. I come first in the mornings to open up." She added, holding up the key ring defensively like it was an alibi to a crime or something.

"Good. We need to speak with somepony in charge here. Are you in a position to answer questions pertaining to your company, Mrs. Leaflet Spring?" Gloom asked.

Leaflet Spring straightened herself and raised her head, "Yes, **Ehem** Yes, I think I am probably the best pony to help you officer." She said, putting on a professional tone. It looked like stepping into her job role was all it took to help calm her down, (even if she still couldn't meet the thestral's eyes).

"Then we would like to ask you for some details about Luxury Linen." Gloom said.

"I think inside might be a better setting for this then officer. Everypony else will start arriving shortly and I can retrieve any records you might need from inside." Leaflet said, inclining her head politely towards the door.

Gloom glanced around at the stairway they were currently blocking, "Yes. After you." He agreed, stepping back from the door to give her adequate space.

Leaflet Spring unlocked the door, and with only a moment of hesitation, lead them in as they waited for her to go first.

The Luxury Linen office was rather small. One large room with four desks with identical set outs, and at the back a door which lead into

a privately partitioned office. Prey could confirm it was an office, and not a janitors cupboard, because of the big glass window in place of a wall between the two offices. No doubt the manager's office. Those in charge always had to have the biggest and best of everything.

Prey looked around as Leaflet Spring pulled out a yellow cardboard square from a rack and scribbled on it. Something to do with, '-clocking in-', Prey read from her mind.

As Prey checked for dead angles and possible traps, he was struck by how the office looked distinctly... The word was 'ponyish'.

Lots of bright colours, photo frames of happy foals on desks, and many useless nick-knacks scattered around, such as ornaments, or a replica dog with an overly large head on a spring.

'Useless clutter.' Why would anyone choose to surround themselves with such junk?

Prey pretended not to notice the moment when Leaflet Spring noticed him in return. The mare was thrown off her professional attitude for a moment.

"You...have a foal with you? A lamb even?" She asked uncertainly.

"This is Prey. He is with us, don't mind him." Gloom answered shortly. He was tired of having to answer this question seemingly endless times. '-how does everypony keep missing Prey until half way through our conversation anyway?-'

Leaflet decided to do as the Night Guard Sargent ordered and not worry about Prey. '-I probably don't want to know-', She decided.

'Clever pony.'

"Well officer, what was it you wanted to ask about Luxury Linen?" Leaflet asked, setting down her hoofbag behind the desk closest to the boss's private back office.

"You are one half of the company, the other half is set up in Manehatton, correct?" Gloom began.

"Yes, that's correct. Luxury Linen was founded in Manehatton by our owner, Soft Touch. Our office and shop here in Canterlot were opened only two years ago, but already we've seen remarkable growth in sales and soon-"

"Okay thank you." Gloom broke in, cutting off Leaflet Spring's little speech. She blushed in embarrassment, having automatically begun reciting her sales pitch without realising it, like she'd no doubt done with scores of potential investors before.

"Oh, erm, sorry. What else would you like to know officer?" Leaflet asked, reminding herself who she was speaking to.

"How do you deal with goods coming into Canterlot and how do you store them?" Gloom asked, easing into the questions rather than jumping straight into asking; 'Are you dealing salt?' Leaflet Spring was a suspect until proven otherwise, and needed to be treated as such.

"Our site in Manehatton deals with the main distribution, and the production is also handled out there. When we need more stock, we send the order to Manehatton, and they send the required stock back to us. We usually bring in two deliveries a month."

"And how large are these deliveries, and when was your most recent one?" Gloom asked.

"Excuse me one moment, and I'll get that for you officer." Leaflet said, pulling open a filing cabinet with her magic and beginning to rifle through the drawer. While her back was turned, Gloom gave a jerk of his head to Prey and Crimson. 'Look around the office', it said.

With a nod, both of them detached from behind Gloom and began to do so.

"Here we go," Leaflet Spring said, pulling out a bright pink file, "Now where did I put my glasses?"

Fishing her spectacles out of her bag, she settled them on her nose via magic and opened the folder. "So let's see...The fourth of the

month...On the-Okay, here we go. The last delivery only came in two days ago actually, and it was for two hundred more size ten towels, one hundred size seven and eight, and a fifty-fifty split of more lilac and white hoof towels."

Gloom frowned. That did not fit, it was too few.

"Was this the amount just arriving in this shop here, or into Canterlot total?" He double checked.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I misunderstood you officer," Leaflet apologized, "That was only what arrived into the shop. We have a warehouse where we store most of our stock. I take it you wanted the dates and amounts for there instead?"

'-why do they want to know about the warehouse? Has somepony broken in there?-', Leaflet thought.

"Yes." Gloom said, not elaborating on what the mare was obviously wondering.

"Oh, alright. I'm sorry for the delay again, let me just get the correct folder...Here we go. So, the latest shipment arrived eleven days ago, for four hundred size ten towels, four hundred size nine-"

"Thank you but that's not relevant. How many crates arrived?" Gloom cut in.

"The... number of crates?" Leaflet paused.

"Yes, the number of crates. Show us the delivery notes of proof please."

"Err, *ehem* I don't think we still have... Let me see if I can find anything." Leaflet said, nervously flicking through the folder although she already knew, '-it won't say anywhere here in here-'.

Pointless. Prey knew the only reason she was putting on the show was so that the; '-intimidating Night Guard-', wouldn't think she wasn't trying.

"Just, let me go check the rest of the files quickly." Leaflet said after

an awkward moment, putting down the pink file and going back to the filing cabinet. Prey and Crimson were poking around the other three desks, but it was already pretty obvious to Prey they weren't going to find anything incriminating. The desks just belonged to normal, boring, privileged pony workers.

His search had been a bit like looking at a snap shot of another world.

At these desks, workers who didn't have to fight or slave for a living, organised and sold luxuries to more privileged ponies in one big endless cycle. Prey grimaced as he inched open a desk draw, finding a jar of glazed nuts and flower petals inside. 'Snacks. Comfort snacks.' He thought shaking his head, 'They wouldn't last five minutes in the wilds.'

Meanwhile, the silence stretched as Leaflet shuffled through the filing cabinet, already certain that she wasn't going to find anything but searching anyway in the hopes she was wrong.

But eventually, Leaflet had no choice but to turn around and admit it.

"I'm sorry officer, but I don't think we have the delivery notes. I mean, our warehouse worker's kept a personal checklist he submits, but I don't know what's happened to the original delivery notes. If you are willing to wait a few days, we can ask the offices in Manehatton to send copies." Leaflet offered. Even to herself, she sounded overly meek.

'-am I really that afraid of some Luna Guard?-', She asked herself in annoyance. Obviously, the answer was yes.

"To clarify, do you only have one warehouse in Canterlot?" Gloom asked.

"Yes."

"And you don't have the delivery notes. Only a personally written record?"

"Yes."

"And so you don't know for definite how many crates you had in warehouse 7B?"

'-they already know the warehouse number? That can't be good-', Leaflet Spring thought.

"No." She was forced to admit.

"Alright, forget about that then. Which pony picks up stock from the warehouse when you need to restock the shop?" Gloom asked.

"I think that would be Terry." Leaflet answered after a moments thought.

"You think?"

"I mean, no it *is* Terry. Terry Golf."

"Good. When will he be arriving?" Gloom asked.

Leaflet's tail started swishing nervously behind her without her notice. Evidently, she had bad news. "Terry Golf hasn't been in for the last three days, he's on sick leave. I don't know if he'll be in today."

Gloom looked over Leaflet's head to see both Prey and Crimson looking back at him. They all saw the same connection. What were the odds the pony responsible for fetching crates from warehouse 7B would go off sick at the same time the secret salt operation in their warehouse was closed down?

It was even possible that Terry Golf was now nothing more than a corpse in the morgue.

"And nopony has been able to get in contact with him over these last three days?"

"No." Leaflet said.

"Hmm. Is there anypony else that we can speak to who manages the warehouse?" Gloom suggested.

Leaflet thought for a minute, "The only other pony who sometimes goes to the warehouse when Terry needs help was Mango Nut." She said as her tail started swishing again, already knowing what question was coming next.

"You said 'was' Mango Nut." Gloom stated flatly.

Leaflet's ears lowered a notch, "He no longer works here I'm afraid. He used to work part time, but he turned in his notice a week ago, at the end of last month."

"Hmmm." Gloom hummed again. He looked to Crimson and Prey again and cocked an ear. 'Find anything suspicious in here?' His look silently communicated.

They both shook their heads in answer. '-oh well, it was a long shot-'

"We're going to need the names, addresses, and any other contact details you have for this Terry Golf and Mango Nut."

"Are they in some kind of trouble?" Leaflet asked hesitantly, having to clear her throat of a tremble on that last syllable.

'-they're both nice ponies, they wouldn't do anything wrong. We all went to the office party together-'

"That remains to be seen," Gloom said, evading the question, "Now, their details please."

"We, um, don't have Mango Nut's details anymore. We're supposed to get rid of personal details once somepony leaves." Leaflet said, looking very uncomfortable.

Gloom's mouth turned down, but he caught Prey mouthing something to him from outside Leaflet's field of view, "*Ask her*."

Gloom wasn't so caught up in the past of yesterday that he couldn't take Prey's hint.

"But you still remember most of Mango Nut's details, don't you? You would have seen them when you were throwing his folder out.

Would you please give what you remember to us?" He asked Leaflet Spring.

At Gloom's prompting, Leaflet realised that yes, she did remember, and nervous guilt flashed through her mind as she agreed, "Well, um, yes."

'-will he think I was trying to lie to him?-', Leaflet thought, looking anywhere but Gloom's slit eyes.

Gloom stepped over and Leaflet flinched involuntarily before you could stop herself, "Here, write all that you can remember down." Gloom said, pulling a sheet from the wastepaper basket and giving it to her.

"Oh, oh right of course." Leaflet Spring chuckeld nervously, backing around the desk and lifting out a quill with her magic.

Prey hid a frown as he watched Leaflet Spring from around the corner of the desk. Why was she so skittish? She was a unicorn, what did she have to be afraid about? Leaflet Spring had started out quite collected and professional, but over the course of the conversation she'd grown steadily more apprehensive.

Not even a single mention of salt or smuggling had crossed the mare's thoughts since they'd began, so why was she slowly getting so worked up if she wasn't guilty? Gloom hadn't made any subtle threats or used any intimidation either. Was it because she was alone with three unknown Night Guards, alright, not even that. *Two* Guards and *one* runt.

'Or is she just that cowardly?' Prey wondered. He'd thought she was doing quite well up until now for not giving into all those vampony stories she'd heard. But now she was getting nervous, and Prey didn't like being around nervous unicorns.

There was the sound of someone else outside, and the door handle being opened and another filthy horn head bustled in.

"Sorry I'm late Mrs. Spring, I had to..." He froze at seeing the Night Guard inside, and Leaflet sitting at her desk writing something out.

"It's fine." Leaflet quickly said.

"You are?" Gloom asked the pudgy unicorn.

"I'm Fruity. I work here." The stallion answered cautiously, eye's darting around. Prey ducked behind the closest desk before he could be spotted.

"I'm Sargent Gloom of the Night Guard. We are here on an investigation. Please wait outside." Gloom said, dismissing Fruity.

"It's fine Fruity." Leaflet repeated.

"I, er, I'll just be outside the door. In case, you know, you need anything or something." Fruity said, speaking exclusively to Leaflet as he slowly closed the door.

"Are you finished with that list?" Gloom asked, turning back to Leaflet once they were undisturbed again.

"More or less. That's pretty much everything I can remember." Leaflet said, offering the page.

Gloom took it and gave it a quick once over. "Prey." He called, and when Prey reappeared back around the side of the desk he passed it to the lamb without prelude.

"Here. You'll remember it." Gloom said, already going back to Leaflet.

"Now, can you please give me a physical description of both Terry Golf, Mango Nut, and then give me a copy of the contact details for Terry Golf. You still have those." Gloom said, not phrasing it as a question.

"Yes, I can get his details for you in just a second." Leaflet quickly said. '-oh I hope Terry's not in trouble-'

"Thank you. Now, their descriptions please."

"Well, Terry is a unicorn, I think he's about thirty five, or fortyish? He's about my height, with a mane cut down the sides, and his cutie

mark is a sort of upside down letter 'G' with a hook under the 'G'." Leaflet said. What gift from harmony that talent was supposed to represent, Prey couldn't even begin to guess.

"His coat and mane colour?" Gloom reminded Leaflet.

"Oh right, of course. His fur is sort of a browny hazel? And his mane's this orange with bits of green in it."

Terry Golf's colouring sounded slightly less offensive than was the norm for ponies. Prey was reminded of the shelves of that aptly name candy store, Candy Canes n' Sweet Stuff, every time he saw a street full of ponies.

Gloom nodded, committing the description to memory, "And Mango Nut?"

Leaflet gave them a description of a green eyed Earth pony with a cream mane and a mango coloured coat. A cutie mark of a swan outlined on a lake completed the mental image. Being named Mango for being mango coloured by your parents if you were a pony was apparently perfectly reasonable.

Gloom's brow furrowed as he listened. The description stirred something in his memory, '-it sounds a bit like...-'

'Like that Earth pony from the cellar.' Prey finished in his head as the Sargent's eyes slowly widened. Gloom's gaze darted to Crimson and the two of them shared a loaded look. Evidently, Crimson hadn't been so traumatised that he couldn't remember the murder victims remains either.

'-well, at least we can narrow the search down for the victims families-', Gloom thought grimly.

"Officer? Is something wrong?" Leaflet asked.

Gloom stared just over Leaflet's shoulder rather than directly at her. '-little rat claws skittering-'

"Nothing," He said after a moment, "It's nothing that you need to worry about."

"Okay," Leaflet blinked uncertainly, "Was there anything else I can help you with officer?"

Gloom flicked an ear towards the bosses office, "When will your manager be in?" He asked.

"He's in Manehatton at the moment I'm afraid. He's not scheduled to be back until next week on his calendar. I'm sorry about that."

"Never mind. Is there anypony else here who could show us around the factory?" Gloom asked.

"What, the factory? You mean, our production factory?" Leaflet asked in surprise.

"Is there another one? We're talking about the factory outside Manehatton near the cotton plantations." Gloom said.

"Yes but, why would you want to go there?" Leaflet asked in bewilderment.

'Yes, why *would* we want to go there?' Prey thought, equally puzzled.

"Night Guard business." Gloom answered. "Is there somepony else here who regularly goes to the factory and could act as a guide?"

"That's at least four hours away by train, and you'd have to catch a cart or walk to it once you got to Manehatton." Leaflet said, as if not sure that Gloom understood how far away from 'civilization' that was.

"Is there somepony who could take us there and show us around the factory?" Gloom repeated, voice flat.

Leaflet quickly remembered herself and who she was speaking to "Ah, no, I don't think so. Terry is the only pony who could really help you there. And since Yeast, the manager, is away..." She trailed off with an apologetic shrug.

Gloom nodded, "Alright. Then you're coming with us as the guide." He decided.

"Coming with-? Wait what?"

Leaflet Spring was not happy. You didn't need to be a mind reader to know that as she sat and fidgeted in the corner of the train compartment.

She hadn't really been given a choice though. Gloom was a Night Guard, his decision earlier had been an order, not a request. Leaflet Spring had understood the difference, which was why she hadn't refused the thestral Sargent. She *had* raised a lot of fuss however.

It should've been fairly obvious that Gloom had no power to enforce her compliance. For starters, Leaflet wasn't a suspect, nor was she a Guard under his authority. She was a civilian, with her own job, and under no obligation to take them to the Luxury Linen factory.

However one look at Gloom's face had snapped her mouth shut and convinced her that pushing the Sargent today was a very bad idea.

So Leaflet Spring had been forced to give a hasty explanation to Fruity waiting outside, (who'd also protested but been ignored), and taken to catch the next train to Manehatton.

Sitting in a train bound out of Canterlot, with two silent Night Guards and a weird lamb who she didn't know, and with only their word that they were actually Guards and weren't kidnapping her wasn't doing Leaflet any good.

She comforted herself with the thought that, '-Fruity knows where I am and what's happening-'

'And what good would that do you if we were really going to murder you? You'd still be dead.' Prey thought.

He was doubly as unhappy as Leaflet Spring about her been brought along. He was sitting in the completely opposite corner to the unicorn, eyes locked on Leaflet's horn for the first sign of magic. This was dangerous. Why had Gloom insisted she guide them? Didn't Gloom know better than to cage a tiger and then climb in with it?

Because of Gloom's stupidity, Prey'd had to take matters into his own hooves to guarantee his safety.

Thus, he'd been forced to strain himself in preparing a number of runes for in case Leaflet suddenly became hostile. What a waste when they could've just left her behind instead. Now instead, he was more tired than ever.

He glared at the mare from behind his mask of boredom. 'If she tries anything, I'll trigger this array and blind us all.'

The effects would only last for four, maybe five seconds at best, but that should be enough to break Leaflet's concentration on whatever spell she was casting and let Prey escape. He didn't need to be able to see to reach the door. He'd already planned the quickest way out in his head. He was also seated closest to said door, and not by chance.

'Idiot,' Prey thought at Gloom for the thirty-sixth time as the **clack-clack** of train tracks continues to pass outside, 'Why'd you have to bring a unicorn along?'

Three hours and fifty-five minutes passed in a heavy silence that only got heavier the further the train went. Gloom and Crimson kept staring off into nothing before catching themselves. Gloom hadn't informed Screech or Nighthawk they were leaving Canterlot, and for a minute Prey let the fantasy of taking the opportunity to escape captivate him.

He estimated he would survive until midnight at most, whereupon Luna would activate the tracer bracelets and blow his legs off or something.

Still, prospects of escape (however impossible), were preferable to what Gloom and Crimson's minds were still fixated on.
Prey's hoof didn't lift off the runic array for the entirety of the journey.

The ISND plus their add one exited onto the Manehatton station at midday, Gloom squinting badly in the sunlight. From there, they started the long trot towards the cotton factory. Gloom and Crimson could probably have flown there in fifteen minutes, but not with Prey and Leaflet Spring in tow.

Gloom glanced again at Prey, and then back at Leaflet behind them, again wishing loudly, but silently, that they either had some way to leave Prey behind, and/or Leaflet knew how to teleport. Then they could get there so much faster. The sun was giving Gloom a pounding headache to go with the ache in his gut.

Preoccupied, Gloom didn't stop to consider why Prey might be hurrying along in front of them, instead of trailing in the rear like usual. Neither did Gloom draw any significance from Prey keeping both Guards between himself and the complaining unicorn at all times.

'-are all unicorns this prissy?-', Gloom thought in frustration as Leaflet Spring trudged along behind them, this brief trot having already winded her. '-this is barely anything, even *Prey* does better than her on those little legs-'

But even as they were overtaken by one cart after another, heading towards the cotton fields to pick up their load, Gloom didn't say anything.

When they finally got in sight of the cotton factory, all that was going through Leaflet Spring's thoughts was finding somewhere clean to sit down, and something to drink.

'-I shouldn't even be here. Cruel, ungrateful Night Guards. This was most certainly not in my job description-'

Prey was thankful that, so far at least, Leaflet's fear of Gloom as a thestral had kept her quiet and compliant. Crimson was hardly a normal pegasus either, and his emotionless expression had helped with that too.

'-what kind of brainwashing indoctrination do they do to these ponies in the Night Guard?-', Leaflet Spring wondered. Evidently the matching tufted ears and eye colour weren't enough to clue Leaflet in on Crimson's shared heritage.

Nevertheless, Leaflet's current docile appearances not withstanding, being so out in the open with a unicorn made Prey's wool itch. Still, she would have to go through Gloom and Crimson first to get to him. They would slow Leaflet down enough for him to run. Since Prey knew Leaflet Spring didn't know how to teleport, as long as he could get out of her casting range, he could escape.

To Prey, all this constant vigilance and paranoia was completely necessary.

The cotton factory came slowly into view as they crest a rise in the road, and spied the start of the cotton field farms.

Low, squat tree's growing cloud fluff sat in neat rows, the fields split into patchworks of cotton plants in different stages of readiness. The orchards went on for miles and miles. Was orchard even the right word for non-fruit bearing trees?

The white speckled expanse was bigger than Prey had imagined. He could turn his head all the way to the right, or to the left, and he would still be seeing cotton trees.

'Does all this belong to one land owner? Or is it split into lots of different farming families?' Prey wondered. In the fields, the odd bright splotches of colourful pony fur stood out, moving amongst the cotton and working the trees. However, as Prey looked closer, he could finally see that most of the work force were actually of the more mundane colouring. Donkeys, mules, a few cows, and even some sheep, the latter's wool blending in like camouflage against the cotton.

'I wonder how much money the factory owners make?' Prey thought, looking at these workers. There were three different large yard areas offset in the patchwork fields, made up of barns and

other buildings he'd never seen before.

If all this was all owned by one, (or even multiple land owners), Prey imagined the answer to that question was; 'Lots.' Followed by, 'Lots more'. If they held the monopoly, they could set the cotton at whatever prices they wanted. This was precisely what Wheat Plow had been campaigning against. Too bad for him and his supporters he was now languishing in Dreverton.

Or was on his way to Dreverton. He'd only been sentenced two nights ago. It felt longer. Celestia's announcement that she wanted a free and balanced election had been literally overshadowed by the dragon. And the Night Guards' success. That was only yesterday too.

"Which factory is the Luxury Linen one?" Gloom asked Leaflet, addressing her for the first time since they'd left the train station.

Leaflet Spring took the moment to catch her breath and surreptitiously work at the stitch in her side, "It's, I think it's that one." She said, pointing a hoof towards the closest cluster of buildings.

"You think?"

"Well, *huff* I've never actually been out to the factory before." Leaflet said, the hint of reproach in her voice all the protest she was brave enough to voice.

'As long as that's *all* she voices, and not some spell.' Prey thought with apprehension.

Gloom grunted at Leaflet's answer, "Then let's go. The sooner we finish, the sooner we can start the return journey."

Leaflet thought some very uncivilised things at the Sargent's back.

The Luxury Linen cotton factory wasn't one building. Rather, it was a series of four different buildings, each processing a different stage of the harvested cotton.

And it was noisy. Really noisy.

Busy Earth ponies shouting to each other made up the majority of the work force. It looked like another batch of cotton pods had just come in.

And the four of them just walked right in with no one challenging them. They got all the way to the supervisor's office door, a small building little bigger than a shed tacked onto the side of one of the barns, before someone finally asked who they were.

"What?" The supervisor snarled, yanking the door open. The Earth ponies chocolate brown fur paled when he saw the ISND plus one miserable Leaflet Spring waiting for him.

"Err...what?" He tried again.

Gloom didn't waste any time, "I am Sargent Gloom of the Night Guard. We will be surveying your factory and interviewing some of your workers."

"Do you... have a warrant?" The supervisor asked. He knew there was, '-something about guards having to have a warrant-', Although it didn't look like he would know what a warrant looked like even if presented with one.

"I don't need a warrant." Gloom informed him.

"But..." The Earth pony wilted under those slit thestral eyes.

"That's alright then, feel free to go ahead." He quickly said, trying to offer a smile. It went unreturned.

"I want accurate reports on all the crates you've sent to the Luxury Linen in Canterlot, and any documents you have to verify your deliveries."

"What? Ah, deliveries! Okay, I can do that right away for you officer." The supervisor had a bit of a thick accent, so he pronounced officer 'off-ah-sah'.

"Good. What's your name?" Gloom asked.

Prey could see for a few seconds the stallion was debating whether or not to give it, before he realised he didn't know what was going on and lying was not going to help him or his workers, some of which had stopped to watch. "Satchel Charge, I used to work in the mines. And as for all of you, get back to work!" He yelled, shouting over to the spectators.

The workers dispersed and went back to work cheerfully enough. That was a minor insight into the supervisor before them. It seemed Satchel Charge was generally on amicable terms with his work force, so he was likely either a fair boss, or good at hiding his faults.

"I want to see those reports on our return. While you're getting those, we will be reviewing the factory. Where do you store finished goods, and where do you box them up to send out?" Gloom asked.

"Err, in that shed, and in the end of building 4. In that order." Satchel Charge pointed. Prey listened to his mind galloping through possible reasons why the Night Guard were here.

'-maybe those riots? Or did one of my boys get in with the wrong crowd? I warned them all to keep clean-', Satchel thought in disappointment.

"We will go and look now. Please retrieve those documents and wait for us to get back." Gloom reminded him.

"Won't you need somepony to show you around?" Satchel Charge asked uncertainly.

"There's no need," Gloom indicated with his wing, left wing claw pointing at Leaflet, "This is Leaflet Spring. She's the secretary of the company you work for in Canterlot. She'll be perfectly capable of showing us around."

"*Me*? But I've never been here before."

"You still know all about the cotton production process and how the goods are made, don't you?" Gloom challenged.

"Well, yes, it's part of the business, but only in theory! I still haven't seen any of this in pony before." Leaflet protested.

"Good. That means you won't purposefully try and skip any bits on the tour. Lead on."

"Sir, is this why you told Leaflet Spring to come with us?" Crimson asked, voice low enough to barely carry over the noise of twenty different mares and stallions pulling cotton through huge comb contraptions.

Leaflet was leading the way in front of of them, wavering back and forth a bit, unsure of which direction to go in as the eyes of lots of curious workers fixed on them.

"Partly Crimson. I am not too sure why, but I felt bringing her along would lead us somewhere. Or rather, I felt it was not a wrong choice to make." Gloom said, glancing back over his shoulder to his own flank, but the mark there was of course hidden under his armour.

"So there was a method to your madness. Because destiny said so." Prey muttered, just loud enough to be heard too. He didn't like it in here. The fine filaments of cotton plant in the air kept tickling his nose, so thin as to be invisible, and made him want to sneeze. And people kept looking at him. Prey didn't like it when there was no cover to hide behind.

"Don't talk to me about madness." Gloom snapped, completely not in the mood.

"No, don't you talk to me about madness." Prey muttered back, but this time made sure it went unheard. He'd wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible. But letting a random mare they'd pulled off the streets blunder about leading them just because Gloom's special talent was giving him cryptic hints was not at all reassuring.

"The guide isn't important, I just want us to get a feel for this place. See if anything stands out or seems suspicious to you two." Gloom ordered.

"Yes sir."

A pause. "Yes, sir."

More raised eyebrows, and more furtive looks from workers came and went as their strange little procession continued on from building to building.

Inside this particular building, they saw six huge weaving looms, the racks reaching almost all the way to the ceiling, staffed by, a bit surprisingly, pegasi. The winged ponies flew up and down the threads, with big toothed combs looped over their hooves, making sure the cotton ran evenly.

An Earth pony trotted along on some tread wheel contraption, the mechanism running the great spools of cotton that fed the looms. Prey saw how everyone here knew exactly what they were doing, keeping everything running as efficiently and speedily as possible. Within the time it took the four of them to walk from one end of the building to the other, three mistakes in the weave had been both spotted, noted, and then rectified.

'And they seem happy with their job.' Prey thought, observing the factory workers.

How could they be happy doing this day after day? Prey couldn't imagine working the looms day in, day out. Actually he could, but he couldn't imagine being *happy* about it. But he sensed no dissatisfaction in the workers minds within his perception range. Was the pay that good? Or was it comradeship, or pride they took in their work? The joy of fulfilling their special talents calling, perhaps?

Or perhaps it just beat the farm work. Easier, less hours, and better pay probably.

"Does this factory produce items exclusively for Luxury Linen?" Gloom asked Leaflet, speaking loudly to be heard over the shuttles clacking back and forth.

"No, we are one of two companies who use this factory. These

buildings are actually owned by the cotton field land owners. Luxury Linen hires this place on a week-on, week-off basis, rotating with the other company, Cotton Creations Co." Leaflet said, also raising her voice.

'What is it with Equestrians and their need to alliterate business names?' Prey thought. Whatever the case, Leaflet's answer just served to add more information and names with which to further confuse matters.

They came to the last building, the one that Satchel Charge had pointed out that housed finished products. Entering in through the double doors, the noise from outside quickly dropped behind them.

In the relative peace, they looked about. This building seemed to be dedicated to putting the finishing touches to the cotton products, then folding it up and packing it away. All the processes in here was done by hoof, cutting down on the noise, which dropped even further into hushed whispers when the ISND walked in.

Leaflet Spring was practically radiating frustration right now, being tired, hot and bothered.

'-I could have just done a nice shift and gone home, but noooo-', She thought.

"Here. We're in the last building like you wanted." She said huffily.

The ISND ignored Leaflet's shortness and went over to examine the area for themselves. Their attention was immediately drawn to the familiar stacks of flat, open topped wooden crates, although this time the crates still held their contents. Gloom walked up to the closest and lifted out a large, neatly folded, dark purple towel. It looked wonderfully thick and soft, just like a pony luxury item.

"I think this was definitely where the crates came from." Crimson said, looking in a different crate of his own. It was similarly filled, but with a variety of different colours and towel sizes this time.

"There were none of these crates left in Warehouse 7B. Why was that? If they can produce this many in a week, surely the Canterlot

store couldn't have used up all their stock in only two weeks. Demand for towels can't be that high." Prey said, waving a hoof to indicate the piles of crates.

"Is that an important factor? It sounds to me like it's probably nothing. Or are you getting a feeling?" Gloom asked, thinking back to how Prey had, '-been right about the Crop Sharer's-'

"Not a feeling. I just thought it strange." Prey shrugged, "Also, I don't think there will be anything to find here."

Gloom checked to make sure it was just the three of them in ear shot, although someone could have been listening in magically and they wouldn't have known. "What makes you say that?"

"It'll be the same here as it was back at Warehouse 7B and Luxury Linen. Everything to do with the salt trade will have already been removed. The drug dealers have closed down this avenue of their operation and removed as much evidence as possible. It was sheer dumb luck that disturbance report came in and we found the cellar. But we're too late to catch anyone here." Prey said.

Gloom accepted Prey's explanation with a dower nod, not even correcting him on 'anyone'. "I feared as much, but I have a feeling there is still something we can find here."

"Sir, perhaps we should go back and look at those records you ordered the supervisor to assemble?" Crimson suggested.

"We'd probably be better served by finding this Terry Golf. It's ninety-five percent certain he's guilty." Prey said. Although since Prey suspected the stallion was one of the four bodies they'd found, the chances of that were looking bleak.

"Terry Golf can't have been the only pony in on the salt trade working here. He just came to pick up the crates. But somepony else here..." Gloom's eyes shifted suspiciously to the workers on the other side of the room, "...Was hiding the salt in amongst the towels."

"Obviously. And what's the bet that when we ask, there's a worker

who's has stopped turning up for work or quit in the last two weeks?" Prey said, almost pulling up a sarcastic smile by instinct.

He caught himself and straightened his lips out just in time. Gloom and Crimson didn't trust his smiles anymore. Later, when this was all over, Prey would have to work on fooling them into believing his mask was real again. He absently tugged at the ribbon behind his ear, 'I'll just be a little runt lamb again. And I'll live long enough to laugh over your graves.

"Let's go and find out," Gloom said, then raised his voice, "Mrs. Leaflet Spring, a question if you would."

Leaflet reluctantly stopped resting against the door post and came over.

"Yes, officer?" She asked. '-what *now*?-'

"The workers here, are they just Luxury Linen's? Or do they work here full time for Comfort Cotton too?" Gloom asked her.

"No, they're employed here by the factory, not directly by us."

"Good, that makes things easier." Gloom then raised his voice again, calling over to the closest workers, "You, yes you. No, you. Yes, the stallion pointing at himself. Please come over here and answer a question."

A very reluctant Earth pony came over, dragging their hooves.

"Aye?" He asked when he was close enough, eyes darting back to his work mates. '-harmony does not like me today. Them bat poniess are just like grandpappy said, only half-ponies-'

Gloom and Crimson were of course deaf to the stallion's more private racism, but it didn't take a genius to see the pony's reticence.

Gloom pretended he hadn't seen it, "Has anypony recently stopped working in this part of the factory? Or perhaps been off sick the last few days?"

"Aye, that's right on the money actually it is. How'd you know?" The stallion responded, eyebrows going up.

Gloom tried to put a polite smile on his face (no teeth), and also tried not to let the stress leak through, "Please just answer the question. Who is absent?"

And catching sight of Gloom's attempt, Prey now knew exactly why Leaflet Spring and everyone else they'd encountered today ended up feeling so uneasy around them, even if they started out brave.

Simply put, Gloom did not have the experience faking a smile that Prey did. When Gloom tried, you could almost see the weight of the cellar resting behind his eyes. Looking at Gloom, these people didn't know what exactly it was they were seeing, but they knew something bad had happened recently. And ponies being ponies, tragedy, death and harsh reality scared them and made them want to look away.

'You need to learn to craft your mask better Gloom. Honey catches more flies than vinegar.' Prey thought as he watched the worker's ear go back a notch.

"Why'd you be wanting to know?" The worker asked, cautious now.

"The Night Guard are looking into another case and it might be related. Now please answer the question; who is it that's absent?" Gloom asked again, brushing aside the stallion's own inquiry without giving a straight answer.

"Aye, well,..." The earth pony considered, perhaps wondering if he was throwing a friend under the cart.

"...Spool, he ain't been in work since last Monday." The worker admitted.

"And Spool's job, what was it?" Gloom asked.

The worker glanced around, "Same as the rest of us. He worked in here, cutting, packing and stacking." He answered.

"Was he responsible for checking these crates once they were ready

to go?" Gloom asked, pointing behind them to the pile.

"Aye, that he was. Have ya' already spoke to him?"

"No. Something we're hoping to rectify in the near future." Gloom said darkly. He looked over to Crimson and Prey, "Anything you two want to ask?"

"Yes. Who was Spool?" Prey asked.

The Earth pony misunderstood the question. He thought Prey hadn't been paying attention and had missed what'd already been said. Prey was only a lamb after all.

"Spool is the pony who works here, an' now he's the one that's had to leave off sick." The stallion said, thinking it very weird a lamb was allowed in here in the first place.

"No, what I was asking is *who* was he? Where does he live, what race, cutie mark, colouration, age, history." Prey's friendly smile didn't fade, helping offset the strangeness of his question with the childish innocence with which he asked it.

The Earth pony started to try and find the answers for Prey before even consciously deciding to do so, disarmed by the lambs earnestness. "Aye, Spool's a great stallion, he's 'bout my own age, ya' know? Used ta' work down by Vanhoover, with his brothers he told me. He's about my height too actually, but he's more a navy colour, ya' know? Spool's also an Earth pony, just like yours truly."

"And his cutie mark?" Prey asked, eyes brightening with fake interest.

"If'n I remember correctly, a half sun an' a cotton flower. He always said it meant he could find a way to make something out of anything." The worker said.

'-she's a polite little fella'. Showing an appreciation for the special talents of us ponies an' all-'

Since Spool wasn't a unicorn, Prey could've cared less about what he claimed his cutie mark meant. All Prey wanted was defining

characteristics with which to identify Spool. He looked sideways at Gloom and Crimson, making sure they'd also gotten the description.

"Alight, thank you for your help. We can take it from here." Gloom told the worker.

The Earth pony was no doubt a bit surprised by Gloom's sudden dismissal, but it wasn't likely he'd going to complain about being allowed to get away from the Night Guard sooner.

And indeed he didn't, returning back to his work and colleagues without a fuss.

Gloom unseeingly watched the stallion go, thinking, '-so this Spool is the pony who's been hiding the salt in the crates. Probably. Still doesn't explain where he was getting it in from-'

Prey's thoughts more or less matched Gloom's deduction. His second, more secretive job here at the cotton factory complete, Spool had left and gone into hiding. If Crimson had managed to come to the same conclusion as both of them, well, he being his normal blank self and not sharing.

"I think it's time to find out what the good supervisor has dug up for us." Gloom announced.

Gloom and Crimson stood, silently reviewing the time sheets and profiles Satchel Charge had given them. Then once they were done, they hoofed them down to Prey for him to also read. Satchel Charge stood at his small desk in the cramped office, nervously fidgeting.

It was no longer just Gloom and Prey who could draw meaningful insights from provided paperwork. After an entire week working non-stop preparing for Wheat Plow's trial, Crimson had improved his understanding of its twisted mysteries too.

And all three of the ISND were noticing the same thing.

"So let me double check, this is the attendance roll for everypony, is it?" Gloom asked Satchel Charge.

Satchel hesitated for half a second, "More or less. At least, I'm pretty sure it is."

Gloom took the time sheets back and looked them over again, "Strange. This is for the last month, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you typically remove somepony's name when they're off sick?"

"Er, no."

"Then why do I not see anypony by the name of 'Spool' on here?" Gloom asked.

Satchel faltered, "I, I can explain that."

Gloom let the papers drop back onto the desk with a *slap* sound, "Please do."

"Spool, he, ah, he no longer works here anymore." Satchel said, scuffing a hoof.

"He was only supposed to be off sick, and now you tell me he's left? And what has that to do with falsifying your records? Were you trying to hide something?" Gloom asked coolly.

"No it ain't like that! I wasn't trying to hide nothing, I was just doing Spool a last favour is all."

Gloom and Crimson's silent stare of accusation made Satchel hurriedly go on, "Well, see it's like this... Spool didn't want it to be on his employment record. He came an' told me he was really leaving, not sick, and asked me if'n I could remove him off the sheets for the last month or so. He didn't want it to look like he was just job hopping to his new boss. An' I figured he was a good enough worker that we could give him an extra week's sick pay before his layoff. It was only fair."

"And you saw nothing wrong with this, because...?" Gloom raised an eyebrow.

"Spool never made any trouble. It was only fair." Satchel asserted again. As somebody in authority around here, he wasn't used to being questioned, but now he was, and by the Night Guard too. It made Satchel Charge mighty uncomfortable.

"These Warehouse delivery quantities don't match." An offended mare's voice sounded out.

'-what? Who?-', Gloom thought in surprise looking around.

It was, of course, Leaflet Spring. Who else could it be? But what was her problem?

Leaflet Spring indignantly held up a sheaf of papers, gripped in her aura a s they all turned.

"Your records are wrong, this isn't what we've ordered." She announced, ignoring Gloom and speaking to or rather *at* Satchel Charge.

The out of the blue challenge unbalanced Satchel for a moment, as he tried to shift gears from being interrogated by Gloom to being interrogated by Leaflet. "What do you mean? Those are the records."

"No they're not, these are wrong. I do the paperwork myself, I *know* these are wrong."

"What'cha mean they're wrong? Those are accurate figures."

"I file the checklist Terry submits myself. I know for a fact we have more crates than this in our warehouse." Leaflet disagreed, pointing at a figure on the sheet.

"Give me that, let me see." Satchel said, swiping the pages out of Leaflet's magic, making Prey flinch in anticipation of an explosion that never came.

"No, these be the right figures. Whatever we send to you, we double check an' mark down here. This is what we sent you last week, see for yourself." Satchel said, showing her an entry on the sheet while the rest of the ISND looking on in bemusement. It was abundantly apparent that Leaflet had been getting riled up all day, and now

that she found something to criticise, all her frustration was coming out.

If she couldn't direct it at the Night Guard, she could damned well direct it at some other unfortunate instead.

"It is certainly *not* right. I check our stock levels every day as part of my job." Leaflet said with her nose in the air, "I can quote the stock figures in our warehouse for the last week by heart. We have at least thirty crates. You delivered us twenty-six the week before, not twenty-seven."

"Well ya' wrong somewhere. We sent twenty-seven." Satchel protested. '-this mare isn't making any sense-'

"There were none of their crates in Warehouse 7B, right?" Gloom asked quietly to Prey.

"No, there weren't."

Gloom nodded slowly, "I thought so. But both of them seem to think otherwise." He said, indicating Satchel and Leaflet as they continued to each try and get the other person to realise their mistake.

"The one crate missing in each shipment held the hidden salt. That crate was then removed down into the secret cellar. One crate from each delivery. That would make up the difference in their numbers sir." Crimson said in realisation.

"Yes it would." Gloom agreed, the three of them still watching but mainly ignoring the ongoing argument.

"Then that proves it beyond a shadow of a doubt, this Terry Golf pony really was a fraud, using his position to hide the removal of the crate of salt from each shipment. But once again, this doesn't actually help us unless we can catch him." Prey pointed out.

"One more pony to add to the list of criminals for the Night Guard to hunt down." Gloom muttered, wing muscles tightening under his fur. Prey raised an eye side long at Gloom. That sounded far darker an outcome than what the Sargent had really meant. Unlike Prey's

own list. Best to move the conversation on.

"We're wasting time here. We could be trying to hunt down Terry or Spool. We know they're both guilty, and catching either one would provide answers to a lot of questions." Prey reminded Gloom. The Sargent had really been off his game and slow on the uptake today. Ever since the cellar, actually.

'Gee, I wonder why?'

"You're right, we don't have time for this." Gloom said. He then raised his voice;

"Both of you, shut up."

Both unicorn and Earth pony flinched, and immediately quietened on being reminded of the Night Guards presence.

Gloom looked at Leaflet Spring, "You're wrong. You have no crates in your warehouse. We know, we've checked. Thank you for your help, I knew I brought you along for a reason. But there is nothing further for you to do here."

Then to Satchel Charge, "Spool was lying to you. I want all and any information you have on him. Now."

It was not a request.

Satchel Charge was not a happy stallion by the time they left to begin the long walk back to the Manehatton train station. The reason he was unhappy was because Gloom was unhappy. Crimson too. Probably. It was hard to be one hundred percent sure about anything Crimson might be feeling, but the pegasus was *probably* unhappy.

Prey personally followed the philosophy of always expect the worst, and then expect it to be worse than that. That way you're never be disappointed. And by that logic, things could certainly have gone worse.

However, they could also have gone better, which was the reason for Gloom's frustration.

Satchel Charge hadn't been able to provide anything useful. He didn't have any address, contact details, or next of kin to find Spool. Their suspect had been a worker who talked a lot but actually said very little. None of the work force knew where he lived either. Spool had merely collected his pay at the end of each week and disappeared until the following Monday. It was likely he'd already skipped town.

Another dead end. All they could do was add his name and description to the wanted list.

'It's essentially worthless information. Perhaps somewhere a month or two down the line, someone will recognise him hiding out in some little village. But that's not going to be soon enough to satisfy Luna.' Prey thought.

And as for Leaflet Spring? She was *definitely* unhappy.

The displaced secretary trailed at the back of their little procession, dragging her hooves. Prey could hear her grumbling under her breath every step of the way.

"...Hungry, sore, tired, dirty, smelly, hot, Night Guard, ungrateful, bat pony, thirsty..."

Bringing her along had served a purpose in the end, but Gloom would've really liked to have left her behind at the factory regardless, '-she walks so slow, but we're the one's who brought her-'.

'No, *you're* the one who brought her.'

Prey thought they should just leave her behind anyway. If someone was no longer useful, abandon them. Leaflet was hardly going to starve or die due to monster attack out here in the sunny open, less than an hour's trot from Manehatton. Worse luck.

'Filthy unicorn.'

"What's the likelihood that the details Leaflet Spring provided on that Terry Golf suspect turns up nothing?" Gloom asked, eye's half closed and head lowered under the sun.

"Very high." Prey said shortly. What more was there to say?

"Where does that leave us to go next?" Gloom asked dully. '-is there a single clue out there that doesn't just lead to a dead end?-' He wondered.

Neither of them answered Gloom's question. Prey was considering if he would have to fall back on getting Lemon Pink to track down and expose that drug dealer her and him had spotted. He didn't want to put his tool at risk, but he shuddered to think what would happen if Luna was not kept pleased. Last night's near invasion of his mind was still very fresh and very prevalent in Prey's memory.

'Filthy alicorn.'

Manehatton slowly crawled closer as they plodded along the road, the grassy verge swaying ever so slightly in the sporadic breeze. Unless Leaflet decided to finally pick up the pace, it would likely take them another twenty minutes to get to the city's gate. Prey looked at the tall buildings slowly growing larger, with every so often a pegasus flying in or out.

He had an idea.

Prey stopped to brush his ear back, so he could look back from the corner of his eye at the unicorn mare bringing up the rear..

"Say," He began conversationally, "What do you think the salt dealers would do if they suspected Leaflet Spring back there of being a Night Guard collaborator?"

Gloom blinked, returning from his mindless plodding and wishing he were flying instead.

"Well obviously they won't be happy about anypony working against them, but she's nopony to them. I don't think they would

really care, because there's so little damage she could do." Gloom shrugged. "Actually, they probably don't even know Leaflet Spring exists as a pony."

"But what if they had some reason to notice her? It doesn't even have to be her, but for the argument's sake, let's say when we get back to Canterlot, there's somebody-"

"-Somepony."

"-watching the Luxury Linen entrance. They see us shaking hooves with Leaflet, congratulating her, and immediately start a city wide search for ponies by the name of 'Spool' or 'Terry'. Then what happens if we also leave a couple of Night Guards obviously guarding her house tonight?" Prey asked.

Gloom thought for a bit. "I don't know where you're going with this, because it doesn't reflect reality and its not going to happen. But if it did, the salt dealers would probably try and find out who Leaflet Spring is."

"They won't find anything. They will discover she really knows nothing and then ignore her." Crimson joined in.

"But what if they *did* find something? Nothing factual or certain, but something to worry them. Say, like her family having a history of being closely affiliated with the Guard, with Guard sympathies, having given tip offs to the Guard before, and has commendations for civic duty?"

"She doesn't have that background. And how would they look into some random pony's background like Leaflet's anyway?" Gloom pointed out.

"Just bribe the City Records Department to gain access. Money talks." Prey shrugged.

"I'd *like*-," Gloom stressed, "-To believe that somepony can't just walk in and bribe our cities officials."

"You'd like to. But do you?" Prey asked.

Gloom let out a sigh that sounded like it contained the weight of the world, "It would love to say yes. But after all this? No, not really."

"Well, it's also possible they could just ask nicely and the City Registrar just looks Leaflet Spring up for them. I'm sure it wouldn't be too hard to fake being a concerned relative or something." Prey said, placating Gloom a bit. Prey didn't do 'nice', but with the Sargent's dour mood, it would be best for his chances of success if he did.

"Whether they will or won't is not a question, because this is all just hypothetical. Leaflet doesn't have that background, and we aren't going to use her as bait even if we could." Gloom told Prey.

"Why not?" Prey demanded.

"First, because she's a civilian, and shouldn't have really been dragged into any of this at all, which is my fault. Second, because she doesn't *have* that background. But most importantly, because she's a civilian." Gloom repeated.

"What if she were never in any danger?"

"You can't guarantee that, not after everything we've seen. And besides which, she's still a civilian. She would never agree to act as bait and we have no right to force her." Gloom said, the idea growing more unpleasant the more Prey pushed it.

"Nor does it address the issue of her still having no such record." Crimson added, looking back at the mare in question.

"As we've already agreed, bribing the City Records Department is easily done, so we could do the same. Or just order the records altered by Night Guard authority. Temporarily of course." Prey hastened to add.

"So that's your plan? Have Leaflet Spring act as blind bait, dangle her in front of the salt dealers, and try and catch whoever they send to kidnap her?" Gloom asked with strong disapproval.

"What? No, of course not. Nothing so crude as that." Prey sniffed,

"Catch whoever they send to the records department."

In those twenty further minutes it took the ISND to get back to the Manehatton train station, a quiet conversation was held outside of Leaflet's hearing. Not that the unicorn would've tried to listen into their conversation even if she'd known they were purposefully excluding her.

Because as Prey got to listen to on the train ride back, Leaflet Spring wanted; '-nothing more to do with these ungrateful bat winged deviants ever ever ever again-'

She didn't *quite* flare up at Gloom as they travelled, but that was only because she was still too weirded out by the thestral to look him in the eye. So instead she proceeded to give the seat Gloom was sitting on a death glare that could've curdled cheese the whole way back. All three hours and fifty minutes of the trip.

Gloom pretended not to notice the glare, Crimson didn't give any indication even if he did, and Prey made himself as small and unassuming in his corner as possible, hoof on the runic flash array, (Which he'd had to make *again*), and ready to run.

Jumping off a moving train would no doubt hurt, but it would be a lot less painful than if a furious, rampaging unicorn went crazy and decided to enact bodily revenge against the Night Guards who'd so inconvenienced her day.

Prey glanced at Gloom and Crimson without moving his head. Perhaps they'd react and stop Leaflet in time if it came to that? Probably not. Gloom was distracted and hollow eyed, trying not to remember the cellar, and Crimson was likely no better behind those mental walls of his.

'Besides, they'd hesitate before going for the kill.' Prey thought, 'Alright. Jumping off the train and breaking my legs it is then.'

It was a long, uncomfortable, three hours fifty minutes for all parties involved.

The train hadn't been stationary in Canterlot station for more than five seconds before Crimson was out the door and flapping into the air. Just as agreed.

When a disgruntled Leaflet asked Gloom where the pegasus had gone, he replied, "To report back to our Lieutenant." There was no obligation to answer a civilian, but Gloom told her the truth anyway.

Well, part of the truth. Crimson was also under instructions to convey their plan to Screech and get his assistance in setting things up. Time was of the essence.

Prey jealously wished he had wings and could've gone in Crimson's place. The longer he spent in Leaflet's company, the more he disliked the unicorn. 'Stupid horn heads.'

"We will escort you back to Luxury Linen, Mrs. Leaflet Spring." Gloom announced.

"Hmph." Leaflet snorted, but followed when Gloom lead the way through Canterlot's streets.

'-can't get back soon enough. I deserve an extra long spa visit after this trip-', Leaflet thought, keen to part company with the ISND as soon as possible.

So she was greatly surprised, both verbally and non-verbally, when she found a squad of four Night Guards waiting for them outside Luxury Linen.

"Mrs. Leaflet Spring?" The Corporal asked, stepping forwards and offering her hoof before Leaflet could change from surprised to uneasy.

"Err, yes?" Leaflet replied, awkwardly taking the hoof on reflex.

Corporal Humming, a rather aggressive looking thestral mare, didn't bump hooves as Leaflet expected, but instead locked ankles and gave a firm shake. "On behalf of the Night Guard and Captain

Nighthawk, we'd like to thank you for once again stepping forwards and helping the Guard, Mrs. Leaflet Spring."

"Huh? But I didn't-This Sargent just took me-"

"Your help was greatly appreciated and I'm sure that it won't be long before this investigation is all put to rest. It was very impressive, you noticing what you did." Humming continued on loudly, completely unperturbed as she continued to firmly shake Leaflet's leg.

"But that-Ow, please stop- But that-"

"Please don't worry about it either. You've done your part, now we'll do ours. You'll be perfectly safe I guarantee." Humming continued on.

Gloom hissed to Humming, "Corporal, out in the open like this isn't the best place."

"You're too cautious Sargent, it's only proper that we show our gratitude to Mrs. Leaflet Spring." Humming returned.

Leaflet finally managed to get her leg back, wincing and looking flustered, "I- What's going on?"

"No need to worry, we're dealing with it. These three Night Guards will escort you safely back to your house once you're ready to leave. Thank you once again Mrs. Leaflet Spring and may night watch over you." Humming said, already walking away with Gloom and Prey in tow up he street.

"Hey, wait!" Leaflet called out behind them, but it went unheeded as the three Night Guards politely, but firmly, started chivying her along.

"Come along Mrs. Spring. Let me get your bag for you."

Humming lead Prey and Gloom around a corner, then ducked into a side street and behind the outcrop of cart shed. Crimson was

already waiting there for them, and immediately saluted to Gloom, "Sir."

Gloom waved him down, "Not now." He turned to Humming, who was peeking back around the shed to make sure they were unobserved:

"Do you think that worked?"

"Luna willing, it did." Humming said.

"That was some of the worst acting in the history of acting back there, sir." Prey muttered.

Gloom's tail gave a flick, but he didn't acknowledge Prey's assessment of the little performance the Night Guard had put on back there for anyone who might've been watching.

Corporal Humming turned away from the corner with a nod to herself, satisfied they weren't being observed. 'Which is great and all, unless, I don't know, anyone's looking out of their second floor windows.' Prey thought derisively at Humming's efforts.

"My squad will be outside of that mare's house all night," Humming said confidently, "If anypony comes near, we'll know it."

"With a squad of Night Guards lurking outside her window, I doubt anypony will come, but that's part of the plan Humming."

"Don't worry Sargent, we know our role. But perhaps we'll get lucky and some dumb thug will get stupid and try anyway."

"Is everything else in place Corporal?" Gloom double checked.

"Not quite, Lieutenant Screech had some difficulty getting a unicorn who could conjure a tracer at such short notice." Humming said.

Gloom was about to tell her that it wasn't actually him who'd come up with the plan, he'd only contributed, when Humming pulled out a small metal vial from beneath her chest plate. "Here's the marker." She said simply, balancing it on her hoof.

Gloom frowned, confused. "But didn't you say the Lieutenant couldn't get a unicorn to conjure a tracer?"

"Yes, but apparently they can finish making that bit later. Or something. But the unicorn said you can still apply the marker to anything and the tracer can find it if it's within a mile." Humming said. Her thoughts went to the rather pompous unicorn, showing Prey she hadn't understood the long winded explanation the stallion had given at all.

"What's this marker agent made of? Ma'am." Prey enquired as Gloom took the vial.

"I'm afraid I don't know, the guy didn't say." Humming said, wings moving in a shrug. As a Night Guard, she knew a bit more about Prey's position in the ISND and so didn't treat him like a complete child.

Gloom paused, looking from the vial to Prey, "Does it matter what it's made of?"

"No idea sir. I don't know much about magic either." Prey lied.

'Must be some kind of magic infused solution. A highly reactive magical component with a traceable signature ground down and infused inside. But in that case, I doubt its signature will last longer than maybe forty eight hours. Especially not when surrounded by so much background magic in Canterlot.'

"Was there a time limit for how long they said this marker would last?" Prey asked.

"I'm pretty sure he said there was no worry of that happening." Humming replied.

Prey hid a frown and backed out of the conversation. That didn't match up with what he'd deduced. Why had the unicorn lied, and was it important? Was this stallion purposefully trying to lead them to fail, or was he just being boastful? Or perhaps he was just nowhere near as competent as he'd acted to Humming and didn't know.

No, probably nothing intentionally sinister Prey decided after a moment's consideration. Just another Canterlot unicorn over confident in his own racial superiority.

Prey returned to the conversation as Gloom finished tucking the vial with its marker agent away, "Thank you Corporal. We'll take our leave now for the Records Hall now. Has Lieutenant Screech managed to find anything on those two names Crimson gave you?"

"It's too soon to know for sure, but we haven't turned up anything yet Sargent." Humming answered. She unfurled her wings and began to give them a few warm up beats, Prey moving to shield his eye's a fraction of a second before she did so.

"I must rejoin my squad. Night watch over you and Luna guide your flight." She called as she took off into the evening sky.

Gloom watched her go, then looked back down to Prey, "Are you sure it won't matter?" He asked.

"Which bit are you referring to? I can't read your mind, sir." Prey said smiling, before remembering that Gloom now didn't trust him when he smiled and quickly wiping it off his face.

"Sure. I meant about the pony who comes to check Leaflet's records after us. Won't it matter if they know some Night Guards were already in there checking out her record? They might guess they've been faked." Gloom asked.

"It doesn't matter even if they know it's fake. They'll still want to see the new record, so they'll know what they think *we* want *them* to know. It's mind games, but it won't matter either way so long as they get some of that marker agent on their hooves." Prey explained.

"I think I understand," Crimson said, "The pony who comes to check, they are just a scout. Not the mastermind. So they will not think to not touch the book."

He paused with a slow blink. "The records are kept in a book, yes?"

"Eh, close enough."

The Grand City Hall Records Department, (a pretentious name if ever Prey heard one), didn't close until eight o'clock, so they were able to get there well before closing time. With how everything else had been going lately, Prey was mildly surprised. The ISND usually only ever seemed to arrive too late, or just before.

The ISND strode in confidently through the front doors, ignoring the ponies that scattered out of Gloom and Crimson's way as they headed straight for the side hall with the big 'City Records Department' sign above it.

On the way, they skirted around a blue mare in a star spangled cloak and hat arguing loudly, (and losing), with a clerk. "Honestly officer, a great and powerful bear *did* eat Trixie's show license. That's why Trixie is here!"

At the ISND's approach The thin unicorn stallion with a floppy fringe behind the desk looked up, bored.

"Hello and welcome to the Records Department, how may I-*erk*! How may I help you?" His tone of boredom disappeared part way through as he found himself confronted with Gloom.

"We're here to see the citizenship files of everypony on Pennyworth Avenue." Gloom said commandingly. That was the street Leaflet lived on.

"There's usually, ah, a request process made in advance of any search-"

"We're skipping it."

"I'm, ah, also a bit unsure where all those records might be. An entire street is quite a lot, and just a street name to go off is, well, ah, difficult." The stallion said, nervously rubbing the back of his neck.

"Then you'd best hurry. We're going to be waiting right here."

Gloom told him unsympathetically.

"There's, also the matter of clearance..."

The stallion trailed off under the pair of unmoving yellow eyes, "But you're both Royal Guards, so I'm sure it'll be fine. I mean you're Night Guards! Night Guards, of course." He chuckled nervously, backing away. "I'll just go and do that now, shall I?"

"That would certainly be helpful, yes." Gloom agreed.

'-I feel bad intimidating somepony like this again, but we don't have time-', Gloom thought as the clerk hurried off.

"I just thought of something I forgot." Prey spoke up from below counter top height, sounding shocked.

"If it's a unicorn scout, they may not physically touch the file at all. If they just use their aura, the marker won't get transferred to their hooves." Prey couldn't believe he'd missed something so obvious. It was beyond basic, how could he not have factored that in?

'Fool, fool, fool.' Prey berated himself.

He'd been too caught up in finding some way to keep Luna satisfied that'd he'd overlooked the obvious.

'This is what happens when you rush things, and now there's no time to make adjustments. Should we just call it off?' Prey worried.

"It's alright Prey. Neither of us thought of that either." Gloom said, bringing Prey's panic to a jarring halt and making him look up in surprise.

Gloom stirred himself to make an effort and tried to look unconcerned by Prey's worries, "Don't worry about it Prey. Nopony's perfect, and there's nothing that can be done now. We just have to proceed with the plan and hold our breath."

"But it's no longer going to work. Always assume the worst will occur in any plan. They're definitely going to send a unicorn." Prey said.

"We had very little time for enacting this plan, so there was bound to be things we overlooked." Gloom reminded him, "And it's still better than having no plan. We can only wait and see if it works."

Crimson joined in, "A unicorn is also only one in three ponies. And one who exclusively uses magic instead of their hooves has got to be even less likely I would think. The chances are in our favour."

"The population of Canterlot is hardly an even split. And still..."

Gloom shook his head, "Remember what I told you Prey? You can't calculate everything. Life's not some big maths problem, sometimes you've just got to do your best and hope."

'Hope? As if that'll ever work.' Prey thought.

Prey hated hope. It was a vice of the weak, a poison far more addictive than salt or any other drug. It built you up with no foundation, promising beautiful things you could never reach, and then brought you crashing down into the depths of despair.

'And don't I know it all too well?' He thought bitterly.

Unfortunately at this point, there was little else to do *but* hope, since the Records Clerk was already on his way back, a heavy looking stack of files levitated in his aura.

"Here they are." The stallion announced, slightly out of breath as he dropped the stack in front of the ISND. Or two of the ISND anyway, since Prey was below the level of the counter top.

"Is this all of them?" Gloom asked. '-doesn't seem to be enough for an entire avenue of ponies-'

"Ah, no err, sir."

"Where are the rest of them, then?" Gloom asked.

The clerks lanky fringe seemed to droop further, "I'll just, ah, just go and try and find those now. There's just a lot of them and they're spaced out, so it might take some time, is all." He excused himself again, backing away to return to his search.

"We'll be waiting." Gloom nodded without looking up from the pile of files, only his tufted ears turning to follow the retreating stallion's hoof steps.

"Found Leaflet's sir," Crimson said a second later, pointing with one wing tip at a file near the top of the pile. "Spring, Leaflet, Mare, Unicorn. This must be hers."

Prey couldn't see the label from his position down on the floor, but Gloom quickly confirmed Crimson's find as he pulled it out, "Here we are. Clerk!" He shouted back into the archives.

"Um, yes?" Came the stallions voice from between two archive shelves.

"Forget the other files. Bring back a blank citizenship form instead."

"Ah, pardon me?"

"Bring back a blank citizenship form and a quill-Ah, never mind, there's one here." Gloom called again.

"A blank citizen...? But-but, that's illegal to just create-"

"I am the Night Guard. I decide what's legal or not. Bring back a blank form." Gloom cut him off, feeling guilty for misusing his authority like this. '-but it is my duty to bring the salt dealers to justice and we need this-'

The knowledge that this clerk would probably forever have his view of the Night Guards trustworthiness tarnished was no small weight on Gloom's conscience. It was not his own reputation he cared for, but that of Princess Luna's. The Night Guard were her creation and its image reflected heavily on her. She was already under intense scrutiny after her recent reformation and return from being Nightmare Moon.

'-but this is more important. Her majesty herself was the one to teach us that all those years ago. Do thy duty, even when none shalt love thee for it. There is honour in sacrifice-', Gloom thought, reciting to himself some quote from clan history.

That quote definitely sounded like something the Night alicorn would've said.

Prey wondered what other secret records the clans had of Luna. Did they have any on her fall to Nightmare Moon?

Gloom removed the little metal vial from under his chest plate, keeping it hidden from the view of the returning clerk bearing the blank form.

"Here goes nothing." Gloom muttered.

'-was it only yesterday?-', Gloom thought, '-was it really was only yesterday we were down a hellhole?-'

Hot water drummed off the taut hide of the thestral's wings as he rinsed them. Prey heard rather than saw Gloom lift his head and look around the communal showers, '-this seems so... *wrong*-'

Prey knew exactly where the thestral was coming from, but he didn't agree. Intellectually, it made no sense. Emotionally however, it felt wrong to be enjoying the hot water, traitorous even.

'-here we are, when there's four murdered ponies down in the morgue who'll never get to enjoy a shower again-'

'Oh will you please get over it already.' Prey thought through gritted teeth, shaking his head to remove some water from his eyes. He was sick of constantly overhearing Gloom's thoughts going back to the cellar every five minutes. Prey didn't want to be reminded of it any more than Gloom wanted to keep remembering it.

Dwelling on the past like Gloom and Crimson were doing wasn't practical. Unfortunately, Prey knew first hoof how deeply something like this could burrow into your head. It rattled round and around in there, and whenever your mind wasn't otherwise occupied the memory would roll back to the forefront in all it's sickening glory.

It was like rolling a stone uphill. The moment you stopped pushing,

it'd crush you.

'-must remember to get some blood wine at dinner. Got to get the tracer from that unicorn in twenty minutes. Got to report to Captain Nighthawk before. Got to avoid rats skittering about-', Prey saw Gloom wince and give himself a small slap upside of the head with his own wing. '-stop*it*!-'

'Alright, that's it. Enough is enough.' Prey thought.

This was affecting Gloom's rationality beyond acceptable limits, no matter how cold blooded that sounded. Because Prey had no choice but to work with Gloom and Crimson, then he needed them to succeed in their job, least they drag Prey down too and left him having to face Luna's displeasure.

Prey stepped out from under the stream of hot water and gave himself a quick shake off, enough to clear the wool from his eyes to see at least. It was just the ISND in this part of the showers.

Over on the far side, and very happy about the distance between their two groups, were about eight Royal Guards, who'd been using the gym in their free time and were now washing up before going home. Good, let them stay over there. Way over there. Prey had work to do.

So what aspects should Prey appeal to in an effort to snap Gloom and Crimson out of it? Revenge? The inevitability of life? Ideals of duty?

Prey weighed it up for a moment before deciding on his approach and making a start.

"Sir, you said we were going to stop with the share and tell session each night. It's not quite night yet, but you never said how long we'd be stopping for. So how about starting again right now?" He asked, sodden fur dripping.

"Now isn't really the time Prey." Gloom said dully.

"It's not quite night yet, but it's probably close enough I think." Prey said, pressing on. He was confident that if he could just talk long

enough while monitoring Gloom's thoughts, he could manipulate the thestral to change his thinking.

"Well, my contribution for the day is that people are actually just by products of life. It's like a river, and we all have got cross it some day. Until then, everybody's just along for the ride, good, bad, indifferent. If you want to see the good, you'll see the good, and if you want to see-"

"Prey, no offence," Gloom interrupted bluntly, not turning his head, "But you are perhaps the last pony I want to hear any of encouragement from. Please be quiet."

Prey paused. Well he'd tried, but it seemed Gloom was determined not to hear anything he had to say. He'd hoped Gloom had found some closure last night. However Prey couldn't allow himself to be satisfied with this result, so pressed on against his better judgement.

"And why not? You're still caught up on yesterday-"

"-And you're not, Prey! That's precisely where the problem is. You aren't letting yourself feel anything." Gloom snapped, going from passive to aggressive in a heartbeat.

Prey took a precautionary step backwards, "And why would I want to feel depressed and apathetic all the time? Why should I let one event drag me down for the rest of my life?"

"It's barely been a day, and you're just lying to yourself."

"Wrong. I'm just not denying reality. I can't choose what happens, but I can choose my response. If you're going to choose-"

"Prey, Prey, Prey. Shut up. You're not even *close* to the same flight path as us. You're *way* off over there, not where you should be. And I haven't got the foggiest how to fix your problem. And that's part of my duty to Princess Luna too, but it's not working and I don't know how, and, so..." The tension drained from Gloom's wings, and he sighed wearily, "...So you're still the last pony we want to hear any encouragement from."

"Sheep. A little runt sheep, but not a pony," Prey muttered under his

breath, pitched just loud enough to be heard over the hissing of water, "And that's not a good enough reason for why not."

"Because," Crimson spoke up in his usual deliberate manner, "You are terrible at encouragement. Like, really terrible. Awful actually."

Gloom and Prey both turned to blink in wide eyed surprise at Crimson. Gloom pointed at the pegasus, "Yes, that. Those reasons. What he said."

"Usually, such a statement is proceeded or followed by the words, 'no offence'." Prey said slowly.

Gloom let out a cough of laughter without meaning to, then quickly clamped down on it with a surprised look of guilt. At the confused yellow and blue set of eyes that turned to him, Gloom reluctantly explained his lapse in demeanour.

"It's not funny, it was just something going through my head. Because you said 'usual', and there's nothing usual about you two." He said, feeling awkward.

"What about this was unusual sir?" Crimson asked blankly.

"No, listen, it wasn't funny, it was just..." Looking at the dripping Prey and Crimson, both still blankly looking back at him suddenly seemed to be exactly that.

'-really funny-'

Gloom's mouth started twitching.

'-funny? This isn't funny, it shouldn't be funny. How can I laugh at a time like this?-', Gloom thought in shock, but laugh he still did.

A snort bubbled out of Gloom's nose, then a rising chuckle which he tried to cover with a hoof, the action accidentally making his dripping mane fall in his eyes. That just made Gloom snort harder as he simultaneously tried to wipe his trailing mane out of his eyes and stop laughing when it was, '-clearly isn't appropriate to do so-'.

That of course just made it seem all the funnier.

And then, "Sn*rk*."

But it didn't come from the Sargent.

Gloom and Prey stared in real astonishment at Crimson, who's normally blank face wore a look of equal parts shock and mortification. "I, pardon me. I didn't mean-I am sorry sir..."

"Ha Ha Ha!" A full laugh finally came out of Gloom, he no longer even tried to suppress it. So he stood there laughing and being ashamed that he was laughing, mane dripping in his eyes.

'-it's not funny, four ponies are dead but it feels good to laugh-'

Ever seen someone with razor sharp canines, bedraggled, soaking wet, and fully laughing out in the open with a slightly crazy edge? Especially when they're normally so careful to keep those fangs hidden?

Prey imagined those normal posh ponies out on Canterlot's streets would have squawked and run a mile.

Prey started to laugh as well, although with him it came more of a conscious choice, and was more of a strange giggle than a laugh.

"Khe khe khe khe."

Of course, hearing Prey's off kilter giggle just made Gloom laugh more, which finally broke through Crimson's self control (or possibly it was just bewilderment), and got him to laugh as well. "Aha, ha, ha ha."

That really got Gloom going, scarred chest jumping up and down as he laughed and laughed, finally having to sit down right there on the tiles, hot water still beating down on his head and pooling around his hooves.

It wasn't funny, or at least not that funny. Definitely not enough for them to all stand or sit here like idiots laughing. Especially considering the ISND had never even chuckled at the same thing before.

"Ha ha Ha ha!"
"Khe khe khe khe."
"Aha ha ha, aha!"

The three of them fed of each other, fuelling their merriment further until finally they were all laughed out.

'-I feel so much lighter-', Gloom thought, sounding surprised as he calmed down, corners of his mouth still twitching. Gloom thought he should feel guilty for feeling better, but strangely he didn't.

Crimson's wing edge came up to massage his cheek as he worked his jaw. "My face hurts from laughing." He commented blankly. Then his lips twisted upwards again at himself in memory, "Ha, ow."

Prey had heard the saying, 'Laughter is the best medicine for the soul'. He didn't prescribe to that belief in the slightest, because there was no way it was so simple. But Gloom and Crimson certainly seemed to feel that way, which was why Prey had joined in laughing with the group.

'No matter how stupid, if it floats their boat and doesn't harm me...' Prey thought, metally shrugging.

Still, acting along and joining in hadn't been an... unpleasant experience.

All three of them completely ignored the Royal Guards on the other side of the showers giving them weird looks. Probably never seen a thestral laugh before.

"Haaa...." Gloom let out a long sigh, finally getting himself back under control enough to get up and turn off the shower. His eyes still had the rings under them, but they no longer looked so hollow. He scraped his sopping mane back out of his eyes and gave Crimson and Prey an embarrassed sort of half grin.

"Lieutenant Screech wants to meet us in ten minutes. What say you we get there on time so we can all meet this unicorn who has our tracer?" He asked.

"Yes sir." Crimson acknowledged, already heading for the towel rails. Prey splayed his legs and gave himself a shake like a dog, paying his swinging ears no mind as they wetly swatted him in the face. He was used to it.

Crimson came back with a number of towels draped over his wing, wordlessly offering one to Gloom, who took it with with a nod. He paused and squinted at the faded label sewn into the corner, "Huh, Luxury Linen. How about that." He muttered.

Crimson offered a towel towards Prey too, "Would you like one, little lamb?"

"Excuse me?"

"What?"

"Little lamb, really?"

"What? I mean, I meant to say Prey-"

"No no, you said 'little lamb'." Prey insisted, hardly able to believe that Crimson had said something as innocent as that.

Crimson didn't seem able to believe it either. His mouth opened and closed, "I didn't mean...I apologise, I don't know why I addressed you like that. Your name is Prey, I mean."

Crimson was so embarrassed that his mental walls even became weak enough for Prey to hear; '-can't believe let that name slip past-'

Gloom was looking like he was trying not to start laughing again.

Prey wondered how long that name had subconsciously been floating around in the back of Crimson's otherwise rigidly structured mind. 'If that's what he's secretly been internally referring to me as all the time in his head, I'm going to...well, do nothing actually.'

In light of the fact that Prey'd only just succeeded in getting Gloom and Crimson to mentally move off the cellar, he wasn't about to start an argument. Besides, he wasn't offended. Little lamb was

hardly an insult, merely a physical description.

Prey took the towel and started to dry his wool off.

Gloom critically examined the tracer he'd been hoofed, gripped in the claw of his wing. It didn't look like much. A small, funnel shaped glass beaker, the top securely corked down and sealed with wax. Gloom gave it a small shake, making the viscous pale liquid inside slosh. There were flakes of something glittery and purple mixed in there too.

"And this will be able to track that marker stuff we put on the file, yes?" Gloom asked, looking at the neat row of similarly prepared beakers set along the counter top.

"Correct. That is a magical solution which'll react when it comes into close proximity to the 'marker' agent, as you called it." The unicorn, a rather shaggy coated brown stallion named Future Spark, told the small gathering of Night Guard officers. Future Spark didn't seem overly bothered about being alone and surrounded by thestrals, but that might've just been because he came across as an over optimistic fool.

"Close proximity? How close is close?" Lieutenant Screech asked. Along with Corporal Humming, Starry Wing, and the ISND, that made seven of them in the office, which looked alot like a hastily re-purposed lab.

"Oh, only about two hundred yards, although depending on the concentration of the marker agent present, it could be two hundred and fifty if you're lucky." Future Spark said, smirking proudly.

"So this cannot lead us straight to the marker?" Screech asked, displeased.

"What, like a compass? Oh no no, nothing like that. It just lights up when the marker agent is close. Like this, see?" Future Spark said, showing them a sealed small metal bowl.

Spark's blue aura lit up around the wooden grip of the thick lid, and

removed it. Instantly, the flakes in the beaker Gloom held and all the others along the counter top lit up, twinkling brightly like purple fireflies.

"See?" Spark said happily, "That's the kind of magical reaction you'll get when you're standing right next to the marker."

Prey couldn't see what was inside the metal bowl, but he assumed it was the same clear marker agent Gloom had painted on the folder back in the Records Hall.

"It only lit up now. Why was it not glowing before?" Starry Wing demanded.

"For the demonstration of course. It wouldn't be much of a demonstration otherwise now would it?" Future Spark asking, looking very proud of himself.

"No, why was it not glowing if you had a bowl of the marker stuff right there?" Gloom said, pointing at the metal bowl.

Screech, Starry Wing, and Gloom were all thinking along the same lines, '-does this tracer only work with direct line of sight? If so, it's kind of useless-'

Spark quirked a shaggy eyebrow, "Because this is a lead crucible, of course." He said, waving the lid still grasped in his aura under their noses as if that should've made it obvious.

Ever the diplomatic thestral, Starry wing stepped in, "Future Spark, could you please explain to those of us with limited magical knowledge why it being lead matters?"

Future Spark wasn't a direct member of the Guard, he was a member of the Palace bureau staff. As such, he hadn't been told exactly *why* they wanted this tracking magic. Not that Future Spark seemed the least bothered by that.

"Magic doesn't go through lead. See? I'm holding the lid by the wood. Actually, you can still manipulate lead if there's sufficient magical power to overwhelm the natural anti-magical properties of lead and interact with the metal directly. It's a fascinating subject to

work on, with real in-depth theory work-"

"Thank you that explanation was sufficient for our needs." Starry Wing interrupted Spark before he could get too far side tracked.

"So this tracer won't work if our target is behind any lead." Screech stated rather than asked.

"Oh that's highly unlikely Lieutenant, don't worry. Who'd want to live in a house entirely made of lead?" Future Spark asked.

"Someone who wants to avoid getting magically tracked down maybe?" Prey muttered. No one heard him.

"This tracer is very limited in range. How do you suggest we best utilise the number of tracers we have here to scan for our target?" Starry Wing asked, picking up one of the beakers. He didn't mention that this all hinged on whether or nor someone actually did take the bait at the Record's Hall as intended.

Three pairs of thestral eyes shifted expectantly to Gloom. "What-? Oh, right. Er, I suggest having a line of Night Guards fly low over the city, at about a hundred yards apart and fifty yards up. Let's see, there's ten beakers here, so we could cover the city in one thousand two hundred yard swathes."

The Night Guard officers nodded in acceptance of Gloom's plan. It was as likely to be as good as any other, and once again this was Gloom's investigation, so the decision was also his until Nighthawk said otherwise.

"You're searching the whole of Canterlot? Well, that'll probably take you at least ten hours," Future Spark spoke up, head tilted to the side as he calculated, "So that means you'll have plenty of time." He announced brightly.

Screech cleared his throat, "Plenty of time until what?"

"Until the tracer magic wears off of course." Spark replied confidently, completely missing the looks he was given. There was a long moment.

"Future Spark, are you by any chance related to a certain Taffy Hopes?" Gloom asked.

"Why yes I am. She's my cousin. How'd you know?" Spark asked, sounding pleased.

"Lucky guess." Gloom sighed, '-I had a hunch-'.

"Okay, how long will this magic last then?"

"Well, I estimate it'll last roughly thirty-four hours. I started at four o'clock, so thirty-four hours on from that... About two in the morning on Thursday." Future Spark answered. That estimate was below Prey's own. Either Spark was being overly conservative (unlikely), or his magic was weaker than Prey had expected. 'Good to know.'

"Can you make more of these tracers once these expire?" Crimson asked, looking at the beaker Gloom still held in his wing.

"Noooope. Well, I could, but it won't help. The marker will have expired by then too, so you'll end up tracking nothing but a dead, dud, doo-doo, dodo."

"That should still leave us enough time." Screech said, while Corporal Humming was busy giving the eccentric unicorn a long, hard stare.

"Well it would be best to not waste anymore of that time limit then. We don't know what other delays might occur in our search." Starry Wing announced, starting to gather all the beakers up into a box.

Spark cheerily waved them goodbye, "Have fun. I hope you find whatever it is that you're looking for soon. Because, you know, it kinda' needs to be soon. But have fun anyway."

---I---

Author's Notes:

Bit of a slower chapter, but it's necessary set up I

promise!
My editor and helper here, who is also kina' like a co-writer? Anyway, thankyou to him:
Sweetolebob18
If you see mistakes I missed please point them out.

32.2 If a tree falls in the Night...

Quietly, and with very little fuss, twelve Night Guard thestrals lined up on the darkened Parade Ground.

They stretched their wings and prepared for a long endurance flight over Canterlot. The moonlight played over the Palace behind this squad, rendering it in faint silvers and blacks. The unlit state of the Parade Ground posed no problem to the ponies using it.

Ten of the selected thestrals had a sealed glass beaker of tracer solution hung on cords about their necks. Once they began their flight sweep, each would split up to a distance of a hundred yards and fly in a staggered line. The remaining two thestrals were there to act as messengers for when, or if, the ten found something.

The tracers were still only accurate to two hundred yards. As such, the rest of the available Night Guard would remain here as a reactionary force, waiting for the signal. But they were ready to rush out and lock down any area of Canterlot at a moment's notice.

If a Royal Guard or passing servant noticed the figures moving on the dark Parade Ground, they would be told it was just a "night time training exercise". Corporal Humming was one of the ten selected thestrals, and would be the officer in charge on the sweep. She was nodding as Screech finished finalising the intended flight plan.

"Yes sir. I'll halt the formation and send one of the messengers back the moment we find anything."

"Good. Sargent Gloom, can you think of anything else to add?" Screech asked, half turning to the ISND, who stood near by in the darkening night.

Gloom glanced at Prey and Crimson, the first of whom shrugged and the second who just shook his head, "No sir, nothing further."

"Thank you. Corporal Humming, Luna's speed and night watch over you." Screech said to Humming as she saluted.

"Yes sir. I'm certain she will." Humming acknowledged, falling back into line as the other thestrals finished their warm up.

Corporal Humming didn't give a verbal order. She simply unfurled her leathery wings, almost pitch black against the night, and took off without a word. The rest of the squadron took off equally silently in synchronisation behind her. They rapidly gained height and were soon lost to Prey's eyes.

Gloom and Crimson however could track the squads flight path for much longer, and Prey watched where *they* were watching, estimating from their gazes that the squadron had begun the split up already. Corporal Humming wasted no time it seemed.

Prey thought it unlikely Humming would find anything in the next few hours, and had shared his observation.

Corporal Humming was beginning the sweep from the closest point outwards, meaning she would be checking the area surrounding the Palace first. Prey doubted any drug dealers would be living in Upper Canterlot. Still, the search had to begin somewhere. It was all on Humming and her squadron to find this pony now.

All of this was of course assuming the drug dealers really had fallen for the ploy and taken the bait

And as long as the scout wasn't a unicorn who only read with magic.

Prey was still angry at himself for missing such an obvious possibility.

Prey noticed how Gloom's jaw had started to set again as he watched the squadron disappear. The laughter session in the shower had helped the Sargent, but the grim pressure was creeping back into his thoughts. Not as bad as before, Gloom was ready to do his duty whatever came, but reality still had to be faced.

Screech finally turned away from watching the thestrals that Prey

couldn't see and addressed them, "Captain Nighthawk should be back by now. He wants to see the ISND to discuss progress." Screech said with a nod as he left.

"Yes sir." Gloom acknowledged.

Prey got tiredly to his hooves. There had been a lot of walking again today, and his hooves hurt. Again. Not that it was anything new. He did hope they'd actually be getting something to eat tonight. Sleeping on an empty stomach was no fun. Not that anything was ever better on an empty belly. Except maybe getting kicked repeatedly in the stomach until you threw up.

Actually, vomiting could also be included on that short list too.

"Do you think that our pony will really be marked sir? I mean, do you think the salt dealers would've noticed our ploy with Leaflet Spring and sent a scout already? It's been less than a day." Crimson asked.

"Too late to do anything else now. We've already applied the marker. We have until two am on the day after tomorrow. If we find nothing tonight, well, we have another chance at sweeping the city before the marker fades." Gloom said.

"The ISND does seem to operate a lot on 'if's', 'maybe's', and 'hopefully's'. We never have enough time for anything proper." Prey grumbled, stretching out a stiff hind leg. This wasn't the first time he'd pointed this fact out, and it likely wouldn't be the last either. Eventually, Gloom would have to take the hint and completely change up the way the ISND worked. But not right now. There just wasn't the time.

"Yeah. Alright, on to Captain Nighthawk's office." Gloom said despondently, leading the way back into the palace.

Thankfully, mercifully, *wonderfully*, the meeting with Nighthawk was short and quickly over.

That did not mean however it was any less dour and heavy. Gloom

gave their report on what they'd done, found, and their plan with the tracer Future Spark had made for them.

Nighthawk was already well informed of all they were doing, having heard it all from Starry Wing himself, but still he wanted to check in with Gloom. However, the meeting soon moved on from simple checking to what Nighthawk had to share with them.

The four murder victims identities had finally been confirmed.

The descriptions the ISND had provided earlier had served to confirm the last outstanding identification. It was the Earth pony, Mango Nut. Terry Golf however was not among the two unicorns slain, meaning he was still at large.

The other three mutilated corpses had belong to the pegasus mare, Crystal Winds, and the two unicorns stallions had respectively been Forward Momentum and Express Pill Junior. Prey didn't care about their names, only about what else might've been discovered about them.

Crystal Wind had no immediate family, nor owned any property within Canterlot. Only a small cloud home above the city. The thestral sent to search the cloud house had returned less than an hour ago to report that the house mysteriously disappeared two nights ago. Prey knew no one would ever find it.

Mango Nut on the other hoof did have immediate family, or rather had. An aged mother and father, and an estranged brother. His parents had been informed. That was where Nighthawk had been. He'd taken on the responsibility of delivering the news himself.

He'd done the same for the family of Forward Momentum too. A pregnant wife, who in Nighthawk's memories had broken down before he'd even gotten the first word out. She'd been waiting in rising fear for her husband's return for two days. She'd known what Nighthawk was there for the moment she opened the door.

Express Pill's family wasn't on record. He'd moved to Canterlot seven years ago, and it wasn't known from where. Deceased notices would have to be sent out to the other major Equestrian cities for

the local Guard to look into.

Nighthawk recited all this to the ISND in a gruff monotone. He didn't need to display any emotion for it to be clear he was still thinking about those two families he'd broken the news to.

Four ponies, four people who'd each had their own lives, hopes, jobs, ambitions, private fears, joys and dreams. Prey rubbed at the end of his ear, 'Not anymore.'

Gloom gravely thanked Nighthawk for keeping them up to date, and repeated the four names to himself with a focused look in his eyes.

'-engrave them on my mind so I never forget why our duty is so important-'

Four more names. But named or nameless, they still weigh just as heavily. Four more didn't even make a noticeable difference to Prey's heap at this point. He knew he wouldn't be forgetting those four names now though. He never forgot. Even after all these years though, he still had yet to figure out whether it was better to have a name or not.

When you knew, you wished you didn't, and when you didn't, you wished you knew.

Nighthawk dismissed them, returning to the stacks of paperwork demanding his attention building up on his desk. From his observations, Prey estimated that the Night Guard Captain got about as much sleep nightly as the ISND did. In other words, not enough. That might be exploitable in the future.

Prey considered possible scenarios in which he might be placed to take advantage of Nighthawk's sleep schedule as the ISND made their way to the dinning hall.

Surprise, surprise, they'd missed dinner again, and had to scavenge left overs from the last two cooks left on clean up duty before it was thrown away. Throw away food? How unbelievably idiotic and staggeringly wasteful was that?

Mashed potatoes, mixed with cold green beans and carrot pieces. It was actually one of Cookie's less awful meals to date. Still, they hardly tasted it. All three of them were too focused on what Humming and her squadron were doing out there in the night.

Had the drug dealers taken the bait? Would the tracer work?

Everyone already knew they were likely to get one false alarm tonight, because the clerk who'd fetched them the folder would've certainly gotten some on his hooves too when he took it back. As such, the Night Guard weren't going to go kicking in the door first, asking questions later on this mission, but actually checking who's house it was first. *Then* kicking the door in.

Since one find was already guaranteed, the real question was, would Humming's sweep turn up a second?

That's what they were waiting for as they sat in the now familiar scene of the empty mess hall. Eating, thinking their private thoughts, and wondering if they were going to have to dash off into Canterlot again to arrest somebody.

They were all tired, as always. It seemed to be a perpetual state of existence in the ISND. Prey was also nervously considering his coming nights sleep. The longer he stayed awake, the more tired and thus more likely he was to fall too deeply asleep. He couldn't risk Luna noticing his dreams again. Last night had been far too close.

Finished eating, they all exchanged glances.

"Now what? Sleep, wait, or keep working?" Prey asked what they were all thinking.

Gloom opened his mouth to say, '-work-', but hesitated.

"What do you think would be the best use of our time? Considering we might get called out at any time." Gloom asked instead, deciding to ask them instead of making the decision as the Sargent. Things had changed in the last two days. Some for the better, more for the worse. One of them was Gloom's decision to ask for his two

subordinates opinions more.

It was unnecessary to voice that they'd all rather be resting, they all already knew that. But it would be slacking off on their duty, something two out of the three of them felt very strongly about.

"If we are going to be called out in a few hours time, I don't think there's any point in trying to rest sir." Crimson spoke up.

"Humming-"

"That's Corporal Humming, Prey."

"Of course, sir. 'Corporal' Humming might not even find anything tonight. We'll be even more exhausted tomorrow if we stay up waiting all night for an alarm that never comes." Prey pointed out.

Gloom's thoughts couldn't help but turn in longing towards his soft bunk.

'-I really wish we were working the night shifts and not these day shifts mixed with whenever shifts-'

"Alright," Gloom decided, "We'll pull a guard shift for a couple of hours. If nothing happens by then..." He shrugged, "It's not like we weren't getting much sleep anyways. What's another night on top of that?"

The night was warm, with drifting clouds covering half of the sky. However, right above Canterlot, the sky was clear of clouds, letting the moon shine down unobstructed. Like an enormous sky light.

'Did Luna purposefully have weather teams clear the sky above Canterlot so she could admire her moon rise?' Prey wondered. After one thousand years imprisoned there, how could she stand the sight of it? Prey knew he never wanted to see Dreverton again, unless it'd suddenly become active again and was erupting.

'One thousand years. That's a long time. That's seventeen and a half times as long as I spent languishing in Dreverton...What did she do

for that thousand years?'

Was Luna imprisoned *in* the moon, or was she *on* the moon? Did she have a physical body or did she exist as a spirit? How about her mental state. Was she conscious for those thousand years?

One thousand years. No sight, no sound, no air, just the sucking cold of the void. Could you even scream on the moon? With no one to hear you, nothing but your own thoughts to torture yourself with.

Prey didn't know why Luna had gone mad a millennia ago, and he probably didn't want to. But one thousand years with only your own madness for company under those conditions... It was not something that even Prey could imagine.

Prey could well understand why Nightmare Moon had wanted to destroy the world on her return. When you're that bitter, scared, mad and alone, the only way out you can see was the destruction of everything else.

Right or wrong didn't enter into the equation. The only way to make it better was to make it all burn. To make it fair. Prey looked up at where the Mare in the Moon used to be. He wondered again what secret method Celestia had used to subdue and brainwash her younger sister back from a mad demonness into obedience.

Prey rubbed the golden bands on his fore legs together, 'Luna was only ever the lesser of the two evils.'

A thestral messenger spiraled out of the night sky, alerting the Night Guards on standby that Humming had succeeded even before he called out his message.

"We found them! East Lower Canterlot, on Natal street, Corporal Humming requests help in locking down the block."

Even if there had been any Royal Guards around to overhear, they still wouldn't have heard any reason as to why Humming wanted the block locked down.

The thestrals posted here of course didn't need the reason. They knew what was going on, and were already flapping up into the air after the wheeling messenger before the echoes had even faded. The only Night Guards trusted to work on this case were the thestrals, meaning that none had any trouble in following the messenger back up into the night.

With just one exception. The ISND. Or more specifically, one flightless exception. Prey.

Not for the first time, Gloom was left keenly wishing Prey was a thestral, or at least a Pegasus. '-things would be so much easier if we could all fly. Or if he would let one of us carry him-'

"Oh, so sorry I was born a sheep and a runt at that. My bad." Prey said sarcastically.

"I didn't say anything!" Gloom protested.

"You didn't need to, you were thinking it."

Gloom didn't waste time denying it. They were already falling behind the other Night Guards, and since they would have to follow on hoof, that gap would only increase.

For a moment Gloom looked Prey over and considered; '-worth it to just grab Prey and fly off anyway?-'

It was a good thing Gloom made the right choice. For all of their sakes.

"Running it is then," Gloom grunted in dissatisfaction, "You'd better keep up Prey." He called back, already picking up speed.

Prey was no stranger to running. Just recently, the ISND had been involved in many situations involving getting from point A to point B as fast as possible. There was the time chasing Pebble Mill, running to Seed Apple's farm, Copper Pot's interrogation, etcetera.

And way before any of that, Prey had been an expert at running

away.

However that was then, and this was now. Back in the Deeper Green, Prey's size hadn't impeded him. Being able to duck and squirm through anything was just as important, if not more so, than raw speed when trying to escape from a chimera. You were likely to break an ankle if you weren't agile, which was just as fatal as not running fast enough. Prey was good at that sort of obstacle course running.

His straight line speed was another matter. Down these open and empty Canterlot streets, where there was no need for ducking and weaving, Prey's natural disadvantage as a small runt came into harsh focus.

Gloom had told Prey to keep up. Following his order was proving to be an issue. Gloom and Crimson weren't even galloping at full speed, let alone sprinting. As Prey sucked air into his protesting lungs, he had no doubt the two full grown ponies could've increased their speed significantly, and still reached Natal Street without breaking a sweat.

'Curse this pathetic runt body!' By this point, such cursing had lost any meaning.

The crystal street lamps cast pools of light which they ran through, passing the neat but tightly packed homes of Lower Canterlot on either side.

They took a right over a gaudily decorated stone bridge spanning a lower street, and Gloom slowed their pace as they emerged onto Natal Street.

They came to a cautious stop.

If you only looked at the areas the street lamps illuminated, you would've missed the Night Guards perched in the shadows, and dismissed the odd flash of yellow slitted eyes as belonging to wandering cats.

But if you *did* notice and did look, you might've seen how the thestrals were thinly spaced, positioned up and down the street so as to not leave any house or side street unobserved.

The ISND cantered up to the closest Night Guard, weaving around the pools of street lamp light as they approached the closest such hidden sentinel.

"Where's Corporal Humming?" Gloom quietly asked as soon as they were close enough. Much as Prey had predicted, Gloom was barely out of breath, unlike himself, who was gulping down air like a stranded fish.

"The search squadron is still slowly sweeping the area sir. They are trying to narrow it down further." The Night Guard answered, pointing up at the sky.

Panting, Prey looked up. If he concentrated, he could just about see the occasional dark patches of bat winged shaped sky passing against the pin pricks of star light. They were keeping well above the street's light, and obviously shielding the glow from the vials of tracer solution they carried. If not, it would've looked like a number of giant fireflies were circling.

"Good, please go and inform Corporal Humming of our arrival. We'll hold your post until you get back." Gloom ordered, still lightly prancing on the spot to stop his muscles from burning after the run, Crimson doing the same. Prey just slumped against the wall and focused on trying to breathe again.

The Night Guard nodded and with a, "Yes sir," And took off up into the night to search for the Corporal.

Two minutes and forty three seconds later, (Prey was counting), he was back.

"The Corporal asks that you help cover the end of the street. Once she's narrowed the sweep down to the right house and is ready to move in, she says she will send for you, sir." The Night Guard relayed.

"We'll go do that." Gloom nodded in agreement, setting off for the end of the indicated street, Crimson following just behind. Stifling a groan as his wobbling legs protested, Prey pushed himself off his considerately placed supporting wall, and stagger-limped after them.

Humming wasn't trying to subvert the ISND by sticking them on the side lines, she was merely doing what thestrals did and being practical. Humming was busy and in the middle of an ariel sweep, and the ISND could help her by more thoroughly securing the area instead of just standing around waiting.

Four minutes, eleven seconds later, Corporal Humming herself swooped down and pulled up to hover above them. She spoke quietly so it didn't carry, "Hello sir, good to see you. We have identified our target as being somewhere inside that building, and confirmed it's not the clerk." She pointed at one of large, three story houses.

"There's multiple ponies living in there. We're going to storm all the rooms at once. Wait two minutes, then we'll all converge. You're on point sir. I just have one last sentry to inform." Humming said, now pointing towards a patch of darkness where another Night Guard was stationed.

"Yes corporal. Two minutes." Gloom confirmed. Humming nodded and flapped up back above the street lamps to complete her task.

"Two minutes." Gloom repeated in a low voice.

"One minute, forty eight seconds." Prey corrected.

"Orders sir?" Crimson asked, eyes locked on their target building. There were five bright lit windows on this side alone, so at minimum, there were five ponies awake and active in there.

"Do as Humming says," Gloom said, forgetting to add the title of 'Corporal' in the moment. "Prey, stay behind us. Let me and Crimson do any breaching. We're going in through the front door."

'-here we go. Will there need to be any violence?-'

"One minute twenty." Prey sounded off.

"If they try to run?" Crimson asked quietly, slowly limbering up his wings.

"Then stop them. Gently, if possible." Gloom answered back.

They waited.

"Thirty seconds." Prey said.

"...Three, two, one, zero."

"Here we go." Gloom muttered, expressing the same sentiment from earlier and stepped out from the shadows. Up and down the street, bat winged shadows emerged too as they saw the ISND serve as the signal. Some approached from the ground, some the air, but they all converged silently on the house.

There were two ways Gloom could've approached opening the front door.

Knocking on it, or kicking it down. Gloom decided they were using the second approach, regulations be damned. Sure, there were certainly innocent bystanders inside, but there was at least one guilty party too.

In a motion very reminisce of their first attempt to gain entry into the abandoned house yesterday, Gloom turned around, lined up the door's lock, and shouted, "This is the Night Guard. Step away from the door!"

This door turned out to be a lot less sturdy than the reinforced door of the secret salt den.

It splintered open with a crash on Gloom's first kick, leaving the door handle and lock still attached to the frame. From somewhere inside the house came a shriek of surprise, followed by another one of fear as the rest of the Night Guard surrounding the building took Gloom's entry as a sign of how to proceed and copied him.

Windows broke and more doors splintered as the thestrals forced their way in, the noise shockingly loud in the quiet night.

Crimson was the first of the ISND into the house, the reason being Gloom had to regain his balance from breaching the door, and Prey had no intention of rushing headlong into an unsecured building. That's what the rest of the Night Guards were for.

Prey let Crimson and Gloom charge on ahead, leaving him abruptly alone outside. More sounds of breaking objects and frightened ponies being rudely awakened continued to echo out. It was making quite the cacophony of noise.

Prey put his hoof to the damaged door frame and left a rune as he carefully stepped over the collapsed door. Some mare was screaming blue murder up the stairs. Quite literally.

"Murder! Murder! Murder!"

Prey scoffed as he entered. There was no murder, her screams held nowhere near enough raw horror for that.

A Night Guard dashed out of one of the ground floor rooms, the kitchen by the looks of it, barely managed to skip around Prey without colliding and kept going up the stairs. Prey didn't hurry to follow him. He took his sweet time, examining the building as he went, checking for any traps or anything else of importance.

If the Night Guard wanted to set off any traps for him, that was fine, but he wasn't going to rush into an unsecured area. His time in the Resistance had drilled that habit into him.

The shortest route is always trapped. So is the second shortest route. And so is the safe route you thought you cleared yesterday. It didn't even have to be a Border Guard ambush, simply a tangle viper. Both killed you just as dead.

Heading for the stairs, Prey peeked into each room as he passed, getting glimpses into the lives of their occupants.

Many worn looking doors that'd previously been locked had been kicked down, revealing the building had been split up into lots of

separate apartment rooms. The residents who were renting these rooms were all cornered against their flat walls by at least one or more thestral Night Guard.

As expected, the pony residents were panicking.

The reassurances the Night Guards were trying to give them if they would; "Just remain calm and follow instructions" were doing little to help.

Stay calm? Don't panic? You try that when strange, slit eyed, bat winged ponies break down your door in the middle of the night, proceeds to back naturally skittish ponies into a corner, and says, "We're here to help."

It wasn't hard to see why it wasn't being believed.

Prey idly wondered if someone outside would hear the noise and be brave enough to call the Royal Guard. That would be interesting to explain.

Prey placed another couple of minor runes around as he climbed up to the first, then second floor as he searched for Gloom and Crimson. He saw more re-purposed apartment rooms, four to a floor, with Night Guards blocking each door. Inside of one that Prey snuck past, he saw a Night Guard waving a tracer vial back and forth above a fearful looking Earth pony's hooves, no doubt trying to work out if the glow got brighter or dimmer.

"You destroyed my door! Completely unnecessary, you'd best hope you're going to pay for that. I demand to speak with my lawyer!" Someone else was shouting.

Prey paused and looked up at the ceiling, 'Found you.' He thought, making a mental note of the position of the room above him on the top floor. Above, he could hear the thoughts of Gloom. Walls and floors were no barrier to the mind.

Only two of the four apartment rooms up here were occupied. Prey made straight for the one which held Gloom, Crimson, and

Humming, along with whichever pony it was that they'd captured.

Prey casually walked in through the busted door and took stock.

Crimson had a frightened looking pegasus backed into a corner next to a messy bed, the stallion's wild mane indicating he'd recently been occupying it.

"It's him, he's the one. I'm sure of it!" Corporal Humming said, triumphantly waving the vial of brightly glowing tracer solution near the pegasus's hooves. "And don't even think about trying to run. Although you're more than welcome to try. Make my night." She told him aggressively.

Crimson had his wings half unfurled as he guarded their suspect/ confirmed perpetrator, and looked ready to drop the other pegasus if he made so much as a threatening twitch.

The captured pegasus was a splotchy green and light blue, with a lanky build and close cropped mane and tail. No doubt that was to help cut down air drag. He'd likely picked this top floor apartment so as to be closer to the window and sky. Too bad for him Humming had busted in through said window before he could wake and flee.

"What're you doing in my house?" The pegasus demanded, voice afraid. '-how? Already? But when did?-'

"We ask the questions here." Gloom told him, voice cold.

"I want to know what's going on-"

"-Shut it." Humming snarled. It was a good snarl, plenty of fangs and a good growl mixed in.

The pegasus 'shut it'.

Humming nodded to Gloom and stepped aside, signalling this was now in the ISND's hooves.

"Let's start simple," Gloom said, stepping up to replace Humming in standing uncomfortably close to the pegasus, "What's your name?"

"I'm Oyster Pinion, but-"

"Oyster Pinion, where were you between the hours of seven and nine this evening?" Gloom interrupted. Beside him, Prey walked quietly up and purposefully into Gloom's periphery to let the thestral know he'd arrived. Gloom gave Prey a quick nod before demanding again, "Where were you between seven and nine?"

Oyster Pinion snapped out of staring in a daze at Prey, and tried to come up with an answer.

"I'm, er, not sure. Just around I guess?" He lied. It was a very obvious lie too. The way his ears twitched back and his eyes went off to the side gave him clearly away.

"You know," Gloom said, rotating his hoof through the air, "I'm tired of doing all of my interrogations this way. I'm bored of asking questions we both already know the answer to, just to give you a chance to come clean. I'm sick and tired of all that so I'll just skip to the chase. Who sent you to the Record's Hall?"

"Nopony, I was just going to look up my family history."

"Lies. You went to the active records desk, not the archives. Who sent you?"

"Nopony did, I swear-"

"Who sent you to steal Leaflet Spring's records!" Gloom abruptly shouted into Oyster's face.

"Aiee! I don't know I don't know!" Oyster cringed, ducking under his wings.

In his fright, the pegasus had just unintentionally confessed that he *had* been sent after Leaflet's records. They'd already known, but there was always the one percent chance this had all been one big coincidence.

'-it worked-', Humming grinned.

'-they took the bait-', Gloom thought. "And who were they?" He

pressed.

"I, I don't know who you're talking about." Oyster stuttered, back to lying again.

"Who was it? Who do you work for!?"

"There's nopony, there's nopony I tell you! Please! It was, it was all just me."

To Prey it looked like Gloom and Humming were both getting ready to launch a joint verbal assault on the blatantly guilty pegasus, when there was a knock from the busted in door.

"Corporal Humming ma'am." A Night Guard called, poking his head in.

"What is it?" Humming asked, not turning.

"We've gathered all the other residents on the ground floor I've assured them this is all Night Guard business on Princess Luna's behalf, but they're being rather unreasonable. Should I offer them an explanation or ignore them, ma'am?"

Prey could tell the Guard didn't really care. The ponies downstairs should've realised the Night Guard were just doing their duty and, '-be thankful they have somepony powerful like Princess Luna to watch over them-'

"I'll deal with them before we leave and drag Oyster back with us." Humming replied

"W-What?!"

Humming ignored Oyster's exclamation, "Just tell them that all their damages will be compensated for by the Night Guard, we'll send somepony by in the morning to write up a receipt. We've just going to break this fool here and then I'll be down to help." She finished.

"Yes ma'am." The thestral nodded and withdrew his head.

Humming and Gloom turned back to their thoroughly intimidated

prisoner. Turning your back on a prisoner was a bad idea, but Oyster wasn't going anywhere with Crimson and Gloom covering him. "Now, let's cut the horse radish-"

From seemingly nowhere, Prey felt a train of malicious thought enter his perception range. It was dark and viscous.

"Watch o-!" Prey started to yell, already leaping away from the window.

A griffin, *the* griffin murderer, had appeared from beneath the window ledge. All any of them had time to see was the crossbow propped on the window sill, and the griffin squinting down its length.

T*wang* *__Thuck__!*

Oyster Pinion was knocked from his hooves as the bolt hit him full in the chest. Prey's leap finished carrying him behind a chair for cover as everyone else began to react.

"Night Guards to me!" Humming shouted.

"Stop him!" Gloom yelled.

Crimson had already covered half the distance to the window as the griffin kicked off, doing a backwards loop to get clear and taking off into the night.

A horrible gurgle of pain and blood came from the downed pegasus, causing both Gloom and Humming to freeze.

'-catch the griffin!-', '-but Oyster Pinion!-'

What did they do? Go after the griffin or try and save their witness?

'Why didn't Humming leave even a single Guards outside to keep watch?' Prey thought.

The griffin must've been coming to receive Oyster's report. He'd seen the Night Guard capture the salt dealer's scout, and made the call to silence Oyster. The griffin had been able to fly right up to the

window unopposed and take the shot.

Gloom's head whipped back and forth from Oyster Pinion to the window with its smashed in glass. He had a split second to make the choice.

"Humming, Crimson, get after that griffin!" Gloom shouted, while he himself rushed to Oyster Pinion's side.

Crimson had reached the window, but was forced to delay a second. He had to line up his jump to carry him through while avoiding the shards of broken glass still in its frame. It felt like a second too long. The griffin was getting away!

"Hurry!"

Crimson leapt through the shattered window, wings snapping out as he cleared the frame. Corporal Humming didn't hesitate like Crimson did. She just ran straight up and jumped through, headless of the glass shards.

"Prey, help me!" Gloom shouted, trying to get Oyster Pinion to lie down flat as he began to convulse.

Prey looked away from the window which Humming and Crimson had exited. Whether they caught the griffin or not was completely out of his hooves now.

"Prey help me!" Gloom repeated, panic edging his words.

'He's been shot, what do you expect me to do?' Prey thought even as he abandoned his cover behind the chair and rushed over.

Oyster did not look to be in a good way. Blood was bubbling out from around the shaft where it penetrated his chest. The pegasus kept jerking and making little pathetic gasps of pain as Gloom pinned his legs and wings down as best he could. "Don't just stand there Prey! Help me save him."

Prey blinked big blue eyes at Gloom, "Help? How? What do you think I can do?"

He was not going to touch the pegasus if he could help it, and he certainly wasn't going to get close enough for either Gloom or Oyster to touch him.

Gloom gritted his teeth, "I don't know how, just, just...!" He couldn't find the words to finish.

'-I don't know what to do. He's too badly hurt. Oh Luna, I don't know the first thing about arrow wounds-', Gloom realised in panic.

"I don't know. Find a cloth or something, anything to use as a bandage." He ordered, the rasp in his voice as strong as it ever had been.

Prey took a moment to stop and properly evaluate Oyster's condition and his chances of survival.

They weren't good.

The crossbow bolt had gone in deep, not even the arrow head's bindings were visible. 'Punctured left lung without question.'

Either it'd had enough power to smash straight through the ribs, or just happened to slide in between. 'Or maybe heavy duty tip or armour piercing then?' Prey questioned.

Actually, it didn't matter. The bolt had gone in so deep it'd likely poked a hole in the back of the lung too.

'Ninety five percent chance he dies.' Prey worked out within that moment. Maybe Prey could've saved Oyster if he had any equipment or tools. But they were in the middle of a messy apartment, and there was nothing to use.

Prey cast about and grabbed a towel discarded on the floor. He balled it up and tossed it to Gloom, "Here. Apply pressure on the wound."

"That's not going to work, there's an arrow in the way." Gloom snapped at him.

"Wrap it around the shaft then, and then apply pressure."

"That'll just push it in deeper!"

"Well there's no other alternative."

"I'll pull it out, just come here and hold him-"

"No! That'll kill him in under two minutes, tops. He'll bleed out and his lung will flood with blood. The only thing keeping him alive right now is that arrow acting as a plug. And what if the head's barbed?"

Gloom didn't know for sure if Prey was right, but he feared he was. He didn't have time to try something else, Oyster's blood was already staining his breastplate and hooves.

'-no time to think, only do!-'

Gloom bundled the towel around the shaft as best he could and pressed down.

Oyster let out a wet scream of pain, a horrible bubbling sound in the back of his throat as he weakly thrashed.

"It's going to be okay. Stay still, help is on it's way. You're going to be okay!" Gloom tried to calm him. It was a lie. Prey knew Oyster wasn't going to make it. That bubbling he'd just heard meant Oyster's lung was filling up faster than he'd originally estimated.

Just then there the sound of galloping hooves came from up the corridor as the Night Guards Humming's call had alerted finally arrived. From the time of the griffin firing the bolt, to the time of the Night Guards arrival was only about thirty seconds. Time had seemed to stretch, but now it was snapping back into place in one alarming rush as the shouting began.

"Corporal Humm- Sargent Gloom, what happened?" The lead thestral shouted as he burst in. Five more followed him, crowding into the room, wings flared and teeth bared for a fight.

That all went out the shattered window when they saw Gloom struggling to try and keep Oyster Pinion still with an arrow in his chest.

"Sir, what happened?", "Where's Corporal Humming?", "Who did this?!"

"Help me hold him down. One of you, try and find a first aid kit and tell the Night Guards downstairs what's going on." Gloom ordered, mind jumping about trying to solve five different problems at once.

"Yes sir!"

"And you two, get up into the sky. Humming and Crimson are chasing the p-griffin who did this. Go help them!"

"Yes sir!"

Amidst the rush, Prey slipped back into the background. Now that the Sargent had plenty of other people to distract himself with, Gloom would no longer require him to try and help save the shot pegasus. Prey could only see glimpses of Oyster from between the assisting Night Guards, but it was enough.

'He'll be gone in two minutes.'

Prey had originally estimated a ninety five percent chance of Oyster's death, but now he was one hundred percent certain. Oyster wasn't going to survive. It'd only been a slim chance anyway, but the body was a strange and fickle thing. Prey had seen people, pony and otherwise, miraculously survive worse, but also die from less.

"The bleeding won't stop!", "Stay with us, keep fighting.", "He can't breathe!"

'And there goes our best lead too. They took our bait, but it was all for nothing.' Prey thought.

If there weren't all these ponies around, he could break into Oyster's mind and learn what they needed to know. At least that way they would've gotten something out of his death. Not this pointless, bubbling hacking attempts to breathe that didn't benefit anyone.

Prey didn't want to listen to it.

It was disgusting. It made him want to cover his ears, but he knew

that wouldn't work. He'd heard it before. Too many times before. The wet bubbling of a dead pony trying to breathe.

'It never gets any better.' Prey thought, staring fixedly at the square of night outside the smashed window.

'Wait.'

Prey realised the sound had actually stopped. Prey'd missed it for a second, but underneath all the noise from the Night Guards clustered around Oyster Pinion, the pegasus's tortured breathing had ceased. He was dead.

It took a full minute for the Night Guards to realise it though, and for a further minute that just increased their frenzied attempts to revive him.

"He's not breathing!", "Clear his air way.", "Don't let up, keep going.", "Where's that first aid kit?"

Prey gritted his teeth and tried to ignore the sounds as he waited to see if Crimson and Humming returned successful in catching the griffin or not.

More Night Guards came up and were sent away, told to keep the rest of the buildings residents calm. Eventually though, they had to cease their efforts. Their suspect was dead, and there was no chance of reviving him. The moment one of them stepped away from the body they all did, like it was already putrid. Gloom had blood smeared across his hooves and chest plate. Other's had some splashed on them too, but Gloom was the worst.

"Sir, orders?" One of the Night Guards asked. Gloom didn't seem to hear him. He just kept blinking down at Oyster Pinion.

'-what went wrong. Why didn't it work? I don't understand-'

"Sir, orders? Sir."

Gloom finally snapped out of it, "Secure the building, make sure nopony leaves. Send a flyer to Captain Nighthawk or one of the Lieutenants, which ever you can find. Tell them what's happened.

The rest of you, just... stand guard or help the others downstairs."

"Yes sir." They hurried away, grateful to have a job to focus on that wasn't in here.

Watching them go, Prey felt Gloom's eyes settle on the back of his head, '-oh no. Again, all this all over again and Prey was here-'

"Prey...You okay?" Gloom asked, unable to think of anything else to say.

"I was not the one shot." Prey stopped rubbing his ear and let it fall. He looked back at Gloom, "Can we please not do this again? He's dead now. There's nothing more we could've done."

Death was death, and Oyster Pinion was already dead. Prey might not have understood why Gloom was so upset at him last time he'd been around a dead body, but he sure as hell didn't want it to happen a second time. He needed to distract Gloom before the thestral began to fixate again.

"Crimson and Corporal Humming might succeed in catching that griffin, or they might not. If they don't, the griffin is going to go to ground or get out of Canterlot tonight. He's also going to warn all the salt dealers he works for. Unless we manage to pull off something big tonight, this investigation is going to dead wall." Prey said, clearly laying out their position.

"Oyster Pinion's and those other four deaths would've been for nothing if that happens. We have to do something." Prey added that last bit to try and rally Gloom. He couldn't do this on his own, because Luna's orders wouldn't let him.

"Prey..."

'-don't you care that some poor pony's just been murdered?-', Gloom didn't ask it though. Maybe he realised how inappropriate such a question would've sounded. Or perhaps he didn't want to know the answer.

If he had asked, Prey was prepared to say whatever Gloom wanted to hear.

Gloom seemed to suddenly realise he had Oyster's still cooling blood all over his hooves. He made a "Hu*rk*!" Sound in the back of his throat and rushed to the bed, grabbing the sheet and frantically scrubbing the blood off.

'-get it off, get it off!-'

Prey left him to it. He was trying to think of someway for them, the ISND, to solve this case tonight. He didn't look at Oyster Pinion either. Prey didn't need any reminder of what could await him from Luna if he failed, he was painfully aware of that fact.

'Examine the flat. It might turn up something.' Prey thought. He started to look around the messy room.

Gloom was breathing heavily as he finished feverishly cleaning the blood of his hooves, guilt running loudly through his thoughts at how disrespectful this was towards Oyster. But the Sargent didn't stop until all the blood was all gone. Prey caught him looking at the corpse and thinking, '-I'm sorry I failed you-'.

Carefully, Gloom took the bed sheet and draped it over Oyster Pinion. The stained sheet stuck up horribly in the middle where the arrow jutted.

Gloom closed his own eyes and made a tiny bow towards the body, "May you find rest among the stars in Luna's mane." He mumbled. Internally, Prey saw that Gloom had never believed those words less.

'-words will no longer help. Another murder has happened. I was right here and I still failed again-'

"Prey, what are you doing?"

"I'm searching the room. Even if we can't ask Oyster questions anymore, there might be some evidence in here somewhere." Prey answered, not looking up from his search.

Gloom wanted to order Prey to; '-stop it! A pony's just died for Luna's sake-' But Prey was just being practical. It might be immoral, but Gloom couldn't think of any way to verbalise exactly why.

'-but how can Prey just-?! No, he's just suppressing it-', Gloom put a hoof to his gut, '-and I can't fault him for that. I wish I could suppress it all as well as he is. I feel sick-'

Prey listened with growing frustration to Gloom's thoughts as he continued to pick over the room. He couldn't find anything useful in here, and Gloom fixating while they waited for Crimson and Humming's return wasn't helping anybody.

'How about instead of standing about feeling sorry for yourself, you come and actually help me look?' Prey thought. He didn't suggest however. He didn't need Gloom getting in his way. They'd just witnessed a violent death. In Gloom's current distressed state, the thestral wasn't thinking clearly enough to help anyone.

He was keenly aware of Oyster Pinon's corpse throughout his search however. The body oozed a horrible presence into the room, sheet or no sheet. The knowledge that it was there was enough. A nasty reminder of how easily it could have been one of them the griffin shot at instead.

Prey pulled open the cupboard under the sink, perhaps Oyster had hidden salt there? No. Just dust and a basket holding a very old cabbage. Lower in the building, the sounds of alarm and thestrals trying to control upset ponies continued. Prey closed the cupboard door and moved on. Perhaps there was something hidden behind the Wonderbolt poster of some fiery orange mare-? No, nothing.

Approaching hooves clattering up the hallway. Gloom went to the door, and looked out.

"Crimson," He rasped, "You're back. Did you catch...?"

"No sir. I'm sorry sir." Crimson's voice came in from out in the corridor. "Did Oyster Pinion, I mean, is he-?"

"No. He didn't make it." Gloom said, not making any futile attempts to soften the news.

"Oh..."

"Come inside. We've... I've put the sheet...never mind, just come in

and tell us what happened." Gloom said, stepping aside.

Crimson plodded in. His hollow countenance matched that of Gloom's. All the previous motivation and intrepidness from laughing together was gone. Even if the two of them both kept their heads up and ears straight, their slumped wings showed the real picture.

Prey unbent from looking under the bed, "What happened to the griffin?" He asked.

Crimson jerked his gaze away from the sheet with it's arrow tent pole in the middle. Prey noticed how he was trying to mainly breathe through his mouth. Same as in the cellar. "Me and Humming flew after him. We were gaining. Unfortunately we didn't see that he had somehow reloaded his crossbow."

"What happened to Corporal Humming?" Gloom demanded in alarm, finally drawing the connection between the missing Night Guard officer and what it might mean.

"The griffin waited until we were almost on top of him sir. I flew out of his line of fire, but Corporal Humming wasn't quick enough. He fired then tossed the crossbow away."

"Humming. Is Humming still alive?" Gloom insisted.

Crimson blinked, "What? Oh right, of course, yes. Corporal Humming is alive sir. I am almost certain she will live too." A muscle was twitching in Crimson's jaw, "It was so close. It almost missed. If it had, we wouldn't have had to land and I would've caught him."

"Humming, how badly was she hurt? Where was she hit?" Gloom asked in worry.

"She was hit in the wing sir." Crimson answered.

"Wing? Wouldn't it just go straight through the membrane?" Prey asked. A small hole there would hardly even bleed. Surely that wouldn't have been enough to stop a thestral?

"No, in the wing." Crimson unfolded his own and pointed at the leading wing arm, "It went right through here, near the shoulder."

Gloom flinched, wondering if, '-will she lose the wing?-'

That was a significant injury, the bolt likely broke the wing bone too as it went through widthways.

'And a very almost near miss.' Prey thought. The griffin had been incredibly lucky, or Humming incredibly unlucky to be hit in the wing arm mid flap.

It certainly hadn't been an intentional clipping shot. The griffin had no compunctions against killing as he'd already proved, and would've certainly gone for a kill shot. However, hitting a moving target while flying was a very different thing from shooting a stationary Oyster Pinion from five yards, and the griffin had almost missed Humming all together.

"I had to break off the pursuit to save Corporal Humming from crashing. She could no longer fly." Crimson said. The look in his yellow eyes said he knew he'd made the right choice in saving Humming instead of pursuing, but worried he somehow might not have.

'You should've let her fall.' Prey thought. There was no guarantee Crimson could've overpowered the griffin even if he had caught up, but Prey didn't care about any of that. All he cared about was whether Luna was going to be displeased. There had been no room for sentiment or attachment in the Resistance. Weakness got you killed.

"Did you see which direction the griffin flew off in at least?" Gloom tried.

"No sir. I mean, yes I did, but I don't know if he kept flying in that direction. By the time those Night Guards you sent after us caught up, he was already gone. They helped me carry the Corporal back here. Somepony is taking her to the hospital right now." Crimson said.

It hadn't been agreed upon in any way, but the three of them had unconsciously moved to stand on the far side of the room. There was no need to mention what was on the other side. '-skittering ratsNo! There are no rats here, get it together Dusky-'

"We have to work something out tonight or it'll be too late, sir." Prey hastily reminded Gloom, trying to stop him and Crimson regressing and slipping back into the same rut.

"What do you mean?" Crimson asked.

"The griffin is going to tell the salt dealer's boss how they've been compromised. Whomever he really was, Oyster Pinion must've known something seriously risky for the griffin to go ahead and make the call on their behalf to kill Oyster. They're going to go to ground and we'll lose any chance of following this trail." Prey explained, repeating his words from earlier.

"We need to wait for the Lieutenant or the Captain to get here first. I've sent a messenger to the Palace already." Gloom said. His tone held no confidence that either officer would be able to do anything he hadn't already.

But what else could Gloom do? They were stuck between a rock and a hard place, and everyone knew it.

Their gambit had failed, their suspect was dead, the griffin had gotten away, and before the night was out, the salt dealers would all have been warned.

"Have we lost sir?" Crimson asked after a minute. Prey stopped.

'-is Crimson right? Is this it? Have we lost?-'

"No..." Gloom squared his shoulders, "No." He announced more loudly.

"No it's *not* over. They're not getting away with this. Do they think they can just murder ponies? That we'll be too scared to stop them? No, no this is where we stop them. We stop them tonight!"

That fire was back in Gloom, the confidence which had been

missing since the cellar.

It was the confidence that here was a wrong that needed to righted.

"Sentiment and righteous intentions are all well and good, but we're still stuck." Prey said. It was good Gloom had gotten himself back together, because Crimson would follow his example, but they had to be realistic.

"It will be enough." Gloom said.

"That's unrealistic, we should-"

"It'll *have* to be enough." Gloom emphasised.

Prey let his eyes slide away and shrugged, "Alright. But as I said, after tonight, it's most likely going to be too late."

"Then we're wasting time. Let's stick to finding the answers to the questions we don't know. So how are we going to do this?" Gloom asked.

That was the question, wasn't it? They had to finish this tonight, but how?

How? *How*?

'-how?-'

Gloom thought and thought. Crimson's mental walls were churning, showing he was thinking just as deeply. Both were scouring their brains, desperate to find the answer to the question.

How?

Prey turned his attention from them and looked around the small room again. The smell of blood was slowly starting to thicken in the air. Idly, the thought passed through his head of what the average pony would've done if they walked in right now.

'Inconsequential.' He need to focus all his attention on the now, not random trivia.

"Give me two minutes, I need to think." Prey said, sitting himself down and closing his eyes.

'How to proceed? Where is the link? How can I find what I need to know?'

Prey had his eyes squeezed shut, and his hooves firmly pressing his ears down to block out any distracting noise. Thestrals were rushing coming in and out of the room, making reports to Gloom, offering suggestions, attempting to help, trying not to let the pressure show.

Prey sat in the corner, out of the way and ignored.

He would still notice if anyone tried to approach him, but right now, almost all his attention was focused inwards on solving the issue.

'The griffin, where would he retreat to at this time of night?'

Prey didn't know. He didn't have enough information.

'Move on. Oyster Pinion, his body wasn't well built enough for a weather team. Living conditions are below the Canterlot average. Unemployed, lazy, or just wasteful? Was lack of money the reason he worked for the salt dealers?'

Prey was possibility crunching, going over everything he knew and trying to slot it into a scenario that would benefit him.

If he were in Prey's place, Gloom would probably try to organise aerial sweeps in the hopes of his cutie mark hinting at something.

Crimson would probably do it himself, relying on his superior sense of smell and warrior training.

Prey was neither of them. He didn't believe in hope, nor did he have either of their skills or strengths. He wasn't strong, or fast, or well trained, or blessed by Harmony with a special talent.

Prey only had two things, his mind and his runes. Runes would not

help find him find the drug dealers, even if he wasn't keeping his runes a secret. Which only left his mind. Prey wished he had some way of secretly contacting Lemon Pink. Her magic would be of invaluable assistance, even if she only worked from behind the scenes, but there was no time.

'Oyster Pinon knew that griffin. The griffin came to receive his report. Oyster would not give illegal information to someone he did not know. Yet the griffin came with a crossbow. Indicative of the outcome or merely caution on the griffin's part?'

No, that information wasn't going to help either. Prey discarded it and started again.

'The salt dealers have made efforts to tighten up their operation. Eliminating loose tongues. This is all about money, yet they've closed down the Warehouse 7B operation. But they still need an income. Money. How are they getting it? Where did they move their import route to? What other operations do they still have going on?'

Prey was tired. Gloom and Crimson were also tired. The whole Night Guard was tired. But the ISND was especially tired.

Sleep had been an increasingly fleeting state of being this last week, and now it was catching up with a vengeance. All of them were trying to think with a head full of noise and eyes full of sand.

Having just witnessed a murder hadn't helped either. In the explosive moments after the killing had occurred, somehow all that exhaustion had grown ten times worse.

'Focus. Focus.' Prey repeated, pressing his ears more firmly shut as an argument broke out over something one of the thestrals had just reported, 'Focus on the here and now.'

'Other avenues of income. Where are they operating out of? A store house and a head quarters of some kind are required. Doesn't have to be large. The person in charge is likely now rich. Won't live in Lower Canterlot. But they're careful and don't want to draw attention, so not Upper Canterlot either. Middle class then. With

such a low profile, chances of finding them are tiny. Useless. Move on.'

Prey quickly double checked the room for a second before slipping back into his state of concentration. Someone, a Night Guard of course, was examining Oyster Pinion's corpse. They dropped the sheet back into place after barely a second, looking green.

Prey had a memory which was poking at him.

It was from the day just before the Resistance lost the war. The Resistance kept fighting of course, they didn't know *how* to stop after shedding so much blood. But it was the day Captain Fire Strike broke their backs for sure.

---<O>---

The Resistance had been on the back hoof, loosing ground and fighters almost daily.

In an attempt to scavenge a chance to breathe, the Resistance's leaders had split them all into two main camps, carefully hidden away deep within the trees. But the Border Guard had kept closing in, combing through the forest and getting nearer every day. They knew the camps were close, and it was only a matter of time before they found one. But the Resistance had been in no state to flee again. They just needed some more time, another day or two to recover, and then they'd be able to make it.

So the leaders of Prey's camp secretly settled upon a gambit. If it worked, it would buy them a clean get away at very little cost.

It hadn't worked. Prey had unknowingly messed it all up, the part he was supposed to play on the board going unfulfilled. He'd been such a small piece, but a key pivot point. He hadn't known. He'd only done his best. He gave it his all and didn't let Fire Strike break him.

And then he'd gotten back to ashes and the survivors called him a traitor. Said that he'd betrayed them.

"Sacrifices must be made for the greater good!"

He'd called them the traitors in return. They'd betrayed *him*, not the other way around.

"You've taken everything from me, and now you wanted this too? Never!"

---<O>---

The Resistance had desperately tried to hide their intentions with misdirection, attempting to sacrifice the hoof to save the leg. This memory poked away at Prey.

If his subconscious kept bringing it up, then it must mean something, so Prey focused his attention on it.

'A key. This is a key. Now to build the door it fits.'

Prey took a deep, deep breath, feeling it fill his small lungs to what felt like bursting point, then he exhaled, letting it take all unnecessary thoughts with it.

'Alright, here we go.'

Prey broke his mind into two different patterns of thought, each capable of independent logic. It wasn't an action that Prey could have explained, or an experience he could've described. Words alone would've done a poor job. It was a state of *being*.

It was not splitting his mind in half like he'd done in his duel against Lemon Pink, back when she was still Night Watcher. This was completely different. Back then, he'd almost sundered himself into two separate minds, only threads left to hold both halves together. It was like dancing on a knife edge whetted with tangle viper venom.

There was no way Prey was going to do something as dangerous as that again unless he had no choice.

This was more just separating into two separate directions. All roads go in two completely different directions, but there is still only ever one road.

Half of Prey's mind pulled up everything he knew, or thought he knew, about the salt trade and the murders. Warehouse 7B, the griffin, Oyster Pinion, Luxury Linen, all of it.

The other half started conjuring up possible frames into which those puzzle pieces could fit. Scenarios, outcomes, reasons.

Then he began jamming the two halves back together.

Prey wasn't trying to find an answer that would fit perfectly into place in the puzzle frame, because there were far too many uncertainties and variables for that. So instead, Prey was forcing scenarios together whether they fit or not, and seeing what came out the other end.

It was like building a mental, three dimensional puzzle with pieces you weren't even sure were for this same puzzle.

It was by no means an accurate process. None of the outcomes were exact. It was all based of hunches and theories that only existed as 'if's' and 'maybe's' in Prey's head.

'Which one? Which one will fit well enough for me to use it as a stepping stone? Let's see. How many employees will this salt dealer have?' Prey asked on the one side.

The other side came up with its answer as the first still continued to provide facts, 'Employees probably split into four classes. On the bottom rung, I'll call them the street dealers. Next rung up, suppliers, who have a number of street dealers under each of them. Then the big salt dealers. Let's call them salt lords. Each responsible for a section of Canterlot. Then at the very top, the boss. The only people this boss ever interacts with will be the salt lords. Only they can identify the big boss.' Prey rationalised, adding it into his calculations.

'This means it's a relatively small operation.' A quick estimate gave Prey the number of individuals he could expect. 'One boss. Four or five salt lords. Sixteen to twenty suppliers, and street dealers anywhere up to sixty. Total of roughly eighty-five people spread throughout Lower Canterlot. As they are caught by the Guard or

judged untrustworthy, they are replaced. But only recently has this boss come to town and started having the failures killed.'

A few pieces 'clicked', and became a new shape. With this new, bigger puzzle piece, Prey started through running all the scenario's he could think of again.

'Salt lords are now too scared to run away with a griffin assassin under their boss's control.' The other side of Prey's mind made a connection and something else also 'clicked'.

'There is no pony leader,' Prey realised, 'The griffin himself is the boss.'

It was a startling leap of logic, with little proof on either side to link up with the other. But once the connection was made, Prey was ninety percent certain it was accurate. He just somehow *knew*.

The Night Guards in the room were now grimly arguing, or having an intense discussion at least, about if they should be performing any further last rites and if so, what?

'So this griffin is the brains behind this salt trade.' Prey thought. It was a surprise. The griffin must have been running his salt trade from outside of Canterlot for years. Yet now he'd ventured into the capital city himself and started to get his claws dirty.

'Likely one of his pony salt lords was getting too big for their horseshoes. So the griffin came here to make an example of them and remind the rest who's boss.'

Griffins did things differently to ponies. Their approach to problems was fundamentally different. Most ponies probably interacted only a few times in their whole life with a griffin, and so knew next to nothing about their culture. But Prey knew griffins from the Resistance. They'd always been the Resistance's most vicious front line fighters and raiders. Although perhaps those blood crazed individuals were a poor representation of their entire race.

Nevertheless, Prey could understand those griffins. First and foremost, they were proud predators. Coming from the cold and

often barren lands of Griffiona, they had to be. The Blood Feather Plague which had swept the Low Kingdom over half a century ago was still dealing damage to this day. Was it any wonder they grew up tough?

In a way, Prey understood griffins better than he understood ponies.

The point being, Prey could quite easily see how this griffin ran his salt trade. It was simple. He ruled by fear.

'In this instance, a very effective method indeed.' Prey thought.

Ponies were easy to panic and prone to giving in to fear. They had the instincts of herd animals. Anything that looked dangerous was to be immediately distrusted and shunned. Just take their reaction to the recently returned thestrals for example. That was something this griffin obviously knew and was taking full advantage of.

'But where to find him? If I were him, and had set up this salt trade, where would I go?'

Actually, Prey wouldn't have been caught so it was a baseless question, but that was beside the point.

'Where would I go? Warehouses? Train station? Lower Canterlot? Outside of Canterlot altogether? Crates? Factories? More abandoned buildings? Cloud homes? Basements or shops? Re-purposed civilian homes? Where? Where? Where?' Prey ransacked his brain, in his mindscape hanging all of the maps of Canterlot he'd seen.

'Where would a murderer like me go?'

"I've got it!" Prey cried at the same time as Gloom did; "He flew to the Lumber Yard!"

Prey stalled, half risen. How on Equus had Gloom managed to work that out too?

'Did his special talent just present the destination to him on a silver platter?' Prey thought in disbelief. Nevermind, it didn't matter how Gloom had worked it out, he could ask later. Right now they had to get things moving, something Gloom was keenly aware of.

"Quickly, who's next in seniority after Corporal Humming?" Gloom demanded of the present Night Guards.

"It's Corporal Echo."

"Where is he?"

"He's downstairs keeping an eye on the residents sir." Came the swift reply.

"One of you go and replace him and send him up. We don't have much time." Gloom ordered. The thestral saluted and galloped off.

Gloom cast about, finding Prey had come back over, "Prey, where are you-? Here, good. Do you know where the Lumber Yard is? Yes? Good. How long will it take to get there?" He asked, firmly fixing his eyes on Prey when he spoke, rigidly not letting them drift to the corner.

Prey only needed to think for a second, "On hoof at a fast canter, twenty two minutes. By air, roughly ten minutes."

"Only ten? Good, it's closer than I thought." Gloom quickly pointed to a Night Guard, "Do you know the way?"

"No sir."

Gloom gestured to Prey, "Give this pony the directions. He can go tell everypony else too. Lieutenant Screech or Starry Wing should be here soon. Then we can all get moving."

Prey speedily began to rattle off the directions to the Night Guard as he mentally picked out the shortest route land marks for a flyer to follow.

"Good, that's..." Gloom's mouth paused mid order, frowning.

'-hang on, that doesn't seem right...-'

"Those aren't the directions to the lumber yard, Prey." Gloom said in confusion.

"Yes they are. What are you talking about?" Prey responded, also confused.

"Why're you sending him on a route across to the other side of Canterlot? Never mind, we don't have time. I'll find some other pony who knows the route if you don't." Gloom said, already turning away to find another Night Guard.

"No, what are you talking about? Those *are* the directions the the Lumber Yard. There's no way I made a mistake. Wait..." Prey thought of something, "We are both talking about the Oak Quarter Lumber Yard, yes?"

"Ye-No. The other one. The one in the Gold Light District." Gloom said.

"And why..." Prey said slowly, "Do you want to send him to the Merry Lumber Yard? The griffin flew away to the Oak Quarter Lumber Yard, not that one."

They really didn't have time to be discussing this. The Night Guards needed orders, and Gloom was the only officer available to give those orders. But despite all the mounting pressure, Gloom still came to a stop and forced himself to properly absorb Prey's words.

'-different lumber yard? How can Prey know? Doesn't matter, he wouldn't say unless he was sure. Does that mean split up? By the moon, why us?-'

"Sir?" The Night Guard who had been about to be sent to the of the wrong lumber yard prompted, poised to fly and wanting to know where he should be going.

"Don't go anywhere. Wait." Gloom ordered, perhaps more sharply than was necessary. His eyes locked onto Prey. Prey saw anger frustration warring with indecision.

"Prey, how do you know that? Quickly."

"Just now, when I was thinking, I worked it out. The griffin retreated to the lumber yard. That's where he's shifted his salt import route too. Why do you think it was the other lumber yard?"

Prey asked back.

'-we're pressed for time. But this is something that I can't afford to get wrong right here-'.

Gloom pointed at the sheet covered body, "Oyster has...had, a paper stub on the table. It was from a hay and chips shop in the Gold Light district from just this evening."

Crimson stepped over, and showed the sloppily written out receipt to Prey.

"It was stuck to the bottom of the coffee mug." Gloom explained as Prey quickly looked it over.

Crimson gave a nod, "I also asked the ponies downstairs. About what they knew about Oyster Pinion, I mean. A mare said Oyster said he was going to be busy flying to the industrial yard earlier this evening."

"And the only place that fits the description of an industrial yard near the Gold Light district is the Merry Lumber Yard." Gloom finished.

"Why would've Oyster told this mare where he was going?" Prey asked automatically. It wasn't likely to have been a lie, but he asked anyway.

"Apparently Oyster promised her a lunch out, but said he couldn't take her today when she asked." Crimson blinked and glanced furtively towards the same thing in the room that everyone kept glancing at, "She doesn't know. About Oyster Pinion. None of the ponies downstairs do. The residents, I mean."

Guilt didn't sound in Crimson's voice, but it was definitely there in the way his eyes lingered on the sheet.

The mare downstairs would never see her potential colt friend again. Unless she attended his funeral. That was a poor substitute for closure.

'But life isn't fair. It's time she learnt that lesson, whomever she is.

Not that it's relevant to me.'

Prey was getting distracted again. It was all these Night Guards crowding around him, and he didn't like it. He backed up a step or two as everyone stared at him, waiting.

"You think the griffin went to ground in the Oak Quarter Lumber Yard instead. Why?" Gloom asked, not wasting words.

That was a hard question for Prey to provide an answer for. He knew, because he'd worked it out. However, his reasoning would not satisfy Gloom, because he couldn't explain it. But that did not mean he couldn't come up with a good excuse on the spot.

"The Oak Lumber Yard aligns on the map, plus, it fits all the requirements for what the salt dealers would need. The other lumber yard is on the wrong side of Canterlot, in too high class of an area. The salt dealers couldn't safely pick there. In addition, it's in the opposite direction to the one the griffin flew." Prey answered.

"Why does that make it more, not less, likely?" Gloom asked. The other Night Guards weren't following Prey's logic on that last point either.

"Think about it. These drug dealers have so far been very cautious and careful. Surely he wouldn't fly straight back to his hideout without first making sure he couldn't be followed? I'm certain that once he got out of Crimson's sight, he changed direction." Prey explained.

He could see they all bought his reasoning, even if they weren't sure it was correct. However, they *also* knew that certainties were an impossibility in any active situation.

The acid butterflies were starting up in Prey's stomach again. The twisted stirrings of the hunt beginning. He didn't like it. He hated having to rush things. But as always, there was no choice in the matter.

The Night Guards in the room were busy sharing silent glances of communication. It was faster than speaking, which was apparently

unnecessary to convey their indecision about which lumber yard they each thought was correct. Prey's logic, or Gloom's logic, which was right?

'-it's up to the Sargent to decide-'

Gloom dragged his wing claw roughly through his mane, trying to decide what to do. He'd removed his helmet. Against regulations, but no one present was going to report him. The importance of the decision weighed heavily on him.

'-we only have one shot at this. Which lumber yard is it? What path should I choose?-'

Prey knew that he was correct, and that Gloom was wrong. But Gloom didn't know that. If Gloom chose wrong and the griffin got away, Luna would blame Prey, he just *knew* she would. The last thing Prey wanted to do right now was run off to confront a murderous griffin. He was exhausted and there was a dead pony on the floor. But Luna would not accept that as a valid excuse.

'Life is so unfair,' Prey thought pointlessly, 'Okay, I need another lie to convince them to go to the right yard.'

Prey opened his mouth.

"I've made the decision." Gloom said, dragging his helmet back on.

Prey closed his mouth and joined with everyone else in staring unblinkingly at Gloom.

"The murderer could be at either lumber yard, because there's evidence for both. I still think the Merry Lumber Yard is more likely, but we just don't know. So we're going to split up."

"Sir, I'm certain it's the Oak Quarter Lumber Yard. Splitting our forces is a bad idea, we'll need all the help-"

"Be quiet Prey. I am the Sargent and these are my orders. Follow them." Gloom interrupted, steel in his voice.

Prey took into account all of the thestral Night Guards present, and

reluctantly closed his mouth again.

Gloom only waited long enough to be sure that Prey wasn't going to interrupt further, before hurrying on; "The Lieutenants or the Captain are on their way here right now. I'm leaving only four Night Guards here to keep the civilians downstairs contained. When reinforcements arrive, tell them to leave some Night Guards here to help, and split the rest into three groups. Please advise them to send one group after each of our two teams."

He paused to take a quick breath, "The third group will head towards Cloudsdale. That's the only other clear destination the griffin might've flown to."

Gloom pointed at Echo, "You will lead one team, I the other. You'll be taking the larger team to the Merry Lumber Yard, since it's further away. I'll be going on hoof with the smaller team to the closer lumber yard. It'll be easier for the Lieutenant to reach us with reinforcements if we need them, which is why we're going as the smaller team."

Gloom spoke of reinforcements, but what was left unsaid was there were very few reinforcements that could be sent. The Night Guard was tiny compared to the Royal Guard, and they were already stretched so thin that there'd barely been enough thestrals available for tonight's operation. What few extra Night Guards could be spared wouldn't be of much assistance.

That didn't stop Echo from saluting in acknowledgement, "Yes sir."

"Good. Go downstairs and tell everypony else what we're doing. Select four Night Guards to stay behind and make sure they know what to tell whichever officer turns up. And, and also about Oyster Pinion." Gloom had to clear his throat. "You other three;"

He nodded at the left over thestrals in the room, "You and us, the ISND I mean, we'll be the second team. We're going to the Oak Lumber Yard. Understood?"

"Yes sir." They all confirmed.

"Then we need to leave right away. Come on."

Gloom sent Prey a look which might've been apologetic, but the Sargent wasn't going to change his mind, '-my responsibility to cover as many bases as possible. Even if your hunch is correct, I can't gamble everything on it Prey-'

"Let's go!"

No time. The sand grains had run out. Prey gritted his teeth as he was forced to hurry after all of them, 'There's never any time to make a proper plan, only react.'

Prey didn't glance back at where Oyster Pinion lay covered, but every single thestral did as they reached the splintered door to leave.

'-feels blasphemous-', '-to just leave him like this-', '-with no door to even lock behind us-', '-may Luna guide your soul to rest-'

Crimson was the last one through the door after Prey. He glanced back the longest, and Prey heard him mutter, "On my father's blades, I will see your murder does not go unanswered."

'Maybe you'll get your suicidal wish before the night is out.' Prey thought. They were running towards lethal danger.

Perhaps he should fall behind on purpose? That way he wouldn't have to get involved with whatever they found waiting for them at the lumber yard.

Except Gloom would probably try to carry him for real if he fell behind tonight. Then Prey knew he would panic, and mind break Gloom, like he'd almost done with that imbecile Topaz Honey. And then Luna would *definitely* kill him.

"Hurry!"

Prey grimaced and sped up, jumping down the stairs two at a time as the Night Guards made for the exit.

The horrible butterflies in his stomach felt like they were breeding

and multiplying. Oh how he hated yet loved this feeling.

The hunt had begun in earnest now. This night would not end quietly.

---I---

[image]

Author's Notes:

And here we go! Hope you all liked the chapter. I even had time to make a quick picture to go with it.
If you see any mistakes that I still missed, please point them out. Thanks!

And of course, bif thanks to the editor and kind helper; Sweetolebob18

33.2 Building a Nest of Lumber

The Oak Quarter Lumber Yard of Canterlot was not the small affair which might've been found in a town, or even another city. Although perhaps the term 'Lumber Yard' was misleading. That name implied the yard was devoted exclusively to wood and timber. This was not the case.

Maybe at some stage, it had been a timber processing site only, but no longer. Canterlot's hunger for building materials was enormous and seemingly insatiable, and it would be silly to think its appetite was restricted exclusively to wood.

Timber was only one half. The other was masonry. Stone of all different types, cuts, seizes, colours and quantities. Marble was always in demand in Upper Canterlot, for example, but there was plenty of demand for other types. Slate roofing tiles, limestone slabs, basalt pavement, granite cladding, all these were needed too.

At one point in the past, the Oak Lumber Yard had been just what it's name said. But over the years, the business had boomed and expanded, changing to meet demand. The only thing which hadn't changed, for some reason, was the name. Now, the Oak Lumber Yard and its buildings covered almost an entire street.

And Canterlot required *two* such enormous lumber yards. The unicorn's of Equestria's capital were never satisfied to leave things how they where. They were always striving to build something new, bigger, and better.

The Oak Quarter Lumber Yard was close to the outside ring of Canterlot, meaning it was on a lower level than the city's center. As a result, Prey got a brief, moonlit view over the sprawling lumber yard as they ran towards it on their approach. It reminded Prey so much as of a giant mushroom infestation, what with the way it had spread to cover the entire street.

The glimpse also showed the Lumber Yard had its own high wall encompassing the premises. In the dark, that wall somehow seemed a lot taller and more solid.

No light came from within the lumber yard.

Other buildings outside of its walls were pleasantly lit up, but inside, the sprawling compound was dark.

Its only illumination came from the distant stars and moon far above. It was quiet as the ISND and their three other Night Guard companions approached. Almost *too* quiet. It was like the empty cobbles of the street circling the walls was nopony's land. Nerves taut, everyone was on guard as they the hurried across the empty street and came to the tall, iron gates.

"I don't see anything sir." One of the thestral Night Guards whispered, double checking up and down the dark street. There was no one else about. No one that they could spot, anyway.

"I don't smell anything either sir." Crimson said.

"And I don't hear anything." Prey muttered, finishing off the assessment. He was staring through the iron bars, straining his eyes to make out any movement in the dark.

Knowing that the thestrals around him had far superior night vision and would probably spot anything long before he did was of little comfort. There was a murderer loose somewhere on these premises.

"Hm." Gloom rasped, eyeing the sprawling compound. His thoughts showed that despite being almost certain that the griffin had fled to the other lumber yard, he wasn't ready to risk anything by dismissing the immediate lack of signs.

"Are we going in sir?" The second Night Guard asked, flexing her wings.

Gloom peered through the gates. The lumber yard extended far in both directions. Massive stacks of shadowy lumber and stone sat everywhere, some over two stories high, creating a pseudo maze. He could count at least seven major factory buildings too.

"It's a lot bigger than I thought it would be." Gloom said plainly.

The thoughts of the three thestrals that'd come along showed Prey that the sentiment was shared. They had't realised the Oak Lumber Yard took up an entire street. It raised the same worry in all of their minds.

'There's too many buildings and hiding places to search them all.'

Gloom had a choice to make, and he did not like it. "Split up. You three start at the far west end and work your way back towards the gate. By the time you arrive back, hopefully our reinforcements will have arrived. We, the ISND I mean, we will start here and move in eastwards." Gloom said quietly, gesturing to the path he meant to take.

"Splitting up is a bad idea." Prey said, repeated his advice from earlier.

"No choice." Crimson grunted.

"It's a tactically poor decision." Prey insisted. He tried to entreat Gloom to see sense, "Sir, we'll only be playing into the griffin's claws."

"We're splitting up. There's no choice." Gloom repeated firmly, but obviously unhappy about the decision.

"But Gloom-"

"Be quiet Prey!" Gloom snapped.

This was the second time he'd had to order Prey to stop questioning his orders tonight. Prey might have legitimate concerns, but *he* was the Sargent and it was *his* job to make the best call in these dangerous circumstances.

Gloom purposefully turned his back on Prey in favour of the other three Night Guards, "We don't know where the griffin might be, if he's here at all. He might have help. Stay unseen and in the air. Search for anything which seems out of place. If you do find any, don't go in for a closer look unless you are sure it's safe. Wait for

back up. This griffin's already murdered one pony tonight, and I won't let him make it two. He doesn't have the crossbow anymore, but don't let your guard down."

Three pairs of yellow eyes bobbed in the dark as the heads they each belonged nodded in unison, "Yes sir."

"Good. Stay safe." Gloom nodded back. '-I should say something more. We're about to risk our lives-'

"Always watching." He added, rather lamely.

The three thestral's did not share any further words. They spread themselves out and unfurled their leathery wings for take off. Near silent wing beats lifted their hooves from the road, and they gained height and flitted over the walls. The last one over the wall looked back and gave a single wave.

The ISND watched them go. Now they were alone outside the gates.

"Alright. We're next." Gloom said. He turned to Prey, "Niceties or no. We need to carry you over the wall. If you don't want me to, Crimson can do it."

"Don't touch me, I don't need your help." Prey backed up, "And forget it, I'm not going in there. Three is far too few of us. It's too dangerous."

"They went in just fine."

"They can fly. They can easily get away if it gets dangerous."

"You're not staying out here by yourself." Gloom said.

"I won't try to run away if that's what you're thinking. But there's a murderer in there. The griffin's already killed at least five people, five! I'm not going anywhere near him." Prey insisted. He might've been prepared to go into the lumber yard before when it was six of them, but after splitting up like this and with the state they were all in? Not a chance.

"That's precisely why you aren't staying out here!" Gloom hissed,

"We're not leaving you behind out here where anypony can get you."

To the side, Crimson's eye's flicked back and forth between the two of them as they faced off.

"I can hide out here. No one will find me unless I want them to-"

"And put you in danger? Not happening." Gloom denied flatly.

"*You're* the one trying to put me in danger. What happened to your assertions back in the cellar that a child shouldn't be involved in things like this, huh? I'm not going in there."

"I'm not letting you get yourself killed!"

Gloom only just kept himself from shouting; "I'm not stupid, I know this is dangerous. Do you think I want to bring a lamb into a potential combat situation? And after all of this I'm going to make damn sure-Never mind. But you'll be in far more danger if you stay out here by yourself. I'm not leaving you behind."

"I will not either." Crimson said, unexpectedly breaking from just silently watching the back and forth. His look of indecision was gone, now he looked certain.

Prey stared at both of them, "What about this are you not getting? The danger is *in* there, *not* out here."

"The danger is wherever we're not there to protect you, Prey."

Prey could see that logic wasn't working. Gloom was being irrational in his want to keep Prey, a subordinate entrusted to him by Luna, close and safe. In some ways, it was understandable. Better people had made worse calls under less pressure.

Prey tried changing tack, "If you won't let me stay safely out here, then why can't we just wait until the reinforcements arrive?" Prey said, sitting right down on the dusty stone to show he wasn't moving for either of them.

Gloom grimaced, "I did not want to say in front of the others, but I

don't know if the Captain has any free thestrals left to send. Not without leaving the Palace unguarded, which cannot happen. At most, after dealing with the mess we left back there at the flat, and after splitting the remainder between the two lumber yards, we can only expect about five or six." He said.

"Well then I'm *definitely* not going in there." Prey snorted derisively.

Gloom looked Prey dead in the eye, "A pony died in my hooves today. I'm not leaving you out here alone. You're coming in with us, and that's final."

"Not a chance-"

"*Shut* **up**! Follow my orders!" That time Gloom did shout, and it echoed in the night before it went all quiet again. This made it the third time tonight Gloom had given Prey that order.

Gloom was being irrational, and it was easy to see why. Gloom still had smears of blood on his chest plate from trying to save Oyster Pinion. Two days ago, he'd lead them into a quadruple murder scene. They were all exhausted, Corporal Humming had been shot down, they were on a shrinking time limit, and now the Sargent was possibly having to lead his whole team into a murderer's lair.

'-I may feel like I'm drowning under the pressure, but Luna help me I am going to do right by Her Majesty!-'

Gloom had made his choice. Gloom thought he was right. In fact, Gloom was *certain* that right now, with all the information he had, and with what his gut was telling him, he was making the only correct decision.

Whether he would feel the same in the morning wasn't so certain. But that was little comfort to Prey when Gloom was trying to force him to go in there tonight.

Worse, Crimson was siding with Gloom, his feathers bristling with impatience.

But just because it was two to one and they expected Prey to respect their authority didn't mean a thing to him. He spoke slowly,

as if Gloom was a particularly dumb child, "You want me, a lamb, to go in there, right now, with a murderer? Not a chance."

'-why can't he understand I'm trying to protect him?-', Gloom seethed, "You are coming in, that's an order."

"I'm trying to stop you from getting us all killed. Wasn't finding four bodies in the cellar enough for you? Wasn't holding Oyster Pinion as he lay dying? Is that it? You won't stop until it's one of us under the sheet?"

Gloom's hoof struck the pavement, making Prey flinch despite himself. He'd been purposefully provoking Gloom and trying to illicit a reaction, but not what came next.

"I'm ordering you as a Night Guard. This is a situation with lives at risk. If you are not going to follow orders, I'll have no choice but to take this to Princess Luna." Gloom threatened with the most serious threat he could think of.

Prey felt like someone had sucked all the air from his lungs. For a moment he forgot how to breathe.

'No no no! He can't tell Luna!'

How had Gloom guessed his weakness?

As a Night Guard, the threat of Luna was of course the means of ensuring ultimate obedience, but Prey thought he'd been so careful in distracting Gloom from remembering how much power he really held over him. And now Gloom knew the power he held. From now until forever, Gloom could just threaten Prey with Luna, and Prey would have no choice but to comply or face death.

'Maybe I could pretend his threat doesn't scare me to lessen its perceived effectiveness?' Prey quickly thought. But what if Gloom called his bluff and really went to Luna? Prey quailed at the very idea.

Or perhaps he could fake cry-? No, that was just as likely to have the reverse effect, and he didn't think Gloom or Crimson would actually buy it, not after his reaction or lack thereof in the cellar.

And that wouldn't stop Gloom telling Luna anyhow.

Gloom misunderstood Prey's silence.

'-even that's not enough? I thought Her Majesty's approval meant so much to him-'

Gloom glanced anxiously at the waiting lumber yard, '-we're wasting time, the griffin could be getting away-'

'-thirty seconds-', Gloom decided, '-that is all we can afford to waste on trying one last time to convince Prey, only one last try. Otherwise I'll just grab him and go, 'don't-touch-me' be damned-'

Gloom stared at Prey, and the lamb stared back, each trying to read the other while Crimson looked on helplessly from the sidelines.

"Prey. Do you really think you'll be safe if we just left you here outside?" Gloom asked, raising a wing to stop Crimson from protesting the idea.

"Yes." Prey answered immediately.

"But if you stay, we have to stay too. It's all or none of us, and it's your choice. But if we do stay, and the griffin gets away, it's going to be your responsibility to explain to Princess Luna. So do you want us to remain here, or go in?" Gloom asked quietly.

Gloom was putting it like it was Prey's decision, but Prey was a mind leech and he knew better. Gloom was only giving him the appearance of choice to try and prompt him to make the 'correct' one. But it was just an illusion. Gloom was determined to do his duty and go into the lumber yard one way or another, but also not to leave Prey behind.

If Prey said "No, I'm staying out here", Gloom would forcibly try to drag him in.

Those thirty seconds that Gloom had secretly allocated for him to make his choice were almost gone. Prey had ten seconds left to decide on what to do.

There was no good way out of this.

If Prey made the choice to go in, as Gloom seemed to think was their duty, he was risking his life against the griffin.

Yet if he tried to stay out here, Gloom would attempt to force him along in a misguided attempt to protect his life. Prey didn't think his self control was good enough to refrain from lashing out and mentally killing the Sargent if Gloom tried to fly while carrying him. And then Luna would kill *him*.

The option to memory wipe Gloom and Crimson both was also out. Even if he could get both Gloom and Crimson at the same time, those three Night Guards who'd gone on in ahead had heard Gloom give his plan to go inside too. Prey wouldn't be able to get to them to alter their memories as well.

'And after all I did to make sure you didn't break down after Oyster Pinion, this is the thanks I get?' Prey thought angrily.

Damned if he did, and damned if he didn't.

'*Now* I remember why I hate being on the hunt so much. Because something always goes wrong.'

"Okay, you're right. Let's go in." Prey said, turning his face away to look into the dark. If his life was going to be thrown into peril either way, he'd choose the option which was least likely to draw Luna's ire.

'Why do I have to keep fighting with Gloom to protect myself at every turn? Fight and also fail.'

Gloom didn't gloat over Prey's capitulation like one of the Resistance would've done, not even privately in his mind. This situation was so far removed from anything the thestral might've felt pleased over. All his thoughts showed was relief, followed immediately by misgivings about what they were getting into.

"I, I mean we, that is, we will protect you." Crimson offered to Prey.

Prey glared back. Crimson wasn't being condescending or even just

offering false comfort, he really meant it, but that wasn't a promise Crimson could keep.

Crimson did not react to Prey's filthy look. He instead extended a hoof, "I will fly you over the wall, if you want." He offered.

Prey completely ignored his hoof, turning his back on the pegasus and began to eyeing up the gate's bars instead.

"Prey, don't be stubborn about this." Gloom sighed.

Prey ignored him too, and stuck his hooves through the iron bars. The metal was cool from the night. Prey sucked in his breath and started to squirm his way through, twisting his head almost completely sideways at one point.

"You're going to get stuck, don't be foalish." Gloom hissed in concern now, hurrying over.

"Don't-" Prey gasped as he held his breath and kicked his back legs.

"-Touch me." He finished as he finally fell through. Only someone foal sized could've fitted through that. Or a runt.

On the other side now, Prey sat up and checked he hadn't lost his ribbon, before looking back at the other two still behind the gate, "I don't need your help."

Gloom gave Prey 'a look', then jerked his head upwards to Crimson, and they both spread their wings. It didn't take more than three powerful beats for each of them to clear the wall and join the lamb on the correct side.

By prior unspoken arrangement, they all made straight for the closest pile of timber, pine by the smell, and crouched behind it. It had been quiet outside on the darkened street, but in here completely cut off behind the wall, it was even more silent. All those quiet background city noises you didn't notice until they were gone had ceased.

The motionless and dark lumber yard, with its piles of stone and hulking buildings, now stood all around them.

"From here on in, whispers only." Gloom murmured. Prey viciously hoped that their Sargent did not survive the night. Who cared if Gloom only thought he was doing the right thing? He was forcing Prey to risk his life being in here. Alright, perhaps not quite wishing all the way to death, but if Gloom got his throat clawed open and lost his voice completely this time, Prey would be satisfied.

Prey bit the inside of his cheek. That thought had been a little *too* close to home. He was just as much at risk as Gloom was right now after all.

"I do not see anything to indicate where we should start searching. Do you sir?" Crimson asked quietly, still scanning the darkened area.

"Me neither. But we're sticking together. No splitting up." Gloom whispered back, looking up at the buildings which loomed in the night.

"No wise guidance from your cutie mark? Sir." Prey asked. Refusing to work together might get all of them killed. Prey wasn't going to let a grudge impact his chances of survival.

"No, nothing." Gloom answered. He hadn't even considered that Prey would hold this against him. He was too focused on their mission and his desire to stop the griffin for that.

"You two have night vision, I don't. My ears are better, yet I don't hear anything near by. The griffin's probably taken cover in one of those far buildings." Prey whispered.

"*If* he's here. We still don't know." Gloom muttered back, yellow eyes scanning the night.

Prey didn't insist that he was certain. He didn't need to. Even if Gloom believed the griffin was hiding in the other lumber yard, they were still going to proceed as if they knew he was here. That was why Gloom had been too scared to leave Prey behind at the gate. Because there was a decent chance Prey was still correct. Prey seemed to have a knack for guessing these things.

'Hang on, Gloom was scared to leave me behind?' Prey realised.

But why? Did the thought that Prey would try and run away worry him *that* much? Had Gloom forgotten about the golden tracer bands?

Distracted, Prey almost missed Gloom's order when he gave it.

"The other three Guards are searching the far half and working their way back towards the gate. We'll cover as much of the second half as we can. Let's start with that building there." He whispered, carefully starting out from behind their cover.

As quietly as they could manage, Prey and Crimson followed after him. They kept to the shadows as much as possible, hugging the piles of timber and stone blocks.

All three of them were proficient at remaining silent. Neither Gloom nor Crimson's armour even offered more than a faint 'tink' once or twice, but even then it was so faint in the oppressive silence of the lumber yard it should've been missed.

That didn't mean Prey wasn't tensed to bolt at a moments notice.

Prey would've missed the side door on his first pass, so nondescript was it in the night. Gloom and Crimson however could see it clearly, and lead him unerringly to the entrance. Prey hated the feeling of being half-blind.

Cautiously, Gloom reached out his wing and slowly tried the door handle. It depressed all the way and the door softly 'clicked' open with no resistance.

All three of them shared a look. Gloom pointed at Prey and mimed listening, ear perked.

"*Anything*?" He silently mouthed.

At least that's what Prey would've assumed he mouthed in the dark, but he picked it out from Gloom's thoughts anyway. Prey listened intently for a full fifteen seconds, but even his large ears couldn't pick out anything.

"Nothing." He mouthed back, shaking his head.

Prey didn't like this. The door shouldn't have been open. It was probable the workers just didn't feel the need to lock this side door because the main gate was locked, but Prey didn't trust anything that was this simple.

Gloom inched the door open, making sure it didn't creak. Inside it was even darker.

"We need a light," Prey whispered, "Even you two can't search the building in this."

Prey was right. It was too dark, but, "We've no light. We will have to go in without." Gloom said.

"No light, no tools, no back up, no weapons, and no emergency communication crystal either." Prey muttered. This was what happened when you rushed into things without preparation. You got yourself into situations with no good options, only bad ones.

This was dangerous and all three of them knew it. They were going in essentially blind.

"I'll go first. Crimson, you next. Prey, stay at the back. If something goes wrong, hide." Gloom ordered in a low voice, stepping inside.

Crimson flexed his wings in readiness for anything and followed, although perhaps it was just him releasing tension from rather than actual courage. Prey certainly wasn't feeling brave.

He was scared. Prey had no problem admitting that to himself. He couldn't see more than two paces in front of him, and had to rely on Gloom and Crimson to lead the way. Even they were operating half-blind in this near blackness. Anyone could be waiting around the next corner. Or possibly even any*thing*.

Every single second stretched painfully in the loud silence as Gloom lead them slowly through the first room. There could have been sacks of salt or black magic materials hidden away in here, and they wouldn't have known. It was too dark to see anything but outlines, and they couldn't stop to search. The only goal was finding the

griffin.

The tension continued to mount as they ventured deeper into the innards of the silent building, ears and eyes straining.

It was exhausting, and adrenaline could only do so much. Prey's eyes felt hot, and he kept rapidly blinking, but he could still see nothing no matter how hard he peeled them. Did the shadows creep closer the moment you looked away?

Yet despite all this, nothing throughout the whole building triggered any of their senses. Prey couldn't see everything in the rooms they entered, but he could still hear, and more than that, *feel* the large rooms they entered. On his mental map, Prey had a fairly good idea of when they'd covered the whole buildings interior. But none of the rooms held their target.

Gloom pushed the side door shut behind them as the slunk back out into the night, having come full circle. However there was no sense of relief for having cleared the building.

This had only been one unlit building out of many.

There was a whole maze like Lumber Yard still waiting to be searched.

Prey knew the griffin was here. The only question was, which team would find him first? The ISND, or the other three Night Guards? The sick feeling in Prey's gut told him it was going to be the ISND, because that's how life worked.

'Please let me be wrong. Please let it be the other three poor suckers.'

This was like the Resistance all over again. Being thrown out into the line of fire as bait, with no idea when the ambush was coming, only knowing that it was. The terrible fear filled wait, with the promise of impending violence and possible agony was almost worse than any fight. 'I hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, *hate* the hunt.'

"Come on. We need to check the rest." Gloom whispered, glancing

up at the dark sky.

"Sir, there's too many. Buildings, I mean. We could easily miss the griffin at this rate." Crimson said, looking out into the huge sprawl of black outlines that made up the Oak Quarter Lumber Yard.

"No alternative. We've just got to keep searching." Gloom answered, keeping it short. His tufted ears kept swivelling every which way, hoping that if something jumped them, it would be from the direction he was listening too at that very moment. Crimson was similar.

Prey had to suffer through the opposite. While drooping, his hearing was superior, but not being a thestral, his night vision was poor. Each of them silently languished in their own personal sensory deprivation as they waited for an ambush that didn't came.

Crimson suddenly froze, "Did you see that?" He whispered.

"What? See what?" Gloom hissed.

Prey hadn't frozen or even hesitated. The moment Crimson had stopped he'd dived for cover, heedless of the dirt and grit he rolled over. His heart thumped wildly. He didn't care whether whatever it was had been an actual person, he needed cover.

If it'd been a wild predator, Prey would've frozen. Against a person however, that reaction could be all it took for them to finish lining up their shot.

"I thought I saw movement, around the corner of that building." Crimson whispered, pointing.

Prey couldn't see what the pegasus was pointing at, and he wasn't about to poke his head out from around his safe stack of granite blocks to look.

"I'm not seeing it." Gloom murmured, yellow orbs narrowing in the night as he squinted.

"It's gone. But I'm certain I didn't imagine it sir."

Silently the two of them shuffled sideways until they were behind the same granite stack as Prey. "Alright, how do you think should we should proceed?" Gloom asked, never looking away from the building over the top of their temporary cover.

"We go in. We need to stop this griffin tonight." Crimson said, no hesitation.

"We don't know what's in there. It's very likely to be a trap. There are too few of us, and we've no magical support. Or any support. We've got to wait." Prey hissed, also no hesitation.

"If it's the griffin, we're going in. That's not the question. But how to get in without getting spotted?" Gloom muttered.

"Of course sir. But going straight in looking for a fight is not possible," Crimson said, surprisingly being a voice of reason, "Not with Prey, I mean sir. He might get hurt. Or...killed. We will have to try and sneak in instead."

Prey felt a surge of something like relief, like he'd had a stay of execution. Even if only by a few minutes.

"You're right. But how to get in, how to get in...?" Gloom repeated, eyes roaming over the building that Prey couldn't see, "Wait, in up though there."

Prey gathered up his courage and very, very cautiously peeked around the corner of the granite, but not over the top like Gloom and Crimson were. If they hadn't been shot at already, then either they hadn't been spotted, or the enemy was getting into a better position to flank them.

'Please let it be the first.' Prey thought as he peeked at whatever Gloom was talking about.

It took Prey a second to work out exactly what it was that Gloom was referring to. He didn't know the device's name, and it took a moment to figure out its purpose.

From what Prey could see in the dark, it looked like a tall mobile ramp, stretching all the way up to a hatch set into the second floor

wall. It was hard to pick out with his inferior night vision, but Prey could see the glint of what looked like metal rollers lining the downward sloping ramp.

'It's supposed to be used to slide things down to the ground from inside.' Prey worked out.

And where there was a way out, there was also a way in. Prey would need to climb up the ramp to get to the hatch, balancing on the edge to avoid the rollers all without slipping, but it would be doable.

And Gloom and Crimson could just fly up.

"Alright, we have our entrance," Gloom whispered, rising from his crouch, "Crimson, you go through first. Prey, grab hold and I'll fly you to the top of the ramp with me."

"Don't touch me." Prey shied away from the hoof Gloom extended towards him.

"Prey for Luna's sake, not this again." Gloom hissed, still reaching out.

"I'll climb up by myself."

Gloom was sick and tired of this, '-we are in a dangerous situation and he's still going on about something so petty?-'

Gloom decided that enough was enough! He was just going to grab Prey and fly him up to the hatch.

Prey of course overheard Gloom's decision, "If you grab me, I'll end up screaming." Prey warned in a low voice.

Gloom froze, "You won't. You'd get us caught."

"I'm not threatening, and I'm not trying to make something up to avoid going inside. I'm telling you what will happen if you try and fly me up there." Prey stated.

"You think this is a joke?" Gloom asked incredulously, '-am I

seriously hearing this right now?-'

"No, do *you* think this is a joke? That I'm lying about this? If you dare to touch me, I'll end up screaming. Or something." Prey warned, making sure Gloom could see he was dead serious.

Gloom glanced helplessly at Crimson, who looked like he had no idea of what to do either. But they needed to move. Now.

"You two fly up. I will climb up. I won't make a sound, I promise." Prey said.

What choice did Gloom or Crimson have?

"We will talk about this later." Gloom growled.

'You mean, 'We'll talk about this later if I'm still alive'.' Prey thought.

Crimson reached the open hatch, no problem, and soundlessly swooped in. A hoof had stuck out from the darkness a moment later, and signalled that it was safe. Already airborne, Gloom flew up to the hatch, going slowly to avoid making any noise.

There, he alighted on the top of the ramp, avoiding the dark metal rollers and waited anxiously for Prey.

Prey didn't look up at his waiting Sargent however. He was focusing too hard on not stepping on one of the rollers. The only place he could set hoof was on the ramp's very edges, where the rollers didn't reach. Which meant he had his legs splayed far wider than was remotely comfortable as he shuffled his way up, trying not to misplace his hoof in the dark and slip.

If he did, the resulting racket would definitely alert everyone in the area. He felt horribly exposed climbing up here, and the ground was uncomfortably far away.

Gloom was going silently irate at the top of the ramp at Prey's stubbornness, '-of all the stubborn, foolish, dangerous, foolish

things-'

But despite Gloom's worry, Prey made it to the top without incident, where he refused to waste even a second stopping to placate the angry thestral. Prey knew full well his escapade had wasted two precious minutes, but no one was going to touch him ever again if he could help it. He shoved past Gloom without the actual 'shove' bit, and slid in through the hatch.

Once again, inside the building all was darkness. The smell of sawdust seeped into his nose.

Prey couldn't see to the end of the room they'd climbed into, but he could tell all was silent and still. Stacks of what might've been raw materials sat at empty work benches, with another roller belt running down the middle of the room. It was hard to be sure in the darkness.

Two yellow eyes hovered in the gloom a yard away, the faint traces of moon light coming in through the open hatch just enough to reflect dully in Crimson's eyes. The way the rest of him was almost invisible made him appear as a spectre until Prey's eyes more fully adjusted enough for him to at least see outlines.

Except that wasn't completely right, for the reason that something was wrong.

"Something's off." Prey whispered, so quiet that Crimson had to lean in closer to hear. Behind them, Gloom was clambering in through the hatch, briefly cutting off even that faint source of illumination.

"What is it? What do you hear?" Crimson almost breathed.

Prey gave his head a half shake, "What do you see? What's in this room around us?" He asked instead.

"Benches, tools, sawdust, machinery." Crimson answered succinctly, yellow orbs swivelling in their sockets.

"What is it?" Gloom whispered, joining them. In his thought's he was still angry at Prey, but now they had bigger concerns.

"Prey hears something." Crimson answered softly.

"I sense something." Prey corrected.

"Sense what?" Gloom asked.

Prey chewed his lip in worry, because he couldn't give the honest answer without also having to provide an explanation, which was; 'Magic'.

He could feel it, the faint pull and unpleasant prickling in his hooves from the runes. Somewhere close by, there was either an active source of magic, or an ongoing spell. He couldn't be certain, because the magic's purpose was unknown, but he didn't think the source was coming from within this room. But it was definitely somewhere in this building.

If Prey hadn't been afraid before, he definitely was now.

"I'm not sure what I can sense, but I can feel something is off in the air, like there's something hiding." He lied. His heart was beating unpleasantly in his chest, fear of this unidentified magic making his pulse race as he whispered.

Gloom and Crimson instinctively scanned the room again, trying to find what it was that was wrong. Crimson sniffed the air, "No blood. Too much sawdust to tell about anything else though sir." He murmured.

Prey got down on his knees in the dust and laid his ear out along the floorboards. He closed his eyes and focused. Was that something? No...Wait, was it? Vibrations, but no sound? Surely this floor couldn't be thick enough to fully block noise like that?

"There might be something below." Prey said.

"Something as in a machine, or something as in somepony?" Gloom clarified.

"I'm not sure. It's not right, not like people should normally sound. Like somethings blocking it." Prey said, lifting his ear away.

Gloom hesitated, trying to decide what they should do. '-my talent isn't giving me anything, so...-'

"Make our way to the door. Find the stairs. Don't get seen." Gloom decided, committing them to the danger.

Prey gulped and reached for his throat, surprised for a moment to find the steel collar he'd worn for fifty seven years gone. 'Of course it's gone. It's been gone for three weeks now.'

Had it really only been three weeks?

Gloom lead the way towards the door which Prey couldn't see, Crimson creeping behind him in the darkness, wing's half spread to take off at a moment's notice. Prey also slunk along, feeling out each hoof step before he placed his weight down, making sure he didn't make a sound.

Out the door there was a short corridor, which, if possible, was even darker. Again, they crept along it even towards the exit.

Gloom tested the handle, pressing his ear to the crack. He shook his head, "I can't hear anything." He whispered.

Prey held his breath as the Sargent cracked the door open. A soft whining creak came from the hinges. They all froze, door half open, and it wasn't only Prey holding his breath.

Nothing but more darkness beyond. Nothing moved.

Prey let out his breath out shakily. He silently glared at the back of Gloom's head as the thestral squeezed through the half open door. Gloom could've gotten them all killed right then and there with his carelessness.

Apparently, the building had been a lot bigger than Prey'd realised from outside. Where it had looked like there were two huge warehouses along side each other, it was, in fact, one giant building joined together. Prey had thought the corridor would've lead them to some stairs down to the second floor, but no. Instead, they found themselves in another darkened work shop floor.

More familiar outlines of benches and tools cluttered this floor too, and once again too, and this was the most important point, no movement. Just space.

Gloom waved them to follow him, already cautiously heading towards the next door. It seemed less used somehow, like a side entrance. 'But a side entrance on the third floor?'

Slivers of pine sawdust crunched silently under Prey's small hooves on their approach, mixing uncomfortably with chips of stone, invisible to him in the dark. It reminded him horribly how they had no idea what they might be about to set hoof into.

Just like all the others before, this door wasn't locked either, and revealed a walkway was revealed hanging in space, showing that they were actually high above the second floor. A glance left and right showed the walkway extending along both walls like a balcony, as well as straight out over the open floor far below.

Prey halted and squinted, just able to see over the walkways edge from his stand point. It was at least a sixty, probably seventy hooves drop.

'Is that movement? People working in the dark down there?'

But what worker would still be here so late?

'-what the?-'

Gloom took a step out onto the walkway, and then flinched explosively, eye's snapping shut as he barely managed to contain a hiss.

"What is it?" Prey whispered urgently. This must be the magic he'd sensed! "Quickly, what does it do?"

Gloom jumped back smartly into the room and shut the door. Only then did Gloom fully open his eyes and face the two of them.

"Sir?" Crimson asked, coiled and tense as a spring.

Gloom blinked rapidly a couple of times, "Well, that I certainly

wasn't expecting." He said shortly.

"Sir?"

"There are ponies down below. There's some sort of magical illusion cast over the whole floor, and I stuck my head through just now."

"A bubble of illusion magic? Are you sure it's nothing else?" Prey asked, large eyes darting across what he could see of Gloom's face, looking for signs of any other magical effect.

"Yeah, it was exactly like a bubble actually. It's as bright as daytime in there." Gloom glanced back at the closed door, "When I went past the threshold, everything was suddenly all light up and I could hear ponies talking."

'A wide spread illusion of this size, *and* a silence bubble sustained continuously at the *same* time? That's far too powerful, we have no chance against a unicorn like that.' Prey thought in dread. They had to leave, right now.

"I'm going in for another look. I didn't see what they were doing down there." Gloom whispered.

"Wait-!" Prey squeaked, but Gloom didn't, cautiously opening the door and poking his head back inside.

If Prey had been armed with a knife, he might very well have stabbed Gloom right then and there for his stupidity.

'Why is this all going so similar to that mansion raid by the Solar Guard?' Prey thought, bracing himself for the alarm to be raised.

By some dumb luck, it wasn't. Ten seconds later Gloom was back and shutting the door again to convey his observations.

"All those ponies down there... They're working on packaging salt. They've got a production line going." Gloom stared straight ahead, like he was having trouble reconciling the reality he'd just said with what he'd seen. Perhaps after tonight, he simply didn't have a reaction left to give.

"The magic," Prey insisted, uncaring about the drug trade running just below them, "Did you see the source of the magic?"

"The source?" Gloom asked dumbly. He seemed to have not caught up yet, '-how did this slip right under the Guards nose?-'

"How many unicorns were there, who was maintaining the spell, where were they positioned?" Prey rattled off, voice rising in pitch and alarm.

"Prey, breathe and calm down." Crimson said quietly, catching Prey off guard.

"I can be calm when I'm not in danger of getting my head blown off or frozen solid. Do you have any idea how powerful a unicorn would have to be to cast both a silencing and veil of that size?" Prey whispered furiously, jabbing his hoof at the door.

"No, we don't." Gloom said. He paused, "Do you?"

"It's *very*." Prey answered, "Even taking into account how they could be specialised in this field, they would still have to be a mid or high tier five at the very least to be able to cast and maintain this spell indefinitely, unless they have a cutie mark that aids them. How long have they been casting this? An hour? All night?" He was talking too much. They didn't need to know all those details.

"That doesn't sound too bad." Crimson said.

Prey stared at him, "Do you even understand what I'm saying?"

"Illusion and silence aren't a physical threat. They will be easy to deal with if it comes to a fight." Crimson replied, not phased.

Prey was struck speechless. His wide eyed gaze turned to Gloom's, and he found the exact same look there as in Crimson's. The lack of necessary fear. How could they not understand? Magic wasn't a joke, they were going to get killed if they went up against such a unicorn in a straight fight.

"Actually," Gloom slowly said, "I don't think I saw any unicorns casting down there. Isn't this the sort of spell that would need to be

constantly maintained?"

Gloom didn't think to question why Prey seemed able to provide the answers, only caring that Prey did.

"Yes, no, maybe. It could be an enchantment, but they can't have set up an enchantment so quickly, and that would require an even *more* powerful and skilled unicorn. The salt dealers only moved here a few days ago, so there's just no way."

Prey licked his lips, mind darting over the possibilities, "Either they have some kind of magical artifact that's fuelling this, or, or," He swallowed, "Or they really do have a unicorn on that tier."

"I'm going to take another look. Watch my back." Gloom said.

"Wait, don't!"

Prey's squeaky protest went just as unheeded as the first. But by the same miracle as before, the drug dealers down below were just as unobservant as last time and didn't notice Gloom. Hadn't they posted any sentries? They were dealing in illegal substances, how did they overlook something so obvious?

"I think you were right Prey," Gloom whispered, withdrawing his head, "I think they have some sort of glowing magical box down there on a cart that's casting this bubble. I can see a unicorn sitting next to it, channelling magic, but since I can't see him doing anything else, he must be powering the box."

Prey knew that could not be all. There must have been magical markers placed around the warehouse somewhere to define the borders of the bubble, and there was no way of knowing if that was all the box did.

"How many other unicorns were there?" Prey asked with growing trepidation.

"Four, five? I couldn't be certain," Gloom whispered, "There's at least twelve ponies down there that I can see. I can't be certain who is what race."

'Four or five unicorns,' Prey thought in dread, 'Better assume five. Five beings who can kill us before we can scream. Who could have fireballs, lightning bolts, ice beams, or any other number of spells. How are we supposed to avoid their attention?'

A horrible thought occurred to Prey, and his head whipped round to face Gloom, ear's whipping along with the movement, "You're not going to try and confront them, right? There's no way we're going to do something crazy like try to arrest them all or something, right? Right?" He asked, grinning nervously.

Gloom shook his head, making Prey slump in relief. "There are too many ponies to confront. We need more Night Guards first. No, we're going to continue covertly searching this place instead. That's all we can do for now, and we don't know who else might be around. I didn't see the griffin down there for starters."

"But he's here sir. I mean, if there's ponies making salt down there, then this must be the right lumber yard after all."

"And we've flown right into the middle of it." Gloom muttered grimly, "This is far bigger and more established than we realised. An entire factory floor? A production line? Who know's how many other buildings here hold similar set ups?"

Gloom shook his head, "Let's face it, we're in over our tails."

Prey had a piece of stone, a chip of marble that must've broken off from one of the half formed blocks as it was being shaped. He couldn't tell what colour the piece was, but he could still feel it just fine. He'd found it just now quite by accident, setting hoof on it in the dark without meaning to.

It wasn't important in the slightest, just a small chip of discarded stone, but he'd immediately picked it up.

Now he was busy rubbing the chip with his hoof, feeling the one rough side and one smooth in an effort to distract himself from the danger just the other side of the door, and down. And how in just a

few seconds the ISND were going to step out of said door, and trying to sneak across the walkway, right above the heads of all those hostile ponies.

Five of which were *unicorns*. Five *hostile* unicorns. Five *dangerous*, hostile unicorns who's best interests lay in ensuring the ISND never told anyone about this place. Prey gripped the shard of marble tighter.

'At least I'm not crying like some crybaby again.' Prey thought bitterly to himself.

"Alright," Gloom whispered, "Let's go."

Prey took a deep breath to calm himself, the smell of sawdust strong in his nostrils. He tucked the stone chip into his wool and nodded once to show he was ready.

Crimson also nodded and stepped up behind Gloom. The armoured thestral gently hooked the door handle with his wing claw. One of those unexpectedly unguarded thoughts came out from Crimson as their Sargent did so; '-I sorely wish I had my fathers wing blades right now-'

"Stay low. Remember, we're only trying to get to the door on the other side." Gloom whispered before pulling the door open. Prey closed his eyes to preserve his night vision against the glare that he knew was coming, and slipped reluctantly through.

A prickle raced through his hooves, like nettle stings, and brightness beat against the other side of his closed eye lids. For a moment, Prey felt greasy as he passed through the veil and into the bubble, and sound from below became abruptly audible. Heart beating hard, Prey shuffled to the side so he wasn't blocking Crimson, and cracked his eyes open to take in his surroundings.

The balcony bit of the walkway on which they stood was a solidly build construct, safe and solid. The walkway that spanned the drop was a lot more vertigo inducing. Thin metal railings suspended from the roof beams on chains, and a metal grate bottom so you could see through all the way to the floor below.

Gloom had exaggerated. It *wasn't* as bright as day. There were still plenty of shadows up here, since all the illumination came from the lights below, something Prey was extremely grateful for, since it meant that the three of them had a much better chance of remaining hidden for what they were about to do.

Gloom hadn't been exaggerating on the numbers though.

There were twelve ponies below, working along two of the many production lines. But in contrast to the usual wood and stone those belts processed during the day, they now held simmering saucepans, chunks of coarse white crystals, and brown paper bags waiting to be filled. A chemical smell hung thick in the rafters up here from the rising fumes.

The set up was small, but seemingly very efficient in producing its drug. The ponies below were working at a fair clip, evidently knowing their jobs well.

'Or are afraid of not meeting their quota.'

Only seeing from above, the subtler facial tells and body language of the ponies below were lost to Prey, but he still got the impression they were all on edge. And not just because they were partaking in an illegal activity.

"Prey, come on we need to move." Gloom whispered. He was crouched and gesturing for them to follow him to the walkway, body hugging the platform. Across the open drop and on the far side, a single door could be seen in the shadows. Their next destination in the search.

Swallowing, Prey went.

He had a nice, *long* view of the unicorns through the walkway grating the whole way across.

It was nerve wracking. Prey was keenly aware all one pony needed to do was glance up and the alarm would be raised. 'We should've gone back around outside.'

But not once did any of the ponies below look up during the tense

crawl, and neither did Gloom nor Crimson bring down one of their cloud steel shod hooves too hard as Prey was secretly certain in his heart one of them would.

Just as they were about to make it off the dangerously see through grate floor to the door, they were brought to a freezing halt for what felt like the hundredth time that night. And the cause was the sudden entrance of a griffin below.

It was 'the' griffin, *their* griffin, the murderer who they'd chased all the way here. Even if their were any other griffins in Canterlot, and even supposing they might be this very lumber yard right now, Prey would've recognised those bright eyes anywhere from the single moment he'd seen them staring down the other end of the crossbow.

Even from up here, those eyes seemed to be alight with life. They sparkled.

The didn't griffin walk in like a murderer either, he swaggered in with barely suppressed energy, a spring in his step, and a friendly grin on his beak.

"Ah! Prenez my friend!" The griffin called out cheerily, as if there was some secret joke that only he was in on, "How are you doing tonight?"

The unfortunate pony apparently answering to the name Prenez, the same unicorn powering the enchanted box, seemed to shrink in on himself at having the griffin single him out. The rest of the workers had all ducked their heads and speed up the moment the griffin entered.

"I'm fine thank you sir." Prenez mumbled, barely audible from up here.

"Good good, that iz' good," The griffin said, speaking with an accent Prey had never heard any griffin from the Resistance use before.

"And how iz' my salt line going. It iz' also good, yez'?" He inquired, still grinning as he strode over, lion tail swaying to its own tune.

Prenez shrank lower, and Prey fancied he could see the glisten of sweat start up on the unicorn's forehead, although that might just have been from sustaining the magic supply to the enchantment box.

"I, er, yes sir. I've just been taking my shift powering the veils." Prenez answered nervously, keeping his eyes fixed on the box so as to have an excuse to not to meet the griffin's eye.

"Ah, unicorn magic, wonderful thing iz' it not?" The griffin asked, suddenly standing over the box with a happy grin. His sudden movement and intrusion into Prenez's personal space, if that really were the stallion's name, made the unicorn's ears go flat and his breath catch, but to his credit he did not flinch backwards.

He probably knew there would be unpleasant consequences if he let the veil drop.

"But I don't think that iz' the question I asked. I asked, iz' it good, yez'?"

The griffin didn't asked it threateningly, or make so much as an aggressive twitch, but the ponies working around Prenez instinctively sucked in their breath.

"It's good, yes it's good boss. Production is right on schedule, you don't need to worry about it." Prenez hastily answered.

"Good, good. You iz' doing a good job my friend. I will just be checking that it iz' going good now, yez'?" The griffin asked brightly.

Evidently Prenez was not required to answer, because the griffin sauntered away, and Prey saw the unicorn's head slump in relief. The other ponies didn't have the same luxury, as the griffin was now leaning over their shoulders to check up on their work, all the while keeping up that bright eyed smirk.

"What are you doing?" Prey whispered sharply.

Gloom jerked up from watching the scene play out below to see that next right to him, Crimson's wings had slowly started to drift

open. Gloom had been too focused on their target just below even to notice. Prey was already off the walkway and crouched by the door, ready to leave.

"You better not be planning on flying down there and trying to fight them all by yourself." Prey hissed.

Crimson's wings snapped closed, "No." He denied. He didn't sound certain though, "But he's just there. He murdered all those ponies and he's just standing down there-"

"Don't you see all their weapons?" Prey asked incredulously.

Gloom and Crimson cautiously peered back over the balcony's edge and looked closer.

'-how didn't I spot those?-', Gloom thought. What they'd previously missed was that almost every pony down there had some sort of weapon close to hoof.

No spears, lances, axes or swords, although that last weapon could only really effectively be used by unicorns. But there were plenty of other, smaller, easier to wield by the unskilled weapons in evidence. A pair of hammer hooves lay on the table next to one stallion, with cudgels making up the rest of the armament for the other earth ponies. A wing blade on one pegasus's wing, a scattering of knives and daggers, but what gave the ISND the most pause were the crossbows.

Four of them, and all of them looked loaded. Admittedly crossbows weren't nearly as bad as the unicorns, but a crossbow represented a much more tangible and immediate threat in both Gloom and Crimson's eyes. To them, any non-horned pony would normally have to get in close to pose any threat, but the crossbows removed that safety net.

'-how in Luna's mane did they get so many crossbows into Canterlot?-', Gloom wondered, '-and how many more do they have? Never mind, that's not important right now-'

Prey could see that deep down. Gloom was just like Crimson. and

would've liked nothing more than to swoop down there and arrest the lot of them, but they weren't crazy enough to believe that would ever work. Gloom's eyes bored hatefully into the griffin's back.

'-once again this is bigger than we imagined-', Gloom thought.

"No choice, we need to wait for back up. We'll keep watching from up here, make sure none of them..." He broke off. Down below, their griffin had finished talking, or terrorising, his workers to his satisfaction.

"You all keep up the good work, yez'? We are all busy, and no one haz' time they want to be wasting, yez'?" The eagle lion asked cheerily, and walked out the door without bothering to wait for an answer. He didn't need one. It was undisputed who was in charge.

"Change of plan," Gloom whispered as the griffin made for a doorway underneath their perch, no doubt heading for the outside, "We're following him. If that piece of filth is on his own, we can ambush and take him down."

Gloom turned and dashed towards their own exit, Prey falling back from the door to get out of Gloom's way.The Sargent pulled the door open, almost being careless in his haste, only remembering at the last second to take it slow so that the disused door didn't screech.

The horrible greasy feeling scurried over Prey's skin as they hurried out. Outside the veil, darkness returned, plunging him back into near blindness. They were back outside. High up. The chilly breeze told him that. Another metal grate walkway then.

"This way." He heard Gloom whisper. Prey couldn't see where Gloom was leading, but he could hear which direction the thestral's voice came from.

"I don't see him." Crimson said. Neither could Prey, but that was because he could hardly see anything aside from specks of star light, whereas Gloom meant he couldn't *see* the griffin.

'-did the griffin go out another exit? No, not possible. But then

where is he?-', Prey heard Gloom think as the Sargent cast about in the darkness below them.

"There. He just entered that building, I saw the door closing." Crimson said. Prey could see what was probably a hoof pointing. What was more of a clue was the big black outline of what could only be a building the leg shaped shadow was pointing at.

"Moon blight, we missed him. Quickly, follow." Gloom ordered.

Prey looked, and saw that the metal grate walkway they were standing on also extended over to the next building the griffin had just entered, forming a bridge of only about twenty hooves length.

Gloom and Crimson wasted no time and shot across the bridge, not willing to risk loosing this chance to corner the griffin in the next building. Prey was scared, not of falling off as he dashed after them, but by their single minded pursuit. They
focusing too hard, fixating on the griffin. It was going to make Gloom and Crimson slip up.

Of course, the door on the other side just had to be the single one in the whole lumber yard which was locked.

Prey caught up as Gloom was wrestling with the handle, trying to break it open without having to resort to bucking it in. '-need to hurry. Blast it, but if I break it we'll be overheard-'

"No good. It won't budge." Gloom grunted, still straining.

"I can break it sir. But I'll need one kick." Crimson whispered.

'-one kick. Can we risk the noise?-,' Gloom hesitated.

Then the Sargent's thoughts turned to the griffin doing Luna knew what inside. "It's all yours." He said, stepping aside.

Crimson took a position to the side of the door, his armoured chest squashed against the safety rail as he lined up his back hooves. "Kicking now." Crimson said simply.

A sharp *__Clunk__!* resounded in the night.

The out of place noise made Prey wince. 'Did anyone hear that?' He worried. That was a silly question. It must've been heard, but would anyone think the noise bore investigation? It had just been one noise in a big lumber yard in the middle of the night. Surely such noises happened all the time with tools falling of benches and what not? At least Crimson's kick had done the job.

The door handle dangled brokenly. Gloom gripped it tightly with both wing claws and pulled as hard as he could. The door was dragged unwillingly open, something sticking in the door jam and making it stick.

Prey was poised ready to run if someone was waiting on the other side. He was crouched in a runner's starter position and everything.

Darkness. An unlit interior. No ambush.

Gloom strained, and Crimson slipped in the moment the gap was wide enough. The pegasus's stance was lowered, and he was ready to attack the first thing that moved. But his readiness wouldn't do much against a crossbow bolt or a unicorn. Unwillingly, he turned his back on the black interior and began pushing at the door from his side until it was wide enough for the rest of them. Unhappily, Prey followed Gloom in.

Prey's eyes still weren't fully adjusted from exiting the illusion bubble, and by the time they were and he could see in the dark room again, Crimson had already found the next exit and was listening at the door crack.

A jerk of Crimson's wing gestured them up. That must mean he thought it was clear. And it was. Just another of those short, dark corridors. Prey hated those corridors. But at least he didn't feel any tingle in his hooves indicating nearby magic. Or at least he thought he didn't. What if it was concealed though?

Gloom and Crimson weren't concerned about that, they were already flitting like shadows to the far corner, somehow their armour failing to give them away. Around the corner, the corridor ended at some stairs.

'-these must lead down to the second floor-', Gloom thought, yet Prey knew they hadn't travelled far enough up here to have already reached the end to the third floor.

Not that it mattered. They knew the griffin had entered on the first floor, so that's where they needed to get to. At least Gloom and Crimson hadn't been stupid enough to fly down and try following the griffin in through the first floor entrance. The front door was certainly guarded or patrolled, and they would be caught.

The staircase they'd found spiralled down and around. It made it impossible to see what was waiting past the curve. They all listened intently.

Prey heard nothing, just the shallow breathing of three people desperate not to get caught.

"Go." Gloom whispered.

Treading down the stairs, they did lead to the second floor, but there the steps ended. They would need to find another stair case if they wanted to keep descending. The corridor now split in front of them, left and right, and shadowed indents showed where more corridors either joined or branched off each split.

"This isn't the same work shop floor plan as before." Crimson observed.

"No, these look like offices. Or specialised work rooms perhaps." Gloom whispered.

"This floor doesn't see much use. I can feel the dust in the corners, and the floor isn't worn smooth." Prey said, trying to figure out if he could hear anything coming from down the dark corridors.

The air felt dead, as if nothing regularly passed this way.

Gloom wasted a second wondering why the griffin came to a disused building, before realising it was irrelevant.

"Which way will the stairs be?" Gloom asked, although he didn't think either of them would know any more than he did.

Neither of them did. That left no option but to search manually. Prey hated this nerve wracking tension, constantly watching every hoof step and every dead angle for an attack that never came. Every new turn was another potential battleground that had to be evaluated afresh.

Gloom took a deep breath that probably only Prey heard, and started them down the left hoof side corridor towards the nearest corner. Prey felt the floor boards bent alarmingly, like they wanted to creak, but weren't quite old enough for that just yet. This building felt like it'd aged badly. They passed cracks in the plaster walls, showing solid brick underneath. This was probably one of the Oak Quarter Lumber Yard's first properties, before their work had slowly spread out to the other, better equipped buildings, leaving this one empty and dark.

It was almost the perfect place for an ambush.

Prey stopped. He was at the back of their group. He had the worst night vision but the best hearing, making this the safest position to be in. Since he was having to face forwards to see where he was walking anyways, if someone tried to creep up on them from the rear, he'd be the one most likely to hear them. He hoped.

But now he looked back. There was no one behind them, and there wasn't enough shadows in this straight corridor to hide in. He listened intently.

The thought that he was at the back had come to him very suddenly just now. Why? Was his subconscious telling him something?

Prey listened harder, trying to time his breathing.

Prey opened his eyes. Gloom and Crimson were already rounding the far corner, not looking back for him, trusting that he was following. Prey looked over his shoulder again, back towards the right hoof junction. Prey caught his breath.

There was a faint light spilling out from the turn, flickering like lamp light, and growing brighter as its bearer approached the corner. Last of all, the faint sound of hooves finally reached Prey's

ears.

The salt dealers weren't as foolish as they'd first appeared. The griffin did have patrolling sentries.

'Zoma'Grika.'

Prey dashed around the corner, "Gloom, Crimson!" He hissed as loudly as he dared.

Both of them jumped, spinning around with wings up ready for a fight. Prey didn't give them a chance to berate him for alarming them, "There's a patrol coming with a lantern, sounds like at least two people."

"Fight or hide?" Crimson asked, immediately summing up their options. They could of course try and hurry ahead, but that would be far worse than those other two choices. They'd be rushing head long into who knows what with enemies blocking their only retreat.

Gloom considered for barely a second.

"Hide," He decided unequivocally, "Find a door that's open, quickly!"

His urgency was clear, and completely unneeded. The next closest door was ahead of them, and they all ran for it.

"Locked, next one." Crimson hastily whispered, abandoning the handle after a tug.

"This one too." Prey said, letting go of the handle he'd jumped to catch and tip-toe running for the next door.

"Locked."

"Also locked."

Locked!"

"L-Open." Gloom whisper called, shoving the unlocked door open. Barely pausing to check that he dark room was unoccupied, they

ran in. Gloom yanking the door shut behind them, only halting it at the last moment to prevent it from slamming.

The room was small and dark. Very dark. There were no windows or other doors. Prey had only briefly seen the room contained crates on one side, and a disused desk on the other before they'd rushed in here. Now he could see nothing.

They held their breath, backs against the wall, and listened.

Slowly, like the inevitable approach of the tide, the faint sound of hooves approached. Prey pointed to the bottom of the door. A ribbon of yellow light was growing brighter under the crack. Instinctively they all stepped back as the multiple sets of hooves trotted up...and past their door.

They all breathed again as the faint 'clopping' and worm of light slowly receded.

'-that was a bit too close for comfort-', Gloom thought. They waited a full minute before Gloom slowly cracked the door back open. Prey picked up from the Sargent's mind that he couldn't see which turn the patrol had taken, just that they were gone.

"It's clear. Let's hurry. We don't know when or if another patrol is coming. If that was a patrol at all, and not just bad luck." Gloom whispered.

"We've no idea where the griffin is by now. He might be hidden in another illusion." Prey said.

"Then we'll just have to look harder." Gloom said grimly, opening the door further.

"Sir, do you think this is important?" Crimson asked in a low voice behind them. As the door had swung open, it had let in the dull light from the corridor to sweep over the closest crates and boxes. It wasn't enough for Prey to see anything by, but apparently it was enough for at least something to grab Crimson's attention.

Prey wanted them to leave as soon as possible, right now in fact. Gloom gave the open door an unsure look, and then went back to

see what Crimson was talking about.

"What is it? That's not-"

Prey heard Gloom sharply suck in his breath through his fangs.

Prey looked, or tried to look. Crimson had the cover of a crate propped open, and Gloom had brought his face down close to make sure of what he was seeing in the near dark. Prey anxiously glanced to the open door again, not wanting to put his back to the corridor, but also needing to see what they were looking at.

"What's in the box?" He whispered.

Crimson pushed aside shredded cardboard packaging and plucked at something with a wing pinion. Prey heard the faint 'twang' of something taut being plucked.

Gloom reached in and carefully hooked out a curved 'T' shaped object, untangling it from a clump of carefully packed, '-crossbows-'

"Horseapples."

"There's a load of them in here sir. Crossbows. And other weapons. And, what's in this side?"

Prey propped his fore hooves up on the crates edge so he could see.

Inside the crate was split into two. The larger half was filled with tightly packed objects, rolled in cloth. Prey caught the dull glint of what might have been a dagger's hilt, or an arrow head. But Crimson was referring to the smaller compartment, a box stored within the bigger box. The pegasus had flipped this second lid open to find stacks of what looked like small metal lock boxes, minus the lock. Instead, a simple catch was all that secured them shut.

Gloom was still looking at the weapons, mind churning over what horrible possibilities of what this could mean. Crimson pulled out one of the small metal cases without Prey having to prompt him, balancing it on the crates edge and flicking open the catch.

With a rustle of paper, a small sealed bag was dislodged and fell out

and landed with a 'plop'. Prey's first reaction was that anything stored in a metal case was likely to either be toxic or dangerous, but the usage of paper bags disproved that worry.

Prey poked at the paper bag. It was probably brown paper, he couldn't quite tell in the dark, but it certainly wasn't white. He gripped it and ripped the corner off, already knowing what would be revealed.

"Salt." Prey said simply, as a small trickle of ghostly white grains drifted out. This was far more finely ground than what they'd just seen being made.

'-a crate full of weapons and salt, all packed up and ready to go-', Gloom thought. He looked at the other crates stacked in the small room. "What do you thing the chances are those hold dried daisies?"

"We should leave." Prey muttered, but he was also looking at the other stacked crates in the deep shadows, mind working.

"We need to check." Gloom said, putting the crossbow down and going over, Crimson moving to help. Prey didn't need to look inside to know those crates would hold the exact same as the first. He had a hunch what they were for, and where they were supposed to be going too.

'They look recently packed. That likely means they'll be being sent out soon. These boxes all look standard, meaning they're going to be transported by a legal freight company. So where would I leave a list with shipping documents in this room?'

Prey turned in the opposite direction from Gloom and Crimson, looking to the desk.

What looked like a an old abandoned clipboard full of papers turned out not be so old or abandoned. The pages weren't aged enough when he touched then, and held no dust. It wasn't a trigger for a magical trap either, he could tell, so he felt safe in lifting up the top page. However he couldn't read anything in the darkness, even when he angled it into the faint light.

Behind him, Prey heard a quiet word of exclamation, and knew that Gloom had confirmed what he'd already known. '-this crate too. All these crates must be filled with the exact same-'

"But for what purpose? It's almost like a basic start up kit... To infect Canterlot with more of those smuggler dens!" Gloom seethed in realization.

"Like the cellar?" Crimson asked.

"Like the cellar." Gloom confirmed.

"I don't think so," Prey said. He held the top set of papers out to Gloom, "Could you read this?"

Gloom sat on his haunches so he could use both his wing claws and fore hooves to angle the pages up to the dim light, squinting.

"It's a list of numbers, wait, those are freight numbers. The shipment dates are set for two days time. Destinations to..." Gloom turned the page and tilted it to catch the light as best he could.

"All the other major Equestrian cities, right?" Prey asked.

Gloom went quiet for a long second, "Horseapples."

Crimson read aloud over Gloom's shoulder, almost like he was compelled to do so, "Manehatton, Vanhoover, Trottingham, Trottingham again, Cloudsdale, Appleton, Bridleham, Detrot times two."

"It's not a set up kit for more drug dens. It's an expansion plan for the rest of Equestria." Prey said with faux cheerfulness.

The smiling mask he worse slipped as he heard a noise. A noise coming from the open door behind them. A unicorn stood there, his horn clear and just beginning to light up, orange eyes widening with surprise. He carried no lamp, which was how he'd snuck up on them.

Prey saw the crossbow the stallion carried on his back, but that wasn't what the unicorn was reaching for.

"The door!" Prey squeaked, but it was too late.

The last Prey saw was a flash of wide orange eyes as the unicorn grabbed the handle and slammed the door shut.

Before anyone could reach the door, Prey heard the unmistakable sound of the dead bolt being thrown across. Hooves pounded away down the corridor to raise the alarm.

"Harp! Harp! Call the boss, intruders!"

The shape of Crimson skidded to a stop helplessly in front of the door, half a second too late. Prey couldn't see Gloom or Crimson's expressions in the dark, but their faces must have matched his own in the sudden silence.

They were locked in.

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Author's Notes:

Sadly, no picture to go along with this Chapter, but that's not why you read a story! It's certainly growing in length. Wow, not long until 400,000 words actually. 😶 Hope you enjoyed it anyways. Action in next chapter, I swear!

[[[]]]----------

Editor? Say it once, say it twice, say it thrice!☆🌈 **Sweetolebob18Sweetolebob18Sweetolebob18**💥 ☆

34.2 Flames of a Feather fall Together

They stared at the locked door. Only the sliver of lighter darkness under the jam showed where it even stood. It looked like hopelessness.

They were locked in.

They were trapped. In only a few minutes, the griffin's salt workers would return, all armed, ready to silence their Night Guard captives. They would be bringing back unicorns too.

Prey's legs started to shake, acidic fear building in his gut, rising up his throat and feeling like it was going to overflow. 'Why why *why*? I knew I should've stayed to watch the door!'

"Look for another exit!" Gloom ordered, all need for quiet and stealth now gone, "There's got to be another way out of here."

Gloom's loud voice made Prey jump, reminding him that he was not trapped in here by himself. He may as well have been. Gloom's order was useless. Prey knew there was no other door, they'd all seen that on entering. And now he couldn't see anything.

The sound of Gloom and Crimson bumping about in the office as they tried to find an exit sounded in his ears. Prey didn't move, remaining where he stood frozen in the dark. He heard one of them trying to buck door, then the walls, but the dull **thump** told him solid brick lay behind the cracked plaster.

"I'm trying the ceiling." Crimson called, and there was the sound of feathers rapidly beating against air.

'It'll be no good either.' Prey already knew. His breath was coming in quick, short little gasps.

Sounds from above, Crimson was knocking against the ceiling, more **thumps** coming as the pegasus tried to punch through it. But it was at the wrong angle, and trying to break their way up would never work.

Above them lay the floor of the third story, built to support heavy stone blocks and timber. It wasn't going to be broken, at least not without tools.

They'd have a better chance of trying to dig through the floor down onto the first floor. 'Not enough time. The sentry would have returned with the rest of backup long before we dug through. And we don't any tools.'

Prey was helpless. His runic magic was useless to him here. That had always been the way of it. Whenever his runes would've been invaluable, he never had the time to use them.

A unicorn could've lit up their horn and melted the door's hinges. Prey could do the exact same thing, provided you needed the hinges melted in an hour's time, and not right-now-escaping-this-instant, because that's how long it would take to make the runic array.

Gloom was trying to kick the door down, but that wasn't working either.

'-why couldn't the architects have been shoddy?-', Prey heard Gloom frantically thinking. Prey felt like giving in to panic. He needed to find someway out of here, and he needed that way out two minutes ago.

'Stay calm, breathe, think clearly. I've been trapped before.'

"It's no good sir," Crimson had finally given up bashing on the ceiling, "But we can barricade the door." He suggested, landing loudly somewhere to Prey's right.

"The other Night Guards!" Prey shouted out his realization in a voice gone high pitched, "We just have to hold out until they can come to save us."

It wasn't much of a realization, more of an unlikely possibility.

However it was only those unlikely possibilities that got you out of these sorts of circumstances. Because if you gave up, you were already dead.

The problem was that the word; 'unlikely'.

"Help me move the crates. Push them against the door." Gloom ordered.

"You two can use the crossbows too! They were strung, weren't they? And there's bolts in there."

"There are, but it's too dark Prey-"

"You can still cock them by feel and load the arrows, can't you?" Prey did not have the strength to draw a crossbow himself, but they could.

"Alright, good idea. Barricade the door first. Crimson are you ready? *Push*." Gloom called into the dark. Prey head heavy crates scraping against the floor, and that last faint worm of light coming from under the door vanished.

While Gloom and Crimson shoved and heaved crates towards the door, working by touch alone, Prey tried to force his mind to come up with anything else that could help them in the few moments they had. One of those emergency alarm crystals like the Solar Guard had used would've been a life saver right now. Instead, Gloom had rushed them into this situation unprepared. It was very easy to blame Gloom right now.

And then unexpectedly, there was a splash of faint light again as one of the crates was dragged away. The illumination, despite being so weak, immediately drew three sets of eyes as they all stopped.

"There's a hole-"
"In the wall-"
"Move that crate-"
"Push it-"
"Out of the way."

All of them spoke at once, converging on the hole.

It was just a small hole, with uneven brick edges, in through which the lighter shade of darkness from the corridor spilled. Gloom and Crimson wasted no time in bracing their backs against the last crate and shoving it aside with a rumbling scrape to fully uncover the hole.

Prey practically heard Gloom and Crimson's hearts fall into their hooves at the sight.

"It's tiny." Gloom muttered in despair. He kicked at the exposed bricks, but they didn't even shake, "We'll never be able to widen it far enough to fit through."

"Us, no. But Prey might." Crimson said.

Nobody had to tell Prey twice, he was already crouched in front of the small hole, trying to see if he could fit his head in.

Gloom's eyes were eyes riveted to Prey's attempt. '-if Prey can get through...-'

"You can go around the side and unlock the door." Gloom finished his own idea.

"That's the plan." Prey grunted. Hard, blunt brick pressed against Prey's cheek as he tried to get his shoulder in behind his head, dust falling into his face. Prey shoved with his back legs, and then jerked back with watering eyes as he bashed his head.

"Is it too tight? Can you make it?" Gloom asked urgently.

"Maybe." Prey managed to coughed, already back to squeezing his way through, heedless of the scrapes he was accumulating. This was a much tighter space than the front gate. But he *had* to make it through.

"Come back, we'll try to kick some bricks free." Crimson ordered. Prey didn't listen. There wasn't time.

The wall was three bricks thick, a pipe or vent had probably run through here before it was removed. The hole was too even for anything else but deliberate placement, but it'd still been messily

cut. Prey accidentally crushed his ear against the uneven side of the hole, and it immediately began to throb. Prey just pushed harder, ignoring the strands of wool which got torn out as he tried to work his way past a jutting brick end.

The problem wasn't his head, he could fit that. It was his shoulder blades. 'This Zoma'Grika brick! If only it were an inch shorter.' It was just this one jutting piece, blocking him from escaping. The hard edge dug into his back as he *pushed* .

'Am I going to dislocate my shoulder?' Prey thought in panic. He shoved harder anyway. Gloom and Crimson were trying to say something, muffled. He ignored them, he could see freedom, just out of his reach.

A horrible thought occurred to Prey just then about what would happen if he got stuck.

He imagined the salt dealers breaking in and finding him trapped like this. They could cut him in two, leaving the other half stuck inside the wall, dribbling blood. He wouldn't even be able to see them coming with the knife to hack him apart from behind. He'd only be able to hang here and blindly scream. Prey struggled harder, scraping his skin raw as he shoved. Blood was pounding in his head. It felt like his upper body was caught in a vice.

Something gave. Perhaps it was his ribs, or maybe he'd finally squirmed past the narrowest point, but his head and front legs popped free. Gloom gave a muffled exclamation through the wall, probably encouragement, Prey wasn't sure.

Prey wriggled and twisted onto his back, so he could better drag himself through from this side.

Prey heard something, and he went as still as a statue, listening.

'Zoma'Grika.' Prey cursed again, and resumed struggling even more furiously. Sharp edges dug into his back, grating painfully on the whip scars. Teeth gritted, Prey pushed harder.

What he'd heard was hooves approaching, still a ways off, but

enough of them that the noise still carried to his ears. They were galloping from the next corridor up, where the locked door was set.

'I've got to move.' Prey thought, redoubling his efforts, headless of the blood and wool he left behind.

'Come. *On*!' Prey strained, 'I did not. Escape Dreverton. Just. For. *This*!'

With no warning, Prey's hindquarters somehow scrapped past the squeeze point and he fell out, banging the back of his head on the floor. He took a deep lungful of air and started coughing.

"Prey," Gloom hissed through the hole, only his yellow slit eyes visible, "Quick, go round and open the door."

Prey jerked his head up, staring up the corridor towards the corner where the rapidly approaching noise was coming from.

"We've moved the crates. Go open the door." Gloom repeated, urgent.

Prey scrambled to his hooves, scraps and bruises forgotten. He look at the corner, and then he looked back down the opposite corridor, towards relative safety.

Gloom had also heard the approaching ponies. Prey would've known it from the way Gloom's eyes widened even if he couldn't read his thoughts; '-ponyfeathers-'

"Prey go open the door."

'I don't owe you anything.' Prey thought, but he was still already running for the corner and locked door, picking up speed. The door was bolted, he'd heard the bolt go across. But what if it'd been locked with a key too? He might've missed the sound of it turning in the lock. What would he do then?

It only took five seconds for Prey to reach the corner. He skidded round it, legs splayed for purchase.

Time seemed to slow as Prey took in a number of facts.

At the other end of the corridor, the first ponies the sentry had called were rounding the corner, same as him down this end. The difference was there were more of them, and they had crossbows and knives. He saw two unicorns, levitating wildly swinging lanterns. No griffin.

This simple equation presented itself in Prey's head.

The distance between the side corridor he'd just emerged from and the charging ponies side corridor was about twenty yards. The locked office door was nearer to his end of the corridor, about five yards from Prey. He could get to it in five seconds.

The salt dealers had fifteen yards to reach the same door. They couldn't fire their crossbows while running, but they were also moving a lot faster than him. They would reach the office door in about ten seconds.

If Prey ran to the door, he would have less than five seconds to pull the bolt back before he had to turn and run away again, so say four seconds.

Four seconds to pull one bolt back. He could do that. Easy. If the door was only locked by a bolt. But he had no way of knowing if that was the case. Didn't matter, he would still only have four seconds. It was simple math.

Five seconds there, tour to undo the bolt, and a one second head start in running away.

He could make that.

Prey pivoted, back hooves leaving the ground he turned so sharply, and raced back down the corridor he'd just exited, ribbon streaming out behind him.

He ran away.

It was simple math. It would now take the ponies fifteen seconds to reach this side corridor. Fifteen seconds in which he could disappear. That's assuming they didn't just stop completely to kill Gloom and Crimson first.

Prey didn't slow as he passed the hole in the bricks. He didn't see if Gloom was still crouched on the other side. He didn't know if even now they were both pulling at the door, waiting for it to open and thinking it would be him.

It was simple math. 'I can't help you two.'

Prey took the fork in the corridor and fled deeper into the buildings darkened interior, looking for a safe place to hide.

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A tiger does not change its stripes.

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Prey closed his eyes and listened. He was situated in a crawl space between beams of rough cut lumber, each more than two hoof square. They'd been poorly stacked, allowing Prey to find this dark gap amidst them.

He was listening for pursuit.

No one had chased him when he'd fled down the corridor, leaving Gloom and Crimson behind. He wondered if they were both dead yet. Could they possibly still be alive? Maybe they'd somehow loaded the crossbows and shot their way out, or re-barricaded the door in time?

No. He would only be deluding himself if he thought that way.

They were almost certainly dead. The griffin would not show mercy, and neither would the unicorns under his command. Gloom and Crimson might be able to fight off Earth ponies and pegasi, but not unicorns.

'Dead. Two more deaths. Add it to the pile of guilt.'

But he'd survived. He was still alive, that was all that mattered. Because even if he'd managed to unbolt the door, Gloom and Crimson would've only had a moment to prepare before the salt dealers reached them. Against superior numbers, crossbows, and

unicorns, what could they have done which would've changed the inevitable outcome? Nothing. Prey wasn't going to risk his life for one extra second.

'I ran away.'

And now he was on his own. Good. That was good. It would be easier to avoid discovery. Prey knew how to survive on his own. It was what he'd done in the forest.

This wasn't the Deeper Green though.

Prey could survive in the wilds, he knew how to move silently through brush and leave no tracks. He was aware what signs to look out for and which plants were dangerous. But this was different. This was an urban environment where he only had limited experience.

Prey opened his eyes, blinking in the darkness. He'd heard nothing. Yet. So, how to proceed from here?

Once, he would have given almost anything for this opportunity. But that was before Luna had locked these golden tracers around his legs. There was no point in escaping now. Luna would find him, and when she did, she would want an explanation for why Gloom and Crimson were dead.

'What am I going to do?' Prey thought, hugging himself. How was he going to explain this? Instead of dying now to the griffin, he was going to die later to the moon alicorn. That may even be the worse fate.

'No, enough panicking and fear.' Prey berated himself. He was scared, exhausted, and hurt, but none of that helped. 'Prioritise. Work out what I need to survive, and go from there.'

Alright. Step one, survive the night. If he could make it through till morning, he would probably be safe. Nighthawk and the Night Guard would definitely have come by then.

Step two, survive Luna's displeasure at losing his squad. To do that, he would need something else to pacify her with. Something to

prove he didn't just run away like a coward, and had actually made an effort. If not, he would be just as dead as if one of the unicorns found him. He couldn't run. The tracer bands would track him. He had no way of tricking or removing them. They were made from alicorn magic.

Prey squeezed his eyes shut, biting his tongue. He felt awful and vile. 'So, that means the question is, what will Luna accept as sufficient evidence of my continued loyalty?'

Slaying the griffin? Rejoining with the Night Guard at the gate when they arrived and then acting as a guide back into the lumber yard? Discovering the names and faces of as many of the salt workers as he could? Prey didn't have a clue what would satisfy Luna.

He would just have to see what he could find before morning came. Either way, he would not prove himself hiding here. He would have to leave.

'Gloom and Crimson are certainly dead.'

Prey did not want to leave the comforting blackness of his hidey-hole. He didn't know where any of the salt dealers had gone, or what they would do now they'd been alerted. They might be sweeping the rooms for more Night Guards even now. Prey was scared, but then, when was he ever not?

Would Luna really dispose of him if she suspected him?

'Yes. Yes she would. She's Celestia's sister. Anything she can't trust or control is dangerous.'

Prey sat for a long minute in the quiet of his hiding place, gathering his courage and forcing thoughts of Gloom and Crimson from his head.

'I really hate the hunt.' He thought.

Prey pressed himself back into the shadows behind the work bench.

At the other end of the isle, two ponies, an Earth pony and a unicorn, hurriedly pushed a loaded cart out into the corridor. The unicorn had a crossbow, and both of them were in a rush.

"Hurry up."

"Then stop hitting the walls idiot."

"You're the one steering this-"

"Will you just shut up and *move*?"

"Steer straighter then."

"I said shut up and *move*!"

Prey listened to them clatter off down the corridor, cart wheels squealing. They took the pool of light with them. Prey waited until he was sure they'd gone before looking around the corner again.

Those two weren't the first salt dealers Prey'd heard entering and leaving the building, but they were the first he'd nearly run into, and his heart was still pounding.

The ISND had really kicked over the ants nest. Now the ants were swarming as they tried to get everything out. It looked like the griffin was trying to get as much of his salt production moved tonight as he could.

And the griffin was not happy about it either, if the fearful expressions of the two ponies who'd just left was anything to go by.

Prey checked no one else was coming, and then hurried to the door, hugging the shadows. They'd left it open. Outside, the night time lumber yard sat dark and silent. Prey peeked through the crack, ready to jerk back. Across the open dirt, the far building's door was still swinging shut.

Prey took a deep breath and slipped out the door, feeling horribly exposed. He fervently wished he'd been born with black wool, not white, to blend into the night.

By Prey's estimation, the griffin probably thought he had some time. At least a few hours, or possibly all the way until morning before the bulk of the Night Guard realised Gloom and Crimson weren't returning and arrived in force.

The griffin knew he hadn't been followed flying back from silencing Oyster Pinion. After all, hadn't he shot down the only pursuit which'd managed to get into the air? That meant the Night Guards who'd found this place did so by chance. If not, surely the Night Guard would've swarmed the whole Oak Quarter Lumber Yard by now? While that still meant his salt operation was compromised and he needed to leave again, he had a little time.

However, Prey guessed the griffin didn't know about the other three thestrals somewhere out there searching in the lumber yard. Although that didn't mean they would be of any help to Prey. There was still the matter of the illusionary veil hiding the salt dealers activities, so it was likely the Night Guards would simply pass on by.

Prey couldn't confirm any of his hypothesis with one hundred percent certainty, but it seemed the most reasonable assumption from what he'd observed so far. He needed to scout and find out more about what was happening. Find a position from which he could observe what was going on.

Prey craned his head back, looking up at the blacked out building. It was a long way up.

"Grab everything. I want it all shifted, no evidence. And youz'!"

The addressed pony flinched.

"Stop standing there uselessly. You go guard the front door, yez'? Who know'z' what other bat'z' are snooping around outside?" The griffin shouted. He was no longer smiling, although his eyes were still hard and bright.

'I told Gloom not to go into the lumber yard. I *told* him what would

happen. I warned him and Crimson both. But they wouldn't listen. It's not my fault.'

Prey watched as below him, the griffin continued giving out orders and making threats. Prey had seen at least a dozen new ponies down there already, raising his previous estimate. Not one of them noticed Prey up here, just a small bundle of wool creeping along the walkway. His goal was on the other side of the work room, but there was still the issue of getting down to the ground floor once he got there.

'Don't look up, don't look up, don't look up.' Prey silently chanted in the back of his head.

"You!" The griffin was shouting at another one of his workers below, whirling this way and that in a frenzy, lion tail thrashing and snapping out orders and questions.

"M-me boss?"

"Yez' you! Get Batton and Truffle from up stairz', go be look outz' on the roof. You see any bat poniez' out there, shoot them straight away, yez'?"

"You want me to kill somepony?" The stallion gaped.

The griffin rounded on him faster than the unicorn could react, grabbing two talonfuls of the stallions bushy mane and dragging him eye to eye. "Yez', shoot them, stick them, kill them. I want them dead, just like I shot Oyster Pinion tonight-"

Gasps of horror went up from all around the room. Evidently, Oyster Pinion had been a friend to many of them, or at least a work acquaintance.

"-Stop squawking like chickz' the lot of you! Oyster waz' talking to the Night Guardz'. A traitor! I don't like traitorz'. You iz' all my friendz', yez'? But if my friendz' won't follow my orderz'..." The griffin's bright gaze swept around the room, "...Then that meanz' he iz' no longer my friend. If you're not my friend, you iz' a traitor instead. Wouldn't you agree, yez'?"

No one dared to answer or meet the griffin's bright gaze. The griffin's grin grew wider, "See? There is no need for unpleasentnezz'. We are all friendz' here."

The eagle lion gave the frozen stallion he was holding a friendly pat on the back as he released him, "You go get Batton and Truffle quickly now my friend, yez'?"

The unicorn nodded vigorously, "Yes, I'll go get them straight away Garrow, I'm your friend." He said backing away, eager to get out of the room.

'So the griffin's name is Garrow.' Prey thought as the ponies below scattered to their tasks. And Garrow was crazy too. He'd grabbed that unicorn, completely unafraid of any retaliation. All of his workers probably knew he was crazy as well, which was why they were too afraid to shoot him the moment he turned his back. Because they knew if they missed, they wouldn't get a second chance.

Or maybe they knew something Prey didn't. The griffin already had one illegal enchanted box, perhaps he had some other charm or dark magical artifact on him too? There was no way to tell.

'At least, with fewer ponies in the room it'll be easier to avoid detection,' Prey thought, steeling himself to begin the climb down, 'But it also becomes more unpredictable with ponies rushing in and out.'

He'd reached the intended corner of the balcony by now, furthest away from the activity far below him. But more importantly, this corner was where his way down began. Parked like a broken down wagon on the ground floor below, there was an old piece of crane machinery, half covered in thickly stitched tarp. The crane had been compacted up to preserve space, but it's folded arms still reached up nearly to the height of the second floor.

It was Prey's way down.

'Alright, step two without joining Gloom and Crimson.' Prey thought, licking his dry lips. He backed up to the balcony's edge

and lay down on his belly, letting his back legs over the edge. The open drop below him made his stomach swoop dizzyingly. Prey shuffled further back until he was just hanging by his front hooves from the guard rail.

Prey didn't weigh much, but nor was he strong. Supporting his own weight when he was already so tired and battered made his muscles quiver as he hung there. He didn't let himself look at the hard ground three stories below in case he froze up. If he froze up he would die.

'So far so good.' The back of Prey's wool itched. He couldn't see what was happening behind him as he began to swing himself back and forth, nor could he turn his head far enough around to see, no matter how desperately he wanted to.
Backwards, forwards, backwards and forwards, Prey built momentum. His grip felt horribly weak, like it might slip at any moment. *Backwards-forwards*.

On the next forward swing, Prey let go.

Gravity immediately grabbed ahold and pulled him down, but the horizontal pipe running along the wall he'd been aiming for was that direction too. Prey's teeth clacked together as he landed. All the breath was driven out of him as he impacted the metal pipe hard, far harder than he'd intended. Prey scrabbled for a hold before gravity could realise what he'd done and drag him off. There was blood on his tongue.

Prey managed to haul himself atop the pipe, and crouched there breathing heavily. He wobbled, precariously balanced, but stabilised himself. The moment he was confident enough to look away, he glanced anxiously towards the frantic salt dealers all rushing in and out to check if anyone had noticed. He blinked. Garrow had disappeared. Prey hadn't seen when or where he'd gone.

No time to spend worrying about that. Prey resisted the urge to swallow and started to wobble along the pipe, balancing on top. This was one of those few instances where being a lamb runt was to his advantage. Prey's center of gravity was low, he was small

enough to fit on the pipe, and his cloven hooves offered better stability than a pony's would have.

Still, he nearly fell off twice before he reached his destination, which was the point where the tarp shrouded crane arm was closest.

Gathering his strength, (and his courage), Prey first double checked the distance, then leapt.

The tarp deadened the sound of his landing, and because of the way the tarp was spread and the angled, Prey was now cut off from view from anyone on the ground floor, even if they did look up.

That meant Prey could take a moment to spit out a of saliva and blood onto the dusty tarp from where he'd bitten his tongue. He swallowed, trying to get rid of the horrible coppery tang.

Prey began clambering down the far side of the crane, hooves finding tiny holds in the sloping tarp. In front, the salt dealers continued to hastily pack up their equipment. From what Prey pieced together, they intended to temporarily abandon the Oak Quarter Lumber Yard, and come back in the future once the Night Guard investigation died down.

There were things however which couldn't be rushed in their packing. The burners over which they'd been simmering the salt were still hot. Trying to pack them away would result in a fire, so they could only be left to the side until last.

Prey reached the ground safely and peeked through a hole. There was a pegasus, about ten paces away and out of Prey's perception range

"C'mon c'mon," The pegasus was muttering, scraping out a flat pan of hard baked salt crystals as fast he could, "Don't have time to deal with this manure."

He didn't notice as Prey crept along behind low benches and circled around him, making his way towards the temporarily abandoned burners.

The burners worked off magically charged crystals placed in the bottom of the frame. Prey didn't know exactly how the crystals were made or charged up, but he was willing to bet it wasn't cheap. However the salt dealers could hardly use normal wood fires in here to boil off the excess chemicals and water. That would leave too much evidence come the morning, like ash and smoke stains.

Prey cautiously raised his head above the table level, eyeing the closest burner. He looked around. The coast was clear. Undoing the silk ribbon from behind his ear, he wrapped it around his hoof and took out the slightly smoldering crystal from the bottom. The heat did not burn the silk.

Apprehensively checking he hadn't been spotted, Prey backed away until he was back behind the line of work benches again, before turning and and running off, carrying his new power source with him. And just in time too.

Prey heard, but wasn't in a position to see, someone rushing down the stairs in a panic.

"There's bat ponies out there, flying around and shrieking in the dark! They're trying to get Truffle and the others, up by the roof!"

Commotion and movement. Prey's legs didn't stop moving, but the rest of him did to listen. "Impossible. How did you get past then?" Prey recognized the voice. It was the unicorn who'd been powering that enchanted illusion box when the ISND had first entered above on the walkway.

"I wasn't out on the roof, I was just supposed to fetch-"

"Hey! Why didn't you help them?"

"I couldn't get near the door. You go help them, you're the pony with the crossbow!" The first pony shouted back.

"H-hey, let's not rush into things, we should go to tell Garrow first. And we don't know how many more bats there are out there."

"There were loads. All flying and screeching and swooping about with yellow eyes." First ponies shouted again. It seemed the three

thestrals Gloom had sent to search the other half of the massive lumber yard had finally caught on to what was happening here.

More commotion, movement and shouting. Prey shrank down to wait it out. He was unable to determine which decision the salt dealers were taking, there were too many conflicting ideas being tossed around. Someone galloped off to look for Garrow. That was bad.

Prey didn't know what the thestrals were trying to achieve with their deliberate distraction up on the roof, but now they'd truly gone and tweaked the lions tail. 'Why're they acting now? What can they achieve? There's only three of them.'

They must be operating under bad information. If they really knew what was really going on here, they wouldn't have revealed themselves but flown off to get Captain Nighthawk as quickly as their wings could carry them.

Their sudden appearance had thrown the already deteriorating situation into chaos. Who knew what rash action the drug dealers would take now? Usually that would have been Prey's path of attack, shake everything up, but this situation was different. Right now, he was stuck in the middle of it while trying to find some scapegoat for Luna's inevitable wrath.

"What are you all standing around for you plucked chikenz'?!" Garrow's furious screech cut through the din, "We're under attack and you're flocking around like nestlingz'. Uselezz'!"

"Boss, w-what should we do then?" Someone was brave enough to ask. Stupid enough too.

Prey didn't know what the griffin did to the unfortunate, but he heard a shriek of pain. Prey had his own memories of the similar tactic Torment used to employ to scare everyone into behaving. Make one scream and the rest will do whatever it takes to not become that one.

"Stop wasting time. You three, and you lot, you and you too. All you unicornz', get crossbowz', get into two groupz', pull your tailz'

out, and get up to the top floor." The griffin ordered.

"All pegasuz', you go out the door and round the back. Fly up nice and high, then dive down at them. Smash them into the roof if you can. If not, you drive them down the south side. Down the south side, yez'?"

"You unicornz', you flank them from the other stairz' and come up behind the batz'. Drive them towardz' the exit. All others follow me to the second floor windows on the south side. They will fly by trying to escape. Me and my friendz' will be waiting. Lotz' of easy shotz'."

From Garrow's words and his rudimentary knowledge of the building's layout, Prey was able to work out where the griffin meant. The three thestrals had gotten into the top floor, and had trapped the three sentry's Garrow had sent up there on the roof.

Garrow planned for the pegasi he'd sent up to stop the thestrals simply flying away, and the crossbow wielding unicorns would force the thestrals to dive down to building level to get out of their line of fire. Garrow was a griffin, and griffins were all natural predators. But Garrow was definitely a hunter. He didn't plan to chase his prey, he intended to drive it right into the exact spot he was waiting.

It was a simple plan, and Prey could see it working.

'He's done this before.' Prey thought. In barely a minute the griffin had a plan to deal with the thestrals. What's more, he didn't hesitate even for a second.

Someone or possibly everyones face must have shown something, probably abject horror at the thought of killing another pony, because Garrow let out an angry screech that touched on some primal instinct that said 'Danger' and made everyone cower. "SKREEE! If'n I see any of you not up there, then you are a dead chicken, understand yez'?"

No one present, Prey included, doubted the griffin's threat.

Garrow was a murderer. He hadn't hesitated to shoot Oyster Pinion, one of his own people, to keep the pegasus from talking. In the last five days he'd killed five ponies, all of them his own subordinates. These thestrals who were getting in his way? They were going to die, just like what had happened to Gloom and Crimson.

Prey didn't have time to think about them two. 'I don't care. I'm the one that left them behind. I chose this.'

Those three thestral's were going to die. They probably thought they were helping, stopping the salt dealers from fleeing or something. They were only going to get themselves killed. At the range Garrow proposed, their armour would do little against crossbow bolts. And even less against unicorn magic.

'But just maybe, maybe they *are* helping. How can I turn this into something that works in my favour?' Prey thought fast. He'd been making a runic array behind this big pile of lumber, planning to use the crystal he'd pilfered as a power source to make something.

"Move move! Get out there you flying chickenz'." Garrow was cawing, giving out more orders.

Prey had an idea. He didn't like the idea. It made his stomach quiver.

But the only reason he hadn't been discovered yet was because he was hiding inside one of the two main buildings. It hadn't yet occurred to the salt dealers there might be someone in here under their very noes. If he was lucky, it wouldn't occur to them either.

However if he left this room...

Prey put that concern aside and forced another rune off his shaking hoof into existence, trying to speed the process up. He had to hurry, the ponies were already running out to complete Garrow's orders. He needed to follow behind them, at least until they passed his destination. Often the safest place in the forest from the cockatrice was where it'd just been.

'Just one more rune.' Prey thought, a splitting headache pushing

away behind his eyes. He gritted his teeth, the cloying tang of blood still polluting his mouth.

'Come on, last one.' The final rune took shape, hammered into existence by his will and dropped into place, closing the array and completing it. This array would be his distraction. Immediately after, the headache began to fade as he finished.
Prey shoved the half charged crystal into the correct spot on the array and turned to go, but his vision grayed out for a second and he almost fell.

'Whoah.' Prey staggered. He squeezed his eyes shut until it didn't feel like everything was spinning. Creating those runes had taken more out of him than he'd estimated. 'I shouldn't be this debilitated already.' Prey thought. This didn't bode well. But he didn't have time to waste, he had to get after the salt dealers.

Prey pinched himself, hard, focusing on the stinging. It wasn't to wake himself up, no, the pain was to help him gather the courage to move. Like climbing a cliff face, if you stop moving, it's hard to start again. And to freeze up was to die. Prey made his way via shadows and under benches to the side exit and hurried out.

Prey pulled back, ducking into the shadows. Garrow and the crossbow wielding unicorns he'd selected were ahead, just at the bottom of the stairs. Why'd they stopped? They should be proceeding up the stairs to the ambush point.

Prey hadn't been planning to catch up with the crazy griffin's entourage. What where they doing here? They were obviously waiting on the griffin's orders, but what was the change in the plan? Prey had been very fortunate to be in a position to overhear Garrow's plan the first time around, this time he had not been so lucky and had obviously missed it.

And he couldn't get past them as long as they were waiting here, blocking the corridor.

Prey couldn't get a clear view, but it looked like Garrow was

rummaging in a chest, attaching things to a belt he had slung across his chest. 'More magical items or weapons.' Prey guessed. He hoped it was only the second.

The griffin finished up a second later, swishing a large cloak out of the chest and over his shoulder.

The griffin straightened and looked around, until he spied the two earth ponies hurrying down the corridor towards them, sweating and pushing a cart. On it, a second enchanted box rode. Having seen the first, it was impossible to mistake this second one for anything else.

"Ah, good, good." Garrow said as they pushed the cart up. He bent to check something on the box, Prey couldn't see what.

"Ah, iz' good for a little while yet. Unicorn magic, wonderful iz' it not? Now we are ready to go. You two," He pointed at the earth ponies, who flinched.

"You carry it up. Make no noise. If you drop my box, I'll pluck out you eye'z and pack salt in the holez'. You can keep the salt. Fair, yez'?" Garrow threatened, grinning. The Earth ponies looked sick.

"You," Garrow spun on one of the unicorns in a flash of feathers and cloak, "You feed your magic to power my box, yez'?"

"Yesyes, of course boss, yes." The unicorn said, staring cross eyed at the sharp griffin talon half a centimeter from his nose.

"Good, good." Garrow grinned, eyes dancing, "And you other unicornz' all. When the batz' fly over, don't any of you shoot till I sayz'. Don't mizz' your shotz', yez'?"

All of the ponies looked like they wanted to do anything else but what the griffin was ordering, but none were dumb enough to rebel.

"Good good, now keep up, yez'?" The griffin lead the way, the rest of the ponies tip-hoofing after him. They were scared, unsure, afraid of following but afraid not to. 'Not blooded.'

Prey waited as long as he dared after the last tail disappeared,

before dashing across the junction. He took the left turn, where as the griffin and unwilling followers had gone right, towards the south side windows to set the ambush.

Three minutes. That was how long ago it was that pony had rushed in shouting about dozens of bat ponies attacking the sentry's up on the roof. Three minutes was all it took for the griffin to execute his simple yet effective plan to drive the night fliers out of the safety of the dark and into a killing zone.

It was quite similar to a plan Prey might've come up with. The three thestrals were going to die. They didn't have any idea about the trap they were about to fly right into.

Three more deaths tonight. Prey remembered how the last thestral over the wall had waved back at them.

'It's not my fault. If you get killed, there's no one to blame but yourself.'

Prey needed to get outside. He ran along in the dark, retracing his steps backwards until he spotted a familiar door. His destination was the metal walkway between this building and the next, the same one he'd trodden with Gloom and Crimson. Crimson had broken the lock, so he knew the door would be open. And now Crimson was dead.

'Not my fault. It was simple math.' Prey repeated to himself.

Through the broken, half open door, the walkway stretched out in the night, silent and uninviting. Prey needed to get across without being spotted. Those pegasi Garrow had sent out, along with the flanking squad of unicorns to drive the thestrals would be arriving up there any second.

'When they start the attack, then will be my chance.' Prey thought, trying to peer up through the crack into the night sky. He would wait until they were distracted killing the three thestrals., then he would take the opportunity to slip across. No one would notice him then.

Prey knew when the flanking maneuver began.

Aggressive shouts and neighs sounded above in the dark, coming from ponies no doubt more scared than the thestrals they were trying to drive. The salt dealers Prey had seen weren't killers. However they were lead by a killer, and for that reason they might be terrified into committing murder, but they were not naturals. It showed in their cracked shouts. They were afraid. But they were armed and afraid.

Prey jumped through the broken door and dashed across the walkway, the shouts of the pagasi as they swooped down from above the buildings roof suddenly far louder and clearer.

Prey shoved the opposite door open and shut it behind him as fast as he could, mercifully leaving the growing sounds of approaching murder behind him.

Now inside the next building, Prey retraced his earlier path and ran to where he knew the stairs leading down lay, taking them two at a time in his haste. It was a minor miracle he reached the landing without falling in the near blackness, but he did. Prey was just about to take off to where he knew the second flight of stairs lay, when he hesitated.

The office where Gloom and Crimson had been trapped was the other way. The corridor was dark and still. Empty. Like the intangible feeling that had seeped out from the cellar.

He could perhaps go see if perhaps they were still barricaded in-? No, he knew what he would find. No light meant no ponies left guarding the door. No guards meant only one thing.

Prey didn't hesitate further, he took off down the other corridor. He needed to get back to that storeroom in which he'd hidden first time. He'd come full circle. Now he needed to retrace his steps. There were still salt dealers in here, trying to hastily pack up up their equipment. Not as many ponies as in Garrow's building, but one was more than enough.

'I only need one.'

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The pony was a watery blue Earth pony mare with a spiky yellow mane, or at least that's the shade it appearedd in the dark. Few of the salt dealers had been mares. Perhaps it was because she was an Earth pony trying to survive in Canterlot which had caused her to end up working for Garrow. Or perhaps it was something else entirely.

The reasons didn't matter. She was just rushing past the storeroom, a lantern's handle clamped in her mouth and a heavy looking box full of salt processing apparatus on her back, when she heard a cry.

"Help, please. Somepony." Came the weak call for help, pathetically hopeful. It came from out of the half open storeroom door.

For a moment the mare hesitated, but the call came again, sounding desperate, "Please don't leave me." It sounded like a small filly, hurt, alone, in pain.

The blue mare rushed to the door, shouldering it open. Her eyes cast about in the light thrown by her lantern, but she had to stop and spit out the handle to call out; "Hello? I'm here to help, where are you? Hello? Hello?"

"Please, help me. I don't care who you are, please..." Came the weak voice again, coming from between the heavily stacked isles of the storeroom, stuff packed right up to the shadowy rafters.

"Hold on, don't worry I'll help you. What's your name?" The mare soothed the filly's voice.

"G-Gossamer..."

"Where are you Gossamer? Can you tell me?"

"D-down here. It fell on my leg. It h-hurts."

"Don't worry Gossamer, I'm coming right now." The mare called, picking up the lantern in her teeth again and hurrying forwards.

She wasn't thinking about what Garrow would say or do, '-I can't

ever leave a foal trapped and alone-', She thought as she stepped over an upturned bucket.

Right as she did so, Prey activated the rune he'd placed on the rope and severed it.

The rafters the mare had seen weren't actually extensions built out from the wall, they were only suspended from the ceiling struts to serve as extra pseudo-shelving.

The rope snapped. The end of one of the rafters, loaded with old timber off cuts, plummeted down, while the other end went up. The noose which had been hidden by the bucket whipped up, yanking the mare's hind legs out from under her. The mare's jaw impacted the floor on her way up, the lantern's handle flying from between her teeth and the glass breaking. The candle winked out.

A groan escaped the mares lips, her thoughts showing her to be dazed as she swung on the rope. The box had tumbled from her back, spilling the paraphernalia on the floor as she slowly spun.

'-what, how, happened? My teeth hurt, ow, what happened?-'

She shifted, looking up, or rather down.

'-why's the floor up there out of reach? Why can't I reach?-', She thought, stretching out her front legs but coming just short as she continued to twist dizzyingly round and around.

It finally worked its way through her mental processes that, '-this was a trap-', At the exact same time the mares rotations were brought to a halt by someone behind her. Something with points lightly pressed into the back of her neck and something metal and glinting was brought up against the side of her throat.

"Don't try and call for Garrow," A gurgly voice hissed into the mare's ear, "Or I might slip. We wouldn't want my little brother disturbing uz' now do we, yez'?"

The mare was not as slow on the uptake as she'd been to regain her senses and went rigid.

'-oh my sweet Celestia butterscotch sugar please no!-'

The points in her back were claws she realised, and the thing under her chin was a knife, '-another mad slasher griffin!-'

'Good. She came to the right conclusions.' Prey thought. He was the one standing behind the mare, hidden in the dark. The points pressing into the back of her neck were actually just three nails Prey held in the cleft of his hoof, giving the impression of talons being lightly applied. The knife at her throat was just a rectangle of blunt metal, but since it was only visible out of the corner of the mare's periphery, it certainly looked like a knife. It wasn't even pointed.

It was just an act. Give a hint of danger and the mare's own mind did the rest.

Prey'd claimed to be Garrow's big murderous sister because he knew the immediate effect he would get. All of the workers here were terrified of their griffin boss. What better way to ensure immediate fear and respect than by claiming to be the psychopath's older sibling?

The only problem was the voice, which was why Prey was speaking in a hissing gurgle. It was the most menacing sound he could think to make that didn't also sound completely fake. He couldn't deepen his tone enough for a proper growl, which was why he'd had to claim to be a big sister.

Even with his best acting, his tone didn't sound very real or threatening. His throat and vocal cords were still and always would be a lamb's. And a lamb's voice didn't exactly do angry, everything either came out high pitched or childish.

However Prey was counting on the mare being too scared and convinced that if she said the wrong thing she would die to notice. Hopefully even if she did, it would only serve to cement even further in her mind that she'd been captured by someone insane.

"Good, good. Stay nice and quiet. You are going to answer some questionz' for me, yez'?"

The mare nodded frantically, the only thought running through her mind was that she didn't want to die.

"Good, good," Prey gave his best attempt at a coo, "First, where else has mine little brother started up more of hiz' salt drug ring?"

Prey didn't want to break into the mares mind, although that would've certainly provided him all the answers he wanted. Sorting through her memories would still take time, and he didn't plan on this interrogation being long. It was faster to ask her his questions and then read her thoughts as she thought of the answers.

Going into her mind would also mean leaving his body vulnerable, and besides which, he intended for his captive to be his proof to Luna. He didn't want the alicorn to notice the mare's mind had been tampered with, since he was sure Luna would have some way of detecting that. He needed her alive and well, and he wouldn't have risked absorbed her mind even if that wasn't the case.

"I don't know." The suspended pony whimpered.

Prey jabbed the nails in his hoof harder into her neck, "Liez'. Don't lie to me, yez'? I will know when you do. What other salt runz' does Garrow have?" Prey repeated.

"He, he doesn't tell us. A-all I know is that he's got another place f-for us to go n-now that the Guard have found us here." The mare stuttered. Her thoughts confirmed her answer.

'-just told us to pack it all up. I don't know where-'

"Good, good. What iz' your name?"

"W-why do you want to know?" She asked, the blood rushing to her upside down head slowly making her whole face go red.

"I ask the questionz'. Your name, what iz' it? Something ponyish, so two wordz', a mare'z name."

As Prey spoke, the scared mare couldn't help but think of her own name, '-Sea Shores, after my grandmare-'

"Letz' see, you are blue, so a water name, yez'? After the sea side. Ah, I see I'm right." Prey exclaimed as she started, "Sea Shores you are called."

"H-how did you know?" Sea Shores gasped in fright before she could stop herself.

Prey completely ignored the question, he needed his own answered and quickly too. "Where are the escape routez' out of this building? I know my little brother mine does so love hiz' escape routez'."

'-fire escape, gate out the back, across the square-'. "There's the fire escape. You h-have to go out-"

"-Out the back, and round the side, yez'? The gate at the end of the lumber yard iz' your exit route. I see." Prey said, almost ending up coughing at the end what with maintaining the gurgling voice.

"How did-?"

"Shut up, yez'?" Prey interrupted cheerfully. Sea Shores' mouth snapped shut.

'Right, I've got the route Garrow intends to escape from.' Prey thought. He had a prisoner, and a means to prove he'd done his best to Luna. What else could a member of the ISND be expected to ask in these circumstances?

"Which pony noblez' do you sell the salt too? Quickly now."

"I don't know. P-please, you've got to believe me." Sea Shores thoughts collaborated, so it was the truth.

"Where iz' little brother mine getting support?" Prey hissed.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Her face was continuing to grow redder as more blood kept rushing to her head, no doubt making it hard to think.

Prey let out the best angry noise he could, "Idiot. Who iz' helping him? Somepony powerful iz' lending him a claw."

"I, I, I don't know." Sea Shores answered, trembling. '-please don't kill me. Is she going to kill me? Oh Celestia help me-'

"Praying iz' no good. No one can help you now. Your only way out of this alive iz' to tell me the truth." Prey hiss gurgled.

'-how did she know?! What's going on? What-?-'

"How many poniez' are in the lumber yard?"

"Uh, uh! Five. NO I meant thirty five!"

"Keep it quiet or I make you quiet for good, yez'?" Prey snapped, pressing the blunt piece of metal against her throat.

Apparently though, Sea Shores was at her breaking point, "No no no! Please, I'll be quiet, I'll be so quiet, I promise! I promise, don't hurt me please. I promise." She babbled, starting to struggle.

Prey almost lost his position keeping the mare's dangling form from spinning around on the rope. He couldn't have that or else she would see that it was just a lamb, not a murderous griffin holding her hostage.

"Quiet!" Prey hissed again, trying to steady both himself and Sea Shores form.

Just then, both of them heard the noise of someone hurrying down the corridor outside, the trundle and squeak of a cart wheels. Prey heard the hope soar in Sea Shores mind.

"Don't even think about it," Prey warned, pressing the piece of metal close again where she could feel it against her neck, "If you shout out, I'll cut your throat. Help iz' no use to a dead pony."

'-I can't die, I have to get back home, Tuppy needs me-', Sea Shores panicked.

"Help!" She yelled, thrashing about, "Help! Help! Help Me!"

Prey could scarcely believe the mares stupidity.

'What an *idiot*.' He thought in disgust. If he'd been holding a real knife, he would have cut open her jugular on sheer principle alone.

But he wasn't holding a knife, and her frantic thrashing about forced him to abandon holding her still. Throwing aside the useless piece of metal and nails, Prey jumped over the fallen timber off cuts and darted out of the line of sight as there was a call from the door.

"Who's in here? Who was shouting?"

"Me me! It's me Sea Shores, help me. Help!"

'*Dammit*.' Prey hared off between the packed shelves, mind racing. That was not how he'd intended for things to go. He couldn't have predicted the mare being such a suicidal fool. And now he'd lost both his prisoner and his excuse to Luna.

"Get me down, quickly. Garrow's older sister's in here. She'll kill us all!"

"Garrow doesn't have a sister."

"Then it's some other mad griffin! Get me down-"

"What griffin? There was no griffin."

"Get me down! I'm not lying-"

"There was no griffin. You were caught by a sheep filly, I saw her."

Prey cursed silently. He'd been spotted before he managed to get away. Now they knew he was trapped in here with them.

"What?" Came Sea Shores disbelieving shout of outrage. Prey knew how quickly fear turned to anger. Terror for your life flew into rage as the tables flipped before the body and mind could keep up. "Let me down, I'm going to get that, that, that, graah!"

Prey didn't know who the pony was who'd come to help Sea Shores was, but he would have to proceed as if they were a unicorn. His heart raced, but it didn't do anything to speed his aching legs. But this was perhaps the one place where speed wouldn't matter.

The storeroom was packed, having served as a dumping ground for a lot of old parts and spare bits for years. Shelving ran everywhere laden with bundles of junk. Plenty of places to hide. But the unicorn might have some way of locating him magically.

'Damn it, why did she have to be a brave one?'

Now he would have to fight. Prey didn't want to fight. He didn't want to die any more than Sea Shores had.

Prey skidded to a halt, almost over balancing as he came to a huge set of double metal doors set into the floor. If he'd run over the top, the echoes would have given him away. Piles of junk and shelves blocked him in on each side. Prey turned around to start back, but he saw a lantern light coming up the isles. He cursed again. The only way to go was forwards.

Stepping lightly, Prey started to hurry across the shutter doors, metal cold and thick under his hoof. More odds and ends had been scattered across the surface, showing it hadn't been opened in years. He glanced up. Above him, a hook dangled on a pulley in the gloom. It must have been used at some point in history to hoist things up from the lower floor into the storeroom.

Prey's eyes darted across the ceiling, tracking the pulley back down to where a disused looking box with levers sat. If that was there, then the controls for the metal doors must be there too, right?

Prey ran as fast and as silently as he could towards it. He jumped onto a barrel, then sprang off onto a stack of boxes, then over the ring of junk blocking off the junction box, almost catching his ear on a nail.

He reared back on his hind hooves, trying to find labels for the levers. If he could drop open the doors as the two ponies were crossing, then it would solve his problem. Failing that, it would still separate him from them across the gap.

'Come on come on, which one is it?'

"...find her. In here somewhere..."

"...brought in by the Night Guard...?"

Sea Shores and whoever her rescuer was were arguing. Prey didn't look away from examine the leavers. There weren't any labels. Just obscure pictures which he could barely make out in the dark. Prey's eyes flicked left, right, up, down, 'Where would I logically put the opening lever?'

Prey looked down, and found the other simple lever below the pulley crane's controls. Would it still even work? No choice but to try.

He waited unmoving, hoof braced on the lever. The light was getting closer. Prey listened, he had to time this just right.

"...foal even doing in here? We should..."

"...No. Do what the boss says. I don't want..."

And then the sound that Prey was waiting for. The dull 'Clomp-Clomp' of horseshoes on thick metal.

'Please work.' Prey thought, and threw his weight against the lever.

It did work. The metal doors swung open with a grinding of gears. Very. Slowly.

"Woah! Oh sugar. Get off the floor!" Came Sea Shores shout.

"Back up, back up!" The other neighed.

Apparently, the doors had apparently been designed with a delayed opening safety feature. Of *course* they had, this was a pony built factory. Prey abandoned the lever and prepared to hide. And then a number of unforeseen things happened.

The lever Prey pulled had evidently not just been connected to the opening mechanism in the floor.

Unknown to them all, there had been a second set of sliding metal doors, this one set in the wall to the outside. The pulley crane Prey had seen was on an extending arm could be projected out this

second set of doors to hoist up heavy things from outside, not just from the lower floor. The reason these doors had gone unnoticed was because the wall had been piled floor to ceiling, hiding them behind a second wall of assorted parts. All of which promptly poured out as the doors opened for what was probably the first time this decade.

It was like a rock slide. The chain effect of which also took out most of the closest shelves as it destabilized with a rending crash.

"Aaaahh-!" Sea Shores yell of fear was cut off under the din as the surrounding shelves promptly collapsed on top of her and whomever her companion was.

Prey backed up to the wall as a slew of shelves and tools spilled over and, much like water would've done, took the path of least resistance and poured down the newly opened hole in the floor. Prey covered his ears as the deafening crashing noises went on and on, until finally everything settled.

The noise had been tremendous, and when it abruptly finished so was the sudden silence. It was like for a moment everything had paused to bear witness.

But it was only for that one moment, and it didn't last.

Everything started to happen again, all at once and all way too fast. Prey's eyes were locked onto one thing and one thing only, out through the newly open doors in the wall. His breath hitched in his throat and his legs seemed to have been frozen.

Some one, or rather somepony, was screaming. It was muffled under all the shelves that had fallen on top them. Male, not Sea Shores. There were no screams to indicate she'd survived. The light they'd carried was also gone. But there was another source of light.

Out in the night, the other lumber yard building was illuminated in flickering orange light. Flames licked from the windows of the entire ground floor. Fire.

'No no no, how did it get this big? This wasn't what I was aiming

for.' Prey thought, feeling the wind whip a wash of heat across his face.

Prey had thought he was prepared. He'd been the one to place the runic array after all. Starting a fire was part of the plan. But only as a distraction. The salt dealers were supposed to spend so much time trying to deal with the fire on top of everything else, that they'd forget about him and his one prisoner. Garrow had already proven he was not above sacrificing his underlings if they were inconvenient, so he wouldn't wait around to check if one of them didn't get out safely.

But Prey hadn't meant for the fire to grow this big. He was no fool. He knew how easily fire could spread, especially in someplace like a lumber yard.

But he'd accounted for that. The old beams he'd set the crystal on hadn't been near anything else flammable. Then how had it spread?

The fire was going to bring the Night Guard, the Royal Guard, the weather teams, the fire brigade, everybody.

"Fire." Prey repeated numbly. There was no smoke blowing this way, not yet anyway. But he hardly noticed. He was still fixated on the increasing blaze. Inside, he was back cowering under the bush, watching the flames rise in the night.

It was unfortunate that Prey also failed to notice the other thing until it was too late.

Naturally, all the salt workers were panicking. They'd congregated outside, and the pegasi were in the air, trying to get someone out from the second floor of the burning building by the look of it. One unicorn who knew some sort of water spell was ineffectively trying to help.

And naturally, when the doors had open and everything had fallen out with enough noise to wake the dead, they'd all stopped in shock to look. Some of the pegasi were flying on level with the now open doors, and could look into the storeroom unimpeded.

Too late did Prey spot the hovering forms in the air, fresh from their ambush and killing of the three thestral Night Guards. And they'd spotted the lamb standing there at the edge of the lip. One of the dumbly hovering pegasi turned out to not be a pegasus but a griffin.

Garrow's bright eyes met Prey's, and it seemed to Prey that he saw the base need to kill him reflected there, even across the distance.

Prey didn't know how the griffin knew the fire was his fault, or how Garrow had somehow zeroed in on him, but Prey knew that Garrow knew. Prey saw it all in a moment.

The griffin yanked the crossbow off his back and brought it up. The bolt went above Prey's head somewhere, he didn't see exactly where. He was already running back into the heart of the demolished storeroom to find cover.

Prey leapt over a pile of splinters that had once been a crate and jumped off an overturned jumble of tools, slipping and sliding as he jumped and crawled over the collapsed shelves.

Prey only had two goals in his mind. 'Get away from the griffin without falling down the hole', and, 'Get away from the fire'.

And it didn't matter if the fire was in the opposite building. It was the smoke that killed you.

Dust and splinters caught in his wool. Prey glanced back. The griffin along with three pegasi trailing him had just flown in through the open metal doors.

"I want to be eating her kidneyz' before the night is old!" Garrow screeched, an angry, twisted, eager grin affixed to his beak.

Prey ran faster, heedless of the dangers of tripping or falling. That was secondary to the danger swooping in behind him with talons outstretched. Prey had to reach the door, now!

The door was ahead of him, jammed open by fallen detritus. His eye's were streaming as he panted for breath. With his head start, he was almost there. But the beat of wings was almost upon. Prey

ran up a part fallen shelf like a ramp and leapt.

He balled himself up midair and sailed through.

Prey rolled into the opposite wall in a mess of legs, not knowing up from down for a moment. The door frame wasn't wide enough, and the griffin and pegasi had to pull up short or break their wings.

"Let me through idiotz'!" Garrow cawed, beating his wings in the face of a pegasus who was in his way. Prey jumped to his hooves, or more accurately staggered, yelping as his weight came down on his leg. He didn't even know when in the last thirty seconds he'd hurt it.

Prey gave the open storeroom door one frightened glance before he started running again, racing down the corridor towards where he knew the stairs lay.

Behind him, Prey heard the sound of claws digging into floor boards as Garrow exited the storeroom at speed, and felt those bright eyes lock onto the back of his neck. He didn't dare look back in case he tripped. Garrow had already fired the crossbow he carried, and it would take him a second to take another one from the other pegasi and aim. Prey had about two seconds to get around the corner.

Prey heard a faint whistling noise, of something tumbling through the air. On instinct alone he jumped right, sacrificing his speed to dodge. A bolas whipped past where he'd been a breath before, skimmed off the floor and clattered into the wall in a tangle of weights and cord. It was the weapon of a hunter, made to snare escaping prey.

Prey was running again, it hadn't been consciously decided. But Garrow had already whipped out another bolas from off his belt, and reared up on his hind paws to throw it.

Throwing something for a griffin was a completely different exercise to a equine throwing something. A non-unicorn pony didn't have the right means to grip an object to give it any speed or accuracy. The better bet was to buck something at your intended target instead, but that was very difficult to get accurate.

Griffins had different appendages from equines. Their claws allowed them to grip objects and release them at the height of their swing. Their front legs gave them a greater range of motion, to rear up and swivel to put their whole lower bodies behind the throw.

All of this added up to Garrow's bolas spinning through the air directly on target and faster than Prey could dodge.

Prey felt the cords impact his legs, the shaped weights cracked sharply against his shins. Prey's legs suddenly stopped running as they were supposed to as the bolas tripped him up.

Prey'd been going too fast to stop, so when his legs no longer came forwards as they were supposed to, his face went down instead. With a yelp, Prey barely managed to twist with the fall, meaning he only bruised his whole shoulder instead of face planting and breaking his muzzle.

'Come on come on!' Prey pulled frantically at the cords and weights tangled about his legs.

His head shot up, eyes wide as he picked out the 'click' over the rest of the noise of ponies neighing and wings flapping.

From down the corridor, Garrow had wrenched a crossbow off one of the three pegasi, and was now taking careful aim at Prey.

Prey's world shrank to only include the crossbow and the dancing, grinning, eyes behind it. Prey didn't feel the tears immediately forming in his eyes. His injuries and exhaustion didn't exist. All that mattered was that he was about to die. Prey shouted something. Probably begging; "No please don't shoot me!"

His plea did not affect Garrow in the least. The griffin pulled up against the trigger. The crossbow jerked and fired.

Prey didn't dodge. He couldn't. But someone else yanked him to the side.

*Sh*wwwick*-* Thunk*

The arrow embedded itself in the floor past where Prey had been.

Garrow screeched in aggravation, "Interference!"

Prey blinked, finally realising he'd just been saved. He looked up. Crimson glanced down at Prey, with his familiar blank expression and tufted ears. Then Crimson blinked, and now his yellow eyes were fixed on the griffin and his company.

"You saved my life." Prey stated dumbly. No one had ever done that. It didn't even occur to him that Crimson should be dead, and not standing here saving his life.

"Hurry and get free." Crimson ordered, never breaking eye contact with Garrow. The griffin tossed the empty crossbow he was holding aside in disgust and eyed Crimson right back. The three pegasi behind Garrow seemed frozen, no idea what they should be doing.

"You saved my life." Prey repeated, still blinking up at Crimson. Not once during his whole time in the Resistance had anyone ever protected him.

'And I abandoned Crimson.'

"Get yourself free." Crimson repeated, more urgent, wings spread in a combative stance. Prey spotted splinters in his feathers.

Prey finally snapped himself from his shock at seeing Crimson alive and started kicking at the bolas tangling his legs. No time to ask how Crimson was still alive.

Garrow spat on the ground, "Bah. You only brought one and think to stop uz', yez'? You iz' a fool." He said, tossing off his cloak in a swirl and reaching for another bolas packed into a pouch on his belt.

A jarringly loud grinding noise travelled out from the open door behind Garrow. It was the sound of many panes of glass popping and the deep *__Whump__* of flames leaping up that made even the dust motes in the air seem to shiver.

It was a sound that conveyed a danger far too close to them all for comfort.

Everyone heard it, and they couldn't all help but pause. They were instinctively waiting for the other horseshoe to drop even if they knew that it was the opposite factory building on fire, not theirs.

Garrow's eye's narrowed, and now there was a separate fire burning in his eyes, a fire kindled by anger and fresh resolve.

"Change of planz' my friendz'." He growled. He turned and grabbed the pegasi and shoved them ahead of him, "You three deal with thiz' guard. I am getting the little sheep."

The pegasi were too scared of the griffin to refuse. So with wide eyed looks at each other, the lumber yard outside catching fire, Garrow behind them and the Night Guard in front of them, they found their courage from somewhere and with a yell to bolster themselves, charged.

Crimson changed stance and braced himself.

Prey knew Crimson was skilled, but unarmed, three on one, in a straight fight? Crimson was going to lose. The Night Guard pegasus may be the one wearing the armour, but his three rapidly approaching opponents were the ones wielding the weapons, and all of them were driven by desperation.

'Why hasn't he run away?' Prey thought as he feverishly struggled to get the last of the bolas untangled from his leg. That's what Prey would've done. Flee, find a better position, a bottle neck, fight them one at a time.

It occurred to Prey in a flash that Crimson wasn't running because Prey couldn't run. He was defending Prey.

'Why? Why is he trying to save me? Why did he save me?' Prey thought, even as he kicked off the last cord and leapt to his hooves. Right then the first attacking stallion arrived.

The pegasus came in swinging for all he was worth with his cudgel. Crimson neatly side stepped and caught the stallion across the face with a wing strike, almost knocking the cudgel from his jaws. Crimson went to follow up with another strike to the throat, but the

other two attacking pegasi waded in.

One had another club, and the second a hooked hoof knife looped over his fore leg. Crimson threw some more quick, conservative blows, keeping the pegasi at bay, but he couldn't focus on either of them. The first stallion recovered from the blow and joined in, the three of them crowding Crimson, shouting and grunting.

Crimson couldn't commit to counterattacking one without exposing himself to the other two. He didn't have the means of dealing a decisive blow in retaliation without a weapon of his own. Prey saw the grim set of his jaw and knew that Crimson also knew the bad position he was in, and Garrow hadn't even joined the fight yet. Because the griffin was coming solely for Prey, just like he'd said.

The three pegasi forced Crimson back down the corridor as they continued swinging away, and he had no choice but to give ground.

Garrow stalked forwards as his underlings dealt with Crimson, moving exactly like the predator he was, closing in on some cornered rabbit.

Prey felt the open space of the side corridor behind him, begging him to flee down it. But if he did that, he would be leaving Crimson behind to fend off the three pegasi by himself. Again. After Crimson had just saved his life.

'I didn't ask him to save my life.'

Yet Crimson had done it.

'This is crazy.'

Prey should just run.

'I can't help fight off three armed ponies.'

Unless he tried to break their minds. Maybe he could do that. Run away from the griffin and into the fight. Get in amongst them and close enough to lay a hoof. The griffin wouldn't expect him to do that. Garrow still had the curled up bolas he'd pulled out clasped in his claw, just waiting for Prey to turn his back and run.

Prey could stay, throw in his lot with Crimson and take his chances fighting alongside the pegasus.

Prey turned and fled. Again.

He ran away again, leaving Crimson behind to fend for himself. There was a crow of satisfaction from Garrow as Prey broke and ran, just like the griffin had expected him to, and then the whistle of the bolas in flight behind him.

But Prey was a coward, so he knew what happened when you ran away from an armed enemy. He was already tossing what he'd grabbed up off the floor over his shoulder before he head the whistle.

The spinning bolas met the hastily tossed bolas by Prey, the one he'd just disentangled from his legs. The first one's momentum was killed as it hit the second and both skittered to the floor. Garrow's caw of triumph turned into one of anger.

Prey didn't look back, but he hard the sound of claws as Garrow sprang after him.

"Prey!" Crimson shouted.

Shame burned his face, but Prey didn't look back. He could only look out for himself. 'I'm sorry Crimson. I don't want to die.'

Prey fled, and left Crimson behind. Again. And the griffin chased him.

Garrow was fast. Much faster than Prey. It was obvious what the outcome would be if the chase continued for any length of time. But Prey could hardly stop and fight the griffin. Prey didn't want to die. He was exhausted, but the fear of having his guts torn out by those sharp claws lent him energy he hadn't know he possessed.

Prey skidded round the corner, raced down another length of corridor crowded with noticeboards, saw the flickering orange light through the windows, and reached the flight of stairs at the opposite end.

Prey's weak, pathetic, traitorous eyes began to cry at the sight of the rapidly approaching stairs. Stairs made for adults. He was so tired, he didn't think he could out run Garrow trying to ascend those stairs. 'Weak, pathetic, crybaby runt.' But he didn't want to die. He would have to climb them and climb them faster than the griffin. Garrow was right on his tail. At any second Prey expected to feel talons slash at his ankles.

Prey somehow leapt the first three stairs, and started bounding up them. His lungs sucked for air, his chest burned, his legs hurt, and fear chased him.

"Why run? Catch you in the end!" Garrow crowed behind him, shockingly close.

Prey reached the third floor before he was ready, his burning legs still expecting to push for the next step but finding no step and the ground flat instead. He almost fell, righted himself at the last second.

He needed somewhere to hide, something to dodge around, some hole to slip down! He shouldn't have run away. He should've stayed with Crimson. He had no way out of the factory from up here. The griffin could fly. He could not. Coming up here was a mistake. He was going to get killed.

A door, half open, Prey felt his heart jump. He didn't know what lay inside it, and he didn't care. He urged his legs to make one last mad dash. They almost didn't obey, his traitorous runt body felt so weak and useless.

But somehow he still made it, yanking the door shut behind him as he shot inside, but that wouldn't help him. He had no way of locking or blocking it. All he'd done was buy himself two seconds while outside Garrow dug in his claws to stop himself.

Prey frantically looked around the room, panting for air. Another storeroom. Dark. Much smaller. Also packed full of boxes and tools. No exits. Not as dark as he'd first thought. There was a large window, dust smeared. Fire light from the rising blaze shone through.

'Hide.' Was what Prey thought.

Five seconds. Ten seconds. Still no Garrow opening the door.

'What's taking him so long?' Prey thought in fear, trying to stifle his gasps for air. It was torture. Was he purposefully dragging this out because he knew Prey had no where to go?

Finally the griffin pulled open the door, and from the crack between the boxes of his hiding place, Prey saw why he'd delayed. Garrow had taken the time to stop and reload his crossbow. Prey would've held his breath if he were able to, but his body was still desperately trying to recover from running away. All he could do was cover his mouth, forcing his breaths to come through his nose.

Standing in the open door way, Garrow surveyed the room, eyes glittering in the dark.

"Well now, thiz' iz' no good iz' it?" Garrow called. He didn't even look winded. Carefully, the griffin placed the crossbow on the floor where he could easily grab it, and reached into the satchel slung over his left hip.

The griffin pulled out a sealed glass vial the half the size of his fist, and gave it a vigorous shake. A yellow glow spilled out from between the griffin's claws as it was shaken, the light pushing back the gloom.

"There now, that iz' much better, yez'?" Garrow said, gripping the glowing vial in the crook of one wing and picking the crossbow back up.

Prey shrank back further in his hiding place, not letting the glow reflect in his eyes and give himself away.

"Come out little sheep. I iz' no going to hurt you too badly. I want you to be my friend." Garrow called, stepping in and firmly closing the door behind him. Prey didn't make a sound.

"You think I am lying, yez'? You think, 'Oh, but boss Garrow, I iz' just a little sheep. You iz' going to pull my lungz' out between my ribz' and crush my hoovez' with a sledge hammer, yez'?" Garrow

asked, bright eyes never ceasing to scan the room. "You iz' smart friend. You would be right." He announced brightly.

"Sadly I do not have time for that. Would take too long." Garrow said, sounding genuinely regretful, "And I need you to be alive. Be my hostage, yez'? So come out and I will not kill you. Promise. Sound fair, yez'?"

Prey didn't believe him for even a fraction of a second.

Garrow growled and lost some of his friendly smile when nothing happened, "Fine. There iz' more than one way to scale a fish."

Garrow hefted the crossbow in his sharp talons and began moving into the room. However he hadn't gone two steps when he stopped. His eyes lit up with mirthful light and his smile returned.

"I iz' just having a wonderful idea!"

Prey's stomach turned over at the horrible savagery that had just manifest itself in the griffin's eyes.

Garrow plunged an arm into his bag, and pulled out another vial. He held it up, tilting it so the liquid inside caught the glow coming from his light. The colour of the orange liquid mingled with the glow of fire coming in through the window, making it glisten and sparkle like blood.

"Unicorn magic really is a wonderful thing, iz' it not?" Garrow commented quietly, then turned and hurled the vial over the boxes into the corner. Whipping out another vial and then another, he threw them after the first, almost too fast for Prey to track.

The sound of shattering glass, then the soft, *Whuff* of a flame catching alight, followed immediately by fire light and dancing shadows rising against the walls.

'He's trying and burn me alive.' Prey thought in horror. The idea must appeal to the griffin. Prey had started a fire, and now Garrow was getting even. How they griffin knew it'd been him, Prey would never know.

Turning, Garrow snapped a padlock into place on the door's bolt, Prey hadn't even seen when he'd gotten it out of his satchel.

'Where's the key?' Was Prey's immediate concern. He didn't see a key. Every padlock needed a key. So where was the key?!

It wasn't a padlock Prey had ever seen. It had a dial, but no key. Then he lost sight of the lock as Garrow's wing blocked his view, but he distinctly heard the whizzing click as Garrow spun the dial and finally figured out how this padlock worked. What was the griffin doing? Now they were both locked in here.

Garrow casually raised the crossbow, aimed, and fired, but he hadn't discovered Prey. His target was something else. The bolt shattered the dusty window, and glass tumbled out into the night. The sound of rising fire outside mixed with the shouts of far off ponies became clearly audible as the tinkling sound of breaking glass ended.

The fire inside was quickly starting to rise too, as it found an abundance of dry food to fuel its hunger.

"Nowhere to go now small sheep. Only way out of here if you do not want to burn iz' to fly out with me. You understand, yez'?" Garrow called, slowly stalking down the narrow isle towards the now open window. He passed within two hooves of Prey's hiding spot, but didn't even glance in his direction.

He didn't need to. The room was burning and the door was locked. Only Garrow knew the code for the padlock, and the only other exit, the broken window, was only one the griffin could utilise.

Garrow continued to speak as he went, "I am in a bit of a hurry, you understand, yez'? The fire, the Guardz', moving onto better hunting groundz', all that. However, a hostage to make sure I can safely wave goodbye to the Guardz' would be nice. With the big fire, they are certainly coming. Children make the best hostagez', perfect size to carry on the fly."

Garrow stopped beside the smashed out window, the fire gradually spreading from its original corner. Its light danced in his eyes.

"Iz' good, all good, yez'? But I am in a bit of a hurry. I am busy griffin. come out now, or else I will be leaving without you. Iz' sad, I know. But needz' must and time iz' money." Garrow said, shrugging apologetically, but his eyes only sparkled all the brighter if that were possible.

Surrender and be my hostage, or stay in here and burn to death is what Garrow was saying.

"I iz' making you good offer here. Fire, not nice way to go, take it from me. In fact, I think I should be charging you for my generouz' offer. But I iz' not without charity. So I tell you what..." Garrow rubbed his chin, faux considering.

"One time special offer for ride out of here and not leaving you to roast like tender fish fillet. You made so much trouble for me, but itz' all water under the bridge. Final price for a ticket, only two eyez'. Very fair, yez?" He waggled two claws in the air.

"Hostagez' don't need eyez' to live." Garrow grinned, like an open wound.

Garrow planned to pluck his eyes out.

Stay and burn in here, or be Garrow's hostage and have his eyes ripped out.

Some choice.

'No, not happening. Not me, not now, not ever.' Prey refused. But how was he supposed to get out of this?

Talking his way out of this wouldn't work. Garrow was a murderer, there was no conceivable way he could make this worse for himself if he did end up getting caught by the Guard. As such, there was no incentive for him not to torture his hostage, Prey. It made a twisted kind of sense. Prey would be a much more docile hostage if he couldn't see anymore.

The griffin was on a time limit. Prey could either try waiting until he flew off and take his chances with opening the padlock, or he could come out now and try to fight Garrow.

Garrow began counting down, "Ten, nine, eight, z'even, z'ix, five-"

The flap of Prey's box opened and he stepped out. Dust and grime stained his wool, small scrapes and cuts trailed over his legs and body. Prey's head was hanging, and his drooping ears brushed the floor. He was shivering. It had nothing to do with any form of cold.

"Aha! I knew you waz' a wise hatchling. Come here." Garrow ordered.

Prey felt the warmth of the fire on the side of his face. He didn't dare raise his head to look. The ceiling of the room was filling with smoke, and it was getting sucked towards the broken window, the opening fuelling the blaze with fresh air.

In less than a minute, the smoke would grow so thick that it would reach all the way down to the floor. It wasn't the fire that killed you. 'All it takes is one or two breaths.'

Prey started shuffling towards Garrow and the window. "Good, good, you make good choice. Very brave." Garrow mocked. "Don't worry, this will only hurt...lotz'! But don't fret, yez'? Blindnezz' iz' only permanent."

Garrow's laughing face morphed into that of Torment's. Garrow could've been her reincarnation they were so alike in that moment, the same cruelty shining out of their bright, bright, eyes.

"What's the code for the lock?" Prey asked, exhausted voice flat.

"Iz' no concern of yourz'." Garrow dismissed, the talons on his right claw curling and uncurling in anticipation.

'-code does not matter. Need to hurry and fly away, but make time for taking out eyes-'

"What's the code?" Prey tried again, feeling desperation claw at the back of his throat.

Garrow didn't even answer this time, just grinning wider as he knew Prey was; '-just trying to buy a few more precious seconds of sight. Fighting off the inevitable. Oh it is so wonderful!-'

The griffin was crazy. Completely crazy. He didn't even think about the answer to Prey's question, not even subconsciously, because it did not feature into the future Garrow foresaw. The only thing which mattered to Garrow in the whole world was what Garrow wanted.

Behind Prey, the fire was picking up speed as its appetite grew. And then something burst with a loud '*cr*a**ck**'.

Both Prey and Garrow turned to looked. More 'cracks' and things popping, then a loud explosion. Physically it was small, but it didn't need to be big to be loud. Sparks showered from mini explosion, spreading.

Evidently it wasn't just old tools stored in here.

Garrow stopped grinning. Prey knew what was going to happen next. No more stalling, the griffin wasn't going to waste anymore time in here with potentially explosive substances. Prey tensed.

Garrow's claw shot out, a fraction a a second after Prey raised his foreleg to cover his eyes. He'd heard the moment the griffin decided to strike, but the most he could do in response to Garrow's speed was raise a leg to take the blow instead.

Prey let out a shriek as the two claws meant for his eyes sunk into leg instead. The pain was sudden and savage, but he'd braced himself for this.

Prey's hoof touched against the griffin's claw. The runes activated. And something terrible happened to the both of them.

They were ripped out of the waking world and into an ashen one filled by a burnt forest.

Garrow only had time to think one coherent thing before a hungry hole of thought opened up; 'What-?'

Then the mouth began to suck, inhaling everything and Garrow was lost to screaming as his mind was stripped into ribbons, and sucked

down the hole. It was wordless screaming, and there was nothing like it in the waking world. There is no physical sound to hear when a mind is stripped away. But inside the mindscape, you could *feel* it instead.

Soon, Prey's own mental wails of pain rose to join Garrow's, but of an entirely different sort.

Garrow screamed as his mind was drained away. Prey as the griffin's drained into his.

Prey had not wanted to do this. This was not breaking a mind, or conquering it, but a third option. Absorbing it.

Breaking a mind was simple for Prey. You did not go into it, you merely shattered it from the outside, like smashing an egg with a hammer. Once you did however, that mind was gone forever. There was no getting anything further useful out of it.

Conquering a mind like he'd attempted to do with Night Watcher in Vanhoover, (and failed at), involved overcoming the opposing mind's defences. It was slower, but once you won, you could do whatever you wanted with the conquered mind. It was more akin to cooking up the proverbial egg to eat.

Absorbing a mind was different from both of those options. It was slower than simply breaking it, but much faster than the time required to conquer a mind and trawl through it for the information you wanted. Rougher and far more crude too. It was like eating the egg raw in one go, shell and all.

Prey had only absorbed a mind twice before. The first time with Snake, before he really understood what he was doing. The second time was in desperate self defence against a Border Guard who cornered him, which was before he learnt to simply break minds instead.

The first time had almost killed Prey, and he'd resolved to never do it again. It...hurt. But to save his life he'd done it a second time

against the unfortunate Border Guard. He'd known what to expect the second time around.

The mental pain had almost broken him regardless.

When you absorbed a mind, it became part of you. The person merged with who you were, and you merged with them. Their memory's became your memories, who you were blurred as two people tried to exist within the same body. It would destroy a normal person, utterly shatter them.

The thing that came came out of the other end of such a melding process was often insane, and if they weren't, they were never the same. A third person existed to replace the original two.

For Prey, that outcome was the same as death, because he would no longer be him. He would cease to exist, and someone else would take over his body instead. That outcome was unacceptable.

So he fought.

As Garrow's mind drained into his own, almost crushing Prey under memories and experiences, he fought back. Prey wrestled with Garrow's essence, beating it down and not letting it infect him.

'I am Prey. You are Garrow. I am the original. You are merely a shadow of a dead griffin.' Prey knew what he had to do, he'd experienced this before.

Prey began killing the memories as fast as they became his own, keeping his own mind pure. But even so, there were still fragments of experiences which got through and merged with his own precious memories.

Garrow's first flight, being taught by his father.

They stood on the ledge of sun warmed stone. A breeze ruffled his head feathers.

This was the slope where all the fathers took their chicks for their first flight. Garrow gulped as he looked over the edge. It wasn't a far drop, and the grassed slope was gentle, but still, he did not want to fail. He refused to fail. He wasn't some loser, he was Garrow Stormcrow. He would not fail his dad. His father reached out a wing and gave him a nudge, "You ready for-"

<O>

That memory cut off there, the rest of it destroyed by Prey in time. 'Worthless. Corrupted. Not my memories. Not my own. Not me.' Prey thought.

A voice was screaming that these *were* his memories, that the big griffin with russet feathers smiling down at him was *his* father, but Prey smothered the voice, 'Not me.' He repeated.

<O>

A grave. One of dozens more. Every time the sun set another one seemed to be needed to be dug by weary claws. The Blood Feather Plague had come to their region, stealing in on silent, plague riddled wings.

'Such a patient hunter. So fierce and cruel. A *real* hunter.'

The shallow grave didn't even have a cross. No proper sky pyre like a Stormcrow deserved, the smoke would only spread the plague. A few griffin's stood around him, silently mourning and trying to comfort him. Worthless. They were all so worthless. There was nothing for him here, all these worthless lesser birds and weak taloned weaklings-

<O>

There were others from periods of Garrow's life. Inconsequential. 'Not me.' Prey killed the memories, ignoring other agonised voice screaming at him not to do so. The more memories he destroyed, the weaker the voice became.

<O>

Garrow was laughing in a tavern. Older. He'd left his worthless home village far behind where it belonged. His head was filled with a pleasant buzz and his friend Creecaw was methodically betting on the dice. He kept betting on thirteen. He hadn't won yet, but that was all good. Everything was good. Life was good.

<O>

'Not me.'

None of this was useful to Prey. It needed to die before it overloaded him. He kept going, refusing to stop no matter how much it hurt.

<O>

Garrow angrily slashed a claw at the tree, easily tearing off the weathered bark. Red stained the furrows he left.

Pluck it. Now he was going to have to leave before the sheriff launched another griffin hunt. And he'd just gotten into this frontier town too. He didn't fancy having to fly away in this heat. Why didn't that pony just keep her mouth shut? It was a simple instruction, '*Shut up*', yet they'd been incapable of even that. Nobody ignored his orders.

He'd been forced to take matters into his own claws. Garrow rubbed them together absentmindedly, feeling the slick blood coating them. Still fresh. Ripping her tongue out had been wonderful.

Still, this was a massive drag.

'Perhaps I should go back to Griffonia. Less ponies there...'

<O>

Another memory.

<O>

Cooking for the Low King. Garrow examined colouring of the venison stew critically. 'Hmm, need's another ten minutes to brown.'

He decided. He adjusted the heat.

"Stephan, you iz' keeping an eye on this, yez'?" He called.

Stephan nervously ducked his head, "Yes Garrow." It was obvious Stephan was scared of him. Garrow smiled brightly. Good. That was how things were supposed to be.

A personal chef. It was still surprising how he'd ended up with this job. And what's more, that he was good at it. Really, it'd just been a passing fancy to occupy his time while avoiding the-

<O>

'Not me.'

The memory joined the rest as Prey ruthlessly destroyed it. His mind ached. His whole being seemed to shiver and quake as he in essence destroyed half of himself. 'Doesn't matter. They're not part of me. Not Prey.'

It was coming to an end. Garrow was almost completely gone now, both from Prey's mind and the griffin's own. It was all draining away into the void, the griffin's mental screams were now nothing more than weak mewlings.

Prey was fast coming to the most recent memories from the dying griffin, the last few months of his life. This was what Prey wanted to see. This is why he'd taken the agonising and potentially lethal route of absorbing Garrow's mind instead of just destroying it.

Prey had absorbed Garrow's mind for one reason and one reason only. It was very simple.

As painful and dangerous as this was, it was still much faster than taking the time to conquer Garrow's mind and then trawling through his memories to find the right one.

Prey certainly *could* have conquered Garrow's mind. The griffin was no mind leech, he would've had no idea how to fight Prey off. But still, he would've struggled. Prey knew not to underestimate the will power of someone within their own mind, that's what had lead to

Night Watcher's end after all. This rule was especially true inside the mind of a crazy murderer like Garrow.

Prey was ninety-five percent certain he would still have won, but how long would it have taken? Absorbing was faster, and since this whole process was only happening in Prey's mind at the speed of thought, barely twenty seconds had passed in the physical world.

Garrow hadn't answered Prey's question; "What's the code for the padlock?" So Prey'd had to take matters into his own hooves and absorb the griffin's mind to find the answer. You could even call it efficient, if you didn't count the blistering mental pain.

It was like using a battering ram to crack a walnut, but at least it was fast.

Prey was still stuck in a burning room rapidly filling with smoke. He needed that code and he needed it as of two minutes ago. He didn't have time to be subtle.

And there it was, the code; 'Six, one, six, five, nine.'

It was one of the last memories that had made up Garrow, so a moment after finding it Prey succeeded in disposing of the last of the griffin's memories and hurriedly withdrew from his mindscape.

There would be a price for this. There always was for absorbing a mind, no matter how careful you were to dispose of the excess memories. What effect it had on you was not always clear at the start.

That was a concern for later. Prey had to escape the burning storeroom first.

Prey sucked in a deep breath and opened his eyes. Immediately he began coughing and his eyes watered. The smoke had thickened considerably in only those twenty seconds. Prey shook. He could've died while trapped in his mindscape dealing with Garrow's memories before he even realised.

The griffin's body stood looming over Prey, right talon still outstretched from where Garrow had tried to claw Prey.

But that was it. Just the body. There was nothing in the eyes, no spark of life. The murderer Garrow was dead. The husk that was his body may still have been breathing, but Garrow was already gone.

Through streaming eyes, Prey looked down at where his hoof still connected to the griffin's talon. Spitefulness made Prey spare the body one last moment to give it one final parting order.

'Throw yourself from the window.'

It wasn't an order giving in thought words, because the husk no longer had a mind and couldn't have recognised them. Instead, it was an impulse, a command Prey sent directly into what was left of its cognitive abilities.

The window lip was low, but even that posed a challenge to the husk. It sort of just... Walked into the lip, fragments of broken glass unheeded, and kept going forwards until it overbalanced out into the orange tinted night.

Prey turned as the body passed the tipping point and slid out, the limp tail trailing last.

The husk was of no use to Prey. It couldn't have carried him from the storeroom. It didn't have the memory to walk properly, let alone fly. It would blindly plummet until it splattered all over the ground three stories below. There was no making another Lemon Pink out of it, no matter how much he might've wished to.

'Let's get out of here.' Prey thought, covering his nose against the stinging smoke.

He was exhausted, bruised, and sore. He'd almost died multiple times tonight, he'd left Gloom and Crimson to die, he'd cried, begged, and been terrified.

"But I'm still alive. Still alive." Prey muttered, starting to limp quickly towards the door. He was sweating profusely from the heat.

'Code for the door. Six, one, six, fiv-'

Something hit Prey in the front. Everything flashed yellow and

white and he felt weightless. He couldn't hear.

'What...'s happening?'

His face felt raw. Black danced in his head. Where had his breath gone? Why was the night sky below him?

No wait, that was up, he was outside. He didn't remember getting outside. Why did he feel like he was falling? And where had that explosion blooming out of the shattered window come from?

He was...falling. Prey was falling.

Something in the storeroom had exploded and blown him out the wide open window. He'd blacked out for a moment there.

And now he was falling.

He was three stories up. He'd just ordered Garrow's husk to commit suicide by jumping out this same window. 'I'm falling!'

Prey flailed like a rag doll. He couldn't drag any air into his lungs to scream. He couldn't hear, but he felt the wind tearing at his smouldering wool, furrowing his fur as he fell backwards.

He couldn't see the ground as it came up to meet him, he couldn't twist around, he couldn't do anything. The last thing he would ever see would be the distant stars in the flame lit night sky. Watching him fall to his death. Laughing at him.

'No! Please, I don't want to die. Mama, Fleece. I didn't mean to. I'm sorry I'msoryyI'mSorryI'mSorrySorrysorry-'

Something came up and hit him in the back, and for a split second Prey thought he was dead, that it was the impact with the ground being transmitted to his brain in the moment before he died, and he screamed preemptively. But, where was the pain? He should've broken apart if-

Prey was yanked out of his fall as the forelegs which had caught him snatched him up into an armoured chest plate. His momentum was cut in half, and what little air he'd managed to regain left his

body in a whoosh as gravity dragged it from his lungs.

He couldn't move, he was being clasped to some pony's chest as they fell. No, not fell, they weren't plummeting, they were pulling up at and angle. Prey's hearing returned, and he heard the rush of wind through fluttering feathers as his saviour's wings strained to level them off.

His face was pressed into the chest plate, he couldn't see, but he heard a strained grunt of effort and felt almost blisteringly hot air blast into them as the pony managed to bank above the towering flames of the burning lumber building.

'Lift. The hot air will provide us lift. We won't crash.' Prey's mind scrambled to supply him with facts. Whomever they were began to beat their wings and started to climb, the shouts and orange light dimming as they rose.

Prey was so shocked he was still alive, that someone had saved him, that he wasn't even struggling. It didn't even register that someone was touching him.

'I'm alive. I'm still alive. How? Who saved me?'

Prey could hardly see anything with his face mashed against a chest plate, but he saw a golden band around the foreleg grasping him, less than an inch from his eye. It looked exactly like the ones Luna had placed on him.

It took Prey far longer than it should've to make the connection.

Shame and confusion washed through Prey, 'Crimson.'

Crimson brought them in to land on the unlit roof of the only other three story building, right next to the stair well and roof access door.

It was perhaps a bit faster than Crimson had intended, because Prey spilled out of the pegasus's forelegs as Crimson had to let go of the lamb to brace his landing.

Prey rolled. The roof was gritty and cold against his cheek. He smelt wind, mortar and old brick. His face felt flushed and raw from the heat of the explosion. Prey half pushed himself up on weak legs that trembled. He looked up, and saw Crimson refolding his wings on the edge of the roof, framed by dim fire light.

Ponies were shouting down below. There were other flying shapes wheeling near the blaze. They weren't important. They were just ponies.

"You saved me." Prey said. He hadn't even meant to speak. The words just came out.

Crimson had a bleeding cut across his left wing edge. Aside from that, he didn't look like he'd fought three enemies all at once. He blinked at Prey, "Yes I did."

"But I, you, you saved my life." Prey repeated, searching Crimson's face.

"Would you have preferred that I let you fall? It was very fortunate that I was there when I was. I almost didn't reach you in time." Crimson asked.

"But, I left you behind. I ran away!" Prey exclaimed. He didn't understand.

"What do you mean?"

Prey found he could no longer meet Crimson's eyes. He was familiar with shame, but this burned him. Why was he so ashamed? It had just been simple math. "I left you behind. You and Gloom. I ran away. I didn't go and open the door."

There was a long silence while Prey cringed, "I already knew that." Crimson said, as if it were obvious.

"But you saved my life!" Prey cried, "Why? I left you behind. You saved my life twice. Even after I left you behind. And then I left you behind *again* and you just saved my life *again*. I don't understand. Why?!"

"I wasn't going to let you die. We are on the same side. I won't let anyone die if it is within my power to save them. It's common sense." Crimson said.

"Common sense? But, but, but why? I don't understand. I left you to die. I ran away like the coward I am. You had no obligation to save my life."

Crimson's brow wrinkled, "Obligation? You were going to die. Of course I saved you. There's no debt or score being kept. This isn't some favour that's supposed to be repaid."

"What? But I didn't save you. So why save me?" Prey repeated, completely confused.

Crimson's head jerked back. A rare look of anger flashed across his face, "So you think it would've been within my rights to just let you die? Is that it?" Crimson demanded.

Prey flinched. An unfamiliar feeling began to squirm in his gut in response to upsetting Crimson. Why was that? It was another thing on the rapidly lengthening list of things he didn't understand.

"Well, yes. You didn't have to, so why should you? I didn't save you. You can only look out for yourself in this world. So what reason was there for you to save me? No one's ever done so before." Prey mumbled.

That didn't seem to placate Crimson, "That does not matter. I already know why you didn't try and save us. It's because you were scared, wasn't it? I know it was."

"Yes. I was scared. I ran away." Prey answered, "Gloom is still alive too, then?" He asked belatedly.

"Yes, the Sargent is alive. You left us behind but neither of us died. You were scared, so you ran away. That's what happens in a fight. Everypony feels fear Prey, it's perfectly natural. You were afraid and you fled. But that hardly means you deserve to die." Crimson berated him.

Prey blinked. That was obvious. Of course he didn't deserve to die

just because he was a coward. It was because he was a coward that he was still alive. There was nothing wrong with being a coward.

But that's not why he was confused. What he didn't understand was how someone he abandoned not once, but *twice* tonight, would still choose to save his life. Twice. "But you-"

"You were scared Prey. It happens to everypony. Nopony will hold that against you. I can still see the tear tracks on your cheeks. What I mean is, you... Are you still crying?" Crimson broke off.

Prey blinked and realised that he was. He dashed the water from his eyes, "Stupid, weak, runt body. Don't mind it, I'm just a crybaby." Prey muttered. He was too exhausted to even be angry or embarrassed.

"Are you hurt? Well, I mean, are you seriously hurt? Crimson asked stepping forwards, "I should've checked for that first. Sorry."

"No I'm fine. Well, not fine, but nothing's broken. I think. And I'm not seriously injured. What about you?" Prey hurriedly asked in return as it occurred to him he should probably do so. And he actually cared to hear the answer.

"No. I mean, yes, but no. Same as you, nothing serious. I'll be fine too, I mean. And it's good you aren't crying about that. Good." Crimson was suddenly awkward again. They both looked at each other, feeling unsure.

"The...griffin. He came out of the window first. He is, he didn't fly. That's why I was in the air. I was flying up to the window which he'd fallen from. What happened in there?" Crimson asked, glancing across the fire lit lumber yard to the burning window in question. Fire was pouring out of the storeroom window. It was a bit overshadowed by the growing inferno just next to it, almost the entirety of the first building ablaze by now. They could feel the heat even from up here.

"He, the griffin Garrow, that was his name." Prey spoke jerkily as he tried to force his mind to come up with what he should and shouldn't say.

"He chased me into that storeroom. I hid. He couldn't find me. So he locked the door with a padlock, and started a fire in the corner. He had these vials of something that burned. Then he shot out the window and announced I could either come with him and and be his hostage, or he would leave me in there to burn."

Prey paused as if to catch his breath, but it was really to think about what he should say next. He still didn't know why Crimson had saved him for splattering all over the ground, but lying to keep his abilities secret and his life safe was something second nature and almost comforting in its falseness by now.

"I didn't come out of hiding. Garrow turned to climb out the window. He didn't know it, but I was actually hiding on the shelf above his head. I had found a hammer. I jumped off and smashed him on the back of the head just as he was about to fly out. That's why he fell."

After that fall, the griffin's body should be in far too poor of a state for anyone to confirm or deny Prey's claim.

"I was just about to go and try to smash the lock, when something exploded and threw me out the window too. You know what happened next. You caught me. Thank you." Prey added quietly.

"Do you have any idea what started this other fire?" Crimson asked, staring across at the roiling flames.

"No, not really. My best guess would be those burners they were using to simmer the salt. Knocked one over in their haste to vacate the Lumber Yard probably." Prey said, sighing and letting himself sag back onto the roof, ignoring the dirt. He was too sore and tired keep himself upright any longer, especially on his wounded foreleg. Everything hurt in some way or another. He could hardly think.

"Did you...did you really think I would simply have watched you fall to your death?" Crimson asked abruptly. He looked pained, now uncertain about himself.

Prey almost said that's exactly what he would've done, but the thought of admitting that to Crimson caused him stinging guilt and

shame.

"I...No, that's not what I thought, I know now you would've saved me. That you *did* save me." Prey corrected himself. Silently he added, 'Even if I can't understand why.'

"Oh. Well that is good to hear."

Prey couldn't read Crimson's thoughts, so he didn't know how the pegasus really took that. Crimson's expression was too blank to read at normal times, let alone shrouded in the dark like right now.

After a minute, Crimson said, "I think we should move."

Prey didn't want to. He was so tired. He knew the Guards and everybody else would be wanting explanations, answers, reasons. His head hurt at the mere thought. Oh, wait, no, that was the ringing aftereffects of the explosion. Crimson may have been so forgiving for abandoning them, but would Gloom be the same? What if the Sargent took his grievance up with Luna? Prey was so tired at this point he hardly cared.

He still had no idea what the shame and guilt swirling in his gut was for, or why it was there, or how to get rid of it.

'Why? Why did he save me?' Crimson had told him it was just because he wasn't about to let Prey die. That reason made no sense. Nothing about tonight made any sense.

Prey needed time to think, to work out what had happened.

'Crimson saved your life and you're still alive. That's all that matters.' The small voice in the back of his head kept repeating.

Not just, 'You're still alive', but, 'Crimson saved your life' too.

All Prey ever tried to do was survive. But now there was something else there on his list. That was important somehow.

'Later,' Prey told himself, 'I can think about it later. If I'm still alive by then.'

Prey sighed again and forced his watering eyes open, "Okay, let's move. But down the stairs this time."

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End of Arc II

[[[Bonus Picture - Explosion Thinggy]]]

[image]

Author's Notes:

ART ✨HERE✨ This was very kindly made by GreatBeaverSpace. It's great, seriously, go look at it. I personally love it, and think the picture of Prey is hilarious! Seriously. Go look at it. You won't regret it.

🍏Annnnnd the end of this Arc. Next time, Arc 3! Hope you liked the conclusion to this one. Even had time to knock up a quick picture thinggy to go with it.

Big thank you once again to Sweetolebob18 for all his help.

If you see any mistakes or errors, please point them out. Thanks! 🍎

35.3 Happily Never After the Fall

[Beginning of Arc III]

---[][][]---

The first light of morning was starting to glimmer above the Guard Compound's gate. Prey's eyes felt like they were full of sand and he could scarcely stand he was so tired. Gloom and Crimson were no better.

Somehow, *somehow*, they were finally back at the Palace. Prey would never have believed he would be glad to see the seat of Celestia's power.

Haggard, the three of them stared longingly towards the Palace where their bunk room lay. They were not the only ones.

"Get some sleep everypony." Nighthawk ordered hoarsely, addressing not just them but the rest of the Night Guard standing, or rather drooping, in formation around the compound, like wilted pot plants in smoke blackened armour.

'Don't worry. I intend to.' Prey thought thickly.

Even now, having left the Oak Quarter Lumber Yard far behind, all Prey could smell was smoke.

"Dismissed. Fall out." Nighthawk rasped.

"Com'n guys. Bunk room. Sleep. My bed needs me." Gloom mumbled, taking the first, shambling step forwards. He looked half-dead. Prey and Crimson's gait mirrored his exactly as they staggered after the thestral.

---The Lumber Yard---

Prey had been dreading what Gloom would do to him for running

away once he got down the fire escape stairs. However the Sargent had been so caught up in trying to help organise the fire fighter ponies and answering Nighthawk's questions, that all he'd shown was relief at seeing Prey alive. He'd completely glossed over the fact Prey had left him and Crimson to die. In Gloom's head, Prey had tried to help, but just hadn't been able to unlock the door in time. Therefore, it wasn't Prey's fault, but his own for getting them all into that situation.

Following that, Prey and Crimson had more or less been shoved to the side and forgotten as everybody from everywhere kept arriving.

Trying to contain the inferno before it could spread to the rest of the Lumber Yard was everyones top priority. Prey numbly sat on the gravel, over two hundred yards from the fire but still able to feel its heat, and watched it all.

Scores of weather pegasi had flown above the blaze, dumping rain cloud after rain cloud onto the fire, working in tandem with about three dozen fire fighter unicorns. Some used their magic to conjure or transport water, while others seemed to be somehow siphoning off the fire and/or containing it with shields.

Regardless, the water vaporised before it even got to the flames, and the most the unicorns seemed able to do was keep the fire confined to the one factory building. Even unicorns have a safe limit when dealing with something putting off as much heat and energy as a blaze of this size.

While those ponies had all been hard at work, the Night Guard had gotten on with scouring the Lumber Yard and apprehending as many of the salt workers as they could find.

The Royal Guard were in attendance too, but they didn't have such an active role to play. Actually, the Royal Guard Lieutenant had ended up having a shouting match with Lieutenant Screech, when the thestral had told the pegasus to; "Stop interfering with our work and stay out of our way."

Understandably, in times of crisis, tempers were frayed.

In the end Nighthawk had stepped in and broken it up. The Royal Guards were stationed outside the Lumber Yard to stop any of the thronging mass of curious ponies gathering from getting in, or alternatively, just stop them from panicking. A large number of the spectators did anyway. It still being nighttime hadn't done anything to deter the crowd.

That went on for some hours, the fire still having plenty of fuel left to work its way through the night. But eventually, Nighthawk had gotten around to calling over the ISND and getting their full report.

Gloom had done almost all the talking. He'd told Nighthawk how their sweep had lead to Oyster Pinion's flat, and subsequent deterioration of everything from there.

He explained how he'd taken command after Corporal Humming's wing injury. Then how they'd worked out it was one of the two lumber yards the griffin had fled to, and split up their forces up to cover both. Next, Gloom recounted what they'd found when they began searching, and how they'd been split up even further.

Haltingly, Gloom then asked what had happened to the other three thestral's who'd distracted the salt dealers. Apparently, that was how him and Crimson had escaped the locked room. They'd re-barred the door just in the nick of time, and the salt dealers had apparently lost the courage to try and force an entry.

They'd balked at the last step. Why?

Prey hadn't understood that part. The salt dealers had unicorns. Why would they have been scared? Never mind, he was probably just too tired to properly consider the reasoning.

Anyway, the three thestrals had somehow heard Gloom and Crimson's struggles from all the way outside, and launched a daring attack on the roof to distract the salt dealers.

Gloom and Crimson had taken the opportunity to break down the door with an improvised battering ram and escape as their captors backs were turned.

The three thestrals who's distraction had allowed Gloom and Crimson to escape where the same ones ambushed by Garrow and his crossbow wielding followers, or depending on your terminology, terrified victims. It was hard to know which was which. All the salt workers they'd arrested so far had surrendered without a fight, almost desperately relieved to be captured.

Amazingly, impossibly, and against all odds, the three Night Guards had somehow all survived Garrow's ambush.

All three of them.

"Princess Luna was watching over them tonight." Nighthawk had said.

The three Night Guards had already being rushed to hospital. Whether they would all survive was still unknown, but, Nighthawk confidently stated; "They're Night Guards. If they're not dead yet, they'll pull through."

Then had come the time for Prey and Crimson to give their accounts.

Crimson went first. He recounted how Gloom and he had split up in an attempt to find and rescue Prey, and how he'd actually managed to do just that, which had earned him nods of approval all around.

Crimson further explained that he'd managed to non-lethally defeat all three of the attackers Garrow had thrown at him, something that made Prey gape with disbelief. 'Three on one? How did he manage to pull that off?'

"They lacked training or conviction. And I do not think they really wished to kill me." Crimson said by way of explanation, and left it at that. To him, his presence still standing there said all there was to say on the matter.

After disabling his attackers, via debilitating blows and dislocating limbs, Crimson had tried to locate Prey. The fire had drawn him outside, where upon the body of Garrow had tumbled from the sky

and splattered not ten paces from where he stood by complete chance. He then recounted the tale that Prey had concocted about braining Garrow on the back of the head with a hammer, and the griffin falling out the window before the storeroom exploded.

Everyone present had turned heavy looks on Prey as Crimson recounted Garrow's end, their thoughts both resigned and sympathetic for the lamb's situation. Prey made a show of keeping his eyes on the ground.

"You did what you had to. That griffin was a murderer." Nighthawk finally said to Prey by way of comfort.

The rest of the officers present just nodded uncomfotably, not knowing what else they should could say. '-young innocence lost-', They thought.

None envied Gloom his position as Prey's Sargent, meaning it fell to him to see the lamb through his coming difficulties.

'-later-', Gloom decided, too weary for anything else right now, '-I'll talk to him about it later. Much later-'

'Pathetic. You're all pathetic.' Prey thought as he listened to them quietly mourn for his "loss of innocence". 'It's a bit too late for that.'

However much like Gloom, Prey was too tired to deal with them right now. So he didn't try and hide it, and they decided not to press it while the ISND were obviously all so exhausted. Prey probably would've been far more angry about their looks of pity if he wasn't so drained.

Only Crimson didn't now look at him as if he were somehow... He wasn't sure of what. Perhaps fragile or broken? It was almost enough to make him laugh.

And last but not least, Prey'd had to find the energy and civility to retell his side of events.

Prey was very aware of Gloom with his odd perchent for sometimes spotting lies with his special talent. With that in mind, Prey cleared his paper dry throat and began to speak.

Prey gave them the absolute minimum he felt he could get away with, yet even so, he'd had no choice but to recount his cowardice in running away.

He heard in their thoughts how none of the listeners approved of that, but none of them judged him for it either.

'-still just a lamb-', '-very brave to do as much as he has done already-', '-no trained warrior-', '-so it's not really his fault-', '-and he doesn't need any more guilt right now-'.

Prey had let out a silent breath of relief, hardly able to believe his good fortune. However he held no misconceptions. It would've been very a different verdict if the improbable *hadn't* occurred, and Gloom and Crimson *hadn't* survived. Prey wasn't sure where all this good luck was coming from, but it was bound to run out eventually.

Prey made no mention of having anything to do with the still raging fire, only repeating his vague speculations from earlier that it might've been a knocked over burner. It was mostly true. He really really didn't know how the fire had gotten to this size.

Later, they would find out from the arrested salt workers that when the fire was first discovered, someone had panicked and tried to smother it with a tarpaulin. However all that'd done was set the tarp on fire too, and things had quickly gotten out of hoof from there.

Then had come the point in Prey's retelling where he'd had to give an account of what happened in the store room where he'd (briefly), captured Sea Shores, and what had followed.

Most of the listeners were surprised at Prey's successful capture of one of the salt workers and following attempts to interrogate her. Gloom, Screech, and Nighthawk were not among the surprised number. Maybe Crimson too. Prey couldn't tell.

But then he'd told them of Sea Shores escape when another salt worker turned up to rescue her. He'd had no choice but to further

relate what had happened next, how he'd pulled the lever and the unintended consequences of collapsing the room.

Nighthawk had immediately broken off Prey's explanation to send Night Guards to go dig through the rubble of the collapsed storeroom to rescue the two trapped salt workers.

They all assumed that Prey had simply forgotten about the accident in shock of what'd happened next with Garrow, and didn't hold it against him. It would've been better if he'd told them about the two trapped workers immediately, but it was understandable. That didn't make it right, but anypony, especially a traumatised foal, would've been distracted in Prey's situation.

Sea Shores was nearly dead, crushed under weight of all those shelves and tools and in critical condition. Apparently it hadn't been pretty. She was not concious, looked like she had brain damage from air deprivation, and was likely to still die. Her unicorn companion had survived, but had broken ribs, two broken legs, and had almost suffocated.

However, he was still directly responsible for Sea Shores likely fatal condition, even if it had been a complete accident caused by faulty lumber yard equipment, as well as in self defence.

And now everyone was silently looking at him again with those pained expressions and sorrowful yet judging eyes.

'-that griffin got what was coming to him-', '-but while this mare was an accident-', '-her blood will still be on a foal's hooves when she dies-', '-why? Why is this fair? All the misery Garrow caused and he's still hurting ponies even now-'.

That last, particularly weary and upset sentiment had come from Gloom, his canines grinding audibly as he thought about all the terrible deaths which had occurred. '-rats eating corpses in a cellar-'

Crimson had gone with the Night Guards who'd searched the collapsed storeroom, saying; "I am still fit to help." Now he was

back, and he kept casting unreadable looks over at Prey to match with all the other uncomfortable looks being directed at him. Prey was getting to the point where he felt like screaming until they all shut up their noisy thoughts and left him alone. He was hurting, drained, and exhausted. Just leave him alone!

Mercifully, Nighthawk quickly moved them on, with a lingering look to Gloom that he thought Prey missed. It said; "We will need to talk later."

More hours had passed, and finally the blaze had started to die down as the moon began to sink and morning approached.

The distraught Oak Quarter Lumber Yard owners who'd turned up, still in their night cloths, had been dissuaded from entering and comforted, and also discreetly detained. It was not yet known if they'd been working with Garrow, after all.

There were newspaper reporters shouting questions outside, having somehow recieved the tip off in the middle of the night and gotten their flanks down to the burning lumber yard to try and catch the story while it was still 'hot'. Actually, it wasn't that surprising. The whole of Canterlot could see the fire's glow in the night.

Nighthawk selected a scant hooffull of the least worn down Night Guards he could find, and left them behind as a skeleton squad to work with the Royal Guards in keeping everything under control. Or in all likelihood, just the Royal Guards. The gold plated ponies were more numerous, and definitely better liked than their thestral counterparts.

In exhaustion, the rest of the Night Guard had marched, flown, limped, or shuffled back to Canterlot Palace.

Gloom shoved the bathroom door open and staggered to the nearest sink. Throwing the cold tap on full blast, he stuck his head under it and began gulping down water. Prey and Crimson were not any slower in copying him.

Prey dangled from the sinks rim, the thought of water granting him strength from somewhere to pull himself up, pain be damned. Cold water rushed down his parched throat, and he drank and drank until he had to stop and gasp for air. Then he went right back to drinking.

Prey desperately wished for a shower too. They all stank of smoke, dried sweat, and spent fear. A hot shower might also do something about all the injuries and pains he'd accumulated. However, the siren call for rest came first. It he wasn't careful, he would fall asleep right here and now and drown in the sink. Prey certainly felt like it might be possible.

Gloom staggered out of the bathroom and into the bunk room. *Their* bunk room. At some point, it had began to feel like theirs.

Exhausted, and far too tired to care about anything, Gloom discarded as much of his armour as he could and collapsed into a bed, not necessarily his. In his muddled state, Gloom likely wouldn't have cared if it was Captain Shining Armour's.

He was burnt out. They all where. They'd barely slept in three days and almost died numerous times. They'd witnessed murders, searched high and low, and it had all culminated in the Oak Quarter Lumber Yard tonight. Or rather, last night.

But it was finally over. Garrow had been stopped. The murderer was no more.

Despite everything, Gloom gave a grim sort of smile into his pillow as he slipped into blissful unconsciousness, '-it's over...The murderer was brought to justice. Just as I promised... I can now rest easy-'

A brief pang of worry for Prey and Crimson passed across Gloom's mind. Shouldn't he see them to bed first, no matter how childish that sounded?

'-....it'll be fine. Aren't going to get lost getting to the bunk room...so tired...tomorrow...deal tomorrow...-'

Prey stood in the bunk room doorway, and watched Gloom drifted

off.

His own bunk was calling him, smell and dirt notwithstanding. It physically pained him to do so, but Prey turned himself away from its siren call. Not yet. His night, day, morning, whatever, wasn't done yet.

Prey limped back towards the bathroom. Every single one of his legs hurt in new and interesting ways, but he was most heavily favouring his right foreleg, the one which Garrow had stuck two talons in.

Someone had provided the ISND with a first aid kit back at the lumberyard, so Prey'd been able to bandage the wound up. He'd refused any attempts and offers of help from the concerned medics. No way anyone was touching him. He could do it himself.

So now he had a multitude of small bandages and plasters across his body. Just because you won didn't mean you got away unscathed. Victory was rarely clean, and it always came at a cost. Sufficed to say, Prey was still in lots of pain, but nothing serious which he hadn't already survived before.

That didn't make it hurt any less.

Prey had taken inventory of his injuries and assembled a list. It was more extensive than Prey could've wished.

Two talon stabs from Garrow in his right fore legs. Bruised left shoulder, left side, and jaw from various falls. There were also deep purple imprints on his shins, perfectly shaped from the bolas weight impacts. His ears might've stopped ringing, but his face was still raw and singed from the explosion. It was lucky he'd been blasted out the window before the flames had reached him. Even luckier Crimson had caught him.

He also had some fairly raw and wide, if shallow, scrapes across his back from squirming through the wall, which overlayed the whip scars. Prey really hoped those didn't cramp. His cheek, head, and even ears were equally bruised, crushed, and scrapped from the same narrow escape, and Prey hadn't even bothered to count the

number of splinters he'd removed.

And none of that was counting how every muscle was aching from overexertion.

And his mind hurt. Both from the after effects of absorbing Garrow and from the unanswered questions which he couldn't understand.

All in all, not copying Gloom and collapsing into bed felt like one of the hardest things he'd done in the last forty eight hours, which was saying a lot.

'Soon,' Prey promised himself, 'Not yet, but soon.'

As he'd said, he still had something left to do.

Crimson was still in the bathroom, slumped over the porcelain sink. Prey hadn't been the only one who'd bandaged himself up in various places. The cuts on Crimson's wings Prey had noticed earlier had also been stemmed.

The pegasus's shoulders and wings were slumped, and he looked completely despondent, legs braced just to keep him upright at the sink. He wasn't looking in the mirror, but blindly watching the tap run, the endless stream of water gurgling down the drain.

It looked like some misery was weighing the young warrior down, however when his name sounded behind him, Crimson jolted out of thought and raised his head.

Crimson twisted around, and slowly blinked smoke reddened eyes at Prey in tired surprise.

"Prey. Why are you here? I mean, I thought you had already fallen asleep. I am about to go do just that."

The lamb was observing Crimson with an unreadable expression on his bruised face, sooty wool and fur a mess.

"Prey. Is there something wrong?" Crimson prompted tiredly after a

long minute of silence.

Prey didn't respond straight away. Instead, he first lowered himself into a sitting position with a stifled groan, his big blue eyes never leaving Crimson's face.

Those sky blue eyes that could look so innocent, but also so masked. And now looking straight at him, never wavering to the mirror behind him or the surrounding room.

"I have decided," The lamb began in an odd voice, "That there is something I need to do."

Prey'd had a long time to think about things while he sat on the gravel back in the lumber yard, watching the fire blaze.

Crimson, for unknown reasons, had saved his life. Twice. Something no one had even tried to do before. In the Resistance, it had been every griffin, donkey, cow, deer and sheep for himself. They only worked together because it was mutually beneficial to do so, since they knew they couldn't beat the Border Guard alone. But they were still only looking out for themselves when it came down to it.

Bandaging up a wounded comrade was only done so that they might heal and keep on fighting your shared enemy. But going back to rescue a comrade who'd gotten cornered? Never. Only the strong survived. And if someone ever betrayed you? Stick a knife in their back as soon as it was turned.

Trying to help someone else would only get you killed. It was common sense. Simple math.

Your life was always worth more than anyone else's.

But Crimson had saved him. That didn't make sense, no matter how hard Prey thought about it. Ponies preached peace and harmony all the time, but Prey had fought the Border Guard. You only got the offer of peace as long as you didn't provide them any excuse to do otherwise. But Prey had betrayed Crimson first this time, not the other way around, so why...?

Crimson's actions had made Prey suddenly unsure about things, and he didn't know why.

Prey wasn't stupid. He didn't think this feeling was anything as sappy as comradeship, gratitude, sympathy, or long buried morals resurfacing. No, it was something further that he didn't have a name for.

So he'd taken a good long hard look at the ISND and his place within it.

And Prey had realised that no one liked him. This was hardly a surprise. Prey wasn't trying to be liked, and nor did he like Gloom or Crimson. Why should that be a problem?

Suddenly though, it seemed like it might be. Because Crimson had saved his life.

Crimson said saving someone's life was the right thing to do, and there was no deeper motive involved. But Prey now felt he was indebted to Crimson.

Crimson had saved his life when no one else would have.

Whatever feeling this was, it was alien to Prey, because normally the concept of someone thinking he owed them would've made Prey furious. Or made him burst out laughing.

'Owe someone? Balance? Fairness? The world doesn't work like that.'

There were only two people in the whole world Prey had ever owed. Or rather, that *Gossamer* had owed, and owed was far too insignificant of a word for his debt to them. But they were both dead and he could never repay it.

Yet now... Yet now he owed Crimson. He'd left Crimson to die, and Crimson had saved his life, and even told Prey that he would always save Prey's life if it happened again.

'He's insane.' Prey thought, 'Crimson knows better than most how unfair this world is. He's not some naive child, nor some good

samaritan. He's a warrior, war is his trade, but still he said that.'

Even if someone else were to come along and save Prey's life again right this moment, Prey wouldn't feel indebted to them. That was their choice to save him, and he wouldn't owe them. But Crimson was somehow different.

The red pegasus exile had depths that Prey hadn't considered before. It was like looking down a rabbit hole and finding a sink hole the size of a house.

Prey realised in retrospect he actually know very little about Crimson.

So that's why Prey had come into the bathroom to speak with Crimson.

"Is this about the griffin? Or that, I mean the mare Sea Shores?" Crimson asked him.

Prey blinked and shook his head, recalling his wandering mind to the present.

"No, it has nothing to do with that," Prey cleared his throat and sat up straighter, "You saved my life. Twice. Even after I ran away. Twice."

Prey quickly held up his bandaged foreleg to forestall Crimson 's protests, "Even if I don't understand why you did it, you still did. And I owe you."

Crimson grimaced, "You've got it wrong Prey. Life isn't something to be weighed on a scale, or bought and exchanged."

"I'm not talking about that Crimson. You were right. There is no debt or something that I need to repay. It's not about that at all. But I still *owe* you."

"I do not want-"

"It doesn't matter what you want. I owe you. Please just, just, listen." Prey swallowed, and then spoke in a high, clear voice to make sure he was properly understood. What he had to say was simple and short.

"From now on, there are only two things that I, Prey, will not do for you Crimson Trace."

Crimson seemed at a loss for what to say. At least he wasn't dismissing Prey outright as if he were a child making promises. Then again, after all they'd seen and done in this last week, Crimson would've been a fool to think of Prey as only a child.

However despite that, Crimson still shook his head, "Now it's me who doesn't understand. We are both squad mates in the service of Princess Luna. None of this is needed, so why are you doing it, Prey?"

"I don't rightly know," Prey admitted, "But I meant every word. There are only two things I will not do for you if you ask them of me."

Crimson pondered for a minute, "I don't want this to...No, what I mean is, we are both in the same squad. We both follow Sargent Gloom's orders. This won't change anything within our squad, will it? Because I don't want it to."

"Okay." Prey agreed.

Crimson seemed relieved. Then he frowned, "Are you only agreeing because you just said you would?"

Prey blinked, "Mostly definitely yes. Not entirely though, because I didn't want things to change anyhow. About an eighty to twenty split. However I would do it anyways because you asked."

Crimson had obviously not been expecting a breakdown for an answer. It made his wings shuffle uncomfortably, "Does this mean, any question I ask you, you will answer honestly no matter what?"

"As long as it is not one of those two things I mentioned, then yes." Prey said, looking Crimson dead in the eye and not breaking the eye

contact off like he'd always done before.

Crimson looked back, perhaps searching for someone thing. An explanation maybe. "If I asked what those two things are, will you tell me?"

"Yes."

Gloom waited. Prey waited. They looked at each other. "What are they?" Crimson finally realised he had to ask.

Ashamed, Prey grimaced, making his bruised jaw hurt, "I wouldn't put my life in danger for yours."

That visibly surprised Crimson. "Not even after I saved yours?" He asked, seeming curious instead of offended.

Prey looked away, "No. Not even then. I'm sorry." He added.

"Oh, right. That is... Good? I wouldn't want anyone to sacrifice their life for mine. I shouldn't have asked that actually. Can we forget I asked that?" Crimson asked, wings shuffling about again.

"Okay, sure." Prey said. Crimson didn't seem to mind his agreement this time. His wings had yet to stop fidgeting however.

"And...what is the second item you will not do for me?" Crimson eventually asked, morbidly curious.

"Sorry, but... just don't touch me, okay?" Prey said, mouth twisting wryly.

Crimson blinked slowly, and then of all things, barked a laugh, "Ha! You really are still Prey. Fear not, I won't."

Prey shrugged, still wearing the wry smile, "That would make both of our lives much safer." He agreed, but he meant every word in dead seriousness. But he couldn't help but feel that Crimson wasn't taking his promise as seriously though.

'It doesn't matter. I meant what I said, and I don't forget. Even if Crimson does, I won't.'

Unfortunately, Crimson just had to go and immediately prove Prey wrong in his assumption of taking his promise seriously.

Well, not wrong per say, because the question Crimson asked wasn't asked with the intention of forcing Prey to answer just because he'd promised, but regardless, he asked and Prey had to answer.

Crimson hesitated, but his wing shuffling finally came to an end and he looked squarely at Prey.

"Prey, did you...? The griffin Garrow... Sargent Gloom, he wants to speak with you about, about what...I mean, how do you feel about his death, Prey?"

"Ahhh...That." Prey let out his breath.

How did he answer this? He didn't want this to turn it into the scene from the cellar all over again. Gloom and Crimson hadn't understood. They'd gotten so worked up, and he hadn't understood. It was only thanks due to whatever misunderstanding had happened later that night which'd caused Gloom's anger to dissipate.

Prey knew that while no longer angry at him, Gloom was still chewing on that. Which meant Crimson likely was too, but Prey didn't have the luxury of confirming that, since Crimson's mental walls still held strong. So how to avoid a repeat performance of that mistake?

"You already know I've seen death before..." Prey began slowly, "And now Garrow is dead too. There is nothing I can do about that."

"But you weren't responsible for those deaths before. It is a... terrible, terrible thing to take a life. And you are, I mean, you were not ready. So are you...okay?" Crimson tried asking, uncertain.

Prey was also uncertain. "Yessss...?" He drew his answer out, buying time to try and think. It was a lot harder than it should have been.

What should he say? Crimson shouldn't be worried on his behalf. He owed Crimson, so he didn't want him to be worried. Prey'd killed many people before, so what was two more? But that's not what Crimson wanted to hear, plus telling Crimson that would go

against Prey's first condition.

He wouldn't risk his life for Crimson. And anyone knowing about the Resistance would definitely endanger Prey's life.

"But are you really okay?" Crimson pressed, peering closely to try and see something in Prey's eyes, "Do you actually understand what you've done?"

"I killed Garrow in self defence, and I haven't killed Sea Shores yet-"

"No, stop that Prey. You can't deny it or try to make excuses. Accept it. *You* killed the griffin. You have almost certainly killed her too. Accept it, and don't hide from it. If you can't accept it, it will destroy you Prey. Their blood is on your hooves. Accept it. You have to learn to live with that." Crimson's voice was empty, flat. He went on;

"I know it's not fair. Nothing's fair. You shouldn't have had to do that. You're just a, a, a...A little lamb." Crimson struggled for words.

'You're a bit late with this advice. Sixty two years too late.' Prey thought bitterly. He shrugged.

"Well, as you say, I'm just going to have to accept it, won't I? I'll live. After all, what's the alternative? Die?" The memory of the very first time he killed, the runic traps with Snake on the jungle trail came to him.

"I'll survive. I always have." Prey rubbed at his ear, then quickly put his hoof back down when he realised what he was doing.

"Of course you say it like that. I should've thought of it already. The bodies in the cellar didn't make you break, so why should this have?" Crimson muttered to himself, then sharply shook his head, "No!"

He breathed deeply, "I'm not, I mean, I am probably not the best pony to try and explain this lesson to you, Prey. But that doesn't mean... Listen, Prey, can you promise me this at least?"

"There are only two things I will not do for you." Prey reminded

him reproachfully.

"Not out of any sort of debt! I don't want that." Crimson snapped, "Sorry, I didn't mean to shout. But please promise me you'll let Sargent Gloom help you learn to cope. When you need the help. You will be fine, in time. Even if you don't feel any different now, in the future...."

"You almost make it sound as if you didn't want that griffin dead. Didn't you swear on your fathers blades you would see him dead before the night was out?" Prey asked.

"I did swear," Crimson nodded gravely, "But between having him dead and on your conscience, or alive and imprisoned, I would choose the second."

"Why? To spare my innocence? I'm not naive or sheltered. I know what death is." Prey responded.

"I didn't say that." Crimson said, making that curt flick with his wing that signalled either strong dismissal or objection.

"You saw your father die. Like me I mean. So that's not what I'm saying. But, argh, I do not have the words." Crimson rubbed his deeply bagged eyes in frustration.

Prey waited to see if Crimson had anything more to say. When it became obvious the pegasus had ground to a frustrated halt, Prey simply nodded and said, "Sure, I can promise you that."

Crimson let out a sigh of relief, "Good. Thank you."

Prey merely nodded again. It was an easily promise to make, because he didn't need any help. It cost him nothing to promise, and it kept Crimson happy, which was Prey's goal.

'How strange, to have such a selfless goal in a world where you can only look out for yourself. Who would've thought?'

"Good, I suppose. I mean yes, definitely good. Thank you Prey. I, errr..."

Crimson was abruptly returned to his usual of lack of social grace. He reshuffled his wings into a more conformable position and glanced around.

"I need to sleep now, Prey. I'm very tired. I will get out of your way and let you use the bathroom now," Crimson paused, "...Will you be alright? I mean, do you want me to stay? In here, I mean-"

"Thank you, but I'll be fine." Prey cut him off. It was an effort to hide his irritation at the demeaning attitude, but he did it because he owed Crimson, "Don't worry, I'm not going to break or collapse in the next few seconds. I'll be along to the bunk room in a minute. I just need the toilet."

That probably wasn't the right answer, but hell if Prey knew what was.

"Alright. I will not wait up for you then if you require a few minutes alone to-" Crimson cleared his throat, "Never mind. Luna watch over you this night."

The pegasus trotted to the door, soot still staining his mane and tail. Prey stood aside to let him past with plenty of room, "It's morning. But same to you."

He almost added a smile, but caught himself. Crimson would not take him smiling about anything well right now.

'It would probably just bruise my face even more if I did anyway.' Prey thought, watching Crimson leave through bleary eyes. He was alone in the pristine bathroom, and he felt ready to fall asleep on the hard tiles without complaint. 'Can't. Not done yet.'

Crimson had left the tap on Prey realised, the gurgle of water had faded into the background while they talked.

'Better turn that off.'

Very, *very* reluctantly, Prey trudged over. He looked up at the sink, or as far up as he was willing to risk without either hurting his neck or catching sight of the mirror. He would need to hop to reach the tap. Prey felt all his pains pressing down afresh. His legs did not feel

like they could make even that tiny little jump.

"Can you come in here and turn off this tap?" Prey called out quietly, not turning.

A moment later, a silvery aura surrounded the running tap handle in front of him and shut it off.

Prey minutely turned so he could see Lemon Pink in his periphery. She'd arrived half way though his conversation with Crimson. He'd heard her thoughts through the wall outside the bathroom, hiding behind a veil.

Lemon Pink's long willowy mane was unkempt, "Master, I am sorry." She said without prelude.

Prey frowned, "I told you at our first meeting, you are to call me Prey, not master. Why have you forgotten?"

Lemon blinked, "A slip. Regardless, I need to apologise."

"Why?"

"I was of no use to you last night. I did not learn of the circumstances involving the Night Guard until an hour after the fire had already started. And I was not able to discover what happened to you until only just now listening in. That is my failure." Lemon said.

"There is no need to apologise for that. There was no way to initiate prior contact, and there was nothing that you could've done in time. Everything which happened tonight couldn't have been predicted. None of the fault lies with you." Prey snapped.

It was true, but more concerning to Prey was how this hadn't already occurred to Lemon Pink. She was Prey's creation, and operated off logic and reasoning, same as him. So why hadn't she already realised all this?

Lemon blinked again, "Ah. Another slip on my part. This is concerning." She said, agreeing with Prey's unspoken assessment.

Prey took a closer look at Lemon Pink. He wasn't worried about her betraying him, but was there something the matter? 'Ah. Now I see the problem.'

"You're exhausted, aren't you?" Prey asked bluntly. He'd been so tired himself he almost hadn't noticed, but it was true. The blood shot lilac eyes and un-groomed pink fur spoke of multiple nights with little to no sleep. The last few days had provided Prey with many prime examples to draw the comparison against. All he had to do was look Gloom in the face to see the same thing.

"There has been little time to sleep. There's been too much work to do on The List. Nor was I able to take my allotted rest period tonight because of the emergency with you being missing either." Lemon Pink admitted.

"That would explain it." Prey agreed simply. Natural or not, Lemon needed to drink, eat, and sleep, same as everyone. It didn't matter how formidable her mental self-discipline was. She was still less than Prey, and just like him, she too had her limits.

Prey didn't need to order Lemon to take time to properly rest. Now that the problem had been brought to her attention, she would address it herself.

Prey forced his drooping eyelids more fully open and stuck out a hoof. His hurts were paining him and he wanted to wrap this up. Lemon Pink reached out her own hoof without needing to be prompted. With only a minor shudder of suppressed revulsion at the contact, Prey connected the gap and brought them into their mindscapes.

The bubble of grey, burnt out forest bordered against Lemon Pink's ashen courtyard. Prey didn't waste time.

'Here.' Prey said, and sent across a copy of his memories of the night.

The memory packet reached across to Lemon Pink and established the link.

And then it ***slipped.***

~

The rusted iron bars shook and eyeless darkness gaped wide to swallow Prey.

~

It was over and the link properly reconnected before Prey could react, but that didn't stop the raw terror which washed through him. Prey was completely wide awake now. He mentally trembled.

'That... that...'

That had almost gone horribly wrong. Prey had almost dumped all of his memories through a link too small for them. The resulting back lash might've mind killed them both. Forming a connection for a mindlink was akin to tying both your heartbeats together with a string. If one pulled away before the string was untied, both hearts were yanked out.

Prey had been too blase. He'd gotten careless in his tiredness.

'Brash, foolhardy! I shouldn't have done this in my current state. Lazy, suicidal! I could've just showed Lemon the memories, I didn't have to give her a whole copy instead. Stupid idiot! I could've waited.' Prey mercilessly berated himself.

Transferring memories like this needed a focused connection. While either mind could be the one maintaining the focus, it was far safer if both minds were doing so. That way if one mind slipped, like Prey had just done, the other would still be holding the connection strong.

What if Lemon Pink hadn't been focusing at that moment when he wasn't either? What if she'd been distracted by her own tiredness, what then?

He was very lucky Lemon Pink had been completely focused, or else they might both be limp vegetables on the bathroom tiles right now.

While there was always a risk when transferring memories across, because minds aren't formed from building blocks you can just pull out and replace on a whim, but it was especially risky when transferring memories containing strong emotion. The more negative the emotion, the worse the risk. And Prey had been despairing, hurt, and terrified for his life at many points during the night. Negative emotion wise, it didn't get much worse than that.

Prey felt Lemon Pink observing what'd just happened. Being Prey's creation, she didn't complain about how Prey might've killed them both. She just patiently waited for Prey to resume the transfer when he was ready.

'Lemon's not the only one who can make mistakes.' Prey reminded himself. If he'd had a body in his mindscape, he would been shaking right about now.

Now much more awake, Prey forcibly calmed himself and carefully created another packet of memories. But this time, he split it into smaller, safer chunks and sent them across one at a time, all the while fully focusing his mind.

'Here. Put them back together. They're taken from Garrow. Review the locations and information it shows and go check them out.' Prey ordered.

Lemon gave the packets a quick once over, getting the general feel of what they contained. Prey had kept more than the code to the padlock when he'd absorbed Garrow's mind. And much use that did him when the room blew up.

'Yes, Prey. I will see to it first thing.' Lemon Pink mentally said.

Prey thought on that for a second. What he'd given Lemon was time sensitive, yes, and was an opportunity that might fade if they didn't seize it, yes. However tiredness had already almost caused one potentially fatal slip up tonight.

'Pressing or not, it can wait. You will go and get some proper rest first.' Prey decided.

'Yes, Prey.' Lemon Pink acknowledged.

'Good. Now I am going to go collapse into bed.'

Prey broke the mental connection and returned them to the bathroom. The bathroom lights felt painfully bright on Prey's eyes. Prey took a step towards the door but his legs did not respond.

"Huh?"

Prey looked up blearily from the tiles. To his surprise, he'd fallen over. It felt like everything was swimming.

His body had finally decided that it'd had enough. It wanted to rest, and it wanted to rest now. Prey's protests about there being a soft bed just down the hall were not enough to persuade it to move. However, these cold, hard tiles were proving to be awfully comfortable all of a sudden.

"I require assistance. Help me to the bunk room." Prey slurred.

"Yes, Prey." Lemon Pink replied, leaning down and pulling him up and putting a leg around him. She did not use her magic, because Prey would have found it even more distasteful to be carried by magic than to be touched. Even if he knew beyond a doubt that Lemon would not do anything to him, he still did not like unicorns.

Prey was light enough that even the slender Lemon Pink had no trouble more or less carrying him to the bunk room. He almost fell asleep twice on the way. Lemon paused outside the door and her horn lit up silver. The air around them shimmered, then returned to normal, but Prey knew they were now under a veil.

She needn't have bothered. Gloom and Crimson had already crashed. Lemon helped Prey across the floor and over to his bunk, going so far as to lift him up into it. He didn't thank her, why thank someone for what they were created to do?
Not like Crimson, who'd saved his life for no reason.

There were many things still left to sort out, but that could wait until morning. Or night. Or possibly the next morning after that, whenever Prey regained consciousness. For now, all he wanted was

sleep.

Prey didn't remember if his head even touched the pillow.

There is always a price to pay. Right now, and for everything evermore.

Prey relived their screams, the terrible happiness he'd felt as he clawed the unicorn's eyes out. 'Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful.' His feathers shivered with glee as Prey ripped into the screaming pony.

Then there was no glee, only a terrible crushing sorrow. It was all his fault. It was no longer the de-horned unicorn, it was his sick father he was torturing. His father, the only griffin he'd ever cared about. It wasn't fair, the Blood Feather Plague, the village, none of it.

'No, I won't allow it. I am a Stormcrow! I refuse to allow this.' He would heal his father and make him breathe again.

The sorrow changed again into terrible, unfeeling cold. Prey flipped the scalpel around on his hoof, and make a straight incision along his father's chest. He'd already had his assistant pluck out the feathers to leave the area exposed.

'A heart. Relatively intact. Male. Twenty five to thirty years of age. Untouched by the plague.' Snake thought, reaching in one stripped foreleg to widen the cut.

'Fresh ingredients.'

Everything became tinny. A ringing resounded everywhere. It was cold, and hot, and nothing at the same time. Pieces of him were missing. 'You did this me.' Both Garrow's and Snake's echoes turned on Prey.

'You did this to me.' They repeated it over and over, empty and dead, robbed of bodies but their echoes still alive. Mockeries of real life.

Prey had done this to them. Prey had done it to himself, because Snake and Garrow were part of him. The lone Border Guard did not stir. He'd been fully eradicated over time.

The personalities, or rather memory echoes of Garrow and Snake were too strong for that. Sixty-one years, and Snake still remained. Why? Because he'd become a part of Prey, too tightly woven to be eradicated. Prey had used Snake's knowledge of plants, medicines, poisons for himself. Snake had been useful.

There was no getting rid of Snake now. Would Garrow end up being the same?

Maybe. Maybe not. Prey couldn't think right now. He was deep in the depths of his ocean, drifting in the twilight zone. He was held hostage to his own mind, too tired to wake or even acknowledge that he was asleep.

'Leave me alone.' Prey thought in the haze. Eventually the remnants did, fading back into the corners of his mind they occupied.

And then came the nightmares. Not the false ones of pain and blood. Not the ones with Border Guards burning them out, not the endless rotting in Dreverton, not the misery of kill or be killed.

No, then came the *real* nightmares, and he was too tired to stop them.

Prey's eyes jerked open. His heart hammered erratically in his chest, feeling like it was going to burst with bitter misery. Why were his eyes swimming with tears?

"Arckk-!"

'Oh, that's why,' Prey thought with surprised detachment as his spine arched and his back went into spasms, 'Whip scar cramp.'

It hurt. All his attention fixed on that pain, and he was at once both furious and horribly grateful that the pain stole all his attention away from the nightmare.

Prey's abused body decided this was the perfect moment to join in on reminding him in a polite, knife-to-the-throat sort of way, that it too was still upset about everything Prey had put it through yesterday.

The cramps promptly chose that exact moment to get worse in a selfish bid to reclaim all of his attention. Prey squeezed his watering eyes shut and drove his hooves as hard as he could into the quivering muscles along his spine. His back had probably been cramping for the last ten minutes at least, but he just hadn't awoken until now. He could literally *feel* the muscles jumping about beneath the ridged whip scars.

'Zoma'Grika, Golomb'die and zetka'fu!' Prey cursed foully in zebrican, biting his tongue.

'Oh yes, lovely day, thank you for asking. What's that Prey? Just survived a murderous griffin, a mind drain, and getting blown up? So tired that you fell unconscious? Well here's a reminder why that's a bad idea. Enjoy.'

Prey was trying to make light of it, even if only to himself, but it still hurt so bad he'd woken up crying. Or that's what Prey told himself. It hadn't been because of the nightmares. The excuse was even true. Mostly.

It was such a stupid, pointless, frustrating pain, and what made it so *infuriating* was that it was Ruin's legacy still tormenting him from beyond the grave. That sadistic donkey was *still* getting the last laugh.

Finally, what was probably less than a minute later but which felt like at least thirty, the cramp worked itself out of his system and Prey slumped back onto the mattress with a groan.

'I have my runes again. I could deaden the muscles and never have to wake to cramps again.' Prey thought, but it was just wistful thinking.

Placing runes on ones self was not something to be undertaken lightly. *Ever*. Runes on living flesh could go horribly wrong. Also,

while he could deaden his own nerves, that would have the consequence of removing his ability to feel any pain across his whole back, not just the scars.

Sounded wonderful, but pain was the bodies way of telling you when something was wrong. It was an important function, and there is always a price and unforeseen side effects for meddling. Prey could just as easily end up doing himself more harm than good, and besides which, there was a limit to the number and what runes he could place on himself anyway. Working with living flesh was never simple, and the body could only support so much. Prey had already made the decision he would just have to put up with the occasional cramp attack long ago.

Even if every time it happened made him consider changing his mind.

'Perhaps one day. But not without extensive testing and research.' Prey thought, as he lay there face down, feeling the rest of his body still complaining.

Once he felt a little less miserable, and with some effort, Prey rolled himself over and observed the bunk room.

It was day time, although what hour exactly he didn't know. There was light coming in beneath the blinds of the lone window, but Prey wasn't in a position to see the position of the sun. Nor did he feel particularly inclined to get up and check. He didn't feel like moving at all, actually.

Crimson and Gloom were still peacefully asleep, unmoving beneath their covers.

Prey took mental evaluation of all his hurts, seeing how they were doing. He quickly reached his conclusion.

'I feel like a chewed dog bone.' Which was an active improvement from when he left the lumber yard.

His worst hurt were the two claw holes from Garrow in his foreleg, but he'd had a look at the wound himself and deemed it not likely

to become serious. As long as it did not fester. The wound was not swollen or expelling excess heat, nor was he feverish, so it all looked good so far.

Still felt like he'd had two holes drilled in his fore leg. Actually, that was an apt description.

Prey would take it over the cramps any day though.

Prey sniffed, and wrinkled his nose. He stunk. The whole room stunk actually. His wool and fur was still filthy with ash. The bed sheets were now properly grimed too. Gloom and Crimson's were likely the same.

Prey realised he was famished, and very thirsty too, but he didn't feel like that was sufficient motivation to wake Gloom and try and get the Sargent to take them to dinner.

Actually, now that Prey observed his internal body clock and measured how refreshed he felt, he realised it was morning. The *following* morning. The ISND had been asleep for an entire day.

'Huh.'

Well, it wasn't really unexpected. They'd been going for the whole week with less than five hours a night, spending the rest of it hard at work, and what with the finale at the Lumber Yard, who could blame them?

'And if anyone does, it's not my problem either. Gloom's the one in charge, so by default it's his.'

Nighthawk must've decided the ISND deserved the rest, since he'd left them alone. He must have supplied the report to Princess Luna himself and not required their input.

Prey jerked upright, 'Luna! I had a nightmare, did she invade my dreams?'

No, thinking back, he realised the dark alicorn hadn't turned up. Either she was busy elsewhere last night, or his nightmares hadn't occurred until this morning when she herself was asleep. Probably.

If alicorns slept. Or perhaps she hadn't realised he was having a nightmare? Or she'd been busy elsewhere?

The reasoning wasn't important, just the fact that she hadn't noticed. Letting out a sigh of relief, Prey slumped back onto his warm pillow.

'Lucky. So lucky.' He chided himself.

Prey pushed his ear out of the way and half rolled over on his pillow. He realised he still had the ribbon tired behind his ear. He'd been too tired to take it off before Lemon Pink had dropped him in here. He didn't feel like getting up. The cramp attack had left him drained and ready for rest again despite just waking up.

The thought of going back to sleep was tempting. Even now, his soot stained bed was enticing him. Buuuuut....

'This is an opportunity for time to myself that I may not get again, and who knows when Gloom and Crimson will wake. I can't afford to waste precious time. I have things to do.'

Namely, further studying the gold tracers on his legs. He glared down at the bands which kept him trapped here. Despite all his study so far, he was no closer to figuring out a way to disable or trick the spellwork than the first time he'd tried.

So, with another long, reluctant sigh, Prey sat himself up and straightened out his blanket. Focusing, he began creating another runic array to help him try a different approach to study the gold bands. He was not out of ideas just yet, nor would he ever give up searching for a way to reclaim his freedom.

It was almost an hour and a half before Gloom and Crimson finally began showing signs of life.

Gloom mumbled and twitched in his sleep, making small flaps with his wings. Arguably one of the few downsides of wings, Prey noted, was that you had to sleep on your front or side lest you crush them. Wing cramp didn't sound like fun. Prey would've taken the trade in

a heart beat however if it meant being able to fly.

Gloom's noisy dream struggles slowly roused Crimson from his own slumber, and it wasn't too much longer before the red pegasus sat himself up, blinking blearily around the bunk room. He at least had managed to divest himself of all of his armour, unlike Gloom who still had his leg guards and back plate on.

Oh wait no, Crimson still had those steel rings he'd tied his mane back with in. Slowly, and very gingerly, Crimson raised a hoof to the back of his neck.

"Owww." He grunted. He tried twisting his head to the side, "Oh ow, ow. Ow. Ouch."

"A pleasant night's sleep?" Prey asked with fake cheerfulness.

"Oh. You're also awake." Crimson noted.

"Unfortunately that does appear to be the case, yes."

Crimson wrinkled his nose, much like Prey had done when first awaking as he took in his own state and smell. Then Crimson checked the state of his wings which he was normally so careful with, and had to close his eyes for a moment.

"Wait, pardon? What do you mean, night's sleep? It is still yet evening." Crimson said, looking to the window.

"No, it's been a full day and night. It's morning again." Prey corrected him.

Crimson's wings puffed, showing his surprised, "A full day? Why did nopony wake us?"

"Probably because Nighthawk-"

"Captain Nighthawk."

"-Captain Nighthawk thought we could use the rest. After all that the ISND has done recently-"

"Wha'? Captain Nighthawk yes sir?" Gloom called, fighting out from underneath his covers as he tried to come awake. He blinked around the room, "Where's the Captain?"

"Not here, you're hearing things. By the way, it's been a full day and a night. I would say good morning but I highly doubt it will be." Prey said brightly.

Gloom just kept blinking, his mind slowly catching up.

'-a full day? Well that's why I'm so hungry. Hang on, we slept a full day? Wait, the lumber yard, the griffin, the fire-'

A shadow seemed to settle over Gloom, and he groaned. "Moon blight. The Lumber Yard."

"Yes, as I said. Morning."

A dour mood prevailed over the ISND as they waited outside Nighthawk's office to be admitted. This was actually the second time they'd come to see the Night Guard Captain this morning.

The first time, Nighthawk hadn't been here, and Lieutenant Screech had answered the rather lost Sargent Gloom's query on what they were supposed to be doing, and why no one had woken them?

Screech had told the ISND plainly they stank, and ordered them in no uncertain terms to go take a shower and eat breakfast before returning. Nighthawk would be back later to speak with them before he retired for the day.

Following Screech's orders, they'd limped to the showers, and enjoyed finally ridding themselves of the ingrained stench of smoke. It had been wonderfully painful to stand under the hot water and let it soak into their bruises. Crimson had spent almost the entire time cleaning his wings and getting every single feather back into alignment.

However, the relief from the shower was not to last. Because Gloom had, with heavy thoughts, sat Prey down right there in the showers while they were all soaking wet and confronted Prey about Garrow.

Why did they always have these conversations in the shower? This was the third one. What was it that encouraged Gloom to raise such topics here? Was it because he was out of armour and so disassociated with his Sargent role?

He probably did it to ensure Prey couldn't run off or something before he was finished talking.

Really though, where was Prey going to run? But apparently Gloom thought the severity of Prey's reaction might warrant it. Whatever Gloom'd expected, it was not what he got. Prey didn't understand what Gloom wanted from him. Did he want Prey to be paralysed with guilt? Stricken and scarcely able to function? Or was it worrying Gloom more that he wasn't having a visible reaction? Actually, Prey knew for a fact that was one of the very things causing the thestral to worry.

Prey ground his teeth. Gloom's expectations of how he should be reacting got on his nerves, 'What does he know? Nothing.'

"Prey, are you listening?" Gloom asked, knocking his hoof on the tiles to try and catch Prey's attention.

'-don't push too far. But I need to make sure he's okay-', His thoughts read.

"Yes, I am listening." Prey had answered. He was being a lot politer than he felt Gloom's enquiry warranted. Crimson had asked Prey to do this. He hadn't forgotten he owed Crimson. The red pegasus was sitting to the side, not quite included but definitely present for the conversation.

"The griffin's death....And Sea Shores... How are you coming to terms with it?" Gloom asked.

Prey shrugged, "He's dead. I am still alive. It was in self defense."

Gloom stared at him, "Just like that? Already? You've managed to

reconcile and make your peace?" He asked, disbelief clear.

Prey considered how he should respond. He could fake guilt, beat his chest and weep. It was in some ways what Gloom wanted to see right now, but when considered from a later point in the future, such a reaction would not fit him.

Prey had no intention of pretending to be hung up over this every coming day for the next two months or so. Besides, he'd already, (perhaps foolishly), shown a side of him he shouldn't have down in the cellar. A detachment from death and an unnatural objectivity. It was too late to take that back.

"Yes. I have reconciled his death. I am able to function fine." He answered.

"Garrow was a murderer, and had to be stopped, yes. He was going to kill you if you hadn't fought back. But what if it had been Sea Shores? Or the other pony crushed in that collapse? Sea Shores is in critical condition and might yet die. Everypony has parents, friends, family, possibly a child for all we know. What happens if you meet one of them face to face. Can you still be alright then?" Gloom asked, peering into Prey's face.

'And Garrow didn't have any of those things?' Prey silently thought. He knew all of what Gloom was saying already.

"Those two survived. Garrow is dead. I am still alive. I have seen death before. The world is not fair, good people die, evil people live, and everything in between. I already said all this back when we found the bodies in the cellar. They're dead and nothing can bring them back." He shifted on the slick tiles, "Can I go now?"

Gloom had been unwilling to let things lie there, but at the same time he didn't know what he was supposed to say. Crimson and Gloom seemed to be more upset about the deaths than Prey was. What seemed to hurt them the most was that he was, to their understanding, still just a child.

Well, in a lot of ways he was and forever would be, but that was besides the point.

Gloom wasn't satisfied, but he let the subject drop there. But he had every intention of raising it again in the near future.

'-again and again, as many times as it takes-'

Gloom would never say it in front of Prey, but he was glad Garrow was dead. Prey heard how guilty Gloom felt for thinking like that.

'-even if he deserved death, he should've been brought before Luna to be judged-'

But, strangely, leaving the showers and heading for the mess hall, a weight seemed to have been lifted from Gloom's shoulders. Crimson's shoulders too, Prey noticed, since he was paying much closer to attention to the pegasus than he used to.

He was still no closer to understanding why Crimson had saved his life. He owed the pegasus, but more than that, he wanted to understand the pegasus. Crimson was now of a much greater importance to him, no longer just a potential obstacle.

Anyway, whatever it was, I seemed to have provided a feeling of closure to both Gloom and Crimson.

The murderer had been stopped. After three long days with thoughts constantly haunting them of the cellar, it was finally over. It did not make things alright, or even close. All those ponies were still dead, and who knows how many had suffered from the salt drug trade and would yet suffer, but it helped.

'-things aren't good. But from here they can only start to get better-'

That cautious sliver of optimism, like a single leaf just managing to float on the surface of the quicksand, didn't float for long. Because once they'd arrived in the mess hall, (late enough that no one else was left, just the cooks preparing for lunch), they found the left over newspapers.

Gloom had the newspaper spread so taut across the table with his wing claws, Prey was surprised it hadn't torn in half.

The Oak Quarter Lumber Yard fire was across every front page, but honestly, that was only to be expected. It had pushed the constant debate about Wheat Plow and the disrupted elections back to the second page.

What was less appreciated was the story attached.

The Canterlot Times had joined with The Canterlot Express in lambasting the Night Guard. In fact, it all but outright accused the Night Guard, through the use of clever wording and insinuation, of gross dereliction of duty and failing to uphold the peace.

"The fire left the innocent citizens of Canterlot shaken to the core. Yet this tragedy which has cursed the loss of so many jobs could so easily have been prevented if operational measures had been taken by Guards who were on the scene before the blaze even began." Gloom read out loud, nostrils flaring.

"A nameless Royal Guard interviewed on scene confided it had not been them who'd gotten to the devastation first, but the Night Guard. What this upstanding Royal Guard also mentioned was that the Night Guards deployed before the fire was actually sighted. Did they enact preemptive measures and fail? Or was there a different motive entirely? The Night Guard Captain, Nighthawk, who has only been in his post for little more than two months, has not come forwards to explain. Many speculate on the appropriateness of the Night Guard when compared to its far more successful rival, the Royal Guard."

"'Yellow Pages further wrote; 'I think everypony is owed a proper explanation for this mess. These latest events have been very telling about how Nighthawk runs this Night Guard. Citizens shouldn't have to worry about what their own Guard force is up to behind their backs at night. I demand on behalf of all Canterlot's concerned citizens more transparency from the Night Guard, or else they will have to face the consequences'."

"This Yellow Pages again." Gloom spat, slapping the newspaper shut

without bothering to finish the article. '-why bother? It'll just be more of the same-'

"This is slander, and this stallion is just one of many. Why are they allowed to write these near lies?" Crimson asked, making a condemning wing flick that indicated his strong distaste.

"The word is actually 'libel'. And it's because the ponies in Canterlot do not like Princess Luna or thestrals. So they don't want to stop people like Yellow Pages from writing this. And because, for some reason, they have something here called 'freedom of the press', which basically equates to being allowed to write whatever they want." Prey said, answering Crimson.

'Freedom of the press? How foolish.' Prey thought, 'They're only free so long as they do not start writing anything against Celestia. If they suddenly came out denouncing Her, I bet they'd disappear overnight.'

Which would probably end up get blamed on the Night Guard, too.

"But they know nothing. They do not have any of the facts. These reporters are hiding behind their press freedom and telling lies." Crimson said.

Prey shrugged and nodded.

Gloom let out a frustrated sigh and forced himself to put the newspapers out of his mind. "Never mind. The ISND do not deal with the press. There is nothing we can do about these lies. Captain Nighthawk will be doing something about it though, I'm sure." Gloom said, purposefully tossing the newspaper away.

"Mentioning the good Captain, he'd probably be ready and waiting for us by now." Prey noted.

Gloom looked at him sharply for his seemingly joking comment. Not because it was disrespectful, but because he didn't think it appropriate for Prey to be in a joking mood. Where was the grief and guilt? That's what normally came after taking a life, especially for the first time.

'-normal, now there's a bad joke. Not even surprising he is so disconnected from reality anymore-', Gloom decided with a disgusted half shake of his head, both at himself and Prey's behaviour.

'-but perhaps this is both better and worse than grief. But if he truly doesn't feel any regret...then we have a problem-'

"You're right Prey," Gloom said, giving his wings a shake and standing up, "Thanks for the reminder. We'd best get going then."

And now they were back waiting outside of Nighthawk's office. Lieutenant Starry Wing stuck his head out, "Captain Nighthawk asks you to please come in." He called.

The ISND entered. The Captain's office looked like it had always done. Overcrowded with things which really should've found another home by now. Armour, boxes, and the omnipresent piles of paperwork. Starry Wing closed the door behind them, joining them as Nighthawk put aside his work.

"Sargent Gloom." Nighthawk nodded curtly. For him, that was positively friendly.

"Sir." Gloom saluted.

"Have you and your squad fully recovered?" Nighthawk asked.

"Yes sir. Sorry sir, I did not mean to leave others to cover our post. It's my-"

"Your squad was exhausted Sargent, and don't pretend that you were fit for duty. You would've done more harm than good. As a squad just coming out of action, you should've had longer to recuperate anyway." Nighthawk cut him off.

Gloom had to concede the point there, "Thank you sir. But we are ready to get back to work."

Nighthawk cast a critical eye over the ISND, "Are you?"

Gloom was very aware of the state of his and Crimson's armour. They'd tried to give it a bit of a clean in the wash room, not having time to do anything further, but it was still a mess. "Yes sir. It's just dirt. We did not have time-"

"-To do anything." Nighthawk summed up. "You haven't stopped since Wheat Plow's trial, and now what with the salt trade and that griffin, there's been even less time to go around."

The ISND were all watching Nighthawk, wondering where he was going with this. Prey could hear the Captain's thoughts, but even they were not giving a clear indication of what Nighthawk intended for them. Likely Nighthawk hadn't fully decided yet himself.

"Her Majesty Princess Luna conveys her commendations." Nighthawk abruptly said, "Your efforts have once again proved instrumental in stopping another crime organisation. She is most pleased with what the ISND has achieved."

"Thank you sir."

"Don't thank me. It is your due. Your probationary posting to First Sargent has been removed. You are now a full First Sargent. Lieutenant, if you would." Nighthawk said, jerking his head at Starry Wing.

The thestral came forwards with the little crescent moon pin, slotting it into place under the three bars already there on Gloom's shoulder plate.

"My personal congratulations to you First Sargent," Starry Wing said, with a grin, "To both you and your squad." He nodded to Prey and Crimson. As Prey had noticed earlier, the thestrals didn't try to hide their fangs when they smiled and talked with each other.

"Sign the promotion papers with Taffy later." Nighthawk added gruffly.

"I will sir." Gloom assured him, only wincing slightly of visiting the liaison's officer.

'-how much else will I have to sign while I'm there?-', He wondered,

'-well, worrying about paperwork sure beats worrying about a murderer. Just about.-'

"Moving on, I'm sure you wanted to see me because you want to know what's been happening. Correct?" Nighthawk asked.

"Yes sir." Gloom nodded.

The Captain grunted and pulled out a thick wedge of papers clipped together, and flicked it across. Gloom caught it without trouble and started reading from it.

"That there's the full list of everything going on from the Lumber Yard and salt trade," Nighthawk told them, "However, Lieutenant Starry Wing, a summary if you would."

It seemed likely this was not the first time the Lieutenant had to have done this, because he launched in without having to pause to think. His first sentence confirmed Prey's observation, "The rest of our officers, along with Captain Shinning Armour and both Their Majesties, have already been appraised of all this and are being kept regularly updated."

"So," Starry Wing declared, "I'll start with what I expect you want to hear first. All three of them will live."

Starry Wing was, of course, talking about the three Night Guards who had been shot down in Garrow's little ambush.

Hearing that, Gloom let out a long sigh of relief, and because Prey was paying close attention, he saw Crimson let out a silent one too. Prey knew Crimson was the only person from his clan in Canterlot and thus didn't know any of the three thestrals personally, so why did he seem to care as much as Gloom did?

'Is this to do with the same reason why he saved my life?' Prey wondered.

Starry Wing's smile widened, showing genuine happiness to match theirs, "Yes, it'll take time, but all three are likely to make a full recovery. It's only Cloud Shade that they are slightly worried about flying again, but I'm told his chances are very good."

"What about Corporal Humming? If I may ask sir."

The smile dimmed, "Corporal Humming took a bad shot in the wing..." Starry Wing started.

'Yes yes, we already know, get on with it so I can leave.' Prey thought impatiently.

"I am assured the doctors are doing the best they can. It is still too early to tell, but, well, her chances are only fifty-fifty of ever flying again. And even then, only short flights."

There was a moment of contemplation as all four of the winged ponies in the room thought about the horror of losing one of their wings and power of flight. Well, three of them definitely did, but Prey imagined Crimson was doing the same.

"She is a good Corporal, wing or no wing." Nighthawk spoke up. Prey assumed that to mean there would be a post within the Night Guard for Humming even if she lost the use of her wing.

'Sentimental,' Prey disdained, 'I thought Nighthawk was smarter than that.'

To do as Nighthawk meant to was impractical. Why downgrade to what was essentially a weaker Earth pony? Humming's expertise hardly seemed invaluable or irreplaceable.

A harsh, unsympathetic and uncaring view yes, but a coldly practical one.

Then again, the Captain probably couldn't afford to be picky. Prey supposed there were so few bodies to go around, that the Night Guard needed every person it could get.

"Let's move on." Starry Wing said, clearing his throat. "Over the course of your investigation of the disturbance report, you found the salt den. Along with the four murder victims hidden in a secret cellar."

Now it was Nighthawk's turn to clear his throat pointedly. Starry Wing quickly cut himself off, "Alright. I don't think there's any need

to rehash what we already all know. Sargent Gloom, I take it you and your squad have not spoken to anypony since waking up about what occurred at the Lumber Yard?"

"No sir."

Starry Wing nodded, "Good. We want to keep it that way if possible. I realise it's a bit late, but we're trying to keep the report of ISND's role in what happened to have been nothing more than happenstance. Bad luck if you will. If questioned by any non-Night Guard officers, please tell them exactly that."

"Of course sir." Gloom nodded.

"The 'why' is very simple." Nighthawk said. Gloom hadn't questioned why, but Nighthawk thought, '-the three of them might as well learn this now-'.

The Captain reached behind the desk and pulled out a bundle of newspapers. Prey looked closer and saw they were the same editions as the ones they'd read downstairs in the mess hall. Gloom and Crimson obviously recognised them too.

"I take it then that you've already read these." Nighthawk observed watching from Gloom's face.

"Yes. Unfortunately we have sir."

Nighthawk distastefully selected one of the papers and read the headline out loud, "'Inferno blazes through Canterlot. Night Guard helpless'. The rest of them are more of the same. We are not going to let them use you as scapegoats."

"Sir, what if we were to issue a statement? Would that not clear this all up?" Gloom asked.

"The press do not like us Sargent. Some influential ponies are backing them who want this..." Nighthawk indicated the newspaper pile, "...To keep getting printed. Ignoring them and refusing to acknowledge the absurdity of their lies is the best method. Responding will only get the Night Guard mired down with retorts and accusations. Our image reflects that of Princess Luna's, and we

must maintain it to the highest degree we are able."

Prey was a bit surprised by the Captain's insight, but definitely agreed with him. Not about protecting Luna's image, that could sink as low as the sewers for all Prey cared. No, he was agreeing that responding in kind would only encourage the newspapers. You don't fight lies with the truth. That was just naive, wishful thinking.

"At least they haven't accused the Night Guard of outright starting the fire and for once are content to make an accurate report that it was the salt dealers." Starry Wing said sourly.

"The insurance companies will have to cover the fire. The crown and Night Guard had no part in this accident." Nighthawk grunted.

Prey made a special effort to keep being quiet and innocent. So acting no different from normal whatsoever.

"How much damage did the fire cause, if I may ask sir?" Gloom asked.

Nighthawk's wings rose in a shrug, "They have still not assessed all the damages caused. A conservative estimate puts it at a hundred and fifty thousand minimum." He said without much care as he stated the vast sum of bits.

'-they should be more grateful there is only likely to be two deaths, not worry about gold-', Nighthawk was thinking. His eyes were drawn to Prey, who was still doing his best to look innocent.

'-and both of them at Prey's unfortunate hoof-'

'Oh not you too,' Prey thought. 'If Nighthawk also tries to start talking to me about 'remorse' and 'guilt' I'm going to-'

"Long story short, don't tell anypony what the ISND did." Nighthawk stated, abruptly turning from the subject of Prey now being a 'child killer'. That was more along the lines of what Prey had expected from the gruff Night Guard Captain.

"There will be rumours, but there always are. If somepony asks you, direct them to us." Starry Wing joined in.

"Yes sir. So, what do we do now?" Gloom asked after a moment.

"Do?"

"Us. I mean the ISND sir. We don't have any orders at the moment, and we sort of missed yesterday. There must still be a lot of clean up, what with interrogating all the captured salt workers and investigating what they've told us. Should we make a start on that sir?" Gloom asked, standing up straighter. He was ready to get back to work after the whole day spent sleeping.

'-and it'll save me from having to think too much about what happened -'

"You will not be involved with any of that." Nighthawk informed them, "Your recent performance will not allow it."

"Sir-?"

"It would be a waste of your time and talents. All of your talents. The ISND has had three serious cases in the last three weeks, and solved them all."

Prey noted he'd neglected Rocky Bed's capture and release in his count, but Nighthawk was still speaking.

"The ISND has proved itself capable beyond what Her Majesty expected. Therefore she has decided that you shall move your focus onto new cases, and leave the clean up to other Night Guard squads while you better utilise your time elsewhere. I agree with Her Majesty."

Gloom didn't protest that what the ISND had accomplished had been mostly been luck, not skill. Even if that's how Gloom secretly felt, that wasn't how thestrals saw things. One instance might be good fortune, but after multiple successes while in the face of opposition? No, the ISND was obviously succeeding on its own merits. Actions speak louder than words, and it was Gloom's duty; '-to step up to the increased responsibility-'

Responsibility in the Night Guard, and by extension the clans, while not something to be relished, was a great honour.

Gloom nodded just once and saluted, "Yes sir." There was nothing else that needed to be said.

Prey didn't like this. It had been his plan to prove he was irreplaceable yes, but as an unintended consequence, Nighthawk now though they could handle even harder and more dangerous cases. This was the start of a long, slippery slope, Prey could feel it. But Prey was still a prisoner. He had no rights. There was nothing he could do.

His eyes flickered across to Crimson for a moment without even meaning to, 'Crimson's in the same boat as me.'

For all the Night Guard's posturing about being so upset they'd forced a lamb to become a killer, they weren't going to change anything. 'About what I expected. Ponies only care so long as it doesn't get in the way of what they want.'

'Crimson's a pony too' Prey's mind added quietly.

Prey wasn't sure if he should classify Crimson as something else. Something more important perhaps? 'Important pony? More than a pony?'

He wasn't sure.

"So, what would Her Majesty have the ISND do?" Gloom asked formally.

Starry Wing twitched slightly, but Nighthawk wasn't phased as he gave the answer, "Princess Luna has not left the ISND any instructions. She has been very busy."

Interestingly, Nighthawks thoughts showed him to be lying, but only in half. However, his thoughts didn't give Prey any clue as to why. What was Luna doing? Something alicorn based, Prey bet.

"Okay, I understand sir. In that case, what would you like us, the ISND, to do next?" Gloom asked.

"To do next?" Nighthawk rasped slowly. His yellow gaze dragged uncomfortably over each of them in turn, and Prey got the nasty

impression that the Captain was taking morbid amusement in something he saw.

"Exactly the same thing you've been doing since the very start First Sargent. Working..." The tips of Nighthawk's fangs showed, "But with some amendments."

Ah, and there it was. Prey had just known there *had* be something else coming.

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Author's Notes:

So that's the beginning of Arc 3, and a follow up answer session kind of for the last chapter. (Which, incidentally, *finally* takes this over 400,000 words) Hope you liked it! "You like it, don't you?" [image]

And thank you again as always to: **Sweetolebob18**

Also! Another great picture by GreatBeaverSpace., which you can see **HERE**. It's of Garrow again, but it really is a great piece, and I, at least, found it funny too. [image]

36.3 Rich Brown Soil

Torn scrap of parchment - Unidentified

-Geo Graphica speculated as to the cause of the strange magical phenomenon found in the ravines of the Dove Cliffs. The cause of these null zones of magic have not to date been documented in any other place in Equestria. The best unicorns of our ages have not prevailed in advancing any theories beyond mere speculation.

Geo Graphica insisted as to it being a remnant from the reign of the dead tyrant of chaos, and his goal was to prove his theory. Her Royal Majesty, Princess Celestia, Sola Invictus all praise her name, and Queen of the Sun; deemed Geo Graphica's petition for her Royal intervention to remove this unnatural blight to be unnecessary.

We can only bow to her majesty's wisdom, for if nothing untowards has occurred in recorded history at the Cliffs of Dove as so with the Everfree, then it must be so.

Geo Graphica's testing proved inconclusive and ultimately fruitless, as Her Royal Majesty had foretold, and his studies turned to that of-

'Nothing! Nothing about how to replicate those magic null zones it talks about. This was all a waste. I can't fight Border Guard unicorns with this!' Prey mentally fumed, heart full of hate, 'It's all useless. Zoma'Grika, 'un dulom' kalaa de gezlto remzala-'

His eyes widened and he stumbled back, almost loosing his footing in the undergrowth. Then a snarl twisted his hollow, half starved features.

"Snake," Prey hissed, "Stay down there where I buried you. This is my head! I am the one in control, not you. Why won't you stay dead!"

The Royal Guard was nervous. Just a bit. Still, he was a Royal

Guard, had been for three years now according to his file, so he didn't fidget on his stool. Not quite.

His nervousness was rather understandable. For the last three days, the Night Guard had periodically been pulling Royal Guards off duty to interview. The rumours going around the mess hall, (and no doubt the barracks too), were that it was a witch hunt. That the thestrals were just looking for a reason to try and get somepony fired.

The officers were not happy. The fresh recruits were not happy. Captain Shining Armour was not happy. The whole Royal Guard was not happy.

'-very bold to suddenly think they can stick their noses into where it doesn't belong-', This particular Royal Guard was thinking.

Still, sitting in the dim office, on the uncomfortable rickety stool with only three legs that touched the floor at any one time, in front of the large desk, about to be interviewed and faced with one of those slit eyed thestrals...Well, he'd decided to keep that opinion to himself.

The Royal Guard pegasus, named Shooting Skies, age twenty seven and eleven months, unmarried, no criminal history, slight allergy to peanuts or so his file said, tried not to let his face show how much being near the thestral Sargent disgusted him.

'-not that it seems to matter-'

The thestral who'd introduced himself as Sargent First Class Gloom barely seemed to be paying attention, flipping through a clipboard of papers instead.

This whole thing was weird. Annoying, pointless, and weird.

'-why didn't the Captain just tell the bats to mind their own bucking business? Celestia damned bat ponies. I hate weirdos-'

But by far the weirdest thing about this whole experience to Shooting Skies was that the interview was apparently going to be carried out by a sheep. A *baby* sheep.

The pegasus silently fumed, '-I thought Song Bird was joking about a lamb. Look at her, what's she even doing being allowed in here? Is this some big joke to the Night Guard?-'

Prey cleared his throat nosily and began reading from off the sheet in a high pitched voice. While admittedly Prey's voice was naturally pitched high, he was making an extra special effort to act the child, deliberately accentuating the big words as he read them out. It would insult and annoy Shooting Skies, while also doubly frustrating him, because there was nothing you could do to make a child read any faster.

"Thank you for coming here this morning slash evening to partake in this interview." Prey pretended to read haltingly.

Everything about this set up was designed to frustrate the Royal Guard interviewee and put him on edge. From the way that the room was deliberately below the comfortable light level, to the unbalanced stool Shooting Skies was sitting on, and the dark curtains pulled across the alcove partitions. The set up included how Shooting Skies couldn't see what was in the file Prey was reading from, how Gloom didn't appear to be paying any attention, and the way Crimson was standing just behind the pegasus but also out of his comfortable line of sight.

"Are you the named individual insert name Shooting Skies?" Prey read word for word.

Shooting Skies was obviously fighting not to roll his eyes as he answered, "Yes I am."

Prey went on, not appearing to even notice his answer, "Are you a faithful member of the Royal Guard at insert rank Private First class?"

"Yes, I'm a Private First Class. I got promoted over a year and a half-"

"Did you take at your recruitment the oath of the Royal Guard to honour and uphold?" Prey droned haltingly on, as if he could only focus on reading the questions out loud and not listen to the

answers.

Shooting Skies tail was twitching something fierce, "Yes, I swore the oath, same as everypony else and proud of it."

"Do you insert name Shooting Skies uphold the oath of integrity, virtue, and four-, fow, forthrightness you took to this day?"

"Of course I do." Shooting Skies almost snapped, reigning himself in at the last second, reminding himself; '-be calm. She's just a foal-'

Gloom noisily turned another page on his clipboard, not paying any attention.

"Have you at any point during the terms of your service been offered bribes?" Prey read.

Shooting Skies scowled, "Yes. It happens often when we catch criminals red hoofed." He answered.
'-come on get on with it so I can get out of here-'

Prey's brows furrowed over the top of the file, as if he didn't know how to proceed from there. Eventually he just shrugged and kept going, "Insert name Shooting Skies, do you know of any reason why you should be considered unfit, both morally and or fisz-, psic-, physically, for your post within the Royal Guard?"

"No reason. Am I done yet?" Shooting Skies asked, hiding the scowl as he glanced back over his shoulder at where Crimson stood impassively next to the closed door.

Prey just kept right on reading.

"Do you insert name Shooting Skies go out on your nights off to a bar in Lower Canterlot called insert bar name here Rusty's Hooves n' Chips?"

Shooting Skies did a double take.

'-wha? How in Tartarus?-'

But no one else in the room was reacting. The lamb just kept

patiently waiting for his answer while the thestral Sargent looked just as bored as ever.

'-whatever. That's hardly a secret. They could've asked anypony. Or had a bat follow me-', Shooting Skies thought with a shudder, '-but there's no crime in going to a bar-'

Suddenly though, he was sitting a lot straighter on his stool. "Yes, I do." He eventually answered, eyeing Gloom sidelong.

"Did you attend with the Royal Guard pony known as insert individual name Forward Planning?"

"...Yes." Shooting Skies was frowning deeply now.

"And while in his company where you introduced to a stallion by the name of Aurora, who offered you money in exchange for the weekly Guard patrol rota of East Canterlot Quarter on Wednesday, to which you agreed?" Prey asked blithely.

"What? No!"

"Did you provide this information for the last year for large cash payments and turn down promotion so you could maintain the same schedule and have access to the patrol rotas-?"

"This is horseapples! I've been a loyal Guard all of my service-"

"-and did you and Forward Planning cover for each other on patrol whenever you were partnered up to look the other way?"

"Never-"

"-Did you both rationalise it? That no one was really getting hurt, that it was everyone's choice what they do with their own body? That salt is just a low end drug? That if not you, someone else would? Why should the money go to someone else less deserving? Haven't you worked hard your whole life? Don't you have big dreams? Isn't there that mare you've always intended to go back to Cloudsdale one day to ask for her hoof-"

Shooting Skies leapt to his hooves, wings flaring open. Or rather, he

tried to.

Crimson swiped his hooves out from under him just before they touched the floor.

Shooting Skies had not been expecting that, and failed to catch himself before he hit the office's floor boards with a surprised shout.

He immediately made to leap up, but a precise hoof in the small of his back stopped him. Furious, Shooting Skies tried to roll free, but froze as the bared steel of the wing blade Crimson extended next to his head. And when he tried turning his head the other way, Skies found that the previously insultingly inattentive Sargent was now standing in front of him, a short spear locked under one bat wing and pointing straight at his nose.

Prey lowered the file he'd been pretending to read from, revealing a bright, friendly smile that clashed horribly with the mottled bruises across his jaw, "And do you, insert name, Shooting Skies, admit to these crimes before these witnesses?"

Shooting Skies face said it all as he stared up from where Crimson had him pinned. His shock turned to furry as he looked at Gloom, '-he set this up, they knew, the bat was just mocking me from the very beginning!-'

"I refuse! I admit nothing. I demand to be released and taken to Captain Shining Armour! I am a Royal Guard, not one of you bats." He shouted.

"You don't have to worry about that," Gloom said curtly, speaking for the first time since greeting Shooting Skies and bidding him sit, "The Royal Guard have been present for this entire interrogation. They've heard every word."

The dark fabric of one of the three previously curtained off alcoves suddenly seemed to be caught in a heat haze. It faded away, and in its place three ponies came into focus, all wearing the gold of the Royal Guard. Two of them were unicorns, and the other was the pegasus Second Lieutenant, Cumulus Drift.

One of the unicorns, the tallest, had been the one powering the illusion spell, while the other unicorn had been casting a silence bubble. The illusion using unicorn was one of only three in the whole Royal Guard able to cast illusionary magic of this level.

Prey had been very interested to learn that little titbit of information. And they'd *still* required a second unicorn to cast the silence bubble over the three of them. Lemon Pink could do both at the same time, with some effort yes, but still.

Shooting Skies gaped at Lieutenant Cumulus Drift in horror. "S-sir, I didn't, surely you don't believe them over me?"

Cumulus looked down at Shooting Skies, his jaw clenched. "I didn't want to..." He admitted, looking coldly at Gloom, "I didn't want to believe you were a traitor to the Royal Guard. But even if you haven't, I still uphold my oath. Integrity and truthfulness in all things. I will not deny the truth when it is placed before me."

Cumulus Drift nodded to the two unicorns, "Arrest Shooting Skies for corruption, dereliction of duty, accepting bribes, extortion, an accessory to drug dealing, and criminal conspiracy."

Shooting Skies seemed to lose all will to fight further. He didn't struggle, just stared at the ground as Crimson and Gloom stepped back and let the two unicorns take over. Shackles were produced, and soon Shooting Skies was chained and being led from the room, head hanging and wings drooping in shame. The ISND watched them go. Only one of them was privy to the thoughts of the four Royal Guards. Shortly to be three Royal Guards and one ex-Royal Guard.

Rather than being grateful to the ISND for exposing another traitor, instead they were angry. Angry at the Night Guard for having done this to them, even if it was the lawful thing to do.

Furthermore, the manner in which the ISND had exposed Shooting Skies had been rude and insulting, the Sargent getting a child to read out the charges like Shooting Skies wasn't even worth his time. Despite everything, Shooting Skies was still a Royal Guard, and deserved some respect. They didn't consider that might've been the

whole point for the ISND's set up. What's more, not counting his accomplice Forward Planning, Shooting Skies was only one of three other traitors exposed. The ISND got results, but of course they didn't see it like that.

Cumulus Drift turned at the door. He looked back at Gloom, eyes angry. It obviously took him effort to speak politely;
"Captain Shining Armour is very, *grateful*, for the Night Guards assistance in investigating the Royal Guard. Please pass on my thanks to Captain Nighthawk, Sargent."

He didn't do Gloom the curtesy of waiting for a response, marching out and banging the door shut behind him.

Gloom sighed as the ISND were left alone in their office,
"Well...That could've gone better."

"Really sir?" Crimson blinked, "This was the fourth successful interrogation. We exposed the traitor, with witnesses present from the Royal Guard, who will have no choice but to believe the evidence."

"Gloom was talking about the bit where they now hate the Night Guard with a passion. Not that they didn't before. But this was personal to the Royal Guard officers." Prey explained. He'd been doing that a fair bit, making an effort to assist Crimson's understanding. No one had noticed he'd had his hoof poised under the desk until after the Royal Guards had left.

Those ponies may have had two unicorns, but this was the ISND's office. Over the last three days, the ISND had been hard at work in here, meaning Prey'd had even *more* time to place discreet runes about the place.

Prey had made the office into his domain. Unicorns might be immensely powerful beings gifted with terrifying natural weaponry, but they were still mortal and were especially vulnerable if you caught them by surprise. If they couldn't get a moment to concentrate, they couldn't cast.

So if those Royal Guard unicorns had gotten aggressive... Well, Prey

only had to twitch his hoof and the rune hidden under the desk would've triggered and taken care of them.

That's right, the desk. The ISND had finally received, at long last, furniture to outfit the office with. Well, one desk, and four rickety stools wasn't much, but it was a start! Gloom had commented they should bake a cake over the monumental success of the Requisition's Department finally pulling their tails out and actually doing their job.

Gloom was only being half sarcastic when he'd said that, too.

"Yes, quite." Gloom said, not amused. His promotion to Sargent First Class aside, Gloom's mood since the Lumber Yard three days ago had been dour. Which is to say, a vast improvement. Stopping Garrow had really helped Gloom. Now he was not above the odd joke like the one about the Requisition's Department, although he was not quite back to normal just yet.

Prey listened in with his mind leech abilities enough to know why. Gloom was aware of how much could've gone wrong. Oh, plus Gloom was also still feeling guilty over Prey having had to kill a person. Only one that Gloom knew of. Sea Shores was still unconscious in the critical ward. The Sargent and Crimson had both cut off a lock of their mane, and done the shortened piece up into a strange knot. Apparently it's something they did to mourn the passing of someone taken before their time, like Oyster Pinion. Gloom's guilt over that was still strong.

'Well that's his problem, not mine.'

Prey certainly didn't feel responsible for Gloom's extra guilt. He had enough of his own to carry. It wasn't something that was ever going to disappear, and Prey had made his peace with that. Or as much peace as was possible anyway.

Sometimes, he even managed to convince himself it helped.

"Well..." Prey snapped the file shut, and gingerly stretched his still bruised forelegs above his head, "I think that's the last of them. I judge it unlikely the salt dealers had anymore people inside the

Guard."

"Ponies," Gloom corrected without even realising it, "And how sure are you that Shooting Skies was the last traitor? We've only been interviewing for three days."

"Well, he was the last of the leads we had, sir." Prey shrugged. He couldn't claim all the credit for their sterling work however. Prey knew the names of the traitors from Garrow's absorbed memories.

Gloom considered that for a while, "Hmm, actually you might be right. Shooting Skies might've been the last. My cutie mark was saying we were on the right track with our investigation up until this point."

"And now sir?" Crimson asked.

"Nothing. I think. Which could mean we've finished, or it could just be because we're out of leads."

Gloom glanced back at his flank, but of course his mark was covered by his armour, "This thing can be very aggravating some times." He sighed in frustration.

'Oh poor you, one of Harmony's chosen. Your free magically gifted talent is not as powerful as you would've liked. Woe is you.' Prey commented inside his head, unimpressed.

Gloom had ordered Prey to conduct all the interviews of all the Royal Guards, or in the guilty ones cases, interrogations. Prey had known protesting was pointless, so instead he'd insisted on the set up they'd done.

Gloom had not approved of his insultingly foalish performance, but Prey's excuse was that their suspects would not take a lamb seriously anyway. So how better to make them underestimate the seriousness of their situation than by making it as absurdly childish as possible?

It'd worked too. Shooting Skies had not been on guard until Prey was almost finished with the interrogation.

Well, that's the reason Prey had sold. The much simpler truth was; he didn't want to become known. The Royal Guard officers had insisted on being present for the interrogations to make sure they were fair, and he wanted as few of them as possible realising he was anything more than he appeared. An innocent, runt lamb. Completely harmless and definitely not a threat. So now instead, the Royal Guard all thought his insulting performance was scripted by Gloom, and that's where their anger was firmly targeted.

"If there are no further leads, then I do not think there is anything further we can do sir." Crimson summed up, shuffling his wings into a better position to accommodate his father's wing blades.

"It could be worse. We could've achieved nothing." Prey said, pointing out the obvious.

"True. Well, this is a good a place to stop as any. If you're forced to halt because you've run out of leads to follow up, you're probably doing something right." Gloom said, slotting his short spear back into the holder across his back.

The new armaments had been one of the amendments Nighthawk had been speaking about.

Prey had been very, very, *very* surprised when the changes Nighthawk had implemented were actually good for the ISND. Good things didn't happen to them. He was suspicious to say the least, but Nighthawk really hadn't had some hidden agenda.

Actually, it was a bit foolish for Prey to have suspected that. The Captain wouldn't have sugar coated anything, that was more Starry Wing's style. Nighthawk would've just straight up told them if there was some deeper reason for his amendments, and gruffly ordered them to; 'Stallion up and deal with it'.

So now Crimson had his father's wing blades returned, and along with Gloom, had been granted special permission to bear a weapon at all times when on duty.

Gloom had been going to request a license to do just that anyway, because; '-I'm sick of us getting caught off guard and not having weapons when it would've really helped-'

Fortunately, Nighthawk had beaten him to it, granting permission before Gloom even asked, having thought along the same lines as the Sargent.

Gloom winced, '-I still need to go sign all the papers for this licence-'

"Thinking about Taffy and the ever growing mountain of paperwork, sir?" Prey asked.

"How did you know that?" Gloom asked, but without any surprise. After the four dozen interviews they'd conducted where Prey had been able to unerringly get under the Royal Guards skin, picking out details about their personal lives without fail, it hardly came as a surprise to Gloom.

"You always make this same grimace whenever you're thinking about Taffy and paperwork." Prey answered.

Gloom frowned, and turned to Crimson, "Do I?"

"Do you what sir?"

"Do always make a face whenever I'm thinking about paperwork?"

"I don't know sir. I don't know when you are thinking about paperwork, so I don't know what face you make when." Crimson answered.

"The face Prey said I made just now."

"I am sorry sir. I was not paying attention to your face."

"Well, right, but I'll do it again. Just let me think about paperwork." Gloom said, and tried to remember what expression he had unconsciously been making.

"That face sir?" Crimson asked, unsure.

Gloom gave up, "No, the other one. It doesn't work when I'm trying to do it on purpose."

"Doing what on purpose? Trying to think about paperwork without becoming aware that you are thinking about paperwork sir? I don't think that will work."

"Crimson's right. It's no good now, you've become aware of it. Forever more, you'll be self conscious whenever you catch yourself thinking about paperwork." Prey broke in.

"Thanks Prey."

"The pleasure is all mine, sir."

"I'm sure it is." Gloom sniffed, "However there are better things to talk about than the philosophical insights into my facial expressions. Like going to get lunch, I mean dinner. Come on, let's go eat."

Prey was all behind that.

Gingerly, he hopped down off the chair. It'd not been made with someone of Prey's stature in mind, and his bruises had not appreciated sitting on the hard wood for every interrogation they'd carried out today.

What Prey wouldn't have mind was a whole load more of those giant floor cushions for sitting on, well, giant for him. That would be much better. Who knows? It wasn't even that much of an impossibility. Life had been full of surprises recently.

Like three meals a day. They'd actually been able to attend the mess hall to eat all three daily meals, the crazy hurry of investigations and work load be damned. Something the nurses Happy Healing and Mulberry would no doubt have been very pleased about, if they'd known.

The reason for this miraculous occurrence was the reshuffling of the ISND's schedule, another one of Nighthawk's unexpectedly helpful amendments.

It had always been the Captain's plan for the ISND to switch from their day schedule to a night schedule, matching the rest of the Night Guard.

However, there was just so much work the ISND carried out which could only be performed during the day, that it just wasn't practical. While Gloom and Crimson would've benefited the most from finally being able to work during the night like they were used to, it wasn't to be. Instead, they were compromising.

Thus, the ISND's day now consisted of half and half.

They awoke at three in the afternoon and ate breakfast, (lunch for everybody else), and then worked until about nine in the evening, eat lunch (everybody else's dinner), then worked straight through the night until six in the morning where they ate dinner, (or an early breakfast), followed by an hour or two to themselves. In theory.

In reality, they'd so far been kept working all the way up until said dinner, or breakfast as far as the rest of the Guard were concerned. There was just no opportunity for rest or free time. Recent successes or not, the Night Guard still was and always had been heavily understaffed and overworked.

The ISND were now the only Guards in the whole Palace who kept this unusual schedule, but so far it was working adequately. But really, who was Prey going to complain to if he didn't like it? Gloom? Nighthawk? Luna?

But tomorrow was going to be a bit different. Tomorrow, the whole Night Guard were going to have another T-Day, or training day, and then the rest of the night off. Except because everything was awkward for the ISND, they would have the first half of their day off, and then be battered and bruised through the night for the second. Fun times to look forwards to.

Their lunch, or everyone else's dinner depending on what you wanted to call it, was cabbage casserole and beetroot. It was Prey's first time eating casserole, (double checked for poison), but since it was prepared by Cookie, he hadn't a clue whether it was a good or bad casserole. Not that it ever mattered.

Food was food. All the bits in Equestria couldn't buy you free food.

One point of minor note, (ignoring the soggy casserole), the ISND by unanimous decision had seated themselves ri*iiiight* against the far wall, as deep into the Night Guard corner of the mess hall as they could get.

Usually, they sat somewhere near the middle of the room, between both the Royal and Night Guards section. But not today.

The reason for their change was simple. Here, they were safely surrounded by thestrals. Over there, they would've been in direct view of the Royal Guards. If there were to be a vote, it would've been easy money to bet the ISND were the Royal Guards *least* favourite Night Guards right now. Hence the change in seating arrangement. Out of sight, out of mind, or that was the general idea at least.

"I think one of them just sent a look this way that constitutes as a death threat." Gloom said, exasperated as he turned back from looking over his shoulder.

Prey's mouth was too full of casserole to respond, but Crimson's wasn't; "It is only reasonable that if they are not able to honestly police themselves, somepony else do it for them. They should be grateful to us really."

"That's certainly not the way they see it. We've exposed and arrested four of their number. Four ponies which they used to know, trust, and work alongside." Gloom explained to Crimson.

Crimson blinked, "I know that sir. That is precisely why they should be grateful it is us who has found them out, and not one of their own number. How much worse would that have been?"

That was rather more insightful than Gloom or Prey had been expecting, but Prey now understood there was much more to the pegasus than he knew.

"Just Gloom, not sir at dinner." Gloom eventually remembered to remind Crimson, picking up a forkful of casserole.

The Sargent slowly chewed his food, not because he was savoring the non-existent taste, but because he was thinking. Something Crimson had said had reminded him about something he'd; '-forgotten to ask Prey about-'

Prey said a zebrican curse word internally, hearing the question before the thestral voiced it out loud. He really wished Gloom had forgotten. Hadn't Gloom made a conscious decision to put Garrow behind him? Yet now he was still going to ask Prey, and right here in the mess hall too.

"Prey..." Gloom began slowly as he considered his words, keeping his tone low so it didn't carry. Thestral's had sharp ears, although not as sharp as Prey's.

"Back in the flat, when that sadist snuck up on us to shoot, no, to *murder* Oyster Pinion. You knew what to do. How?"

Prey swallowed his food and pretended he didn't know what Gloom meant, "Knew how to do what?" He asked.

"The arrow. You knew how to respond. What to do and what... *not* to do." Gloom put it delicately, while thinking:

'-and you weren't bothered by the blood either-', Gloom managed to refrain from staring at Prey's hoof. This time.

"What do you mean?" Prey repeated.

Gloom put his fork aside, suddenly not hungry, "You knew not to pull the arrow out, to wrap the cloth around the shaft and apply pressure."

"That's nothing impressive," Prey responded, "It was just common sense. As long as you weren't panicking, anyone could've thought of

it."

"Anypony," Gloom corrected, "And that's it? It was just common sense?" He asked dubiously.

'-it felt like it was more than that. You almost seemed to have experience with it-'

Prey quickly thought up with a believable lie about hearing from the local village story teller in one of his tales that was how you were supposed to treat arrow wounds. He was just about to voice the lie when Crimson spoke.

"I did not realise that was you Prey. I didn't see. I was chasing after the griffin with Sharp Tang. How did you know what to do?"

Prey hesitated, but it had been Crimson who'd asked.

"I was taught by a zebra. Actually, taught is the wrong word. I was told, *once*, how you were supposed to deal with deep arrow wounds by a zebra." Prey said, telling the truth but not giving any context.

"A zebra?" Crimson repeated in puzzlement.

"You have zebra's living in your home village?" Gloom asked in interest, '-aren't they supposed to live across the continent and all be witches or something?-'

'Look who's being racist now.' Prey thought, but he answered promptly, "No, we don't have zebras living in my village. They just occasionally passed through."

"What were they like? Zebras, I mean?"

Prey cocked his head at Crimson, "They were like people. What did you expect? Chanting, voodoo dolls, witch brews, and speaking in rhymes?"

"Well, did they?" Gloom asked.

Prey stared at him for a good long while, letting Gloom realise how stupid that question had been. "Yes, and just for good measure

while they're at it, they sacrificed the occasional unicorn, used their hearts to brew potions to turn you into a dragon, and worshipped pagan gods of death."

Gloom frowned, "That wasn't the truth, you were lying just then." He said, pointing an accusing hoof at Prey.

"No, *really*?"

Gloom lowered his hoof, "Ah, right. Of course you were."

"You really needed your special talent just to tell you that?" Prey asked.

"Very funny Prey. And no, but it works off and on a schedule only it knows, like just now." Gloom scowled at his own flank, "Temperamental thing."

Prey made a show of rolling his eyes and returned to gobbling down the last of his beetroot casserole. Gloom and Crimson had both been successfully answered and distracted respectively without raising further suspicions. Avoiding giving definite answers was the easiest way around Gloom's special talent, Prey had found. He was grateful that in all the confusion and hard work of the last three days, Gloom had forgotten to ask Prey the *other* question he'd been meaning to.

Specifically, after the Lumber yard, Gloom had resolutely decided to sit down with Prey and demand an explanation for why the lamb wouldn't let anyone touch him. But for now at least, Gloom had forgotten. That was not a confrontation Prey had been looking forward to.

After they'd finishing lunch in the mess hall, they returned to the ISND office, (now complete with limited furniture, and unlimited promises for more), to continue their work. Meaning *paper*work. They ignored the glares thrown at their backs from the Royal Guards as they exited. Well, two of their backs. Prey was a bit too short for that.

'And Gloom always wonders why I don't want anyone noticing me. But now I'm the only one of us who doesn't have to worry about a vengeful dagger in the back.' Prey thought.

He would still need to watch out for that though. He owed Crimson, and as long as it didn't involve risking his own life, he would try to return the favour and keep Crimson safe.

'-finally leave the angry timber wolf den behind-', Gloom thought as they left, glad to be out from under all those hostile glares.

Not that the ISND would've carried out their spy hunt any differently if they had to do it all over again.

'-Crimson put it exactly. If they can't keep police themselves, we'll do it for them-'

"Right, we need to go report our daily findings to Lieutenant Screech," Gloom double checked to make sure no one was close enough to overhear, "He wants the names of the traitors to ensure they don't get let off lightly."

Crimson's wing twitched, "Off lightly sir? They will all be going straight to prison, will they not?"

"Most certainly. But there are other ways they could be let off lightly. No mark added to their records, early parole, identity kept anonymous, that sort of thing. The Lieutenant will attend the trials himself representing the Night Guard to make sure that doesn't happen." Gloom explained.

From Prey's knowledge, in thestral society which placed so much value on honour, publicly shaming someone was often seen as the most effective punishment.

"Will Lieutenant Screech even be allowed into the trial? I thought the Royal and Night Guard had no jurisdiction in each other's internal matters, such as disciplinary hearings." Prey said.

"Well, that's true," Gloom admitted as they turned up the corridor and passed a gold plated mural of the Sun Queen, "But since it was the Night Guard, us, who were tasked with rooting out the spies,

the case proceedings are also partly under the Night Guards authority. Princess Luna ordered us to investigate, and her authority is the same as Princess Celestia's in both the Night and Royal Guard. It's a little complicated."

'-this does have the potential to be the start of a huge rift between the two units. I hope it doesn't escalate to that-'

"Surely Her majesty would not allow these traitors to get off lightly either sir?" Crimson asked as they came to Screech's office door.

"Princess Celestia?" Gloom double checked. There were two alicorns who Crimson could be referring to as 'Her Majesty' after all.

"Yes, I mean Princess Celestia."

"Then no, of course she wouldn't. She is the same as Princess Luna, she'll always do what is for the best." Gloom said confidently as he raised his hoof and knocked.

'Do what is best for ponies maybe. But only ever for *her* ponies, and only if it aligns with her plans. And the unicorns needs also trump the other two tribes at that.' Prey thought, as the voice of Screech called from inside.

"Enter."

They gave the names of the ponies they'd caught to Screech, who was just starting his day (night), and reported how they also suspected those were likely to be the last of the names too.

Not all the Royal Guards they'd uncovered had been working for criminals. Some had simply been pinching things from the Palace on the sly, and one had been spying for a noble, but those wouldn't be arrested, just disciplined.

As a side note, that noble would shortly be receiving a surprise and very unwelcome visit from the Guard. Royal or Night hadn't been decided yet, but that wasn't that important to the ISND. They had already done their job.

Screech given them a nod, the thestral version of hearty congratulations, and asked Gloom if there was anything else he wanted to speak about. His tone conveyed that what he was actually offering was to speak with Gloom alone if the Sargent wanted it.

'-about the after effects of the lumber yard-'

Gloom had assured him it wasn't necessary. "There is nothing further I have to report." He'd said.

'-no signs of a breakdown from Prey yet. I shall continue to watch-', Is what Gloom had really meant.

Just because they'd solved the case, stopping the murderous griffin, and brought some justice didn't mean everything was now fine. People had died. Gloom still thought of rats in the cellar in moments of distraction. Corporal Humming really wasn't going to fly again. Sea Shores was still in critical condition. Everything has a price, including winning, and part of the price was a few more mental scars to go around.

Screech dismissed them with a wave of his leathery wing, and a; "Luna watch over you" In farewell.

The ISND had been happy to leave Screech with the problem of attending the upcoming Royal Guard disciplinary hearings and insuring Luna's justice was done. The thankless task was better on him than it was on them.

'-and without starting a fight. I don't know how the Captain puts up with the pompous gold idiots-', Prey heard as Gloom shut the door behind them, and they left to continue with the second half of their day now that night had fallen.

Which invariably meant paperwork and filling out reports in duplicate. Sometimes triplicate. Now *there* was a true thankless task.

As per their new schedule, it was early morning, with the sun just starting to rise when they finally finished up in the office. Not

finished with all the paperwork, not even close, merely finished for the night. Which was now becoming day. Gloom was rather disheartened by the stacks of paper which would still be awaiting them come this afternoon when they awoke.

'-it's just plain depressing-'

But their shift wasn't quite over just yet. No rest for the wicked.

"First in line again this morning? Well here you go dearie. You get better soon, okay?"

"Yes Miss Cookie. Thank you Miss Cookie." Prey said sweetly, returning the cooks concerned smile as he balanced the tray on his back. The advantage of having their dinner so late it was actually early, was that they were always the first ones here and had the mess hall to themselves.

Cookie kept smiling until Prey was walking away. Then her face morphed back from its happy state, all the way through its usual grumpy state, and out the other side to barely restrained righteous fury.

"*You*," She almost spat, jabbing a hoof at Gloom and Crimson who stood braced, "You are a pair of no good, unscrupulous, unkind, rotten, scallywags. Don't you *dare* bring any foal so bruised in here again if you know what's good for you." Apparently those were some very foul insults shed used, at least according to the gospel of Cookie.

Gloom could only grit his teeth, '-don't worry, the feelings entirely mutual. Perhaps I will take that advice and get out of here if I know what's good for me-', He thought with distaste, examining the near slop in his bowl.

Their shift went on uncaring of the Sargent's grievances against taste.

Prey finished punching his pillow into shape and sat atop it, before beginning the far too lengthy process of checking how his various hurts were healing up before sleep. Unpleasant tasks always took the longest.

That said, his cuts and scrapes were coming along nicely. It was mainly just the larger bruises left to fade now, and of course Garrow's final parting gift on his foreleg. The last physical reminder of the griffin at least. As far as mentally went though...well, it was good thing Prey was so skilled at keeping memories locked away.

Prey began unwrapping the bandage from his foreleg.

'Why couldn't Garrow have clawed the tracer instead? Would that have been too much to ask?' Prey thought, sourly looking down at the golden bands, glimmering smugly up at him in the lamp light.

The one armoured bit of his body which might've saved him from two painful new holes, and of course it had to sit just half an inch too low. Typical.

Speaking of armament, Gloom and Crimson were actually taking the time tonight to properly clean, oil, and pack away theirs. That had been another unexpected but welcome bonus these last three days. Time.

Even putting aside the impossibility of the eight hours sleep they were supposed to be getting a night, and the *actuality* where they got seven and crammed everything else they were supposed to do in their non-existent free time into the sacrificed one hour, it was still a massive improvement on the previous eighteen to nineteen hour days they'd been working. Or rather, 'surviving', as they prepared for Wheat Plow's trial.

And the cellar murder case too, but as Gloom kept reminding himself; '-that's over and shut. Put it in the past and move on. Or at least try to-'

Prey still caught Gloom thinking about rats at least half a dozen times a day, but then, it had only been five days since the lumber yard burned. He glanced sideways at the thestral in question.

Gloom was gripping a shin plate between his two wing claws and vigorously working a grease cloth into the strap to keep it supple.

The strap wasn't leather, Prey knew that, but hadn't found out what sort of replacement it was. No one in Canterlot used leather. Not surprising, considering where it came from. Nature wasn't pretty, but pigs weren't sentient.

In the Resistance, the griffins hadn't tanned leather from pigs.

Prey gave his head a half shake, before dipping it to untie the ribbon from behind his ear. Gloom and Crimson didn't even comment on it anymore. Good. Prey would wear this ribbon whenever he felt like it. They could keep their opinions to themselves.

Unless it was Crimson, then Prey would listen.

The red pegasus in question was, surprise surprise, practising his kata, running through mock strikes and kicks. As always, it was like watching a dance.

'A dance capable of defeating three armed opponents at the same time, while being unarmed himself.' Prey thought, thinking back to the three pegasi Garrow had sent to fight Crimson.

And Crimson had defeated all three of them without killing any of them. Killing someone was much easier than subduing them. Prey had always thought martial arts were a bad joke. All those fancy strikes and flips? Completely worthless.

While you were doing a spinning kick you'd practised a thousand times, your opponent wasn't doing anything fancy and simply rammed into you with a knife. Or if they were a unicorn, ripped your legs off from twenty paces away. That's how things worked in a real fight. Yet Crimson had beaten all three salt workers.

Sure, he'd been wearing armour, sure, none of them had been unicorns, and sure, Crimson was a warrior with proper training, and sure, Crimson said he didn't think the three pegasi had really wanted to kill him, but still... Three on one, and Crimson had

triumphed.

Perhaps the type of martial arts Crimson practised was actually an effective one? It'd been enough to beat three untrained pegasi, and that was all without Crimson even having his wing blades equipped at the time.

Which he was now wearing. Nighthawk had returned Crimson's father's blades to him now that he'd proven himself completely devoted to Luna's cause. Crimson's flowing dance looked a lot more dangerous now with the naked steel bared along his wing edges.

'Those three pegasi were lucky he was unarmed at the time.' Prey thought as he watched the display, his hooves slowly folding the ribbon up and tucking it away under his pillow.

Strangely, despite Crimson being armed and obviously dangerous, Prey did not fear him. Not anymore. That didn't mean he trusted Crimson, because he trusted no one except Lemon Pink and himself, but it was more than could be said about any other person.

Crimson's wing blades were a matching set passed down from his father. Prey remembered how the pegasus'd had Gloom swear on his honour the very first night they would be kept safe.

Watching Crimson receive them back from Lieutenant Starry Wing had made it obvious how much they meant to him. He hadn't thanked Starry Wing, or even waited for the Lieutenant to leave before unfolding them and checking for damage, eyes flicking over the joint for any specks of dust, smoothing his hoof along the flat of the blade to feel for any scratches. Those blades were most assuredly the only thing Crimson had left from his father, and it showed. What ever other possessions his father might've owned, Crimson certainly wasn't getting any of them back from clan Myrrdon now.

Prey had nothing left from his mother or brother, back from when he was Gossamer. 'You don't deserve anything.' A little voice in the back of his head said.

Prey shook it off. Mementos were nothing but pointless sentiment

anyway.

Thestrals however, did greatly value their heirlooms, but with a slightly different take. In the austere lives of the clans, thestrals had little which wasn't strictly practical. With the exception of some jewellery, if it served no purpose or was sub-par, you wouldn't consider passing it down to your children.

Take for example Crimson's father's wing blades. Useful in and of themselves, and definitely not meant to be hung on the wall and reminisced over.

Actually, Prey had been rather unimpressed by the wing blades when Crimson had received them back. From all the fuss Crimson had made, Prey had expected something more.

But they were just a plain, if well care for, pair of wing blades. No flourishes, engravings, decoration, or old enchantments. Just polished dark wood for the brace, the simplest of lock joints for when they were extended, and a plain steel blade.

The only differences Prey could see in Crimson's wing blades compared to the regular Night Guards ones was that they were just a little bit longer for extra reach. That, and Prey was sure the straps on Crimson's blades were made from actual leather.

But at least Crimson had a weapon, and one he was skilled in too. Gloom had his short spear, one end a narrow diamond head, and the other a weighted butt. It wasn't a personal weapon like Crimson's, but one of a number standard issued from the Night Guards armoury. Nevertheless, Gloom carried it casually enough to convince Prey the thestral knew how to use it.

But Prey, of course, was still weaponless. Really though, what could Prey possibly wield that would be more dangerous than the runes on his hooves?

The only weapon Prey could've even held without overbalancing was a dagger, and that wasn't a weapon the Guard used. A dagger was not a defensive weapon, nor could it be used to maintain the peace. A dagger could only be used to attack with, and its whole

purpose was to kill.

That might've sounded obvious, but most weapons were not made to kill. They were meant to be a threat, to say; "don't mess with me, I've got a big club". A sword did that, and could be used to fend off an opponent and keep them out of reach without ever coming to blows. A spear did the same, but even better since you could also just hit or trip someone with the haft. A club or hammer's strike were blunt, and could be pulled to disable rather than kill.

A knife could do none of those things, it was made for stabbing in close quarters. Nor was it threatening and visible enough to deter the fight altogether. That was the exact opposite of what the Guard wanted to do in any situation. They were there to keep the peace.

With all that said, Crimson's practice did not look like it was designed to keep the peace either, not unless ending the fight in a permanent manner counted as keeping the peace.

"He's not bad, is he?" Gloom's question made Prey blink and recall his attention. He looked away from Crimson who was coming to an end of his kata, and over to Gloom's bunk. The thestral had paused in sealing the letter he'd been writing to join Prey in watching.

"Pardon?" Prey asked.

"Crimson's quite skilled, isn't he?" Gloom said again.

"I wouldn't know, not having any experience and all." Prey said, gesturing down at his runt self.

"Well, take it from me, Crimson is a lot better than most thestals. And pegasi too, I suppose. I am no expert myself, but I'm good enough to be able to tell that Crimson has a lot more skill than me." Gloom said, lifting up the envelope to lick the seal.

"You use a short spear." Prey pointed out.

"True, but that's just my preference. That doesn't mean I can't use a wing blade. Or like in Crimson's case, two wing blades at once. So I do know what I'm talking about. Eugh," He added, making a face, "That tastes awful."

"Hm." Prey shrugged noncommittally, but he wasn't disagreeing. Lifting up the blanket, he climbed under and curled up, tucking his ears out of the way ready for sleep. He sent another glance towards the pegasus they were talking about.

Crimson was now tending to his Blood Fern. The plant was slowly growing, and had begun to sprout the red russet fronds it was named for. It was a good thing Crimson could just use that disguised thestral clan blood wine, or else he'd have to open a cut every time his fern needed watering.

Prey gave a mild snort and rolled over while Gloom wound the brass alarm clock. Neither the Sargent or Crimson would openly drink their two cups of blood a week in front of Prey, despite him now knowing exactly what it was they were doing when they went off at dinner. In fact, him knowing seemed to be the very reason they did so. How pointless.

Oh well, he'd keep an eye on Crimson's Blood Fern to make sure it stayed healthy. It was Crimson's, so Prey would help. He owed Crimson.

Prey got comfortable and closed his eyes.

Prey opened his eyes. It was about eight in the morning by the light coming from under the drawn curtain, or in other words, only two hours into their sleep schedule.

Prey got up and creapt over to the door. He stuck the rolled up note under it for Lemon Pink, and went back to bed.

It was truly a wonder of natural psychology how quickly someone could return to normalcy after a near death experience. To all appearances, at any rate.

Life ticked on uncaring of individual trials and experiences. Ditches still needed digging, the fields still needed weeding, the rubbish still needed taking out.

You could pass an empty stand on the street and never know that the newspaper seller's family had all died in a freak accident yesterday, and not realise how he was now left to face life all alone.

You never knew what the masks people wore everyday might hide. They got up in the morning, and got on with life.

Or they didn't.

Those were the only two options. And you might never realise until someone took the second and it was too late.

As such, the ISND got on with their lives and put the Lumber Yard with all it's murders and near deaths behind them. Or at least buried it deeply.

---Later that day---

The Happy Customer cafe was certainly busier than their last visit. Although that might've had something to do with it being half-past two in the middle of the day, rather than at the crack of dawn like last time. Once again, the three of them sat in the corner of the slate paved courtyard, as much in the shade as they could get. A couple of other contented customers occupied other tables, chatting away blithely.

It was a bit of a surprise that the mare who'd waited on their table last time still remembered them. Although only a little bit surprising, since Prey was willing to bet he was the only runt sheep in the whole of Canterlot right now.

"Hello and welcome back to the Happy Customer, it's nice to see you enjoyed our food and came back. What would you like to have today?" Pottery Clay asked, beaming.

Gloom was wearing a dusk pony amulet. He had to be, or else the mare definitely wouldn't have been smiling. They gave her their breakfast orders, since it was currently morning according to their schedule.

"From the breakfast menu? That's fine, but have you had a look at our lunch menu? It's much better suited to this lovely day I assure

you. Would you like me to come back once you've had some time to look at it?"

No, breakfast was fine thank you very much Gloom politely told her, while personally thinking; '-I remember her too now, she was just as nosy last time-'

"Are you sure? I can guarantee it's up to everypony's tastes no matter the time of day and goes very well with our tea too." Pottery Clay kept on pushing and prodding, concerned they were not getting everything out of their meal that they could be.

'-Luna give me strength-'

It took a bit more convincing with an increasingly strained smile on Gloom's part before Pottery Clay finally took their breakfast orders and left.

Pottery Clay aggravations aside, their food was pretty good. Prey hardly tasted it, more focused on devouring it as soon as was equinely possible, but he still noticed it was relatively tasty. He'd gone for the same leek and potato salad as last time because he knew what was in it, and thus, would be able to pick out any poisonous elements, unlike the pancakes which Gloom and Crimson ordered.

"Try branching out a bit Prey, try new things."

"What's wrong with having the same thing again if you enjoyed it last time?" Prey had returned.

They ate, paid, and left. In a reverse of their path from their first day off in Canterlot, they made their way to the bank next. That had been, what, almost two weeks ago? It felt more like two months, so much had happened since then.

The reason they were going to the bank was the same reason anyone went to the bank; to get money. Specifically, to make a withdrawal with which to go make a deposit on renting a flat. A months pay was finally enough to do that.

That had been another one of the things Nighthawk had said would be changing. Prey and Crimson had apparently proven they could be trusted after all they'd done. That meant they were allowed to live in a flat instead of being confined exclusively to the Palace barracks.

Prey was almost ecstatic about Nighthawk's oversight. Sure, he wouldn't be allowed to move in and be unobserved straight away, but it was only a matter of time.

'Apparently all you needed to do to earn enough trust is kill a murderer, expose a drug trade, and stop a series of riots which no one else was able to.' Prey thought.

Still not enough trust to remove the gold tracers though.

On a side note, the months pay they withdrew from the bank would've been enough for Gossamer to live off for two years back in Rushweed.

Crimson's normally almost silent hoof falls 'clumped' up the apartment block stairs. They'd made a detour on their way back from the bank via the Black Smithies street. There, they'd finally picked up those cloud steel horse shoes Crimson had ordered on their first day off.

The pegasus blacksmith had given up hope they were coming back, but had kept the lighting forged horse shoes just in case. So now, Crimson had four brand new cloud steel shoes to get used to. Crimson had been getting a lot of new gear recently, Prey noted.

Although of course, Crimson wasn't wearing his newly acquired wing blades right now as they trooped up the stairs behind the apartment block's landlord. No non-Guard was allowed to carry weapons in Canterlot, not even if you were off duty. As it was, it'd taken quite a lot of convincing and persuasion to get Crimson to leave his father's wing blades back in the bunk room.

Gloom'd had to remind him; "We're not in the clans anymore. There

are different laws here we've all got to follow."

Gloom was quite correct. Crimson was no longer in the clans. Right now, they were on the second story of this apartment block. The staircase was a balcony style, with open air flowing in, and with a glimpse of Canterlot Palace visible as they ascended.

Normally, being this close to the Palace would've meant they were in Upper Canterlot, and the pricing of such flats would've been obscene. Apparently though, this housing estate had been commissioned especially on Celestia's orders to provide rented accommodation for the myriad staff who kept her Palace running.

Since they technically counted as staff, they were able to get a viewing of the flats and priority on renting, along with a reduction in price.

However, that didn't mean they were getting five star at discount just because the housing estate was in Upper Canterlot. Not in the slightest. The apartments had been built with 'space saving' and 'basic functionality' as the bywords. And most of the flats were already taken.

The landlord of this apartment block, a brown unicorn speckled with yellow, kept up a constant stream of chatter promoting the flats as he showed them around.

Cosy Holding, the landlord, had been a bit surprised at pegasi looking for non-cloud homes, but it wasn't completely unusual. Plenty of pegasi lived in Canterlot city, and not above it.

"-Always gotten good reviews, and there's a lot of good features no matter what flat style you decide fits you best. We guarantee all the flats for any damage not caused by negligence, but that's never happened anyway. I am of course around almost all hours of the day if there is anything you need answering." Cosy Holding nattered on. He had a pleasant voice, a likeable manner, a ready smile, and a business pony's attitude.

Essentially, he thought the ISND would be an easy sell, and he had some spare rooms that no one else wanted, '-rooms going to waste

with no income may as well be a hole in my pocket-'

Sufficed to say, Prey hated the stallion. And no, not just because Cosy Holding was a unicorn. Hopefully, when they rented out these flats, he would just take their money and get lost. Prey wasn't too sure what to expect from a 'flat' or 'apartment'.

"And here we are," Cosy Holding said, enthusiastically waving towards the door at the end of the landing, "Two flats near together, as you requested. Not too high up or low down the block, and nicely situated at the end here. You won't get ponies walking past waking you at all hours of the night or any bat guards."

That he was talking to a 'bat guard' under an illusion went completely undetected by the stallion, which was another reason for Prey's complete disdain of Cosy Holding. The stallion was a unicorn, he should be able to tell when something was magically amiss.

'Arrogant, to dismiss Gloom as a threat. Or maybe just greedy.' Prey thought. Although perhaps Cosy Holding had good reason for his arrogance. He was a unicorn after all, so maybe he was confident he could hold his own.

Gloom's brow furrowed slightly in puzzlement, "Flats? I only see the one." He said, looking at the single door numbered 31.

"Of course. The two flats are inside. Here, let me lead the way." Cosy said, unlocking the door and pushing it open with his magic.

There was a short, low, unadorned hallway. At the end were two doors facing off from each other, numbered 31A and 31B respectively.

"Two separate flats, see? They just have the same front door. There'll be a set of keys for you Mr Gloom and the good Mr Trace both of course." Cosy Holding assured Gloom, laughing like he'd made a joke.

"Sorry, there's been a misunderstanding, it won't be me renting, I already have a flat. It'll be Crimson and Prey instead of me." Gloom

said as Cosy unlocked the other two doors.

The unicorn didn't seem to hear him, still chattering away and planning how best to; '-make this sell-'.

Learning Gloom already had his own place had come as a bit of a surprise to Crimson and Prey. It shouldn't have really, since Gloom had been in Canterlot for two months before they'd ever turned up, so of course he would have a flat. A flat that'd he'd still been renting out even though he was sleeping in the bunk room to keep a watch on the two of them.

Crimson seemed like he felt slightly guilty over that. Prey thought it was Gloom's own fault for not cancelling the contract or just refusing to pay.

"Here we are." Cosy Holding said, pushing both 31A and 31B doors open, "Both flats are functionally the same, so I'm sure it won't matter which pony gets which. But if you're feeling competitive, I'm sure we can toss a coin." He said, speaking as if the contract was already a done deal.

"It's not going to be. I already have a flat. It's going to be Prey and Crimson who are looking for accommodation." Gloom repeated, almost gesturing with his wing but catching himself and just pointing at the two of them instead. Didn't want to break the dusk pony amulet illusion, after all.

"Ah?" Cosy Holding, said, not following. '-them two? But there's only one pony adult-'

Prey was reluctantly brought out to Cosy Holding's attention, where he stood next to Crimson. "Prey and Crimson. See?" Gloom repeated.

"She's not with one of you?" Cosy asked in surprise, then he shook his head. "I'm sorry, but a foal's not eligible to rent a flat. All applicants must be over the age of eighteen to sign any contact. She can only stay with one of you two."

"Prey's a lamb, not a pony, and he's a ram, not an ewe."

"I'm sorry but the laws are very clear Mr Gloom, pony or non-pony, only somepony over the age of eighteen who is a recognised Canterlot citizen can rent a flat." Cosy Holding said regretfully. Regretful at what looked like was going to be a lost sale.

Privately though, Cosy couldn't help but scoff at how; '-silly can you get? A baby sheep renting an apartment? Ha, does this uneducated pony come from Cloudsdale?-'

"Prey is perfectly capable of living by himself, especially if Crimson is just next door." Gloom insisted.

"I'm sorry, but that's just not possible. Now, if he was to live with somepony who is his legal guardian, then that would be perfectly acceptable. But a minor absolutely cannot rent a flat, even if another pony is paying for it." Cosy insisted right back.

Gloom opened his mouth to explain that Prey was actually, '-a full member of the Night Guard and most certainly can rent this flat-', But Prey coughed and interrupted him.

By now, both Gloom and Crimson knew Prey well enough to know when he was conveying that he had a scheme to solve a problem. Gloom smothered a flare of irritation at Prey's constant need to manipulate and sneak around every issue, because while it ticked him off, he also knew; '-Prey's idea's usually work-'

'And don't you forget it.' Prey thought.

So instead of protesting further, Gloom merely nodded to Cosy Holding's words, "Alright, we'll come back to that later. For now, let's have a look at the flats please."

"Glad we could get that all sorted up. Please, do come in. I'm happy to answer any questions you might have." Cosy said, all smiles again as he waved for them to follow him.

Prey waited for everyone else to go through, then entered last once no traps went off. It never hurt to be careful, especially when entering an unknown area, and he hated being this close to a unicorn enough as it was.

Prey looked around the flat. When Cosy Holding had said the rooms were "designed for functionality", what he should've actually said was, "designed to be empty".

No tables or chairs, no carpets or curtains, cutlery, cupboards, wallpaper or decoration. There were three rooms in the flat. A windowless bedroom, lacking even an empty bed frame, a small bathroom without a mirror, and the largest room was pulling double duty as both the kitchen, dining, and living room.

It was clean, but that was about all that could be said for it. The other flat was an exact copy.

Cosy Holding knew that these two apartments were far below what anyone would want to rent. Any and all furniture would have to be bought at the discretion of the tenant, and nor did the rooms even have positioning or any view to make up for the lack of amenities.

Yet Prey could hear that Cosy still intended to do his level best to get them to take both flats. '-hopefully I can convince them this is all a diamond in the rough-'

"It's not much now, but this is merely a blank canvas. Anypony can see the potential to mould this place however they wanted, and at a steal price too."

Cosy Holding started going off on his prepared sales speech as the three of them looked around. No Canterlot citizen would've wanted the flat.

The three ISND members saw nothing wrong with the place.

Four sturdy walls, clean running water, both cold *and* hot, no leaks, rot, cracks, or mould, plus floorboards instead of packed earth or cold stone. Why, this was luxury compared to what the three of them came from. Two of them used to live hidden from civilization in caves, and the third in a single room log cabin out in a frontier village, followed first by no home, and second by a cell.

'-a bit austere even by clan standards, but nothing that can't be fixed with a trip to the market-', Gloom thought, checking the glow

crystals set into the ceiling worked. And they did.

As for himself, Prey still could scarcely believe he was going to be given this flat and trusted to come into the Palace every day by himself. Although that probably had something to do with the fact that he and Crimson couldn't exactly run away. Or fly away in Crimson's case.

He looked around the empty flat, eyes roaming over the walls. 'And they want to give all this to me?'

Fleece had always joked with Gossamer that one day his younger brother would make it into Canterlot's university and impress all the ponies with what a sheep could do. This wasn't quite Celestia's school for Gifted Unicorns, but it was still Canterlot. In many ways, Prey was fulfilling both Gossamer and Fleece's impossible dream.

And just like that, Prey's mood instantly soured.

A shelter was a shelter. The opulence and extravagance put into it didn't really matter. Shelter, water, food. That was all he needed to survive. This flat was not and never would be a home to him. Because he could never forget all those who'd been killed by Celestia for trying to reach the goal of living the same life her privileged chosen enjoyed.

"So what do you think? Not bad, eh?" Cosy Holding said, finally coming to the end of his sales pitch. He looked expectantly at Gloom.

Gloom hadn't particularly liked the stallion's attitude so far, but Cosy Holding had done nothing offensive, so Gloom merely nodded politely, "We will discuss it."

"Of course, take all the time you need. However if somepony else comes along in the mean time, I mean no offence, but it's first come first serve." Cosy said smiling easily, as if he wasn't pushing to close the deal and wasn't in any sort of hurry.

None of the ISND bought his act, and Cosy Holding's ears started to splay back and his smile slip under their blank looks.

"If you would give us a moment, we will discuss it." Gloom repeated.

"Of course, take your time," Cosy said, "I'll be just outside if you need anything. Just holler."

Once the unicorn had left, Gloom looked to them; "Well?"

Prey shrugged, "I see no problems with this place that won't be present elsewhere too."

"But do you want to live here?" Gloom pressed.

"No, but it makes little difference. It's close to the Palace and is cheap. I think Crimson and I should stay here." Prey said.

"You do?" Gloom asked at the same time as Crimson asked; "We should? What's your reasoning?"

"It's convenient, and I know you do want to stay here Crimson." Prey answered.

"Just because it's convenient doesn't mean you have to take it. You could stay somewhere else. There's lots of other flats in this housing estate, with more in them." Gloom said, gesturing around at the empty walls. While there was nothing wrong with this per say, he wasn't going to force Crimson and Prey to live here if they didn't want to.

"Crimson wants to stay here, and I don't care where we stay. Therefore, it seems fine." Prey said.

"How did you know I wanted to stay here?" Crimson asked.

"Because of the open balcony. You can launch off and fly to the Palace in the morning, I saw you eyeing it." Prey answered.

"Oh. Well you are correct." Crimson paused, "I would offer to carry you when I fly in, but I do not think you would accept."

Prey smiled brightly, "You're correct, I wouldn't."

Gloom looked in mild surprise between Crimson and Prey, "So you don't mind staying here because Crimson would like to stay here." He stated.

"It makes no difference to me where we stay, so yes." Prey said.

"How about getting into work by yourself every day. Will that be fine?"

"I'm not a child. Alright, I'm not some *other* child. I think I can manage the ten minute walk to Canterlot Palace without getting lost."

Gloom turned to Crimson, "You happy to stay here?" He double checked. '-or as happy as you get?-'

"If Prey is fine with the arrangement, I do not mind living in this flat opposite him." Crimson nodded.

"Good enough. Alright, so since Cosy is offering a decently low price, do you both want to put down a deposit right now?" Gloom asked, making to call Cosy Holding back in.

"Sir-"

"-Off duty. Gloom only."

"Sorry, yes. Gloom, there is still the issue of how are we going to get the landlord to allow Prey to rent." Crimson reminded them.

"I believe that question should be addressed to Prey, not to me. You have a solution already, don't you?" Gloom asked, looking to Prey.

"Yes. It's a very easy law to get around. Just have both flats signed in Crimson's name. We will still each pay rent separately, but Cosy Holding isn't going to care where his money is coming from so long as he gets it, now is he?"

Gloom started nodding, then frowned at how easily Prey was able to spot a work around for the law. '-I thought Prey had a legal solution, not merely an evasion-'

Crimson nodded, "I have no problem with that. What?" He asked when they both blinked at him, "There is no harm coming to anypony. That law was written to protect children, but Prey is not at any risk. In fact I rather think it is the other way around and it is Cosy Holding's purse strings that are at risk."

The joke was unexpected, but appreciated, "Good point." Gloom grinned.

Eager to please Crimson, Prey gave an exaggerated eye roll, "I'll have you know I have never caused anyone to go out of business. Not yet anyways."

"Only because you've no hoof in business and are in the Night Guard. Who knows though? There's still plenty of time to bankrupt some nobles when you grow up. I bet you'll even end up rivalling Triton Fell with all the money you're going to make." Gloom joined in on the joke. Much like the two of them, he had little regard for money or business. As a thestral, duty was the most important thing.

"Alright, I'll tell Cosy Holding that you want the flats, and Crimson can sign for both and put down the deposit." Gloom said.

"Wait, tell him we want the rent lowered from a hundred bits a week to sixty, and a fixed term of tenancy in the contract." Prey said.

"One hundred to sixty? That's quite a steep drop, I don't think you should get greedy on this Prey." Gloom said.

"Trust me and do it. He'll still accept."

"I do not think-" Crimson began.

"Trust me, I can save you, and me, some gold. And if he doesn't accept, we can go back up to one hundred. But I'm willing to bet he says yes." Prey said.

"How do you know that?" Gloom asked dubiously.

Prey beamed innocently, "Let's go with mind reading. Besides, I've

got to ramp up my game and start putting people out of business, remember?"

To Gloom and possibly Crimson's surprise, Cosy Holding did agree to the discount, and hardly even hesitated before he did so. Prey had known he'd had these two flats sitting empty for well over two years now without being able to rent them out even once.

'-and any income by this point is better than nothing-', Cosy had thought.

They put down their deposit's, (or rather Crimson put the deposits down for the both of them), of three hundred and fifty bits in advance, and then signed the papers. There was a bit of an issue there, as Crimson unsurprisingly did not have any records in Canterlot, but they got it sorted out in the end.

Cosy Holding said they could pick up the keys in one week's time and move in. Then, quite satisfied at fobbing off the two empty flats, he bid them good day and left, whistling a merry tune.

So, Prey and Crimson were not getting out from under Gloom's yellow eye for at least one more week yet. And some time between then and now they needed to get furniture to outfit their flats, food, and bedding, all while working their normal non-stop Night Guard hours.

Easy.

Compared to what they'd being doing recently, it didn't sound like the slightest problem.

Besides, what did they really need? Some bedding, and that was about it. Who cared about furniture, curtains, fresh paint, wallpaper, or pointless decorations? Certainly not the ISND.

Finally, with the flat finding done and out of the way, came the fun bit of their afternoon.

Going back to the Lower Canterlot Market District and going their

separate ways for two whole glorious, wonderfully free hours.

'And all we had to do in exchange for these two hours was topple a drugs trade, kill a murderer, and expose a corrupt major political leader.' Prey thought, looking out at the crowds milling around the garishly bright stores as Gloom and Crimson flew away.

His observation wasn't even sarcastic. Alright, maybe a little bit, but Prey seriously meant it too. He was a prisoner of Luna. Good behaviour was rewarded, but it was only that. A reward for staying in line. For following orders. For not tugging on his leash.

There is a price for everything, and this was the price Luna had charged him for these two hours in the middle of the richest and most widely acclaimed city in Equestria.

A fair price? No, but life isn't fair, so Prey would take what he could get.

Well, he'd better make the most of the free time he'd bought then, hadn't he? With that in mind, Prey started heading towards a certain sweet shop he remembered from last time, slipping around the edges of oblivious pony crowds, hurrying past open junctions, and just generally avoiding attention.

Prey thought he would try something different from the lemon sherbets this time. There had been a great variety of multicoloured jars of sweets that he was looking forwards to trying. Once he'd checked they weren't poisoned, of course.

Although Prey knew Gloom still had a lot of doubts about leaving him unattended, the Sargent and Crimson had still left him, being desperate to stretch their wings. Prey knew they both always felt confined to the ground, and that it grated on them badly. Before, Prey hadn't cared how they felt in the slightest. But now he did care, or about how one of them specifically. Crimson. He owed Crimson, which was why he'd pushed for them to take those two flats with the open balcony.

Today was turning out to not be such a bad day after all.

And a good day it was, because after getting a paper bag filled with a mix of peppermints and sugar rose petals, Prey walked down an alleyway, took a left, and met up with Lemon Pink in disguise.

"You got my note?"

"Yes, Prey."

"Good. You have confirmed the place is safe and unobserved?"

"Yes, Prey."

"Then lead the way."

"Yes, Prey."

"Oh," Prey asked as they set off through the alleys, following the mentally mapped back ways to avoid any attention, "How much of Garrow's caches were you able to recover before the Night Guard could get to them all?"

Lemon Pink turned her head as she answered. She was wearing that ridiculous sunhat again over her abnormally sharp horn, and her coat was glamoured to appear buttercup yellow. "Two of them. The cache in the buried safe had already been retrieved by the Night Guard when I arrived."

"Two out of three. Not bad. I didn't expect to get any when I decided to wait. Garrow didn't have any clear memories about how much he hid in there. How much did you successfully recover?"

"Both stashes totalled together came to one hundred and fourteen thousand, eight hundred and ninety six bits. I have moved it all to the attic in the flat I am occupying. I have spelled it to avoid detection. The magic will last for three more days before it needs renewing.

"Not bad." Prey commented as he thought over the number. A

Private in the Guard earned yearly about 7000 bits. A small house in Lower Canterlot cost about 15,000 bits, or two years wages. Alternatively, for that same money, you could by a large house with ten acres of land anywhere outside of Canterlot. And now Prey had 114,896 of it.

Whoever said crime doesn't pay obviously had never been any good at it. To Prey though, it was just a means to an end. He wasn't suddenly rich, although it might look that way. Personally, Prey would never even touch the gold, because he wasn't stupid. He knew he was closely watched by Gloom and the Night Guard. All of what he earned was recorded. Even if he wanted to buy solid gold horseshoes, (which he didn't), it would be a bit hard to explain where they came from if anyone asked.

As such, Prey's personal expenditure would only ever come out from from the wage paid to him by the Night Guard.

However that was Prey. Lemon Pink on the other hoof, could spend of much of the pillaged gold as she wanted. And Lemon only wanted what Prey wanted.

So as Prey walked beside his tool, he did some mental arithmetic to see where to assign the bits he'd suddenly come into possession of.

"Ten thousand bits short term to your idea of hiring spies to keep an eye on my various people objectives, provided you deem them trustworthy." Prey began listing off:

"Set ten thousand aside to go into bribes and incentives for getting ahold of dark magic texts in the future. Start looking to use about twenty-two thousand to lay the ground work for items twelve to seventeen on The List. Three thousand goes into to item ten."

Lemon Pink nodded and memorised Prey's instructions as he continued to reel them off.

"Put another ten thousand aside broken into two stashes, and find places to secrete them in Canterlot, just in case. The rest goes towards obtaining any artifacts which magical properties, information I'm after, or research material. You know what to look

for. The rest of the gold is to be spent or saved as you see fit once we're finished today."

"Yes, Prey." Lemon Pink acknowledged. And just like that, Prey had already assigned away the massive hoard of gold he had come into possession of without second thought.

Gold was just bits of metal. It did nothing useful until you spent it. Holding onto it achieved nothing.

Well, it had been a bit inaccurate to say that Prey would spend none of the gold. Things without fixed value or were unidentifiable and couldn't be tracked by the Guard were still on the table.

So that was where they were going right now after all, to spend some of the blood money he'd just obtained.

Prey smiled to himself and looked around the covered square of the Underground Market.

'This is perfect. Or as close as you can find in Canterlot.' He thought.

The term 'Underground Market' might conjure up the wrong image when spoken. There was no organ trafficking for dark rituals, or shadowy assassins for hire here. This was *Canterlot*, the capital of ponykind.

Most others would've still called this a black market, but Prey only judged it to be an Underground Market at best.

But if you were to ask any of the 'shady' characters with 'questionable' backgrounds and morals in 'Lower' Canterlot about a black market, this is where they would inaccurately point you with much sideways muttering and subtle ear flicks, before hurrying away with their heads down.

Perhaps one good way of differentiating between classifying this as only an Underground Market to Prey, and not a black market like ponies called it, was by what it sold.

Everything for sale here, while heavily frowned upon, was not illegal, or exploited some loop hole in the law. By Prey's understanding, said loop hole was usually there simply existed no specific restriction against that particular item. Yet.

One such example? Red meat, pig and chicken. There was only one place in the whole of Canterlot you could get butchered cuts meat that weren't fish, and that was here. Not illegal, but you certainly wouldn't want anyone to see you buying it.

The market square was actually more of a market circle. An almost unbroken line of shops packed tightly together circled around the circumference, chipped paint on the store signs. Those were the permanent shops. In the middle of the circle, the courtyard was taken up by the less permanent variety of more traditional stalls. Wooden makeshift counter tops set up on the back of carts, with canvas tent roof covers.

The market circle was small, only eight of the permanent shops and about twelve of the stalls. Because of its positioning right up against an upper level of Canterlot, the whole Underground Market was overshadowed.

"Which was the shop you found for me?" Prey asked Lemon Pink as he looked around. The Underground Market was almost unattended, with only a few ponies drifting between stalls. Prey noted that all of them wore some article of clothing which hid their cutie marks, vendors included. He bet none of them introduced themselves using their real names either.

"That store holds items I believe are of interest to you." Lemon Pink said, indicating with her eyes. She did not point, pointing might draw attention. The vendors did not call or hawk their wares. They seemed apathetic, probably only set up here because they had no better place they could try and sell at. They looked resigned.

Prey nodded, "We proceed." He ordered. Lemon Pink removed the floppy sun had and put it on Prey's head. It fitted, despite being ridiculously large on Prey.

"How long did it take to place the runes?" Prey asked, reaching up

and patting at the brim. He'd ordered Lemon Pink to create this array in his last note. She would be the primary user of this hat, but right now it was for him.

"Nine hours, fifty minutes. No breaks." Lemon answered.

"Hmm. That took too long." Prey observed.

"Agreed. It seems I do not have an affinity for runes." Lemon Pink agreed without protest.

"Unfortunate. It seems only the knowledge of the runes carried over. My experience with creating them didn't. This bears further investigation in the future." Prey decided, putting the matter aside for now. The simple notice-me-not runic array on the hat would still function, regardless of how long it had taken Lemon Pink to make it.

It wasn't that people wouldn't be able to see Prey under the notice-me-not array. Rather, it meant that unless they looked closely or he drew attention to himself, they wouldn't remember any details about Prey once he left. Just that there'd been a small person wearing a hat. Maybe with white fur? Their minds would fill in the blanks.

Prey checked the array was working properly, before nodding at Lemon to lead the way.

The sunhat didn't affect her because she was aware of it, and being a mind mage, this sort of thing wouldn't work on her anyway.

The bell on the shop door let out a sad '*Ting*' as they entered, and then another as the door shut. The glass was frosted, so no one could look in or out. The smell of damp earth immediately became almost tangible.

In defiance to what you'd expect from somewhere in a disreputable place like this, the interior of the shop was actually well lit. Reason being, the greenery which grew everywhere demanded it. This was a plant nursery and herbalist shop. The green brown unicorn, (a

fitting colour scheme), behind the counter looked up from his newspaper the moment he heard the bell 'Ting', his attention homing in on Lemon Pink.

His eyebrow's went up at seeing, '-a pretty mare down here-'

"Hello there. Are you lost?" The stallion asked, puzzlement mixing with suspicion in his voice. He didn't seem to notice the sunhat wearing lamb.

"No. I am exactly where I want to be. I will be looking around your shop...?"

"Seeder. Camamile Seeder." The stallion supplied.

"Camamile Seeder." Lemon Pink repeated without inflection. Her and Prey both knew he was lying about his name.

"Just Seeder is fine."

Camamile Seeder's real name was Autumn Seeder. Not very inventive if it still used half your real name, but the stallion probably didn't want to get confused and forget when someone addressed him.

"Do you know what you're looking for? Name it, and I can tell you whether I've got it, and if not, I might know somepony who can probably get the plant or flower you're after." Seeder suggested. He was fishing, unwilling to volunteer information until Lemon Pink confirmed why she was here.

"Thank you, but it's fine. I want to look around first." Lemon blandly deflected his inquiry, turning away and starting to look through the planted pots on the shelves and tables.

Seeder's ears flicked in annoyance, but Prey wasn't scared of him doing anything. The stallion might be a unicorn, but Prey had his own unicorn with him right now. One unicorn to counter another. Plus, he himself was basically invisible to the shop keeper.

Thus satisfied he was safe(ish), Prey was confident enough to join Lemon Pink in browsing the shelves.

Prey could identify a whole host of poisons by symptoms only, along with which plants you could mix or refine them from. He had survived in the leafy depths of the Deeper Green being Snake's apprentice, on top of which, he had most of the rest of the voodoo witches memories to call on besides.

He knew Halra berries which were most deadly when young and grew near water, and Blue Spear Nettle which could strike a person blind. Jeu Jeu stems, Red Breezie mushrooms, Pony-Were root, Poison Joke, Nightshade, Deathcap, Yew, Hemlock, and many more besides. There wasn't anything deadly poisonous like that in here, but there were plenty of the other, less poisonous but still fatal if used right variety.

Yet even so, Prey did not recognise more than about two-thirds of what he saw on the shelves. It wasn't just plants, there were small bags of strangely shaped seeds, boxes of mixed bulbs, dried or powdered leaves and flowers, specialised pots and fertiliser. There were many unfamiliar smells too, some good, some bad, many strange.

Lemon Pink reached up and brushed her three tone mane back behind her right ear, catching Prey's attention. It was the signal that she'd found one of the things Prey was looking for.

She could've just lowered her mental shields and thought it loudly to catch his attention, but that was bad practice and could become a bad habit. Prey went over.

Seeder blinked at Prey as he stepped out from the rows of pots, the stallion had quite forgotten someone else had come in with the mare, '-actually, she hasn't introduced herself yet-', Seeder realised as his attention returned to Lemon Pink, his eyes sliding off Prey.

"What should I call you?" Seeder called out.

"Does it really matter?" Lemon asked without turning.

"I guess not." Seeder shrugged, but he kept waiting for an answer.

"Sunflower. Call me Sunflower." Lemon Pink said. That was the

name of this yellow illusionary alias she was wearing. It wasn't like it mattered what name she gave. Seeder wasn't going to remember them once they left. Sunflower didn't exist, and Prey was wearing the runed sunhat.

'-Sunflower. Nice name for a pretty mare. Kind of cold though-', Seeder thought, going back to his newspaper but keeping half an eye on what she was doing.

Prey glanced up at Lemon Pink to see why she'd gotten his attention. She pointed, "There. Gold and Ruby." She said, indicating a small square pot of round leafed herbs, calling the plant by it's commonly known name.

"Good. We'll take it. Keep searching for anything else on the list." Prey said.

"Yes, Prey." Lemon said, floating the pot off the shelf and over to the counter.

"You just want this? Frillica Desilli?" Seeder asked, reading the hoof scrawled tag.

"There will be more. Please be patient." Lemon Pink said without sparing a glance for the stores owner.

Together, Lemon and Prey continued to work their way through the shelves and boxes. Despite being packed with variety, it was still only a small shop and it didn't take them long.

Prey knew the plants he was looking for, and when found, it was added to the selection on the counter, sometimes two of the same, sometimes just the one copy as a bemused Seeder looked on.

'-but hay, as long as she's buying I'm not complaining-'

'There's some very interesting and potentially useful stuff in here.' Prey thought, brushing the tip of his hoof along the spine of a tiny Snapper Fern and watched it try to twist and bite him. Still, they had most of what they'd come for, and what couldn't be found could

be done without.

"How much?" Lemon asked plainly, stepping up to the counter.

"Some of the plants you are buying have harmful properties. You need a licence. Do you have a licence?" Seeder asked, pointing at a disclaimer sign on the wall behind the counter, sounding like he didn't actually care either way but had to ask.

"Yes." Lemon lied.

"May I see the copy?" Seeder said, fishing in a draw with his magic.

"No."

"Then you need to sign this." Seeder said without missing a beat, pulling out a ledger and quill. "Read, sign, and date here, here, and here." He indicated.

Lemon Pink smoothly penned the name 'Sunflower' in flowing script as requested. "There. Now, how much?" She repeated emotionlessly. Seeder tired to give Lemon a dark look for being rude, but couldn't quite seem to meet Lemon Pink's eyes when he tried.

"Alright. Give me a moment, and I'll tot up the bill." Seeder said, pulling out a tattered notepad and a pencil and quickly starting to jot the prices down.

The plants Prey was buying were for a very specific purpose. The poisonous ones, Lemon Pink would be keeping and cultivating, and with the other potted plants he'd taken a pair each of.

One set was for him, and the other for Lemon again to look after as a back up. Crimson wasn't going to be the only one with a house plant. The difference however was that Crimson's Blood Fern didn't have a very specific and unique set of properties which would be of great interest to the Guard if they knew what those properties were.

Prey was being very careful. By themselves, each plant he intended to keep was completely harmless. If anyone was to ever investigate him, they would find nothing but some unusual herbs and flowers. If, however, you were to mix them in certain ratios that only he or

perhaps a voodoo witch might know, you would have a very different case on your hooves.

If Gloom and Crimson asked him where he'd gotten the seemingly innocuous plants, he'd tell them he found them at some random stall in the market district having a clearance sale and bought them for a couple of bits each because why not? Didn't Crimson have a pot plant for his flat already, so why couldn't he too?

And since Prey was accounting for all his money in case the Guard was tracking it, there would be no discrepancy for a mere dozen bits he would tell them he'd spent on the plants if questioned. A clearance sale for some small random pot plants was something even a poor Night Guard like him could afford. (He'd actually spent those dozen bits on those peppermint candies)

You never could be too careful or paranoid.

"Two-hundred, ninety-six bits and a half Mrs. Sunflower." Seeder said, magically laying the pencil back down. Prey was envious of the unicorn's ability to do that.

"A bag or tray to carry the plants in if you would. Please." Lemon Pink requested.

Seeder hid a grumble and searched behind the counter until he found a couple of sturdy cardboard box lids that would serve as trays. "That was two-hundred and ninety-six bits and a half, thank you."

Lemon Pink, or Sunflower as Seeder thought of her, levitated a large bag of bits out of her saddle bag and proceeded to swiftly count out the correct amount, creating little neat towers of ten on the counter top. Seeder raised an eyebrow, '-not even going to try to haggle? Should I have tried for more? Wait, these aren't fake bits are they?-'

Seeder surreptitiously picked up one of the bits in his aura as Lemon continued tallying up the correct amount, and cast a quick spell on it. Not that trying to be sneaky hid his actions from Prey and Lemon.

'-nope, completely genuine. That's a relief-', Seeder thought, putting the bit back down.

'A cantrip spell to check if a bit really contains the correct purity of gold.' Prey observed. Working in the place like this underground market, it was probably a necessity of business to know such a detection spell.

"Thank you for your patronage and have a nice day, Mrs. Sunflower," Seeder said, sweeping the bits off the counter into a money bag, "Come again."

Lemon Pink didn't waste breath on replying. She picked up the two box lids, levitating one onto Prey's back and the other onto her own. '-oh hay that's right, she brought in her foal with her. I hope the filly knew not to eat anything in here-'

Prey rolled his eyes as Lemon Pink pulled the door open for them to go, when a tray of mixed bulbs and seeds caught the corner of his eye. Prey's heard jerked round.

"Sunflower, can we please stay a while? Come back in and close the door, maybe?" Prey called out sweetly, surprising Seeder.

Lemon Pink turned around immediately and shut the door again. Incidentally, she was now also blocking anyone from entering or leaving the shop also. Not that Seeder noticed.

"Mister Seeder, what's this box? Are these flower bulbs?" Prey asked.

Seeder stared in surprise at Prey, "Lamb? Not a filly?" He mumbled to himself. The runes on the sunhat were doing their job.

"What are these in the box?" Lemon Pink asked loudly when Seeder forgot to answer Prey.

"Those? Those are a random mix of seeds and bulbs, a lucky dip. Are you interested?" Seeder asked, sensing another possible sale.

"Where did you get them from?" Prey asked.

Seeder spoke the answer to Lemon Pink, ignoring Prey because; '-she isn't the one carrying the bits-', and also incidentally getting Prey's gender completely wrong again.

"My suppliers often bring me interesting seeds and tubers, and the ones that nopony can identify go into the lucky dip here. Would you care for a go?"

"So you have no idea where these particular bulbs come from?" Prey asked, holding up a pair of spherical, red veined wrinkled pods, each about two inches across. He was smiling widely at Seeder, but his eyes weren't smiling. Again, not that the stallion noticed.

Seeder glanced at the two bulbs, "Nope. They might've come from anywhere. That's part of the fun of it being lucky dip, seeing what will grow."

"Seeing what will grow? Yes...I suppose that would be interesting to see." Prey mused. He turned his head to look at Lemon Pink, "Can we get these two, please?" He asked brightly. Seeder never saw the signal Prey gave her.

Lemon came back to the counter, already fishing out the bag of bits again, "If you insist. Mr. Seeder, might we please have a bag? A small paper one would do."

Seeder turned to get one, "Sure, coming right up-"

Lemon Pink's horn flashed silver and red, her buttercup yellow coat illusion vanished and a blast of magic shot from her horn.

The crackling stunning spell caught Seeder in the back of the head, and he went down without so much as a groan, sprawling over the floor.

"Bar the door." Prey ordered, already ducking under the counter, "And put your disguise back up."

"Yes, Prey." Lemon Pink acknowledged, locking the door and flipping the 'Open' sign to 'Closed', her silvery aura quickly reapplying the Sunflower illusionary disguise. She'd had to let it drop to cast the stunning spell. A stunning spell took power and

concentration, and so did her disguise. It was one or the other. Basic levitation was about the extent of what she could magically manage while also holding the disguise spell.

Prey reached out and placed his hoof on the back of Seeder's head, suppressing a shiver of revulsion at being so close to the unicorn's horn. No subtle mind blank spell to subdue the pony this time, just a straight up stunning spell. The mind blank only worked as long as the target wasn't shaken or stimulated in any way. And what Prey was about to do definitely counted as disturbing the victim.

'Let's see if I can't jolt that location free from your memories.' Prey thought as he dived in.

Entering the mind of someone unconscious was much easier than if they were awake. Unicorns may be naturally more resistant to mental invasion, but even if Seeder where conscious, it likely wouldn't have been enough to stop Prey at this stage.

Seeder's mindscape didn't look like much of anything defined, and Prey didn't particularly care to stop for a closer look. He started roughly rooting through Seeder's memories with a barbed drag net; 'Where did you get these two bulbs?'

Seeder was going to have a massive headache when he awoke. Prey didn't care. Seeder would have no memory of any of this, Prey would see to that before he withdrew.

The plan had been to buy the pot plants, pay, and leave. Lemon Pink was in disguise, and Seeder would forget Prey because he was wearing the sunhat and hadn't done anything to stick in the Seeder's memory.

All that had gone out the window when Prey had spoken up to demand where Seeder had gotten the two eggs Prey had found in the lucky dip.

They were eggs, not some strange plant pod, no matter what Seeder had mistakenly thought.

Prey was searching for a specific memory, but he couldn't help but

see other things too. Seeder had grown up in a rural town outside Canterlot, spending alot of time exploring outside. He had two younger brothers who he'd become estranged from, his grumpy parents too.

After school, he'd been taken on to fill an open job post at a run down botanical garden-cum-lab, before it had finally been closed down.

Some years ago, he'd moved to Canterlot in the hopes of finding a market for the strange flora and fungi he so often worked with.

'Not important,' Prey pushed the memories aside, 'Where's the information on Seeder's suppliers? Where did he get these, and from whom?'

Prey searched and searched. It had to be recent, within the last four moths, the eggs wouldn't have lasted longer. But he couldn't find anything. Seeder had three ponies he bought from off and on, and he didn't remember where what came from whom.

Prey had often found that this was the problem with memory probes. Mundane and non-important memories tended to fade over time, losing detail and focus. Where did two random seeds out of the multitude Seeder dumped into the lucky dip bin come from? The unicorn hadn't a clue.

'Useless.' Prey thought in frustration. Seeder couldn't remember, and short of tracking down Seeder's three suppliers and seeing if *they* could remember, Prey had no way of finding out. And no, Prey wasn't going to do that.

Dissatisfied, Prey began the task of cleaning up after himself, removing Seeder's memories of him and Lemon Pink coming into the shop.

It wouldn't be hard to simply erase the stallion's memory of the last fifteen minutes completely and take back the money Lemon Pink had paid, but Seeder might notice something was amiss when he saw the plants they'd bought missing from the shelves.

So instead, Prey painstakingly constructed a false set of memories of a red and golden unicorn mare with a funny accent, (also by the name of Sunflower to match the disclaimer in the ledger Lemon Pink had signed), who'd come into the shop and bought the plants instead.

Then, Prey added a memory for when Seeder woke up in five minutes time on the floor. He would remember that the mare had left, and he'd returned to reading his newspaper, when suddenly he overbalanced and fell off his stool. That would explain why he was lying on the dirty floor and his head hurt.

Prey opened his eyes, blinking to clear his vision. His head felt cottony and heavy, like it always did after coming out from someone else's mindscape. Lemon Pink was waiting unmoving by the door, prepared to stop anyone who tried to enter the shop.

"Done." Prey said, working his heavy tongue around his jaw to get it back to life, "Take the two eggs and hide them until I can make a plan for what to do with them. Eventually they will need sustenance. Until then, keep them dry and warm." He said, ducking back out from under the counter.

There was no need to explain what he'd done to Seeder, how he'd invaded and violated the stallion's mind. Lemon Pink already knew it all.

"Yes, Prey." She flipped the door sign back to 'Open' as they left, leaving Seeder collapsed stunned and helpless on the floor.

They did a bit more searching around the underground market, Lemon Pink leading Prey to the places of potential interest she'd previously found, but only for a little while. After the discovery of the two eggs and obtaining the selection of plants, Prey didn't feel like risking much more today.

He gave Lemon Pink some last instructions as he hoofed her the sunhat back, filling her in on the new apartments that he and Crimson would be moving into next week.

"Try and get a flat in the apartment block across from ours if possible. If your application is successful, leave your old room at the inn, and replace yourself in the landlady's memories with another unicorn mare who had to leave Canterlot in a hurry due to family reasons." He instructed.

"Yes, Prey."

"There will also be less need for you to work as a maid in the Palace. Maintain a few days work there for now. Focus on advancing the list, and start identifying hidden places close by to use as a base for item 3A."

"Yes, Prey."

Prey paused, then added, "And Crimson is now important. Remove him from The List. He is to be protected as an asset. Avoid any contact."

A brief fraction of a second's delay, "Yes, Prey."

"I haven't yet decided what plan to commit to with the eggs, but I will have built the appropriate runic arrays to accommodate them by the end of the week."

With that, Prey left, not needing to wait for the acceptance of his orders he knew Lemon Pink would give. She would obey him in everything. She was his tool.

"What are those?"

"Exactly what they look like. Pot plants. I bought them. With money. I thought they would go well in my new flat." Prey answered Gloom, who was looking over the half-a-dozen plants Prey had in the box lid on his back.

"You haven't actually moved into the flat yet." Gloom pointed out.

"So? Crimson has his Blood Fern, why shouldn't I have some plants too?"

"What are those?" Crimson asked, flapping down and landing next to Gloom. They had re-congregated at, surprise surprise, the lone and lonely statue of Luna.

"Four are potted herbs, the other two are small flowering creepers. This first one is called Gold and Red, very sour. It can be boiled into a tea that reduces fever but numbs the extremities, or if refined, it can be powdered down to use as a mild antiseptic. This green spiky one is called Blasted Newt Grass. It can be used to-"

"Woah, hold your storm cloud, why are you giving a full answer instead of the sarcasm I got?" Gloom asked.

Prey blinked slowly up at Gloom, "Because Crimson asked."

"So Crimson gets an over the top answer, and I get a non-answer?" Gloom asked, ear cocked.

"Yes."

"...Well, alright then." Gloom said, '-haven't got a clue, and I don't care-'

"Did you...have a nice flight Crimson? Or get asked to play hoofball again?" Prey asked. Why was that so difficult to ask? It was just a simple, polite question.

"I did not encounter Nimbus Feather to be invited to hoofball again, no." Crimson said. His jaw worked for a moment, "I went to Tulip Beds house." He admitted.

Tulip Bed, the pony whose foal Lemon Pink had kidnapped and erased from the mare's memory in an attempt to contact Prey.

"Oh?" Prey asked cautiously.

"Yes." Crimson confirmed.

After a minute, Gloom prompted, "And? What happened?"

Crimson's wings bunched, "She was not there. She was away at the psychiatric hospital. I spoke with her neighbours instead. Her foal

Rocky Bed has been taken away into foster care."

Prey avoided looking at anyone.

"There is still hope she will recover her memories yet." Gloom said out loud, although his thoughts had grown heavy with resignation.

'-another pony the Night Guard have failed. That I've failed-'

"Why did she not take our advice?" Crimson asked as his tail twitched in frustration, "Why didn't Tulip Bed listen? I warned her it would be tough and she would need to seek help."

Prey felt the strange need to protest, "Maybe this is her seeking help. Ponies-"

Here Prey had to work to keep his lip from curling there;

"-ponies here in Canterlot aren't as strong as you think. Mentally. Few have ever faced real tragedy or loss. They can't do the things we can. But that's not to say that Tulip Bed won't get better, perhaps she's just taking a longer route back to health."

"Luna willing, it'll work out in the end." Gloom agreed, "Hope is hardly lost. It has only been one month. Lieutenant Screech told me the unicorn doctors said it could take many months before her memories return."

"Oh, good. I mean, not good, but good that there is still time left to hope." Crimson said.

"Luna willing." Gloom echoed again. Prey glanced away. He didn't feel guilty per-say about what Lemon Pink had done. But he felt... Something, because it upset Crimson.

"There are still some hours left until T-Day starts, what shall we do until then?" Gloom asked briskly, putting the bad news about Tulip Bed behind them for now, "Who wants to go to the art museum?"

Prey did not want to go to *any* art museum. "Last time we had half a free day-"

"-That does feel like months ago, doesn't it?" Gloom cut in.

"-Yes, quite. Last time, you said you would see about possibly letting me go into the Palace library next time." Prey licked his lips, "Would that still be possible?"

'-oh, he remembered that? I certainly didn't-', Gloom thought, scratching at his chest scar underneath the scarf.

Yes, Prey *did* remember. He hadn't forgotten Gloom's promise for a single second. He'd even sent Lemon Pink into the library ahead of him to have a look. And while all the knowledge Prey wanted to research might be in the restricted section, the rest of the library still held great interest to him. Prey desperately wanted to get inside and start reading as many books as he could get his hooves on.

"We would have to go back to the Palace to visit the library. Seems a shame to waste the rest of the day when we so rarely get out. I think we should go to the art museum today." Gloom decided.

"I've got all these plants to drop off. You want me to walk all around the art museum carrying these? If we went to the library instead, I could go and drop them off at the bunk room too." Prey protested.

"I'm sure you can just leave them at the front desk in the museum." Gloom said, completely unwilling to return to the Palace and waste this rare free time. '-the art museum is pony culture none of us have ever had the chance to see before-'

"The museum will probably be closing soon for the evening. It's already almost four o'clock." Prey tried.

"That's plenty of time." Gloom dismissed Prey's excuse.

"I'm already tired, and there's going to be lots more exercise tonight for T-Day-"

"No, we're going to the art museum now." Gloom snapped at Prey, and if they weren't illusioned, his fangs would've flashed. Prey and Crimson stopped walking. Gloom took a deep breath, letting the

sudden spark of anger pass.

'-that was not called for, and was nothing worth getting worked up over-', Gloom reprimanded himself.

It was their day off. He shouldn't have gotten angry over something so trivial. So why had he? Of course, he knew the answer, they all knew it.

'-I'm still mad at that moon blighted griffin-'

One would've thought that if Gloom was going to get angry, it would've while at working. It was, after all, in that very same occupation which had brought him into conflict with Garrow in the first place, but as usual, things don't work like that. In fact, it was the exact opposite. It was when Gloom was off duty and his guard was down that the lingering stress got the better of him.

Murder and death. Fear and pain. Even after you thought you'd moved on, things would keep coming along to remind you when you least expected it. Silly little things. Time would make the reminders less common, but for now the events were still fresh. Only five nights had passed, after all.

It was a perfectly natural reaction by Gloom. Experiences like those of the cellar and lumberyard never left someone unchanged. The effects varied for everyone, and showed through in different ways, but it would with out a doubt have after effects on Crimson too. And as for Prey, well, wasn't his whole life just one big after effect?

"Right. We're going to the art museum." Gloom repeated. He didn't offer an apology. He didn't want to talk about it. "There's still plenty of time left, and you'll like it Prey, you'll see. And anyway, it'll be good for all of us."

Prey wasn't stupid. If someone with power over you was irrationally angry, you shut up, and kept out of their way.

One of the fourteen whip scars Prey carried was from not following that lesson. Prey hadn't done anything to earn it. Ruin had simply been angry, and Prey happened to be in his line of sight. That was

all the reason it took for the donkey to lay Prey's back open. Life wasn't fair.

'The art museum it is then.'

It was the last tour guide of the day. The paintings and art pieces were all brightly lit, cordoned off to prevent curious foals and sometimes over zealous art fanatics from touching, and preserved under enchanted glass.

Prey shifted from one tired hoof to another, trying to find some comfortable position standing on the hard marble floor.

"Salvor Da Bridle worked on this piece during the later years of his life, as I think you can quite easily see by the fineness of the yellows used in contrast to his earlier well known pieces, such as 'Faces of Harmony', and 'Grand Victory' in Griffonia. Here, we can see how he refined his art style in this recreation of the Cliffs of Dove."

The tour guide droned on, extolling the supposed finery of the painting he was showing the small crowd. Prey, Gloom, and Crimson stood at the back.

This particular painting, one of a miserably large number they'd been shown over the last hour, was a huge canvas piece, and was called 'Mortality at the Cliffs of Dove'. On it, slightly faded paint depicted the cliffs in question. Or rather, the huge rift in the land, the far side shrouded in mist. The artist had taken a few artistic liberties. Prey didn't imagine there'd ever been a real line of pegasi lining up to try, (and fail in vividly over the top portrayed tragedy), to fly across the chasm one at a time.

Honestly, if Prey had wings and could fly, and he saw his fellows leaping off some cliff and plummet as their wings failed to work, he'd take the hint.

The tour guide was somehow still going, his throat by some miracle not having seized up or run dry; "...I think this one portrays with startling poignancy the nature of our own mortality, and the

unconquerable nature of ponies to try against all odds. Only her majesty, Princess Celestia, is made to ascend these planes to a higher existence..."

"By the Night, this is dull." Gloom muttered, deeply regretting his choice to bring them here.

"It was better without the tour guide. I do not need to be told what to think of a painting, thank you very much." Crimson said in quiet agreement.

"And we wouldn't have to spend half an hour on looking at the same piece over and over." Gloom added, tail swishing as he snorted, but softly so not as to distract the rest of the tour group who were listening with rapt attention to the guide.

'-how can they still be interested in what he's saying?-', Gloom though in frank amazement, gazing at the attentive tour group.

Prey finally stopped shifting the small box around in his hooves and cleared his throat. He'd been trying to get up the courage to speak for the last hour, trying to figure out what to say. He hadn't done this before.

Gloom and Crimson glanced at Prey when he cleared his throat, "Here." Prey said, shoving the plain box over to Crimson.

"What is this?" Crimson asked blankly, scooping the box up with a wing.

"A, ah, I got it for you." Prey said.

Gloom and Crimson were both surprised by that, "You bought a gift for Crimson?" Gloom asked in interest.

"Yes. For Crimson." Prey replied, wishing Gloom would shut up and stay out of this. The gift had been for Crimson, not Gloom, so the thestral should keep his mouth shut.

"Why?" Crimson asked blankly.

"Because... Just because it was something you would want." Prey

answered. Because he owed Crimson. This is what you were supposed to do for someone you owed, right? Prey didn't actually know, but he was attempting to try.

"I don't need anything. You didn't need to." Crimson said.

Gloom gave Crimson a not so subtle nudge. Crimson blinked uncomprehendingly at Gloom for a moment as the disguised thestral tried to send the hint. "Say thank you." Gloom muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

"Oh. Oh right, I mean, thank you very much Prey." Crimson said, dispassionately considering the box. He made to put it away in his new saddle bag.

Gloom sighed, "Are you not going to see what Prey got you Crimson?" He prompted.

'-Luna, it's like guiding a foal. Although why Prey did this is beyond me. Didn't think Prey would ever even give somepony a push of a rock-'

"Oh. Right." Crimson said again, halting his actions and opening the box instead.

The plain cardboard opened to reveal a polished ring of thick green stone, resting on a bed of crumpled newspaper. It might've been made from emerald or jade from the deep green of the stone. It certainly looked nice, but what were you supposed to do with it? Put it on a shelf? Make a paperweight?

'-looks niceish, but what practical use is it?-' Gloom thought, rather disapprovingly, '-I thought Prey knew better than that-'

Thestrals had little place for something which had no practical use. They lived spartan lives in austere homes, although Prey had learnt that back in their clans, their culture did go in quite heavily for traditional silver clan jewellery, a bit like zebra's did with gold hoops and earrings. However this ring of dull emerald didn't look to be something that could be worn, and it certainly wouldn't be worn on duty. Which the ISND were basically on all the time.

"What is this supposed to be for?" Crimson asked, examining the gift critically.

"Maybe you could use it instead of one of those metal mane rings?" Prey suggested, gesturing vaguely at Crimson's tied back mane.

Truth be told, it was the only possible use he could think of for his gift. There was nothing else he could've gotten Crimson which he would keep on his person that was not either a weapon, or armour. He would've had some explaining to do if he got any of those for Crimson.

"Maybe." Crimson said.

"You didn't go out any buy anything expensive did you Prey?" Gloom frowned.

"With what mountain of money? But no, it was just something I saw sitting around in a stall I thought Crimson might have a use for. The seller probably found it in his attic left over from his great great grandmare or something." Prey dismissed. It was a lie, but a reasonable one that wouldn't tip Gloom's talent off.

"Then he should not have sold it if it is a family heirloom." Crimson said, closing the box.

"Well he did sell it, and now it's yours." Prey shrugged.

Crimson blinked at him, then put the box away. Gloom gave him another nudge, "Perhaps say thank you?" He suggested, slightly exasperated.

"Thank you, Prey. I will... yes, thank you." Crimson said, turning his head back towards the tour guide who was *still* somehow going on about Salvor Da Bridle.

'He didn't want it.' Prey thought. He'd tried, but he hadn't achieved the outcome he'd wanted. But so what? If Crimson didn't appreciate the gift, it's not like it mattered. Prey's gift had come pretty much out of the blue, so there was no reason Crimson should've liked it.

But Prey had tried. He owed Crimson, even if Crimson didn't like

him. They worked together, relatively well too, but Prey knew that at the end of the day, neither Gloom or Crimson actually liked him.

That was fine. Prey would work on changing that.

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Author's Notes:

This chapter could alternatively be called, "A day in the life of the ISND"
If you've spotted any mistakes, please point them out, thanks!

- Editor and great help: Sweetolebob18

37.3 The Opposite of Consequences

Crimson caught the strike on his wing blade, expertly angled his wing at the exact moment of impact, and sent the blade skittering wide. Too wide. His thestral opponent had put too much force behind the blow, and just for a moment, he was wide open.

Crimson stepped neatly forwards with one perfectly measured pace, and snapped his other wing into the opening so fast it was just a blur.

Dull practice steel met padded neck armour hard.

"Hagk-!" Crimson's opponent spluttered.

Crimson, true to his father's training, was not satisfied to leave it there at one lethal strike, practice or not.

Thwok, *Thack*, *Thwak*

Crimson's training partner was not fast enough to block any of his strikes and was driven against the metal bars. He sagged there for a moment, catching his breath, "By the moon, that was fast." He panted.

Crimson simply blinked and returned to his starting position. He and his opponent were each fitted in padded and weighted training armour and armed with practice blades. They were sparring in the cage, a metal box shaped set of bars which forced the two combatants to fight in a space no more than six yards across. With permission granted to use his weapons once again, Crimson was getting his belated welcome tradition into the Night Guard. It was a bit different from the Royal Guards simpler, and certainly less painful tradition than with the confetti bucket.

Outside the metal cage, the rest of the Night Guard grunted and sweated away, training in the dimly lit hall. Running or flying laps,

lifting weights, sparring with blunted weapons, bucking wooden training dummies, and performing other varied forms of exercise.

Sufficiently recovered, Crimson's opponent pushed himself off the cage bars and grimly threw himself back into his fight.

At that point, Prey stopped watching Crimson beating up his persistent but ultimately out-skilled opponent. The lamb had other things he needed to focus on. Like breathing.

Gloom, once again, wasn't quite sure how he was supposed to get Prey up to Night Guard standards, something that everyone knew was impossible, but the Sargent was determined to die trying. Or rather, have Prey die trying.

Since Prey couldn't physically wield any weapon larger than a knife, or wear any armour, Gloom was forcing him to try and improve his fitness level instead. A pointless endeavour. It didn't matter how strong he got, Prey would still be weaker than everyone else out there. He was a runt, and always would be.

"Well then just train to increase your stamina. Aren't you tired of not being able to keep up with me and Crimson?" Gloom had told him.

Gloom's point was redundant, since he and Crimson both had wings and were only earth bound because of Prey. As long as Prey was in the ISND, they'd always be slower responders than the rest of the Night Guard. Prey didn't point that out in case Gloom got any ideas which involved 'flying' and 'Prey'.

So here Prey was, like a fool, sweating away with the rest of the Night Guard, doing sit ups and squats, jogging laps and trying, (and failing), to lift weights.

"Another set of twenty." Gloom breathlessly ordered Prey, doing his own wing press ups next to the lamb. Prey was too out of breath to say something sarcastic as he completed another sit up, forelegs behind his head. Thank goodness he had his ribbon. He'd had to tie back both of his ears in what looked like a ridiculous pig tail to stop his ears slapping him in the face every time he completed a sit up.

Prey looked stupid and he knew it. He was also sixty years past caring.

'Just another hour,' He told himself as he strained up once again, 'One more hour and T-Day will end and I can get a shower and go to sleep.'

He didn't even care if they didn't go to get something to eat from the mess hall first. He was just so sick of this. 'I can think of fifty better things I could be doing right now. No, fifty and one. I can literally list them off.'

'One, preparing the runes for the two Veropede eggs. Two, continued study of these tracer bands. Three, figuring out how to make a runic array to reflect light around an object. Four,...' And on the list went. It was a way to distract himself from discomfort, something he'd gotten down to a fine art.

The next day, they arose at twelve in the afternoon and started their shift by limping down to the mess hall on complaining legs. Following that, they limped all the way over to Taffy Hopes office.

Although to be accurate, Prey was the only one limping. Gloom and Crimson seemed only mildly strained from the after effects of the intense training day. 'Bastards.'

Gloom visibly did not want to be here outside Taffy's office. His thoughts were making no secret of the fact either, but there was no getting out of the mountain of paperwork awaiting them. So with a hope and a prayer, Gloom reluctantly knocked.

Taffy's magic pulled the door open. Inside, the short, frizzy unicorn in question was sitting at her cluttered desk, scribbling away with a levitated quill, a mug of coffee, and a steely-eyed focus.

"Do please come in." She called without looking up.

"Good afternoon Taffy ma'am." Gloom said, trying not to sound resigned.

Taffy's quill froze and looked up as she recognised; '-that paperwork dodging swindler's voice-'

An enormous grin lit up her features, "Sargent Gloom, *so* good to see you. Or isn't it Sargent First Class now? And you didn't come and tell me, hmm?"

"We've been a little busy, ma'am." Gloom defended himself.

"Too busy to come sign your own promotion papers?"

"Yes. Very busy, as I said."

"No, you said 'a little' busy. A 'little' is not 'very'. And busy doing what anyways? Setting fire to lumber yards?"

"What-? No, we did not set fire to anything, no matter what the newspapers say. That was a salt worker who knocked over a burner." Gloom responded. "Hang on, why do you think that was us? We might not have even been there that night for all you know."

"Because Corporal Sapphire came in to get her leave form and she told me she was on duty and she said she saw you guys leaving past her post, silly." Taffy answered in a cheerful tongue twister.

"That could have been any Night Guard." Gloom said. The ISND had been ordered not to give out any details of their participation to any but Night Guard officers.

"No it was definitely you guys. How many other squads in the Night Guard have a pegasus-"

"Ma'am, there are definitely others too-"

"-and a sheep in them?" Taffy finished, arching one eyebrow mischievously.

Gloom kept his face blank, hoping that, '-Crimson and Prey have the sense to do the same-'

"I can neither confirm nor deny that. If you want to ask anything,

I'll have to direct you to Captain Nighthawk."

"Ha! So it *was* the ISND. Knew it." Taffy exclaimed, thumping the table top. Then she frowned as a stack of papers overbalanced and cascaded to the floor, "Phooey."

Her horn lit up orange and she began to reassemble the fallen pile. Prey backed away from the display of magic. Gloom however leapt upon the opportunity while Taffy was distracted, "Lieutenant Starry Wing said there was a file we needed to pick up. Might I please have it, ma'am?"

"Not so fast Sargent First Class Gloom! You've still got a huge bundle of paperwork and forms to sign. I'll trade you once you're done and not before."

'-was worth a try-', Gloom sighed.

"Alright ma'am, you win. Where is it?" Gloom asked morosely. Prey, who could hear his thoughts, knew that the thestral was not as put out as he let on. In fact, he was almost relieved.

'-still the same old Taffy. Murderous griffins, salt, and bodies, but this hasn't changed-'

"And Crimson, you too got promoted to private first class a while back didn't you? Well done! Your paperwork came across my desk. Hang on, I'll just get it and you can sign that too." Taffy smiled at the pegasus, "So tell me, what have you guys been doing? Being in a special division, you must see lots of interesting stuff."

Crimson blinked slowly at the enthusiastic mare, perhaps thinking over all the stress and near death experiences of the last week.

"We have been doing Princess Luna's work." He finally decided to answer.

"What, is that it? Come on, there must be lots more juicy details. Not all of them can be secret."

When Taffy's attempts at extracting more information from Crimson failed, the unicorn turned her questions on Prey, much to the lamb's distress.

Of course, Prey valiantly tried, (and liked to think he succeeded), in hiding his fear of the unicorn and the magic she possessed. 'Never show weakness.'

His masterful act of normality did have the undesired consequence of meaning everyone thought it was perfectly alright to leave Taffy questioning Prey while they got on with their paperwork. Prey had to fight down the continuing rise of an irrational need to flee.

Taffy blithely ask him one question after another, while her aura continued to float papers and quill around, and Prey increasingly felt like he was getting backed into a corner. Prey tried giving her short, closed ended answers in the hopes of dissuading her, but she *just kept talking*.

'Won't stop. She won't stop talking. Why won't she just leave me alone?'

'Okay, calm down. You've been this close to a unicorn before, and recently too. Taffy isn't hostile, there's no need to panic.' Prey told himself. It wasn't helping.

Just then, someone knocked on the door and pushed it open without waiting for a response, "Taffy, I've got the Day 2 files here. Sandy want's to know how soon you can-oh, pardon me."

The unicorn stallion dressed in the pale khaki uniform of the Office staff stopped on seeing the ISND. He hid it well, but inside he thought some very unflattering things. Prey, unnoticed on the side, backed further away.

"Oh it's no trouble New Star, just leave them here and I'll have them by the end of the day." Taffy chirped.

"I'll come back later then." The stallion said, levitating the papers across while already heading back out.

Prey seized the opportunity.

"I find myself suddenly needing the toilet. Excuse me." Prey announced jumping to his hooves and rushing out the closing door before Gloom or Crimson could say anything.

Taffy had no choice pause mid flow in her ceaseless barrage of questions as her target escaped. She pouted at the wooden door closed, separating her from the; '-cute little distraction from the drudgery of my day job-'

Gloom blinked at the sudden cease of chatter, looking up as his ears caught up with what Prey had said as he realised the lamb had made an escape. Which meant him and Crimson were the only ones left in Taffy's sights.

'-Moon blight-'

On the other side of the door, Prey breathed a silent sigh of relief and calmed himself.

Gloom probably wouldn't be happy about Prey just leaving without asking permission, but Prey didn't care, since it got him away from Taffy before the unicorn went too far and used magic on him. 'I left Crimson behind with Taffy though.' Prey thought guiltily.

Prey pushed himself away from the closed door, he'd said he needed the toilet, so he should probably head that way in case Gloom came looking for him in the next ten minutes. He'd judged the stack of paperwork Gloom had left to complete, and estimated it should take the Sargent that long at least.

Prey glanced both ways up and down the corridor, and hurried off before some other unicorn came looking for the liaisons officer.

The logistics section of the Palace existed more or less as two long corridors, running from one end of the Lower Palace to the other, like a divide. The Guard section was on one side, and the normal Palace on the other. The logistics section existed as the stretch of beach between the land and sea.

This placement was no doubt to accommodate effective

communication between this logistics staff and the political aspects which went on inside the gold and finery of the Upper Palace.

It was quite easy to notice when you crossed this metaphorical strip of sandy beach from one side to the other. The uniform white marble and plank floors of the Guard section changed to the wide red carpeted corridors, with golden patterned columns, and tall satin curtained windows everywhere.

Obviously, in a Palace of this size, with this many people coming and going, a wide scattering of bathrooms and toilets were required as a necessity of nature.

And the closest toilet was just outside of the logistics section, and barely inside what would be the 'Royal Palace'. Prey headed there, since he didn't have to worry about running into any pony nobles, because they wouldn't deign to leave the center of the Palace where the opulence was at its height. Plus, at this time in the afternoon, there wouldn't be any servants or maids passing through on their rounds either.

Come six in the evening however, and the Palace corridors would be swarming with servants like a kicked termite mound. The amount of work needed to keep Canterlot Palace in its pristine condition was simply mind boggling. Family generations had grown up, worked, aged, and passed on their professions to their children all within the Palace.

But that was neither here nor there. The point was, Prey should've been able to make the half-minute trot to the bathroom without having to cross paths with any infuriating ponies. Should've.

Prey slowed, frowning. There was a large floor to ceiling bay window coming up on his right, the sunlight flooding in making the marble of the corridor sparkle. That wasn't what had caught Prey's attention. This set of bay windows had a glass door set in their middle. Which was open.

The door led out onto a small stone balcony. Prey silently moved up to the edge of the bay window to check who was outside.

The balcony looked like it had been created almost as an after thought, tacked onto the side of the Palace to fill some 'balcony' requirement quota.

The balcony was rather plain, and looked like no one ever used it, slivers of wet green moss showing between the paving slabs. There was no view to speak of, every direction blocked off by the soaring walls of the surrounding Palace, although Prey supposed that also meant no one could look in on you either. The balcony must only ever get a few hours sunlight a day, when the sun was high in the sky like now.

Prey peaked out. There was a single grey stone bench occupying almost all of the small balcony. On it sat a lone white mare, her head bowed as she quietly sat. She wore a stylish red silk dress of some regard, and her mane and tail were done up in enormous golden ringlets.

She shifted, raising her head to look up at the blue sky, and Prey saw the straight spiral of her horn rise into view. Disgust and trepidation immediately suffused Prey as he pulled back. A *unicorn*. Never mind, he'd go back and wait for Gloom to finish. The possibility of running into some other unicorn was better than the certainty of having to pass by this one.

Prey turned to leave, but then stopped, his hoof faltering. He cocked his head, not at anything physical, but to something only audible to him as a mind reader.

He listened for about fifteen seconds, and then all at once a vicious smile of pleasure twisted lips, 'Oh but this is wonderful to hear. What are the chances?'

What had made Prey happy was not anything wholesome, but rather the suffering of another. It was cruel, it was spiteful, it didn't give him any true happiness, but it was close enough. The world wasn't fair. It took and took and kept taking and hurt you.

So when the world finally served up even a sliver of what you'd endured to someone more deserving, it helped soothe the jealously and made the bitterness sweet.

The unicorn mare in front of him was wallowing in self pity and sorrow. She didn't look like it on the outside, but inside her thoughts were despairing. She hated herself. She felt weak, powerless, and pathetic.

How did Prey know? Because she was calling herself those very same names in her head.

One of the reasons why? This unicorn mare was a magical cripple who couldn't even open a door with her magic. Her own self depreciating words, not his.

What was Prey going to do with this knowledge?

He was going to enjoy this unicorn's suffering. He had some time to kill until Gloom came looking for him.

The mare was gazing up into the clear blue sky with unseeing eyes, the pleasant coolness from the stone balcony permeating the area despite the sun. She started when Prey appeared and plopped himself down on the other end of the stone bench.

Large, rose pink eyes perfectly matched to her silk dress blinked at Prey in surprise. They were wet, but they weren't red or crying, and her face was expertly made up.

"Hi." Prey smiled.

"Hi," The mare returned softly, unsure. "Who are you, little filly?"

Her words were kind and polite, but her thoughts despaired at even seeing Prey, '-pure and innocent. Oh if only I were young and could start my mistake of a life again-'

"I'm Prey. It's wonderful to meet a unicorn like you, Miss...?"

'-worthless-'. "My name is Saffron Swirl. I suppose you're a bit young to know me though." She said, in a perfect Upper class Canterlot accent.

'-that means I don't have to lie and pretend to be what I'm not in front of a child-'

"That's a nice name." Prey chimed.

"How did you get here in the Palace? Are you lost? Perhaps you need help trying to find your parents?" Saffron Swirl suggested to Prey kindly, thinking:

'-I can do this one thing right before the end. Some small act of worth-'

Prey smiled right back at her, "No, I'm perfectly fine Miss Swirl. How about you? Are you perfectly fine?"

"Yes I'm fine, darling." She said, smile not faltering in the least.

'-I'm not fine. I'm a pathetic, useless, scaredy-cat. I'm just stalling-'

"Are you sure your parents aren't going to be worried about you, ah, Prey did you say your name was?" Saffron asked.

'-Prey. What a horrible name, oh it makes my heart hurt to think about-'

"It's okay. I'm positive my parents aren't looking for me." Prey shook his head, peering up at her with eyes full of curiosity.

"What about you miss Swirl? Aren't your parents worried and looking for you?" He asked, not a single flicker of malicious intent in his eyes as he asked the innocent seeming question.

The question was cruel, so cruel it almost broke Saffron's desperate mask. Prey knew how much it hurt the unicorn.

'-I'm a disappointment, a disowned mistake. They wanted a better daughter than me-', Saffron held it together though, nothing showed on her heart shaped face, "Oh, I'm a grown pony. Your mama and dada don't need to chase after you all the time when you're all grown up."

Prey's teeth showed in his smile, "I'd love to grow up. Are both your

parents unicorns just like you?"

"Why yes they are. Pureblooded for centuries." Saffron said with a wan smile.

'-and I'm a disgrace to them all. Pureblooded failure more like, one who can't use magic-'

"You're a noble? And a unicorn? And you've been in Canterlot so long? Wow, you must be amazing at magic then." Prey said in wonderment, enjoying the misery he was causing the mare.

"Well, sometimes I suppose..." She trailed off, looking back up at the sky so she didn't have to look at Prey.

'-and now I'm lying to a little filly. I'm despicable on top of being worthless-'

"Wow," Prey repeated again, stars in his eyes, "I've always wondered what would've happened if I'd been born a unicorn. I could live in Canterlot, where all the rich ponies live. And I'd have magic just like you!"

'-oh no, here it comes-', Saffron thought in dread.

"Show me some magic Miss Saffron Swirl. Please?"

"Ah, I'm sorry but I can't right now, perhaps another time?" '-I'm a worthless, worthless liar-'

"Pretty please? Just for me?"

"Another time, good things come to those who wait. I need some time to prepare. It'll be worth the wait, I promise." Saffron said, smiling down at Prey.

'-liar. But it won't matter by then, it'll all be over. What's one more little lie at this point?-'

"Awwww. Alright then. But you promise another time?" Prey insisted, twisting the knife.

Saffron hid the swallow she had to choke down before she could speak, "Yes, I promise. I'll come and find you and your family when the time comes, alright?" She said softly.

"I'll wait for you then Miss Saffron. Please don't take too long though. Please?"

"I won't." Saffron lied.

'-I'm such a bad mare. Disappointing a filly on my last day. Oooh, why am I so useless?-'. Her long eyelashes quivered briefly, but not in any breeze. Her mask was starting to slip, just the slightest bit.

Prey kept digging, enjoying tearing her down. She was a unicorn, she deserved it. "You're very pretty. Are you an actor? I bet you must be very famous if you are."

"Close. I'm a model actually. That means I wear clothes ponies design on stage." Saffron answered, trying to keep her smile up.

'-I'm a fake. They all look at me up there but I'm not the pony they want me to be. I'm worthless, weak, a liar-'

"So you *are* famous then?" Prey asked, leaning forwards.

"I suppose I am." Saffron said, smiling indulgently. '-fake, fake, fake, fake-'

"Loads of ponies must look up to you."

"That's very flattering, but I'm hardly the only model on stage. There are lots of others as well." Saffron waved it off.

'-deceiver, liar, fake-'

"But you're so great. There must loads that look up to just you." Prey pressed.

"Maybe. I can only hope."

'-hope that they can hate me less when I'm gone-'

"They must love you." Prey enthused.

"Oh I don't rightly know." She shrugged off hoofedly. '-they've never seen the real me. They wouldn't love me then-'

"So what are you doing out here by yourself, Miss Saffron?" Prey asked brightly.

"It's a beautiful day. I'm enjoying the warmth of the sun with some peace and quiet."

'-getting up the courage to finally decide how to end it all-', Saffron answered in her head.

"Oh? Why's that?" Prey asked.

"Sometimes grown ups just want to be alone I suppose." She shrugged, golden curls rising and falling.

'-because I'm a failure. I should've been born an Earth pony. Because it's easier to die than to keep living this lie-'

Prey leaned back on the bench. This mare was utterly pathetic. Seeing how far she sank every time he asked even a simple question disgusted him. 'The world isn't fair, so you've decided that's enough of an excuse to leave? You live in a land of privilege and wealth, protected by the Sun Goddess. You've never known a day of hunger or fear in your life. And you're just going to give up?'

Prey had wished for death more times than he wanted to remember, but he'd never followed through. He was still here. After everything, he still came out the other side alive. Broken and twisted, yes, but still breathing.

Suddenly this wasn't amusing any longer. Prey's smile dimmed and his bitter joy turned sour.

'You really are worthless Saffron Swirl, just like you think.' Prey decided. Why had he wasted his time here? Enough of this.

"You know, I do believe I'm quite done here." Prey declared, hopping down off the stone of the bench.

"Oh?" Saffron asked, perfect voice mildly thrown as she raised one gentle eyebrow.

"Yes, I have other things I could be wasting time on." Prey said, trotting back through the glass door.

Saffron put on a smile, even though Prey wasn't looking back to see it, "Foals do have such a way of phrasing things." She mused, but even the musing was an act, a lie to herself.

"Have fun making your decision." Prey called back as he left.

"My decision?" Prey heard Saffron's voice float after him.

Prey didn't waste any more breath on the mare as he headed back to Taffy's office. 'Make the decision of how you're going to end your sorry existence, some way which doesn't waste any more of my own life.'

Saffron Swirl, a failure of a unicorn, here one minute and quite literally gone forever the next. 'What a disappointment. As a magically crippled unicorn, I can't even take any satisfaction in knowing that soon another one of Celestia's chosen will be no more, since she doesn't count.'

His mouth tasted bitter.

Arriving back at the ISND office, Gloom passed the file Taffy had been holding hostage over to Prey.

"What's it say?" Prey asked, putting the file down on the floor so he could open it.

"Paperwork."

Prey looked at his Sargent, "Yes, but what is it about?"

"I told you, paperwork. For you to do." Gloom said.

'-teach you to abandon me to have to deal with Taffy by my

lonesome. I need a break from paperwork-'

Prey gave an exaggerated, long suffering sigh, and began to read the file. Crimson came over to see what it said as well. Prey shuffled out of reach but didn't protest the pegasus reading over his shoulder.

"It's just a follow up incident report." Crimson announced.

"Well, there's a bit more in it than just that, but essentially yes." Prey said, speaking out loud for Gloom's benefit.

"A follow up on what specifically? We've got a lot of old incidents on file." Gloom said, looking at the stacked ISND shelves.

"That one about those disappearances in the village over the mountain." Prey said.

"Not ringing any bells. What's the village name?"

"Mayflower." Crimson read off, answering for Prey.

"Mayflower..." Gloom mused, "No, I must've forgotten. Remind me."

"Three months ago, fifteen ponies vanished from Mayflower without a trace. The Royal Guard went out and searched, but couldn't find anything. No tracks, motive, or bodies."

"This was a murder investigation?" Gloom asked looking up sharply. '-fifteen ponies?-'

"No, it's a disappearance report. But for fifteen people. In the end, the Guard had no choice but to return empty hoofed. It says here that House Fell even funded a small search expedition when someone petitioned them, but no luck."

"Some*pony*. Why though?"

"Why did they fund a search? Doesn't say. Charity? Flight of fancy? A vested interest? What's a few thousands bits to a noble house?" Prey shrugged.

"Well, since the villagers weren't found, I don't suppose it really matters." Gloom sighed.

Crimson glanced at the map they had on their wall, looking for the named village. However, this map only included the lands inside the borders of Equestria and thus, he couldn't find it. Crimson flicked his wing and turned to Gloom.

"Sir, fifteen ponies is a lot. Surely they could've found them with scrying. I mean, I have heard that magic can be used to find anything or anypony. I understand a small village may not have skilled unicorns, but surely Canterlot would've used some of their own sir."

Gloom stared, bowled over, "That's...That's right. Why by Luna's starry mane haven't they done that already?"

'-how has nopony thought of this already?!-', Gloom thought in outrage.

Prey raised his hoof before the Sargent could grow too incredulous. He waited until he had both of their attention, "Why? Well that's simple. It's for the very same reason we didn't use divination to find Rocky Bed. Or scry who was starting the riots. Or who the salt dealers were. Or who Garrow was."

"Because none of us are unicorns?" Crimson suggested.

"True, but no. For that matter, it's the same reason why the Guard doesn't solve every single crime immediately."

'And also why they couldn't use it to track the Resistance's camp down during the war.' Prey privately added in his head.

"So it's because they can't." Gloom realised, calming back down.

'-oh, that makes sense. Damned if that wouldn't be convenient though-'

"Why can't it be done?" Crimson asked. "If you know, I mean."

Prey took a moment to clear his throat. Alright, better not appear

too knowledgeable here, just provide a concise answer instead.

"I'm no expert," He started by covering himself, "But divination doesn't work like that. From my understanding, it's very imprecise, inaccurate, and often just plain wrong. And the biggest limiting factor is you can't scry what you don't already know, much like how a unicorn can't unassisted teleport to an area they haven't been before or can't see."

"Can't scry what you don't already know?" Gloom repeated.

Prey nodded, "Take Rocky Bed for example. No one-"

"-No pony."

"-No one had met him. Familiarity begets clarity. They had a photo, but that would only be enough for a tenuous link at best. Even if there'd been a unicorn skilled enough in divination to try, and *even* if the spell had worked, probably all they would've seen would be the same photo they'd tried to scry him from. Or if they were very lucky, they would've actually seen Rocky Bed. And that's it."

Prey made a 'poof'ing motion in the air, "Rocky Bed. That's all. They wouldn't have seen his surroundings, if anyone else was with him, if he was tied up, if he was awake, what condition he was in, or if he was even still alive."

Prey shrugged, "Simply put, it's very limited. A skilled diviner might be able to scry their own house, and *maybe* see their family if they were inside. But if there was an intruder? They wouldn't see anything. Or perhaps they would. A blank space maybe? Or not. Who knows? It's apparently different for everyone."

"Everypony." Gloom corrected.

"Whatever." Prey dismissed.

"That was quite the detailed explanation. Did you look into divination before?" Gloom enquired.

'Oops. *Too* knowledgeable.' Prey thought.

"Sort of. For about ten minutes worth of reading. That's how little there was on the topic."

"Well, good job looking into it anyway. I didn't think about it, but it would've really been great if we could solve all our cases like that." Gloom sighed.

'Suuuure. That's why I was looking into it. To help solve crimes.'

"Well, good try Crimson, but it seem's that idea is a dead end." Gloom said, turning back to Prey, "So that report...?" He prompted, nodding to the file still in the lamb's hooves.

"Right, anyway, this follow up report is from the couple of Royal Guard scouts sent to Mayflower to see if anything had changed, or if any of the missing ponies had returned." Prey said.

"The Guard went all the way out there? Fifteen ponies is a lot, but surely the villagers would have reported if anything had changed." Crimson said.

"No. Remember, it's on the other side of the Ridgeback mountain range. There's no fast or reliable form of communication. Something could quite easily have changed but no one took the time to report it to a Guard force who weren't able to do anything about it the last time." Prey explained, flicking through the report again.

"Things are different over the mountains." He added in a mutter.

Gloom frowned at Prey's disparaging tone about the Royal Guard, but didn't chastise him, "So, did anything change?" He questioned.

Prey closed the file, "No. They're still missing, no new developments."

Gloom grimaced, "That's most unfortunate. File it on the shelf with the first one. Wherever that is." He said.

'-what could've caused a whole fifteen ponies to disappear? Luna watch over them wherever they are-'

"Didn't you say your home village is over the mountains too Prey?"

Crimson abruptly asked.

"Yes, but 'over-the-mountains' is a big place and there's more than one range. I don't come from anywhere near Mayflower if that's what you're asking. If the Guard haven't found anything, and nothing's changed, then there's little more we can do." Prey said, deflecting their attention as he closed and went to file the folder. 'Anywhere near' was subjective to what you counted as 'near'.

"Unfortunate." Crimson echoed. "That the fifteen ponies have not yet returned, I mean. Not that we cannot do anything." He paused, "Although that is unfortunate too."

"There are too many of these types of files on the shelf," Gloom muttered quietly, "Because those are the ponies who need the Night Guard's help the most."

Unfortunately, wishful thinking never changed the facts. There was nothing further the three of them could do. So they returned to working on other, more solvable and mundane cases.

At lunch, or everybody else's dinner, they had a fight.

'They', in this case, being the Royal Guard and the Night Guard.

The ISND weren't there to see what started the fight in the mess hall. They only missed the beginning by about thirty seconds, but by then things had already escalated.

"What's happening?" Gloom asked as they stepped through the mess hall doors. His voice was lost under the rising shouts.

"Get 'im, get 'im!"
"Stop it, you're gonna' get us all in trouble!"
"Watch out Berry, from the left!"

The cheers and shouts were coming from the Royal Guards, their opposites in the Night Guard were barely making a sound as they

squared off against each other across a cleared impromptu circle.

In the middle of the circle, four ponies were duking it out on top of a long table, trays, and plates discarded.

Two thestrals, obviously Night Guards, against a unicorn and a pegasus. Prey's heart jumped and he immediately started looking around for cover in case magic started getting thrown around indiscriminately.

It was more a brawl than a real fight. All the combatants were armoured, but none were armed, although in the unicorn's case that hardly mattered. However none of them were really trying to kill each other. Just hurt lots.

"Get im, get 'im!"

One of the thestral's was locked in a wing grapple with the pegasus, each straining to overbalance the other.

"Teach you to stick your tail where it's not wanted!"

The unicorn was using his blue aura to easily keep his opponent out of reach, throwing the thestral all over the table. The Night Guard was putting up a fight, twisting and bucking ferociously to break out of the unicorn's grip over and over, but never long enough to get clear before the unicorn caught him again.

Prey's eyes darted about the crowd. Wasn't someone going to stop this? Had an officer been called? There were two trained military groups facing off against one another, shouldn't that be a cause for reasonable concern? The Royal Guards heavily outnumbered the Night Guard, and had unicorns to boot.

Prey looked at Gloom, scared that the Sargent would want to do something responsible, like try to fly into the middle of it and stop the fight.

Unfortunately, from the set of Gloom's jaw, it looked like that's *exactly* what he was planning.

"Don't-" Prey began, but Crimson was already preemptively moving

past them towards the fighters. Prey's eyes widened. 'No, Crimson can't get involved! I've got to keep him out of danger, I owe him.'

But before Crimson could, a pony pushed his way out of the crowd and leapt onto the table between the four Guards, "Stop it! Stop fighting!" He shouted, rearing up and shoving out a hoof in each direction to separate them. The Earth pony seemed familiar to Prey.

The Royal Guards were momentarily stunned that one of their own would intervene, so much so that the unicorn dropped his telekinesis. The freed thestral was back on his hooves in a heartbeat, poised to resume fighting. The crowd shouted their discontent.

"What are you doing? Get out of the way of the fight!"
"You're siding with them? They're trying to get us all fired!"
"Out of the way greenie!"

Now Prey placed the Earth pony in his head. It was that same one who they'd taken with them when they found the cellar. Scenic Paint was his name, or Paint Spot as he preferred to be called. 'I thought he'd run away or quit.'

"Stop fighting please. This is silly, why are we fighting? We all serve the Princesses don't we?" Scenic Paint called. He did not look at all comfortable about the judicatory role he'd thrust himself into.

The unicorn Royal Guard angrily shoved Scenic aside, "You're embarrassing yourself greenie, get out of the way."

Scenic Paint swallowed visibly, but he stepped back into the unicorn's path, "We shouldn't be fighting."

"We didn't start any fight." The pegasus interjected hotly. His nose was bleeding.

"Yeah!" The crowd joined in, "They started it."

"They started a Celestia damned witch hunt for no reason!"
"But now they're afraid to finish it."
"Those bats have been trying to pin the fire on us."
"They haven't got any backbone to fight a stallion face to face!"

"But those Guards were traitors!" Scenic loudly exclaimed, "It's not anypony's fault those guys decided to betray their oath to the Royal Guard."

"I don't care about any of that, those ponies made their choice." The angry pegasus retorted," I'm fighting these buckers because they think they can get away with it. You hear that? Yes I'm talking about you!" He shouted, glaring at the Night Guards.

"You haven't fooled anypony! We all know what you're trying to do, worm your way in and try to take over just like your Nightmare did."

The Night Guard, both the surrounding thestrals and the two who'd been fighting didn't make any move to lower themselves by arguing back. A smart choice. There were almost four times as many Royal Guards as them, they'd be shouted down. Don't start a contest you can't win.

Many murmurs of agreement arose from the crowd for the pegasus' words, but no one agreed too loudly for fear of getting recognised and called out later.

However others looked around uneasily. They were just interested in the fight. They weren't looking to risk their job or spread dissent by badmouthing a Princess. They might privately agree, but they were smart enough to keep such opinions quiet.

"Attention!" A magically enhanced voice boomed from the doors, full of authority.

It was like a whip crack. Instinctively, the Guards all came to attention. Prey looked where everyone was looking and saw a very displeased Shining Armour standing in the entrance, with Lieutenant Swift Arrow at his right, and some Sargent on the left. The Captain's blue eyes were burning.

He glared for a long moment, letting everyone work out just how much trouble they were in.

"What is this, bickering like foals? Is this my Guard?" Shining

Armour barked, sweeping his gaze around. Shining Armour was unquestionably a born leader. He obviously both expected and demanded the Guards respect, and he radiated an intimidating aura of displeasure.

No one dared answer him.

Shining Armour snorted, "Enough is enough. No more of this nonsense. It's *disgraceful*. Didn't you learn as foals, it you can't say anything nice and get along, keep your traps shut?"

The Royal Guards looked embarrassed, and their hastily adopted masks of stoicism did a poor job of hiding it. In their turn, the thestrals coolly regarded Shining Armour. They also stood at attention, and although they offered no hint of a challenge, it was obvious they were not cowed. Shining Armour was not their captain. They served Nighthawk and Luna, and no one else.

"Clean this up," Shining ordered into the deafening silence, indicating the table, "And you five. You're now suspended. Follow me."

"Me?" Squeaked Scenic Paint, who'd only been trying to stop the fight.

"Did somepony say something?" Shining Armour roared.

Scenic's ears went straight back and he froze.

"That's what I thought. Now follow me, your disciplinary hearings will be held immediately. Sargent," Shining Armour turned to the unidentified unicorn on his right, "Go and get Captain Nighthawk. Tell him to meet me in my office. These trouble makers will be waiting for him to join us."

No one said a word as the five unfortunates stiffly got down off the table and filled out after the furious Captain.

Lieutenant Swift Arrow, who had remained behind to clean up, was fuming.

"Disgraceful, all of you. I was lead to believe you were the the finest

Her Majesty had to offer. I hear some ponies here have ambitions of getting into the Solar Guard? Well you can just forget it after this shameful display. Disqualified and kicked from the program on the spot! Foals throwing your toys out the pram." He ranted at them.

That was just the start. He went on for a full fifteen solid minutes, seemingly without needing to breathe as he slated all of them, regardless of rank and position for this foolery.

Finally he seemed to run out of steam, or perhaps just patience, because he left. Silently, the two Guard sections returned to eating, not looking at one another.

The only one who seemed to have enjoyed the Guards dressing down was Cookie. She stood with her ladle and smirked out at them all from the kitchen hatch, looking for all the world like some overlord surveying her minions.

The animosity between the Royal and Night Guard was coming to a head. What was going to happen now? What would the ISND do if the Royal Guard specifically turned their anger on their unit, the ones who had conducted the investigation? Possibly nothing, possibly something.

Prey had always known pony racism wasn't something which could so easily be overcome with something as simple as an order to integrate from Luna. There would be violence yet before this thestral integration was over.

The only questions was: Would it be now, or would it successfully be delayed again?

Prey anxiously glanced at Crimson. A pegasus throwback who grew up as a thestral and was rejected. Prey didn't care about the rest of the clanners, only about what might happen to this one.

Crimson was just the type to stand up for what he believed in. That worried Prey. He couldn't see Crimson backing down from doing what was right, even if faced with a unicorn. The Royal Guard wasn't filled with magical failures like Saffron Swirl. Like she *was*.

'Don't do anything suicidal Crimson, please.' Prey thought.

The oppressive silence over the mess hall continued.

Prey put the finished paper he held down, "Another what?"

Prey glanced sideways to Crimson, who's blank look proved he'd heard their Sargent right after all. Crimson had his helmet off. He didn't have the green stone mane band Prey had given him. In fact, Crimson hadn't worn it at all yet.

"Why, sir? I mean, why does Captain Nighthawk feel this is necessary?" Crimson asked.

"Short answer?" Gloom sighed, rubbing his eyes, "Because of the fight in the mess hall. The Night Guard has got to prove we aren't showing any favouritism. So now we've all got to get investigated too."

"That won't go down well with either side. The Night Guard has only recently been reconstituted, so how could they've been part of the salt trade? And the Royal Guards won't like it because when we don't find anyone in the Night Guard guilty, they'll just accuse us of favouritism." Prey said bluntly.

"It's *anypony* Prey. And when I said we, I meant we're the ones going to be getting investigated. As in, the entire Night Guard. By the Royal Guard." Gloom said.

"That's going to go down even less well." Prey summed up.

"No," Gloom agreed, lip curling in distaste, "It's not. In fact, I think you're significantly underselling how 'less well' it's going to go down."

"I'm assuming that any Royal Guard investigators are supposed to be impartial, right sir?" Crimson asked.

"Yes, just like we were." Gloom answered.

"That's not going to happen, is it sir?" Crimson asked flatly.

"Nnnnope."

"And guess who's going to be first on their target list?" Prey piped up with sarcastic cheer, "I'm betting it's the ISND."

"Oh really? I would never have guessed." Gloom returned just as sarcastically, slumping in his chair. None of his frustration was aimed at them, but rather at all the inter Guard political conflicts he could see coming in the near future.

'-and we're inevitably going to end up getting involved in something way beyond our experience again. Luna damn it-'

The news came that Sea Shores had died.

The critically injured mare had awoken unexpectedly from her coma in the night. It was assumed she'd panicked, disoriented in the dark and high on drugs, and she had pulled out her wires and tried to run. In her delirium, Sea Shores never noticed her hoof was cuffed to the bed.

Sea Shores was found dead in the morning by the nurse, twisted face down and dangling by one leg.

Gloom hadn't known what to say to Prey. Neither had Screech who'd delivered the news. Could her death really be attributed to Prey? Could he reasonably be blamed?

Prey hadn't forced her out of her bed, but he'd been the reason she was in the hospital in the first place. Did that make a portion of the blame his? If so, how much? Fifty percent? More? Less?

'-I don't know-', Gloom thought, '-I don't know what the right answer is. I don't think there is one-'

Prey didn't say anything either way, either to assert his innocence, or express his regret. He would've, if asked, but no one did. So the skeleton was pushed into the closet, and by silent agreement, left

there to accumulate dust.

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[[[Bonus Picture - Saffron Swirl]]]

https://imgur.com/RK3OoUz

Author's Notes:

Hello to all who may/are reading this. Hope it was a decent chapter, but if you spotted any mistakes again, please point them out! Thanks.

(Even had time to make a silly picture to go with the chapter today)

Editor: **Sweetolebob18**

38.3 Don't pull on the Stitching

The Night Guard, and the Royal Guard.

There were some ponies who questioned the naming of the Night Guard on its creation. If it was called the 'Night' Guard, shouldn't that make the Royal Guard actually the 'Day' Guard instead?

The name could be a bit misleading, but ultimately, it was an unimportant difference.

A much more prevalent, and certainly more relevant difference you could hold up as an example, was the operational procedure time each took when they decided to do something.

When Nighthawk ordered the ISND to carry out the investigation for spies and traitors inside the Royal Guard, they started immediately and it only took them three days. While this was partially because of the names of some traitorous Guards Prey already had from Garrow's pillaged memories, there'd still only been the three of them working on the task.

On the other hoof, the Royal Guard were bringing in independent Royal inspectors to carry out their retaliatory investigation. It would take a full week before those ponies were even available, and once here, the inspection was scheduled to take a further two whole weeks.

Three days versus two weeks.

The Night Guard was a quarter of the size of the Royal Guard. How under the moon was it going to take two whole weeks? It was one unspoken insult after another, implying there could be so much wrong with the Night Guard that it required a full two weeks worth of investigation.

Prey bet the *actual* reason was because these independent Royal Inspectors charged by the hour, and intended to drag the job out for as long as possible.

To nobody's surprise, tensions between the Night and Royal Guard were at an all time high, and tolerance was at an all time low.

Nighthawk was not happy. The Night Guard was not happy. Over on their side of the line, the Royal Guard were the mirror image. If the Princesses cared, they weren't bothering to step in. Likely they found amusement in watching their devoted, almost worshipful oath bound Guards pitted against each other. Like some sort of game, or test.

Gloom, (because of all the recent events the ISND had taken part in), had become a more closely included member of the Night Guard's inner command structure. He was ordered to come to a lot more of the meetings, which thankfully Nighthawk had little patience for and thus always kept brief.

That wasn't to say Gloom was summoned to *all* the important meetings, far from it, there were plenty the ISND didn't attend. Still, he was required to go to a fair number of them. And where Gloom went, Prey and Crimson were bound to follow.

Even though Gloom had very little to contribute in these meetings, (being the least experienced and acutely aware of it), he was still included. It was the curse of competence. Prove yourself capable once, and forever after more will be expected of you. The upside was it did mean the three of them were well informed of the approaching inspection. And it *was* surprising, because apparently, Shining Armour was not too keen on the upcoming inspection of the Night Guard either.

Prey would've expected the exact opposite from the Royal Guard captain. Shining Armour's motives however were far from selfless. What he *really* objected to wasn't the biased inspections the lords and nobles were demanding, but rather the political factions interfering in 'Guard Business'.

"We could've put this all behind us. Now instead leaving us to do our jobs, those penpushers are purposefully rocking the boat. Celestia knows we've already got enough work what with the upcoming Gala."

Prey spat on all of them, (metaphorically), with their political infighting and posturing and backbiting. It was only a taste of what went on in the courts of the nobles and politicians, but Prey would've loved nothing more than to watch all of Canterlot burn.

'Wait, no, what about Crimson? I'd have to get him out first. Have Lemon kidnap him and get him out beforehoof?'

"It is ready?" Lemon Pink asked.

With a blink, Prey refocused himself on the bathroom. He shook his head vigorously, ears flapping. "Yes, the arrays are ready." He answered. His mind had been wandering.

To be completely honest, he'd actually been distracting himself because he wasn't looking forwards to what they were about to do.

The two of them stood in the Palace toilets, or rather one of the ones closest to the bunk room. Gloom and Crimson were asleep, or Prey hoped they were. He needed to work uninterrupted, and this was the best place available.

So Lemon had hung an 'Out of Order' sign on the door, using her magic to turn the tumblers in the lock to 'locked'. Hopefully that would be enough. The toilets had been checked for magic, and it was clean. Figuratively. Who'd want to go so far as to enchant a bathroom anyway?

Weirdly, the spotless, white tiled bathroom provided an excellent place to work. Although the atmosphere *really* didn't fit, not for the kind of thing he and Lemon Pink were about to do.

One would expect candles and shadows, blood circles and hooded robes.

That was stupid. A robe would just get in your way. And it was bright morning outside, he didn't need candles. Why would you try to do something complicated and delicate with poor lighting? Unless maybe you could see in the dark. Which Prey couldn't. Perhaps that might be something he could look into improving in

the future?

He was just delaying once again.

Prey had been preparing himself for this since he'd stolen the two veropede eggs from that incompetent shop keeper. Time to actually go through with it.

Mentioning the Underground Market, Lemon Pink had been busy down there these last few days while Prey had unwillingly been equally busy, here involved in Guard politics.

Prey had set aside a good portion of the recovered gold from Garrow specifically for Lemon to spend on looking for overlooked magical artifacts. Whether that be through bribes, obtaining information, hiring a thief, or just straight up buying the object in question.

That wasn't to say she'd managed to locate anything of real value.

So far, he'd merely been able to obtain, through proxy, a lumpy stone which was always seven and a half degrees hotter than the surrounding temperature, a strange glass prism which filtered light into component parts which so far were completely random each time, a sewing needle which'd been hinted to have come from the great witch Selenia but was really just plain iron, (a big disappointment), and an old, yellowed, paperback journal which Lemon had judged might contain some obscure magical knowledge. It didn't.

Perhaps mildly interesting as paperweights, but otherwise utterly useless to Prey.

If anything, it was indicative of the level of magical artifacts and secrets passing through Canterlot's Underground Market. Meaning; utterly laughable and not serious in the least. For goodness sake, ponies down there thought trafficking in bones hundreds of years old that had been snuck out from archaeological digs was bad.

Prey took a deep breath and nodded to Lemon Pink, "Alright. Let's begin stage one."

From under his wool, Prey pulled out two small pieces of wood, about the length of his hoof, and placed them on the bathroom floor tiles. You couldn't see it with your naked eye, but each section of wood was crawling with identical runes.

Each piece represented about ten hours of work. Prey'd had to secretly stay up late every night, (or rather early every morning), when Gloom and Crimson were asleep this past week and a half to make these. Prey made sure the two array bearing pieces of wood were a good distance apart. Satisfied they were aligned, he closed his eyes and started drawing more runes out in a wide circle around him and Lemon.

It was slow work, and as always, mentally draining. Prey's strength slowly leaked out of his limbs as he carefully poured it into the lesser runes. Patience was the key. Prey kept methodically going. Lemon didn't move or try to help, she would just get in the way. For as of yet unascertained reasons, Prey was far more competent with runes despite Lemon having a copy of all his memories.

Prey wasn't building any complicated runic arrays here, that wasn't needed, just a few basic ones to act as set up for what they were about to do.

It only took Prey about half an hour to finish. Lemon and him were left in the middle of the circle, each with one of the pieces of wood in front of them.

"That's stage one completed," Prey said, shaking out his hoof, "Stage two, begin."

Lemon Pink didn't need to be prompted. She'd already removed her maids uniform and folded it neatly by the sink, but not before taking out five small glass vials from the uniform's pockets. Two were filled with a mucky green sludge, and the other three with a yellow liquid. Now, Lemon Pink levitated the two green ones over, taking one for herself and giving the other to Prey.

Prey flicked open the top and with a grimace. Holding his nose, he

drank it all down in one gulp. It tasted exactly how it looked. Like sour mud.

Lemon Pink had done the same in drinking hers, and now they stood silently looking at each other, feeling very introspective in the silent bathroom as they waited for the effects of the poison to show.

Thorn Root poison. It numbed your entire body. The more concentrated the dose, the more potent the effects. Prey did not want to feel what they were about to do. This poison was made from the Thorn Root they'd bought off that illicit underground market, as were the other three vials of yellow antidote. Three because you always make a spare antidote.

Veropede eggs were an interesting and scary thing. It was very rare to ever encounter a veropede, rarer to survive said encounter, and even rarer to find not one, but *two* eggs unplanted.

Veropedes themselves were also very interesting creatures. They either hatched their young live and squirming, or they instead planted the eggs. It seemed to vary on a number of environmental factors such as season and availability of territory. An interesting, but ultimately irrelevant side note, was that both the male and the female could lay hatches, because nature said so.

Planting an egg did not refer to anything so nice as burying it in the soil. An adult veropede would instead catch a live animal, like a boar or cougar, and implant the eggs into the unfortunate creature, much like some species of wasps. After about two weeks of absorbing blood and energy from the host animal, the eggs would hatch, and eat their way out. Utterly revolting.

An unpleasant tingling coldness spread through Prey, starting from his lips and seeping outwards at an uneven rate. It was a very unnerving sensation, to have random bits of your body loosing sensation. Like slowly dying.

"The effects have started. You?" Prey asked, slurring slightly.

"Yes, I am experiencing the effects too." Lemon nodded in agreement, her head bobbing about on her neck.

"Enough to not feel anything?" Prey asked.

"Yes, Prey."

"Alright, we'll do you first." Prey said. It was getting a little hard to stand up. Not being able to feel your legs really threw your sense of balance for a loop.

Lemon's horn lit up silver, and she levitated one of their two veropede eggs above her piece of wood. The veined egg looked dull and unresponsive, like a stone, yet inside a monster embryo slept, just waiting for a food source.

"Ready." Lemon said, voice steady.

Prey activated the runic circle around them, and the array glowed for a fraction of a moment. Lemon Pink's piece of wood abruptly jerked, and the egg Lemon Pink held was snatched from the air by an invisible force and flew to the wood. Invisible, the runes from the wood began to crawl off and onto the veropede egg, the wood smoking and curling as the runes shifted medium.

As the last of the runes finished migrating, the length of wood was left as little more than a crumbled piece of charcoal.

"Don't touch the egg, use your magic only. It will bond with the first flesh it touches." Prey warned unnecessarily. Lemon already knew all this but he felt compelled to speak the reminder again.

Lemon used her aura to float the now rune covered egg up. She didn't hesitate or brace herself. Rather anticlimactically, she pressed the vein covered egg to her side, just below her ribs where there was a body cavity.

It vanished, sinking through Lemon's flesh like a pebble into a pond. If it wasn't for the Thorn Root, she would've been doubled over on the tiles, crying in pain.

Prey blinked at Lemon, and she blinked back.

"Feel anything?"

"No. Were there any complications?" Lemon Pink questioned, looking down at her side.

"None. The runes wouldn't have bonded the egg if there were. Good. By the time the Thorn Root wears off, the other runes will have started up. A success." Prey slurred.

It may have seemed like Prey was murdering Lemon Pink, but of course he wasn't.

He was hardly going to feed his loyal tool to the veropedes now was he? For one thing, Prey would *never* waste a good tool like that, and second, he was going to be taking the second egg for himself. So double *never*.

The eggs needed a host to absorb nutrient from before they could hatch, however the veropede's would stay dormant until he or Lemon Pink decided otherwise. The runic arrays he'd built on the wood, (then transferred to the eggs), would ensure that. Among other things.

If Prey'd really wanted a sacrifice to hatch the two eggs with, he could've easily gotten Lemon Pink to kidnap some random pony. Not that he would have.

No, Prey had other plans for these two eggs aside from a simple hatching. Veropede's were special. So what would happen if he hatched one that'd combined runes and blood magic from the egg stage? As he'd said, Prey had plans.

No use putting it off any further. "My turn then."

Everything has a price, and this was one which had to be paid in blood.

Lemon Pink obliged him by levitating the last egg over to his piece of wood. Once again, he activated the rune circle and watched the egg snatched out of Lemon's aura and the slat of wood begin to blacken.

Prey knew some blood magic. Only some. A tiny piece really. Any initiate into the forbidden art would know more than him, but what

he did know was the principle upon which all blood magic was founded.

What comes from you, belongs to you.

The essence of blood magic was sacrifice, giving up your own blood, for the ability to control power.

The two eggs would be infused with their blood. One for him, one for Lemon Pink. A veropede was a monster. They weren't something that could be tamed. But Prey wasn't planning to tame them, but control them instead.

Lemon Pink floated the egg up once again, bringing it around to his side. There she paused for his order, the wrinkled orb hovering an inch from his fur. Prey shuddered, but didn't hesitate.

"Do it." He said, not looking. If he turned his head, he'd probably over balance.

His whole body was numb and he wouldn't feel it. Later, the runes would deaden any discomfort once the Thorn Root wore off, but that didn't mean he wanted to look.

There was the sudden sensation of... Actually Prey didn't know how to describe it. Like he'd just ingested a chunk of ice was about the closest he could come up with. But there was no pain, and that was all that really mattered. Prey hated pain.

"And that's stage three done. Stage four, the antidotes." Prey ordered, putting aside the thought that he'd stuck a parasite in his gut. If he wasn't one-hundred and ten percent sure of his runic work, he wouldn't have taken the risk. The blood magic prize however would be worth it. He hoped.

Prey clumsily plucked the vial of antidote from the air, and after a few tries, got the top off. If anything, it tasted even worse than the Thorn Root had.

'The cure is indeed often worse than the sickness.' Prey noted. That seemed really funny for some reason, and he snickered. "The same could be said for life, really."

Side by side, Prey and Lemon Pink sat in the spent runic circle, waiting for the effects of the poison to wear off. With the mirrors at their backs, they each stared straight ahead in the locked bathroom, thinking, scheming, planning.

This whole thing with the veropede eggs had merely been a side note on The List, an amendment made to take advantage of an unplanned opportunity. There were other, *larger*, plans in motion, sand trickling down in the hourglass as they slowly counted down towards completion. Lemon Pink had done most of the leg work, but the closer each plan came to completion, the more Prey's own input would be required.

"Prey," Lemon Pink said, catching his attention, "I want to again raise the potential of investing a portion of the gold into promising businesses which could turn over a net profit."

Prey half turned his head to regard his tool. He'd already made a decision on this topic, hadn't he? So why was Lemon raising it again?

"I place little value on such an outcome. It's just money. Investing with stolen money could come back to haunt me, and I won't risk having anything expose me, no matter how unlikely. And a return on investment takes a long time to come to fruition. If and when I do manage to flee Luna, it'll all be gold down the drain anyway." He said, this time going into a full explanation to make sure Lemon understood.

While they were both from the same mind, that didn't mean they always thought the same way.

"Forgive me Prey, but I still estimate it could be of worth. If there is a business doing research which aligns with our interests, would you consider investing then?" Lemon Pink asked.

Prey turned his head all the way, risking the mirrors, to look at Lemon. She had questioned him, on something he had just made clear he did not think held any value. Which meant she strongly felt that investing was something worthwhile to Prey's interests, otherwise she would not persist like this. He wasn't angry.

"I still do not see the potential outweighing the time and risk cost..." Prey said.

Lemon Pink bowed her head, finally submitting to his decision. "Yes, Prey."

"...However, if you still estimate otherwise and can find somewhere to invest that meets those criteria, I give you permission to look into it and report back." Prey finally added. He didn't need to add 'and keep any such inquires discreet', that went without saying.

"Yes, Prey. Thank you."

"What are you thanking me for?"

"Yes, Prey."

"Something bothering you Prey?"

Prey stopped morbidly poking at the small lump on his side, "It's nothing." He answered Gloom dismissively.

It was the truth. The runes on the egg were preventing him from feeling anything. It was a shame he couldn't do the same for the whip scars the next time he awoke with cramp. Unfortunately, those were a physical part of him, not a foreign object under the skin, thus a completely different runic situation.

Not to mention, carving runes into yourself was absolute agony.

"We're here, sir." Crimson said.

"Just Gloom. We're off duty. Ah, we are here."

"That's what Crimson just said."

"Pardon?"

"Never mind. You were distracted."

"I said, we're here, sir."

"And now you're not listening either Crimson. He said to just call him Gloom out here in Canterlot. We don't want anyone-"

"Any*pony*." Gloom broke in.

"-anyone knowing we're Night Guards. Again. Dusk Pony amulet secret, and all that."

"I know that. I mean, I know we're incognito off duty. I merely slipped."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to be a pain by constantly reminding you." Prey apologised.

Gloom squinted at his two subordinates as they turned off the busy street, '-what's up with those two?-'

But Gloom didn't comment, deciding it wasn't, '-anything important. Hopefully.-'

So he commented on something else instead, "Enjoy your ride up there, eh Prey?"

"You're the one who offered." Prey retorted, for once able to look down on Gloom from atop the cart the disguised thestral was pulling.

"Well as Crimson said, we're here now, so time to hop off." Gloom huffed, unhitching the cart strap and loosely tying it around the post outside the store.

"Right. Time to go shopping. Furniture shopping." Gloom said as they looked up at the two storey furniture department store, advertisement signs outside loudly boasting of its wares. That was why they had borrowed the cart, to carry back bulky purchases.

They stood there for a full minute, not making any move to go inside.

"Furniture shopping sounds awful." Crimson bluntly stated.

"I agree with Crimson." Prey immediately echoed.

"You'd agree with Crimson if he said he wanted to go ballroom dancing at the upcoming Gala. It's not that bad, I mean, look at us three. We're in Canterlot, off duty, we're furniture shopping for you two's very own flats. How normal are we, am I right?" Gloom grinned, spreading his hooves wide. He was putting far too much effort in.

"Normality?" Prey asked, somehow making the word sound contemptible, "We should be happy to fall in line and copy the Canterlot pastimes? What's next, learning to enjoy playing croquet?"

"You're right, this furniture shopping does sound awful." Gloom admitted.

"I would prefer to just sleep in a plain cloud bed. Rather than buying one, I mean." Crimson put in.

"Regardless of all that," Gloom pressed on, "You two need to get your flats outfitted. Which unfortunately means we've got to perform a necessary evil." He pointed at the busy store with distaste, "Shopping."

"Furniture shopping." Prey corrected.

"*Furniture* shopping." Gloom agreed.

"Just any shopping full stop." Crimson said.

But who should they bump into while perusing the isles? None other than Taffy Hopes and Future Spark.

The three of them were methodically, and with grim patience, working their way through bed frames looking for one of Prey's size, having shaken off the annoying shop assistant long ago, when the sound of familiar voices came to them from down the isle.

"-Yes that one's quite lovely, but it doesn't go with the yellow, y'know? The curtains would match nicely, don't you think? Or how about this one? Or this one? This one? This?"

"I haven't even seen your curtains Taffy...But I'm sure that whatever you say is best will be perfect!" The second voice hastily added.

"Is that Taffy Hopes?" Gloom asked, instinctively ducking. '-wait, why am I hiding? I'm off duty-'

"It certainly sounds like Taffy Hopes." Crimson agreed, leaning past Gloom to have a look.

"That *is* Taffy Hopes." Prey observed.

"Who is the other unicorn? He looks..."

"Familiar? Yes, that's Future Spark. It turned out they're cousins, remember?"

Crimson's brows grew faintly traced, "He was that unicorn who made us the second rate tracker and marker, wasn't he?"

Prey was going to answer Crimson 'yes', but he was interrupted before he got the chance to speak.

"Yoohoo, Crimson. Over here, it's me Taffy. Fancy seeing you here!"

Any chance of avoiding the unicorn duo was lost as Taffy trotted over, smiling in delight at spying someone she knew. As per Canterlot citizenship rules, both wore articles of clothing; Taffy a neck wrap, and Future a multi-pocketed coat. Prey wondered if Taffy greeted everyone outside of work this way. It seemed likely for her. Future Spark was just dragged along for the ride.

Seeing as there would be no happy escape, Crimson blankly greeted the mare, "Taffy Hopes, ma'am."

"Please, just Taffy. It's much nicer to not be on duty. Speaking of not being on duty, I almost didn't recognise you without your uniform. Good thing I saw you without it that first day, eh? Perhaps you should change your name to Greyish when you're on duty." Taffy chatted away happily.

"That's-"

"Oh, by the way. This here's my cousin. He's called Future Spark. He's like, a crazy scientist." Taffy joked, gesturing to Future.

"We've met before." Crimson said.

"You have?"

"We have?" Future Spark echoed.

"Oh, is that you Prey?" Taffy interrupted before Crimson got a chance to explain, "I didn't see you behind the trolley. It's nice to see you too. How're you doing this lovely afternoon?"

'*Curses*.'

Prey backed up a step, "I'm fine." He answered neutrally.

"Are you two are both out here on your day off together? Cool. It's great that you look after Prey all the time Crimson. Oh, by the way, Future Spark, this here's Prey. He's actually a part of the Night Guard. The ISND. I mentioned them once, remember?"

Future Spark started to nod thoughtfully, "Actually yes, I do remember a Night Guard meeting where a lamb was present. No idea what it was about. I just got randomly called in out of-"

"So what'cha ya' two doing here? Well, shopping, obviously. But what are you looking for? Perhaps we can help." Taffy enthused.

Next to her, Future Spark froze on hearing the possibility that he'd be stuck in this store for any longer than he already was, "Err..."

He went completely ignored as Taffy chattered away unimpeded.

"What are the chances of meeting out of work? Who's your friend? Hi, I'm Taffy. Gosh, it's weird seeing you two without Gloom around. Nice to meet you, you look a lot like Gloom actually." Taffy laughed, offering her hoof to the disguised Gloom who'd been trying to slink away.

There was an awkward frozen pause as Prey and Crimson both glanced sideways at Gloom, chest scar covered by the scarf and

thestral heritage hidden under the illusion of the Dusk Pony amulet he was using.

'-and this is exactly what I was trying to avoid-', Gloom thought, smile just as frozen as the moment.

Taffy was looking curiously back and forth between Gloom and Crimson as her hoof remained hanging unshaken. "Is something the matter?"

"This is, I mean..." Crimson tried to think up an excuse, but as always, he was very bad at lying. Prey was hesitating on offering one himself, because although it would help Crimson with what he wanted, it would mean speaking up in front of Taffy. The choice was then taken out of his hooves.

"Wait, is your name-Are you actually Sargent Gloom?" Taffy asked, squinting. He eyes widened, "You are Gloom! Wait, no, not possible. Gloom's like, all batty with batty bat wings, and you're like, all pegasusy with pegasus bird wings."

Gloom was caught. What choice did he have but to admit it? "Yes it's me Taffy, but keep it down-"

"Say whaaa-? How come you're not a thestral anymore?"

"Of course I'm still a thestral. Nopony can just change species you know."

"But your wings and eyes, your teeth even. Where'd they go?" Taffy asked in curiosity.

Gloom glanced around quickly to see who might be listening, "Nowhere. You just can't see them."

"Huh?"

"It's nothing you need to worry about." Gloom tried to dismiss.

"Nu-uh, what's going on Gloom? How are you going around looking like a normal pony?"

'Normal pony? So thestrals aren't normal then are they? Showing you real colours now.' Prey silently mocked.

"It's an illusion!" Future Spark suddenly exclaimed, eyes lighting up with realisation, "You've got some sort of illusionary based enchantment on you, don't you?"

"This is all an illusion?" Taffy asked, waving a hoof in front of Gloom's face.

"Well not him obviously, there's still got to be a pony base under there for the illusion to be applied to or else the spell matrix for the enchantment-"

"And that's enough crazy scientist out of you thanks, I got my answer." Taffy stuck her hoof over Future Spark's mouth, then turning back to Gloom, "What gives?" She asked.

'-are the thestrals getting that much bullying that they're trying to hide as pegasi?-'

Gloom looked helplessly to Prey and Crimson for assistance, but they could only shake their heads. Gloom suppressed a groan of frustration. The Dusk Pony amulets weren't a clan secret, not anymore, but they *were* supposed to be a Night Guard secret.

"Yes it's just an illusion. You can see what it does plainly enough. It's designed for thestrals to remain undetected in the crowd."

"You're working? Wait, are you undercover right now?" Taffy asked in a hushed voice.

"Not...really."

"So you're *not* undercover at the moment and I'm *not* blowing your mission?" Taffy checked.

"Nnno." Gloom was forced to confirmed.

"Then why are you walking around disguised as a pegasus? That's not right."

"That's not-" Gloom broke off as a pony came down the isle. They stood silently until the pony had passed. "And why not?" Gloom demanded.

"Ponies shouldn't be walking around with illusions on. I mean, then anypony you pass on the street might not be who they're supposed to be." Taffy exclaimed.

"Statistically, that's an unlikely occurrence," Future Spark put in, "Illusions usually have some flaw which make them impractical-"

"Thank you Spark, that's very interesting," Taffy said, obviously not listening, "You shouldn't be wearing that enchantment." She told Gloom.

"Why?" It was Crimson who spoke, meeting Taffy's eyes flatly, "Why should we not? All we get is fear and derision if we don't."

"Well that's just all the more reason not to wear it." Taffy declared.

She got confused looks from all of them in response. Taffy huffed, tossing her frizzy mane, "Isn't it obvious? Racism is a stupid waste of time. Nopony should be made to feel ashamed of being any kind of pony, so why go around hiding what you are?"

'Says the magically superior unicorn.'

"Why, you should just march right in through every door exactly as you are and not care about what anypony else thinks! If everypony does that, then eventually it will become normal and nopony will be racist anymore." Taffy declared.

'Yes, key word being 'nopony'. Not a pony? Then in that case, get stuffed.' Prey thought venomously, glaring unnoticed at Taffy. She was talking about something which she obviously had no idea.

Gloom and Crimson were stuck for words. Taffy made her bold declaration with confidence, but not much else. Her unbiased sentiment was nice, but didn't impact the reality of the clans situation. Thestrals were not liked or trusted. It was all very well to speak of not needing a disguise, but that was all it was. Talk.

A small smile went across Gloom's face.

'-however it's nice to know Taffy isn't racist and never was-', He thought. He glanced at Future Spark, who was nodding along merrily to Taffy's words; '-oh, and this guy too by the looks of it-'

"So go on, undo the illusion for us," Taffy encouraged, "Or do you need a unicorn for that?"

Gloom's hoof twitched towards the Dusk Pony amulet, but he didn't remove it, "No can do Taffy. Sorry, but this is a secret, and I'm going to have to ask you to keep it."

"But nopony should be ashamed-"

"I am from clan Cilldara, I am most certainly *not* ashamed of my heritage, and I never will be." Gloom cut Taffy Hopes off rather hotly. Future Spark kept on nodding agreeably away, until he realised they were no longer agreeing and stopped nodding.

Taffy sighed, "Oh alright, but only since it's you Gloom." She harrumph'd.

Gloom frowned at her choice of words, "So you're aren't going to go around and trying to expose other thestrals, right?" He double checked.

"Hmm, I probably could..." Taffy mused, tapping her chin.

"Taffy this isn't some big joke-" Gloom warned.

"...But how would I even spot them? Well, aside from going up to every pegasus with yellow eyes and yelling, 'Are you a thestral!?' really loudly. Although that might be funny in the right circumstances. I think I'll do that at Mistletoe's party tonight."

Gloom was once again at a loss for words as to what to say in response to Taffy's logic. "That's... Something I guess. Taffy, can you please swear to not reveal go around telling this to everypony."

"I hardly think this is as big of a deal as you are making it out to be, Gloom. Stop being gloomy."

"While this isn't a matter of life and death, it isn't a small deal either." Gloom said, not letting himself get irritated.

"Oh alright fine, why not?" Taffy said, unexpectedly flipping in her approach. While Taffy might not seem like a good person to keep a secret, she was a liaisons officer. She dealt with confidential information on a daily basis, so her word did mean something.

"Thank you." Gloom nodded to her seriously. Then they all looked to Future Spark.

"What? Is there something on my muzzle?" Future Spark asked, going cross-eyed.

"Nope, don't worry, no hot-choc mustache this time." Taffy grinned.

"Ah. Then why-?"

"He wants you to swear too, doofus." Taffy said, elbowing him.

"Is that so?" Future Spark blinked, "Well alright then. *Ehem* Sargent Gloom, let me offer my word that the aforementioned and discussed secret shall not come to light to the general public by my involvement." He said. Then he paused and reconsidered, "Not intentionally anyway. One never should speak of one hundred percent certainties. Unless you're answering the question, 'Are you asleep?' And even then, there's sleep walkers-"

"I'm sure Gloom's very grateful Sparky," Taffy interrupted him before he could get too far off tangent, "Isn't that right?"

"We are indeed." Gloom agreed.

"Most welcome of course." Future Spark beamed, then he leaned forwards eagerly, "But I really must ask you, how is the illusion based? Is it a refraction matrix? Or perhaps a perception charm? And how do you balance out the light reflections-"

Taffy elbowed him again, cutting off his discourse before it could get too deep into spell crafting theory and matrix mathematics. Gloom and Crimson's blank looks said they wouldn't have followed any of it anyway.

'-well, to be fair, I don't understand any of it either and I'm his cousin-', Taffy thought.

"Oh, *Eherm* Do excuse me." Future Spark coughed again.

"Are illusions your field of study?" Crimson asked, with what might have conceivably been a hint of distaste. Probably because Crimson saw illusions as a form of lie. A narrow minded view, but since it was Crimson, Prey made a note to avoid mentioning illusions favourably if at all possible in the future.

"Ha ha! Oh no no, nopony majors in illusions. It's a, 'fake science', with, 'no real substance'. Get it? But as a side subject on concept work only, illusionary spell work is very interesting. Fascinating really, but there's no real cause to study it. Or grants." He added.

"Grants? What are those?" Crimson asked.

"What, grants?"

"Yes, that is what I asked."

"It's when study bodies give you money to research a certain subject with. Sometimes mages or even magi post private grants themselves if you go and work on researching for them. It's great fun, but they can be so stingy. Bleh." Future Spark said making a face.

Prey gathered his courage and spoke up to ask a question of the unicorn stallion, "Don't you work for the Guard? You must be really busy if you're doing grant work too." He said innocently.

"Oh hello there little filly. Why yes, I do get to do both." Future Spark said agreeably. "I work part time in the Palace three days a week, and I get to do my own stuff during the rest of the time. It's Perfect. No wait, *almost* perfect. There's not enough coffee breaks and they've only got the bad stuff." He started to ramble again, but Prey had gotten his answer.

"Soooooo," Taffy drew the word out like it was some big joke only she got, "Whatcha' you three doing here? You're not furniture shopping, are you?"

Crimson checked around the isle again in case something had changed in the last ten minutes he wasn't aware of. "This is a furniture store, isn't it?"

"You actually are furniture shopping!" Taffy exclaimed, "Don't you have anything better to do?"

"You're shopping here too." Gloom pointed out.

"First, I'm a mare so I'm excused. Second, I'm not actually 'shopping', I'm 'browsing'." Taffy accentuated the difference.

"...I don't follow."

"I'm not looking to *buy*. I'm looking for ideas to *think* about buying. That's why I brought Sparky along, to bounce ideas off, see?" She said, smiling broadly and patting Future Spark on the shoulder.

"Err, yes, that is why you asked me to come along I was lead to believe." Future Spark said, that grimace smile back. '-please Celestia let somepony save me. Or let spontaneous combustion occur across all these curtains in a glorious distraction-'

"As dull as it is, yes, furniture shopping," Gloom confirmed, "Or rather, Crimson and Prey are furniture shopping."

He stepped aside and exposed the two of them fully to Taffy's attention. Prey gave Gloom a dirty look. 'Traitor.'

Taffy's smile slowly morphed into glee, "You finally got a flat Crimson? Oh well done! Don't worry, I'll help you pick out everything you need, just leave it to the design master."

The though that she would get to direct someone else's shopping seemed to send Taffy Hopes into rising fits of excitement. And she completely missed the point about Crimson and Prey getting a flat each, rather than one joint flat total.

"I do not think we quite need help. We are only here for a bed and table each-" Crimson began.

"Nonsense," Taffy scoffed, "Everypony needs a keen mare's eye when

they go shopping. It's basically the law."

"Really there's no need-"

"I won't hear of it. Come on, let's get started. Right, first things first, we need to head back to the start of the store and begin again."

And so it was that four unwilling participants were dragged off behind the very willing fifth, all because the four didn't have the heart to say no. Well, three of them didn't. One of them just didn't have a heart but was too intimidated to say anything.

"Just a few more stairs...There." Gloom grunted, letting the last crate drop to the balcony floor. "Whew."

Crimson, who'd been carrying the other end, glanced at Prey, who was sitting atop the rest of the already delivered crates, "No comment from you please."

Prey quirked an eyebrow. Crimson wouldn't tell Prey not to comment, unless he was actually expecting his words to illicit a comment. 'Is Crimson trying to make a joke? Or perhaps just conversation?'

If so, the pegasus was going about it in an odd way. So in fairness, not really that odd for him. Well if Crimson was trying, Prey had better respond.

"Comment on what? The fact you ended up getting the bed Taffy told you to in the end? Or were you referring to how it was the biggest and heaviest? Or did you mean not gloat about how I got to just sit up here all the while you two carried everything?" He asked with a big, innocent smile.

However when Gloom and Crimson both winced, he immediately realised what he's done and wiped the smile off, "Sorry." He hastily apologised.

'Zoma'Grika, I slipped up again.'

"No, it is not an issue. I mean, it shouldn't have to... Never mind." Crimson tried to dismiss it like it didn't really bother him. He was a really bad actor though.

"What's the problem? Go ahead and smile when you want to smile. There's no problem here." Gloom lied, trying not to let the carefree mood which'd been present all afternoon fade.

It didn't work, the reminder had been enough for everyone to think back, just for a moment, to the blood and rats. Prey just smiling should not have formed the tenuous connection, but it had and the conversation still withered and died.

It was little things which stuck in someone's head, Prey knew that better than anyone. Little actions which would forever after be associated with something vile in the past.

An oak leaf splattered in blood. A certain shade of blue mane from a dead pony. A certain smile. Those sorts of things.

It was unfortunate, and stupid, and silly, and oh so aggravatingly frustrating to experience.

'-Luna damn it, what a waste-', Gloom thought, in a flash of temper making to kick the crate. At the last second however he stopped and shook it off. "Whatever Prey, it's not something...Forget it. Let's just get this stuff inside."

Gloom had the right idea. The solution was simple. Do something else until the dark moment passed and normal everyday moments replaced it. Crimson flexed his legs, "I am ready to lift again whenever you are sir-I mean, Gloom."

"Good, Prey, get the door open would you?" Gloom said, bending down to get his shoulder under the crate lip again.

"Crimson, the landlord gave you the keys to both flats. Toss the ring over, would you?" Prey said.

"One moment. Alright found them. Catch."

*jingle-jangle-*kirsh**

"Thanks. Just let me get something to wedge the door open with." Prey called back, disappearing inside.

"With what? We've got no furniture or anything inside, remember?"

"Give me a moment, I'll find something to use."

"Hurry up then Prey. This is heavy in case your forgot." Gloom called. "Oh wait that's right! You didn't have to carry it did you?"

In the end Prey just used his ribbon to tie the hall door open by the handle, and between the three of them, Prey directing while Gloom and Crimson carried, they manoeuvred the crate down the narrow hall and into Crimson's empty flat.

And so they passed the unpleasant moment by, and let life wash the memory back out to sea.

Prey surveyed his almost empty flat. Crimson's own was no better. On Taffy's recommendation, (orders really), they'd each bought a bed frame, and a mattress. Annnnnd that was it.

Taffy had been nowhere near satisfied with their meager purchases. "What about a sofa? And the coffee table? A bedside table, chest of draws, wardrobe, floor cushions, chairs, curtains, glow lamps, lamp shades? What about all that?" She'd demanded.

Gloom had managed to intervene by pointedly reminding her that Prey and Crimson were just starting out, and could not afford any of what Taffy was suggesting.

Blushing in embarrassment, Taffy had quickly changed the topic of money. Not that any of the ISND felt any shame talking about money, but it was a good excuse. Neither of them had any intention of getting what Taffy had insisted was 'The Bare Minimum'. What she'd spoken of was of all useless bric-a-brac.

But even then and with their minimalistic purchases, it'd all added up. Gloom and Crimson had to take turns when pulling the cart back here.

They'd come back to drop off the mattresses and beds, and gotten rid of the packaging. Putting the bed frames together was a problem for the future ISND. If they were to assemble the flat pack right now, by the time they were finished their free day would be over, (especially since they didn't have any tools).

So after all that effort, Prey and Crimson *still* weren't able to move in yet.

Prey stood in the small living room of what was to be his flat, looking around.

Prey examined the blank ceiling. This was to be *his* flat. His. As in, he was supposed to treat this like his own home from now on. Or when they were allowed to move in, at any rate.

The rooms were currently spacious with emptiness, and had that strange feeling you get when looking at a half finished building. It wasn't completed, but you knew what it should be.

There was no cutlery in the kitchen. Prey decided a couple of bowls and a pot would be plenty. There wasn't any food in the pantry, but that could be fixed. A couple of floor cushions could replace the unnecessary idea of chairs and sofas perhaps, those were nice. Maybe a towel and blanket too, why not go all the way? The plants and herbs he'd bought could go on the single window sill. Everything missing in the flat was only that, missing.

Prey let his gaze fall to his hooves. He tested the floor boards under his hoof, thinking about what kind of runes the ash wood would hold.

'This is supposed to be my home?' Prey thought.

His lips drew up into a snarl. 'Home? Home?? This is not a home. It's an insult to what the memory of home! It's disgusting. Canterlot, ponies, privilege, riches. This will never be a home. I will make it into a fortress with protective runes, yes, I will build escape routes and sleep here, yes, but it will never *ever* be my home.'

He spun around and left his flat. Crimson and Gloom were only

across the corridor, pulling off the last of the packaging from Crimson's bed frame, which was proving not to be as simple as it sounded. Only three hooves separated Prey's front door from what was to be Crimson's.

'At least that's one good thing,' Prey was forced to admit, 'I'll be able to easily keep an eye on Crimson.'

So what if Crimson still hadn't worn Prey's gift yet? Even if Crimson didn't appreciate his gift, it didn't matter. He still owed Crimson.

Perhaps he could go lend a hoof in Crimson's flat? There was no reason to linger in this one after all.

And then Gloom just had to go and make everything worse on their way back.

It was like the Sargent had some sixth sense for saying things at the wrong time, some greater cosmic force directing his ill timing, more so than even Crimson. All Prey wanted as they walked back was to be left alone to mentally compose a note for Lemon Pink, and figure out a way to get Crimson to use the jade stone mane ring. But not so.

"Outfitting mine and Prey's flats seemed... Sort of pointless today, sir."

"What you mean?"

"Well sir, I mean, we aren't even going to be moving into the flats until next week."

"Your flats, not 'the' flats. But yeah, I get what you mean. But at least now they're ready to go when you two actually do move in. Isn't that right, Prey?"

"You mean wasting our time today rather than next week with, forgive me, furniture shopping?" Prey groused.

"Ha. Close enough. I won't mind moving back into my own flat too."

Gloom mused. '-I miss my own cloud bed back at the caves. This new one is rubbish-'

"Speaking of which, Prey, have you written home recently?" Gloom asked.

Prey's mouth twitched, and he had to stay quiet for a moment. *Of course* Gloom would raise this right now, why wouldn't he?

"...No, I can't say that I have."

"C'mon Prey, that's not fair on your family. I know it's hard, but you need to try and keep in contact, okay?" Gloom encouraged.

Prey bit the inside of his cheek, "Yes, I probably should do that." He agreed evenly.

"But are you going to do that?" Gloom pressed, not satisfied, "It's not fair on your mother to not write home. I know if I didn't write, my mother would definitely throw a fit in worry."

Prey tasted blood, "It's as you say. I'll do that. Just as soon as I get a free moment."

'A free moment from these shackles, from Luna, from Canterlot, from all of you.'

Now in an utterly foul mood, Prey followed behind Gloom as he led them back towards the Guard Compound entrance.

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Author's Notes:

A slower paced chapter, but I promise this is all just build up towards something bigger! I'm just a slow paced writer, that's all. I like world building a bit too much (as can be testified to by 400K words) [image]

If you spy any mistakes, please do not hesitate to

point them out. Thanks!

Thank you to: **Sweetolebob18** for helping edit this. ☆
Also another kind person who has been very helpful over the last few chapters: **sesquipedalian**
And thank you to everyone else who helps by pointing out typos and mistakes when they spot them!

39.3 Simple Exploits and Difficult Tasks

Things are never simple in life. That was the unadorned truth.

Some people might argue otherwise, or quote exceptional mitigating circumstances, or perhaps even agree. But nothing is ever simple, clear cut, or black and white.

Want to get revenge? In theory, simple. Go out and kill the guy.

But wait, the guy is already dead, died peacefully in his sleep actually. So it'll have to be his son instead.

Except you don't know where his son lives, you're not a fighter, he has a big, rich, powerful family, and he hasn't personally ever done anything to you. Revenge is never right. It doesn't help, it doesn't makes the hurting stop. But you want it because you can't see a future without revenge in it. But deep down, half of you doesn't even want revenge anymore.

Immediately, the matter is complicated.

But wait, it doesn't stop there. This son isn't a good husband. He provides, but he isn't faithful. He has a weakness for drink, but dotes on his foals. A lot of people don't like him, but he's still on the local committee, because he always chips in when it really matters. He gives to charity but also steals beer from the brewery on the sly.

Do you still seek revenge? Can you blame a son for the father that sired him? Can a child be guilty because of its parents?

Even more complications float up, weeds obscuring the pond. Because life is never so cut and dried as they make out in stories.

Wrong is always wrong, but right is not always right.

Case in point, the royal inspectors coming in to internally review the Night Guard.

It was adhering to all the rules, having been signed off and approved by all the correct people in charge, but was it right? The Night Guard had investigated the Royal Guard, so now that it'd been turned around and the shoe was on the other hoof, was it right?

Or was it just a retaliatory blow against the Night Guard to remind them to mind their own darn business? Wasn't it just petty revenge born out of spite? What did Captain Shining Armour and Nighthawk think? What did the individual Guardspony think? Who was right and who was wrong?

No one? Everyone?

As far as Prey was concerned, it was all a moot point and waste of time arguing over.

What was happening was happening, protesting now wouldn't change a thing. The strong acted, and the weak suffered the consequences. That was life, unfair in all things.

Apparently though, Nighthawk had been thinking about it quite deeply, because he summoned the three of them the next evening at the end of his shift, and halfway through theirs.

"Come in. Prey, Crimson, you too. Shut the door." Nighthawk rasped.

Prey hurried to get the door for Crimson, and once shut it left them all in the now familiar dim lighting of the Captain's office.

Gloom saluted and stood at attention, waiting.

Nighthawk frowned at the mess in Gloom's helmet plume, "What is that?" He demanded.

Gloom's eyes flicked upwards to where his helmet sat atop his head,

even if he could see it, "This sir? Well...There was a little incident in the mess hall just before we came here. With the Royal Guard." He added when Nighthawk kept looking at him.

"Explain."

Gloom couldn't help but glance at Prey and Crimson, who were keeping their mouths shut. They'd been there of course, but Gloom was the Sargent, or now Sargent First Class, so it was up to him to do the talking on this one.

"Well-"

The three of them plodded into the mess hall, having not gotten enough sleep, and with just more overworking on paperwork and old reports to look forwards to. Prey just wanted to eat breakfast, get the meeting with Nighthawk later over with, and make a start. Sooner started, sooner finished.

Since as usual theirs was the most unbalanced day in the Night Guard, it was actually lunch time in the mess hall. First mistake. There were no other Night Guards around the mess hall during lunch, they were all either asleep, or the few unfortunates who'd pulled the day shift just too busy to attend lunch. Not unusual. The ISND themselves skipped their lunches most days too.

'-these timings are still throwing me for a loop-', Gloom thought, heading for the counter, '-oh please let it not be mash again-'

Second mistake, not evaluating the mood of the Royal Guards also in the line before joining.

Prey however, did, and he sent a silent warning look up to Crimson. Crimson caught it, but didn't seem to understand what Prey was trying to convey.

Unfriendly Royal Guard faces were all around them. Out of the all the Night Guard, the ISND was probably the most hated aside from the Captain and Lieutenants themselves. Although after the fight in the mess hall a week ago and resulting suspensions, none were

willing to act out on their hate. And as a small mercy, this hate didn't seem to extend past Gloom and Crimson.

Prey was just a child who had no business being here, but that was hardly his fault now was it? It was Gloom's. All those insulting interviews Prey had conducted? Yeah, all orchestrated by Gloom, so those were all the Sargent's fault too.

Or perhaps Prey looked so inoffensive with his innocent face, blue eyes, fluffy wool, and droopy ears, (not to mention his prized ribbon), that he was completely overlooked.

Regardless, when Crimson looked about, he didn't see anything new or out of the ordinary. Just more Royal Guards who despised the ISND, but who'd been ordered not to make trouble.

Perhaps that's why Crimson turned back to Prey with a small wing shrug, as if saying; 'What's new?'

He missed the glob of mashed spuds as it was thrown from a magical aura at him. Or perhaps not, because somehow Crimson instinctively ducked.

Gloom was not so quick. Crimson dodged his projectile, but Gloom failed to dodge his own.

The second glob hit Gloom's helmet with a wet *Slap*, splashing all over the deep indigo plume. A smattering of laughs went up from the tables all around them.

Prey knew Gloom was by no means a stupid person. And he proved it once again as it took him less than a second to to figure out what had happened, why, and how to respond. The usual thestral approach would've been to stoically ignore the childish behaviour, but not this time. To these ponies, that would be a sign of weakness, not strength.

And you never show weakness.

"Who threw that?" Gloom loudly demanded. He looked stupid when there was no answer from the smirking Royal Guards, but it was better than the alternative.

To have remain silent and ignored the insult would've proved the ISND was silenced by guilt. Gloom loudly calling them out showed he was not ashamed or trying to hide anything.

"Well?" Gloom boldly demanded again.

All he got back was eye rolls of annoyance and disbelieving shakes of the head as the Royal Guards exchanged the, 'Can-you-believe-this-guy?' look. But his boldness did the trick, because no one else threw anything.

Gloom snorted, making sure everyone saw his tail swish of exasperation as he turned back to the counter. Since there was no clear culprit, Gloom was proving the Night Guard the bigger pony and letting this drop. Just this once.

The Royal Guards were left satisfied that they'd gotten one back on the ISND, but also weren't going to risk doing anything else. It was an impressively engineered outcome, Gloom had thought on his hooves there, Prey admitted.

Crimson, of course, missed all this subtext and was still braced for a fight until Prey whispered to him to, "Get back in line and pretend nothing happened, it's over. If you do anything now, they'll really kick off."

They made a show of sitting and eating their tasteless mash in an annoyed manner, like they were frustrated they hadn't been able to retaliate, but were in no way actually cowed. Never show weakness.

When they were finished eating, and *only* then, they arose and walked, not hurried, it was an important distinction, from the mess hall.

"The Royal Guards in the mess hall were satisfied with that, and luckily left it there, sir." Gloom summed up.

Nighthawk grunted. He hadn't asked any questions while Gloom was offering his brief report, and he didn't now. He didn't want to know if Gloom recognised the culprit. There'd be little point, since

Nighthawk obviously didn't intend to do anything about it.

Strictly speaking, this was a military organisation, and a reprimand should've been issued against the responsible Royal Guards. That's exactly what the Royal Guards would've sought if it'd happened the other way around, but things are never straightforward.

Just like Gloom had, Nighthawk evaluated the matter, found it inadvisable to escalate, and so dismissed it. '-we won't sink to their level. We serve Luna's best interests, not our own-'

"Do nothing." Nighthawk ordered, in case it wasn't clear enough already.

"Of course sir." Gloom acknowledged.

"It is good timing though..." Nighthawk said, hoof absentmindedly beginning to tap out a rhythm on his desk, "In relation to what I called you all in here for at least."

They all waited expectantly.

Nighthawk gave a wave that encompassed the three of them, "You are a problem. The ISND's presence here is fuelling tensions. It will die off after these royal inspectors finally arrive, find nothing wrong, and get lost. But until then, seeing you just riles up their wings."

'Oh, and who's fault is that?' Prey thought. Nighthawk was the one who'd ordered them to carry out the interrogations, following up from all those salt dealer arrests and post lumber yard fire. The newspapers were still ragging that incident for all it was worth.

"Simply put, I do not want you here for these inspections. They will not approve of the ISND." Nighthawk looked at Prey, clearly showing which bit they would disapprove of, "Frankly, I don't care what they like or not. It's Princess Luna's decision. But the Night Guard has better things to be doing than placating whining foals."

"But sir, the inspectors will be visiting for at least two whole weeks. The only way to avoid them entirely would be to leave Canterlot." Gloom said. There was another, simpler option, just have the ISND

declared on extended leave, but that would mean not working when they were perfectly capable of doing so.

"Correct," Night said, "You are getting out of Canterlot and staying gone until the inspections are over, and also the Gala while you're at it."

"Er, why the Galloping Gala in particular sir?" Gloom asked, confused.

'-I thought that was just a big feast and dance. Was I mistaken?-'

Nighthawk's muzzle wrinkled, "This Gala starts dredging up politicians and nobles out of the woodwork a week in advance. It's going to be a stewing cesspit. It's one of the biggest political money making events of the year." He said with contempt as he thought about the courts of Canterlot.

"The ISND needs to keep away. Somepony is going to try and involve Princess Luna and the Night Guard with something political. Backing, funding, blackmail, it doesn't matter which. It's an inevitability we're just going to have to deal with. I've been... 'Informed', that if the inspections go poorly, lots of ponies are going to leap on the opportunity to make trouble for Her Majesty at the Gala. So you three are not to be here."

What Nighthawk was essentially saying was; 'The Night Guard doesn't want to deal any such problem. Solution? Remove the cause.'

Prey didn't like Nighthawk, even if the Captain was predictably practical and thus understandable. Which wasn't saying much. Prey didn't like any of the Night Guards. Aside from Crimson, of course.

Nighthawk really was going into great depth with his explanation though.

'Which means he must really despise this Gala event, even if he's never attended one,' Prey thought, 'It must be serious.'

Prey wished Gloom would just hurry up and ask the important questions, like; 'Where will you be sending us instead?'

Prey was very keen to know that answer.

"I understand, sir." Gloom nodded.

"Good. You leave on the first train tomorrow morning."

"Yes sir-Pardon sir?" Gloom blinked.

"You leave tomorrow morning." Nighthawk repeated.

"Yes sir. Uh, where are we catching this train to exactly?"

Nighthawk finished up tapping on the desk with a miniature drum roll and stood.

"Right here." He said, striding over to the wall map studded with coloured pins.

All three of them stepped closer to get a better look, not bothering to question the suddenness of this new development. After everything which kept getting sprung on the ISND, the unexpected was basically the new expected.

Prey squinted up at the map, trying to make out the spidery writing of the area name Nighthawk was pointing at. It really got old being the only one without night vision, especially when working alongside those who did, and who thus never saw the need for proper lighting.

Nighthawk was pointing at a spot over the mountain range, on the west side of a sprawling forest.

Depending on which stretch you were looking at, the forest had many different names. Reason being; its trees sprawled for hundreds of miles, ranging up and down the length of the Ridgeback mountain range. It was all mostly unexplored and untamed.

But it wasn't the Deeper Green, which was further South, down where it was warmer and wetter. And that's all that really mattered to Prey.

Still, the bit of map Nighthawk was pointing at looked...

"Familiar." Crimson muttered.

Nighthawk nodded, "It should. Mayflower. It's the village where those fifteen villagers went missing three months ago. They did a follow up and found nothing. Taffy should've given you the inactive case file last week."

Prey felt he had to break his usual silence to ask, "Why are you sending us there in particular? Has something new suddenly come to light? Sir."

Nighthawk glanced down at him, "No. That's precisely why you're going out there to investigate, to stay gone for the full two weeks."

"For two full weeks?" Gloom asked, forgetting to address Nighthawk by his title in his shock.

'-I thought he just meant get out of Canterlot for this Gala thing-'

"Yes. Give the place a proper search. If you can find something even after three months, then all the better." Nighthawk said, walking back around his desk.

"Yes, of course sir. But travel and supplying at such short notice-"

"Take whatever you think you might need from the Night Guard storehouse. However many bits for the train journeys and lodgings. The logistics are up to you, Sargent." Nighthawk shrugged.

Prey felt he had to speak again. He had experience, and there was something that couldn't be ignored. "The villagers, they won't want us barging in on their land-"

Nighthawk's look made Prey go silent. 'Oh wait, that's right, you don't care. You just give the orders. Who cares if the locals don't want us there and will be hostile? Moon knows, I'd be hostile to us.' Prey thought, glaring at the floor.

"So we just...Go and investigate sir? Leave tomorrow, take whatever we need from the store, come back in two weeks?" Gloom asked,

like he wasn't quite sure there wasn't something he was missing.

"And you'll be taking the two new ISND recruits with you." Nighthawk added.

All three of the only known ISND members were stunned.

"What?"
"What?"
"What?"

"Both of them will be waiting for you in C barracks in half an hour. Dismissed."

Captain Nighthawk, Prey decided, despite all appearances, did indeed have a sense of humour under his cold thestral hide. It was not a comforting realisation, nor was Prey laughing.

Ruin had thought it funny when he'd ordered a group of new recruits to patrol down the ravine with Quarry eels.

Torment had enjoyed tearing pegasi wings off.

It had amused Razor to trick Fleece away willingly into his clutches.

Perhaps Prey was overreacting. He despised Nighthawk, but nowhere near as much as he did Valour, (whose place on The List wasn't forgotten), or nearly as much as any of his previous commanders in the Resistance. Overall, Nighthawk's orders were usually within Prey's expectations, or at least his understanding.

So perhaps, while undoubtedly awful, this sudden addition to the ISND wouldn't get Prey accidentally killed.

'Nope,' Prey thought when they got down to C barracks, 'Absolutely none of the above.'

Gloom, Prey, and Crimson all stood just inside of the barracks

doorway, while opposite, the two new recruits stood at attention at the foot of their neatly made bunks, amour brightly polished, and ready to start. Prey stared, his stomach knotting up.

A long minute passed in silence, then another as Gloom tried to find words for the situation which had been thrust upon them. The two recruits subtly tried to check their uniform for a mistake to explain their new Sargent's silence.

Prey spied a lucky sun charm some Guard had hung on a pin from the ceiling. It had chips of missing paint. It looked like it'd been up there for a long time. Somewhere outside, Prey could hear a Royal Guard doing punishment push ups, shouting their count out.

"...sixteen...seventeen...eighteen..."

The three of them were supposed to have gone to bed by now, it was the end of their day. Yet instead, here they were.

"...twenty-three...twenty-four..."

Both two recruits stared straight ahead, trying hard to not let any nerves show. Gloom was still finding this all hard to believe; '-somepony joined the Night Guard, and the ISND on top of that! What am I supposed to say?-'

The silence dragged on.

"...twenty-nine...thirty..."

Prey was trying very hard not to do anything to attract the attention of the unicorn mare who was almost glaring straight ahead, rigidly saluting. 'This is bad, this is very bad. Nighthawk assigned a unicorn to us. I've got to, to, to-'

Prey felt Crimson's yellow eyes on the back of his wool, and realised he needed to calm down. He took a deep breath. 'It's going to be fine. I have my runes, and we're on the same side. She won't touch me. And Crimson's here, he'll help me. He said he'd always save my life if he could, and if it comes down to a fight.'

He wasn't over reacting at all. That mare right there was a *unicorn*!

That made her dangerous.

"...forty-eight.....forty...nine.....fifty!"

As if the punishment count outside coming to an end was the signal, Gloom finally cleared his throat.

"Scenic Paint. I did not expect to see you here." Gloom said, addressing the other pony. If *that* wasn't the understatement day, what was?

"Yes sir. I mean, no sir." The Earth pony answered, still staring straight ahead at attention.

"Last I knew, you were on suspension." Gloom commented. It perhaps wasn't the most tactful thing to say, but they were all tired. Plus, being a higher rank meant Gloom could say almost anything and go unchallenged.

Next to Scenic, the mares eyes widened, and she couldn't stop her self from glancing sharply to her companion. Obviously, this was news to her.

Scenic hid a wince, (badly), "Er, that was a misunderstanding sir. Captain Shining Armour dropped the suspension the very next day after the mess hall fight. He told me I should take a vacation and come back in a week's time. So here I am sir." He answered.

'-meaning Shining Armour was just trying to keep Paint Spot out of trouble and wasn't actually punishing him-', Gloom thought, nodding in understanding. That was very similar to Nighthawk's reasons for sending them out to Mayflower.

'-aaaaand now we've got to take these two milk teeth greenies with us too. Just perfect-', Gloom mentally added. He shook his head, the reasons didn't matter, orders were orders.

"Right, let's get this flight in the air. We're already on a tight enough schedule as it is. You're in the Night Guard now and part of the ISND. Congratulations. There's no confetti I'm afraid. Now, introductions please." Gloom ordered.

The mare immediately stepped forwards and saluted, "Sir! I am private Lilly Blossom. Permission to speak freely, sir?"

Gloom couldn't help but raise a questioning eyebrow, not quite looking to Prey and Crimson but still managing to convey his bemusement to both of them. "Alright, go ahead private Lilly Blossom."

"Sir, I can do anything anypony else can do. If you just give me a chance, I can prove to you that I am a hard worker and team player. I'll prove it, sir." She half shouted, still saluting.

Again, none of the the three of them exchanged any looks, but each could tell the others were thinking the same thing: 'Okay, that's worrying. Why does she feel it important to get that out there right at the beginning?'

"Alright, thank you Lilly Blossom. I'll...keep that in mind."

"Thank you sir." Lilly Blossom dropped the salute and stepping smartly back into line.

Gloom gestured to Scenic Paint, "You're up. We already know who you are, but for the benefit of Lilly Blossom here, please introduce yourself again."

"Yes sir, I'm Scenic Paint. I prefer to just be called Paint Spot. Um, that's it for me." The Earth pony said with a nervous smile.

'-oh please Celestia let this go better than the last time I worked with them-'

Gloom waited, but neither of their new recruits were volunteering anything more. "Okay, and why are you here?" He asked.

"Sir, this is where the Lieutenant told us to wait this morning, sir." Lilly Blossom immediately answered.

"No, why are you *here*?" Gloom emphasised, one bat wing pointing at each of them in turn, "Do you know that you two are the first new ponies to join since the Night Guard began? Nopony would've joined without a good reason. So, let's hear it."

Both Lilly Blossom and Scenic Paint looked a bit uncomfortable, obviously unwilling to share.

However if they were planning to out wait Gloom, Crimson, and Prey, they were unqualified for such an attempt. Gloom was a thestral, Crimson was basically a thestral, and Prey knew The Hunt. Even tired and annoyed, the three of them had the patience of snakes.

It was Scenic who cracked first.

"Um, well, you know how last time I was put with your unit sir? I was with Quick Draw, before he, before he quit. I, I mean we, we were there when we, er, *you,* found that, that...." Scenic licked his lips, looking slightly unwell, "...That house with the secret salt den. With, what was down there. I mean, I never even saw it, but-!"

"It's fine. We know what you mean. Go on." Gloom said, ignoring Lilly Blossom's ears perking in interest.

Grateful to skip over having to talk about the murder scene, even the indirect reference having made the stallion look queasy, Scenic hurried on, "Right. That. Anyway, after I came back from the enforced leave, I had a lot of time to think. And I talked it over with the therap-My doctor. I joined the Royal Guard to help, to make a difference, and on my very second day..."

Scenic Paint cleared his throat, ears lowering, "And I almost ended up quitting like Quick Draw did. This was what I knew might happen signing up, but- That's not important. But then I saw you guys, you were still here. You didn't quit, you kept going and did your job. And I want to be able do that too. So when Captain Shining Armour called me aside to speak with me, I, dunno'. It was a kind of a spur of the moment thing, but I asked if I could transfer to the Night Guard and work with you guys." Scenic finished, rubbing the back of his neck.

'Oh you poor, poor, poor soft deluded idiot.' Prey thought, feeling like laughing. Scenic Paint was an utter fool if he thought joining the ISND would somehow let him get over his trauma of the cellar.

Actually, what the hell? *What* trauma? Scenic hadn't seen anything. He hadn't even smelled the cellar. They'd stopped him before he could go inside. Counselling? Therapists? Mandatory leave? The Royal Guard insisted on it like it was their right. Did the Night Guard get any of those things? No.

Scenic Paint was pathetic, and an idiot for coming back a second time.

Gloom however nodded slowly, "I see. Thank you for telling us that. There is no bravery without fear." He said, looking Scenic in the eye. Which kind of backfired when Scenic was utterly unable to meet the thestral's eye for more than a second.

"And you, Lilly Blossom? What are your reasons?" Gloom prompted, switching ponies.

The mare set her jaw and squared her shoulder, "Sir, I joined the Guard to make a difference. I need to be where I can make the biggest impact. The ISND has made major impacts everywhere sir. That's what I heard when I asked, and that's why I'm here, sir." She answered, eyes fiercely defiant.

"Is that the only reason?" Gloom asked, as Prey and Crimson exchanged another loaded glance behind him at the mares overconfidence.

"Sir, I believe that is the only reason that matters sir. Results speak for themselves, and I'll prove it if you give me the chance, sir."

"Hmm, I see." Gloom opened his wing and flipped out both Lilly and Scenic's files from underneath. Lilly Blossom stiffened. "I thought I would give both of you the chance to put anything you wanted to out there in the open before I read these out."

Lilly Blossom hotly interjected, "Sir, I must protest. That is confidential-"

"Welcome to the ISND." Gloom easily cut her off.

"I don't know what you thought you were getting into before you joined, but the ISND is *not* the Royal Guard. It's not even like other

Night Guard units. There are no set hours, no real clocking off, we're on call twenty-four seven. We work almost completely independently, and are responsible for ourselves. Everypony needs to know and get along with each other. That means no hiding stuff from the unit." Gloom said, wagging the folder reprovingly at Lilly Blossom.

"Sir, what about him sir? If you're going to let everypony read my file, he should have to share too." Lilly Blossom said, pointing at Crimson but dismissing Prey.

That was fair, but Gloom did not agree to her protest. "These two are special cases. They don't actually have folders."

Lily Bloom started in surprise, '-the filly is a Guard?! Impossible-'

That definitely proved that Lilly Blossom and Scenic had not talked before the three of them arrived, since the Earth pony had met Prey already.

"Sir, that's impossible sir. She can't be older than eight-"

"-Private Lilly Bloom, this is private Prey. He is fourteen years old and was hoof selected by Princess Luna. Can you claim the same?" Gloom asked calmly.

Well, it seemed Gloom wasn't overly keen on their two new recruits either. They were not part of the ISND, not where it mattered, and were likely just going to get in the way. Gloom didn't want them. However he was a Night Guard, and a Night Guard always did their duty.

But that didn't mean he had to like it.

"Sir, no sir." Lilly Blossom was forced to admit, glaring straight ahead.

"Then trust that Her Majesty has her reasons, and trust the Guards she has chosen to stand alongside you, even if you don't know why." Gloom told her.

For all Gloom's talk of hiding nothing, all three of them had secrets

and that's exactly the way Gloom intended to keep it. Even Crimson, who hated lies, wasn't uncomfortable with this behaviour. Secrets could be dangerous, and the ones the ISND held were not trivial.

Gloom and Crimson had kept the secret about thestrals blood requirements from Prey because they were afraid of his reaction. Their expectations were proven wrong, but their caution was not. Prey knew for a fact that wasn't the only clan secret they hadn't told him.

Lilly Blossom and Scenic Paint did not come from the same background as any of them. They didn't *deserve* to know their secrets.

Before Gloom could open the file Lilly Bloom burst out, "Sir, everything in my file is just words. It doesn't reflect my real potential. I know I can do better than everypony else, sir. Just give me a chance and I'll prove it to you, that's all I'm asking sir."

"Is there something that you want to clear up for us?" Gloom said, still holding up her file.

Prey could hear Lilly Blossom's teeth grinding, and he shrunk down, hoping that if the unicorn did attack, she would only attack Gloom while he ran. He checked behind him, the door was still open.

Lilly Blossom glared straight ahead, '-this isn't fair. Why can't anypony ever just give me an honest chance!?-'

When she finally did speak, it was in a fast, hot voice.

"They wouldn't let me into the Royal Guard, they washed me out of boot camp three times. I beat every test, I passed every bar but they still thought I had the 'wrong attitude' or something. Which was total horseapples! The psych's just didn't like me and failed me on purpose. I can hack it, and I'm going to prove it to everypony. If they don't want me in the Royal Guard, fine! Their loss. I'll join the Night Guard and show all of 'em. Sir." She belatedly added on the end, internally wincing.

'-buck, I let fly again. I just need one chance to prove them all wrong-'

So what Lilly Blossom was essentially saying was; she didn't measure up to the Royal Guard's standards, so she went for second best with the Night Guard, who were so desperate for bodies they couldn't say no. Even when she asked to transfer straight into the rising ISND unit.

'Wonderful. Really. Just *perfect*.'

Against Lilly Blossom's rather obvious expectations, Gloom did not shout her down. He merely nodded and tossed Scenic and Lilly's folders to them, "There's no need for these then. Thank you for being honest, both of you. And Lilly?"

Lilly Blossom braced herself, '-here it comes, this bat brain isn't going to even give me one chance-'

"The Royal Guard might not have wanted you, but the Night Guard does. If you want to do what's right, you'll get the chance, don't you worry. As you'll soon learn, your past doesn't matter in the ISND, only your performance. So, both of you..." Gloom stepped back and smiled tiredly, "Welcome to the Night Guard."

Lilly Blossom and Scenic looked to each other, despite not having met each other before today, then both saluted, "Thank you sir!"

"Right, enough of that," Gloom stifled a yawn, "Alright. We need to get you two up to speed. You've kind of come at a bad time, but here we are. So. Explanations."

Gloom turned and waved to Prey, "You're up."

Prey froze, going wide eyed as the unicorn and Scenic looked to him, "What?" He squeaked.

"Lilly Blossom, this here is Prey. He's a member of the ISND, and very smart. He's going to try and fool you until he gets to know you, but don't you believe a word of it."

"What're you doing?" Prey hissed, pulse racing.

Gloom gave him a knowing look, '-I know what you're like Prey. You'll hide. So I'm going to force you to face this head on-'

What Gloom said out loud was; "You're the best at giving explanations Prey. So go on, speak up and let them get to know you."

Prey cursed Gloom. How dare he throw Prey in front of the unicorn like this? Unbidden, he looked to Crimson, as if the pegasus could somehow help him.

'Wait. I'm looking to Crimson to help me?' Prey thought in shock. Crimson had certainly saved his life, (twice), but this was quickly going to become a misguided dependence if Prey didn't rely on himself.

'Come on. I can do this. Pretend you're only speaking to Scenic.'

Yet when he looked up and saw Lilly Blossom looking down at him, his knees still went wobbly. Prey coughed, cleared his throat and tried not to squeak, "Okay, I'm Prey, hello. I joined the ISND because of reasons Princess Luna knows. This is Crimson here, he grew up with the thestral clans, which is why he's in the Night Guard." Prey half lied to cover for Crimson, pointing at the pegasus.

Crimson blinked slowly at the two new initiates, "Hello. And hello once again, Scenic Paint. Or Paint Spot." He greeted.

"Our assignment?" Gloom prompted Prey, not letting him divert the conversation.

Prey felt like screaming at Gloom.

Prey was *not* over reacting. Lilly Blossom was an aggressive hot head, a hot head with a horn. So instinctively, and forgetting about Gloom and Crimson, he put on a smile to say, 'See? I'm friendly, I'm not a threat.'

"Yes, the expedition. The ISND are shortly going to be going off on a trip across the Ridgeback mountain range. Captain Nighthawk has given us a case investigation. We leave on the first train tomorrow morning." Prey explained, smiling like this was great news that they

were getting kicked out of Canterlot until the inspections were over.

Scenic and Lilly Blossom were visibly surprised at this news, but didn't speak.

"You can ask questions any time around here. You don't have to be at attention all the time." Gloom told them.

"Sir, we're going all the way across the mountains sir?" Lilly Blossom asked him.

Gloom raised and eyebrow and pointed to Prey, "Ask Prey."

Prey kept up the smile, "Yes, across the mountains. We've got to pack and leave. We'll be gone for two weeks."

"Two weeks?" Scenic Paint echoed in surprise, "A whole two weeks in the field? What could we be doing all the way out there for two weeks?"

"That's hardly even in Equestria." Lilly Blossom joined in, for some reason making it sound like an accusation against Prey.

'-how am I supposed to prove myself out there? There's nothing out there-'

Sweat was running down the side of Prey's head as he kept smiling disarmingly.

"That's where Captain Nighthawk is sending us. He's decided that's where we can best be utilized. Probably to get to know each other and learn to work as a team. He ordered us to leave in the morning." Prey explained, trying to shift any blame onto the captain.

"What?"
"What?"

"He told us to pack everything we need and leave tomorrow morning." Prey repeated.

Scenic sucked in air over his teeth, "So we have a day to prepare.

I'm ready to start sir." He said.

'-unexpected, but this is what the ISND must do all the time, so I've got to step up if I want to work with them-', The Earth pony thought.

"Sir, we'll be leaving first thing tomorrow, right sir?" Lilly asked.

"Yes that's correct."

"Sir, in at case, will we be meeting at the train station in the morning, sir?" Lilly Blossom asked, thinking; '-this sucks, but whatever, I can deal-'

"Meet at the station?" Gloom asked, puzzled. "No, we'll be travelling to the station together at the end of our shift of course."

It was Lilly Blossom and Scenic Paint's turn to look confused.

"Did nopony tell you?" Crimson spoke up, sounding completely uninterested, "The morning is the end of our day. Right now we're about to retire to our bunks."

"The ISND works through the night. And so do you now." Gloom said, smirking as he realised what was going on here, "No more beautiful sunrises to start your day, only moonlight for you from now on. Didn't the name tip you off? I'll say it again, welcome to the Night Guard."

"What?"
"What?"

Explanations followed, yet Lilly Blossom and Scenic were still left very off balance about their sudden change in situation, station, and shortly to be place of habitation.

Gloom, Crimson, and Prey were tired, and not in the mood for giving detailed explanations or answering any unnecessary questions.

"Sleep first. More explanations tomorrow."

"Sir, permission to speak freely sir."

"Denied. You can ask all the questions you want when we wake up this afternoon."

"Uh, this is very, uh, unexpected. Sir, so how're our shifts going to work when we're out of Canterlot?"

"I welcomed you to the Night Guard. Now I welcome you to the ISND where we work whatever, wherever, and whenever. You'll get used to it."

"But sir-"
"Sir, but-"

"Sleep now. Questions later."

Was Prey happy about sleeping in the same bunk room as an angry unicorn and a relative new unknown?

Not in the slightest. They both had homes, why couldn't Gloom send them back there?

Did Prey get any fitful sleep that morning before they had to start their next working 'day'?

Less than two hours at most.

Was Prey still exhausted, angry, worried, drained, and not looking forward to their coming trip when Gloom's infernal alarm clock went off?

Absolutely.

Did the knowledge that they were going to be leaving Canterlot and getting away from it's two alicorn rulers help alleviate any of this?

Only possibly maybe. They were going beyond the Ridgeback,

which wasn't exactly one hundred percent safe.

Did knowing Scenic and Lilly hadn't gotten any sleep either, (since to them their day had only just begun), help improve Prey's temperament?

Only sightly.

And did Prey plan to put as much distance between himself and Lilly Blossom at all times during the next two weeks, and let everyone else undertake any necessary interactions with the mare?

There had never been any doubt.

One very, *very* restless morning of sleep later, Prey was up again, and all he had to look forwards to was another full afternoon and then night of work, followed by multiple long train journeys the next day.

The knowledge that their waking day cycle would once again be thrown for a loop as they transitioned back from night to day life was just the icing on the cake. And then as the candles, they'd have to readjust all over again once they returned from the two weeks exile over the mountains.

Actually, that sounded like the only upside to all of this. The exiled from Canterlot bit, not the readjusting bit.

Except the time would be spent in the company of a unicorn. Prey longingly considered how many opportunities there would be to escape on this trip, and bitterly thought of how he wouldn't be able to take advantage of any of them. He petulantly swung his leg against the wall, the golden tracer **tink**ing against the marble.

It would be a hollow victory. A few days of freedom, then Luna would hunt him down.

The recently expanded ISND were all in the bunk room, bright, early afternoon light shining through the window. Collectively, all pony races were represented here. An Earth pony, a pegasus, a

unicorn, and a thestral. And a sheep added on the side.

"Sir, ready to start sir." Lilly Blossom shouted, standing straight at attention at the foot of her regulation made bunk, saluting and very obviously impatient.

Everyone who wasn't Scenic Paint winced at the volume.

"Thank you Lilly, but there's no need to shout." Gloom said, finishing putting on his helmet, (hastily cleaned of mashed potato), and picking up his short spear.

"Scenic, Prey, Crimson, you got everything? After we walk out that door, we're not coming back here for two weeks." He reminded them, slinging a mostly empty saddle bag containing personal possessions over his back.

"What?"
"What?!"

The exclamations came from, (no surprise), the two new members. It was growing to be a very familiar exclamation.

"Is there a problem?" Gloom asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Wait wait, so, uh, we're not coming back at all sir?" Scenic asked.

"That's what I said. Crimson, Prey, you got everything?"

Crimson and Prey just looked at each other, then down at themselves, then back to Gloom.

Crimson already had on his armour and his wing blades. Prey had his ribbon, which was in its customary place behind his ear, (Lilly and Scenic's resulting comments about that this morning had been ignored). What more did they own that they could possibly take?

"Good to go sir." Crimson said simply, answering for the both of them.

"Good. Lilly, Scenic?"

"Um, well, no sir, sorry. I wasn't expecting- I thought I would be returning back home before we left, sir." Scenic grinned nervously.

'-but this means I won't even be able to say goodbye to Carton Juice. She's going to be so angry when I get back in two weeks time-', Scenic thought, thinking of his marefriend.

"Sir. Why can't we come back here before we leave on the train, sir?" Lilly Blossom asked, glaring straight ahead. Internally, she was fuming:

'-you didn't tell us this. Was this some test?-'

Gloom raised an eyebrow, "You think we'll have time to come back? Trust me, we won't."

Gloom really should've sent them home this morning while the ISND slept. However, he'd thought it more useful if Lilly and Scenic instead tried to catch a few hours of extra sleep, because they certainly weren't going to be getting any tonight.

"Alright. You have two minutes to pack whatever personal effects you might have on you that you want to take." Gloom relented.

While Lilly Blossom and Scenic scrambled, Prey privately asked Crimson, "What about your Blood Fern while we're gone?"

"I've...'watered' it enough. It can survive two weeks fine." Crimson blinked and tilted his head at Prey, "What about yours? Your pot plants, I mean. They're more delicate than my Blood Fern." He said, keeping his voice down on the name 'Blood fern' and nodding to the window sill where Prey's own purchases sat.

"I asked a maid to water them for me while I'm gone." Prey half lied.

"Really?" Crimson blinked, "Since this morning you've found time to ask somepony? And somepony who said yes?"

"In the corridor this morning," Prey answered, not happy about having to lie to Crimson, "It's been taken care of."

Or rather, it *would* be taken care of, at least once Lemon Pink came by and collected the pot plants. While she was at it, she'd also take Prey's blanket which he'd been building runic arrays on for safe keeping while they were gone. This was all detailed in the encrypted note he'd left for her.

Prey hid a wince and rubbed his eyes. He'd wanted to speak with Lemon Pink personally to relate the unexpected turn in his circumstances, but she was no longer working night shifts here in the Palace six days a week.

On his instructions, she'd been cutting down her hours masquerading as a maid. It was supposed to be in preparation for when Crimson and he moved into their own flats. Prey had important orders and instructions for her, but now he had no choice but to leave them in his note instead.

He'd ordered this change in her schedule because he didn't want anyone drawing a connection between the day he moved out of the Palace, and the same day a maid quit. A highly tenuous connection, since there were hundreds of servants coming and going in the Palace, but Prey hadn't wanted to take even that tiny risk.

Prey regretted his paranoia now, and he had no one to blame but himself. Lemon Pink would've been an enormous help, but now he had to rely on his message conveying everything to her.

"Right, time to go," Gloom announced, "Off to the supply depot to begin the real packing."

Scenic Paint and Lilly Blossom, who were already starting to develop the ISND look after less than half a day, (that is to say, harried around the edges), hurried out the door after Gloom.

Prey cleared his throat and quickly spoke, "Wait, Crimson, are you wearing that jade mane ring thing I got you?"

To a thestral stallion, Prey knew it was not an insulting thing to be asked. For a start, all thestrals wore the stud earring of their clan regardless of gender after all.

Crimson grunted, and his eyes slid off to the side, "It's in the locker."

"You haven't used it yet. Do you not like it?" Prey asked, strangely nervous over what Crimson's answer would be.

"It's fine. But it might get broken if I were to bring it." Crimson said evasively.

"Can you please bring it anyway?" Prey pressed.

Crimson looked towards the open door. They were falling behind, "We need to go."

"Can you please-, I mean, it's completely your choice. But I got it for you because it was practical. Just a small gift. It doesn't matter if it gets broken, so don't worry about that. But if you could take it...?" He trailed off.

"Crimson, Prey, keep up!" The call came back.

Prey was still waiting hopefully for Crimson's answer. The Pegasus made a wing flick of annoyance, "Fine, I'll bring it."

"Thank you."

Signs of the upcoming Grand Galloping Gala were clear throughout the Palace as they headed down towards the Guard entrance, and then out to the Guard Compound. Looking in on the different sections of the Palace as they passed allowed one a view of how the preparations were gearing up.

Silk banners, streamers, red rope brass cordons, rolls of more plush carpet, and so much more were all in the process of being transported about the Palace from one spot to another. It was the sheer quantity of these aforementioned items that was the most boggling. Lilly Blossom and Scenic Paint stared openly, heads on swivels to track the busy servants as they passed.

But even that wasn't what was really worthy of note. All these grand preparations? Nothing. Just more rich ponies wasting

privileges. At this point, it no longer even shocked Prey when he saw room number plates spelled out with turquoise and emeralds.

No, only one thing worthy noting as they passed, and only Prey was privy to its nature.

They were just going through an intersection. The corridor on the left passed by floor to ceiling bay windows, in through which light poured. Prey happened to glance that way.

On the little stone balcony, secluded and out of the way, sitting in the exact same spot Prey had first seen her, was the mare Saffron Swirl.

Prey's head jerked round.

Had his eyes deceived him? No, it was the same magically crippled unicorn mare, in exactly the same place as before. The big difference between the chance encounter back then and now, was that the mare was wearing a serene smile as she gazed up at a sky.

Prey's question was; Why? Why was she still alive?

Prey had spoken to her and read her thoughts, which revealed she had decided to commit suicide that very night.

Yet here she was. Something must've changed her mind. Did she lose her nerve?

Then why had that brief glance Prey had caught of her face seemed so...happy? So free of the shame which should've been wracking her?

'How did she pull herself out of the dark hole?'

It shouldn't matter. She was just a random pony, not even really a unicorn since she couldn't use magic. She wasn't a threat or an asset, and thus wasn't important. Live, die, what did it matter to Prey?

Yet the glimpse of her serene smile as Saffron gazed up at the sky sat ill with Prey for a long time.

Scenic Paint stifled a sneeze, dust motes drifting in the air. "Pardon me." He muttered.

'-why's it have to be so dusty in here?-', He thought, '-and dark?-'

'Welcome to the Night Guard,' Prey thought sarcastically, 'Run by people who can see in the dark and who are oh-so considerate of those who can't.'

"Sir, what is our mission out in Mayflower exactly sir?" Lilly Blossom asked, standing at attention as they all stood in the Night Guard supply deport, surrounded by boxes, crates, and barrels all crammed into the small, dim, storehouse. They'd had to track down a reedy looking clerk from the Guard Compound, who'd eventually been able to grumpily unlock the door for them.

"To investigate the disappearance of fifteen ponies from three months ago. This will be a two week trip, and we have no idea what we might need to carry out our investigation on the other end. So anything we might need..." Gloom waved a wing at the room around them, "We've got to take with us."

"Sir, yes sir."

"Yes sir."

"Yes, sir."

"Yes."

Prey and Crimson got started on looking through the crates straight away, Crimson pulling a number of empty packs off the wall and wordlessly tossing the smaller one to Prey. He caught with a nod of thanks. Gloom joined in, taking a canvas saddle bag from Crimson for himself.

Lilly Blossom and Scenic looked lost.

"Sir, permission to ask what we're doing sir?" Lilly Blossom asked.

Gloom paused, ear cocked, "Weren't you listening earlier?" He responded, puzzled.

"Of course I was sir. I'm asking where are the travel packs, sir?" Lilly responded, immediately getting defensive.

'-does he think I'm an idiot?-'

Gloom pointed at the empty packs hanging on the wall, "There. Fill them up with whatever you need."

"Sir, are there no standard issue travel packs, sir?" Lilly Blossom asked, sounding outraged. Really, everything seemed to get the mare angry in some way, shape, or form.

"No private, there are not." Gloom said, tone letting Lilly Blossom she'd better calm down.

"Count this as your first learning experience in the ISND. Packing for a mission. You need something? Then make sure you bring it. It's down to you to pack for you." Gloom ordered, unhooking a canteen from a shelf and clipping it onto his saddle bags. Having wings, he and Crimson were using saddle bags instead of more normal backpacks.

Prey watched out of the corner of his eye as Lilly and Scenic uncertainly take down a pair of packs for themselves, and begin poking around the store room, wondering what they should take.

Lilly Blossom's uncertainty only lasted for a minute thought, before she decided; '-this'll be easy for me-'

She began confidently throwing items into her pack.

Lilly was going to have a bad time later, Prey could tell. Crimson and Gloom probably realised the same, but were letting the mare make and learn from her own mistakes. As Prey well knew by now, that was the thestral way.

'Good.' Prey thought. Not that it mattered if Lilly Blossom messed up. They were going to be staying in a village for two weeks, or camping just outside one at any rate. Any necessities she forgot

could be obtained there. Or simply covered for with her magic, another example of why unicorns were far superior to everyone else. A strong enough mage could provide, transmute, or conjure up everything they might ever need.

Fire, shelter, water, food? All were possible if you had magic and knew the spells.

Prey focused on what he was packing instead of Lilly, and also on what Crimson was too, keeping close by to the pegasus. This was both to help Crimson if for some bizarre reason he needed any, and to keep away from said unicorn.

Just because they were going to a village didn't mean Prey wasn't going to prepare like they were entering the Deeper Green itself. Better to have it and not need it, than to need it and not have it. Besides, Mayflower bordered on its own untamed forest. You couldn't be too cautious.

Prey knew from sad experience what he needed to survive; what was essential what was useful, what was merely convenient to have, and what was just plain unnecessary.

Packing the essentials were easy. The fine balance came between 'useful' and 'convenient'. There were so many things it would be good to have just in case, but that would quickly overload him. And since Prey could carry the least out of everyone present, (perhaps only half of what Gloom or Crimson could manage even in their armour), he was going to have to be picky.

As such, he had to pack light and sparingly. As he did so, he once again regretted not being able to get in contact with Lemon Pink before they were set to depart. There were a few 'things' he would've liked her to pick up for him.

Prey saw Crimson taking a tinder pouch off a high shelf, and quickly asked, "Could you pass me one of those too, please? And some matches too." Matches were wonderful, until they got wet, so better to have both.

"Of course. Here."

"Thanks." Prey slid the pouch into a side pocket. He liked this back pack, it had adjustable padded straps which wouldn't rub, something very desirable in any pack. It was a dark green khaki that didn't stand out, and appeared to have been waterproofed in the past.

Nighthawk hadn't skimped and evidently knew what he was doing. It was even better than the packs the Border Guards used to have. People in the Resistance had killed for those. Frequently. And not just because of the much needed supplies they contained.

It was something of a surreal experience to have everything he needed around him, and getting to pick whatever he wanted.

'Fifty seven years too late.'

Prey packed away a square of tarpaulin in place of a tent, a thin coil of rope, (rope was always useful) and two of the smaller metal canteens. It was better to split your water between two canteens in case one broke or became contaminated.

Water was always the biggest problem when travelling, because it was the heaviest. You could only travel so far as your water stretched. He was also careful to choose the most scuffed but still sound canteens he could find to hide any metal reflection.

Next came food.

Dried fruit. That was all Prey packed, because it was light.

He picked through the ration boxes and discarded the rest, ignoring Gloom's annoyed look for; '-ruining the rest of the perfectly good ration packs-'

Following that, Prey packed not one, but three different knives away into various places in his pack. And that was him all packed for essentials.

Prey looked at his pack. It was only half full. Everything else Prey knew he could either improvise, provide himself, or go without. Even carrying this small amount would grow heavy mile after mile.

Yet he had so much variety here in the storeroom to pick from. Prey glanced at Crimson, who was still methodically picking over the shelves and barrels to make sure he was only taking the best quality available.

Prey hesitated. Crimson could definitely look after himself, he was a grown, well trained warrior, but Prey owed him. That meant he was supposed to look out for Crimson. He should pack stuff that could help Crimson too, right?

Checking to make sure he wasn't overheard, Prey sidled up to Crimson. He still kept out of hoofs reach, but close enough so only the Pegasus could hear.

"Crimson, you... need any help?" He offered, feeling strangely awkward.

"No. I mean, no thank you, I am fine."

"The trip is supposed to last two weeks. That's a long time to be gone." Prey gave Crimson a significant look.

"Yes?" Crimson said, not picking up Prey's hint.

"We've got to take everything we need with us."

"I know. What are you getting at?"

"What about blood. Do you have any packed?"

"Don't say things like that." Crimson whispered, immediately checking to see if Scenic or Lilly had overheard Prey's words.

"They're not close enough to hear us. Don't worry, I would never tell anyone." Prey assured him.

"We...that isn't something that is any of your business Prey. We know what we are doing."

"I'm just trying to help and make sure you haven't forgotten to pack any of that clan wine-"

"-Don't talk about it Prey." Crimson cut him off.

"Alright alright, sorry." Prey was quiet for a moment, "There are only two things things I won't do for you, remember? I'm just trying to help."

"I haven't forgotten Prey," Crimson said quickly, "But you don't owe me."

Crimson's mental walls were churning, and Prey realised he was somehow upsetting Crimson. Prey didn't want to upset Crimson. So he ducked his head and stayed quiet.

Crimson's jaw worked as he thought over his next words:

"Thank you Prey, but no thank you. About helping with this, I mean. Not about help with other things, just... Not on this. It is clan business. Please do not bring this up again. It is..." Crimson coughed, "...Not something to talk about. With you, I mean. And unpleasant too."

"Okay, I won't bring it up in the future." Prey quickly agreed.

"Good. And I do not need your help with everything. You keep asking me all the time, like if I want the pepper at breakfast, or if I need a new quill. I'm capable of doing things myself. Please stop."

'But I owe you. I'm just trying to help. That's what you're supposed to do, isn't it?' Prey thought, but he couldn't say it. Crimson didn't want his help. Well tough, Crimson was going to get his help anyway.

"We're a team, we're supposed to help one another." Prey said.

"Well yes, but not like-"

"I'm just trying to help. Is that so wrong?"

"Of course not, but I...Look, I am not saying I don't want your help, but not for every little thing."

Prey realised it was that Crimson didn't want to rely on someone

else. That was perfectly understandable, Prey didn't trust anyone either. Prey didn't even trust Crimson, at least not implicitly, but Crimson could trust Prey. Or rather, he *should* trust Prey. Prey owed him, but Crimson didn't seem to understand that.

Well, Crimson was wrong and Prey was right, that's all there was to it.

Prey would remain keeping an eye out for Crimson even if the pegasus didn't know he was. Crimson's wishes for him to do otherwise were misguided, so Prey would ignore those wishes. He would do what he thought was best for Crimson, as long as it didn't infringe upon his two exceptions.

"Alright," Prey told Crimson, raising his hoof and backing off, "Alright."

However Prey didn't confirm he would stop.

With that in mind, Prey packed the one thing he could use better than anyone else here. Medical supplies.

Prey may not know what all the new pills and fancy medicines in the Palace hospital did, but the small first aid kits piled in a crate were incredibly simplistic. Bandages, some sutures, plasters, a few pills clearly labelled as 'Pain Relief', some scissors, a single scalpel, and that was about it.

Where was the dried yarrow? The ground fever root, Golden Red, Happy Hearththorn, willow baste, split paper vine, and Crella seeds? Those were the absolute basics of what any good medical kit should contain.

Nevertheless, Prey packed up three of the kits. Here's to hoping he wouldn't need any of it. His known zebrican cures and remedies weren't available, so he'd just have to do without.

'Another issue which could've been solved if I only had some way to contact Lemon Pink.' He thought bitterly.

"Done!" Lilly Blossom declared, levitating up and dropping a bulging back pack on top of the central bench with a clatter.

Prey eyed the bag dubiously. She'd just shoved stuff in there, not packing it down or in any order. The last thing you wanted was to need something which was at the bottom of your pack.

They were going into an unknown and unsecured area. First rule for setting camp, never have anything unpacked you weren't using, because who knows when you're going to have to grab your bag and run? Second rule, always have your bag and weapon within hoof's reach.

Gloom didn't comment or offer Lilly any advice however, merely nodding and adding his own saddle bags to the table. To his mind, Lilly Blossom didn't seem the type to learn from anything but painful experience.

'-she'd just dig in her hooves and silently resent my help-', Gloom thought helplessly, '-I do wonder how much of what she packed is completely useless-'

Scenic, having been smarter than just to pack everything that caught his eye, had been trying for the most part to copy whatever he'd seen Gloom or Crimson taking. It still looked like he'd over packed, but he was an Earth pony, so he could probably take the extra weight.

"Sir, when are we going to pick up our standard issue weaponry for the trip, sir?" Lilly Blossom asked.

"Do you know how to use a weapon?" Gloom replied.

"Sir, yes sir. Standard Guard training included proper spear care and maintenance. I was one of the best in drill practice-"

"Thank you private Blossom. But what I meant was, do you have real training in the *combat* use of a weapon." Gloom corrected.

Lilly Blossom's mouth tightened, but she couldn't answer anything but, "Sir, no sir."

"You?" Gloom asked Scenic Paint who, unlike Lilly, looked apprehensive rather than eager at the thought of being given a weapon. He really was the smarter of the two.

"No sir."

"In that case, the answer is you aren't. Prey hasn't got a weapon," Gloom added before anyone could protest, "And he's a member of the ISND too. The reason why? Because he can't use one."

Lilly Blossom was obviously biting down the protest, '-that's completely different. Prey's just a foal and I'm not-'

"What were you going to use a weapon for anyways?" Gloom asked raising an eyebrow.

"Sir, the Guard must be prepared for anything sir. At all times, at all places, in all things." Lilly immediately recited.

'And she believes every word of that.' Prey internally sneered. He may have been scared of her, but that didn't mean he couldn't mock her stupidity. The issue was, Stupid had been born with a horn unfairly attached to her forehead.

"In the unlikely even something does go wrong that can be solved with violence, you'll still have your magic." Gloom pointed out, buckling shut his saddlebags.

"We're going to be spending these two weeks mostly in and around the village. We're just going to frighten the locals if we're all unnecessarily armed. Crimson and I are only going armed because we know what we're doing."

Gloom refrained from adding the obvious implication, 'And you don't'.

But not to worry, Lilly Blossom leapt to that conclusion all by herself.

'-just you wait, I'll prove I'm the best and then everypony will know it-', She thought, stoking herself up.

"Right, everypony got everything they need?" Gloom asked, surveying the group. '-no, *my* group. This is now my group now. Luna, that's going to take some getting used to. Again.-'

"Sir, yes sir." Lilly saluted, beating the more normal; "Yes sir." of Scenic and Crimson.

Prey grimaced, fiddling with his ribbon. As usual he didn't want to say anything around Lilly Blossom that might get the unicorn to focus on him.

"Prey? What've you got to say?" Gloom asked in a moment of insight.

Well there was no point holding back now that he'd been called out. Prey cleared his throat, "I believe that there are some items we should obtain before our trip, if at all possible. Sir."

Gloom ignored whatever surprised looks Scenic or Lilly might be giving Prey in favour of hearing out Prey's suggestion. He wasn't about to dismiss Prey's words out of hoof ever again. If he'd listened the first time, then maybe the tragedies with Garrow might've been avoided.

"Go on Prey." Gloom prompted.

Prey only hesitated for a fraction of a second longer, before practicality trumped caution, "An emergency beacon crystal. If we'd had one at the Lumber Yard, then things would have gone down very differently."

"What really did happen at the Lumber Yard? I didn't believe what the newspapers wrote." Scenic Paint whisper-asked to Crimson. Crimson grunted and didn't answer.

Gloom couldn't help but nod at Prey's idea, "Yes. That would've been very useful indeed. Unfortunately, I don't think they have beacon crystals that can be used all the way across the mountains. I don't pretend to understand the magic, but it can only send a signal so far to the main crystal hub before it stops working entirely. Not to mention, it would still take anypony two days to reach us out there." Gloom said regretfully.

If experience had taught Gloom anything, it was that, '-no ISND mission ever turns out as simple as it's supposed to be, and being

able to call back up would be really nice-'

Prey kept his eyes from flicking to Lilly Blossom, hoping this wouldn't pique her interest enough to have her come and actually undertake the dreaded activity of *questioning* him later about it.

"Well..." Prey reluctantly began, "I did read through a Royal Guard non-standard asset list that Lieutenants, or the Captain too I suppose, are permitted to commission from. There's a small store of these items specially set aside for exceptional circumstances. And the Night Guard technically has access to this store too because it was created as a pool asset."

"I take it there was something in particular on that list that you had in mind, right?" Gloom asked, interested.

"Yes. Message-in-a-bottle fire. Portable, although it's limited in the number of uses, but it can speedily send a letter between two points. If we take one with us, it would allow us to immediately send back a message in an emergency." Prey explained.

"That sounds perfect. Why doesn't every unit already have one?" Gloom asked.

Prey's brows drew together as he looked at Gloom. Wasn't it obvious? "Because it's a type of single use, stable spell fire, sir."

Gloom picked up on Prey's tone and Lilly's sharp intake of breath, "Ahhh. Let me guess, incredibly rare and hard to get hold of?" He asked, not bothering to wonder how Prey knew of it then.

"Very much so and more," Prey nodded seriously, "I don't know the specifics, just that it's something usually only very rich nobles use."

"So unless you're Triton Fell himself, going around willy-nilly using the stuff is damned expensive, am I right?" Gloom summed up.

"More or less, sir. The more well known method of magically teleporting letters from one enchanted receptacle to another is very different, although that still takes a lot of magic. The problem with that method is you're limited in sending from fixed point A to B. Neither point can be moved. It's not the same with message-in-a-

bottle. The bottle can be carried and moved around on both ends, and doesn't take any spell to use." Prey explained.

"Right. Well I'll see about asking Captain Nighthawk to get us a bottle of this message fire before we go then."

Lilly Blossom appeared to be struggling to fight down a bad cough, obviously shocked by Gloom's casual decision to obtain a bottle.

"Something the matter?" Gloom asked her.

"Sir, no sir. It's just, those are like, really expensive. My father's in the courier business. He said they once had to transport a chest of message-in-a-bottle spells, and the insurance premiums almost gave him a heart attack. If one bottle had broken, it still would've cost his business nearly a thousand bits each."

Gloom shrugged, as if it were no big deal, "It's not like we'll need it unless there's an emergency. If nothing goes wrong, we'll just give it back when we return."

Leaving Lilly Blossom looking slightly stunned at the suggestion of simply using thousands of bits worth of magic so blasely, Gloom turned back to Crimson and Prey, "Any other suggestions?" He asked.

"A map, sir." Crimson said simply, which was exactly what Prey had been about suggest next.

"Good idea. Prey, I'm going to leave that to you. That's going to be your task before we go." Gloom said, delegating it.

Prey nodded, that was something he was happy to do. He may still have been tired, nervous, and grumpy about getting sent off into the middle of nowhere in the company of a clueless unicorn and Earth pony, but information was always worth scouting for.

Gloom clapped his hooves together sharply, "Right, that's it. We're done here. Grab your packs and let's go. We've still got plenty to show you two before we go anywhere to help get you into the swing of things." He said, gesturing Scenic and Lilly towards the door.

Lilly Blossom glanced longingly towards the crate of hammer hooves as Gloom shooed them out. Prey slung his pack onto his back, doing the strap up around his middle and rolling his shoulders to get used to the feel.

Gloom ducked his head back in from the door once Scenic Paint and Lilly Blossom were outside, so what he said next would stay between the three of them.

"Thoughts?" Gloom asked, jerking a wing claw back to indicate their two newest members outside.

Prey didn't hesitate and gave his brutally honest opinion.

"Lilly Blossom is a danger. She's hot headed, angry, and naive." He summed up. Prey hated unicorn's, and Lilly Blossom with her childish need to prove herself to everyone definitely wasn't the exception to the rule.

Gloom hid a grimace, '-yeah, and now I'm her Sargent. How do you think I feel?-'

For his part, Crimson didn't dispute Prey's statement either, although he did add something different. "But she does have magic, which we want. I mean, it would've been most useful in the past if the ISND had unicorn assistance."

"That's also true. And it goes without saying that we'll give everypony a chance. She did willingly sign up to the Night Guard, after all." Gloom said.

"Scenic Paint was amiable enough the first time we met him. That has not changed." Crimson added, speaking of their second new addition.

"He's unsure and unskilled." Prey said, as damning as ever.

Gloom however hadn't really expected Prey to say anything different, and took Prey's words with a grain of salt.

"He's green," Gloom agreed, nodding, "But so were we all once. We've got two weeks of enforced vacation to get to know one

another and train them up. It'll be a good opportunity to develop our teamwork."

That sounded like a horrible idea to Prey.

So did riding three different trains for a total of over twenty-two uncomfortable hours, all the while sleep deprived. And that journey didn't even begin until the end of today. They still had a full twelve hours of shift left ahead to get through with both Scenic and Lilly just looking for an opportunity to mess up.

He thought of the village they were going to. Mayflower. The Guard had failed to help there the first time, and so had the follow up search expedition. And now the same Guard was going to waltz back into their village again claiming; 'We're here to help.'

That sounded very familiar to Prey.

Prey did not want to go. The ISND were not in the right, not usually something that would stop him, but this was different. This was... Too close to what had happened before to him.

The villagers wouldn't want to see their faces, and he especially didn't want to have to go there in the same group as a self righteous, bigoted, hotheaded unicorn. Scenic would probably follow orders fine, but Prey just knew the mare was going to do something rash.

His reticence had nothing to do with how, (if they didn't disembark at their stop in Alfalfa Dale), the train's journey would end in the border town of Straperdale. Sixty miles up from Straperdale lay the ruins of Rushweed. Home.

'Only sixty miles...' Prey thought quietly to himself. The train would carry him essentially almost all the way there, close enough to walk the rest in a day or three. But he knew he would never make that trip. Even if he was free from Luna, he could never return to his family's farm.

'No, not *my* farm. Gossamer's farm. Gossamer went back to the farm, just once. Prey never did. Because he couldn't face it, and

neither can I.'

"Prey? You coming?" Crimson asked for the second time. Prey blinked, realising that Gloom had already exited and Crimson was looking back into the storeroom to see what was taking him so long. The pegasus was giving Prey a searching look.

Prey blinked a second time, and fixed his mask firmly back in place. He dropped his hoof, letting go from tugging at his ribbon.

'Sloppy, angsty, melancholy, ill-disciplined, unobservant crybaby.' Prey scorned himself for getting caught out like that.

'Forget it. That was Gossamer's life anyway, not yours. You'd just insult their memory going back anyway.'

"Yeah sorry, still tired, I didn't sleep well. I'm right behind you." He said, shouldering his pack and heading out after Crimson.

"No way. Fifteen ponies can't just disappear out there, even in a place like that. Maybe one lost to some Celestia damned monster they didn't drive off properly before settling, but fifteen ponies? Ha! No way. Wherever they went, they went willingly, I bet you." Lilly Blossom declared, banging her mug of water down onto the table top.

She'd taken the news that they were off duty at meal times and could speak their minds freely very well.

'-too well. She's close to overstepping her bounds regardless of off duty or not-', Gloom thought, taking another forkful of cold pasta as he regarded the two newest members in the Night Guard.

The five of them were, unsurprisingly, in the mess hall eating lunch, or what counted for every other Guards dinner. Even less surprisingly, they were late. Again. Meaning they were the only ones sitting in here. Scenic and Lilly would definitely have preferred having the normal Guards around to talk to.

'Too bad, how sad. Welcome to the ISND. Better get used to it.'

Prey, who was having trouble keeping his eyes open after only two hours of sleep, held no doubts that Gloom had delayed this late intentionally. By this point, Crimson and Prey both knew exactly how long seven files of old case work took, even stopping to explain to Scenic and Lilly every step of the way, and it did not take them until eight o'clock, (a full hour after dinner officially ended), unless it was on purpose.

Gloom was making the smart call, and avoiding meeting the Royal Guard again before the ISND disappeared across the mountains for two weeks.

'A perfectly understandable decision.' Prey thought, his lips stretching wide as he yawned against his will.

Prey had... distanced himself from his upset earlier. He was now back to not irrationally letting his mind distract him with past traumas. It was probably caused only because he'd been so tired in the first place.

Prey had successfully managed to avoid speaking to Scenic or Lilly for almost the entire day, always starting on something the second just before they asked him a question. Meaning they had to go ask Gloom or Crimson instead, their curiosity in Prey going unstated.

It couldn't last, Prey knew. They would be spending two weeks in close proximity, but for now it was preferable to interacting with either of them.

Lilly Blossom was still going on about this and that as she leaned forwards on her bench, slowly hyping herself up over nothing; "We can solve this, just watch me! I'm not afraid of hard work."

Scenic Paint seemed more amendable to the idea of this two week mission now too. Perhaps because he'd realised how much of the ISND's daily workload involved stacks and stacks of paperwork. In retrospect, the trip out to Mayflower was gradually sounding better.

"Pah! Two weeks. It'll be easy if I pull my weight. Really boring, but I bet you'll this'll be a walk in the park. There's no way it'll take two whole weeks." Lilly declared confidently.

"So what'll we be doing once we've found them, Gloom? Train? Defend the village? Teach them how to drive off monsters before we come back?" She asked Gloom boldly, her eagerness for glory clear.

"We're there to find the missing ponies first and foremost." Gloom calmly reminded her, taking another forkful of pasta and darkly thinking; '-and I hope to Luna it's not like the last four missing ponies-'

He ate the mouthful before finishing; "Then, and *only* then, I'll decide what we're doing next."

At his place at the table, Crimson was obviously put out by Lilly Blossom's readiness to call Gloom by his name rather than 'sir' at dinner, despite it being allowed and even encouraged by Gloom himself.

'Probably thought she gave in too easily.' Prey thought, resting his head on the table, using his ear as a makeshift pillow. Doable for about ten minutes, but after that his ear would start to kill.

Perhaps to distract himself from the brash mare, Crimson looked to Scenic and tried to force stilted conversation, "We spoke once here before. Briefly. Before the day with the dragon smoke and the cellar, I mean." He began.

Lilly's ears perked, "Cellar? What does that mean-?"

Her attempt to butt in went completely ignored by Crimson, "It was not a good opportunity to get to know each other. That should be rectified. Tell me about yourself Scenic Paint."

Scenic seemed surprised, "Oh, uh, sure. Well, there's not much to tell, I grew up in Canterlot, and I'm an only child. I went to primary school here too, I made two really good friends, Harpsichord and Trotter, and art class was always my favourite." He proceeded to go on, reciting boring details about his life growing up, none of which any of them could relate to.

Except Scenic Paint was hiding something from them, and very

obviously too. Perhaps Crimson missed it, but Prey and Gloom certainly didn't. Every time the subject of his parents came up, or why he'd wanted to join the Royal Guard in the first place instead of going onto do a fine arts degree, his answers became evasive.

No doubt Scenic thought he was being very subtle about it, but really, his obvious time skips were as plain as day.

But again, it wasn't important. Whatever petty family squabbles Scenic Paint had, they had little bearing on his position within the ISND.

"-And that's, uh, more or less me." Scenic Paint finished, coming to an end of his frankly boring life's story, smiling nervously. The amount of privilege he'd unconsciously listed off disgusted Prey.

"I understand. Thank you for sharing. It was interesting." Crimson said with a slow blink.

Scenic nodded and smiled, obviously waiting for Crimson to reciprocate and tell them a little about himself. Except Crimson made no indication he intended to do so, and when Scenic opened his mouth to ask, he lost his nerve at the last moment under Crimson's yellow gaze, and so turned it into an awkward cough instead.

*Eh*rrm*.*

Considering how both the Earth pony and Lilly Blossom had both requested specifically to join the Night Guard, they really weren't doing well on getting used to being around thestrals, or a pesudo-thestral in Crimson's case.

Head on the table, Prey wanted to groan at this, at *all* of this. He'd been wanting to do that a lot in the last month and a half of his life. Everything just kept slowly getting that little bit more infuriating each and every day.

There was a motion at the mess hall door. Some blue pegasus or Earth pony stuck their muzzle in, (definitely not a unicorn though, because no horn), and checked around. A moment later they

withdrew, and their was the faint sound of conversation outside.

Then the mess hall door opened and a group of five ponies strode in, talking loudly amongst themselves. Now Prey did groan, 'And it just keeps getting better.' He thought, forcing his eyes open to properly observe the newcomers, checking how much of a potential threat they posed.

Prey quickly started paying close attention when he realised they were not Guards, and not just because they were in civies and not uniform. They certainly looked like Guards, like the ideal pegasi of Royal Guard recruitment posters actually. Even across the mess hall and under the casual clothing, their coats gleamed with health. Lean muscles visibly shifted in their legs as they trotted for the kitchen, and their wings looked just as strong.

This group of five pegasi were even in better condition than the pegasi in the Solar Guard had been. Yet they were not Guards, Prey could tell that much from a glance.

They were too confident in a way Prey couldn't quite quantify. Guards were taught to follow orders from superiors, to stand in line, march in step, and guard a post motionless for hours on end. These ponies did not look like they could do that, they had too much energy. Plus, they were far too casual in their chatter with each other, not at all like you would be with a commanding officer.

Of course, it was always possible there was no officer present and that they were all off duty, but Prey could tell from the way they deferred to the two at their front that wasn't quite the case.

'And they're all wearing a hat, glasses, or hood of some kind that obscures their mane and faces...' Prey noted, narrowing his eyes and subtly shifting to put them better in his field of vision.

Gloom and Crimson had glanced around too at the group's entry, and although they frowned slightly, they didn't pass comment. These pegasi wouldn't have gotten into the Palace without coming past a check point, so obviously they were allowed to be here.

Lilly Blossom hardly paid the newcomers any mind, and Scenic,

who'd jumped slightly when the door opened, merely checked to see what his Sargent was doing before copying him, leaving the newcomers be as they pushed open the door to the kitchen and disappeared inside.

"Hey! They just went into the kitchens. They're not allowed in there." Lilly Blossom protested, pointing at the closing door.

"And for all we know they do have permission. Leave them." Gloom told her, thinking back to the times the ISND had worked so late they'd also missed dinner and resorted to raiding Cookie's kitchen.

'-searching of something vaguely edible I bet-'

As if to confirm the thesrtal's thoughts, the five reemerged, carrying plates and tray's laden down with fruits, hay, and even half a pie.

Lilly Blossom stiffened in outrage at them somehow getting, '-better food than that grumpy old fart gave us-', referring to the cold pasta Cookie had dolled out to them before closing up the kitchen and giving them all, (minus Prey dearie of course), the stink eye.

Gloom paid little mind as the loud group snagged a table right in the middle of the room and started eating with gusto.

"They may not look it, but they're keeping a careful eye on us." Prey murmured to Gloom, not raising his head from the table.

"Are they now?" Gloom didn't turn his head, "Well it's not like it matters. I've never seen them before in my life. As soon as Scenic and Lilly finish eating, we're out of here anyways."

"Oh and by the way," Gloom added, "Captain Nighthawk okay'd the message-in-the-bottle. In fact he said take two of them, just in case."

That was even better, 'Nighthawk's being generous for once.' Prey thought. Or perhaps the Captain was just playing it safe, knowing how trouble had a habit of following the ISND.

"Ahoy yonder table!" A jovial voice rang out from the pegasi group rising above their chatter. The ISND all looked up.

A white stallion wearing a large brown flight jacket and hat waved a hoof languidly, "Flitterbat pony, come on over and join us for a bit." He called to Gloom, smile brilliantly white in a handsome face.

One of the stallion's companion's immediately punched him hard in the leg, "*Thestral* you doofus, it's thestral."

"Take it easy." The pegasus yelped, fending off his fellow.

Then to Gloom, "Sorry, my bad," He laughed, "I meant thestral pony. Forgive me, I haven't had the honour of meeting any of you ponies before. Say, come over here and join us for a bit."

This pony reminded Prey a lot of that Royal Guard pegasus, Nimbus Feather, with how both sounded like they were used to laughing alot and being liked. 'How wonderful for him.'

Gloom neutrally regarded the stallion and his buddies for a long second, "No thank you, I am quite comfortable here." He answered, speaking clearly.

The group of pegasi seemed surprised at Gloom's refusal, but not offended. In fact, a couple looked smugly pleased, something that immediately made Prey more suspicious. 'They were pleased about not being recognised.' Prey deduced.

White boy laughed again, "Really, I meant no offence. In fact we were surprised to see anypony else in here at this hour. We'd just like to talk with you for a few minutes Mr. thestral."

He got another punch from the pony next to him and more laughter, "Come over, I promise we don't bite." One called out with a pronounced lisp, so that "promise" was actually "promith".

The orange mare in the hooded jumper, who Prey had worked out was somehow in charge, seemed thoroughly bored with her group's antics, and turned her head away as they continued to joke around.

"If you want to speak, you are welcome to come over here." Gloom returned.

"OooOOhh, get told." The lisping mare from earlier mocked the

handsome pegasus, punching him again, which got the same yelp as before while the others laughed again, evidently very pleased at still not being recognised. Lilly Blossom's brows were furrowing, as if she were trying to place something.

"Hey hey, quit it," The stallion hissed at his fellows, then back to the ISND:

"You sure I can't convince you to come over? We have pillaged food." He jokingly offered, waving a bowl of fruit invitingly, "We want to hear about the thestral's aerial performance history."

"I...Pardon?" Gloom asked, thrown. That was not the question Gloom had been expecting, Prey was sure.

"You've got like, a thousand years of thestral clan history, and you're all fliers. You must have developed some pretty impressive manoeuvres in a thousand years that we've probably never even heard of. Plus, you guys have had three different clans which means combined three thousand years of learning." White boy said, sounding genuinely enthusiastic.

"I am not sure we are talking about the same thing." Gloom said cautiously. The mention of the clans had piqued his own interest, but also his caution. Not many people understood the distinction between the three thestral clans. Crimson was now listening in closely too. And Prey had simply been listening closely from the start.

"You know, ariel moves like we've got. The double reverse corkscrew, Fabo's helix twister, the Double Roll, Thunder Bombing Run, Maxine's Maximum. What renowned ones have you guys got?"

"None." Gloom said honestly

"What, none? Why in Equestria didn't you do any of those? Aren't you any good at flying?"

"There was little time for developing tricks, nor were we in Equestria." Gloom answered coldly, picking up he tray and standing, "You four done? Good, let's get back to work."

"You mean to say your tribes did not have an elite air force?" The stallion, who wasn't taking the hint, called after them, "But what about-?"

Orange boss mare made an irritable sound, "Zip it Soarin." She snapped, voice gravely.

Lilly Blossom and Scenic Paint both gasped, "S-Soarin?", "S-Spitfire?"

The pegasus called Soarin ducked his head sheepishly at his commander's order, and the rest of their group groaned good naturally. "You gave us away again."

Soarin rubbed his neck, grinning, "Sorry guys-Youch! Hey, cut it out."

The fact that they were all blaming this Soarin instead of the Spitfire mare for revealing them was a bit strange. Both the ISND's newest members were both staring slack jawed at the other table, awe in their faces.

Crimson cocked an ear at Prey, "Do you know who these ponies are?" He asked.

"Yes. A flight exclusive squadron that goes by the name The Wonderbolts," Prey answered quietly, eyes narrowed as he studied the pegasi closely, "I thought they were supposed to be an elite military unit, but I guess I heard wrong."

These pegasi certainly looked the part, powerful, fast and strong, but somehow Prey doubted they were soldiers. Prey had seen soldiers. And these ponies in front of him didn't feel like soldiers. Not if they were supposed to be elites.

Why were they here? Extra security for the upcoming Gala at the end of the week?

"The Wonderbolts?" Crimson asked, looking straight at the group, "Never heard of them."

"Wh*hhaa*at?" Lilly, Scenic, and all the Wonderbolt ponies chorused, the only exception being Spitfire who merely snorted in dismissal

and turned away.

"The Wonderbolts? Fliers extraordinaire? Fastest ponies in Equestria? Air Force One? None of that ringing any bells?" Soarin protested, waving his hooves in the air.

Crimson sniffed at them, "No."

More consternation from the group of pegasi. Their leader, Spitfire, didn't appear to give two hoots about Crimson's opinion.

Prey took advantage of the distraction and walked out the mess hall doors and grumpily waited in the empty corridor for the others to join him. Preferably, 'others' would just mean Crimson, but no.

"Come on, we've got work to be doing." Gloom jerked his head at the door. "Paint Spot, Lilly Blossom, don't just sit there. Now means now." He rasped.

"But, but, sir! Those are the Wonderbolts-"

"Yes and I'm sure they don't appreciate you gawking. Now get after Prey and Crimson. Back to the office. We've plenty more to do before the train ride to Mayflower."

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Author's Notes:

Well, a bit of an unexpected direction out of the blue. Two new recruits, and actually getting kicked out for the Grand Gala. But what'll happen out there beyond the mountains in Mayflower and Alfalfa Dale?

Hope you liked the chapter. Please point out any spelling mistakes!

Editor here: Sweetolebob18

40.3 A Flower Forest in May

Author's Notes:

Hello to any and all readers. A different start to a chapter here. You may want to refresh your memory on where the last chapter left off. If you spot any mistakes, please let me know. Thanks!

Editor and adviser: Sweetolebob18

------One Week Later------

The reaper king crashed through the last flimsy barrier of saplings, sending splinters flying through the night as it swung its massively oversized claw through the trees. A horrible orange light burned from within its metal caged pumpkin head, like a glowing blister.

The stars wheeling in the clearing sky above seemed to shrink as a horrible gurgling roar rose from the split in the reaper king's chest. Why such a thing had been created to roar was beyond Prey.

It had been created solely to break, to destroy, and to kill.

Prey shrank back behind the boulder in the darkness, slimy moss sticking to his already filthy wool. The ravine lay behind him, with its rotted tree trunk strewn length gaping blackly in the night.

He could try to cross the ravine and keep running, but even if he managed it, the reaper king had already proven it could leap the ravine.

Prey was limping and wheezing horribly, he had a hoof pressed to his side, and blood trickled from any number of scratches and cuts.

Beside Prey, Crimson's normally placid eyes were wide, red, and running as he grimly prepared himself for a fight they both knew he would not win, not even with the magic of his chain necklace.

Blades could do nothing against this monster either. Nor would there be any flying out of this.

The Border Guards were gone, who knew where. Likely dead. Lilly Blossom might be dead too, her injury had been mortal. They'd been split from Gloom and Scenic earlier somewhere in the cloying mist, separated by the kindersnatch victims.

The reaper king lumbered forwards, the horrible noise still seeping from its chest and foul vapours rising from its head, as it swung itself into the clearing. Two enormous claws dug into the ground, its three stubby back legs trailing, black against the sky.

Their call for help to Canterlot had gone unanswered, no response coming through the message bottle flames. There was no time to consider what that meant.

"Split...up." Crimson managed to cough out, voice mangled as the reaper king crossed the the clearing in four great strides, "Sorry...Prey."

"No...not...y'et." Prey managed to gasp back, eye streaming. '*Crybaby*.'

And then when things didn't seem like things could get any worse, an answering roar sounded in the night, a terrible rumbling shriek that made the heart seize as it ricocheted around the darkened trees.

Crimson breathed, "Pony...'eathers."

Prey didn't even notice the use of bad language from the pegasus, "Zoma'...'rika."

------< < <Before> > >------

A train wound its way down the far side of the Ridgeback mountain range. From high above in the cold morning sky, drifts of grey clouds hung, the sun still having yet to raise high enough to bathe them.

Below, the train looked like a glinting grey caterpillar, albeit one moving at a remarkable pace, and letting out tiny puffs of white smoke, which were immediately whipped away by the wind.

The train had ventured through the lowest pass of the Ridgeback range, the only route which wouldn't be buried in snow this coming winter, (the border town being too small to merit a weather team), but for now, the train was still able to make its way through, and was descending back down towards the warmer lands below. This was the only train that ran this line, and it only ran once a week, there and back. There were only two carriages behind the engine; one a passenger car, and the other a goods carriage.

The goods carriage was full. The passenger car was almost empty. This latter was occupied solely by the five members of the ISND, three old, two new. They'd been travelling for twenty-hours off and on by train. This was the third, and last, train ride required before it deposited them at their final stop.

After twenty hours, (with the other four spent waiting for late trains), and a long night spent in a bumpy carriage, it was quite easy to imagine that none of the ISND were in a joyous mood as the sun filtered through the curtainless train windows.

Unexpectedly, you would be wrong in such assumptions. Or three-fifths wrong at any rate.

Prey, Gloom and Crimson had taken the opportunity to catch up on some much needed sleep. Sleeping on a train without any real beds was not what you would call comfortable or uninterrupted, but for the three of them, such minor inconveniences hardly registered.

It had been an unexpected boon, what with the multitude of hours they'd missed sleeping back in Canterlot always working overtime. Or alternatively the other, unspoken and private hours each of them spent tossing and turning when pangs of guilt came calling.

The other two fifths of the ISND had not had it so easy. Lilly Blossom and Scenic Paint were Canterlot ponies, born and raised. They were used to soft beds, pleasant temperatures, and regulated weather.

They must've thought that boot camp had prepared them for rough sleeping. They'd thought wrong.

'Ha. They know nothing of sleeping rough. Why, this train is positively a five star hotel.' Prey thought.

Scenic seemed to deal with his discomfort better than Lilly however. He'd probably spent his own fair share of sleepless nights staring sightlessly into the dark after his little identity crisis following his first patrol with the ISND.

Back onboard the train, Gloom had gone up front to ask the locomotive drivers how soon they would be arriving. Bets were the drivers would be all too happy to tell the Sargent whatever he wanted so long as it got the thestral out of their engine room faster. No Dusk Pony amulet for this mission, not with Scenic and Lilly now included amongst their number.

Scenic Paint was leaning on one hoof, eyes closed and drooling as he kept nodding off before snorting awake as the train went 'Clack'.

Lilly Blossom might've been a unicorn who took exception to everything, but at the moment she looked a lot less threatening with baggy eyes and her mane a sloppy mess.

Without her armour on, (which Gloom had allowed them to remove for the night), said mane was a solid light blue, and her coat a contrasting peach. Scenic Paint's nickname of Paint Spot became a lot more relevant when you saw him without his armour enchantments.

He had lots of large, russet splotches in his fur, looking very reminiscent of paint splatters.

Crimson was sitting up straight backed in his seat, meditating, while opposite him, comfortably squashed up into the corner, Prey rested atop his backpack. (It was better than the hard wooden seats).

Prey blinked open his eyes and sat up with a stretch, giving his ears

a rub to get the blood circulating again as over the noise of the train, he heard Gloom clomping back through the car.

"Alright, up up up." Gloom called, reappearing, "Time to get our armour back on, use the bathroom and get ready to disembark. The driver says we'll be arriving at the end of the line in Alfalfa Dale in thirty minutes."

Alfalfa Dale was the last stop on the train line, a small, slowly growing border town. The five of them would have to get off there, and walk the six or so miles to the pine forest and village of Mayflower, as they'd discovered after examining the map Prey had brought.

The long hours of travel hadn't been spent solely resting, or for some of their number, *trying* to rest. A significant waking portion of their time had been given over to discussing their plans for when they arrived in the village and how they were going to approach the villagers.

Prey had brought out the map Gloom had asked him to obtain, copied onto a square of cloth.

"Why isn't this on paper?" Scenic had inquired.

"Because I copied it onto cloth, obviously." Prey answered.

"What's wrong with paper?" Lilly had demanded.

"Nothing, nothing," Prey quickly said, "It's just that paper isn't waterproof. However if this gets wet, it'll still be fine."

"Good thinking Prey. So, where are we going on this map?" Gloom had asked.

If someone were to put it bluntly, there wasn't much map to go on. There were less than four small border towns over the Ridgeback, with one or two villages scattered to each. The rest of the map was either mountain or untamed land, and beyond that, the great pine forest.

So aside from looking at the cluster of dots on the map and the line

of the train track, there really wasn't much to see.

There had been various other conversations held, half of them attempts to while away the long hours of travel, or get to know a bit more about one another.

Mainly those conversations were initiated by either Scenic or Lilly, and it was usually only Gloom who got drawn into them. Prey did listen in though, even if he pretended he was sleeping. It had taught him a bit more about their two new tag alongs.

Scenic mentioned his marefried a lot, some random pony called Carton Juice, who he was already missing, and how he was getting on well with her and her parents. He wistfully said he wished he'd brought along his latest Daring Doo book or a pack of cards for this train ride, as he was a huge fan of fantasy, board games, and miniatures.

Lilly had disapproved of Scenic's wish for some cards straight away, "Cards are against regulations!" She'd recited, nose in the air.

Gloom had not agreed or disagreed with either of them.

Lilly also let them know a bit more about herself, whether they wanted to hear it or not. Her story was much as Prey had already guessed. Born and raised in Canterlot, youngest of three, parents held high expectations for their first born unicorn son, and Lilly Blossom had been trying to catch up to her older siblings ever since.

Every set back only increased her determination that she was right and everyone else was against her, thus her complex about proving herself.

By the sound of it, this attitude resulted in her having very few friends outside of work, all of which she'd cut contact with when she tried for the third time to get into the Guard.

She was very disparaging of her parents in her remarks, not even naming them, something that Gloom, Crimson, and Prey all deeply disproved of, but said nothing about. Her choices were her own.

Her favourite pastimes were shopping, running, and unicorn ultimate frisbee. Oh, and she played the guitar.

Prey and Crimson kept quiet and shared nothing personal, despite multiple prompts from Lilly and Scenic trying to get them to engage. Gloom had offered them no assistance in their attempts either.

"Come on, wake up team." Gloom called again, clapping his hooves together.

"Huh? Wazat?" Scenic protested, chin falling off his hoof, "Oh, right. Sir yes sir."

Jerkily, and with much stifled groaning on Lilly Blossom's part, the four ponies began putting on their armour. Prey didn't have to do more than check his blue ribbon was clean, in place, and straight, and he was dressed as far as he was concerned. There'd been a conversation about that last night too.

During the interminable hours of the night while trying to get comfortable, Scenic Paint had privately tried asking Prey about his insistence on wearing a ribbon. It had made sense to the Earth pony back when he'd made the usual blunder in assuming Prey was a ewe, but now he was confused.

"That's a...nice ribbon you're wearing Prey."

Prey twirled the silken end around his hoof, "Why, how very kind of you to say so. I hadn't noticed."

"Yes, very nice. Very blue. Er, did somepony give it to you?"

"No, I bought it myself. Why? Don't you think it suits me?" Prey asked, beaming.

"No no, it's, er, fine. But you must admit that it's a bit out of place."

"It is?" Prey asked, feigning confusion.

"Well, colt's and filly's...not usually something...that the other..."

Behind Prey's smile and innocent eyes, his emotions were hard as he dared Scenic to go on. He wore this ribbon in defiance of how laughable he looked. It reminded him of all those other people who thought they owned him and who'd laughed. And they were all dead.

'Luna might hold my chain right now, but eventually I'll get free.'

Maybe Scenic got the feeling he was paddling in dangerous waters, or more likely he just decided it was not his place to ask. '-I am not Prey's parents, I'm not having *that* conversation-'

The memory of Scenic's discomfort and confusion brought some smug satisfaction to Prey now as they got ready to disembark. The train started to gradually slow, and Prey knew they would soon be arriving.

The train station for Alfalfa Dale was just a short wooden platform that didn't even get a hoof of clearance off the ground. There was no ticket office or even shelter of any kind. Just the weathered plank platform.

There was also no one waiting as they filed off, not even to unload the wares from the goods carriage as the trio of train operators disconnected it.

To their right was the border town of Alfalfa Dale. Wood, thatched roofs, rutted and hard packed dirt roads. The only buildings which were greater than one story clustered obviously together in the center of town. A few donkeys and Earth ponies were already out and about.

It was like Hay Steam, except smaller and more weathered. To be honest, Alfalfa Dale was called a town, but if it'd been within Equestrian lands proper, it wouldn't have been labelled anything but a village.

The train tracks proved the town was *technically* part of Equestria,

but it was far from the supervision of the Princess, or rather Princesses now. The inhabitants paid tax, but if it weren't for that, not even the relevant government offices would be any the wiser to their existence.

To the ISND's left swept hilly stretches of tough grassland, running all the way up to the Ridgeback's lower slopes behind them. Then, sweeping down ahead of them, towards the band of dark green which seemed to monopolise the horizon. That was the great pine forest, the individual trees not visible at this distance.

Prey looked up, shifting his pack on his back. The sky did not seem so bright on this side of the mountain range. It seemed...more normal, muted, honest. What Prey remembered it being.

Grey clouds lazily drifted hither and thither above. The omnipresent breeze stirred his wool but didn't quite bite all the way through. Everything was just that few degrees colder over here.

Prey took a deep breath, it tasted sharp, with a damp edge.

'Fifty seven years...' He thought. This wasn't the Deeper Green. But still... It felt so different yet so familiar.

For a moment, one of the spines inside his twisted heart seemed to twist and he jumped. Prey quickly looked around, trying to find what had startled him. He couldn't see anything threatening or out of place. They were the only ones close by.

It was *probably* just a bad memory then.

"All ready to go?" Gloom asked. Prey glanced up. The Sargent had come over to ask him specifically, seeing his distraction.

"Ready whenever you are." Prey said, shouldering his pack higher. It was going to be a long walk out of Alfalfa Dale to Mayflower. He couldn't help but glance over to check on Crimson.

"So there's nothing wrong?" Gloom double checked.

"No. Why? Something making you jumpy?" Prey asked. He wasn't being snippy, he was being serious. Perhaps it hadn't just been a

bad memory.

"Nothing. It's all clear." Gloom said, waving it off.

'-Prey's too jumpy. We've barely arrived-'

Prey scowled. Paranoia was healthy, damn it. But perhaps Gloom had a point. He *was* being rather jumpy.

"Right," Gloom called, regaining the attention of the others who were stretching stiff legs and limbering up, "We're not stopping here. We'll just fill up our water canteens in town, and then it's a fifteen mile trot out to Mayflower."

"Sir, yes sir." Lilly barked and immediately fell into marching line, Scenic Paint joining her.

Prey, Crimson, and Gloom all looked at them. The Sargent tried not to sigh, "We're not on the parade ground. Marching fifteen miles in armour with heavy packs isn't a good idea. At ease both of you, we're just walking."

Stepping hoof into the border town felt... wrong to Prey. Like he shouldn't be here. He remembered the three border towns which had existed back when he was still Gossamer. All three had fallen or been abandoned during the war.

Straperdale had been recolonised after the war at some point during the fifty seven years, Prey knew, but that was by new families and new settlers. And it was a people which made a town. None of them remembered.

Following at the back of the group, Prey saw homes, livelihoods, and people's lives. They were making their way towards the middle of town where a well or trough likely lay. No matter how ridiculous it sounded, Prey worried he would bring down disaster on this town simply by coming here.

If it was a pony town, he wouldn't have cared. But it wasn't. This was beyond the border of Equestria.

An old, stooped nanny goat with a patched apron swept her steps with a twig broom, not even looking up as they passed. A mule was removing the wooden shutters of his home to greet the day. A donkey opening up the town's lone convenience store, his young jenny daughter smiling as she played with a homemade ball.

These weren't his people, Prey did not relate to *any* people for that matter. But he knew that here were real people, who worked, sweated, and toiled for their daily bread, all while outside of Celestia's sphere of protection. They had Prey's respect.

Even the Earth ponies who made up about half of the waking population of Alfalfa Dale were okay in Prey's book.

'And not a unicorn in sight.'

Gloom and Crimson were as at home here as they ever where anywhere, being a thestral and an exile, and just walked ahead unminding. Scenic and Lilly however were trying not to gawk like they were the yokels, and not the other way around. In their heads, they were busy marvelling at the strangeness of this all. Even Scenic who was an Earth pony didn't have any experience with this.

'-they still have to use fires to heat their homes?-', Scenic thought, blinking at a chopped wood pile.

From Lilly came, '-don't they know anything about hygiene? That's an outhouse! In this day and age-'

And Gloom was worrying about the logistics of if; '-we miss the train in two weeks? Need to be back in Canterlot. What then?-'

That was a stupid question. 'Then we'll have to wait until three weeks, won't we?' Prey thought.

Much as Prey had guessed, there was indeed somewhere to fill up their canteens in the middle of the small town, although not in the form of a well. A stone post with four separate iron pumps, obviously meant to service the whole town, was set up there. There were already people starting to queue to fill up buckets for their daily water needs.

This, more than anything else shocked Scenic and Lilly. '-we're really not in Canterlot anymore-'

Prey secretly rolled his eyes. What did they expect? Prey had grown up without running water, just the same as many who lived beyond Equestria's borders. This right here was the norm, not what happened in Canterlot where everyone took privilege for granted.

As the ISND entered the square, people quickly got out of their way, and their chosen pump's line dissolved leaving them a clear path. Gloom sighed, but didn't waste time protesting their unfair treatment and began filling up his canteen. No matter what he said, they would not be making any friends here today, and they weren't going to be stopping in Alfalfa Dale at any rate. They were just passing through.

It would be far politer to simply fill up and get out of the townspeople's way, who were being rightfully wary of four strange ponies in armour, one of whom was a thestral, a species which most here had probably never even heard of. Oh, and there was Prey too of course, but he was hardly threatening, now was he?

However one person was brave enough to talk to them, or perhaps just curious.

"You lot Guards?" Someone demanded.

Gloom stopped screwing his second canteen closed and turned to see who had addressed them. A tall, middle aged donkey, a heavily stained tool belt across his chest, was regarding the ISND critically.

"Good morning. Yes, we are the Night Guard. I am First Sargent Gloom." Gloom politely greeted the donkey.

The donkey grunted, looking them over, "You staying here long?" He asked, not returning Gloom's introduction.

"No, we're just passing through in fact. We'll be out of everyponies way soon."

The donkey snorted at that, '-he says everypony? Ha-'

He nodded at each of them, even Prey, "You here for Mayflower then?" He challenged.

"Yes, we are indeed here to look into that." Gloom said.

The jack grunted, "About bucking time. Nothin' ever got done last time you lot came by though."

His words were rude, but the watching townsfolk seemed to ease up slightly at the news they were here to try and find the missing villagers and weren't here to stay in Alfalfa Dale.

"Rest assured that we'll do our best." Gloom said confidently, even if he was thinking:

'-but I don't hold much hope. After three months and nothing new, what can we really accomplish?-'

"I have relatives in Mayflower. You'd better find them." The donkey said gruffly, turning and trotting away now that he'd had the last word.

Lilly Blossom was outraged, glaring at the departing donkey's back. But since Gloom wasn't reacting she was forced to bottle her temper.

Scenic himself was shocked at the perceived level of hostility around them, thinking it much more serious than it really was, so unused to it was he.

'-this isn't how the Royal Guard is treated in Canterlot at all-', Scenic thought.

'Just wait until you've spent a few weeks in the ISND, by then you'll hardly even notice it anymore.' Prey thought, stepping up when it was his turn at the pump, which Crimson helpfully worked for him while he held his canteens underneath the spout.

He still kept a watchful eye on the townsfolk as they got on with filling their own water containers, but he didn't feel afraid. He felt this should be familiar, even though he'd never been here before.

Prey was always afraid of one thing or another, and he lived with fear every single day. But right here and right now, he didn't feel more than his usual caution. Strange. This was a new situation, he should be far more tense than he currently was.

It was just he couldn't help but feel that whatever there was to fear, it wasn't here in Alfalfa Dale. It was out *there*. This was the border. These weren't the tame lands of ponykind. Here monsters roamed, and people had to be watchful if they wanted to survive.

Prey capped his canteen and stepped back from the pump.

Whatever. This was all biased paranoid introspection based off memories which were outdated. He put his musings aside and his canteens away, and switched places with Crimson on the pump handle.

The road to Mayflower wasn't a road per se. It was more of a track which wound its way towards the distant pine forest, following the path of least resistance over the uneven ground.

It was obviously a path upon which hooves infrequently trod. Grass and bush roots still tried to lay claim to the strip of path as they plodded out of town. They settled in for a long walk. Fifteen miles, it should only take them about three hours at this sedate pace.

Prey walked at the rear, both because it allowed him to stay away from Lilly Blossom, and also because it allowed him to look around unobserved. And that's exactly what he did, watching anything and everything across the open land.

Scenic and Lilly Blossom may be chatting up front, but Prey was completely absorbed by trying to take everything in. He felt like he'd been missing something for fifty-seven years and now was his long lost chance to reclaim it. He didn't want to miss anything.

He saw a hawk drop out of the sky. He waited for it to take off again, and when it didn't, he knew its hunt had been successful.

A little latter he saw what the hawk might've been hunting. The

knotted ground and holes of a rabbit warren, almost invisible amid the tough grasses and bracken.

The twitchy nosed rabbits themselves were nowhere to be seen, too smart to emerge until the hooved intruders were gone. Prey knew the rabbits could feel the vibrations of your steps through the earth. But not the change in air currents as you dived down upon them. That fact was something Garrow had known.

The ground of the path was firm, trodden down, but if you took half a step to either side, you could feel the loamy earth under your hoof. Prey saw a patch of pale yellow mushrooms growing in the lee of an overgrown hunk of slate, and had to step aside to pick the hoof full of available caps.

"Prey, keep up. What are you doing?" Gloom called.

"Nothing. Just...grabbing some stuff." Prey called back, hurriedly wrapping the mushrooms in a fold of cloth and tucking them away.

"What stuff?"

"Just some mushrooms."

Gloom half turned back, the head of his short spear showing over his shoulder, "Careful. Mushrooms can be seriously poisonous. Do you know how to identify them?"

"Yes, I know what I'm doing." Prey answered, rejoining the path.

"Alright then." Gloom shrugged, taking Prey at his word.

Lilly didn't look like she could believe Gloom's negligence in allowing a child under his care to just go about picking wild mushrooms, "Sir, permission to speak freely-"

"-If Prey says he knows what mushrooms he's picking, then he knows." Gloom preempted her.

"Sir, but a foal cannot reasonably be expected to make informed decisions like that sir."

"Did you know Prey grew up in a border town, on this very side of the Ridgeback mountain range? His family works a farm." Gloom told Lilly lightly. "As such, I am far more inclined to trust his judgement over what is poisonous and what is not than you, Private."

Lilly obviously hadn't thought of that, and her jaw snapped shut. Prey got to listen in on her internally berating herself for opening her mouth without thinking.

'-I need him to approve my promotion, and I can't get one if somepony keeps making me look bad-'

'The only one making you look foolish is yourself.' Prey thought, cautiously falling back another couple of steps to put some more distance between him and the unicorn.

The sun crested the mountains of the snowcapped Ridgeback, the yellow orb looking oddly muted amid the far off peeks.

The walk was going fine, with Alfalfa Dale and its outer farms having disappeared from view. Scenic had commented at one point how strange it was they hadn't met anypony from Mayflower coming the other way.

Crimson had inquired bluntly why on Equestria Scenic thought they would? It was a small village, with busy farm life all day, everyday. It was unlikely anyone would leave Mayflower unless they were travelling to Alfalfa Dale for market day. Even more so with fifteen less ponies to help keep the farms running.

Prey was on the look out for any further herbs or plants which might be useful, but didn't spy anything special amid the tough grass and scrag. The likelihood of finding much outside the forest itself was remote, but not impossible. And Prey would prefer not to enter the forest at all.

The trees sat, large dark and foreboding ahead of them, slowly growing bigger as they approached. At that size, Prey knew the

forest could support an almost limitless variety of monsters. Luckily, they intended to stay in or close to the village only.

At about the halfway mark, Gloom called a halt for a short break. Prey's hooves were only mildly sore, but from the way Lilly groaned and slumped down, you'd have thought they'd just done forty miles, not eight.

Prey gave the bulky back pack Lilly had overloaded an appraising look. The idiot mare hadn't even packed it properly to distribute the weight, and the straps were way too loose. So far, no one had seen fit to point out to Lilly her mistake.

Gloom and Crimson were content to let Lilly suffer and learn from her mistake, while Prey was just content to let her suffer. Scenic Paint seemed to have gotten his back pack right more by luck than any skill, and so was completely unawares of how to help.

With a sigh, Gloom decided to finally; '-take pity on her-'

"Lilly Blossom, here, let me give you some pointers about your pack." Gloom said.

Lilly's first thought was, unsurprisingly; '-I don't need help, there's nothing wrong with my bag-', And Prey even saw her open her mouth to automatically say so. Then she seemed to realise that no, she did not want to continue walking with her back pack the way it was, and yes, she did need help.

Sourly, Lilly swallowed her pride, "Sir, thank you sir. Some pointers would be great."

Gloom hid a sigh, at her stubbornness, '-she's like another Prey-'

Prey was deeply offended by the notion.

"Alight," Gloom said going over, "First things first, unpack and lay out everything you've got on the grass. Yes all of it. You need to wrap everything so it doesn't clank against each other. Like this, see?"

While Gloom got on with instructing the reluctant Lilly Blossom and

she used her magic to float everything out of her pack, Prey ate a hoofful of dried fruit. He offered some to Crimson, and none to Scenic as they sat.

Scenic seemed a tiny bit put out by that, which only pleased Prey more, but the Earth pony quickly forgot it and asked them a question instead, one which Prey'd overheard him thinking about before.

"Er, so you two, you didn't know each other before you joined the ISND, right?" Scenic began.

"Before we 'joined', no. None of us knew anything about each other. The past is the past." Prey answered dismissively.

Scenic hesitated, but kept pushing, "And Sargent Gloom said earlier you came from off a farm Prey, so..."

"Yes? So what?"

"Well, I'd thought you came from a different thestral clan like Crimson did. Like, er, adopted or something." Scenic said.

Crimson stopped checking that his wing blades were absolutely free of any minuscule spec of dirt, "I beg your pardon? Why would you even suppose that?"

"You, well, you both have the same bracelets, so I thought they were like a clan badge or something?" Scenic suggested, starting to feel really uncomfortable as they both stared him down.

'-did I say something wrong?-'

Prey cocked his head, "You don't sound very sure of yourself. Were you making a statement or asking a question?"

"Uh, asking a question I guess?"

"So you're saying you're asking about these?" Prey held up a foreleg to show off the dull gold band.

"Yes, caus' I know Crimson came from one of these clans, and he's

not a thestral, so I kind of assumed it was the same for you." Scenic said, scratching at his helmet plume.

"So you're *not* asking about these, but *where* they come from?" Prey asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes. Wait, no, sort of."

"So you want to know how *and* where we got them now?"

"Yes?"

"Are you asking if you're saying yes, or are you actually *saying* yes?"

"...Maybe?" Scenic replied, thoroughly confused by now.

"Stop confusing him on purpose Prey," Crimson said, tightly refolding his wing, "And no Paint Spot, these gold bands do not come from any clans. And I am most certainly not adopted."

"No? I just thought, since you wear them all the time... Never mind, sorry, my bad. I was mistaken." Scenic mumbled.

Prey flicked another slice of dried apricot into his mouth, eyebrow raised at the Earth pony, "Seriously, how could you not already know any of this? Did you not think to ask around before you joined the ISND? It's not exactly a secret."

"Well, no, it wasn't quite so easy as that. I just kinda' took it for granted that you guys were adopted." Scenic admitted.

"Well you assumed one hundred percent wrong," Prey informed him cheerfully, "No one here was adopted. Unless there's something you're not telling us...?"

"Er, no."

'-but I wish I was-'

Crimson considered for a long moment, examining the bands on his own forelegs, "Yes... You were merely mistaken." He said, effectively ending the conversation.

The slight tension Prey had been holding left his shoulders. He never could be absolutely certain what Crimson was thinking, meaning he was never sure what Crimson would do or how to help. He'd been trying to distract Scenic from asking any more probing questions just now.

Typical. The one person whose thoughts Prey couldn't read, and it was the one person in the whole world he would use that knowledge to help instead of harm.

"Crimson." Gloom called, making them all look up. Gloom had finished instructing Lilly on how to correctly pack her back pack it seemed.

"Yes sir?" Crimson asked, straightening up.

"I had a thought. You might as well fly ahead on of us and let the villagers know we're coming." Gloom said.

Prey saw Scenic Paint glanced up at the sky, muttering to himself, "Flying in this weather? I might not have wings, but still..."

Of course, the Canterlot Earth pony had forgotten once again that he was in the presence of three people with great hearing.

"There is nothing wrong with the weather. Why? Do you see something Scenic?" Gloom asked, squinting up at the sky for a storm cloud or something obvious he'd missed.

Scenic balked, "Er, no sir. I'm sure you have a much better idea of what's safe than me. I just, I'd heard that pony's shouldn't fly in wild weather is all, sir." He shrugged.

Gloom and Crimson both frowned, looked up at the grayish sky with drifting clouds, and then back at Scenic, "Wild weather? This is practically balmy." Gloom said.

"Sir, but there's nopony to manage the weather here sir. I'm certain the locals haven't been keeping ahold of it." Lilly Blossom said, putting in her two misguided half-bits.

Gloom smirked, "This?"

He pointed up, a light breeze making the tips of his ear tufts sway, "This isn't wild weather. Back in the clans, this is what we'd take foals out in for their first flight. Wild weather is gales, cross winds, storms, tornadoes, and lightning that covers the sky. This? This is nothing."

Prey knew of the torrential storms Gloom spoke of. When the wind howled so loud you couldn't hear yourself shout, the rain came in so hard it choked you, the lightning fell like the rain, and the trees cracked and splintered. *That* was a real storm. And if it was bad on the ground, Prey could only imagine how much worse it would be if it caught you in the sky.

Scenic and Lilly decided to refrain from embarrassing themselves further and shut up.

Scenic took the lesson as a reminder there was a lot he didn't know about the larger world, while Lilly took it as a personal rebuke and got angry.

'-it's not my fault nopony ever told me this stuff-'

"I will inform the villagers of our purpose and imminent arrival before I return, sir." Crimson said, spreading his wings.

"No need to fly back. We'll meet you there." Gloom told him as he prepared to take off.

"Yes sir." Crimson acknowledged, taking a short run up before leaping into the air, powerfully beating his wings for altitude, kicking up bits of grass.

When Prey uncovered his eyes, he found Scenic and Lilly both cursing and trying to get dust out of their own eyes. Prey chewed his lip, glancing at the slowly dwindling pegasus shape in the sky. He would have much preferred Crimson to stay with them. Runic preparations or not, it was safer around the unicorn with Crimson present. Prey sourly wished yet again that he'd been born with the power of flight. Then trips like this which took hours would've only taken one at most, and obstacles like ravines or rivers became inconsequential.

He knew for a fact that Gloom was wishing he could follow Crimson into the sky, rather than plod slowly along at ground level. '-I can't though. Got to stick with the squad-', Gloom thought with a mental equivalent of a shrug.

"Come on, let's see you back on your hooves. Break's over, time to go. I want to get there before midday." Gloom called, getting them moving back on the faded path.

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Life is like pushing a paper boat out into a stream.

The little boat wobbles about in the gurgling water, twirled by the current, sometimes swatted by inattentive dragonflies, but always moving ever onward. Water never flows back on itself. A stream can only ever flow one way, just like time.

Sometimes obstacles get in the way, like lily pads or bulrushes, but even if the paper boat gets stuck for a time, it'll eventually bob free to float on down the stream, passing by the scenery of life.

As you follow along from the grassy bank, you never can tell what your little paper boat will meet just around the next bend.

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Prey was the first to notice the returning shape of Crimson in the sky. It was perhaps the one time he could've, when they were working during the day and not the night as per usual. At the sight, Prey's paranoia immediately reared its head.

'Why's Crimson returning? He isn't supposed to be coming back to us.'

"Sir," Prey called out to Gloom, his high voice catching the other twos attention as well, "Look."

They all tilted their heads back to follow Prey's hoof, spotting the approaching shape of Crimson too.

"Why's he coming back? He was supposed to wait and meet us

there." Gloom frowned worriedly.

"Something's gone wrong." Prey declared, not knowing what, but knowing his words to be true.

Gloom could've said they didn't know that yet, that there could be a completely mundane reason for Crimson's return, but he didn't because he had the exact same sinking feeling Prey did.

Crimson was coming in fast, he'd reach them in less than thirty seconds.

"What do you think the problem is?" Prey heard Scenic quietly say to Lilly.

"Don't know, but we're about to find out." She answered as Crimson entered his final decent, rapidly growing in size.

Crimson looked for a moment like he was going to crash, but then he flared his wings and pulled up expertly, letting his wings snap shut to his sides and dropping to the ground in a canter to cover the last few yards.

Gloom met him halfway, and Prey couldn't help but move up from the rear to hear too.

Gloom didn't waste time, "What's the situation?"

Crimson was breathing deeply. Flying that fast in armour with heavy saddle bags on was no mean feat. Nevertheless, he managed to speak clearly as they gathered around him on the faded path, "Sir, the villagers, they're gone."

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The paper boat unexpectedly gets caught in a patch of reeds, and you get a stick to poke it free. You lean out, teetering on the bank so as not to fall in. The stick isn't quite long enough, but you don't want to get your hooves wet. Plus, there's pond worms and mud in there.

In a pique of frustration, you throw the stick into the stream, and

unexpectedly, the splash knocks the little boat free. Except now, the wash carries it down an unintended fork in the stream.

Now you've got to cross the stream if you want to keep following. Sighing, you start gingerly probing the water with a hoof.

And then a dire wolf lunges out of the trees and tears you to pieces.

Life is like a paper boat. It floats and bobs onward, despite the water running sparkling red.

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Prey crouched beneath the boughs of young pine on the rise above the village of Mayflower. The village was little bigger than a hamlet. Gloom and Crimson were circling in the grey tinted sky above.

About a hundred yards below him, the small village was laid out. Prey counted sixteen houses, all wood, no stone or glass in sight. It was silent and still. It was wrong. Prey could tell that much without having to take a step closer.

He'd refused to do exactly that until they were absolutely certain there was nothing unpleasant waiting in there, which caution Gloom had completely agreed with. That was why Gloom and Crimson were still up above, slowly circling in wide arcs, searching.

Prey's wary eyes were drawn past the village. Just a few yards beyond the last house, the first trees of the pine forest began. The farther in you looked, the thicker and deeper they got.

They'd gone and built the village right on the forest's edge. Prey wouldn't have believed it if he wasn't seeing it.

It wasn't just that either, the villagers had actually cleared ground to build and plant even *closer* to the trees. Prey could see tree stumps dotted about to prove it.

Prey hadn't moved from this hiding spot for almost an hour. He, Gloom, and Crimson were taking no chances. Scenic and Lilly were supposed to be keeping watch from the path at ground level. Prey

said 'supposed to', because he didn't know if they were still alert and paying attention. It was chilly, and uncomfortable. Their minds may have started to wander.

Prey's eyes flicked up as he saw Gloom start to drift down towards the abandoned village, as wary as a vulture. Prey fixed his attention on the dark windows and empty doorways, ignoring the prickle of needles from the pine as he watched for any small flicker of movement at Gloom's approach.

Nothing.

Gloom touched down atop the cracked, mismatched slabs in what passed for the village square, the stones deeply embedded in the earth. It was the most open and clear spot available. Gloom folded his wings, standing next to the thin stream which trickled right through the village and disappeared into the forest, the brackish looking water filled with black gravel.

Where had those cracked stone slabs come from? They looked old, older than this village. Gloom slowly swivelled about as he scanned his surroundings, his short spear at the ready.

Prey watched Crimson touched down atop a sloping roof. His wing blades were unsheathed as he covered Gloom's back, high and low. The Sargent cautiously approached the door underneath where Crimson crouched, ready to spring down, and used his spear to ease the door open.

"This is the Night Guard. Anypony here?" Prey heard him call.

He was met with ringing silence. The lonely cawing of crows stopped. It started up again a minute later, but the unnerving moment lingered.

With a signal to Crimson, Gloom entered the house, and Prey was left guessing as to what the Sargent was finding inside. It was a long, tense minute.

Gloom came out, and with a shake of his head to Crimson, they moved onto the next house. Then the next. Then the next. And the

next one after that.

It soon became obvious that there was nothing here, nothing living at any rate.

Gloom returned to the stream and raised his spear horizontally above his head. It was the pre-agreed all clear signal for them to come out.

Prey emerged from under the low pine branches, brushing green needles from his wool, and started down the tangled rise. At the bottom he hopped across an overgrown ditch, and began covering the last forty yards into Mayflower. Prey paused, testing the ground under hoof. It rose in low, close packed ridges, seemingly too regular to be natural. Prey realised he was walking through a small field, those ridges were ploughed furrows.

He hadn't realised at first, because it was all overgrown with virulent weeds and grasses, but this was indeed a field. Already a number of spiky saplings had sprung up, a hoof high.

No one had tended this field in a while. 'This must've belonged to the people who went missing three months ago.' Prey thought. Fifteen people had originally gone missing. Now the rest had also disappeared.

Prey hurried out of the field, over to Gloom and Crimson. He caught the uncertainty and guardedness in their postures as he joined them. Gloom gave him a tight nod, but his eyes never left the houses, his spear still out.

Now that Prey was in the middle of the village, he was getting a sense of what else was wrong with the place. Scenic and Lilly jumped the deep cut stream and joined them, ears laid back as they looked around at the silent wooden homes. Down here, it seemed a modicum darker than it had appeared up on the rise. It was the shadow of the forest. Even if it didn't physically extend over the village, its presence still did.

Lilly Blossom looked around, "This place is a dump." She said tossing her head, but she still spoke quietly.

It was all bravado. She was just as unnerved as the rest of them by the still silence.

"Where is everypony?" Scenic muttered, peering into an empty dark window, thick ivy crawling up the frame.

"Not here." Crimson said shortly.

'-*no*, really?-', Lilly thought but didn't say.

By unspoken agreement, they were all watching a different direction to keep all angles in view.

"None of the doors were kicked in, nor the furniture inside broken when I checked. It doesn't look like there was any struggle." Gloom noted.

"Sir, do you remember that mule in Alfalfa Dale? He asked if we were here to find the missing ponies. I thought he was referring to those fifteen ponies from three months ago. But now I think he meant this, and we misunderstood him." Crimson said.

"That we did." Gloom muttered. They'd all misunderstood, even Prey who had listened in on the mule's thoughts. The mule had been upset, and only thought about the missing villagers, not a time frame. Each side had assumed the other knew what they were talking about.

"So when he said they'd sent a request for help to the Guard, he thought we were the answer to their plea." Gloom realised.

"And we will." Lilly Blossom declared, "We'll be the ponies who answer his plea and save the villagers."

Prey could hear rising excitement in the mare's thoughts, '-it's just like a story! Mysterious village, missing ponies. We'll solve this and I'll get to prove myself-'

"There's no proof that these villagers actually need saving. There is no evidence that they were taken by force." Gloom said, although his eyes were narrowed as he looked suspiciously about, trying to spot anything they'd missed. Prey was doing the exact same.

"Sir, there's nowhere for them to go sir. They *must've* been foalnapped sir."

'Nowhere for them to go?' Prey thought, looking at the dark forest, 'Wrong. There's plenty of places for them to have gone. Or rather, one, big, uncharted, place.'

"This place feels so...wrong sir. Like a surreal painting." Scenic spoke up, scuffing a hoof on the turf.

"I think we've all noticed, thank you Paint Spot." Gloom agreed, "Lilly Blossom?"

"Sir, yes sir?"

"You know any spells or magic that might help us here or find the villagers?"

'-does he think I'm made of magic or something?-', Lilly thought incredulously.

"Sir, basic training did not require recruits to master intense, high level magical matrixs-"

"I'll take that as a no then," Gloom said, "Prey, you getting anything?"

"Where did they get these stones?" Prey mused, looking down at the smattering of slab work they stood on.

"What do you mean?"

"These look ancient. They've got worn indents in places. I was just wondering where they came from. Not from around here, that's for sure." Prey said, looking at the entirely wooden constructed houses of Mayflower.

"Is it important?" Gloom asked.

Prey considered, before shaking his head, "No, probably not." He refocused on the village, looking for anything out of place. Except there was so much here out of place, or which could've just been

how the village normally looked. It was impossible to tell.

"Anything?" Gloom prompted him again. Prey caught Lilly roll her eyes out of the corner of his vision.

'-sure, ask the foal twice. Why's there even a village this close to some untamed forest in the first place? Idiots. This was bound to happen-'

Out of the five of them, Lilly was unsurprisingly the least unnerved. Prey dismissed her arrogance. She was a unicorn.

"Maybe..." Prey slowly answered Gloom's question, tilting his head to the side to view the village from a different angle. He saw wisps of beard moss hanging from the edge of roofs.

"Does this place feel...overgrown to anyone else?" Prey asked.

Gloom didn't even correct his pronoun, instead everyone looked about them and spotted what Prey meant.

Dark moss growing on doorsteps, brambles and ivy advancing up the walls, grass twinging thick around foundations. Crimson took a step closer to a wall and scraped his hoof down the boards. He examined his cloud steel horse shoe. There was a thin smear of black, sludge like algae on it, the kind that only grew on wood which'd lain abandoned for a long time in vegetation.

The pegasus looked down, spotting the buds of orange fungi starting to grow on the base of the wall too.

"Yes, it does." Crimson agreed.

"Er, how do we know these ponies just didn't take very good care of their houses?" Scenic asked.

"We don't." Gloom said, but he felt it too, how strange it was. Like the land was fighting against the village, wanting to reclaim the land because it was built right here on the forest's doorstep.

Three pairs of eyes were drawn inexorably towards the pathways winding off into the grey gloom under the trees. The eyes belonged

respectively to Crimson, Gloom, and Prey.

"So, what now?" Prey asked, raising the big question. This was most definitely *not* what Nighthawk foresaw when he sent the ISND out here.

Gloom made the logical decision, "Now? Now we go all the way back to Alfalfa Dale of course and ask questions."

Cautiously, the ISND left the shaded dip, but not without many a backwards glance. Prey felt the forest watching their departure the whole way.

Uncertainty. Doubt. Confusion. Frustration. And beneath it all, a strong undercurrent of apprehension.

Words, theories, questions, these were all exchanged on the three hour trek back to Alfalfa Dale as they tried to figure out what might've happened, but really, it was only a way of expressing their doubts and fears.

Prey did not participate in the talk. It all boiled down to the same result in the end; they didn't know what had happened.

It was Lilly Blossom who came up with the wildest suggestions; "A band of griffin brigands could've foalnapped them for slavery."

Scenic was a tad more realistic, although he obviously knew as little as Lilly how life outside of the tame lands of Equestria really worked, "Griffionia's on the other side of Equestria. But perhaps it was diamond dogs instead."

Gloom was mainly the voice of reality, with Crimson chipping in. "Just because Griffionia is on the other side of Equestria does not mean all griffins live there." Gloom pointed out.

"But still not dogs or griffins. I mean, there would've been signs of a struggle. Disturbed earth. Destroyed doors." Crimson said.

Prey did not join in. He kept his council private and thought over

how eerily familiar this was. Fifty-seven years, and the prickling feeling in the back of his wool was exactly the same.

Farmer's weeding the fields dourly watched them as they returned to Alfalfa Dale, eyes untrusting and stances closed.

Prey had expected that. The ISND were the invaders here. Gloom and Crimson bore it naturally because they were Night Guards. Scenic and Lilly were uncomfortable and thrown by it.

In the end, it was down to Prey to find the same mule from earlier to question. Prey remembered he'd been wearing a tool belt, and successfully tracked the mule back to the only carpenter's shop in Alfalfa Dale.

While they could've asked anyone in the whole town, the mule more obviously knew about what had happened out in Mayflower, thus he was the one they sought out.

"What're you doing back here?" He asked suspiciously when he came to his workshop's door.

"What happened in Mayflower?" Gloom asked, not beating about the bush.

"Don't know. No one does. That's why we sent a letter to the Guard, isn't it?" The mule responded.

"You sent the letter?"

"No. Mayor did o'course. But I'm his brother." The mule said flatly. He still hadn't given his name.

"I understand that nopony knows what happened. But what can you tell us? It's obvious all of that hasn't only happened since the original fifteen ponies were reported missing." Gloom said.

"What you on about, fifteen ponies?" The mule scowled, "There were only four ponies."

Gloom's brows drew together, "Was the report mistaken?"

"Aye it was. Fifteen people were stolen away. Four were ponies. Do they count people differently over the Ridgeback?" The mule snapped.

Gloom did not let himself get riled up in return, "Of course not. I'm sure whomever filled out the report just made a mistake."

"Mistakes are all well and good over there where the rich ponies can afford 'em, but not over here."

"Mayflower," Gloom reminded him, "The rest of its po-people have gone missing. What happened? What details can you give us? When did this happen, how many more have vanished? Anything of note you can think of may greatly help us." Gloom pressed.

"It was in the letter for help we sent. Did you not read it?" The mule asked suspiciously.

Briefly, Gloom considered lying, but decided against it. "Ah, no. You see, we were actually sent here to try and help discover what might've happened to those fifteen po-people three months ago. Nopony in Canterlot has received any further letter requesting aid."

"I see. So you didn't even come here with the intention to help." The mule stated flatly.

"Nopony knew," Gloom repeated patiently. The mule had a right to be angry, even if it was misguided. "But we're here now. We're trying to help, but for that, we need you to help us first."

The mules tail was lashing about in anger, but he restrained his temper; '-these rotten Guards. But if it might help those poor unfortunates, what's the harm?-'

"Aye. *Nobody* knows where they've gone," The mule said, staring Gloom right in his yellow cat eyes as he stressed the word, daring them to take issue with it, "But I'm probably as good a person as any to tell you what little we do know."

His anger passed, and the life slowly seemed to be draining out of

the mule as his tail fell limp, "I'll tell you what I can. Might be you can help somehow."

But there was no hope in his voice.

They were there barely five minutes, even with Gloom asking about every detail he could think of, plus Crimson and Prey's input. That was how little the townsfolk of Alfalfa Dale knew about the villagers disappearances and fates.

A week ago the mule, finally identified as Bale, and his wife had gone to Mayflower to visit his wife's younger sister, but more importantly, deliver an order of new barrels. There was no time for leisure out here on the border. But once there, Bale and his wife had found Mayflower exactly as the ISND had seen it earlier today. Empty and abandoned. They'd hurried back and told Bale's brother, the mayor, and then the rest of the townsfolk. They hadn't tried to suppress the bad news.

Bale's news had been met with despair. It was the second time that Mayflower had suffered this tragedy, and the villagers from the first time were still missing. A search party was organised from volunteers and sent out, but there had been little hope.

Their low hopes had not been disappointed. They hadn't discovered anything more than the ISND, and the townsfolk could hardly continue the search indefinitely. They had farms and families to look after. So they'd done the only thing they could.

They sent a message to a Guard force who were useless the last time, and prayed for a miracle.

"And that's the last we heard of it, or anyone saw of them. No one knows anything else." Bale said dully. The mule got up off the upturned barrel and brushed his tail off.

"I have work to do." He said simply, turning to go.

"Wait," Gloom called, "Did you say you searched deep into the forest?

Bale didn't slow down as he returned to his shop, "O'course we didn't. No one goes in deeper than daylight can reach. Maybe if'n you had a guide, sure, but we're not suicidal. Little good you can do for Mayflower if'n you're already dead. You've got to be realistic about these things."

And with that, Bale pulled the door shut and left them standing outside on the dusty street. Busy citizens gave the misplaced group a wide berth, their eyes wary. A goat pulling a barrow paused and traced a hoof over his cracked horn as he gave them a long look, before finally trundling on.

Prey watched everything. He saw how the townsfolk acted, and what they hid. They were worried, all of them. But Bale...Bale had been scared. He hadn't openly shown it, the mule's pride hadn't allowed it, but Prey had listened in on the mules thoughts. And Prey knew Bale hadn't told them everything.

Bale hadn't hidden anything as such, but nor had he shared everything he suspected, or rather everything he feared.

"Sir?" Crimson prompted, asking what they should do now.

'-I haven't a clue-', Gloom thought, looking around the street, '-but one thing's clear. We won't solve anything standing around here-'

Scenic and Lilly Blossom were both looking to Gloom expectantly, instinctively expecting the Sargent to have a solution. Prey saw the wince Gloom hid at being burdened with their expectations.

"First, let's find somewhere to sit down and eat. Then, we're going to make a plan." Gloom decided.

"Oh but you must travel through the woods again and again..." Said the shadow at the window,
"...And you must be very lucky to avoid the wolf every time."

41.3 What's under the Yellow Brick Road?

There was no inn, pub, or restaurant in Alfalfa Dale. No one had the money or time for that. There were only two stores that sold food. One was the mill combined with the bakery which made the daily bread, and the other was a store which sold bulk crop produce, like potatoes and cabbage. Although Prey was willing to bet some farmers had their own stills set up around. They always did. Here on the border, you almost exclusively ate what your own fields grew.

As such, the ISND ended up buying bland loaves of bread, and finding a spot on the fence of an empty field just outside of the small town.

The baker had ludicrously overcharged them when she'd seen who was buying, but Gloom hadn't even tried to haggle. Her steep price was still not even half of what would've been charged in Canterlot.

So they ate their meal of bread and water, using the short break to remove their packs and rest their hooves. Lilly and Scenic privately complained and pulled faces at the simple fare, but Gloom, Prey, and Crimson were so used to eating Cookie's cooking they didn't even notice.

Gloom washed down his mouthful of thick bread with gulp of water from his canteen, before speaking, "So. The incident from three months ago has repeated itself. Ponies have been taken, or have left. By magic, willingly, or some other means, we don't know. As I said, we need a plan, so I want everypony's input."

Scenic looked unsure of what he could possibly offer as a greenie, but Lilly Blossom was more than eager to offer her opinion without needing further prompting.

"Sir, I think it's obvious. Somepony foalnapped them all and dragged them into the forest. If we get one of the locals who knows

the area, I bet we could track them down."

Prey stared at the mare, 'Go into the forest? Did she hear a word of what Bale said?' But even as he thought that, Prey could feel the sway of the forest pulling at them. It was an uncaring force, but it still wanted them to venture inside.

Lilly Blossom was right about one thing though, the villagers of Mayflower had definitely gone into those trees. There was nowhere else they could've gone. The forest felt like an inevitability, like all roads would eventually lead back to it.

"The forest does seem like the only logical conclusion sir." Crimson agreed.

"Then we should definitely go in and rescue them, sir." Lilly said, immediately jumping on Crimson's agreement.

Gloom looked towards where the far off trees darkening the land. They'd been right on the border of the forest only a few hours ago, and Gloom had not forgotten the look of the place. "I have a feeling in my flank that our path lies somewhere in the forest regardless of where we choose to begin investigating." He admitted.

Prey grimaced. If even Gloom's special talent was directing them that way, it boded ill.

'But that forest isn't the Deeper Green,' Prey reminded himself, 'I'm sure it's dangerous, but not quite *as* dangerous.'

Scenic raised his hoof, wincing, "Er, sir, I know they're really expensive and rare and all, but would now be a situation where using a message-bottle-fire is permitted, sir?"

"Of course we will be doing that." Gloom agreed. He'd thought it would've already been taken for granted they would be sending a message back to Captain Nighthawk.

"Ah...?"

"But first, we need to decide upon our course of action. We can only send and receive once per message bottle, so we can't afford to

waste one of the two we've got on an incomplete report." Gloom explained.

"Sir, forgive me but, er, shouldn't we wait for Captain Nighthawk to tell us how to proceed before making the plan?" Scenic asked.

The ISND, the *true* ISND, all gave the Earth pony a look at his complete lack of understanding of how the Night Guard operated. Nighthawk would not tell them what to do. The ISND were the ones on the scene. Even if Nighthawk got the train to make another run to Alfalfa Dale a week early, it would still take over twenty-four hours before backup arrived. Therefore as the ones on the scene, it was the ISND's responsibility to decide what they thought was best and to follow through.

Scenic needed to change that attitude. He was a Night Guard now, and needed to start thinking like one.

"No. It's up to us." Gloom said.

The Sargent then glanced out of the corner of his eye at Prey. The lamb was the only one who hadn't contributed anything yet, and he was the one whose advice Gloom was most interested in hearing.

'-Prey always spots something I've missed. And I'm not going to dismiss him again. I'm just as guilty as him for having to carry the burden of Seashores and Garrow's deaths-', Gloom thought, a wash of tiredness suddenly passing through him.

'A bit arrogant, aren't we?' Prey thought, managing to keep his face from twitching, 'Assuming you somehow own my actions.'

Nevertheless, Gloom wanted him to contribute. But there wasn't much of anything Prey could contribute.

Prey let his eyes meet Gloom's, and then he shrugged and shook his head, "I've got nothing. Because that's precisely what we found at Mayflower. Nothing. We know nothing. We've nothing to go on. We have a report of nothing. If we want something, then we have to do something first. It doesn't matter if it works or not, but we'll learn nothing here in Alfalfa Dale."

The rest of them went quiet. Prey's words had basically summed up the lack of everything. And Prey knew what was going to happen next, because it was the only course of action left open to Gloom. And Prey did not want to go along with it. Did he? Prey paused. No, no he didn't. At least, he was almost certain he didn't. Yet the caterpillars in his stomach were still squirming, wanting to hatch into butterflies.

There was a Hunt coming, Prey could feel it in his gut, and he wanted no part of it. Or at least, he shouldn't.

'Get your talonz' dirty, yez'?'

Prey blinked. Crimson had leaned over on the fence and muttered something to Gloom. Gloom didn't verbally respond, and only the slightest nod showed he'd heard. Lilly and Scenic were none the wiser.

Gloom pushed himself off the fence, "Well, there's not much more that can be said. Prey? Would you come with me for five minutes? The rest of you, finish up your lunch and get ready to go. Or what passes for lunch."

Prey's eyes flickered to Crimson, then back to Gloom, who was waiting for him, "You coming?" Gloom asked, raising a brow.

Prey stopped fiddling with the end of his ribbon and got up, "Coming."

They didn't go far, perhaps ten paces along the fence, but far enough away to ensure Gloom's words wouldn't carry back to Lilly and Scenic. Crimson's tufted ears though? Maybe.

Gloom propped his chin on a hoof as he leaned on the fence, looking over the empty field. "You're nervous." He said pleasantly, "Something about all this is scaring you. You're on edge. Well, more on edge than usual. What is it? What do you know?"

"Know? I don't *know* anything about what might've happened." Prey said.

'Since when did Gloom start noticing these things?' He thought

worriedly.

"Suspect then." Gloom corrected himself, "You have an idea, and whatever that idea is, you don't like."

"What did Crimson say just now?" Prey asked instead of answering.

Gloom looked down at Prey, "He said he was concerned about you being scared of something. And you're not the type to be scared over nothing."

The corner of Prey's mouth twisted self deprecatingly, "You're wrong. I'm scared of lots of things."

He wasn't comfortable admitting it, but he'd already told this to Crimson once, so Crimson had probably told Gloom.

"Being brave isn't the absence of fear. It's being scared and doing it anyway." Gloom said, repeating the oft used empty platitude.

Prey rolled his eyes, "Bravery is interchangeable with suicidal, and scared is a pseudonym for survival."

Gloom put in the effort to smirk, "Which pony said that?"

"I said that."

"Oh. Well there's nothing wrong with being afraid. I was afraid too when we were stuck in that storeroom with the salt dealers bearing down on us." Gloom told him.

"You would've been a fool not to have been."

Gloom's half grin widened, unconsciously showing his fangs, "Yeah." He agreed.

Then Gloom's thoughts turned to what had happened next after that, and the grin faded, "Yeah..."

Prey spoke before Gloom could decide that now was once again the time to try and confront him about having killed Garrow and Sea Shores, because the Sargent was still certain Prey was suppressing

the event. Prey knew how the thestral thought.

Prey leaned on the lower fence cross bar, "We're going to go into the forest." He said, making it a statement. There was no use beating about the bush any longer.

Gloom cocked an ear, apparently not knowing the significance of that, "Okay. Because...?"

"Lilly Blossom was right. There is nowhere else the villagers could've gone or been taken. All paths point to the forest."

"Yes I understand that point. Wait, is that what you're afraid of?" Gloom asked, looking at the dark ridge line of far off trees, "The pine forest?"

"The forest is hardly made up of pines exclusively."

"But is it the reason?" Gloom pressed.

"The forest is dangerous, you should know that already. Thestrals should know how dangerous the wilds are." Prey narrowed his eyes, "Unless your clan didn't live beyond the border, but were actually hiding close by in Equestria the whole time. Where did you say your caves were?"

Prey wasn't really trying to fish for information about the thestral's secret ancestral home, but Gloom had no right to pry, and turning this around and putting it back on Gloom was a good way to get him to stop.

"I know how dangerous the forest is Prey. We're no strangers to the wilds." Gloom said, refusing to be drawn into providing any details about his clan.

"Do you?" Prey challenged, meeting Gloom's eye.

Gloom frowned at him, thinking, '-if it was any child but you asking something so absurd I'd be laughing right now-'

However it wasn't. It was Prey asking. And Gloom didn't find it absurd.

"Do you?" Gloom asked back, just as seriously.

Prey's eyes were inexorably drawn once again towards the dark border of trees, looking little bigger than grass stems at this distance. How much should he say?

"We're going to have to go in there. I've...been in a forest before. Not this forest, obviously, but somewhere similar. It was dangerous. Very dangerous. I know some of those dangers." Prey looked back to Gloom. A shiver passed down Gloom's tail. Prey almost never looked him in the eye.

"I'm only telling you this because in this forest, if I say something, I need you to listen to me. So I'll answer your question. Yes, I know how dangerous it is. And I'll ask you the same again. Do you?"

Thestral looked down at little lamb, and little lamb looked back up at thestral. Both had an understanding of each other. There was as much left unsaid as said. They were heading into danger, not just in the forest but with whatever had snatched the villagers. The forest was bad news, they both knew it. However Prey was telling Gloom he knew something the thestral didn't, although Prey didn't have the words for it. He just needed Gloom to trust his word in those split second moments, and as the ISND's Sargent, get everyone else to do the same.

'-do I trust Prey?-, Gloom wondered for a moment, '-yes. After all we've been through, how could I not?-'

"I do." He answered Prey, "If you can trust me to do the same."

"Well obviously. In there, we're all going to have to be watching each other's back. It's us against the forest. I'm just a runt, I can hardly watch everything going on above my head, now can I?" Prey said, rolling his eyes and letting the tension dissipate.

Gloom was happy to let it fade, "We will all watch out for each other." He agreed.

Sending the emergency message back to Nighthawk was more effort

than it should've been.

After a deep search of the town for paper and quill, they finally tracked some back to the tiny hardware store the small town had. The shop was run by an old ram, the only sheep they'd interacted with so far in Alfalfa Dale.

The ram hadn't been in his shop at the time, (too busy out working the bean field), and Crimson'd had to track him down. Prey had flinched and stared when they'd met. This was the first sheep he'd seen in... 'Over fifty seven years.'

The ram had not been happy to help, even if they were paying customers. Old people seemed to think they had a right to be crotchety and complain about anything and everything, one which the old ram had taken full advantage of.

"Half a mind to tell you to go buck yourselves. Some people have to work for a living, ya'know."

"Git out of my way, you dundering jumped up bat, this here is my shop."

"Touch that an' I'll stripe your hide. I ain't going to start tolerating disrespect at my age."

Prey refused to go into the ram's store, and stayed outside and out of sight, the old sheep left none the wiser. Prey didn't want to be seen by the ram and asked who he was, why he didn't have any horns, and where his parents were.

Prey's step was a little faster as they walked away from the tiny store.

It was obvious that Lilly Blossom was having to bite her lip to keep her self from bad mouthing the grumpy ram the moment they were out of earshot, but somehow she managed it. Barely.

'-keep it professional Lilly. Keep it professional, keep it professional-'

"Hey, at what age do sheep start growing horns?" Scenic asked Prey as they left.

Prey completely ignored him.

Gloom had Lilly write out their report to Nighthawk. With her naturally granted telekinesis, she made the most efficient scribe out of the five of them. The report went thus:

"Arrived in Alfalfa Dale at 7:00 via morning train. Disembarked. Made straight for Mayflower. Sent Crimson flying ahead. Returned post haste with an alarming update on Mayflower. Arrived 11:00. Found Mayflower abandoned. All villagers missing. No destroyed property. No blood. No bodies. No tracks. All doors open or at least unlocked. Uncertain if travel supplies were removed and taken. Possible destination: unknown. Hostiles: unknown."

The report continued on in a similar vein, going into detail about everything they'd found, no matter how insignificant. Everyone dictated any theories and ideas they could think of, having Lilly make a long list. Included was the general state of Alfalfa Dale and what Bale had told them, his position as the mayor's brother, etcetera. This message was a one time only thing, so it was better to cram in as much detail as possible, no matter how trivial it might seem.

Prey drew up a map of Mayflower, showing the forest's border, while Gloom dictated their current plan of action:

"We will begin scouting inside of the borders of the forest to search for any signs of the villagers. Will recruit a guide or any help from Alfalfa Dale, if available. No current leads. We will begin at Mayflower and start a sweeping arc search from there."

Gloom did not add anything flowery and unnecessary like, 'We shall not fail', or 'Luna guide our search' at the end, only the bare facts. He took the quill from Lilly and signed it himself, 'First Sargent Dusky Gloom'.

Then came the 'postage' bit.

"Can anypony think of anything we might've forgotten to add?" Gloom asked as he rolled up the sheaf of papers.

Everyone shook their heads. "Well here goes." Gloom said.

He'd wrapped both message-in-a-bottles in padding and stored them securely in his saddle bags. Now, he drew out one of the blueish green glass bottles, and unwrapped it.

Soft green light from slowly flickering flames was revealed. It was odd, seeing a fire hanging in the bottle with no fuel source. The flames always burnt straight up, no matter how you turned or shook the bottle.

Prey sidled back as Gloom broke the seal. Just because it was supposed to be controlled spell fire didn't change the fact that it was *spell fire*. Prey didn't want to be in the blast range if, for some reason, it suddenly became unstable. Unlikely, but unlikely was not the same as impossible.

Gloom gripped the bottle between his forehooves, and used his wing claws to force feed the roll of pages through the bottle's neck. For a second the flames did nothing, and then in a silent '*Woosh*' they consumed the whole roll in a second and vanished. There wasn't even a trace of ash left in the bottom. Lilly and Scenic couldn't help but wince as they watched a thousand bits literally go up in smoke.

"So...That's all there is to it?" Gloom asked, looking at the empty bottle.

"Yes, that's it. It'll pop out of Captain Nighthawk's message bottle on the other end." Prey confirmed, having approached again.

"Huh." Gloom said, eyeing the inert bottle.

"That was simpler than I imagined." Crimson said.

Gloom shrugged and tucked the green glass container back into his saddle bags. Now they were waiting on a reply.

By this time, it was late. The ISND did not travel back to Mayflower that day, instead choosing to spend the night outside of Alfalfa Dale. Gloom, partly because of Prey's advice and partly just because he had common sense, did not want to spend the night sleeping on the forest's door step. And in the time it would've taken them to walk back to Mayflower, night would've certainly fallen.

So instead of engaging in such unnecessary stupidity, they camped outside of Alfalfa Dale instead. Prey knew they would be spending more than enough time in the forest soon anyway. Enough to kill a person.

Scenic and Lilly were each trying to set up their oversized one pony tents in preparation for the coming night, and mostly failing. Prey was gazing towards the darkening horizon instead of watching the show, not bothering to erect a shelter himself. He knew it wasn't going to rain tonight. Just a blanket would be fine.

But Prey wasn't thinking about that. He wasn't thinking about much of anything.

Prey felt the tough grass under his hooves, the light chill of the wind in the darkening sky, the scent of earth, and remembered the feelings of fifty-seven years ago.

Surviving in the Deeper Green. What Snake had taught him, both willingly and unwillingly.

The fear, the danger, the rawness, the pulse of the forest's heart beating all around you.

Prey had feared the Deeper Green, (still did), but he had also respected it.

This forest was not the Deeper Green, it wasn't even halfway there in terms of dangerousness. But the differences were slim enough to stir up his memories.

Lilly Blossom was cursing non-stop under her breath as she tried to figure out how the tent pole was supposed to fit through a loop too

small for it, while Scenic wasn't doing much better with his own tent.

Gloom sighed and got up to help them, "Here, let me. Look. It goes through there."

Crimson meditated for a time, before rising and launching into his kata training. Scenic was immediately captivated, and stopped to stare, '-wow. I wish I could do that-'

Prey only had half his attention on the rest of the ISND, as some of them got cross at having to be helped, some of them tried to learn what they were doing wrong, another tried to do the teaching, and someone else trained.

Background. Peoples lives.

Prey sat and unwillingly thought of darker memories of being alone and uncertain, until it was time to turn in for the night. He waited until he observed that Lilly Blossom's mind showed her to be asleep, before allowing his own eyes to close.

Prey sank into the deep blue of his ocean mindscape, and dreamt of an unadorned, cracked wooden mask, bone rot, and a swimming sea of rustling green.

Prey woke up sometime during the night. He immediately checked to see Lilly was still asleep, then that there was no other danger close by. In that order.

Prey reached a hoof under his makeshift pack pillow, checking his ribbon was still there, the tangible reminder that he belonged to no one but himself. It was. He spared a glare for the gold tracer bands in the dark, then pulled the thick blanket tighter and rolled over.

Lilly Blossom had not slept well during the night, nor the night

before, and it showed. Prey, Crimson, and Gloom on the other hoof had all slept fine. Or at least, they were used to the disturbed sleep schedule which came with the job.

Actually, what was reaaaaally putting Lilly's tail out of joint as they wordlessly reloaded their packs and began the trek back towards Mayflower, was that she was only now realising what two weeks out here entailed.

'-no showers. No bucking showers. And. No. Bucking. Toilet. Paper.-'

How she was only realising this just now was a bit of a mystery, but it served as one more reason for Prey to avoid the foul tempered mare who had no one to blame but herself. A fact which just aggravated Lilly all the more as she stomped along. Scenic took it upon himself to try and be a cheerful voice, chatting quite amiably to her in an attempt to improve the mare's dour mood. There was precious little else to be cheerful about.

Prey moved forwards to stay close to Crimson as they walked in the grey morning, keeping his eyes roaming and his ears alert.

Over the hours of the trip, Scenic's chatter did go some way to drawing Lilly from her mood, but he went quiet as they crested the rise over Mayflower. The forest's shadow loomed up afresh and the cold quiet of the empty village reasserted itself. Although the feeling had never really left. It was only them who had.

Now they were back, and looking at the almost aggressive advances of nature overtaking the village.

"It's only been one week, and already there's vines climbing up the doors." Prey overheard Scenic muttering.

Prey took another long look around at Mayflower, with its empty houses already falling to the ravages of time. Something unnatural had taken place here. It takes one to know one, so Prey knew what unnatural felt like, and this area *definitely* had that feeling. He looked at the start of the forest. The closest trees were pines, rough bark encrusted with dark lichen.

He breathed deeply. He scented mouldy pine, old sap, leaf litter, heavy air, and dirt. And there was the feeling again. In the darkness behind his shut eyelids, Prey imagined he could feel something ahead. A heartbeat out there amid the twisting paths of the trees. Slow, deep, silent. The arteries of the forest.

Prey felt the mental walls of Crimson coming up beside him and re-opened his eyes. Crimson shifted his wings as he stood next to Prey, the wing blade joint slightly folding and unfolding as he did so.

"Do you think we will find the villagers in there?" Crimson asked Prey bluntly, not mincing words.

Prey dithered on his answer. Crimson wanted to hear an affirmative, but he was also asking Prey what he really thought.

Prey hesitated, "You sure you want to know?"

Crimson nodded.

Prey drew a hoof through the dirt, "I think it's about a one-in-twenty chance we find all of them, but one-in-six we find at least one of them. And one-in six-again that the person we find is still alive."

Crimson grunted. "You were right. I didn't want to know." He turned and walked away, although he never fully turned his back on the forest.

At what point does something become dangerous?

On one side of the line, safety. On the other, danger. But how do you know which side it is?

At what point does walking up a path transition to walking up a *treacherous* path? What measures the crossing point into dangerous? Was it when you actually slipped and fell, or was it when you first noticed the rocks were slippery?

What if you didn't notice any difference right up until you fell? Did

the path only count as treacherous after the fall, or beforehoof too? If so, that would imply it was only dangerous after someone had a tragic accident.

Further more, was it the path's fault, or the person walking it? Surely an object couldn't be blamed as dangerous.

So as the ISND picked their way along just inside the forest's border, never losing sight of the way out on their right, but the depths of the forest lying to their left, were they in danger?

Only just being inside the treeline, there was little risk as they scanned the ground for tracks indicating where the villagers might've entered the forest. But was it really only a little risk?

Lilly and Scenic, poking about gnarled roots, seemed to think it was fine as long as they could still see the way out.

Gloom and Crimson thought the danger lay further in, although that didn't mean they let their guard down as they picked over the thickly pine needled dirt.

Prey felt the trees all around him, the canopy overhead, the cold staleness in the air, and decided the danger had begun the moment they'd first set hoof under the shadow of the trees. The Deeper Green had always been dangerous no matter where you stood in it, so it must be the same here. The only factor was *how* dangerous.

"I think I found something." Scenic called.

Prey flinched instinctively and cast about, "Keep your voice down!" He hissed, angry at the sudden fright.

"Why?" Lilly asked, just as loudly, "Aren't we trying to let anypony who might be out here know where we are, so we can rescue them?"

"Quiet," Gloom snapped, voice low, angered by their carelessness. "Did you already forget, these villagers disappeared for a reason? That reason might be close enough to hear you. Do you want it to find us before we find it?"

Scenic and Lilly's jaws snapped shut.

Gloom grunted, mollified, "Better," He returned his short spear to its holster across his back with a wing, "Now, what is it you've found, Scenic?"

"This sir," Scenic whispered, now much quieter, "I think it's tracks. It looks like little hoof prints."

Prey peered at what Scenic was showing them. Gloom sighed.

"That's a badger trail." Crimson bluntly informed Scenic.

"What? But that doesn't look like badger paw marks at all." Scenic protested.

"Did you expect perfectly formed prints, with the claws and treads clearly laid out for you?" Prey couldn't refrain from sweetly mocking he Earth pony, "This isn't fresh fallen snow. You won't see prints, the pine needles disrupt that and the earth isn't soft enough to hold tracks. All you'll see are scuffs. Like these 'little hoof prints'."

"How am I supposed to know what a badger trail looks like? It could've been a chocolate jackolope for all I know." Scenic weakly protested.

"For all you knew?" Crimson echoed, the pegasus somehow making his flat pronouncement sound incredulous.

"Hmmm." Gloom also studied Scenic critically. The Earth pony fidgeted under his yellow slit gaze. Lilly held out better when it was her turn, but her ears gave away her discomfort and frustration.

"You're right," Gloom announced, but still keeping his voice down, "For all you knew. Because you don't know anything. You're like foals, making noise, blundering about and not knowing what to do."

Prey saw how Lilly Blossom bristled, but Gloom kept talking, "However this isn't a good learning environment. It's dangerous, and we've got ponies to save. But you're going to get yourselves killed if you aren't taught something. Or get somepony *else* killed."

The seriousness of Gloom's pronouncement seemed to shock Lilly and Scenic.

Gloom pointed a hoof at the badger scuff marks in the fallen pine needles, "You need to learn things like this. A badger is harmless, but a manticore isn't. Unfortunately, we don't have time to teach you properly. So you're just going to have to try and learn the best you can."

"Sir, what do you mean sir?" Lilly asked tightly.

'-I mean you both haven't got a clue what you're doing-', Gloom thought, '-so we're gonna' have to foalsit you. Luna I'm stupid for not realising this earlier. I'm too used to working with ponies like Prey and Crimson who grew up outside of Canterlot-'

"Lilly Blossom, you stick behind me. I'll lead the way, and you follow my lead. You can ask any questions, and I'll try to point out stuff to look out for." Gloom said, then nodded at Scenic.

"Scenic Paint, you'll be doing the same with..." Gloom hesitated as his hoof hovered between Crimson and Prey, "...With Prey. He know's what he's doing."

'-Prey's actually the most approachable out of them both. He doesn't seem to hate Scenic nearly as much as he does Lilly, so hopefully he'll keep his temper in check-'

"Yes sir." Scenic agreed, eager for the chance of guidance.

Prey scowled. He didn't want to teach Scenic, nor had he agreed to anything. But if he didn't at least keep Scenic from bumbling about, he might get them all killed. Although it was a massive relief Gloom had taken on Lilly. That was an arrow narrowly dodged.

Scenic shuffled, "So, yeah, I'll be in your capable hooves." He said, trying to smile down at Prey but his attention kept getting grabbed by the dark tree trunks all around them.

'At least he's the less arrogant of the two and will actually learn from correction.' Prey thought. This was hardly the ideal time or the place to be trying to teach anyone anything, but there was nothing

for it.

"Come on," Prey said, "Follow behind me. Walk where I walk. Keep your armour from clanking. Don't touch anything. Look up at the trees, and never keep your eyes stationary. If you think you hear or see something, don't approach it until you're sure it's safe. Don't shout or call out, or otherwise make noise. Tread lightly. Don't speak unless it's serious. Try to communicate with gestures where possible. You do what I say, when I say. Clear?"

Scenic Paint blinked down at the lamb, who wore a large backpack, had a silk ribbon tied behind one ear, and who was giving him orders with dead seriousness. Those big soft blue eyes bore into him. Scenic thought of the quadruple murder scene he hadn't even seen but Prey had. Scenic nodded vigorously and made a zipping motion across his lips.

Scenic and Lilly did as they were ordered for the next four hours as the ISND slowly swept down the outer reaches of the forest. They followed behind their assigned instructor, kept quiet, and tried to learn from observing how Prey, Crimson, and Gloom acted.

Four long hours under the shadow of the trees, the dim quiet only broken by rustling branches, and the occasional sharp craw of ravens or crows sounding right when you least expected them.

It was cold and dry inside the forest's border, but also weirdly damp in many places as they searched. Sometimes the ground squished under the pine needle carpet as your hoof came down, other times it was rock solid. Prey skirted both patches where he could.

There was little that grew in the perpetual shadow of the evergreen canopy. Little wholesome anyway.

Mushrooms and assorted parasitic fungi, moss, lichen, floor creepers, and leafless thorn tangles which sought to bite at your fetlocks.

Prey spied a black beetle the size of a potato dragging an enormous

squirming earth worm from its hole. The straining beetle managed to rip the worm in two and fell on its back, hairy legs waving while the rest of the earthworm escaped. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Scenic covering his mouth and looking slightly queasy.

In terms of staying focused and alert, patrolling was only slightly better than standing Guard. Four long hours of fruitless tracking in this atmosphere was more than enough dishearten and distract anyone, and that was dangerous.

Gloom made an effort to keep Lilly Blossom focused by keeping her engaged. He pointed things out, like animal signs, or changes in the landscape which indicated dried up stream beds or dips hidden under piles of leaves. He also frequently questioned her in a low voice to make sure she was retaining what he told her.

Prey made for a very poor teacher in comparison. He hardly told Scenic anything, merely pointing at stuff and expecting the Earth pony to work it out for himself. He was impatient with the stallion. In fact the only reason Scenic was here, as far as Prey cared, was to act as a meat shield if anything attacked them.

As the four hour mark slowly rolled around, and still nothing had been found, Gloom decided that if there were any signs at all of where the villagers entered the forest, it was not on this side of Mayflower. They needed to double back to the village and search along the West border of the forest next. Maybe they'd find something there instead.

"If there is anything on this side, it's obvious we've missed or aren't going to find it," Gloom said, holding up a hoof to halt them, "Time to turn back."

They left the forest and emerged back onto the scrub of the open land. It would be faster travelling out here than walking back through the forest's border, and Gloom thought it, '-a good idea to not be in there any longer than necessary-'

As they stepped out of the canopy's shadow and left the mouldy smell of pine behind, Scenic seemed to straighten, the hunch coming out of his shoulders. He tipped his head back and breathed

deeply under the open sky.

"Mmmm Ahhh." Scenic breathed, letting out a sigh he hadn't been aware he was holding. '-funny, I don't remember it being so nice and bright out here-'

"Don't do that. Never turn your back on the forest." Prey snapped.

"Why not?" Scenic asked cocking an ear, his sudden mood improvement making him restive.

"Don't question me. We've only left the tree line. This close to the forest, what makes you think something else can't do the same?"

"There was nothing dangerous in there." Scenic protested.

"Oh, you think so?" Prey asked easily, "Then why don't you step back inside? You can walk back to Mayflower through the trees. Me and Crimson will be walking along side you the whole way. Out here."

"What good would that do?" Scenic argued back, but weakly.

"You said yourself there was nothing dangerous. So go on, it doesn't have to be far in. Just a few paces under the trees. But walk back to Mayflower inside the forest the whole way." Prey said.

Scenic looked back at the trees, seeing the dim shade underneath their spiky branches and hesitated, "...No." He said.

"Why not? You said there was nothing dangerous."

"Because."

"Because what?"

"Because..."

Prey narrowed his eyes up at Scenic, and then nodded, "Because you've realised there is something to fear. Good. You're not totally stupid."

"Hey, what do you mean by that?" Scenic demanded, slightly offended.

Prey ignored him and moved up next to Crimson as they began their walk back, leaving Scenic to fume for a second before he realised he was getting left behind. "Hey, wait up."

Prey kept one eye on the forest at all times, and snorted as he thought back over Scenic's words. They'd all felt it back in there, whether they acknowledged it or not. It was the low thrum of unspecified danger, faint, but always there. Prey remembered the Deeper Green and how it had felt.

'A part of you never leaves the jungle. They'll learn that soon enough.'

"Celestia's ever flowing rainbow mane, it's unpleasant in there." Lilly Blossom muttered to Scenic through a mouthful of bread, the two of them at the back of the group.

"Uh, yeah, I think I know what you mean." Scenic answered vaguely, distracted as he tried to get his canteen back into his pack while still watching the forest at all times like Prey had instructed.

There were no breaks. They were eating as they trotted back to Mayflower. The day old bread was a bit stale, and had been tough to begin with, but it's what was for lunch and was easy to eat while on the move. Well, easy for those who had a way of carrying their food outside of walking on three hooves.

'-this stuff is awful, not fit for the Guard at all-', Lilly internally grumbled as she took another bite of her levitating loaf.

Prey kept the dried fruit he was sharing with Crimson out of Scenic and Lilly's line of sight as he passed it over. They were almost back at Mayflower. As usual, Gloom and Crimson could've been going a lot faster if they weren't ground bound by the rest of them, but that was only as far as getting back to their starting point in Mayflower was concerned.

For once, the two fliers were in a situation where they were being forced by more than just other peoples lack of extra appendages to stay grounded. Any tracks or clues would be inside the forest, not above it, even if the dense canopy had been thin enough to see through from the air.

Gloom himself was nibbling on a wedge of hard cheese he'd cleverly packed, perfect for travelling, as he continued to scan the area all the time, much like Crimson and Prey. He was letting Lilly and Scenic take a break from the constant vigilance. They were still new, and after four hours, those two really needed the break if they were going to be able to properly focus again later.

"Crimson?" Gloom raised his voice.

"Yes sir?"

Gloom waved a wing and Crimson trotted up ahead. Only once Crimson was next to Gloom did the thestral continue speaking, but Prey could still overhear them.

"You didn't smell any traces of blood in Mayflower, right?"

"That is mostly correct sir." Crimson confirmed.

"Mostly?"

"I mean, no blood that I thought was recent enough to have been from the villagers disappearing a week ago. I think. It was hard to tell. Although I did smell something strange." Crimson said.

"Strange? Any idea what it might've been?"

"I can't say for certain, only that it was not blood sir. Sorry. That's all my talent is good at recognising."

"It's fine. We'll make do. Something strange though, you say?" Gloom mused.

"Yes sir."

"That whole village was strange. This whole place is strange.

Hmm..." Gloom trailed off, unable to think of anything more to add.

'Did you really need Crimson's talent to figure out something strange is going on?' Prey thought.

He shifted his pack, glad once again it had proper straps, and conversely wished once again he'd gotten a chance to speak with Lemon Pink before they'd left. Overhead, clouds drifted past the early afternoon sun, casting roving shadows over the scrub grass as it hissed in the wind.

It went without saying they avoided entering Mayflower on their return. Rather than walking through the silent village, they trotted up the slope and looped around instead. This was the group's fourth time laying eyes on the place, and it felt like they were looking at a ruin more and more each time.

Reentering the forest once safely past Mayflower and beginning their search West was not as easy as simply stepping back inside. At the treeline, each of them in their own way paused and privately prepared themselves for a moment.

'Here we go again.' Prey thought, flicking the free end of his ribbon before taking the first step back onto the carpet of dead pine needles. His eyes instinctively flickered to Crimson, just to double check, a habit he'd developed since the Lumber Yard. In much the same way, the pegasus was giving his wing blades one last flex, just to double check for hundredth time they were still unencumbered. How very like Crimson.

'-Tartarus it's icky in here-', Prey overheard Scenic thinking with a shudder as the Earth pony stepped back into the shadow. The air inside the forest did indeed have that feel to it, like you were walking in something. Like dust, or faint spiderwebs.

"Right, back in we go," Gloom said quietly, and completely unnecessarily, "We proceed same as before."

As they travelled West from Mayflower, the forest didn't differ much from what they'd already seen when tracking East.

Or it didn't right up until Prey spotted something amid the leaf litter.

Prey immediately stopped, something which triggered Crimson and Gloom to freeze as well.

Lilly stopped before she ran into the back of Gloom, but Scenic failed to do the same with Prey, almost knocking the much smaller lamb onto his face.

Prey spun around, spitting fury as he shook his hoof at Scenic, only just managing to stop himself from shouting; "Don't touch me".

Instead, he just gesticulated wildly at the stallion.

"What? What? What is it?" Lilly demanded in a whisper, far too loudly. There was also the blue sparkle of magic blooming around her horn in preparation. *Stupid*. She was lighting up a torch to draw everythings attention to them.

With an effort, Prey managed to swallow down his anger at Scenic's clumsiness. He forced himself to ignore both of the idiots inappropriate reactions in favour of reassuring Gloom. Gloom was staring at him, yellow eyes conveying the all important question.

Prey shook his head in answer, 'Not in danger'. Gloom relaxed, taking his wing claw from off his spear. Crimson let the tension fall from his wings, the wing blades fully retracting again.

"What? What?!" Lilly was still demanding, casting about.

"Shut up." Gloom ordered her.

"Sir, what's-"

"Shut *up*." Gloom growled through his fangs. He pointed an accusing hoof at her:

"Haven't you been paying any attention at *all*? No, I can see you're

not taking this seriously. What part of this forest has deluded you into thinking there's no danger?"

Lilly opened her mouth but Gloom kept going in a rasping growl, voice suppressed but his anger still abundantly clear, "Your reaction was completely incorrect. First, you didn't react in time. Second, you reacted wrong. You moved, you made noise, you asked stupid questions, you cast a spell."

"Sir, I didn't cast sir-"

"You were gathering magic! You made light. Didn't it occur to you that you were painting a big fat target on your forehead? Luckily this time there wasn't a monster, but if there was, you'd have given away our position."

Lilly Blossom's affronted look clearly showed she clearly thought that's exactly why a Guard lit up their horn in the first place, to fight monsters. How were you supposed to fight monsters if you weren't ready?

Gloom read her expression. "This isn't a game. Don't you get that? If there's a monster, our priority is to avoid it. *Not* fight it. This isn't a subjugation mission to defeat some beast. Do you want to get yourself killed in a pointless fight you could've avoided if you'd just backed off?" Gloom demanded.

"And you, Scenic Paint." Gloom pointed at the Earth pony, using his full name instead of the nick name Scenic had asked them to call him by.

"Why weren't you paying attention? If that was a monster, you could've gotten Prey killed. He's a lamb. Just because he's seen- That doesn't matter. *You* need to pay attention. And I mean really pay attention. Not just think you are. Just thinking is no good if you can't do it, is it?" Gloom demanded.

Scenic looked at the forest floor between his hooves, "No sir."

Gloom's small rant seemed to have let some of his anger drain away, and now he was regretting his harsh rebuking of Lilly and

Scenic.

'-ponies learn better from guidance, not anger. Even if they needed it. Or if one in particular sorely needed it-', Gloom thought, his gaze resting heavily upon Lilly.

More calmly this time, Gloom spoke, "This is deadly serious. It's not a story, it's not a game. We, I, have enough ponies on my conscience already. I don't want to add anypony else on to it. I'm just trying to keep us all alive. Does everypony understand?"

Prey heard what was running through Lilly Blossom's head;

'-enough ponies on his conscience? That means he's done this before. And won. Which mean's we'll be victorious this time too. Tragedy makes heroes stronger-', Lilly thought, fire sparking in her eyes.

"Sir, I understand completely sir." Lilly said, her head held high.

Prey was speechless. Was having the arrogance to only hear what she wanted to hear secretly Lilly's special talent? It took a special kind of person to view someone telling them they were wrong as actually proof they were doing something right. It was the exact opposite of what Gloom's reprimand had been intended for.

Gloom frowned at her sceptically, "Do you really understand?"

"Sir, yes sir. You don't have to worry about me sir."

'-then why do I have a feeling it's the exact opposite?-', Gloom thought, studying Lilly's face as he attempted to discern her thoughts. He decided that right here and now probably wasn't the time for it though.

"Alright then. I'll hold you to that." Gloom said quietly.

Gloom didn't see the mare puff out her chest behind him in self-deluded congratulations at just how much she was going to improve. Instead, Gloom looked to Prey, who had been the start of this little debacle. "Alright Prey, what was it you spotted?"

Prey shifted to be a bit further away from Lilly and closer to Crimson, who'd not once let his watch on their surroundings falter. Prey pointed a cloven hoof up ahead of them, "Over there, on the forest floor."

They all squinted, trying to make out what it was in the shadows. Gloom and Crimson managed it first.

"Stone?" Crimson asked.

"Yes." Prey said. He cautiously moved forwards and knelt down by what he'd spotted. Underneath a mat of brown pine needles and some ranging thorn vines, lay the flat grey of stone, too flat to be natural. Prey brushed aside the detritus to further reveal the slab, and what had appeared to only be a hoof's worth of stone grew to nearly a yard across.

"A paving slab? How under the moon did this get all the way out here?" Gloom wondered, helping Prey in clear off the stone. It was covered in fine grooves, ingrained with dark earth.

The slab was smooth cut, but not formed into any standard rectangle shape. It was more like a shard, broken off an enormous sheet of stone if such a thing were possible.

"Old." Crimson commented, "I mean, it's very old."

"Hmmm." Gloom mused as they studied their find.

"Is the, er, stone going to help us, sir?" Scenic asked, looking lost.

Gloom shrugged and looked to Prey for the answer to that question, "Is it?" He asked.

"Back in the middle of Mayflower, do you remember those half buried stone slabs? They looked-"

"-Exactly the same as this one." Gloom realised, "They must've come from the same place." He finished, running his hoof across the cold surface of the stone.

"This stone is much older than the village though. It's obviously

been cut smooth, but it's also so old it's got all these tiny grooves worn into it, and has almost been buried under soil. So the question is, did the villagers take the stone to use, or did they build Mayflower on top of what was already there?" Prey mused.

"I don't know. But what does this tell us all the way out here?" Gloom asked, warily eyeing the endless sea of tree trunks stretching off around them.

Prey looked at the slab, noting how it was set into the ground. "Maybe..." He muttered.

He stood up and moved further along to where the stone seemed to point, stamping his hoof down as he went.

"What are you-?"

"Aha." Prey started kicking aside the dirt and needles. Within a few moments, another patch of smooth grey was revealed.

"It's a road." Lilly exclaimed in sudden realisation, but remembering Gloom's dressing down, she at least did so quietly.

"Yes, a road." Gloom echoed, "Are there more paving stones?"

"Let's find out." Prey said, starting to stamp the ground again as he moved forwards.

There were indeed more of the mismatched stone slabs, set at irregular intervals. Sometimes one slab on its own, sometimes clustered together, but the direction the impromptu road pointed was clear. Deeper into the trees.

Lilly started forwards to immediately begin following, before a look from Gloom reminded her that she was not in charge and had to stick with the group.

"Anypony got any idea's where this path might lead?" Gloom asked.

Unsurprisingly, no one did. If you tilted your head and looked out of the corner of your eye, there just might be a clearer route through the trees which indicated where the grey stone path lay,

winding away into the dark between the trees until it was lost.

Who had lain it? Why? Where did it go? Was it supposed to be a path out of the forest, or a path in?

"Alright then. That just leaves one question. Do we follow it or not? What does everypony think?" Gloom looked round at them.

"Sir, I think we should follow it sir. It's the only lead we've got, so we should go for it." Lilly advocated, to no ones surprise.

"Uh, me too sir." Scenic said, shifting from hoof to hoof on the pine needles.

'-I don't like the idea of wandering around in here without a direction-', He was thinking.

Prey was quiet for a moment, looking down at the cold, featureless stone slab at his hooves. Someone at some point in history had gone to great lengths to lay this stone. And through this forest too.

"I don't think this road has anything to do with our missing villagers. It isn't a clue. It just is what it is." Prey said quietly.

"So is that a yes or a no?" Gloom pressed.

Prey closed his eyes in thought for a second. He didn't feel anything from the stone, but the winding route represented something. "I don't know." He answered honestly.

"Hmm, alright. You, Crimson?"

"I don't like it." Crimson stated without any hesitation. He flicked his wing, "This whole place, I mean. I feel like I'm being watched. It's...not like the other forests. It feels different."

"It feels old." Prey said.

"Yes, that. Old. Watchful. Unfriendly."

Lilly wanted to say that was ridiculous, Prey heard her thinking so; '-it's just some trees. Trees can't be unfriendly-'

But even she couldn't completely deny the stealthy feeling.

Gloom considered all of their words, weighing the dangers up against the possibly of them finding something.

"We'll follow it," Gloom decided, "For a while at least. See how deep this rabbit hole goes. We're turning around and getting out here before it gets dark though."

Cautiously, they followed the ancient buried road. Gloom took the lead, using the butt of his short spear to tap and find the next stone slab beneath the leaf litter. Slowly, the twisting path lead them deeper into the trees.

Occasionally, they had to stop and back track to find the next submerged stone when they took a wrong turn. The stale scent of pine hung in the still air, and the deeper they went, the more it pervaded every breath. Patches of sky in the canopy provided their only source of sun light.

They stepped over the low thorn bushes that blocked their paths, or went around them in Prey's case. Apart from the odd far off bird call, or a sigh of wind in the tree tops, it was very quiet.

No calling insects. That was a difference between here and the Deeper Green. Obviously there were still insects here, there are insects everywhere, but here, they were the silent type. Black ants, moths, spiders, worms, woodlice, grubs, tree borers.

Prey spied patches of other mushrooms and plants he knew uses for, but he didn't make any move to collect any because he still didn't know this forest. He didn't know what it would allow, and what it wouldn't.

While the forest was almost exclusively dark pine, here and there were still a few other kinds which were ether big or gnarled enough to fight for dominance with the pines.

Occasionally, they came across chunks of craggy stone which'd forced it's way through the earth, but you often missed them, so

overgrown with moss and leaf mould turned soil were they.

Gloom probed with his spear butt, "This way next." He indicated in a hushed voice.

Prey stepped over the slight rise of what would one day become an overhang, and slowed as an unpleasant tingle in his gut started up. He scanned their surroundings.

Pines, fallen branches, brown needles, a half buried boulder, sun patch, shadows.

No danger.

Crimson raised his head, turning his muzzle this way and that. He stopped and held up a hoof. This time, Scenic and Lilly were paying enough attention to halt immediately. Everything was silent as everyone held their breath.

Prey desperately wished he could hear Crimson's thoughts right then. What had Crimson spotted?

Crimson silently sniffed the air again. Then with a flick of his wings, the wings blades were unsheathed. Gloom's spear was immediately out and at the ready. Prey still couldn't see where the threat was.

Five seconds. Ten seconds. Eventually, Gloom had to whisper; "What is it?"

"I smell b-something." Crimson whispered back, recalling at the last second Scenic and Lilly, "It's close."

"A predator then." Gloom said. The word made Prey's stomach give an unpleasant lurch.

"Sir, can I light my horn now sir?" Lilly hissed, eyes darting about as she practically hummed with adrenaline.

"An ambush predator," Prey whispered, "Wherever it is, it's still an ambush predator. We stopped in time, so it likely won't attack."

'-oh thank sweet Celestia-', Scenic thought behind him, all the talk

of danger suddenly very real to the Earth pony.

Gloom's eyes scanned the shadows, "I can't see anything." He admitted.

They all strained to spot anything out of place. Eventually Lilly Blossom started to doubt there really was anything. Prey didn't. He frowned at the oblong boulder ahead, craggy and overgrown. Was there something hiding behind it? Or...

"I see it." Prey whispered.

"Where?" Gloom asked, never looking away from the forest.

"The boulder. It's actually a camouflaged ambush predator. It doesn't chase. It waits. Our best option is just to take a large detour around it."

Gloom considered, staring at the boulder, "We'll likely loose the path if we do."

"We mustn't go near it." Prey insisted quietly.

"What *is* it?" Crimson asked.

"A mama'duke, a false skin, or a stone chameleon. Take your pick of names. They travel slow but attack fast." Prey whispered, already starting to back away.

"Could we beat it if it came down to a fight?" Gloom asked.

"Depends how big it's grown, but probably. No point though, we should just avoid it."

"Hold on," Gloom said, staring hard at the innocent looking chunk of rock, "I have an idea."

Without turning, Gloom gestured Lilly up with his wing, "Lilly Blossom, come up here."

"Sir, yes sir." Lilly whispered.

"Can you hit that rock from here?"

"Sir, do you really think there's-"

"Can you hit it? Yes or no."

"Of course I can sir. I was the best in the class at-"

"Good. Hit it."

There was a budding glow of blue light in the shadows of the trees. It sparked, and then there was a flash and a *swish* of displaced air as a blast of blue magic flew through the air.

It was a concussive blast spell. Simple, straightforward, easy to learn, point and fire line of sight, and one of the four spells required of all unicorn recruits in the Royal Guard.

Those four being; a kinetic blast spell, a minor shield spell, an emergency flare spell, and the recruits choice of either a stunning or binding spell.

And this blast spell flew true to splash against the boulder with enough force to send small chips flying.

The reaction was immediate. The boulder jumped off the ground as if on a hinge, and a blur of brightly coloured tentacles lashed out in a distorted windmill of violence.

Pine needles filled the air as the creature sought its attackers. Lilly and Scenic cursed in sync, as the Mama'duke emerged from under its stone shell. Already at the rear, Prey was busy retreating even further to waste breath doing the same. A boneless balloon of flesh with two horizontal bars for eyes swelled out from underneath the rock as its futile attack came to an end.

The suckered tentacles were jagged, with little backwards facing spines, and the wrinkled flesh slowly pulsed and changed colour to mimic the forest's floor.

"That's an octopus." Lilly said, sounding shocked. She had gone wide eyed at the violence of the monsters reprisal.

"What's an octopus?" Prey asked.

"That. Well no, not that right there, but *that*." Lilly jabbed at the Mama'duke, as Prey knew it.

The newly identified octopus looked at their little group reproachfully with its horizontal eyes, like they'd somehow cheated. Then it manoeuvred itself around and started shuffling off into the forest, using its tentacles to drag its heavy main body, boulder house and all, behind it.

Scenic suppressed a slightly manic whinny-laugh.

The ISND watched the monster until it was little more than a distant boulder outline bobbing between the trees.

Prey noted down all his observations about the Mama'duke to add to Snake's knowledge on the camouflaging ambush predator. This wasn't the first of the boneless mollusc Prey'd seen, but if he was lucky, it would be the last. As far as monsters went, the Mama'duke was one of the less dangerous ones. As long as you saw it coming.

"Well, it's safe to move again on the path now at least." Prey said.

"What if there're more of those mimic things? Or if that one comes back?" Lilly demanded, still thrumming with suppressed energy. "We could've taken it down easy, no problem."

'-teach that no good cheating octopus to leave the sea-'

"No point. It's too slow to chase us. As for the possibility of any more of them, we'll just have to be on the look out." Gloom shrugged. What else could they do?

Prey made another mental note to try and look up 'octopus' at some point. That Mama'duke had been unnerving, but not outright terrifying. He glanced at Scenic Paint and found the stallion still wide eyed, his breathing shallow.

Prey had a quick listen in on his thoughts; '-I would've walked right into that and never known. I could be dead right now-'

"Come on Paint Spot, time to get moving." Gloom quietly said, giving Scenic's shoulder a shake.

"Wha-Oh, oh yes. yes. Right. Need to keep moving. Of course sir."

"Everypony good to go?" Gloom asked, checking around.

They all nodded, back to remaining silence except when necessary.

"Crimson, you take point," Gloom ordered, "You're the one who sensed that misplaced shellfish last time, you're our best early warning."

Crimson nodded and did as Gloom ordered, and they started to slowly proceed into the forest again, uncovering the path stones as they went.

But everyone was much more on edge. It was only to be expected. That monster had not been what any of them had expected. Prey himself had thought it too cold for the Mama'duke to be here in this forest. Obviously, he'd been wrong.

'What else from the Deeper Green might've migrated its way here?' Prey worried. Now *that* was an unpleasant thought. Lilly thought they could've killed the Mama'duke, and they probably could've. But why would they? There was never any guarantee of victory in a fight. It was far easier, simpler, and safer to drive it off.

But in Lilly Blossom's view, they should've killed the monster, because one less monster in the world meant the world was a safer place. But safer for whom? Not for them, the ones who would have to fight it. But it was the pony way of thinking, to believe that doing their best would somehow improve the world as a whole.

Ponies had a ridiculously over inflated sense of self importance like that.

Gloom slowed down enough to be next to Prey, “So you’ve seen Matta’dukes before?” He asked quietly.

“Mama’duke. Yes.”

“Where?”

Prey swivelled an eye up to regard Gloom, “In the forest of course.”

“Mama’duke. Strange name. Is it signifficant?” Gloom asked.

“No. It’s just a name.”

“Is it zebracin?” Gloom asked.

Prey hesitated, but there was no harm in Gloom knowing, "Yes, it is.”

Thankfully, Gloom didn't draw the connection, instead focusing on the threat:

"How dangerous was it really? If somepony had gotten grabbed, could we have saved them?” Gloom asked serious. Prey knew he didn’t want the two new recruits to hear Prey’s answer in case it was ‘No’. They were jumpy enough already.

“Maybe. If you were fast enough to cut them free and before it injects its digestive poisons. It mainly relies on crushing and suffocating its prey until it can drag it into range of its mouth. It’s got like a beak thing that can crunch through metal.”

‘-Luna’s mane-‘, Gloom thought. “No pun intended, right Prey?” Gloom asked with a weak attempt at humour.

It took a second for Prey to replay his own words and see what Gloom was talking about. “That wasn’t funny.”

“No,” Gloom let the false grin fall, “No it wasn’t. But thankfully you and Crimson spotted it in time. Good job. You can do it again, right?”

Before Prey could answer, ahead of them Crimson slowed again. Instantly, everyone was on maximum alert.

“Sir,” Crimson said softly, “Do you also see that?”

"Another monster?"

"No-"

Everyone breathed again.

"-It's... come and see sir."

“Where?” Gloom murmured, stepping up alongside Crimson and following his pointing wing, peering into the shadows.

Prey couldn’t see what Crimson had spotted with his superior night vision. How he hated being a half blind sheep. And being a runt.

Prey squinted, willing his eyesight to somehow improve. He couldn’t hear anything as they creapt forwards.

“Oh,” Gloom murmured, “Well that’s… different.”

A circle of stones stood in the clearing. Tall pines bent over the worn stone pillars, leaving only a single hole right in the middle of the canopy. The single, weak shaft of sunlight splashed down into the centre of the stones, yet it made the grey stone appear glowing white against the shadows of the forest.

The standing stones reminded Prey of teeth, old and blunt with age. The shortest one was still at least twice Crimson’s height, and the tallest over five times that, ranging in thickness and size. Prey imagined the effort it would’ve taken to transport them here. Inside the circle, vividly green moss sprouted everywhere, but barely spilled past the invisible line where the circle ended.

Slowly, the five of them approached the tall formation, on guard for what precisely they didn’t know, but wary all the same. It was oppressively silent, like making any sound would've been sacrilege.

“This is… I feel heavy. Like the air is too thick.” Scenic whispered.

“I feel it too. I do not think we should go closer.” Crimson said, stopping where he was.

‘-this is exactly like those stories with crazy cultists-‘, Lilly thought, “I know what this is.”

“Oh?” Gloom asked voice hushed, tilting his head this way and that trying to get a sense of the air.

“That feeling in the air, it’s mana. This is a naturally occurring wellspring, I read all about them. Ponies of old used to build shrines and stuff atop of them before we ponies properly understood magic. Like ancient druids.”

Gloom slowly nodded his understanding, but did not speak as they all stared at the stone circle.

‘-I would’ve loved to paint this if I were back in Canterlot-‘, Scenic thought, ‘-but out here, it feels wrong to even think of telling anypony else about this-'

Prey did not like this place. It felt like nature was concentrated here. Primal. A part of the forest. Like a focal point of something special. It seemed…Calming. Serene. Prey did not like how it made him feel. It set him on edge in a way he couldn’t verbalise. Like it knew who he was beneath his constant mask.

He did not like feeling judged by a circle of stones.

There was no magic here forcing him to feel dirty, to feel unclean. Nature did not have feelings. Whatever he felt came from within. That made him angry.

Prey grimaced and took a step back from the stones, not wanting to get any closer.

"Hey, what's that?" Lilly whispered. Prey glanced up sharply. The mare had started moving around the edge of the ring, peering inside the circle of stones. Now, she'd seen something which had previously been blocked from view, resting against the inside of one of the stones.

They all circled around, looking between the gaps of the stones to see what Lilly had spotted, none of them willing to step on the carpeting of moss inside the circle.

There, resting against the base of the tallest standing stone, was a small pile of woven, dried out wreathes.

The wreathes were simple affairs, rough grass, some wild flowers, and held together with twisted ivy. Prey blinked at them. Those looked like they'd been sitting here a long time, the plants were completely brown and withered. He counted the wreathes, and knew why they were there.

"What pony would risk coming all the way out here in these Celestia forsaken trees just to stick some dumb wreathes here?" Lilly muttered.

"Fifteen." Prey mumbled, just loud enough for Crimson to hear.

"Pardon?" He asked, leaning down closer.

"Fifteen wreathes. The fifteen people who went missing three months ago. This is a memorial."

"A memorial?" Crimson echoed, looking at the stones. His eyes moved, as if following someone who was not there. A mourning villager risking their life to make it here through the trees. A hope, or a prayer that maybe, somehow, it would all be alright.

"They might yet still live." Crimson said quietly. Whether he was talking about the original fifteen, or the rest of the village, Prey didn't know.

"These look really old." Lilly said, forgetting her caution and striding into the stone circle, grabbing a wreathe in her magic. Prey flinched.

"Put that down," Gloom hissed, "Leave it alone."

Lilly's ears went up in surprise, but she dropped it, "But sir, it might be a clue sir." She protested.

"Show some respect. Can you not see what this is?" Gloom asked.

"Yes sir. But sir, this is just the kind of place where we'd find some kind of clue. There might be a hidden message of some kind in

these sir." Lilly insisted, still standing in the middle of the stone circle as if there were nothing wrong with that.

"Those are months old. There will be nothing from the villagers who only disappeared last week. Come out from there."

"Sir, permission to speak freely? There's nothing supernatural in here. It's just magically saturated air sir."

Gloom bit down a response, he didn't want to get angry here. The air felt heavier. '-just because I don't have a horn doesn't mean I don't know when not to mess with strange magical places-'

"That as it may be, I'm still ordering you to come out from in there." Gloom said evenly.

"Sir, just let me show you what I mean, I can-"

"Private Lilly Blossom," Gloom began very calmly as he shifted his footing and next to him, Crimson's wings twitched, "Do as I say and come out of there right now. Move slowly."

Lilly did exactly what you're not supposed to do in these situations. She spun around, her horn lighting up.

Immediately levelled at her throat, a pair of deadly sharp flint tipped spears glinted in the shaft of sunlight.

---I---

Author's Notes:

If you've spotted any mistakes in the reading of this chapter, (be it grammar or spelling), please let me know. I expect there *will* be a few, as I kind of got a bit behind with writing it. Thanks!

🍎 Thank you to the Editor for lots of help: **Sweetolebob18**

42.3 A Crown of Pine Needles

Two spears. Two lethal flint weapons.

Lilly Bloom stared, too shocked at suddenly having her life threatened to move. Her glowing horn spluttered out.

At the other end of the spears, the two deer dressed in bark and leaves stared unblinking at the unicorn mare, expressions closed.

Gloom cleared his throat, "Why don't we all pause before anypony does something they'll regret?" He asked calmly.

Prey however could see the muscles in the thestral's wing bunched around the spear shaft pressed to his side.

Crimson stood stock still, but Prey knew how fast the pegasus could go from standing to explosive motion in the blink of an eye. Ancient and silent, the stone circle stood at their backs. The two deer were outside of Prey's perception range, he couldn't hear what they were thinking. He braced for everything to go to hell in a blood soaked mess.

It came as an immense surprise when the two deer, both stags, did as Gloom had suggested and lowered their flint spears. Prey felt rather than heard the breath of relief leave Gloom. Scenic and Lilly were both still frozen, wide eyed.

Prey had not seen a single deer since the Deeper Green and the Resistance, and now he openly stared. Both stags were tall, sleekly muscled, fur dappled a rich dark brown, and looked to be related. Their antlers were sharp and strung with knotted strips of birch bark.

The two deer put up their spears, exchanged glances, and nodded. Then, without any sort of explanation, an apology, a warning, or even a parting threat, they turned to leave just like that.

What?

'That's all? If they were just planning to leave, why'd they revel themselves at all? Why here? Why so hostile to Lilly Blossom?' Prey thought in surprise.

"Hey! Where do you think you're going?" Lilly exclaimed, "You just tried to kill me! You're not going anywhere! You're both under arrest!"

Crimson and Gloom, who had slowly been untensing, braced themselves again.

The deer turned in sync, their smooth, tawny coloured faces calm and expressionless. Their eyes were very dark, and deep.

"Private Lilly Bloom, I told you to calm down. That's an order." Gloom said through clenched fangs. Then to the deer before anything else could be said; "Please excuse her. You just startled us, is all."

"No, it is we who need to apologise, travellers," The older deer said in a velvety smooth voice, "It was us who engaged in hostilities first. Please know however, we had no intention to slay anyone." He dipped his antlers to the ISND, the strips of birch bark swaying.

"I'm sure it was a misunderstanding. No harm was done in the end. It *was* a misunderstanding, right?" Gloom asked, smiling. It was a friendly smile, but clearly showed his sharp fangs.

"As you say." The stags nodded their assent, keeping one eye on the fuming unicorn who'd gone red and looked fit to explode. Prey's stomach clenched when he spotted the stray blue sparks leaking from the end of Lilly's horn.

The two sides faced each other. Prey's hoof inched towards the strap across his shoulder where one of his three daggers were hidden. Silence descended again on the small clearing, the standing stones bearing witness to whatever was going to happen next.

It was the younger looking deer who broke the silence:

"Excuse us. There is little need to linger. We will bid you farewell travellers, and take our leave. Our apologies again. This

misunderstanding has soured what might have otherwise been a chance meeting. Farewell."

The two stags bowed politely and once again turned to leave, their spears slotted away into loops of woven vine rope across their backs. The assortment of bark and leaves they wore acted as a very effective camouflage.

Lilly's mouth opened to shout, Gloom stepping forwards at the same moment, but it was unexpectedly Prey who beat them all to it.

"<All Mother smile on our meeting. I entreat you, please stay a little.>" Prey called in Fourlon, stepping forward and bowing his head just like the two stags had done. His accent was broken, and his pronunciation of the deer language imperfect, but his words were clearly understandable.

Gloom's eyebrows shot up, and both the deer spun round in surprise at hearing the lamb speaking the foreign language. The older looking deer, the one with ten tines on his antlers to his companion's eight, answered back in the same flowing language, although far more gracefully than Prey:

"<All Mother smiles upon our meeting,>" He said, returning the traditional greeting, "<It is a strange and rare pleasure to find a traveller who knows the language of the trees. How came you by it?>"

"<A thousand apologies. My understanding of your language is but basic. I must confess to only knowing a little.>" Prey said, still holding the bow, ignoring Gloom's hissed demands to know what was going on.

"<It is more than basic, traveller. You speak it exceptionally well for one not born in the trees. Might we know why you have stayed our hooves ere we depart?>" The stag asked, curious.

Prey straightened up, "<My name is->" He paused, having to switch back to plain Equestrian; "-Prey. <Forgive me, I do not know my own name in your beautiful language.>" He flattered them.

"<Your name? It would be, 'The Hunted One'. Or perhaps merely 'Hunted'? Or, 'One Who Is Not Hunter'?>" The second stag mused on the translation for Prey's name, "<How came you by such an unfortunate name?>"

"Prey, what are you telling them?" Gloom hissed. Prey ignored him, trying to wave the Sargent to be quiet.

"<It is simply my name,>" Prey shrugged, "<Might I ask you and your fellow traveller's for yours?>"

The older deer with ten tines bowed again, "<Of course. I am Runner On Swift Leaves. Or in the common tongue, simply> Fallen Leaf."

"<I am named Morning Dew Burning In The Sun. But you may call me> Happy." The eight tine stag joined in. His off theme name was a bit jarring, but Prey knew deer simply picked names they liked the meaning or sound of for speaking in Equestrian.

"I greet you, Fallen Leaf, Happy." Prey said in Equestrian for the others benefit, bowing again. The deer culture required alot of bowing, "<Thank you for not slaying my, ah, fellow traveller earlier. That would have been most unfortunate. And messy.>"

"<That it would've been,>" Fallen Leaf smiled back at the joke, "<Our most sincere apologies once again. We mistook your fanged one's mage for something else.>" He said, smile fading as an uneasy look stole over both him and Happy.

"<Fanged one?>" Prey asked, tilting his head as if he did not understand.

"<I meant your leader. The one with wings of skin. Forgive us, we have not seen a traveller such as him before.>" Fallen Leaf said with another small bow.

And there was the opening Prey had been angling for.

"You mean Gloom?" He asked, in Equestrian again. He half turned, waving between Gloom and the two stags, "Here, let me introduce you. Gloom, this is Fallen Leaf and Happy. Happy and Fallen Leaf,

this is Gloom. He is the leader of our little group. He's here to search for the missing villagers."

Gloom caught on quickly, copying what he'd seen Prey do and bowing, "It is nice to meet you Fallen Leaf, Happy."

Politeness dictated that the two deer returned the greeting, "Greetings to you too, fellow traveller Gloom."

"I have not met any deer before, so I'm sorry if we were trespassing on your territory. It was not intentional, I assure you. We're only searching for clues." Gloom said.

"Our territory?" Fallen Leaf sounded mildly insulted. He waved to the stone circle which Lilly Bloom had now vacated. Unexpectedly wise of her.

"Land does not belong to those who merely travel it. And this place is sacred and free to all."

Gloom didn't let himself get side tracked by wondering what that meant and gestured Scenic, who was trying to ask a question, to be quiet.

"Good, I am glad to hear we are not trespassing. We're searching for the villagers of Mayflower. Fifteen of them went missing some three months ago, vanishing without a trace. Then the rest disappeared last week. We're Guards from Canterlot, sent out here to rescue them. Perhaps you could help."

"A worthy quest, travellers. I and my brother wish you success in your journey, truly we do. But..." Fallen Leaf hesitated, "There is nothing we can do to help you. I am sorry."

"Surely you'd be willing to at least try to help save them?" Gloom said.

"No, my brother said we *can*not. Not that we *will* not." Happy interjected, "We know of the disappearances from three months ago, but that is all we know. We were not long migrated here ourselves. And now you tell us the rest of their village has also been taken? That is dark news indeed, but there is nothing we can do. Please

believe us, we would tell you anything if we but knew."

Prey quickly rejoined the conversation, sensing Gloom was losing the deer. The two stags seemed more amiable towards him, since he was the one who spoke their language.

"You're good people, so of course we understand that you'd help if you could. But please, there must be something further? Something you at least suspect? Why else did you mistakenly level your spears at Lilly Bloom if you didn't think she was someone or something else?"

Again the two stags exchanged an unreadable look, but what they didn't say with their faces they said in their heads, and Prey heard:

'-<this little one speaks the truth>-'

'-<we may not know, but we have received enough dark hints>-'

They thought in Fourlon, their native tongue. It was common and how most people did, at least with their surface thoughts. Not all, but most. If Prey hadn't known Fourlon, he would've only been able to pick up the odd impression from listening in.

The two brothers shared a silent nod. The ISND all stood tensed, waiting for what would be said next. What did the deer know that they didn't?

Fallen Leaf spoke for the both of them, "We know not what happened to the villagers three months ago. But shortly after, an intruder entered this grove. The garlands of mourning were left by them." He pointed a hoof at the wreathes.

"Who? Did you see them?" Gloom immediately asked.

"No, we saw them not."

Prey however had noticed something else from the stags words.

"An intruder, not a traveller?" Prey asked slowly, "The grove belongs to no one. But you still said they were still an intruder. Meaning, they're not welcome because they did something to offend

the forest, didn't they?"

'-trees? You can't offend trees-', Scenic thought in bewilderment at the back of the group.

Morning Dew Burning in the Sun, or Happy, nodded in answer to Prey's question, "You are right, young traveller. You know of the cycle of nature."

His brother sniffed and nodded at the circle, "An unwelcome influence came here. We felt their lingering foul magic after they left. Whether they are still a person or something lesser now, we can but guess. However, we fear it is the second."

Lilly Bloom couldn't keep her mouth shut any longer. She was taking the spears pointed at her thing very personally, "Feel magic? Now we know you're lying, deer can't feel magic."

"Quiet Lilly. Keep a civil tongue in your head." Gloom snapped.

"We apologised for mistaking you, and we apologise again. However your words are incorrect, traveller Lilly Bloom," Fallen Leaf said, lifting his horns higher, "I do not have to be able to weave magic like you to still be able to feel magic. And I know foul magic when I feel it in my antlers."

"If it's bad magic..." Gloom started, "Then it's probably related to the villagers disappearing three months ago. And now it might have repeated itself. That's what your afraid of, isn't it?"

"It was unnatural. Something not meant to be in the forest." Fallen Leaf stated, not confirming or denying the bit about being afraid.

"We can help. We need to find the missing villagers, and you say there was some dark magic or something that made them disappear. Where can we find the source of this magic?" Gloom asked. This mysterious magic the deer were talking about may not have been what they were after, but it was the only lead they had.

'-if we can just get them to show us where, we can start searching-'

"Were we not clear earlier?" Happy blinked, "We did not know who

the intruder was back then, and we do not know now either, nor do we have any idea about where."

Prey quickly interceded again. He could feel the others growing tense and frustrated, but that was how the deer were. Unless they trusted you, they were vague and often only answered the letter of the question you specifically asked, not the spirit.

Prey humbly bowed again, "<Morning Dew Burning in the Sun, Runner On Swift Leaves, please, can you not help us? Please. We are fellow travellers, trying to do good. I understand you do not know what happened three months ago, nor what happened last week, nor would we dream of accusing you.>"

Prey half turned to indicate the stone circle, "<You said you haven't sensed this foul magic tainting the forest again, but there is something else foul about, isn't there? You came here to check if this intruder had returned to the grove, because there is also something else amiss in the forest, isn't there? Can you not tell us? Please?>"

Prey knew he was right, he didn't have to see the stags exchanging loaded looks to know that. They had come here cautious and armed. And deep down, afraid too. Prey saw it in their dark eyes. Something stranger than normal was going on in the forest, and it had them worried.

"<Little Hunted One, you do not need to beg us to help for a worthy cause.>" Fallen Leaf said, seeming both slightly embarrassed and uncertain in turns, "<It is not about that. But it is... Unknown, dangerous, unsafe. You should leave while you still can.>"

Well, *that* certainly didn't help Prey's constant paranoia in the slightest.

Gloom was trying to pick up some clue about what was being said, his eyes and ears shifting back and forth between Prey and the deer. Prey made a motion to 'Wait' with his hoof, hiding the gesture as merely shifting the strap of his back pack, and spoke to the deer again;

"<I wish we could heed your kind warning, but we cannot. We are bound in service to the alicorn Lady Night Walker. We are not allowed to travel home until we are successful.>"

"<So it is true then. The Sun Queen's sister has returned. When the Mare in the Moon vanished, we wondered.>" Happy said. There was no indication if this was good or bad news to them. If they were smart, they would know it was bad.

"<Yes, she has returned.>" Prey confirmed.

"<And you say she has bound you and your fellow travellers to this task?>" Fallen Leaf asked, making a sympathetic face.

"<Please, if you can't tell us what you know, might you show us instead?"

"<It is not quite as simple as that. We are...>" Fallen Leaf looked to his brother, who gave an uneasy shrug. "<Please, excuse us for a moment's time.>"

"What's happening Prey? What did you say to them?" Gloom whispered as Happy and Fallen Leaf moved to the edge of the clearing and began to converse in hushed tones, gesturing with their antlers at the forest.

"What does it look like? I'm trying to convince them to show us what they know." Prey whispered back.

"How do we know we can trust them?"

"We don't. But as I said before, we needed a guide, and here two guides are."

"Have they agreed to guide us?" Gloom asked, looking about him at their little group.

"They're discussing it. They're not sure yet." Prey answered.

"Okay, so what do they want as payment?" Gloom asked.

"Keep it down, and it's nothing like that. I just explained the

situation, that's all."

Lilly snorted, "You could've been saying anything in their funny language." She mumbled.

Gloom overheard her comment and sent her a look, but he too was wondering about that. "How *do* you know their language Prey?"

"I can't speak it the best, but the how and why isn't important right now. The deer know something important, but deep down they're afraid to tell us." Prey answered.

'-ha! I knew they were just cowards-', Lilly thought.

Crimson's head half turned to Prey, his eyes still watching the talking stags, "What is it they are afraid of?" He asked quietly.

"I don't know. That's what I'm hoping they'll tell us. Just don't mention Luna when they come back." Prey instructed.

"What?" Both Gloom and Crimson asked.

"Just trust me, don't talk about Princess Luna." Prey pleaded.

"Fine." Gloom conceded, "You hear that Lilly, Scenic? Don't mention the princess."

"What is their problem with Her Majesty?" Crimson asked.

"I don't know," Prey lied, "But if they bring her up, try and change the topic." Gloom would not be happy that he'd told the truth about them essentially being slaves, since that's not how the others saw it.

"Sir, quick, they're coming back sir." Lilly hissed and quickly stood at attention, glaring in what she probably believed was an intimidating manner as the two deer returned. They were far more blasé about a unicorn being angry at them than Prey could've been. They just seemed to accept the mare's hostility as their due for pulling spears on her.

"<Little Hunted one, we have agreed. We will offer you shelter and rest. And we will help you before we leave this forest. Come, we

will take you back to our holt.>" Fallen Leaf told Prey.

"<On behalf of all of us, we accept your hospitality.>" Prey said, bowing again.

Gloom however, had had enough of being left in the dark. "I don't mean to be rude, but might I ask if you're going to help us?" He asked, trying to smile politely.

Happy inclined his antlers, "You are correct. We have offered you our hospitality and Prey here has accepted on your behalf."

"That's very... kind of you." Gloom said.

"<We will show you to the place on the morrow.> Come, tonight you will stay at our holt." Fallen Leaf said, beckoning and switching back to Equestrian.

"Wait wait, time out a minute. What do you mean, stay the night at your holt?"

The deer paused, head tilted, "The holt is where our family lives. It is one of the few places that are safe at night. You will be safe there."

Stay the night? They hadn't said anything about that.

'Spend the night with strangers?' Prey thought. There were five of them, one of them a unicorn and the other Crimson, and deer were supposed to never betray a guest they'd offered shelter to, but still...

Gloom obviously felt the same caution, "That's really not necessary. Just showing us to whatever it is you've found will be more than enough, I assure you."

Fallen Leaf shook his head, "We will not reach the place before night fall. Usually the night is no opposition, but now... We will not risk it."

Gloom looked around at his squad. They all had their packs with them, but the plan had never been to spend the night in the forest. The very idea made an unpleasant thrill go through the Sargent's

stomach and he was not the only one.

"Is it really that far?" Gloom asked. '-one would think it would be closer to Mayflower. Are they leading us on?-'

"No, it is not far." Happy answered. There was a pause, but no further reason was offered.

"Not that I'm ungrateful for your help, but then why wait until tomorrow?" Gloom asked, confused.

"We cannot go directly there. We must go around. Our holt is on the way. We will spend the night and you will be safe there." Fallen Leaf repeated.

Gloom flexed his wings, gesturing between himself and Crimson, "Is there no way we could fly over?"

"I suppose you could, traveller. But the rest of us cannot." Fallen Leaf replied.

Gloom sighed, starting to become familiar with the deer's way of only answering the exact question asked, "Okay, is there no way that we can all get to wherever it is today?" He tried instead.

Happy and Fallen Leaf both shrugged, "Not unless you are willing to brave crossing a baloth's territory."

"Sir, I don't like this sir. I don't trust them." Lilly muttered out of the corner of her mouth.

"Then don't, but you will still be polite. They're our guides." Gloom replied curtly, before increasing his stride and pulling ahead.

Fallen Leaf and Happy were leading the way through the trees. They moved quickly and quietly, eyes never ceasing to roam the shadows, often stopping to sniff and listen. In short, they reminded Prey almost exactly of the deer from the Resistance. The deer had always made the Resistance's best scouts. Griffins came in a very close second, but were also far better fighters over all on account of

them being able to fly, and naturally being armed with talons, claws, and a sharp beak.

Prey knew Gloom had decided to follow these two stags first, because the ISND was out of leads, and second, because his cutie mark hadn't said not too. Or hadn't yet anyways. That they outnumbered the deer two-to-one, (not counting Prey), probably didn't hurt the Sargent's confidence either.

Prey himself stuck close behind the two stags, knowing they could lead him on safe paths, while also being close enough to listen in on their thoughts and learn a bit more about this forest.

'-<dip coming up. Stream water still hasn't returned. Going to be a dry winter>-'

Happy checked the base of a tree, '-<kapadapa beetle colony on that side, so still going west then. Good.>-'

Fallen Leaf paused to sniff the air, '-<flower scent, pollen is sweet. Might mean Snooze Blossom close by>-'

"Step this way travellers. Careful. Ground soft." Happy instructed, bounding over an old fallen trunk with ease.

Being a runt, Prey had to climb over the mossy obstruction instead of jumping it like everyone else. He brushed his wool off on the other side and they got moving again.

"<Why do you stare so, Little Hunted One?>"

Prey glanced up to find Happy there. Prey politely dipped his head, as per deer culture protocol, "<I beg your pardon. I merely was thinking of the other deer I have met before.>"

"<I must confess, me and my brother are both most curious about where you learnt to speak our language so well. Which traveller did you learn fourlon from?>" Happy asked. Like he'd said, he looked most curious. In fact, he looked eager behind his calm mask. It was a good mask, but nothing compared to Prey's.

'So this holt is a small group without much outside contact then.'

Prey thought.

"<Is it safe to be speaking and making noise?>" Prey inquired, glancing about them.

"<Here it is fine, there is nothing near by. But please, tell me, where did you learn to speak so well?>"

"<You flatter me. I am not as fluent as I would like.>"

"<For one so young and not born to our language, it is most impressive.>" Happy assured him.

Prey faked a pleased smile, "<Why thank you. There were a number of deer travellers who frequented my home village. They brought two fawns who I became fast friends with, and I succeeded in picking your language up.>" He lied.

Happy made a sound of surprise, "<I did not think it common for deer to travel across the mountains into pony lands.>"

Prey shook his head. He could feel the others eyes on his back burning a hole in his wool, wondering what was being said. "<My village is not in pony lands. It is here, on this side of the... Teeth of the Mountain, I believe you call it?>"

"<Ah, your reasoning makes much more sense now. Pray tell, whence lies your village that you were frequented by travelling deer?>" Happy asked. "Oh, and it's this way. Please follow." He said back to the other four.

"<My village is not close. It is further on, beyond the...forgive me, I do not know the name. Beyond the big forest.>" Prey said. He'd almost said 'Deeper Green', but he was not supposed to know that name.

"<A big forest,>" Happy frowned, "<I heard that deer did not go near there anymore. That all the holts from there died or fled half a century ago.>"

"<Oh really?>" Prey said carefully, "<I don't suppose you happen to know why?>"

His guts squirmed uncomfortably. Guilt.

"<Not really,>" Happy said with a shrug, a surprisingly flippant answer for a deer, "<Just that it is ill fortune to go there, and unsafe.>"

'Do the deer not remember the war? Surely they cannot have forgotten so soon, yet why does Happy not know of it?' Prey thought. He knew Happy wasn't hiding anything either, the stag's thoughts ran true to everything he'd told Prey. True the deer were a nomadic people, but how could they have forgotten the war and all those who had died?

"<I had thought you came from pony lands. Tell me, Little Hunted One, your travelling companions, they come from the pony lands do they not?>" Happy asked.

It took Prey a moment to answer, "<Ah, my apologies, no. Only two of them do, Lilly Bloom and Scenic Paint grew up there in Canterlot. The rest of us are from beyond the borders.>"

"<The holt you travel in is a varied and mixed group certainly,>" Happy said, sounding approving, "<Forgive me, but do you suppose the two of them would be amendable to speaking about their pony lands later? I am most curious to hear.>"

'To hear what? Of privilege, wealth and racial ignorance?' Prey thought.

"<I do not know. Why don't you ask them yourself and find out?>"

Happy tilted his head, the birch strips swaying, "<Why of course. That is a very sensible idea. Forgive me, you are so well spoken and eloquent that I forgot for a moment that I was speaking with a child.>"

"<Don't fret over it,>" Prey said, smiling brightly back, "<Sometimes I forget it myself.>"

Happy dipped his antlers to Prey again and then turned and trotted straight over to Scenic and Lilly, who watched him coming with apprehension.

"Greetings." Happy announced.

"Hi." Scenic returned warily.

"You were talking a long time with Prey. What were you saying? And what about the noise you made attracting monsters?" Lilly immediately demanded.

"There are no dangerous creatures near here. We may talk quietly for now if you wish." Happy answered.

"What were you saying to Prey? And what if I don't 'wish'?" Lilly pressed.

"Then I will not disturb you and take my leave. My apologies, I can understand why you would not wish to speak with me." Happy said, antlers bobbing as he dipped his head.

"Stop ignoring my question. What were you talking to Prey about?" Lilly snapped, tail swishing.

"My apologies, you kept asking two questions so I of course answered the latter inquiry. Equestrian is not my first language." Happy explained politely.

"Well *obviously*. I knew that from the way you kept jabbering away at Prey," Lilly snorted, "Now for the last time, what were you saying to Prey?"

"We were discussing his skilful grasp of our language, and I was asking about pony lands. He graciously suggested that I speak with you two instead, seeing as it is your home land."

"Pony lands?" Scenic asked.

"Yes, the lands where you travelled from. Beyond the Teeth of the Mountain." Happy explained.

"Oh you mean Canterlot," Lilly said. Then suspiciously; "Why're you asking?"

"I wish to learn more." Happy said simply.

Lilly narrowed her eyes at the stag, "So now you want to ask questions after almost spearing me?"

Happy had the decency to look contrite, "I can only apologies for the misunderstanding once again. Forgive me, I will not bother you further." He said with another bow and backing off.

"Hey wait, I'm, uh, up to answering a few questions," Scenic said, raising a hoof, "You want to know about our capital Canterlot, right?"

"I...Forgive me, what is word, 'capital'?"

"It means the most important city in the country. Paint Spot means Canterlot of course." Lilly said, rolling her eyes and mentally adding; '-what a doofus-'

"Canterlot is where your Sun Queen reigns from, if am I not mistaken?" Happy asked, all politeness.

"Yeah, you mean Princess Celestia." Scenic nodded.

"She's actually a Princess, not the Queen, and there's also Princess Luna now too." Lilly added.

"My apologies, I misspoke. 'Princess' Celestia and 'Princess' Luna. Please, tell me more."

Prey watched out of the corner of his eye as Happy succeeded in drawing Scenic and Lilly into conversation, despite the mare's previous decision not to trust the stag Happy in anything. Happy. Now there was a stupid, contrite name. Almost as stupid as the name Prey.

Prey saw how Fallen Leaf was keeping half an eye on his younger brother, while still leading them confidently through the forest. Evidently, he knew this particular path well.

Crimson silently came up to walk along side Prey, "Is what Happy said he was talking to you about the truth?" He asked in an undertone.

Prey jumped over a thorny vine straggling across their path, "Yes, more or less. He was asking about where I learnt to speak Fourlon."

"And did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Did you tell him the truth?" Crimson asked, looking sideways at Prey.

Prey hesitated. Was that reproach in Crimson's yellow eyes? Why? Because he hadn't told Crimson about being able to speak Fourlon either?

Did Crimson want to hear the answer yes or no? The pegasus hated lies, but would he prefer to hear that?

"I...Not really. But I didn't lie," Prey said, hastening to add, "I just told Happy the basics of what happened."

Prey was certain Crimson was about to ask what those 'basics' where.

But he didn't.

"Hmm." Was all Crimson said.

He didn't push or ask. He simply accepted it was a secret and let Prey keep it. Prey didn't know how to respond to that. He would've wanted to know if he were Crimson.

More evidence that he really didn't know Crimson as well as he wanted to.

Their procession shuffled under some low hanging branches, having to walk with their heads ducked for a stretch, scratchy pine needles dragging over their helmets and back packs. Prey himself walked straight under unaffected, and somehow the stags avoided getting their antlers tangled.

Emerging, Fallen Leaf gestured them to the side, "The forest has grown a patch of Hozias Merriment ahead. It is best we do not

disturb it. This way."

"What's Hozias Merriment supposed to be when it's at home?" Lilly asked Happy.

"They are a tall pale blue flower, and it is at home wherever the All Mother see's fit to plant it." Happy replied.

"What? That's not-What does it do?"

"Do?" Happy echoed, puzzled, "It is a flower."

"She means, why must we avoid Hozias Merriment?" Scenic said, already starting to get used to; '-these guys weird way of answering questions-'

This nuance wasn't restricted to only these two deer, Prey knew, but Scenic wasn't to know that.

"The flowers are most beautiful, but their colouring is fair warning to avoid lest you, forgive me, excrete blood and expire from severe dehydration." Happy answered with a distasteful grimace.

"Ah." Lilly said.

"Oh." Scenic echoed.

Reminded of where they were once again, Lilly and Scenic looked around at the shadowy trees again. For a minute there, Happy had succeeded in distracting them. Following a guide had unwisely led them to stop paying attention for themselves, and put their faith in the two deer instead. Fools.

Prey had been paying attention for himself, thank-you-very-much. Sure, Happy and Fallen Leaf had no plans to betray them, but that didn't mean the two deer, (no matter how experienced), couldn't make mistakes.

"Apologies travellers, we will be entering a path amid the All Mothers trees where we must remain silent. Please, if you have anything to say, make it known now." Fallen Leaf said, briefly halting.

"I have a question," Gloom said, "How large is this baloth's territory. We've been going around it for a while now. Shouldn't we have come to the end of it by now?"

Gloom's question could've been taken as; 'Are you trying to lead us on a merry chase?' The deer either didn't get the implication, or chose to be polite.

"Its territory is large. It is two full days trot from East to West, or North to South, for a baloth must hold large swathes of trees if it wishes to feed its hunger."

"Sounds quite formidable. What type of monster actually is a baloth?" Gloom asked.

Prey went to answer, but Fallen Leaf beat him to it, "It is very large, savage and swift. It can hunt both day and night without any opposition to fear. It is king of the forest."

But in his thoughts the stag worried, '-<but perhaps now there is a contender>-'

"What does it look like?" Crimson asked.

"You will know it if you see it, and I pray to the All Mother that it is not hunting if such an unfortunate circumstance ever falls upon you." Fallen Leaf said.

"But fear not, a baloth rarely will leave its established territory. And you will hear it before you ever see it." Happy added on. That was probably supposed to be reassuring. It wasn't.

"So we'll hear it before we see it?" Gloom asked slowly.

"Oh yes," Happy nodded, "In fact it must be on the Northern end of it's territory, or we would all be feeling its hunting call by now."

Gloom raised an eyebrow in question. Lilly and Scenic were waiting with baited breath. "Feeling its call?"

"They meant what they said," Prey spoke up, "You'd feel it. It's a deep rumble which makes the very air in the bottom of your lungs

vibrate. It echoes for miles, and there's no way to tell which direction it's coming from."

Prey got a hoofful of surprised looks, "You know of this monster?" Gloom asked.

"<You have encountered the forest king before?>" Happy said in surprise.

Prey hesitated, "I've heard one's hunting call before. Or felt rather, once. But that was all. When I asked, they told me it was a baloth."

Fallen Leaf nodded, "The description offered by your travelling companion is most apt. It's call is more felt than heard."

Happy nodded too, "But the whole forest hears its battle howl when it attacks."

"Come," Fallen Leaf beckoned, "Let us lead the way. Once we have passed, we will almost be back to our holt where we may make good on our offer of shelter and rest."

The already low light of the forest further faded as evening approached, and seeing distance between the dark trunks fell. Visibility felt like it was slowly starting to blur, and then Prey realised it really was starting to blur.

Around them, grey fog was slowly rising. It was very gradual and unhurried, but it was definitely thickening. Their guides however weren't reacting, so Prey took it to be normal.

Knowing that did not help make the silence any less oppressive. Crimson's wings shifted on his back as he eyed the edges of the fog.

"We are almost back to our holt." Fallen Leaf whispered as they came to a section of broken ground which signalled the start of a slow rise in elevation.

Prey had been very carefully memorising their route, and now he added this change in terrain to his mental map as the two stags lead

the way up. He also noted how the deer had placed their own markers and signs, even if the others missed them.

The leaves on an old sycamore woven together and facing back in on themselves, pointing the way. A sliver of birch bark tied around a low pine branch. The empty pockmarked hollow between tree roots where mushrooms had been plucked. It was all evidence pointing to where the deer were camped. They weren't trying to hide. Prey did not understand that mentality.

"We have arrived." Fallen Leaf said, a tension which they hadn't realised the stag was carrying dissolving off his withers.

"We welcome you to our holt." Happy said, turning and bowing to them all.

At the back of their little possession, Scenic made a sound which was half way between awed and impressed.

'-this is not what I expected-', was the general mental consensus heard going around the group, excluding Crimson of course.

When the two deer had spoken of their holt and offered shelter for the night, they'd automatically associated the word 'holt' with the word 'camp'. And in some ways, it was a camp, although only in the same way an artistic marble sculpture is a lump of rock.

First of all, the holt wasn't just an open camp. No, it had walls. Walls made from living wood and plant life.

Thorn vines, tree branches, creepers, and saplings had all been woven and crafted around thick posts, running between tree trunks. The top of the wall rose high above Fallen Leaf's head, antlers included. Nor was it flimsy. For all it being made from plants and branches, it was thick, dense, and vibrantly alive. It looked like it could take a hit from a chimera and spring back unscathed.

'-it's like a living canvas-', Prey heard Scenic thinking.

There was an arched gateway, of a sort, formed by woven branches meeting above them, all flowing lines and interwoven branches. Some kind of pink and yellow flowering vine was draped across the

arch.

Under this arch was the gate. What the gate actually consisted of was an enormous roll of thorns, that could be dragged back from the entrance on braided vine ropes. Even this viciously spiked thorn bundle somehow managed to look natural and artistic.

The second thing you'd noticed after the living wall were the structures inside the holt compound. Tall huts made of supple woven branches, with comfy moss lining the walls to keep heat in. Comically, these huts looked like they had antlers of their own to match their occupants, because at the crest of each of the six huts, budding branches sprouted, and small flowering plants had somehow been supplanted onto the roofs.

The third thing you'd notice was that there were more huts than Fallen Leaf and Happy could need. There was a very simple reason for that. There were more deer than just the two of them. Five pairs of the soft dark eyes known to the deer curiously emerged to greet their visitors.

Fallen Leaf raised his voice in the deer tongue as he entered, "<Me and my brother return with weary travellers. I have offered them the shelter of our holt for the passing of the night. Come, welcome them.>"

"What did he say?" Gloom murmured to Prey. The ISND had stopped just outside of the archway, not knowing if they should enter yet or not.

Happy answered before Prey could, "My brother bids you welcome. Please, do come in and feel welcome." He said, standing aside and bowing.

The ISND exchanged glances, then Gloom squared his shoulder and with a smile on his face, stepped in. The rest of them followed, Prey the most hesitantly.

The deer crowded round them, but politely refrained from encroaching into their personal space. Prey counted one fawn, three does, and one other young stag in addition to Fallen Leaf and

Happy, bringing it up to an even number with the does.

"<Who are these travellers? And whence do they come?>" A doe asked.

"<A pony with wings of a bat, see Malatrida Questing Branches? How interesting.>" Another said, tilting her head curiously at Gloom.

"<Come Morning Dew Burning Off, introduce us to these good travellers.>"

"<Yes, introduce us.>"

Happy smiled and bowed first to the deer, then to the ISND, "Travellers, might I please introduce you to my holt?" he asked.

Gloom blinked, "Well of course you can."

"Thank you. <These travellers are known, in Equestrian, as follows.>"

Happy went around their group, naming them first in the deer tongue, and then doing it all again in Equestrian for the ISND's benefit. Following that, he did the reverse and introduced all the deer in both languages. Each of the deer bowed as they were named and smiled. They took meeting a thestral far better than the average pony would've.

The ISND all tried to be polite and memorise the deer's names, although it was probably only Prey who managed it. The deer were delighted when Fallen Leaf explained how Prey spoke Fourlon, and immediately congregated on the lamb.

Prey backed up, almost to the wall as all of the deer began introducing themselves all over again in their own language and asking him questions, complimenting his grasp of their native tongue.

Prey tried to offer answers, (or rather lies), to their questions, but back in the safety of their holt, even the more reserved Fallen Leaf became obsessively curious over their visitors and peppered Prey

with questions.

Prey managed to hold out for only two minutes before he had to get away, "<Please excuse me, my group leader needs me.>" He said rather rudely, and made a break for Gloom and took refuge behind the thestral.

Gloom was standing with Crimson, carefully keeping an eye on everything about them. Not suspiciously, just... '-being cautious never hurt nopony-'

Like watching the third stag, who was laying the fire in a star formation in the middle of the fire pit. Or the doe, who was sorting mushrooms from a woven grass pan, casually flicking them into a 'good' or 'bad' pile with barely a glance, even while she asked Lilly in halting Equestrian, "Tell me, please, traveller, you are unicorn pony. I graciously ask, how is magic like?"

Over by Scenic, the Earth pony did not appear to be showing any restraint or caution at all, instead matching the deer's inquisitive eagerness with his own, questioning how they'd made their holt, survived in this forest, if they painted at all, and most importantly, if they knew where the villagers had gone?

'-there's something dangerous out there that they're not telling us about. Maybe I can pull my weight and find out if I ask enough questions-'

Seems Scenic wasn't as distracted as he acted. Clever. More clever than Prey had honestly expected from the stallion. Prey hid a frown. Something to keep an eye on.

The lone fawn was jabbering away at Lilly Bloom in Fourlon, and she couldn't understand a word of it, which she was futilely trying to convey to the fawn via the age old practice when trying to communicate with foreigners by speaking extra loud.

The sun light was still fading from between the leaves. The lower the light got, the more a soft source of illumination within the huts became visible. Peering through the hanging screen of dried vines, Prey saw small orange pod like flowers planted in bowls of clay.

'Discord Lanterns.' Prey thought. The orange of the paper like pod glowed softly with an internal light, about the brightness of a fire fly.

It wasn't enough to read by, but at least you could go to the toilet in the middle of the night without tripping.

Over by the fire pit, the third stag unwrapped a broken off chunk of fungi, and inside a smouldering ember could be found. Using a flint knife, he shaved off pieces of smoking fungi and kindled the fire.

Prey silently looked around at it all and saw the deer's lives. The feeling of not belonging from the stone circle came back even stronger. The holt was its own little self contained world. Everything they needed was right here. Why then, Prey wondered, had any deer left their own holts and joined the Resistance?

Fallen Leaf trotted up to the three of them, who were standing apart.

"Please, come travellers. Set down your packs and lay aside your weapons. Come, join us. You are guests." He encouraged them, trying to draw them towards the center.

'-Crimson set aside his father's wing blades? Good luck with that-', Gloom thought, stifling a snort.

"Thank you very much for the offer. And as much as I appreciate your help so far, we came for answers. We have ponies who are counting on us."

Prey was watching the deer, so he saw the unease that went through them despite their graciousness. The way their ears flicked, how they glanced at their walls, how one doe checked that the strips of bark were still tied to her slim antlers.

Fallen Leaf bowed, "My apologies. Please do not assume we care not for their fates. But please, eat with us first. Let us talk afterwards."

Prey's ear gave a tiny flick, which Crimson caught. The armoured pegasus lowered himself slightly to catch what Prey muttered, "They're getting ready to leave the forest and go."

Crimson's eyes widened ever so slightly in concern. He looked, and saw the packed woven leaf panniers, the low wood pile, and the cooling berry cakes set aside to eat on the move.

Crimson stared at Fallen Leaf, "You are planning on leaving, aren't you?" He blurted. Prey sighed.

Gloom's tufted ears swivelled towards Crimson in surprise, "What, leaving?" He looked to Fallen Leaf, "Is that true? You're leaving?"

A look of tiredness passed across Fallen Leaf's soft features, "Come, let us eat first. Then we will talk." He repeated.

'-we're already committed to stay the night, so we might as well show some patience-', Gloom decided after considering. It was obvious that pushing wouldn't net them any answers, and it would be rude to their hosts to try.

"Alright. I guess it can wait until afterwards." Gloom said, letting his saddle bags slide off and removing his helmet. The rest of his armour stayed on for now though. The others followed suit, gratefully taking the opportunity to remove their packs and stretch after the day they'd had.

The deer moved to sit around the fire, and the door of thorns was dragged back into place, sealing the entrance. Prey stiffened up at their exit being cut off, before forcing himself to relax. He'd read these deer's thoughts. None of them currently meant the ISND any harm. Although he was much more concerned with himself in particular. And Crimson.

'Besides,' Prey reminded himself, 'It's safer to spend the night in here than out there.'

Dangers still lurked outside the holt walls, but inside, here and now, they were safe.

Prey sat himself down far away from everyone else, yet with Crimson still being the closet. The deer had already realised the pegasus made a poor conversationalist, so instead were all still pestering Scenic and Lilly. Politely of course, because everything

the deer did was polite.

One of the does started hoofing out woven grass plates, on which were generous servings of wild salad. Various berries and seeds, leaf buds, flowers, and a healthy mix of mushrooms, one of the staples of this forest it seemed.

"<Here you are Little Hunted One. The forest provides.>" The almost velvet black doe said with a smile as she gave Prey his portion. Prey accepted, bowed, and smiled sweetly back.

Gloom and Crimson accepted their plates as well. "Here you are travellers. The forest provides."

Crimson blinked at his food, then shrugged, "I can see that. Thank you ma'am."

"Yes, thank you." Gloom echoed.

"Oh, uh, yeah, thanks?" Scenic joined in, eyeing his woven plate.

Lilly looked like she was smiling through a grimace, "Yum. This looks wonderful."

All of the deer sat with their grass plates set in front of them, patiently looking to the ISND in the fire light, waiting.

Gloom realised the holt was waiting for them, as the guests, to take the first bite. For a moment, a horrible suspicion sounded in the back of Gloom's head, '-lots of mushrooms. What if it's poisoned? No, that's silly-'

Prey raised one of the mushrooms from his plate, "<I thank the all mother for providing.>" He said, and bit it in half. He tasted the loamy smokey texture of the Gillfish cap.

Prey swallowed and gave Gloom and Crimson a smile, "It's good. You should eat."

They got the message: 'It's not poisonous.'

The rest of the ISND all followed suit with varying degrees of

enthusiasm.

"<We thank the All Mother for providing.>" The deer chorused, then all got on with eating. In dead silence. There was only the crackle of the fire and the sound chewing.

Gloom glanced about the silent holt uneasily, but the deer seemed unaffected by their strange silence. Prey spotted Scenic looking around in bemusement, and open his mouth to ask what was going on. Prey made a sharp jerk with his head and angrily pressed his hoof to his lips.

The other four got this message too, and held their silence. Uneasily, they slowly resumed eating.

The others didn't know, but it was customary in the deer culture to never speak during formal meals, unless it was a celebration or a funeral feast. Breaking bread with travellers to which shelter had been offered counted as a formal meal. No discussions were to be held until the last guest had finished eating.

However only Prey was aware of this strange deer custom, the others were ignorant.

Prey tried to convey through various looks and head motions to the other four to keep silent until the meal was over. Crimson and Gloom understood it first time, but Lilly and Scenic took increasingly obvious signals before they finally got the message.

The deer were somewhat amused by this, but also pleased to see that he was setting the precedence for his travelling companions.

'Hopefully, this will endear us all the more to them.' Prey thought.

The food wasn't particularly tasty, but it was sharp and fresh. Gloom made sure to scrape up his last leaf and chew, before putting his grass plate on the ground, not too close to the fire. He glanced at Prey to double check it was alright before speaking. Once Prey nodded, Gloom looked to Fallen Leaf, who seemed to be as in charge as it got around here, and cleared his throat.

"Thank you. Can I-"

Immediately, all the deer turned to one another, or to Lilly and Scenic, and began talking, resuming their conversations and picking up where they left off. Gloom was left hanging.

Lilly's ears flicked, '-rude much-'.

Gloom shrugged and addressed Fallen Leaf anyway, "You said we should speak after we ate. We have eaten, and thank you for the meal by the way, but now we really need to talk."

Fallen Leaf neatly placed his own plate on the ground and scooted closer to the fire before replying, "Yes traveller Gloom. That I did."

"You said you don't know what caused the villagers to vanish, and that you don't have anything to tell us, but have something to *show* us instead." Gloom prompted. The low conversation around the holt faded as many pairs of soft tawny ears swivelled in their direction.

Gloom looked towards the entrance with its gate of thorns, and beyond that the dark of the night, "Can you then at least tell us what it is you want to show us out there?"

"Apologies traveller, but it is not something seen. It is only felt. Its presence leaves a foul taste lingering in the air."

The fire cracked.

"What presence? A monsters?" Gloom asked.

Fallen Leaf shook his head, bark strips swaying in the flickering light, "We do not think so. All beasts are part of the All Mothers great design. Birds, beasts, trees, and flowers. All have a place in the cycle. Hunters must eat, but this... My apologies, we do not call it beast or monster. We don't know what to call it."

"You're saying you've never seen it, but you're also saying it's not a monster of the forest," Gloom questioned, "But you're also saying its *worse* than a monster."

Fallen Leaf used a stick to poke the fire, "A monster kills to eat, as is natural. Whatever this thing is, it does not eat its kills. It hunts even other monsters. Perhaps on the morrow we will come across one of

its hunts, and then you will know what we speak of."

All the focus was solidly on Gloom and Fallen Leaf now. Prey sat, for the moment forgotten. His face was expressionless as he listened to the stag's words. His attention was elsewhere, listening in on the surrounding minds for any further hints. He got none. Everything that Fallen Leaf was saying was the extent of what the deer knew. And feared.

Prey heard Fallen Leaf's description of a monster, and why the holt was so unnerved. Deer were big on the cycle of nature. Anything unnatural which didn't fit was to be feared. The deer were intelligent like that.

Prey thought on Fallen Leaf's description. He remembered the Deeper Green. Here in this pine forest, this monster stood out. In the Deeper Green, such a thing would've fitted right in.

'Is that what it is?' Prey worried, 'Has something from those evil depths migrated here?'

Someone snorted, "Is that why you're running away?"

Only Lilly Bloom would demand something so offensive, and all eyes turned to the unicorn.

"What? Just because it's a monster you've never met before, you're going to give up your home and run away? Sorry, but that's stupid. Where are you going to go? You've never even seen this monster thing, in fact it might not even exist. You should at least *try* to fight before giving up." Lilly slapped a hoof to her chest plate, "We're not going to give up or run away. *We're* going to fight. The villagers need our help."

Lilly's words were brash. There were only two reactions such an opinion could elicit. Anger, or shame.

This time, it was the latter. Around the holt, the deer would not meet any of the ISND's eyes, ears falling, looking instead their home which they would be leaving. Meanwhile Gloom was furious, but he dared not show it. His wing claws were twitching though, and

Prey's excellent hearing picked out his fangs faintly grinding together.

Fallen Leaf regarded Lilly Bloom, mild distaste showing through his polite mask, "My apologies traveller, but I do not think you understand what a holt is. We are not defined by where we live, but by each other. We do not own the land we live on, for we are all but travellers on the All Mothers soil. We do not live in any one place, and migrate often. This time is will be no different."

The stag nodded his antlers at the other deer, his family, one by one, "Perhaps we will return in a few winters time, perhaps not. Where the All Mother guides us we will go, but we will go and survive. Together."

"You travel around all the time? I thought you lived here." Lilly pointed out, accusation in her tone.

"That is not so." Fallen Leaf threw his stick into the fire and stood, rolling his neck, "Please, make use of our holt and rest well this night. Come the morning, I will guide you to the place. All Mother watch over your dreams."

He bowed, then abruptly left them in silence and walked into one of the huts.

Conversation was slow to restart with his departure, and when it did, it was a low murmur in Fourlon as deer started to get ready for sleep. The parents of the lone fawn began telling the child a bed time story, their voices smooth and lulling.

This wasn't Canterlot with candles, lamps, or enchanted light crystals. You rose and slept with the sun, making the most of the daylight hours. There was little point in staying awake otherwise.

The ISND sat and looked on, as around them the holt was broken for the night.

The grass plates were packed away, bowls turned over, flaxen blankets unrolled, and the fire banked with more logs for the coming night, the holt walls keeping the heat trapped inside.

A couple of deer however stayed, wishing to take this rare chance to talk with their unexpected guests further. Or rather, to continue asking Scenic all the questions they could think of. They avoided Lilly after the unicorn mare's offence.

Gloom picked up his helmet and put it back on, "I need to go speak with Lilly Bloom. I'll be back." He said darkly to Prey and Crimson and stalked off.

Prey leaned over to his pack, which had never gone further than his hoof, and pulled out his blanket. He draped it around him, but stopped when he realised Crimson hadn't moved from his spot by the fire, "Aren't you turning in? All the deer are."

"Not quite yet. I am waiting."

"Oh, well I'll wait with you." Prey said, shrugging off his blanket for the moment. The fire was warm enough for now.

Gloom had taken Lilly to stand by the gate entrance and was now giving her a stern talking to. The two deer whom were staying up to talk to Scenic seemed fascinated hearing about the other world the Earth pony came from.

"-Er, 'what's a job'? It's like, your profession. What you do for a living. Uh, do you know what I'm talking about?"

"You mean the gathering of food? You only do that all the day long?" The velvet black doe ask curiously.

"Uh, no. A profession is something important that you get paid for. Like, bits and money and stuff."

"Ah, you mean gold."

"Yes that's right, bits." Scenic agreed.

"And you are paid for performing your profession?"

"Yeah."

"Thus, your job as a painter must be of great importance in the land

of ponies, right traveller Paint Spot?"

"Uh..."

"You are doing well." Crimson said. Prey looked sideways up at the stallion.

Crimson had not replaced his helmet yet, and his lanky black mane was a ruffled mess, looking alot like wet ink in the fire light. "Doing well with what, exactly?" Prey asked.

"The forest. I mean, you have skills. Tracking, stealth. You were far more reliable than the other two." Crimson said, sparing a look towards Scenic and the still being chastised Lilly.

"Well, so do you and Gloom." Prey shrugged.

Crimson didn't say anything for a minute, considering something as the fire sparked infront of them. Then he asked, "Is there alot of cause for po-people in your village to know those skills?"

"To some extent, yes. You've got to know the dangers of the land you farm."

"No, I understand that. What I mean is, you obviously have the skills Prey, but those take years to develop. And you are still young. Do they make all the foals in your village start so early?" Crimson asked.

"Nnnno," Prey reluctantly admitted, "It was...more of a necessity, let's put it that way. I'm a quick learner though, so it didn't take me nearly as long as you probably think."

Crimson blinked slowly, "I see."

"How about you, how did you learn? Your father taught you, right?" Prey asked in return, then immediately thought, 'What a stupid question Prey. Like any *other* thestral in his clan would've given him the time of day.'

"Yes, woodcraft was taught to me by my father." Crimson nodded seriously.

Prey bit the inside of his cheek. He glanced at the fire, then at Crimson, then back to the fire and Crimson again. Why did every time he wanted to seriously speak with Crimson he'd clam up? Prey had a question he wanted answered, but he didn't want to offend Crimson. He could've asked Gloom no problem if he'd thought the Sargent would answer, but now he was nervous.

Prey hesitated, "What does..." He trailed off.

Crimson cocked an ear, then half turned to blink at Prey when the lamb didn't finish. "What does what?"

"What does..."

'What does Luna have over the clans? Why did you rejoin her? Why has such an ideal of loyalty been passed down the generations when she abandoned your clans a thousand years ago? How many of you did she wipe out back then, and yet you still returned to her?'

And why did Prey want to know this? Why had it suddenly become important?

Because these suspicions had been in the back of Prey's head since he first saw Celestia's sister's and learnt of the thestrals return. More bits and pieces kept getting added and slotting into place, but before the lumber yard and Garrow, it hadn't been important enough for Prey to press.

'Why are you loyal to Luna when she's enslaved you Crimson?' Is the question Prey really wanted to ask, but he couldn't.

So he sat their stupidly, mouth open, for once his mind blank as it searched for a convenient distraction.

And then, much to Prey's relief, Happy reappeared and Prey's question was forgotten. The stag carried a stack of those same woven flaxen blankets balanced on his antlers. "Forgive me travellers, but will you not be turning in for the night now?"

"Not yet. We will wait for Sargent Gloom to decide." Crimson answered with a shake of his head.

"Of course. These blankets are for you and your travelling companions for when you do. A hut will of course be made available for you. The five of you should fit. Which hut would you like?" Happy graciously offered.

"That will not be necessary, out here by the fire is just fine, but thank you very much for the offer." Gloom answered. The Sargent had finished giving Lilly her dressing down and was returning to the fire. Lilly seemed to be trying not to sulk as she followed behind, neck stiff and head held high as she refused to meet anyone's eyes.

'-a Guard does not sulk-', She told herself, '-a Guard gets going when the going gets tough-'

"Please, you are our guests. It is only right." Happy insisted, bowing.

"That's very kind, but you've done enough for us already. Fallen Leaf will be undertaking the dangerous task of acting as our guide tomorrow, what more can we ask? We're already indebted enough to you and your holt as it is." Gloom said.

"But you are guests-"

"Really, it's fine. These extra blankets will be more than enough." Gloom assured him.

Happy thought for a minute, "As the guest, I suppose the decision is yours. But please, at least allow me to keep you company around the fire until then."

It was obvious that the stag just wanted to take this opportunity to ask more questions, and he wasn't doing a good job of being subtle about it.

'-I would prefer it if you didn't-', Came Gloom's thoughts, but; "By all means. Some extra company never hurt anypony."

Happy smiled, and bowed, and took a seat. He made himself comfortable while the other two deer, who were also remaining awake, continued to interrogate Scenic. Something it looked like Happy was angling to copy.

"Might I please ask traveller Gloom, about the why for you terming everyone as such?"

"Pardon? What do you mean?"

"Apologies for not making myself clear. We say 'anybody', you would say 'anypony'. Why is this?"

Prey joined in giving Gloom an innocent look, "Yes, why is that?" He asked.

"It's, well, it's just how we ponies talk I guess. I've never really thought about it," Gloom said, trying not to wince at how weak of a defence that was, "That's just how everypony spoke as I grew up."

"And there, you speak another term again. 'Everypony'." Happy remarked, sounding quite delighted with the pony's verbal nuance, like spying a rare butterfly.

"I did?" Gloom blinked, "Oh, I guess I did."

"If you're hoping to get him to change and speak properly, you're wasting your time," Prey said dismissively, "It's an inbred patriotic mentality of making ponies believe they're center of everything and the master race."

"That's rubbish Prey." Gloom said, offended.

"Oh? Then why do you always insist on correcting me to say 'pony' all the time."

"Because you're speaking improperly. In Equestria, the grammar is different and you should use it correctly." Gloom said.

"So Equestria *is* the center of the world then? And we should all start acknowledging it now rather than later, is that right?" Prey returned, tossing his ear back dramatically, "Because basically what I'm hearing is; 'Everyone should just start emulating us ponies. Look at how much better we are at everything with our magic. Let's start speaking like this so they all get the message'. Such arrogance."

"Stop insinuating rubbish Prey," Gloom said, annoyed, "It's just the

proper way ponies speak. You can speak a foreign language already, so why is speaking Equestrian properly so difficult? If it's really such a problem for you, just treat it as learning a different dialect."

"So said the pony to the non-pony." Prey rolled his eyes

Crimson was looking slightly confused about where this was all coming from, obviously having never second guessed about something which was, to him, so basic, while Happy was looking lost and not sure if he'd asked a bad question.

Gloom calmed himself and let the annoyance go, deciding; '-this isn't worth getting into an argument with Prey over-'

"Whatever, you speak as you want to speak. And everypony else back in Canterlot will do the same. I would say you'll be the odd one out, but you've never really cared about that, have you?"

Prey decided it wasn't worth pushing either. Ponies were arrogant, even when they didn't realise they were being arrogant, and he wasn't going to be able to change their minds.

Happy looked between each of them in the fire light. "My apologies, but is something-?"

"Don't worry about it," Gloom waved a wing, "Here, perhaps you can answer a cultural question of my own."

"It would be my pleasure, traveller Gloom."

Gloom pointed at the strips of birch bark tied to the stag's antlers, "Why do you wear those? The leaves and camouflage I get, but what purpose do those serve?"

"Ahh," Happy sighed, "It is to ward off ill fortune in times of hardship, or a sign of mourning."

"Mourning?" Crimson sat up straighter, "I mean, have you lost one of your own?"

"No no, thank the All Mother for her grace that is not so. No, our holt has lost no one recently." Happy shook his head, making the

items in question sway; "We mourn because we are having to leave. And to help protect us against the reason we're leaving."

As if on cue, something out in the forest let out a warbling cry that carried through the misty night. Once it'd trailed off, all of them turned back to the fire, having instinctively turned their heads to the living holt walls. They were safe here tonight, but tomorrow...

"My brother Fallen Leaf will lead you true tomorrow, you need not fear." Happy said, a tad more subdued, "You were most fortunate that we met at the stone circle when we did. A day or two longer and our holt would've been gone."

"Where will you go?" Crimson asked.

"Not East. No holt goes near that forest nowadays. So we will go West once we have circled around the baloth's territory. I will not mind seeing the sun more often." Happy said with a shrug and a smile.

"Thank you again for delaying enough for Fallen Leaf to try and help us rescue the villagers." Gloom said.

Another smile and a bow, but Happy did not speak. He did not voice what he felt inside; '-<I fear those travellers have returned to the mud and you will find nothing but death>-'

Unfortunately, Prey thought the stag's realistic assessment was likely to be the correct one. Everything he'd seen at Mayflower, at the stone circle, plus his own experience pointed to that outcome. But there was always the tiny possibility those villagers were somehow still alive, and that the ISND wasn't too late.

However even if that was there case, there were still only the five of them, and over three dozen missing villagers, not even counting the original fifteen.

Which reminded Prey. He jerked a head at Gloom's saddle bags, "Sir, did Captain Nighthawk send a reply? It's nighttime, so he should've gotten around to reading it by now."

Gloom slapped his forehead with a wing, "Moon blight, I forgot to

check, what with tracking through the forest." He said, reaching for his saddle bags.

Happy was visibly puzzled, and was obviously having to contain his curiosity as Gloom unwrapped the message-in-a-bottle from its padding and moved it into the light

The inner fire that had floated in the bottle this morning was gone, but replacing it could been seen a tightly rolled page. Nighthawk's reply.

Gloom wasted no more time in shaking it out, being careful it didn't roll into the fire. With the use of his wings claws, he spread the page open and proceeded to read. Prey and Crimson did not crowd around like Lilly was obviously itching to do. If it was meant for them, Gloom would tell them. Plus, it was dark and hard to read. That, and Gloom was reading the message out in his head so Prey heard it all anyway.

'-your report is most concerning. No such letter requesting aid has arrived from Alfalfa Dale. This failure has been reported. No known possible causes for Mayflower phenomenon are reported within a two hundred mile radius. Reported your findings to Princess Luna. Her majesty has informed us other dreams do exist within the area. Many nightmares, and the dreams are clouded. It is not clear if these signatures belong to the missing ponies. Proceed as if they are-'

'Yes,' Prey thought bitterly, 'Luna can just search for dreams can't she? Divining and scrying may not work, but who needs that when you're an alicorn?'

Why hadn't Luna just directly invaded those dreamers minds through the dream and learnt what she wanted?

Could she somehow not manage it? If so, Prey dearly wanted to learn why and how to replicate that feat. Or perhaps the villagers weren't *actually* asleep but unconscious, like if they were drugged. Either way, it seemed like there might yet be survivors somewhere out there despite the odds.

Prey refocused on Gloom, who was still reading; '-Your request for backup is approved. Two squads will be dispatched to Alfalfa Dale as soon as possible. You are hereby appointed to assume command on their arrival. You are permitted to proceed however you judge best. To be frank Sargent Gloom, we are flying sun blind. There is nothing we know that might help. A magus will be travelling with the group with scanning spells. Always watching. Signed Nighthawk-'

Gloom finished reading and looked up at the ISND around him, (sans Scenic Paint still talking to the two does), with an uncertain grin, "Well, it's good news and bad news. The good is that it looks like the villagers might still be alive. The bad news, that's all we know."

"Will there be more ponies coming to assist us sir?" Crimson asked.

"Yes. Here, pass it around and read for yourself." Gloom said, hoofing the page to Crimson.

"Sir, surely we shouldn't be reading an officers papers sir." Lilly protested, but weakly. She really wanted to know what was going on.

"It's fine Lilly. It's not restricted." Gloom assured her.

Happy was looking curiously on, "Forgive me, but did you carry a message from your captain all the way from Canterlot capital before only reading it now?"

'-he's not a Night Guard. Should I tell him anything?-', Gloom wondered for a second, before shrugging.

"No, this is a message that came through by magic earlier today. Not sure when. Sometime while we were in the forest I expect. It just appeared in the bottle." Gloom said, holding the aforementioned bottle up.

"Really?" Happy asked, leaning in close in his interest, nose almost pressing up against the green glass, "Forgive me, but how does it work? The magic, please tell me."

"I'm not a unicorn, so I'm not the best pony to be explaining how it works... But luckily, we have one right here, Lilly Bloom. She'll be more than happy to explain."

Lilly, who had been reading Nighthawk's reply by horn light, looked up to find Gloom pointing straight at her. "Sir, I-"

Gloom narrowed his eyes.

"-I suppose I can, yes sir." She finished, grumbling. Gloom was obviously forcing her to make up for her previous blunder insulting the deer earlier.

Reluctantly, Lilly passed the letter to Crimson and began trying to explain the concepts of spell matrixs and formula to the stag, something she only had a basic understanding of herself.

Crimson didn't need the now absent light spell Lilly had been casting to read, and so he soon finished and hoofed it to Prey. "That is...Indeed both good and bad news sir." He said.

"Quite. And this forest isn't making anything any easier." Gloom agreed dourly, staring into the fire.

'-will we be able to rescue them in time? And why does everything we do have to be a race against the clock with next to no helpful information?-'

Prey held the page up into the fire light and pretended to give it a cursory scan. It was more or less exactly what he'd heard Gloom reading aloud in his head, but appearances had to be kept up.

"Thoughts, Prey?" Gloom asked.

"It sounds like these villagers might be drugged. I'm not sure how Luna-"

"-*Princess* Luna."

"-How Princess Luna views dreams, so maybe it's because the villagers are drugged? I don't know. However if they are drugged, well, then they must be being held somewhere, and that somewhere

has to be large enough to keep all of them confined in and alive too. Which indicates shelter of some kind. Buildings? A cave possibly? Plus, if that's the case, someone has to be keeping a watch on them. Some*one*, not something."

"Hmm." Gloom nodded slowly, brow furrowed in thought.

"*If* these dreams are from the same people, that is." Prey repeated.

'-ponies-', Gloom mentally corrected, but did not verbalise it this time. Some of Prey's words earlier must've finally gotten through to the Sargent. Neither Gloom nor Crimson chastised Prey for his cynical prediction either.

A minute of silence around the fire passed, before the two deer which had been interviewing Scenic finally stood up, stretched, and wished them all a good night. Evidently, they'd finally run dry of questions. Or perhaps they just knew they'd need their strength tomorrow. The Earth pony surreptitiously wiped his brow as they left, and took a long drink from his canteen. He then trotted back over to join them around the fire.

"Hi sir. Boy, those deer can talk." He said as he sat down in a sprawl.

"You were still polite at least, I take it?" Gloom checked.

"Of course sir. They kinda' remind me of my marefriend back home, Carton Juice, with how they question everything." Scenic said, grinning at the fire.

'-hope she doesn't chew my ear off too badly when I get back too-'

"Good. Read this. It's the Captain's reply through the message bottle." Gloom ordered, not interested in hearing about Scenic Paint's girlfriend in the slightest.

Prey secretly checked the small bag which he'd collected over the course of today at his side. Inside were were four small, waxy orange fungi caps, nestled in a layer of spiky leaves. If Prey got a chance, he would render these down later.

"-It's spell fire, which is like, I don't know, unstable thamuic energy, but not this kind because, because...Look, I can't be expected to remember this! It was a long time since school. I didn't go to Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns!" Lilly threw up her hooves in frustration, unable to explain how message-in-a-bottle magic worked.

She cast around for help, or possibly just a distraction for the curious Happy. She spotted the rest of the ISND sitting undisturbed around the fire, and seized upon the first idea that came to mind.

"Sir, I've always wanted to ask, how did you get that scar sir? It must've been an epic fight with a monster. Please tell us." She said, abandoning Happy and plonking herself down across the fire.

Prey and Crimson looked at the mare with blank disgust. You didn't ask about someones scars. But Gloom didn't seem offended, instead he cocked an ear, glancing at Prey and Crimson thoughtfully.

"Haven't I told you that story?" He asked.

They both shook their heads.

"Huh, well I did say it was a story for another time. I guess I could tell it now." Gloom mused.

When Happy saw that Gloom wasn't taking offence, he couldn't help but lean forwards in interest, "Forgive me if this is inappropriate, but what scar?"

"Oh, she means this." Gloom said, reaching around and unbuckling his chest plate, not at all self conscious about revealing the swathe of jagged scar tissue. Perhaps he might've been once upon a time, but he'd likely been forced to move past that since the scarring was in such an obvious place. Prey had never seen Gloom treat his scar as anything to be ashamed of.

"All Mother, how did you survive that?" Happy couldn't help but exclaim on seeing the relatively large expanse of puckered furless hide.

Again, rather than be offended, Gloom just laughed, "With alot of

hope, luck, and prayers. I was stuck on my back for three months waiting for it to heal. They had to put me in a hammock with holes cut in it for my wings. Once it became clear I was going to survive, it was the most boring three months of my whole life."

However Prey saw behind the Sargent's levity, and saw what Gloom didn't speak about. That period of time before, where he didn't know if he was going to survive.

"How did it happen? Uh, sir." Scenic asked.

Prey already knew, having benefited from his mind leach abilities. Gloom scratched at the scar, "Everypony know what a wyvern is?" He asked.

"Sir, yes sir, of course I do." Lilly eagerly jumped in, "It's a classified danger three monster. It's a type of flying reptile capable of short flights and-"

She glanced at Happy and Scenic, who were both looking slightly lost.

She sighed in exasperation, "Look, picture a dragon. But stupid, can't talk, or breathe fire, it doesn't have front legs and isn't magic resistant. And their scales are only ever brown and green. And a wyvern is also much much smaller."

"Smaller is a subjective term," Gloom said drily, "This one was plenty big enough for me. It was about..."

He thought for a second, "Over twice as long as me. Or three-and-a-half if you count the tail."

"Oh, and the tail has spikes!" Lilly added.

"Why yes, yes it does. I can attest to that. That's how I got this. It tail swiped me in mid flight and almost tore my chest out." Gloom said, tapping his chest. The gouges which had looked so much like enormous claw marks now revealed themselves to be the tears left behind by raking spines.

"We were trying to drive the wyvern off, away from the caves. It

shouldn't have come to violence really, since it wasn't the wyvern's territory so it should've left with a few spear prods. But I guess the one we got was just a particularly moody bastard that decided it wanted a fight." Gloom shrugged.

"Sir, what happened?" Scenic asked, listening with rapt attention.

"Yes, please do tell us traveller Gloom, what happened?" Happy pressed.

Gloom shifted, a bit uncomfortable under their avid stares, "It wasn't anything dramatic or impressive. Well, unless you count getting my tail knocked out of the fight straight away as dramatic. One moment, the wyvern was sulkily leaving, and the next it changed its mind and I just so happened to be the unlucky pony it went after. I dodged its teeth, but not its tail. Thorn and Cloudy Weft caught me before I hit the ground, staunched as much of the bleeding as they could, and rushed me back to the clan. I was pretty out of it."

"And? And?" Lilly asked, forgetting herself for a moment as she listened to what she counted as tales of adventure, completely missing the part how Gloom had almost died.

"And that's pretty much it for the next three months. The healers managed to get me as stable as they could. There was nothing more to do than wait. By the Moon, was I glad to stretch my wings when I was finally discharged."

"What happened to rest of your flight group sir? Was anypony else injured, I mean." Crimson quietly asked, "And what was done with the wyvern?"

"The wyvern had attacked a pony. There was only ever one possible outcome." Gloom said with a small shrug, "Sure, if it'd been a hydra or the like, the clan wouldn't have risk anypony else. But a wyvern? No, it had to be put down. They crippled one of its wings, made it crash. Then just kept flying over and spearing it until it died."

"Uh, sir," Scenic raised a hoof, like he was a foal in class, "I hope you don't mind me asking, but why didn't you guys just do that

from the start?"

Gloom frowned at him, "You should never take a fight you can possibly avoid. We don't kill monsters if we could drive them off instead, only if we're in danger and have no other choice."

"It is well said." Happy agreed.

"That's why we didn't go after that octopus monster earlier." Gloom said pointedly, looking at Lilly.

Privately, Lilly didn't agree with that, '-a hero would never run from a monster, and a Guard is a hero-'

"And which type of monster do you think it is that Fallen Leaf is taking us to see tomorrow?" Prey spoke up, looking away from the light and up at the shadows and night above them.

Crimson shifted his wing, examining the sheathed wing blade in the fire light, "The kind that makes a whole village disappear." He said flatly.

"This dark presence Fallen Leaf spoke of may have nothing to do with whomever took the villagers," Gloom warned them, or possibly himself, "It may just be a monster."

"*Just* a monster?" Prey echoed.

"Yes. Just a regular monster. The kind which kills you." Gloom said heavily. He was saying it for Lilly and Scenic's benefit, to remind them that despite the safety and warmth they enjoyed tonight, the forest was still out there.

The fire sparked. Gloom got up and lifted up his saddles bags, taking one of the blankets that Happy had delivered with him, "I think it's time we turned in. We'll all need our rest for tomorrow."

He nodded politely to Happy, "Thank you for your help Happy. Night watch over you."

Pulling out their sleeping rolls and blankets, the ISND silently did as they were told. Happy bid them good night and retired into one of

the huts.

They were left to themselves, each to their own thoughts lying in the night around the fire.

Prey lay thinking late into the night about all the possible monsters from the Deeper Green that might've ended up here, trying to think up escape and contingency plans.

Snake pulled the blackened clay beaker out from the bed of red hot embers. Sweat stood out unnaturally on the voodoo witches coldly indifferent face. The fire combined with the sweltering humid heat was too much even for the plains dweller, yet Snake made no move to wipe it away. Like it didn't even affect him.

Prey was parched from the heat. He needed water, but he didn't dare leave until Snake dismissed him. His burnt hoof throbbed from where he'd carelessly touched an ember. It hurt. He wanted to go dip it in the stream. He didn't dare move without permission.

"The leaves." Snake ordered without even looking at the lamb. Prey jumped forward and emptied the bag of spiky leaves into the clay beaker.

"Mortar." Snake ordered, sticking out his hoof. Prey dashed to place the grinder in the zebra's hoof lest Snake decide he was being too slow.

Snake picked up the smoking beaker, and Prey winced. Snake didn't. Face unmoving, he methodically began grinding the contents into a fine orange powder.

Scrape, Scrape, Scrape went the mortar.

There were hard cots in the next tent. Every so often, a low sob or cry would filter through from the wounded stored in there. Waiting to die.

"Crumble caps," Snake spoke, emotionless, "Instead of the Waya'Bonga mushrooms I tasked you to find. It means lower

potency."

Prey held his breath and tried not to whimper. There hadn't been any Waya'Bonga mushrooms to find, only the less lethal Crumble caps. It was all he could find.

"A non-lethal result, but it will still have its uses. The resulting powder will still incapacitate, causing possible respiratory problems in a victim." Snake observed indifferently. The voodoo witch put down the beaker on a darkly stained plank of wood. He removed a crudely carved measuring spoon and scooped put a tiny pit of the orange powder.

Snake examined it, careful not to bring it too close to his face. A tiny frown appeared on his striped brows, "The colouring is off. The Crumble Caps were not at full maturity."

Snake glanced at Prey, and then without any flicker in his expression or hesitation, tossed the pinch of powder in Prey's face.

Prey screamed and collapsed onto the floor, coughing and writhing. He couldn't see! He couldn't breathe! His face was on fire, no, it was on fire from the inside out! Tears streamed down his cheeks as he thrashed.

He could still hear though. Snake was calmly observing the result, his voice warping as Prey faded in and out of red tinged conscienceless. In his memory, the voice sounded like a mocking hiss of laughter, "Less deadly than the Waya'Bonga powder. But a much more instantaneous and debilitating result."

Prey blinked in the dark. In front of him, the embers of the fire occasionally cracked. The shapes of the ISND lay wrapped up in their sleeping blankets around the fire, asleep and unmoving. The holt was dark and silent, the deer all resting.

He looked down. Between his hooves, a dark orange powder sat in the small stone bowl he'd 'borrowed' from one of the huts. A faint wisp of vapour rose from the bowl in the cold night.

'A better colouring. The mushrooms were fully matured this time.' Snake whispered in the back of his head.

Prey rocked back on his hooves and shook his head, 'Sink back to the depths! You're already dead, *I'm* the one in control.'

Prey's will was iron, and the remnant of Snake vanished. Prey slowly looked around, checking he was still alone. Satisfied, he gingerly emptied the stone bowl's contents into a small pouch, making sure none of the powder drifted free.

He remembered all too well what the weaker version Snake had tested on him had done. His eyesight had never fully recovered. Even now, when he tried to focus on something too far away, it was always blurry around the edges.

'I could fix that with runes.' The thought came to him once again. However the very thought of the agony that would entail, carving runes into his very eyes, made Prey quiver and shy away. It wouldn't be worth it. Being hit with another face full of the same blinding powder would hurt less. Much less.

Prey carefully stored the pouch with its dangerous contents, and lay back down amid his blankets. He hated Snake.

'I know who I am. Mostly.'

---I---

Author's Notes:

Annnnd another chapter. Two weeks really do keep rolling around on me quickly.
Sorry, no action and killing *juuuust* yet for those who were comping at the bit for that, more exploring first.

Thanks to the Editor again for his help:
Sweetolebob18

43.3 Playing in the Mist Fields

Mist hung heavy in air, the silent shapes of dark pines speared the fog, the trees grey, vague and undefined until they were right on top of you.

It was very quiet. Water vapour coalesced on pine needles and hung from the ends in tiny droplets. It might've been a breath taking sight, if the droplets hadn't been sickly green in colour. Fallen Leaf said the mist came every morning and night. But he'd also said it had been getting thicker of late.

The stag had guided them out from the holt before the sun had risen, the thorn gate pulled free of the arched exit and replaced behind them by Happy. The ISND had only had time for a rushed bite of travel rations, while a bleary Lilly Bloom magicked up water to refill their canteens and four of them struggled into their armour.

Once outside the holt's walls, Fallen Leaf, flint spear out, had wordlessly gestured them to follow.

Now they were back out in the forest, with its presence looming over them at every step.

Lilly and Scenic seemed to have finally taken all the warnings seriously, and were appropriately silent and cautious as they brought up the rear of the group.

The ground changed as Fallen Leaf began to lead them uphill, even if the trees of the forest remained constant. As they went further, differences in elevation became more common, along with those large boulders poking from the earth. The ISND eyed each one they came across warily, remembering the disguised false-skin from yesterday.

Crimson and Gloom were the first line of defence behind Fallen Leaf, and both followed the stag closely. Gloom with his spear held

under a wing, and Crimson with his wing blades never more than a flick away from extending.

On what was probably a hill but was hard to tell when surrounded by trees, Fallen Leaf called a short halt.

"Take five moments travellers. I need to check here first before we travel on." He whispered.

Here on the hill's peak, the pine trunks were more thinly spaced, and grey morning sun light finally made its way all the way down to the ground. Prey stood in one of the shadows and stretched. He took this opportunity to re-tighten his backpack's straps, one eye always scanning their surroundings.

'-finally. Enough sun to actually shake a stick at-', Scenic thought, seeing the sun patch speckled hill crest, not realising how much the lack of sun light had been bothering him until right then.

Fallen Leaf was scenting the air and carefully checking the leaf litter for tracks. Prey checked Crimson. The pegasus was muttering something to Gloom, indicating back the way they'd come. Prey moved closer to hear what they were talking about, and got a very nasty surprise.

As Prey stepped closer, his point of view naturally shifted, and he saw out through a sudden gap in the trees. They were indeed on a hill, and through this wedge of revealed perspective where a pine had fallen, he could see down onto the tree canopy below.

There, at the bottom of the hill, as if perfectly placed just so that Prey would catch sight of it, with the morning mist slowly fading, Prey saw the grove of trees.

A grove of trees within a forest of trees.

Not a hundred yards from the base of the hill, there was a break in the trees, a deep ring of shadow formed in the dark pines. It was

like the whole forest had drawn a step back from the grove. As if it didn't dare disturb the thick copse of twisted trees squatting there. It shouldn't have been there, but there it was.

Just the sight made Prey's wool crawl and his breath come faster. He knew what that twisted grove was.

'A Wolf Wood.' He thought, stomach curdling.

The knot of trees seemed darker, menacing in a way that couldn't ever be put into words. And not a single pine grew amid the tangled grove. Gnarled branches knotted together, like the roots weren't only growing beneath the earth but above it too. Prey recognised rare and exotic trees he'd only ever seen once or twice in the Deeper Green, and which had absolutely no business being here.

Meld Wood, Blood Oak, Dalarta Tea, Limericks Verse, just from a glance he knew those, and Snake's remnant stirred at the sight, having recently surfaced once and now back for more.

Viciously Prey stamped down and strangled the remnant until it was gone. It would be be back though. Prey would never erase the old voodoo witch forever.

Fallen Leaf was looking closely at some scratches in the moss, '-<now was this a simple fox, or a Toridae?>-'

"Do you know what it is down there you're taking us past?"

Fallen Leaf lifted his head to find Prey standing in front of him. The lamb's voice was low and intense as he pointed down the hill through the gap in the trees.

"That copse of trees. Why have you brought us anywhere near it?" He demanded.

The stag glanced where the lamp was pointing and recognised it, "<Oh. Yes, that is indeed a bad area. Ill fortune. We do not go near it. You are wise to avoid it.>"

"Don't you know what that is?" Prey insisted.

"<My apologies Little Hunted One, but I do not. However we know enough to never venture near. Why has it upset you so?>" Fallen leaf inquired, tilting his antlers.

Prey could only stare at him, blue eyes searching the stag's face and thoughts. 'He's a deer, how can he not know?' The Resistance deer had known. Prey remembered how they'd fled at the sight, not even pausing to explain why.

But the stag in front of him was speaking the truth. He knew there was something bad down there, but he and his holt did not know *what*.

"That's a Wolfing Wood..." Prey said slowly, "Do you know what that is?"

"<My apologies again, but the name is unfamiliar to me.>" Fallen Leaf shook his head.

"Prey, what's the matter?" Gloom asked. He and Crimson had both come closer, somehow sensing Prey's disquiet. They had their weapons at the ready, "Is there a monster nearby?"

"Yes, no. Yes. There, down there," Prey jabbed his hoof repeatedly in the copse's direction; "That there is a Wolf Wood."

"Wolfing Wood? Like what you told me about?" Crimson asked, twisting about to look.

"Yes, a Wolf Wood, exactly like I told you about. And there's one just down there!"

Crimson considered, "I...You did not tell me much last time. About whether a Wolf Wood was really real or not. Is there a monster down there in those trees? I do not believe in ghosts."

"What's a Wolf Wood?" Gloom asked, "And how dangerous is it?"

"It's an unnatural bunch of trees. You mustn't go near it or the entity inside will come out to hunt you."

Gloom blinked, "Entity? What kind of-?"

"The kind that kills anyone who goes near it. Seeing how I'm still alive, I don't know, okay?" Prey snapped, "We just mustn't go near it."

"<Little Hunted One, are you speaking of evil spirits?>" Fallen Leaf asked dubiously, but with a touch of wariness.

"What did he say?" Gloom asked, looking to Prey.

"He asked if it's an evil spirit. It's not a ghost or something stupid like that. Whatever it is, it's dangerous, even if it's not real."

"Oooookay," Gloom said, "So you say it's not a ghost or the like, but it's also not actually real?"

"I, maybe, it's not like I've ever seen it." Prey held up his hoof to forestall them all.

"And yes I know how dubious that sounds. But trust me when I say we need to stay away from the Wolfing Wood." Prey looked up at Crimson, "We mustn't go there. You remember what I told you, don't you? Tell them, tell them we mustn't go near there."

Gloom was starting to become slightly unnerved by the intensity with which Prey was insisting, looking like he was...

'-really afraid-', Gloom realised.

"You, I mean, of course I remember, but-"

"-It's fine Prey, we'll believe you. It's okay." Gloom broke in, waving Prey to calm down.

'-he's not making much sense but I promised I'd trust his instincts this time-'

"If you say we shouldn't go there, we won't go there. It's not like that was our destination anyway, right?" Gloom asked, looking to Fallen leaf for confirmation.

"<No, we will not be-> Ah, forgive me. No, our path does not lead there."

"See Prey? It's fine, we're not going to go there and disturb...Disturb whatever a Wolf Wood is." Gloom assured Prey.

Prey took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down. Gloom was right, he shouldn't be overreacting. There Wolf Wood was just over there, yes, but as long as they didn't disturb it, then they'd be fine.

They were still in the forest and in plenty of other danger, fixating on one particular danger was foolish. But the thought of the unknown danger the Wolf Wood represented scared Prey nearly as much as did those other terrible, nameless, hungry things from his darkest memories. Nobody really knew Prey, but if they had, that more than anything else should've proved how much the Wolf Wood scared him.

Prey let out the breath, mumbling, "Alright, alright. Good. So long as we're clear."

Gloom wanted to ask, but knew, '-now is definitely not the time-'.

Prey fell back to the rear of their group again as they left, trying to get the old fears out of his head and refocus on their task. His worry and unease lasted all the way to the rocky cliff pool Fallen leaf led them to, where upon the cause for his concern swiftly transitioned onto what they found.

They had started heading down, only gradually, but the ground was definitely sloping, and with their decent, the mist came back even stronger, and the number of boulders and rocky outcrops increased.

Fallen Leaf stopped at the top of a dale, and pointed ahead of of them down into the trees and mist. He spoke in a whisper, "This is the place. The dark presence came from down there. It has returned here, recently. I can feel the foulness in my antlers."

"I can't feel anything." Lilly muttered, eyes squinted as she stared ineffectually into the mist.

"Well we're all here. What did you want to show us?" Gloom asked, shifting his short spear to his other wing.

Fallen Leaf didn't answer for a moment, "We do not know. No one has seen its comings or goings. Yet we can always tell of its passing. Can you not feel it?" He asked.

Lilly, Scenic, and Gloom shook their heads.

Crimson hesitated, and Prey nodded, "Yes."

"Is it the feeling of....watchfulness? I mean, as if something had happened here?" Crimson slowly suggested, looking to Fallen Leaf.

The stag dipped his antlers, "It can be, and it can also manifest as something more, or less."

'-oh that's very helpful in our quest-', Lilly thought. She actually used that description for their job, a 'quest'.

"Luna curse this mist," Gloom said, squinting, "Even if Crimson and I scout above the trees first, we won't be able to tell if it's safe on the ground. The only way is for us to go down there ourselves."

Fallen Leaf turned his head, looking mildly confused, "You mean yourselves of course. I am not going down there as I'm sure you realise."

"But you are our guide." Gloom protested.

"My apologies if I lead you to believe that I would be venturing down there with yourselves. It was not my intent to deceive." Fallen Leaf said, shaking his head.

"Coward." Lilly hissed under her breath, but only Prey heard her.

Scenic and Crimson both shifted on their hooves, looking to their Sargent for his decision. Prey had no choice but to do the same.

Gloom grimaced, but he could hardly force Fallen Leaf to do something the stag was unwilling to do. He briefly considered the possibility that Fallen Leaf meant to abandon them here, but that was ridiculous. Besides, he'd spoken with Prey before they left and confirmed that he could memorise the route they took and lead them back to the holt without Fallen Leaf if necessary.

"It's fine," Gloom assured Fallen leaf, even if the Sargent didn't really mean it, "We'll proceed ourselves."

'-we've come this far, we can't back out now-'

"Forgive me, but are you sure you wish to do this? If you want, I can lead you back to our holt and you may shelter with us until we take our leave on the morrow." Fallen Leaf offered, not able to help glancing down into the dale as he said this.

'-<I hope I have not lead you to your deaths>-'

"No thank you, we're sure." Gloom answered.

"Very well. If your path is set, I shall wait for you here, travellers." Fallen Leaf bowed and stepping back.

The ISND stood at the top of the dale, looking down and listening hard. They heard only silence, and saw nothing but mist and vague tree outlines.

"Sir, can you uh, do anything about all the fog with your weather magic?" Scenic asked nervously.

'-fog is basically a cloud, right?-'

"It's mist, not fog, and no." Gloom shook his head absentmindedly, focused on what lay ahead of them. "There's too much of it, and besides, it's far too thin to do anything with. Nor is this tamed weather."

After five minutes of them all straining their senses but getting nothing, Gloom rolled his shoulders and stepped forwards:

"If there is anything down there, it's hiding. There's nothing else for it. Come on."

"I'm personally hoping it's not here at all sir." Scenic mumbled.

The two warriors took point, with Lilly behind them, and Prey and Scenic bringing up the rear. Arguably the best position in their little formation.

Tensely, the ISND descended into the dale, feeling the ground harden into stone under their hooves, heads swivelling.

Prey stopped, and meaning everyone else froze too. Prey tilted his head, "I hear flowing water." He whispered.

They all listened hard, holding their breath.

Crimson and then Gloom slowly nodded, signalling, 'We hear it too.' Lilly and Scenic could only shake their heads though, unable to catch the faint sound.

Gloom considered for a moment, then signalled forwards. '-we continue on-'

There was no cliff, and then five steps later there was a cliff, abruptly looming out of the mist. Not below them, but above them. It rose, a sheer wall, with vaguely pine tree shaped spines at the top. But until they crept closer to both the source of the water and the base of the cliff, it was all the same grey.

The air grew heavier, the irregular trickling of water louder. Prey wished this forest had calling birds, then he might've been able to tell something.

The shadow of the cliff was cold. The top of the rise behind them where Fallen Leaf waited seemed a long way away. Mist slowly drifted across their path, damp and clinging. The already poor visibility dropped down to less than ten paces. The pine needles under hoof were wet and cold.

Prey did not like this. His hoof gripped one of the small knives sheathed under the strap of his pack. Much use a tiny blade would be, but that's not what it was for.

The cliff grew taller above them, looking much higher than it really was, the mist skewing perception.

Crimson's hoof shot up and his head snapped to the side. He sniffed, scenting the air deeply, and his mental walls coiled in on themselves.

Those who had been there couldn't help but remember the cellar trap door. Blood. It was here in the mist with them.

'-little rats scrabbling in the dark-'

The back of Prey's wool crawled. Gloom and Crimson silently conferred with mere looks alone. Gloom motioned. Crimson hesitated, then shook his head. Gloom motioned again, insisting. This time Crimson nodded.

"Be ready." Gloom whispered to them, and then both ponies reared up on their back hooves and began to beat the air with their wings.

The sudden flapping of feathers and leathery wings was terrifyingly loud in the silence.

Tendrils of mist billowed as the gusts of wind slowly began to blow away the mist in a cone ahead of them, with the the two winged ponies at its point.

Everyone instinctively drew together in a circle, facing outwards, braced for a monster to be revealed as the mist receded. Lilly had her horn lit. Prey had drawn the knife and Scenic was trying not to panic.

'-where? Where's it gonna' come from? Where?!-'

A billow of mist twenty paces ahead lifted away and revealed water. A large flowing pool lay at the bottom of the cliff. Dark silt and wet looking pebbles made up the shore. Thin streams of cold water flowed down the cliff and fed the pool.

More roiling mist was briefly driven back as Gloom and Crimson continued to flap, and more was revealed. The pool emptied into a fast stream at the base of the cliff, cutting deep into the ground and creating the beginnings of a shallow ravine. The pools water was cloudy. It gently rippled.

But no monster was to be seen.

Prey breathed out. A foul scent reached his nose, the scent of rotting meat. He saw a carcasses half submerged in the water, the

white of a rib bone in soaked fur.

Then a second carcass was revealed, a third, a fourth. Five, six.

Lilly gagged and covered her face, eyes watering. Prey didn't, his eyes darted between the animal corpses. Two brindle boars, a grey dire wolf, a young black bear, a snook, and a barbtail.

Not people. Just animals. This was what Crimson had scented. Prey's clefthoof grip on his knife slackened slightly, but then quickly retightened when he saw that the dead boar on the shore was fresh. He also saw no scavengers. Why were there no scavengers? Fresh meat always brought out the scavengers.

Gloom and Crimson stopped flapping their wings and fell back onto all four hooves. Ever so slowly, tendrils of mist began to flow back over the pool, reclaiming it's territory, but it would take a minute or two, and for now, the scene stayed revealed.

Cautiously, with Lilly and Scenic gagging and choking, they approached the water. The two normal ponies could not bring themselves to go closer than ten hooves, and the other three of them stopped at five, well back from the murky waters in case something lunged.

"Watch our flanks." Gloom ordered to Scenic and Lilly, since they couldn't bring themselves to approach the dead animals any further. If there was something dangerous hiding in the dale, it was too late for stealth. It now knew they were here.

"What killed these sir?" Crimson asked, looking over the carcasses, "And what threw them into the water?"

"All except that one. It isn't in the water." Gloom pointed with his spear at the large dead boar on the shore.

"And it's fresh." Prey said, eyeing the water beyond the dead body, "No claw or bite marks, but there's blood in the sand."

"Remember what the deer said? About this monster not eating its kills?" Gloom murmured.

"Killing for pleasure." Crimson said flatly.

Prey heard Scenic gulping and telling himself; '-not to be sick, not again-'.

Prey sneered. Soft, weak, sheltered ponies. But really Prey was just trying to keep himself distracted from being afraid. This whole scene unnerved him as much as everyone else.

"There's no wounds. So how were these killed?" Prey repeated. Not that either Gloom or Crimson could answer him. Crimson had his wing blades out Prey noticed. But he hadn't noticed the moment when the pegasus had unsheathed them.

Slowly, keeping the boar's body between him and the water, Prey shuffled closer for a better look. The stink rolled across his face. He'd smelt worse, the cellar for one, but this was still foul.

The boar's thick bristles were matted. It looked like it might've been condensed mist, but it was actually sweat. Old lather was still visible under the bristles. The boar had not died quickly or suddenly, but the shore wasn't overly kicked up as if it'd had a chance to fight for its life. Rather, the trough dug behind the boar showed it had dragged itself here over the shore. Towards the water. As if it could somehow escape.

Prey looked at the other carcasses in the water. The ripest stench was coming from the oldest looking corpse, the bloated snook. It looked to be about two weeks old, but the submersion in the pool may be affecting his estimate.

"This is, *was*, a watering hole. These beasts came here wanting a drink. Desperately. They weren't killed in the water or thrown in afterwards. They dragged themselves into the pool."

With fresh eyes, Gloom and Crimson looked over what Prey was speaking of, seeing what he meant.

"How did this monster slay these beasts then? Poison?" Gloom asked.

"The term is venom. But in this case..." Prey finally approached far

enough around to have a look at the dead boar's head, "Poison might be more accurate actually."

Old strings of blood, now nothing more than black tar, leaked from the boar's mouth and nostrils and all down its chin. It's lips were blistered and cracked, and the whole face looked purple.

"It looks like it asphyxiated, but whatever kind of poison it was, it drove it almost suicidal with the desire for water first." Prey said, stepping back.

"Horrible." Crimson summed up.

"But it's not a villager. Thank Luna for that." Gloom said grimly with feeling.

"There's no other tracks from whatever did this."Crimson said. He was examining the ground as the mist continued to slowly creep back in. "Who knows how far this boar dragged itself here from where it was attacked."

"The ground's too rocky here. No good for tracks." Prey said.

"I can feel what the deer were talking about. This feels like...something bad." Gloom narrowed his eyes back the way they'd come.

"Was this some sort of dark magic?" Gloom suggested.

"I don't know sir. What does dark magic residue feel like?" Crimson responded.

"Good point. None of us would know even if it were." Gloom said, his ears flicking towards a new direction every few seconds, never letting his guard down despite carrying out a conversation. As the mist returned, the bad feeling was intensifying. Lilly and Scenic were slowly backing up closer as visibility decreased.

"Sir, permission to speak freely sir?" Lilly asked, still staring warily at the trees.

"Yes?"

"Sir, I don't believe in ghosts sir, but if this were one of those books, this is exactly when the boogey mare would jump out and grab one of us."

'-thanks for that-', Scenic thought next to her, swallowing drily. He fumbled for his canteen and took a quick drink. He wiped his mouth and shakily spoke;

"Well... I don't think this is a good place to refill our water bottles, hey?"

No one even attempted a smile in response. At Lilly's words, they'd all turned to look back up the dale to where Fallen Leaf said he would be waiting. Nothing could be seen except the white grey of the mist, but all their eyes were drawn there. Scenic was just slowest on the uptake.

"Move." Gloom ordered, not panicked, not yet.

"Back up to Fallen Leaf. We'll all wait up there for the mist to lift. Then, we search for tracks. Diamond formation. Prey in the middle. Follow my lead."

Fallen Leaf was gone.

Gloom rotated on the spot, casting about in the mist as they all faced outwards, but spotted nothing.

"Fallen Leaf. Sound out if you can hear us." Gloom hissed as loudly as he dared.

The unmoving trees mocked them with silence, tendrils of mist hanging all about them. Prey was cursing up a foul storm in Zebrican in his head, ears straining. The silence rang.

'See? *This* is what happens when you split up.'

They hadn't descended into the dale for more than five minutes. Fallen Leaf hadn't had any plans to abandon them, Prey would have known if he did. So whatever had made the stag vanish was not by

his own volition. Was he already dead?

"This is the right spot. It's got to be sir. It's the only hill." Crimson insisted, pointing at where they stood as his wings bristled.

"Sir, what should we do?" Scenic gulped. The heavy feeling of being watched was growing heavier. '-is it only in my head?-'

Gloom made a snap decision.

"Clear the mist." He ordered, not waiting for Crimson before rearing up and beginning to beat the air with his own wings.

Crimson and Gloom flapped, hard, trying to clear the mist as fast as they could. Like a grey tide, the mist flowed backwards, but just like the tide, it would return.

Gloom and Crimson rotated, damp pine needles being kicked up as they cleared a circle about them. Trees, bushes, and shadows came back into focus. But no hide nor hair of Fallen Leaf was revealed. Prey dared to drop his gaze from the trees to swiftly scan the ground.

Instinctively, he searched for the dark splatters of blood he knew so well, even as he told himself that was stupid. Crimson would have scented any blood if there was any.

'Which means Fallen Leaf either ran or was taken without a trace. Like the villagers.'

Prey saw that Lilly had her teeth gritted and eyes narrowed, tiny blue sparks jumping about the end of her horn. For the first time in his life, Prey was glad there was a unicorn standing beside him.

Gloom and Crimson's flapping efforts came to an end as the mist refused to retreat any further, and they dropped back onto their hooves. "Fallen Leaf!" Gloom hissed again, making Prey cringe.

Making noise would only draw attention, no, they were far past that stage. Anything in the trees already knew they were here. Prey knew that, just as he knew the others would never abandon Fallen Leaf to his fate no matter how sensible it was.

"We have to find him." Gloom ordered.

Prey ground his teeth, why couldn't he have been wrong just this once?

"Quick, before the mist flows back. Look for tracks, clues, anything."

"Sir, I know a flare spell sir. I could fire it up, maybe he'd see it and come to us for safety-"

"It'll do no good Lilly. Fallen Leaf either was forced to leave or was attacked. And in all this mist he wouldn't see it... But do it anyway." Gloom ordered, eyes glued to the ground.

"Here."

Crimson was pointing at the ground, "He went this way."

They all hurried over and saw a scuff in the pine needles, and there, another one further on, as if someone moving in haste had kicked them up.

"Sir, should I still send up a flare sir?" Lilly hesitated.

'-this isn't how it's supposed to go in stories-'

"No, belay that order. We're going after him." Gloom rasped.

"Wait," Prey hurriedly interjected, "What's this here?"

Gloom and Crimson's wing muscles bunched as they strained against the delay, but they knew they had to stop and listen lest they risk all their lives.

"What? Quickly Prey, quick."

Prey pointed at a small dark mark that was off to the side of the of Fallen Leaf's track. It'd almost been missed. A little pock hole, like the end of a branch or walking stick had been stabbed into the leaf litter. Prey pointed to the other side of Fallen Leaf's trail.

The stags flight was heading off perpendicular to the dale, heading

in the same direction Prey had seen the ravine running.

There, in the dirt, was another of the little spike holes. And then another. And another and another. Running unevenly along each side of Fallen Leaf's trail and disappearing into the mist.

Prey knew of no beast or monster with a tread like that, not even the giant spiders. He judged the distance between the strange foot prints on either side of Fallen Leaf's trail and got an idea size of whatever it was leg span. It was not small.

"Uh, sir? There's also..." Scenic was pointing further off to the side.

In the dirt and pine needles, running around thorn bushes and heading after the stag's trail, were many more little holes. They all went in one direction, heading off into the shadows to cut Fallen Leaf off.

"What are these?" Prey heard Lilly mumble.

"Doesn't matter. We've got to get to him before this monster pack." Gloom ordered, and broke into a run, their path clear for all to see.

'-I will not be too late again!-'

For a moment Prey could scarcely believe that this was their plan, again. But then, this wasn't a plan. It wasn't anything. It was just a desperate attempt to try and save Fallen Leaf by throwing themselves into danger.

'Wait!' Prey wanted to shout, 'This is a bad idea!'

But Crimson was running after Gloom, Scenic and Lilly kicking up their hooves to follow. He was going to be left behind. *Again*. Prey didn't know which was more dangerous, following the trail or remaining here.

He didn't have time to think or evaluate.

'*Zoma'Grika.*' He raced after Crimson.

Hooves pounded over pine needles, biting deep into the

decomposing layers. The trail turned sharply around a tree and made for the stream, the ravine the water had cut through the forest appearing suddenly. Mist rushed past all around. Now they were running along side the deepening ravine, Prey struggling to keep up, backpack bouncing wildly on his back.

Prey kept up, just. The others couldn't gallop full speed in the forest, but Prey could, dogging and weaving around obstacles with his smaller size. Prey saw how the ravine was narrow enough to leap across as they ran along side it. And then it wasn't, suddenly yawning wide as whatever stone the old stream had eroded through transitioned to something softer.

The splash of water on sharp rocks below changed into an echo, reaching Prey's ears over his racing heart. Fallen tree trunks lay jammed across the divide, halfway down the deep 'V'.

Prey could feel his breath already starting to come shorter, Lilly sounded like she was panting. The backpack which he'd purposefully packed so light was growing heavier. Low hanging branches grabbed at them, trying to stop them, little twig fingers clutching.

At their head, Gloom abruptly skidded to a stop, wings half opening to halt himself. Prey splayed his hooves and dug in his heels, leaving four furrows in the pine needle floor.

"Sir, what-?" Scenic gasped unnecessarily. Prey saw what. The trail of spike holes split up and veered away from the ravine, fanning out into the forest in a dozen different directions.

Gloom stared, '-did they catch Fallen Leaf? No, but then why do they split up?-'

"Which way sir?" Crimson asked, looking for orders.

"Quick, look for Fallen's tracks. Find which trail is the right one." Gloom rasped, his tone more hoarse than ever.

Contrary to his order, Gloom did not join in as they began casting about the forest floor, the mist and trees dampening all noise,

including any possible calls for help.

Trying to catch his breath, Prey saw that Gloom had his own eyes squeezed tight shut.

'-which is the right path? C'mon, work, work! For once just work when you're supposed to you damned flank-'

"Sir I smell-" Crimson cut himself off and just pointed, "That way."

"Luna blast it." Gloom hissed, levelling his spear in the direction Crimson had indicated, "There's a fight coming." Was all he said in warning before charging off again.

Blood. Prey knew that must be what Crimson had smelt.

'So is it already too late to save Fallen Leaf?'

They raced to climb the hill, but Prey's mind was going even faster, thinking ahead. The villagers had been taken, not killed. If this monster was the same one as had gotten the villagers, then there was a chance the stag was alive.

'Or is this a trap?'

Before he could shout out his warning, Prey heard noise ahead over the pounding of his heart. Commotion, strange creaking, gurgling. Gloom and Crimson heard it too, and with a snap Crimson's wing blades locked into place.

They broke through the mist as the ground levelled out and came upon the scene. Prey's mind captured it all in a heartbeat.

Prey saw the stag they'd been chasing, desperately ducking into shadows and around trees. He slashed with his antlers and tried to ward the lurching shapes in the mist back. He was being surrounded.

His flint spear was lodged ineffectually in one of the gurgling monsters as it thrashed out of the mist. Whatever they were, they weren't flesh and blood.

Upright, wicker casket like bodies rode on mismatched numbers of bulky root like legs which stabbed into the ground and scrabbled for purchase. The things bulbous upper bodies swayed about wildly as thorny arms lashed and flailed at Fallen Leaf.

Creaking, rustling, strange gargled noises, spikes and thorns. The monsters looked like particularly vicious briar patches come life.

Prey's mind counted their enemies and arrived at a total before he was even aware, 'Nine.'

Scenic let out a high pitched whinny. Gloom and Crimson didn't waste their breath. Countless hours of clan training kicked in as they immediately began prioritising. They'd come upon the enemies rear, and one of their own was in danger. Their course of action was clear. Prey knew they were about to charge in to break the encirclement and rescue Fallen Leaf with the element of surprise.

Prey wanted to turn tail and run, but Gloom had already committed all of them. He knew what he had to do next:

Prepare for after Crimson and Gloom broke through the encirclement, and then tried to break back out.

Prey spun, still running, hooves nearly slipping, and almost getting run over by Lilly Bloom as she charged fearlessly after Gloom. He only half saw Gloom and Crimson's charge strike the closest wooden monsters.

Gloom's short spear impaled one of the things from behind, and for the briefest of seconds Prey's mind skittered to pointlessly wondering how the creatures hadn't sensed them coming since it didn't seem to rely on any visible eyes but some other method of detection. Didn't matter.

Gloom used the momentum of his charge to swing the monster off its root like legs and half tossed, half tipped it into another monster as he wrenched his spear free.

He spun low, lashing out with the spear haft, and knocked the legs out from three more of the top heavy creatures. He wasn't going to

try to figure out how you were supposed to kill these things, just wanting to disable them long enough to rescue Fallen Leaf.

At the same moment, Crimson's wing blades blurred and sliced through the whipping bramble arms, which in turn phased the creatures not at all. Crimson took one precise step sideways, so quickly he seemed to skate across the pines needles, avoiding one of the lurching creatures and getting into range to strike out against another. *Slash-slash-slash.*

Chips flew off from wicker body and deep gouges appeared. The thing didn't care and just tried to grasp the pegasus and drag him close.

"Fallen Leaf! Out, this way, while the path is clear!" Gloom shouted.

Fallen Leaf saw his chance and took it, one of the wooden monsters narrowly missing grasping his fluffy tail as he dashed between Gloom and Crimson.

The stag shouted something at them, but if it was Equestrian or Fourlon, he wasn't clear enough to understand.

More garbled groaning and creaking filled the air as the wicker creatures finally all succeeded in turning themselves about to face the two new threats. Now it was Gloom and Crimson who were in danger of being trapped, and in a few seconds, they would be just that as the monsters lurched in. The trees prevented taking flight, but if they could just get a second, they could still break free.

The monsters Gloom had knocked over were still on the ground, but their lashing arms reached out to grab at the two winged ponies from where they lay, penning the two in. Gloom however had seen their weakness.

"Knock them down, go for the legs!"

He needn't have bothered shouting it, Crimson had already figured it out a second before his Sargent did.

Prey meanwhile fumbled at the small cloth bag tied to his backpack, hearing the sound of branches and twigs striking against

armour as Gloom and Crimson forwent defence and just struck, slashed, bucked, kicked, and knocked the things over.

Scenic ran forwards, although what he thought he could do to help was anyone's guess. Act as an alternate target maybe?

Fallen Leaf wheeled as he skidded to a stop by Prey, and shouted again in panic. It was in Fourlon, and this time Prey caught enough of it to understand.

Prey heard him, and head snapped up, blue eyes wide, "Watch out!"

Gloom and Crimson knocked another two of the creatures over and took the moments breathing room to do the smart thing and run clear, the gargling sounding horribly like people drowning.

"Watch out!" Prey shouted again, voice going high pitched.

Mercy, providence, or luck. Either way, this time Gloom and Crimson finally heard him. They looked back at the over tipped monsters, but that's not what Prey was squeaking about.

Fallen Leaf hadn't been running away from these wicker things. They weren't nearly fast enough to outrun the stag, and were so overly clumsy too. So how had they managed to corner the deer?

They hadn't. Fallen Leaf had not been running away from them. He'd been running away from something else which had driven him into these wicker monstrosities.

The monster rose out of the mist. Tall, like a giant spider. Rigid, spindly legs ending in spikes carried it out from between the trees. The four long legs attached to a vaguely equine body, suspended above. Some kind of tattered grey cloth covered this body, swishing and flapping as it scuttled horribly towards them.

It had no head. It wasn't alive. Prey stared. It hadn't got a head! Just carved pumpkin spilling sickly orange illumination from inside. Its gait was horrible and juddering. Had someone built a scarecrow? Was that what he was looking at? Was he not actually seeing a terrifying wicker monster bound with wires rushing towards him, but some farmer's escaped bird deterrent?

"A...scarecrow?" Lilly Bloom mumbled blankly, standing there slack jawed.

She wasn't the only one who was staring. Even Gloom and Crimson stopped for half a second at what they saw.

The terrible scarecrow thing was at least twice even Fallen Leaf's height. It didn't slow as it came on, instead speeding up. It bunched closer to the ground, and Prey saw the wicker and metal wrapped around the top half of its spidery legs coil tighter as it picked up speed.

Scenic and Lilly were frozen, unable to believe what was bearing down on them, the other lesser wicker monster all but forgotten.

"Back into the forest. Fallen Leaf, lead us out of here!" Gloom yelled.

"It's a golem of some kind-", Prey tried to shout.

There was a shrieking rattling sound, like a piece of metal wound too tight, and the scarecrow thing's legs somehow hurled its body forwards in a pounce.

The breath caught in Prey's throat, and he heard Lilly or possibly Scenic give a high pitched scream. It's target was Gloom and Crimson. Instinct made them both launch backwards with a flap of their wings for extra distance, and the scarecrow landed short, sharp legs scuttling and stabbing the earth for balance.

Crimson lunged forwards and attempted to sever the monster's leg while it was off balance. Prey heard the sound of metal striking metal and Crimson's wing blades rebounded.

"It's not alive!" Prey yelled, already backing up into the forest, "You can't kill it!"

"<Run!> Run! Follow me." Fallen Leaf cantered wildly in place, obviously desperate to flee but unwilling to leave Prey and the others behind.

The scarecrow lashed out with unreal speed and Lilly shrieked,

finally coming unfrozen and levelling her horn at the monster.

The scarecrow missed Gloom by inches, or perhaps the thestral dodged, "What are you waiting for? Run!"

Lilly Bloom's crackling stunning spell struck the scarecrow in its pumpkin head, and did absolutely nothing as the electricity crackled and vanished.

"It's not alive! It's not alive! What about that don't you get?" Prey yelled ineffectually at her, not even caring he was yelling at a unicorn.

"Back, run!" Gloom shouted again, uselessly jabbing at the scarecrow with his short spear. The only thing apparently stopping the scarecrow from simply trampling either Gloom or Crimson was that there were two targets splitting its attention.

Prey was completely ready to follow Gloom's most sensible and necessary order to date and run. He was continuously backing away even as the scarecrow and the smaller wicker monsters advanced. He clutched his small knife, eyes darting about trying to find something to give them an edge, but there was only one way out of this that he could see. To run.

Fallen Leaf thought the same. With a sound of frustration mixed with fear, the stag dashed back to Scenic and tried to push the faltering Earth pony after Prey and down the hill. "Run traveller, run!"

Whether it was Fallen Leaf or Gloom's shouted order, Scenic finally did as instructed and turned and ran. Prey heard the white noise of panic in the stallion's thoughts as Scenic dashed past.

Fallen Leaf next ran to Lilly next, but she shook him off. "No, I need to fight!"

Over with the scarecrow, Crimson ducked left, and the scythe like swing whipped past in a blur, tearing a hoof deep trench in the dirt without slowing. Gloom dashed in, impaled the scarecrow's pumpkin head and twisted away before a return strike could land.

His spear punctured straight through the slightly rotten pumpkin flesh, but nothing happened. The scarecrow wasn't hurt, it skittered forwards unslowed. The only effect was an extra hole for the sickly orange light to now leak from.

Behind the attacking scarecrow, the rest of the wicker plant monsters had almost caught up, having righted themselves. In a few moments, they would reach the fight between the two ponies and the scarecrow, and then their numbers would overwhelm Gloom and Crimson.

"Sir-!"

"I know. Fall back!"

Gloom and Crimson both did just that, leaping backwards with a flap of their wings, turning around mid air, and landing in a run. The trees restricted them too much to take to the sky as they ran towards Prey. Behind them, trashing through the mist, the hoard of gurgling, slavering monsters chased.

Lilly fired another off stunning spell which did worse than nothing, before she finally realised the monsters were racing towards her. "Ponyfeathers!"

Finally getting the message, she too turned and ran.

Prey had only waited long enough to see that Crimson was fleeing, and then he began running down the hill after Scenic Paint and Fallen Leaf, dodging tree roots that tried to grasp and twist his hoof.

Prey wove in between trees, the decent adding speed to his flight. A straining Gloom and Crimson were catching up, and behind them Prey heard the monsters coming, but they were gaining distance. They could outpace the wicker monsters, but they weren't the problem, that scarecrow thing was. They couldn't just keep running blindly ahead like this, they needed to cut left.

"Cut left!" Prey yelled between breaths.

"What?"

"Cut left. The ravine, it's dead ahead." Prey shouted back.

"No keep going! It's our only chance to fight this thing."

"What?!" Prey yelped.

But they'd already reached the bottom of the hill, and a moment later the shapes of the trees in the mist disappeared and the ravine yawned open.

Prey skidded frantically to a halt. At this place, the ravine was at least six yards across at its narrowest point, a distance of over twenty hooves.

Gloom and Crimson could fly across, no problem, but what about the rest of them? There was no way he could jump that, however there were many fallen tree trunks stuck in the ravine, wedged at various heights and angles as the ravine narrowed. He'd have to risk trying to climb across one of the moss slick trunks. Maybe he could make it, maybe he couldn't.

Prey's sharp ears picked up the sounds of the following wicker monsters halfway down the hill already, and the scarecrow was faster than them so it must be very close.

Prey looked to the left. The land ran away into the mist beside the ravine. Perhaps he could still make it out before the scarecrow arrived? Slip away and leave Scenic, Lilly, and Fallen Leaf who were stuck here on this side. They'd be better able to defend themselves than him, a runt.

For a split second, Prey felt the weight of his pack on his back with everything he needed to survive inside and knew he could run for it. He could do it and survive alone.

"Across the gap!" Gloom ordered.

"Yes, across the ravine!" Fallen Leaf shouted in agreement, and sprang off the edge.

For a second it looked like the deer was committing suicide, but then he landed lightly on one of the fallen pine trunks bridging the

ravine halfway down. For another second it looked like he would slip, or the old trunk would break with rot, but both held.

Fallen Leaf's hooves found hoof holds where there were none and he began all but skipping across, moving as if he were on solid ground and not crossing an old rotting tree trunk above a deadly drop to shadowy water and sharp rocks. Gloom stared, then snapped back to the present.

"Across! We'll fly you. Take Prey first." He ordered Crimson.

Prey leapt back, "No! Take Scenic first, he's heavier." He protested.

They didn't have time to argue and Gloom saw what Prey meant. It would take both him and Crimson to fly the heavier, armoured Earth pony across, and they had time for perhaps one uninterrupted trip together before the scarecrow arrived.

"Get Scenic across. Here, help me." Gloom ordered, but Crimson hadn't needed any encouraging, already moving around to Scenic's side.

"Hang on, I'm not-" Scenic began to protest.

Gloom and Crimson each picked the stallion up from under his forelegs and lifted up, wings beating up a storm in strain. Scenic was lifted bodily into the air, armour, pack, and all.

"Whoah!" He cried out as he was carried across, and made the mistake of looking down.

"Stop struggling." Crimson grunted.

Prey's head whipped round as he heard the thrashing of low hanging branches being shoved aside and the scarecrow burst out of the mist, tattered coverings flapping and spike legs digging in as it came straight at them.

It was just Prey and Lilly Bloom left, Fallen Leaf was already scrambling up the rocky ravine wall on the other side to safety.

"Burn it, use fire magic!" Prey shouted at Lilly.

"I don't know any!" Lilly's wide eyes were locked onto her approaching death. Her horn was aglow with magic but nothing was happening.

Useless. She was useless. Prey turned to jump onto one of the fallen pine trees and take his chances, when Lilly Bloom finally got her act together and realised that unless she did something, she was going to die.

Lilly's horn lit up even brighter, and a blast of magic shot at the scarecrow. It wasn't pure magical energy, it was actually a shaped spell, the same kinetic blast one she'd used on the disguised Mama'do. Except bigger.

There was a loud *crash-**Bang*** and the scarecrow stumbled, momentarily slowed.

But Lilly Bloom wasn't done.

*crash-**Bang***

*crash-**Bang***

*crash-**Bang***

Lilly kept blasting the scarecrow, the force of the impacts rocking it briefly back with each strike. It was working... at delaying the monster. But that was all it was doing.

The scarecrow was tough, it wasn't taking any damage, all Lilly's spells were doing was delaying it. Neither could she move while casting, all of her attention was needed just to keep shooting, she wasn't skilled enough to cast on the move. And while she might have them in a deadlock, the rest of the wicker monsters would soon be here, the gurgling approaching through the trees was getting louder by the second.

Crimson swooped in from the scarecrows blind spot, appearing from nowhere and bringing a wing blade down on the scarecrow's back, hard. From his angle on the ground Prey couldn't see what damage the strike did, but it finally got a reaction from the construct.

The scarecrow jerked, bowing in the middle, and then whipped around, striking with a metal leg blur.

Crimson was already gone, and Gloom came darting in as the scarecrow turned, stabbing its main body three times in quick succession before dropping to the ground as he lost momentum, running back and leaping off the ravine and back into the air as the scarecrow thrashed, turning the air around it into a deadly windmill around it. However it made not a sound aside from the twanging of metal and wood. There was no roar or screech.

Lilly was still blasting away, but despite all this and Gloom and Crimson's attacks, they were doing nothing more than delaying the inevitable.

"Leave!" Gloom shouted at Lilly as he circled, "Get across the ravine while we keep it distracted."

"Sir, I can fight this-"

"No! That's an order!"

And that was when the trashing bramble tendrils of the other nine wicker monsters spilled out of the mist and onto the scene, along with the overbalanced bodies those tendrils were attached to.

Prey saw Lilly Bloom hesitate, perhaps a second too long as the wicker things rushed forwards. He himself was standing on the ravine edge, with the sturdiest looking tree trunk immediately available directly below him, ready to jump and trying not to think about if he missed.

Scenic and Fallen Leaf's shouts bounced across the ravine; "Lilly run! This way." "Flee traveller Lilly, flee!"

Lilly turned tail and ran towards where Prey was getting ready to jump, the whites of her eyes shockingly wide as she raced towards Prey.

'-he must've found the best place to jump from, so I'll follow his jump!-'

Prey hated Lilly with a hatred that was as pure as it was black in that moment, as all the wicker monsters charged after her and came towards him.

There wouldn't be enough time for them both to get down onto the log. If he jumped first, Lilly would jump next and knock him off before he could get his balance and climb up. And if he waited to jump second, the monsters would get to him first. He couldn't jump, not until he'd delayed the monster hoard. Gloom and Crimson were stalling the scarecrow. They were too busy to come help.

Prey yanked the small cloth bag from the strap on his pack.

For a moment, Prey thought about throwing it at Lilly instead, and letting her body delay the monsters. But the others would see. Prey shifted his aim, turning his body sideways, the drawstrings in his mouth as lined up his throw.

"Go already!" Lilly yelled, almost on top of him.

Prey tasted the stink of rotting mould, mixing with the sharp bite of acid rising up the back of his throat. 'Not yet, not yet.'

"Go!"

'*Now*.' Prey whipped his head up and tossed the bag. As it arched over Lilly's head, a wave of dark orange powder spilled out across the lead wicker monsters.

Lilly reached him and barely slowed as she took the jump, legs swinging wildly as she let out a defiant shout, or it might've just been terror.

Prey didn't look to see if she managed to land and latch ahold. Either she'd make it or she wouldn't, and he didn't care if it was the latter. He was staring at the wicker monsters, legs shaking, stomach in his throat.

For a second Prey feared the powder had done nothing and he despaired. The monsters had no eyes or mouths, what use would the blinding dust be against such beasts made of thorns and branches?

But then the veil of drifting orange powder seemed to slip between the dark cracks in the chaotically woven wicker.

The gurgling sounds caught, and for a breath the monsters paused. Then their tendrils kicked up into a frenzy, the sounds they made changing in pitch to something horrible. The leading wicker monsters blundered in all directions, lashing the ground, each other, everything in reach.

It had worked! The did possess eyes and lungs.

However one of the monsters still came on. It was blind, so it was nothing but sheer bad luck on Prey's part that it lurched straight for him, making a wild, high pitched gurgle.

There was no way to retreat further, the ravine edge was already scraping Prey's rear hooves. He glanced frantically behind him. Lilly Bloom had managed to land on the log, but she had not yet climbed far enough along to make room for Prey's own jump.

'-_ *hr*k_ _ iiae_ g*rah*- _agh-'

Prey flinched and looked back. An arm of thorn and branches missed his muzzle by inches as it blindly whipped past. Prey shrank back as the wicker thing bore down on him, it was going to run both of them off the cliff in its frenzied state.

Prey dived, aiming to roll between the things stabbing root legs. He was small and quick, and the wicker monster was blind and clumsy. He should've been able to make it. Prey did. His backpack didn't.

Prey was yanked up short, the straps digging painfully into his shoulders, and a scream was dragged from his throat. The underside of the wicker monster swayed above him and its root feet stabbed down all around him as it tottered on the edge. A horrible smell of rot and mould made him gag.

Prey reached up as he was dragged backwards and whipped out a small knife. Invisible runes flared to life and the blade severed the tough backpack's straps like wet paper. Prey dropped to the dirt and rolled free of the tangle.

The wicker monster, freed from the only drag holding it back, went over the ravine edge, tendrils still madly trashing, and gurgling.

Prey took a moment to breathe, staring up at the mist, cold, rock hard earth pressing into his back. Someone was shouting at him. Prey ignored whoever they were and got to his hooves. He looked over the edge to see if Lilly had finally moved and if he could jump.

He blinked. A few inches from the top of the ravine, the wicker monster clung to the wall. Its stubby root feet had somehow wormed their way into a crevice in the rock, suspending its dangling upper body.

Somehow, some instinct in the thing was still functioning enough to make it desperately cling on.

Prey stared at it, stared at the knife in his hoof, and thought about what he'd heard in his head a few moments ago. Prey knelt, and slashed down on the gnarled root legs desperately gripping the stone.

The angle was bad, and Prey didn't have the strength to cut through a branch two inch think with a slash like that, let alone hard wood like this. But the runes on the small knifes edge burned themselves up and cleanly sliced through the monsters legs in one go.

It fell, still gurgling, tumbling end over end.

Without pausing to check who or what might be coming up behind him or if the monster had survived the fall, Prey shoved the knife handle into his mouth and lined himself up for the log.

The fallen tree impacted his chest, and Prey wrapped all four hooves around the trunk as his teeth clenched on the knife handle. The damp moss padding the log had helped, but it still felt like getting bucked in the chest. Prey breathed shallowly, and began crawling up the log. He craned his head up and saw the far ravine wall and safety ahead of him.

The far end of the pine tree was the end with the splayed root structure, and it was only wedged about three hooves down from

the ravine's lip.

He could climb that, easily. All he had to do was get to the other end. Fallen Leaf and Scenic were standing there at the top, shouting encouragement to Prey.

"Come on, you can do it Prey!"

"You must hurry."

He saw Lilly already up there and shooting spells back across the ravine. 'Finally doing something useful.'

Prey didn't look back at the fight he could hear happening behind him. He heard gurgling, the whistle of the scarecrows legs slashing through the air, and the *crash-**Bang*** of Lilly's spells.

Prey reached the end of the pine trunk, moss and rotten bark staining his chest's wool from pulling himself along the log, and began climbing up the makeshift ladder of roots.

"Here, grab ahold of us." Scenic called as he and Fallen Leaf stretched down, their legs extended.

Prey ignored them and scrambled up the rocky bank by himself.

Scenic tried to help him anyway, but Prey jerked back. He spat out the knife, "Don't touch me." He hissed, scrambling over the edge.

His backpack was gone, but he'd made it!

Prey finally turned back to see what was happening back with Gloom and Crimson.

The scarecrow was still slashing its spindly legs as it twisted about, trying to swat the two pesky flyers out of the air as they dived in to harry it again and again. The strikes came perilously close, and each time Gloom or Crimson circled around and dived to land a strike they risked death.

Lilly was still blasting away at the scarecrow every time she managed to recharge the spell and get a clear shot, but she was

sweating and panting with the effort of casting the constant barrage of magic.

All of their strikes, Gloom's, Lilly's, Crimson's, it didn't matter which, all were doing next to nothing. A beast like a hydra or a chimera would've either become enraged by this point, or given up and gone looking for an easier meal. But this scarecrow thing wasn't hunting for food. It wasn't alive. It did not roar or rage. It kept swinging and striking at Gloom and Crimson with exactly the same jerky speed and power it had from the very start.

The scarecrow couldn't make mistakes, it wasn't alive to either make or to learn from them. However Gloom and Crimson could, and the longer they tried to delay the scarecrow, the more likely it became they would slip up.

Prey's stomach lurched as he saw a blow that looked like it was going to skewer Crimson only just miss by what must've been a whisker as the pegasus jackknifed. Now that Prey was out of danger, his concern and need for Crimson to survive came back. He owed Crimson. He wasn't allowed to die, damn it!

"Fly away, we're safe. Fly, fly!" Prey squeaked, joining in on adding his voice to the others as they shouted across the ravine telling Gloom and Crimson to run.

Prey looked around, then reared back and threw the knife.

Equines were not made for throwing things. The knife went high in a slow arc, but then instead of bouncing off or missing completely, the knife almost changed course.

It was a split second, and in the adrenaline and fear fuelling everyone nobody noticed, but the knife somehow hit the scarecrow right in its pumpkin head and sunk straight through.

Gloom and Crimson had stabbed and slashed the rotting orange head before to no effect, but something different happened this time. The scarecrow jerked, and the orange light leaking from the pumpkin flickered, and didn't stop flickering.

However neither did the scarecrow stop, still swinging and flailing its deadly limbs about at the two flying Night Guards.

"Fly away! Now, take the chance!"

Finally the message seemed to get through, and Gloom and Crimson moved to disengage. If they'd been ground based fighters, it would've been dangerous and probably fatal to turn tail on such a thing like this scarecrow monster. But with wings, it was an entirely different battlefield.

With a flick of their wings they rose up and away from the scarecrow, and just like that, they were clear. They floated away, disengaging. Both circled above the scarecrow, effectively out of range. The scarecrow lowered its limbs. It turned its body to track Gloom and Crimson as they drifted across and safely touched down.

It stood there, they on this side, and it on the other, the ravine dividing them.

Flickering orange light still blinked on and off, and its tattered clothes hung like a shroud from its body. The thing wasn't alive, but if it had been, it would've been glaring at them. Somehow, that wouldn't have been half so bad as the unliving construct of metal and instinct regarding them across the gap.

Eight yards across. It wasn't much, but it was enough to be safe. There'd been a moment of fear where Prey had wondered if the scarecrow would be able to leap across, but no, if the golem were capable, it would've done so already. That was obviously beyond its capabilities.

The ISND all stared back at it.

Around the scarecrows legs, its smaller wicker minions continued to gurgle and thrash about in blind agony.

"Sir...What was that?" Crimson asked, breathing hard. He and Gloom had been performing their aerial maneuvers while still weighed down by their saddles bags.

"I...have no idea. Black magic, it must be." Gloom panted.

"That is the evil, that is the cause of the forests sickness. <All Mother watch over and preserve us.>" Fallen Leaf said, voice numb.

They all stared for another long minute, ears back. The scarecrow didn't move, just sat there, terrible and waiting.

"It's not going to move as long as its targets are still in sight. Us, I mean." Prey spoke up, rubbing at his shoulder where the backpack's strap had dug in.

"What? How can you know that?" Gloom asked, still panting.

"It's not alive. Or were you too busy to notice all your attacks doing nothing?" Prey jabbed his hoof across the ravine at the scarecrow, "It's a construct, a golem. Someone built it. It only does what it's been instructed to do and nothing more."

"A golem?" Scenic asked shakily, swallowing loudly every few seconds.

"You mean somepony *built* that on purpose?" Gloom asked, aghast.

"Does that thing look in any way natural or alive to you?" Prey responded.

"But it *can't* be a golem." Lilly exclaimed. The unicorn mare had mostly recovered her breath, but the fight or flight jitters were still bouncing all over her frame.

"Then what would you call it?"

"It can't be a golem," Lilly insisted, sounding panicked, "I learnt about golems in school. That scarecrow monster is way too advanced! It would take a master enchanter or magi to make the spell matrixs for a golem like that."

Prey's knowledge on golems was sorely lacking, so Lilly Bloom was probably right in her assessment, and more than that, Prey felt she was right. Her logic made sense. Free form magic, to animate something and give it independence to the degree that scarecrow had displayed, (however rustic), was a monumental undertaking.

But the scarecrow was a golem, just a darker kind to what Lilly thought possible. And that was something Prey *did* have more knowledge on. Evil shamanic voodoo, witchery, black magic, and dark rituals. Enough for him to guess what the scarecrow was.

A golem lacked a soul. That was why it could only think or act in situations that had been covered by the spell matrix. Building a spell and including every single little circumstance your golem might run into was basically impossible. That was why golems were only used for repetitive actions. For example, mopping the floor in a mage tower, all day every day.

But what if you had a ready built base of experience and actions to animate the scarecrow and act as a foundation? And what if it wasn't a spell matrix you used? What if it was, say, a living body? A soul, a brain, a person.

Prey stared unblinking at the scarecrow. It was terrifying, and it had been purposefully built by someone, but built from what? Prey thought he knew. What he was looking at was the horribly ingenious idea of a twisted mind.

And the wicker thorn monsters. Prey recalled a children's tale Gossamer had heard as a lamb. 'Kindersnatch.'

Prey blinked and looked up. Gloom had been talking to him, asking him something. "What?"

"Are you alright?" Gloom repeated worriedly, eyes scanning Prey for injuries, "What happened to your pack?"

"Oh, that. I lost it."

Prey looked himself over. Aside from the dirt, the only thing he had left on him was his ribbon, still securely fastened behind his ear. And the two golden bands on his forelegs. His pack, the three runed knifes he'd prepared earlier, the rations, the map, blanket, mushrooms and medical supplies, all of it was gone. It wasn't important though. He was still alive.

"Where did it go?"

"With one of the kindersnatchs, I got tangled with its legs when I tried to jump across. I cut it off." Prey explained disinterestedly. The monsters just across the ravine were a little more attention grabbing that what'd happened to his backpack. As long as he was still alive, he could make do without.

"Kindersnatch?" Gloom repeated.

"Those wicker monsters." Prey pointed.

Gloom stared at him, "You've met these things before?"

"What? No, I didn't think they were real. They're just from a story, called kindersnatches."

Prey hesitated, "About them, I think you should know..."

"Not now. We'll speak later." Gloom said, "We can't stay here. Fallen Leaf, lead us somewhere safe where we can recover."

Fallen Leaf didn't seem to be listening, he was still mumbling a prayer to the All Mother.

"Fallen Leaf." Gloom barked, and the stag looked up.

"You're our guide here, and we need your help right now. Can you get us to somewhere safe?" Gloom asked.

"Safe?" Fallen Leaf stared at the scarecrow, "I fear there may no longer be anywhere safe within the forest."

"Do your best. We're counting on you." Gloom encouraged him.

"I, I will do my best, traveller Gloom." Fallen Leaf said, however he didn't look too sure in himself about the achieveability of what Gloom was asking.

"That's all you can do." Gloom said, already turning away to Crimson, "Crimson, I need you to-"

"Sir, you can't be serious sir." Lilly protested out of the blue, interrupting Gloom.

Prey stared at her, along with everyone else. What was she talking about now? And then Prey heard her thoughts, and could scarcely believe the mare. 'Is she for *real*?'

"Ha?" Gloom asked, looking in all directions, spear at the ready, "What do you mean? Is something-"

"Sir, can't you see that thing right there sir?" Lilly exclaimed, "That thing's evil. And all those messed up thorn minions things too. We're the Guard, it's our duty to destroy that monstrosity. We fight evil. It's what heroes do."

Prey saw Scenic Paint openly gaping at Lilly. He didn't blame the stallion. Lily Blossom had just announced to them all that she was crazy.

Gloom himself was stunned for a full five seconds before he could reply; "There is no way we're going to fight that. We barely escaped from it, we're not going back."

"But we can beat it sir, definitely! Didn't you see how us three could hold it off? If it wasn't for those kindersnatch things, we would've beaten it, no problem." Lilly said. She was breathing quickly and there was a fire in her eyes.

Gloom finally caught on to what he really should've noticed before.

'-she's a fanatic-', He thought. It's what they all thought.

Even something slipped out from behind Crimson's mental walls, '-she really thinks this is a story where good ponies always triumph?-'

Gloom could only shake his head at her, stunned, "No. Just no. Private Lilly Bloom, we are falling back and not fighting that thing. We almost died and I'm not letting anypony get hurt."

"Sir, I must protest. Look at it, it's right there. We can beat it, I can beat it. I can do this, trust me. Any Royal Guard could easily-"

"We almost died!" Gloom snarled, fangs fully bared.

"What about 'almost dying' don't you get? It's not even been five

minutes and you're already back at this nonsense!" The rest of them flinched at the noise, the horrible gurgling and flickering orange light still much too close.

Lilly most certainly did not 'get it'. "But we didn't sir and we're not going to, because it's just an evil monster and we can beat it. That's how it goes sir."

"This isn't a game or some foalish story, this is *real*." Gloom grabbed Lilly's head and forced her to turn and look.

"See that? That scarecrow is made with black magic and it wants to kill us. We could barely scratch it. *Look* at it. Do you think any of us can fight that thing?"

Prey saw a terrible construct full of death perched across from them, with flickering orange light spilling from its head and metal legs able to tear through stone. Lilly looked, but she obviously did not see the same thing Prey did.

"It's not a question of if we can beat it sir, it's just a question of how." She announced.

How wasn't she terrified? Did she actually believe her own delusional fantasies? Prey started backing away, the unicorn was obviously still crazy on her battle high and adrenaline.

Gloom growled in frustration, "I-you stubborn-Of all the foolish!-"

"Sir, we should be going." Crimson reminded them all, voice tight. They were still in the forest, just behind them the trees began again, and sitting here was dangerous. What if the warlock who'd created those monsters knew another way across the ravine?

Fallen Leaf copied Prey in sidling away from the certified crazy Lilly Bloom. He cleared his throat, getting everyone's attention, "I have somewhere to lead us. We must go. <Little Hunted One, please convince your companions that we really must go now before it is too late.>"

"We need to go. We need to rest, plan and reassess." Prey quickly said to Gloom.

"But sir, if we leave, the scarecrow will leave too! Prey said it himself, it's only here because we are. If we leave now, we'll lose track of it. We should fight it here and now."

"No, we're going. Now."

"Sir, I-"

"Now. That's an order."

Lilly gritted her teeth, "Sir, I disagree most strongly with this course of action."

"Read my lips Private. That's. An. Order."

Lilly didn't move.

"Are you going to disobey me?" Gloom asked the fuming Lilly.

"The forest." Prey felt he had to remind them all.

Gloom motioned for him to be quiet, not breaking eye contact with Lilly Bloom, "Are you disobeying me, Lilly?"

Lilly stared across the mist filled ravine once more, '-it's right there, right there! It's our, *my*, chance-'

Gloom took a step forwards, "Private Lilly Bloom, is there a problem?" He pressed.

"...Sir. No. Sir." Lilly slowly grated out, wasting even more of their precious time.

Gloom let his breath out, "Good. Then come on, Fallen Leaf has somewhere for us to recover. Be on your guard, who knows if there's more kindersnatches on this side."

Fallen Leaf let out a sigh of relief as Gloom turned away, relieved that they'd finally seen reason.

Crimson flexed his wings and stepped up to guard Fallen Leaf's flank, looking sidelong at Lilly.

Scenic just looked lost and scared, asking himself; '-why did I think signing up to the ISND was a good idea?-'

Prey looked back across the ravine, they all did, unable to help it. They just had to see what had almost killed them one last time.

The mist added a blurry edge to the scarecrow and the kindersnatches. But the tortured gurgling was clear. The wicker monsters weren't rolling around, their roots balanced them upright despite how unfeasible it looked, but the blinding powder Prey had thrown in their eyes and noses somewhere under that wicker was still crippling them.

The others hadn't noticed. The way the kindersnatches lurched around all the time had thrown them off. However they would question soon, Prey knew. Questions and answers that Gloom would not want to hear.

Was Gloom going to get angry at him for being the bearer of bad news again?

Then, as Prey was finally turning away from the ravine with its small army of monsters, his eye was caught. Far beneath the trees across on the other side, hidden in the mist and shadow, Prey thought he saw the wispy shape of someone.

Prey's eyes snapped back. He squinted, trying to make his sub-par eyes see through the shadow. Was he imagining it? If he looked away, it would disappear, Prey was sure.

A thick wisp of silent mist rolled across the ravine, obscuring the thing that might've been a figure. Prey kept his eyes locked on the spot.

To his unpleasant surprise, the shape was still there when the mist passed.

For five more long seconds Prey stared. And then it shifted.

Perhaps the shape was only the drifting of mist, but either way, it vanished back into the shadows.

---I---

[[[Picture - Scarecrow concept]]]

https://imgur.com/9dm9O4m

Author's Notes:

And here we go, now officially at 500,000 words. Yikes. Halfway to a million. At this rate and how much of the story is left to tell, it could well reach 1,000,000. Okay, that's a lot of writing I've got left to do. [image]

Anyway, to those who read, hope you liked the chapter. I think next time, I'll add a picture of what a kindersnatch is supposed to look like.

If you spotted any mistakes (or just have a question about something I might've missed), please do let me know. Thank you!

Helper and kind editor: **Sweetolebob18**

44.3 Sign on the dotted Border Line

"I must return and warn my holt. I cannot let them stay in this forest another day."

That was what Fallen Leaf had said the moment they stopped, sheltering under an overhang he'd led them to.

The stag was jumpy, eyes still abnormally wide after nearly dying, or whatever it was the kindersnatches had been going to do to him, but he was firmly focused on his goal and would not be shaken.

"But we need you. You're the only pony here who knows this forest. Only deer." Gloom correct himself.

Fallen Leaf shook his head. "I must warn my holt. Evil is ahoof in the forest, and it seeks to take people. I cannot risk my family by delaying."

Gloom could hardly refute that, but, '-we need him now more than ever-'

"Fallen Leaf, I'm very grateful for all you've done, but you can't just leave us here. We still need your help. It's not just your holt at risk, it's all the missing villagers. And after seeing that... 'scarecrow' thing, it's even more imperative we rescue them as soon as possible. Please, I ask you in the name of the Princess."

Fallen Leaf looked away, studying the forest. The ISND waited tensely, watching their surroundings outside the overhang with distrustful eyes.

Prey was waiting nervously for his turn to come, glancing every few seconds at Crimson. He was thinking about what the scarecrow and the kindercatches meant.

'This is bad. I don't want to fight someone able to create such

monsters. He or she wasn't even directing their creations back at the ravine. This all reeks of black magic. Or Necromancy.' Prey shuddered.

"No. I must warn my holt." Fallen Leaf eventually decided, "I will lead you back to my holt, and then from there, safely out of the forest."

"Coward." Lilly muttered.

Gloom gritted his teeth and pretended not to hear the mare, "Please, can you not-?"

"I will not be swayed. I am sorry." Fallen Leaf shook his head, looking away.

Gloom sighed, "Alright." He gave in.

"Thank you. Its not that I... I am sorry, but my duty is first to my family." Fallen Leaf bowed all the way until his antlers touched the leaf litter, "Thank you for saving me. If not for you, those things would've caught me and, and I do not know what would have happened then. But I thank you."

Prey saw Lilly Bloom kicking a tree root in anger, '-you're so thankful you can running away like a bucking coward. We saved your life and this is how you thank us?-'

"No, it's fine. I understand. You were only in danger because you were helping us, so it's not fair to demand any more of you." Gloom said, rubbing his eyes with a leathery wing tip.

"So what do we do now sir?" Scenic asked.

Prey raised his hoof and spoke up; "Captain Nighthawk is sending reinforcements to Alfalfa Dale. There isn't much we *can* do, except meet up with them when they arrive and go from there. Plus-"

Here Prey swallowed distastefully, "-Nighthawk said a mage would be coming with wide range scanning spells. They're our best chance of finding the villagers."

'And also our best chance of staying away from this dark mage. Let the Night Guard reinforcements confront them instead of us for once.'

"I think Prey is right sir. We need more ponies to be able to fight that scarecrow. My wing blades just bounced off it." Crimson reluctantly admitted. He'd been obsessively cleaning and smoothing down his feathers whenever he thought none of them were watching.

That was funny for some odd reason, but Prey tried not to laugh. Laughing wouldn't help matters.

"Just give me a moment."

Gloom concentrated, trying to feel any guidance from his cutie mark, but he got nothing, leaving only Prey's suggestion. "That's probably the only thing we can do. I don't want to face that thing again like we are now." Gloom admitted.

Scenic looked very relieved by the idea of getting help, whereas Lilly looked frustrated. '-I don't need anypony's help. The hero always beats the monster no matter the odds-'

Prey couldn't believe she was still thinking like that, even after having faced down the scarecrow and the thrill of battle had faded. 'She must really be a bit insane. It's the only reason that makes sense.'

"Prey," Gloom called, getting the lambs attention, "You sure you're unhurt?"

"I'm fine. It was just my backpack I lost."

"You called those things kindersnatches. What do you know about them?"

Prey sucked in his breath. He'd known this was going to come up. Prey didn't want to think about what he'd discovered, but he knew he'd have to tell them eventually. He glanced nervously at Lilly Bloom, wondering how the unicorn would overreact.

Prey licked his lips, "Well... They're from a children's story back home. If you cut down a tree out of season, evil spirits come and posses the stump. In the story, these spirits snatch children who wandered too close and imprison them under their roots, growing off the trapped child's anguish."

"Wait," Scenic gasped, his thoughts having jumped ahead, "You don't mean-"

"-Those things were ponies?" Crimson exclaimed, head jerking around.

"Yes." Prey answered reluctantly. The kindersnatches contained people inside. But knowing hadn't stopped him from cutting that one back at the ravine off.

"*No*." Scenic breathed. Fallen Leaf muttered a prayer in Fourlon.

"Uh-uh, no way, impossible. There's no way that's true." Lilly shook her head rapidly.

"Prey, how can you be sure?" Gloom rasped.

"I'm sure. That one that I knocked off the ravine edge-"

"-What?" Gloom exclaimed.

"-Just as it was falling off, I saw inside. Behind that wicker casket thing it has for an upper body, there's someone trapped in there. I think we've found what happened to those villagers three months ago."

"But, but those things were monsters," Scenic Paint protested, looking horrified, "They *can't* be ponies. That's, that's, that's too messed up."

"And that logic worked so well for you last time in the cellar, didn't it?" Prey retorted nastily.

Scenic flinched and Lilly wanted to know, '-what the buck do they keep talking about with this bucking cellar?-'

Gloom's face set as Prey confirmed his fears. '-those were victims, not monsters. And we attacked them-'

"Those villagers are being mind controlled somehow. Like puppets." Crimson said, the corner of his mouth curling with disgust. "Coward. Whichever pony did this is a filthy coward. They're like Garrow, but worse."

"Who is Garrow, what do you guys keep talking about?" Lilly burst out, but she was silenced with a furious glare from Gloom.

"Lilly, you...just be quiet." He ordered. Then he pointed back at Prey, "Why didn't you say this earlier? We could've tried rescuing them from out of those kindersnatch things back at the ravine."

'Because I knew that's exactly what you'd want to do.' Prey thought. However he had his excuse ready, "I tried to tell you, but you told me to save it until later."

Gloom thought back, realising he had. Immediate guilt skewered him. "You're right, I'm sorry Prey. I did say that."

Gloom rubbed his face vigorously and stared around the misty forest; '-buck, I messed up. Now how are we going to find those kindersnatches again to free their captives?-'

What none of them seemed to draw the connection on was Prey had just admitting he'd probably killed a kindersnatch, along with the innocent villager it held. But no one accused Prey.

"Evil spirits. In the story, kindersnatches were evil spirits. But that's impossible. Those monsters were real, physical. They were made, just like the scarecrow." Crimson said.

"The rest of the villagers... Has that happen to them too? Put into kindersnatches?" Scenic asked, face pale "Wait, no, that can't be right. There were only nine kindersnatches. Surely there would've been more if the whole of Mayflower had been turned into those kindersnatches. Right?"

Scenic's logic was based off hope, not common sense. So what if they'd only seen nine? Who said there couldn't be more than one

group of roaming kindersnatches? Or only one scarecrow for that matter?

"I..." Gloom looked at Scenic's face of hope. How could he deny Scenic that hope? "That's... You're probably right."

"And we're going to save all of them, right?" Scenic asked, trying to weakly smile.

Gloom nodded firmly before Prey could raise the point that they didn't know *how* to save said villagers, and that the warlock was probably marshalling these same enslaved villagers to kill them all.

"That is the plan and always has been. Nothing has changed in that regard. We will save them." Gloom said.

'-as many as we can-'

Lilly stamped her hoof in agreement, "Yeah, there's some evil villain out there who's enslaving ponies to make an army. He's using the villagers as hostages and minions so we can't hurt them. And that scarecrow is like the commander of his army. It's sick."

"So you believe Prey's words now, do you?" Crimson asked flatly.

"Enough," Gloom cut in before the mare could respond with something trite and pointless, "We can't afford to waste time. Fallen Leaf's got the right idea. He needs to go warn his holt, and then we need to get back to warn Alfalfa Dale and meet up with our reinforcements. That's all we can do right now."

Gloom looked around at them all. Just a little while ago, they'd been fighting for their lives against an abomination constructed from black magic, while inside a forest which felt wrong and twisted. "Can anypony think of a better plan?" He asked hopelessly.

None of them could.

Prey wanted out of this forest as quickly as possible. It was beginning to feel all too awfully familiar.

"Fallen Leaf, lead us out of here please."

The stag nodded eagerly, "Swiftly done."

If the forest was unnerving before, it was nothing to how it now felt. Every distant tree in the mist and shadow might be a kindersnatch or the scarecrow.

Fallen Leaf was leading them back South-East, avoiding the baloth's territory. He trotted fast, ears flicking every which way as his eyes remained locked ahead. He was going faster than before, being less cautious. He was in a hurry.

His mind was locked on one thing and one thing only; '-<my holt must be warned. They must flee the forest>-'

The deer had his priorities. His family came before his own safety. Prey would do the same if he were in the stag's position. But he wasn't. Prey had never had family, that had solely been Gossamer's right, not his. And now Fallen Leaf's push for haste was putting him at risk.

'But demanding he slow down will do nothing,' Prey thought grimly as he hurried along behind Crimson, his progress speeded by the new found lightness of his missing pack, 'He will not slow down, and if we do not keep up, he will certainly leave us behind.'

Prey would've forced the stag to slow, but not with everyone here as witnesses, all of them hurrying alongside him in the mist.

Prey knew the only reason Fallen Leaf wasn't outright galloping was because he had to pace himself, and he couldn't warn anyone if he got himself eaten before he arrived. He was dancing a fine line between caution and haste, but he'd also promised to see the ISND safely to the forest's border.

And Prey could tell how much that responsibility was eating away at the stag. '-<my holt must be warned. My place should be with them, but they would never forgive me for abandoning guests>-'

Prey didn't care about the stag's anguished dilemma. If Fallen Leaf broke and did try to abandon them, Prey was ready to act.

'Life isn't fair, and survival ain't pretty.'

Prey would do what was necessary to ensure his own safety came first. And Crimson's of course. Crimson was important too. It wasn't just himself Prey had to look out for anymore.

Ten minutes. Half an hour. Forty-five minutes. Then a full hour of unnerving quiet, straining eyes, and shallow breathing.

Prey could well remember this. The feeling of not knowing if you were being hunted was almost worse than having your fears confirmed. His ears twitched about for the first tell tale gurgle of the kindersnatches, or worse, the whirr-click of the scarecrow.

The ground began to level out beneath the leaf litter, and presently, but what felt like hours later, they came upon something familiar.

Crimson's sharp eyes picked it out first amidst the shadows and mist, "Sir, it's the road to the sacred circle." He whispered, pointing.

Ahead, set into the dirt, mostly covered by pine needles but still clearly recognisable, was the cold grey-white of the paving stones.

"That is good. The road will lead us out. Follow." Fallen Leaf instructed quietly, and sped up even more.

With their path set, and the old stone road to act as a signpost of sorts, their pace only continued to increase.

Gradually, so gradually at first Prey wasn't sure if he was imagining it, the mist started to thin. The clinging grey mist would probably fully dissipate as the day wore on, coupled with them getting closer to the forest's border. It didn't seem possible, but above the dark tree canopy shone the sunlight of a normal day. It wasn't even midday yet, but it sure felt longer. Day and night were different under the trees.

Their road started to grow more and more familiar as it wound between trees and thorn bushes, the scent of pine and mould somehow a touch less old. They were getting close to the border,

and that meant close to the site of Mayflower. It was still at least an hour out, but they were drawing closer.

'-will there be a reception committee waiting to welcome us there? More kindersnatches?-', Gloom wondered darkly, shifting his spear to his other wing.

'-well if they are, we'll get the opportunity to try and immobilise them to free the villagers from inside-'

Quietly, Gloom passed that order around to them, making sure that they all understood their priorities. "If the kindersnatches are there, we scout first, make a plan, *then* engage and capture."

Prey frowned and cocked his head, trying to listen, something pricking the back of his wool. At the same time, Crimson slowed and lifted his muzzle to scent the air.

Fallen Leaf had also slowed his pace, antlers lowering as he peered ahead.

"Traveller Gloom," He murmured back to the Sargent, "I believe we are no longer alone."

A brisk wind rustled the dark pine branches and made the needles ripple, yet the wind penetrated no farther than the forest's border. But the current inhabitants of the forest would never know about that.

They were in deep, miles too deep for the cool air to reach, and crouched next to the old fallen road, its stones almost entirely buried under decades or more likely centuries of time. They were waiting in ambush.

Prey peered out from behind his tree trunk, keeping low. To his left, Crimson was pressed up against another pine tree, motionless. Prey turned and looked further up the road to his right, and didn't see anyone. Good. That was good.

Across on the other side of the buried road, Prey knew Gloom, Scenic, Lilly, and even Fallen Leaf hid. It was an ambush. Basic, uncomplicated, but effective. *Hopefully* effective. Or maybe they were the ones about to be ambushed.

Gloom had grimly ordered their current division to surround the road, with the idea being for Gloom's group to attack from the front, and then Crimson to surprise them from the rear when they least expected him. If the group was too large, they'd just let them pass unhindered. Prey was supposed to stay out of any fighting.

Fallen Leaf had refused to help, and had made it clear he was going to be taking off at the first sign of trouble.

"My holt must be warned, that is my first duty. And for that, I cannot die here. I have seen you to safety, but now I must take my leave." The stag had resolutely refused Gloom.

Yet despite that, and his own declaration, for some reason Fallen Leaf was still here.

The stag had kept his word, and guided them to safety. But he hadn't left the moment he was done like Prey was expecting. Guilt had made Fallen Leaf stay, because even if he knew he should be galloping back to his holt with all speed, the stag's conscience wouldn't let him just leave the ISND like this.

So here Prey found himself once again, lying in ambush. Waiting.

Prey had the better hearing. Crimson had the better vision. So Prey listened, and Crimson watched. And Prey also watched Crimson. The pegasus's yellow eyes were bright in the shadows.

Sitting unmoving like this was cold. Nor did it help. Sitting made you stop and remember. The scarecrow, the kindersnatches, and worse. This was just the sort of time the forest started playing tricks on your mind.

Prey fought down the urge to swallow. They were not alone in the forest. Something or someone else was here. The ISND knew it, but did this other party also know it? They all waited, breath shallow.

'There.'

Shapes moving between the trees, following the twisting road buried under the pine needles. The figures looked brownish, although it was hard to tell in the mist, and moved silently with relative swiftness. There were two of them, medium sized, each at least as big as a pony. Prey's heart started to beat faster, he couldn't help it.

They were going to walk right into the middle of the ISND's ambush.

Prey didn't risk turning his head to check, but out of the far corner of his eye, he saw Crimson's powerful wings slowly, oh so slowly, flexing, one feather at a time, the wing blades along their length just waiting to snap open.

The two shapes drew closer, passing behind a line of hanging vines and a boulder. When they came back into view, Prey saw the figures were indeed equines under heavy camouflage cloaks. The material looked waterproof, unobtrusive, and plain. The best type of camouflage. Around the hoods, there was a fur like lining, and the cloak was clinched to the figures upper bodies.

'Is that real fur?'

Prey couldn't tell from here, but the answer would tell him a lot about the wearers. They also wore saddle bags, but Prey had no idea what those might contain.

And both figures moved like they were armed. There was no evidence of it or outlines under the cloaks, but Prey would've bet Lemon Pink's life on it.

Who were these two? What were they doing out here? It couldn't be anything good, nor could this just be a coincidence. Not after the kindersnatches and the scarecrow.

The two cloaked people were still coming closer. A few more steps, and they passed right by Prey and Crimson's hiding place, heading on up towards Gloom and the others. The cloaked figures were just about to reach the patch of brown toadstools, which was the predetermined ambush point.

Prey all but felt Crimson tense.

For no reason, the lead equine figure suddenly hesitated, then abruptly held up his hoof. A straw coloured foreleg was revealed. That proved it, definitely a pony. The two figures stopped, hooded faces turning this way and that.

Prey mentally cursed. Somehow, their ambush had been sensed.

'Mud's claim, how did they know?'

Prey knew they should just run. The ambush was a failure, and who knew what abilities these two might posses? There might be unicorns under those cloaks and hoods for all he could tell.

Prey would've activated his runic trap and fled in the chaos, not waiting to see if the two survived or not. But this wasn't the Deeper Green, Prey didn't have a runic trap, he wasn't alone, and Gloom refused to kill.

The two hooded figures turned around in a circle, exchanging low words. They turned to look back down the path, obviously spooked that they were being followed, which was a mistake.

The moment their backs were turned, Gloom decided to go ahead and spring the impromptu ambush anyway.

Gloom, Scenic, and Lilly all jumped out from behind their trees and rushed to surround the two cloaks.

Of course, their two targets heard the movement. Rushing out like that just can't be done silently without magic, and the two cloaked

ponies spun around. Crimson exploded out from behind his tree, wings driving down to give him extra speed.

The ambushees instinctively spun around yet again in surprise as they did a double take in both directions. Now with Crimson behind them, and Gloom, Scenic, and Lilly spreading out to encircle them in the front, they were surrounded, not to mention outnumbered two-to-one.

The second cloaked figure reared up and threw their cloak back. They were turned away from Prey, but they didn't need to be for Prey to see the two pairs of yellow wings flare out. Wing blades ran their length, the same as Crimson. Who would win between this Pegasus and Crimson? Prey was a split second from finding out.

"Hold! Friends!" The other cloaked figure shouted, "We're also Guards."

Everyone pulled up short, and for one moment, everything was frozen as they all stared at each other.

Gloom was the first to unfreeze, "We were expecting no reinforcements until tomorrow. Identify yourselves." He barked.

"It's rude to ask for names without offering your own," The figure who'd shouted for them to hold replied, not looking that intimidated by being surrounded. His voice, for it was a he, held a smooth confidence:

"I don't know who you ponies are either, but you aren't the only ones not expecting reinforcements. So let's trade, our names for yours. Sound fair?"

The two weren't in any position to negotiate, but the confident one hadn't even been phased for more than five seconds by suddenly being confronted with the ISND.

"That remains to be seen. You first." Gloom ordered.

The winged one, obviously a pegasus, didn't seem so sure of himself from what tells Prey could spot from his hiding place. The confident one shrugged, "As an act of good faith, we'll go first, but I'll hold

you to your word afterwards. I'm Corporal Shimmer, first scout division."

The pegasus with the yellow wings slowly refolded them and introduced himself too, "First Private, Atlas Line, also first scout division."

'First scout division?' Prey thought. It sounded familiar.

"It's your turn now, fair's fair." This Shimmer pony said to Gloom.

Gloom considered the two cloaked figures infront of him. The ISND had them surrounded. But Gloom wasn't looking to start a fight if he could help it, especially if they were all on the same side here. Plus, he still had both Prey and Fallen Leaf in hiding who wouldn't do well in any fight.

"While you're at it, how about ordering your other two ponies to come out from hiding? We're not going to start trouble if you don't." Shimmer added, seemingly not at all perturbed.

His perception startled Prey, 'How did he know?'

Prey wasn't the only one who started. Gloom hid his reaction, but Scenic and Lilly were not so experienced and visibly gave it away. The two people calling themselves Shimmer and Atlas Line definitely saw it.

"Not just yet," Gloom said, not letting this stranger call the shots, "I am Sargent First Class Dusky Gloom, ISND division in the Night Guard, serving Her Royal Majesty Princess Luna. We have our orders-"

"-To investigate the disappearances of the villagers of Mayflower, right?" Shimmer cut across, "Our orders are the same. We received a letter requesting aid. Strange though, I didn't know the Lieutenant had sent a request for a joint effort to Canterlot."

Shimmer's words were obviously a subtle challenge to Gloom. Prove who you say you are, a reverse of what Gloom had been asking just a moment ago.

However, Shimmer's words rang true. Alfalfa Dale had sent out a letter requesting aid, but that letter had never arrived in Canterlot. So it must've gone somewhere else instead.

The pieces fell into place and the dots connected up.

'No. No possible way. There's no way.' Prey thought, shaking his head in denial behind the tree.

He didn't believe it. He wouldn't believe it.

Not taking his eyes off Shimmer, Gloom slowly reached into his backpack and fished around. "We were sent here to investigate the first set of disappearances from three months ago. We didn't know about the rest of Mayflower until we arrived two days ago. Here's my Guard badge and rank as proof."

Gloom held up a dark purple backed silver tag, and flipped it open and revealing the badge of the Night Guard, along with Gloom's name and rank. "As you said, fair's fair. Your turn."

"Fetch your badge for the good Sargent, Atlas." Shimmer said, waving at his pegasus companion.

His companion snorted and flipped off his hood, revealing a dark beige face and proud orange eyes. Apparently this pony wore his Guard badge around his neck at all times, because he proudly lifted it up and flipped it open. But Prey didn't need to read it to know where they came from because he'd already seen the helmet.

Gloom read it out loud, "Private Atlas Line, first scout division of the Border Guard."

Hate. Hate hate hate hate hate. It tasted like ash and bile rising up the back of Prey's throat.

The Border Guard. His enemy, the *Resistance's* enemy. Captain Fire Strike, Breaker, Fleece, Gossamer, and their mother. Everything *he'd* done. Everything *they'd* done.

Prey was rational. He was always rational. 'I'm rational.' Prey told himself he was rational.

Prey was not being rational.

Prey could taste blood. He'd bitten his tongue. His hooves were shaking. He was shivering, but it wasn't from the forest's chill. No, he felt hot.

The Border Guard, two of them, they were right in front of him. Proud, self righteous, *alive*.

'How dare they?'

Gloom was speaking, talking to the betrayers. They were talking back, explaining why they were here and asking Gloom the same. Gloom nodded, satisfied, and put up his spear.

"Prey, Fallen Leaf, join us." He called.

Prey only barely heard him. His eyes were fixed on the two Border Guards. One beige, one straw coloured. Their all too familiar armour wasn't enchanted, it didn't disguise their fur. He hated them. Prey's legs carried him slowly out by themselves, plodding forwards in a daze.

'How dare they? How *dare* they?!'

Garrow's remnant was egging him on in the back of his head, crooning to see blood and gristle.

For a dark moment, Prey's mindscape shook, non-existent chains clanking in the deep ocean, and Garrow fled. '*H*ow d*are* t*hey*?'

Prey breathed, feeling like his head was about to burst at the seams, and the moment of dark need passed unheeded.

Gloom was speaking quickly now, urgently, gesturing back the way they'd come. "Mayflower... Scarecrow... Kindersnatch...Ravine..." Prey heard the words as background noise.

Gloom's lips were moving, more words were coming out. Prey didn't

hear them, his eyes wouldn't leave the two ponies in their midst. Shimmer pulled off his hood, a straw coloured unicorn. Prey shuddered. 'What am I doing?' A small part of him wondered. He was projecting too much. It was going to make him slip up.

But just he hated them so much!

Atlas Line was looking warily deeper into the forest and mist, asking short questions, "When...? Where...? How big...? Fast...?"

The buzzing was so loud in Prey's head that he couldn't focus on what he was picking up from the two Border Guards.

'Calm down. Calm down.' Prey told himself. It wasn't helping.

Fallen Leaf was joining in, giving his own brief run down of what had happened. "Unnatural...Wrong...Kills for pleasure."

Prey had no weapons. No Bone Rot, poison, or blinding powder. His pack was gone, along with the other two runic inlaid knives he'd pre-prepared. All he had left was his touch. He could do it, reach out, break their minds, shatter their souls. 'No, I'll be caught, everyone will see. Fifty-seven years. They're not the same Border Guards. All of those are dead.'

Prey realised Shimmer was doing most of the talking, asking lots of earnest questions, but even then, it felt like the unicorn was always staring sideways at Prey.

Prey willed himself to focus, to see why the unicorn might be looking at him.

'I can't hear him,' Prey realised, 'I can't hear him.'

Shimmer was like Crimson and those few rare individuals Prey had met whose thoughts, for one reason or another, were hidden.

Shimmer was a blank spot in front of him, a black wall of nothing.

'I can't hear him.' Prey thought, and now there was panic mixing with his blistering hate. The buzzing thrummed in Prey's head and veins.

Gloom was still talking, "Night Guard reinforcements coming. ...Train.... Alfalfa Dale.... Message in a bottle.... What are your own orders?"

"Scouting division.... Just arrived.... Will report back.... You should help us."

Gloom was; '-not so sure-'. He shook his head:

"Scarecrow.... Dangerous in there.... Got to.... Mayflower villagers.... Rescue from kindersnatches."

The Pegasus scout, Atlas, agreed with whatever Gloom was saying, but Shimmer shook his own head; "We should work together, that's our best chance." Atlas quickly changed his opinion to agree with his superior.

No. Prey did not want the two Border Guards to work with them. He wanted them dead.

Prey felt like he was underwater. Or was it just in his head? It was hard to hear. 'Calm down, calm down, calm down.'

Gloom shook his head on hearing the Border Guard Shimmer's suggestion, '-they don't understand what we saw-'

"Listen, I know it doesn't sound believable, but we can't beat that scarecrow golem thing. We tried, and what's more, it's got hostages. Nor can it be killed, since it's just a puppet, but what if the pony controlling it decides to start throwing the kindersnatch hostages at us?"

"Then we'll do our utmost to rescue them, it's as simple as that. But we need you to work together with us." Shimmer said.

"If you have a plan, then I'm all ears." Gloom said.

Atlas Line rolled his shoulders, "We're scouts, so let's scout. We can find this scarecrow and track it back to wherever it comes from."

Shimmer agreed with his subordinate, "Just like Atlas said. Both of us, along with both you and your other flyer, Crimson wasn't it? Yes, we can track this monster down easily. Together, we'll find out where the villagers are being held."

Gloom shared a glance with Crimson, who responded with a small wing shuffle but no actual words. "Splitting up is a bad idea, half of us are ground bound and there's no way we can carry everypony. And even if I agreed to that, there's all the trees and the mist to navigate."

Fallen Leaf, who was pacing restlessly in front of them, nodded his antlers, "The forest is far too large travellers. You will never find the place."

Shimmer gave Fallen Leaf an understanding nod, but there was a dismissive tilt to his ears. "I don't judge anypony for being afraid. I've faced down many monsters that would've turned a lesser stallion's legs to jelly. I know what I'm getting us into, and trust me, Atlas is no slouch either."

Shimmer said the words as reassurance to Fallen Leaf, but he was speaking just as much to the ISND. Atlas's shuffled in mild embarrassment and pride at his superiors praise.

Shimmer confidently went on; "I've got over six years experience on the border, and I've dealt with any number of monsters in my time. I'm not bragging, but it doesn't matter how big and bad this scarecrow is, we can find a way to beat it. I'm not saying it'll be easy, but I'm saying with all of us, it can be done."

Shimmer certainly looked like he was speaking from experience and not just over confidence. He hadn't panicked in the face of an ambush, he wasn't letting his guard down even now, and he stood with a ready posture that said he was prepared to spring into action at a moment's notice.

Still, Gloom wasn't completely convinced, '-I'm not risking anypony in my unit, and I have yet to hear a solid plan from you Shimmer-'

"Working together sounds good. It'll improve all of our chances, but

if that's going to happen, I need to hear a plan that we-" He gestured, encompassing all of the ISND, "-Think will work."

"I get what you're saying Sargent," Shimmer also looked around at the ISND members Gloom had indicated, lingering for an uncomfortable moment on Prey, "I completely understand. You're right, we need a plan. If, like you fear, we're unable to track this scarecrow, then we'll need another approach, correct?"

"That's what I'm saying Corporal." Gloom nodded.

"So we need to take five minutes, sit down, and talk this out. We can formulate a plan together. But going all the way back to Alfalfa Dale and waiting for reinforcements..." Shimmer firmly shook his head, "No, I'm sorry but that's not something I'm willing to do. It'll take far too long and time is something we can ill afford to waste."

"Sir, we should totally join up with these guys sir." Lilly murmured to Gloom.

Atlas Line stepped forwards, bravely meeting Gloom's yellow slit eyes and refusing to look away;

"Please, listen to Corporal Shimmer. With what you say about these kindersnatch things..." His mouth tightened, "It means we can't afford to wait. Any delay means the missing villagers suffer."

'-I know all too well what happens if you dither and only hope for the best. We've got to make our own destiny and save Mayflower-', Atlas Line thought.

Gloom wanted to save the villagers too, of course he did. He was a Night Guard, it was his duty to help innocents, and the thought of what some evil pony had done to them made his blood boil. If he knew for a certainty that joining with these two Border Guards was the correct course of action over waiting for reinforcements, he would do so in a heart beat.

But he wasn't sure, and that was the point. His special talent wasn't giving him any hints, and he didn't know if his choice might condemn the villagers of Mayflower to agony, violation, or possibly

even death. The mere thought made his heart clench in fear.

Gloom remembered something Lieutenant Screech had told him once, '-sometimes the worst thing you can do, is to do nothing-'

Gloom didn't know what he should do, so he was going to go with what felt right.

"I agree. We can't wait around for help to arrive. We've got to act now." Gloom announced.

Atlas Line sighed in relief, Shimmer nodded his head in thanks and opened his mouth, Crimson cocked his head, Fallen Leaf raised his hoof to interject, but before anyone else could say anything, Prey exclaimed; "*NO*! You can't do this."

Gloom's ears went straight up in surprise at Prey suddenly speaking. After everything, the scarecrow, the near escape, the kindersnatches, mist, paranoia, and all these sudden developments, Prey had almost been forced from the thestral's mind. Now he blinked uncomprehendingly at the lamb, "Huh? What-?"

"No, I, we *can't* work with these two," Prey hissed, drawing closer to Gloom, "We can't work with them. You can't trust them, don't you get it?"

There was a strange almost slur in Prey's voice, and his eyes were wide.

Atlas Line seemed completely bemused by this sudden outburst. He raised his eyebrows at his Corporal, then around at everyone else. '-what's this now?-'

"We're here to help," Shimmer said, frowning down at Prey, "I don't know why this foal doesn't trust us, but we've only just arrived here. There is literally nothing we could've done that might've upset the villagers. Was her rescue especially traumatic? That would explain her hostility."

"Rescue? What are you talking about?" Gloom asked.

"Don't speak to them, don't trust what they're saying." Prey urged

Gloom, glaring at the two Border Guards.

Shimmer looked surprised, "You mean to tell me she isn't one of the villager's you rescued? I'd thought..." His brow furrowed in confusion.

"No, this is Prey. He's a he, and he's part of our-"

"Stop it! Stop speaking to them." Prey ordered.

Gloom gave Prey an uncertain look, his ears swivelling to listen to the forest, '-what's going on? Is he trying to tell me something's sneaking up on us? Why doesn't he trust them?-'

Shimmer stepped forwards, lowering himself to get down closer to Prey's level, ignoring the way Prey drew back in loathing and Crimson twitched reflexively. Shimmer smiled at Prey, "Hey now, I don't know what's wrong with you, but I promise we're only here to help. You can trust us, we're here to help."

"Trust you? *Never*." Prey squeaked, "Go away."

Shimmer's eyes flicked up to Gloom and gave the Sargent a look which clearly said, 'I don't know what's going on but I'm doing my best'. The unicorn put on an even more obviously friendly smile for Prey. Prey couldn't hear anything from the stallion, he couldn't tell whether Shimmer meant it, or was planning to gouge Prey's eyes out and sticking them on the end of his horn.

Prey chose to believe the worst. He wanted the border Guard dead this very second.

"Trust has to be earned, yes. However you don't have to trust me if you don't want to. In fact it's smart not to, we are strangers after all. But that doesn't mean we're going to go away just because you say so. Me and Sargent Gloom have an important job to do."

With his piece said, Shimmer straightened, turning his full attention back to Gloom, "We can't afford to delay. We need to talk and-"

"You can't trust them, they're liars. They turn up out of nowhere and want your help. There's no way that's a coincidence, they're just

looking to stab you in the back. *Us* in the back." Prey snapped through gritted teeth, alternating between glaring at Shimmer and at Atlas. Everyone else was completely thrown by this excessive hostility.

Shimmer sighed impatiently, his cloak settling as he shifted his weight onto his other hoof to fully face Gloom, "Sargent Gloom, we don't have time for this foolishness. If you could please put the lamb aside, we can get on with the business of saving villagers-"

"How *dare* you-"

"Would you give me and Prey a minute?" Gloom interrupted, grabbing the lamb by the scruff of his wool while his back was turned and dragging him off to the side.

"Don't touch me!" Prey twisted free of Gloom's grip.

"Quiet, we need to talk." Gloom snapped, still forcing Prey backwards.

Shimmer pursed his lips, casting an exaggerated look at the forest around them, "Now is hardly the time."

Gloom mentally agreed, but he had to speak with Prey. He couldn't just ignore the lamb, he owed Prey that much. "We'll only be a minute. I'm sorry but we really need to speak."

"Better make it fast then. Who knows how long the villager's have while we delay." Shimmer warned

Prey opened his mouth again but Gloom jabbed a hoof, "No, be quiet. We're going to talk." He ordered.

Prey's wide eyes turned to Gloom. He glanced furtively back and forth between Gloom's stressed out scowl and the others.

"Crimson," Prey suddenly exclaimed. Gloom paused. Prey licked his dry lips, "I want Crimson to come talk too."

Gloom screwed up his brow and glanced back over his shoulder, "Crimson?" He offered the pegasus. Crimson looked back blankly,

just as unsure about this sudden change in Prey.

Prey ignored the rest of them. Whatever they they were thinking, he didn't care. He only looked up at Crimson, trying to silently convey with his eyes that the pegasus needed to come with them.

Uncertainly, Crimson trotted over. The three of them stood about ten paces off from the other five. Lilly and Scenic were looking back and forth between the two Border Guards and their Sargent, while Fallen Leaf made up his own singular forth group in this conflict.

Around them, the forest leaned in to listen.

Gloom lowered his voice, "We don't have time to mess around Prey, so tell me, what's going on?"

"Don't trust them, they're dangerous. Send them away, we can do this by ourselves." Prey immediately said.

"Where's this hostility coming from, and why don't you trust them? They seem to be on the level, and what they've proposed makes sense." Gloom responded.

"I don't trust them because they're lying. I know it."

"No, you don't know. You just hate them," Crimson spoke slowly, peering into Prey's face, "I saw your eyes. You hate them. Really hate them."

"Really? Is that true Prey?" Gloom asked, however he didn't need to wait for Prey's reply when the answer was so obvious, "But why Prey? You've never even seen them before today."

"I don't have to have seen an ice viper before to know what it is."

Gloom hesitated, but he had to make a choice here. "You hate them for some reason, but you won't tell us what that reason is. I can't just accept that if you won't tell me why."

Prey opened his mouth hotly, then froze, "I, you don't, I, I.... No, I can't."

"Prey, look at this from my point of view. I trust you, but we can't do nothing. If together we can come up with a plan to save even just *one* of the villagers from the kindersnatches, I'm taking it. The villagers come first. You understand that right?"

Prey glared at Gloom, but what could he say? Crimson and Gloom didn't understand, they didn't *know* the Border Guard like Prey knew.

Gloom scowled when Prey didn't immediately confirm they should save the villagers over everything else, "Don't you *care* about them?"

"Of course I do, you think I'd want to leave anyone to that fate?" Prey protested, but he was lying, he didn't really care. Right now he just wanted Shimmer and Atlas dead.

"Stop biting your tongue," Crimson abruptly snapped, making Prey jump, but Crimson was already shaking his head, "No, I, sorry. I just meant, can you please stop? I can smell the blood on your breath. I don't like it."

"I-what?" Prey hadn't even realised.

Crimson rapidly shook his head, "Never mind, forget it. That's not what's important right now." He looked Prey in the eyes, and Prey felt like for a moment that Crimson could see so much deeper than he ever wanted anyone to see.

"It's because Shimmer is a unicorn, isn't it?"

"What?!" Gloom exclaimed, only just about managing to keep his voice down to a hiss.

Prey took a step back instinctively, 'No,' He thought, panicking.

"I, I, I, that's not true-"

"You don't trust Shimmer just because he's a unicorn?" Gloom demanded, "How can you be so racist, Prey? I thought you were better than- Wait, is that why you're so negative about Lilly Bloom?"

"No, I never- that's got nothing to do with that. Lilly's hot headed, arrogant, and unsafe, *that's* the reason why I don't like her."

"You're lying," Gloom stated, eyes narrowed, "Don't deny it Prey, I can feel it. You're lying."

This was exactly how Prey had feared Gloom would react.

Crimson gave Prey slow shake of his head that seemed to be apologetic, but also uncompromising. 'You're supposed to help me.' Prey thought, his heart sinking. What'd happened to Crimson's assurances about always saving Prey's life if it was in danger? But Crimson wouldn't, because he didn't understand about the Border Guard, and Prey couldn't make him.

Prey tried to think up a denial, but his head was a mess of worry and panic over the two Border Guards, mixed up with old memories, what Crimson thought of him, the scarecrow, whomever was controlling it, and now this.

"No, no it's not like that, I just, I just..."

They weren't believing any of it, Prey could see it in their eyes.

"...That's none of any of yours business, and maybe if you hadn't let Lilly Bloom mess up everything so much, then we wouldn't be having this problem!"

"Moon rot this!" Gloom hissed. He was disappointed in Prey, but mostly just angry at him for wasting precious time right now.

"Can you only ever think about yourself Prey?" Gloom demanded, despite knowing it wasn't true, "You promised me you would do your best to keep us alive in here, but I'm realising you never promised anything about anypony else. If you aren't willing to do your duty and look to the villagers well being, then I'll do it instead. Shimmer and Atlas are offering a chance I'm not going to pass up."

Gloom straightened his wings and turned around. Prey was left gaping as he still tried to come up with an excuse, afraid of what Gloom would do with this knowledge now that he knew Prey was terrified of magic and unicorns.

None of them had the time, but Gloom still paused for a moment, "I know you're scared Prey, but that's only a reason, not an excuse. Me and Crimson would never leave you behind, so don't think it's okay to leave these villagers behind."

Prey saw Shimmer watching them closely, watching him, as Gloom walked away. Prey couldn't believe it. Gloom had dismissed him in favour of these two filthy traitorous Border Guards? Hadn't they worked together, fought together, survived together?

Prey didn't care about the stupid villagers, this wasn't about them. It was about Shimmer and Atlas worming their way into the ISND. 'Liars. Traitors. *Deceivers*.'

But Crimson was here, he still had a say in the matter. Crimson had saved his life, so that meant he wouldn't so casually dismiss Prey's words-

Crimson shook his head just once at Prey, "Nopony is born any better than any other pony, trust me Prey, I know from experience. You're being racist and wrong. But you're not a bad pony Prey, just misguided. I can explain why it's wrong to you if you need." He offered.

Prey gaped at him.

"Later it is then. But right now Prey, we all need to work together. You said you would do anything I asked, didn't you?"

"Yes." Was all Prey could say.

"Then from now on, never be racist again."

Prey stared at the leaf litter between his hooves. This wasn't fair. He was only trying to keep him and Crimson safe. Why couldn't anyone else see this? "But they killed Breaker." He whispered.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing." Prey quickly shook his head, "I, I'll try."

What else could he say, even if it was a lie? It was Crimson who

was asking. He owed Crimson.

Crimson gave Prey an encouraging nod, "Good. Come on. Sargent Gloom is discussing a plan. They will need our help."

"My holt must be warned." Fallen Leaf stubbornly insisted, shaking his head in answer to Gloom. He spoke with calm seriousness, but the white of his tail was flared even now in fright.

There was still dried blood on Fallen Leaf's fur from the numerous small cuts and thorn punctures he'd taken, but the stag's minor hurts and fear didn't matter to him when he thought about his holt, waiting oblivious of the danger for his return even while the scarecrow, kinderstatches, and who knew what other dark creations roamed the forest.

Prey hated the stag. He hated everyone right then. The deer were going to be escaping the forest, while he was forced to stay inside. It was a bitter realisation. Prey flexed his hoof, glaring from under his brows around at everyone. He imagined wiping all of their memories, killing the two Border Guards, and then restarting everything over again.

But he'd never be able to pull it off. Everyone was on guard, and there was no way to get anyone alone one at a time. He'd be caught straight away in any attempt.

Gloom was still trying to convince Fallen Leaf to stay and act as a guide while the rest of them all looked on. Shimmer and Atlas, who did not know the stag, were watching the exchange neutrally.

"There's more of us now, and we have a better chance of rescuing the Mayflower villagers. You know your way around this forest, we don't. If we encounter the scarecrow again, we'll also have a better chance of defeating it, which'll keep your holt safe too." Gloom reasoned.

'No it won't,' Prey thought, 'This won't protect anyone at all. It's just going to get everyone killed.'

Gloom's argument was not swaying Fallen Leaf, even Scenic and Crimson tried adding a few words that didn't do any good:

"We kind'a did save you, so, uh, could you maybe help us out please?"

"Ponies are in danger. You have to help."

It didn't work. Fallen Leaf just repeatedly shook his head, looking guilty, but not willing to change his mind.

Shimmer sniffed and turned his head away, "Fine. In that case, you can leave. Go back and warn your family." He dismissed.

Next to the unicorn, Atlas seemed most surprised by his Corporal's abrupt attitude, but Shimmer didn't seem bothered by what anyone else might say. Shimmer pointed off into the forest while staring Fallen Leaf in the eye, "Go on. You obviously don't want to be here, and we don't want to waste time trying to convince somepony who's not committed. So go on, leave."

Gloom made a movement to disagree, but caught himself, frowning. This was the exact opposite outcome from what he'd been trying to achieve. The Border Guard Corporal had just completely undermined his attempt to convince Fallen Leaf, but Shimmer didn't appear perturbed as he held his pose, waiting for Fallen Leaf to either follow his pointing hoof and leave, or give in.

'-<letting me go just like that? Why?>-'

Fallen Leaf had not been expecting this, but his guilt only held him back for a second in the face of his duty; "Then I will take my leave immediately. My holt, it is...I must get back."

Fallen Leaf bowed low to the dirt, "My apologies. <None of this is what I wanted.>" He muttered, unable able to meet any of the ISND's gazes.

Keeping his gaze lowered, Fallen Leaf turned and cantered quickly off back up the broken road before anyone could change their minds. Prey watched his antlered outline fade into the mist, and wondered if the stag would survive.

"That's him gone and enough of our time wasted. I must apologise Sargent Gloom, I didn't talk that out with you first, but we had no time and arguing further with that stag would've been pointless. If he wasn't going to help, it was best he just leave. I'm sorry if my method left a bad taste, but it was for the best."

"No, you're probably right." Gloom said.

"The villagers. We've gotta' save them from this villain's clutches, and quickly too." Lilly broke in.

She'd just rudely interrupted two non-commissioned officers talking, even if they were from completely different military commands, but Gloom didn't even register her slip. There were far bigger concerns hanging over them right now.

"Yes, we've lost enough time. We need a plan. Corporal Shimmer, what did you have in mind?" Gloom asked briskly.

"Perfect. Atlas, get our map out." Shimmer ordered.

Gloom was about to order Prey to do the same so they could compare the two, but then remembered the map had been lost along with Prey's backpack.

'-Moon damn it. That means Prey has no rations or water either. Doesn't matter, we'll just share ours-'

Atlas Line was pulling stuff out of his pack, looking for the map. Shimmer flicked his tail curtly, "Hurry up."

"Sorry sir, I know it's in here somewhere."

Leaving aside his subordinate for the moment, Shimmer turned to Gloom, speaking in a quick, all business tone; "First things first. What are your strengths? I'm a unicorn of tier two with experience in scouting. I have a detect life spell so I always know when anything living is near by, and my special talent is camouflage magic. Atlas Line is an excellent flyer, and his special talent is making and reading maps from an aerial view. How about your team?"

Prey held his breath, waiting to hear what Gloom would say. 'Will he lie? Try and keep the sensitive stuff secret? He'd better, or else.'

Gloom realised he didn't have a summary of his squad prepared like Shimmer did. '-we haven't got anything like that. Two of us are completely new, and all we ever do is scrape by-'

However Shimmer was expecting an answer. Gloom just wanted to get on with making the plan, but Shimmer's enquiry was completely reasonable. They'd just met, and they needed to start working together as quickly and effectively as possible. An exchange of information and abilities was the best way to do this. Gloom thought fast.

"I'm Sargent Gloom, I'm a thestral. Me and Crimson both come from the clans and have excellent night vision. My special talent is knowing when I am travelling along the right path." Gloom didn't add the, '-*sometimes*-', He was thinking, and quickly moved on to the others:

"Crimson is the fastest flyer of us two, and he's likely the best wing blade user you'll meet-"

Atlas Line made a dubious noise in the back of his throat, but he was otherwise a bit busy rummaging with increasing intensity for his map.

"-Because of his special talent." Gloom lied with a straight face.

If Prey had cared more right then, he would've watched for the red pegasus's reaction to Gloom's lie, but Crimson had ignored his dire warnings about the Border Guard. Prey ground his teeth. Crimson could go and get stuffed right now.

"And this is Prey. He's...with us. Don't think of him as a foal, he's actually very intelligent."

Flattery would get the Sargent nowhere. In fact, it only made Prey hate Gloom more at the moment.

Gloom hurriedly moved on, maybe sensing Prey's seething anger or perhaps just keen to skip over why he had a child under his military

command, "Scenic and Lilly are new, this is their first mission with us. They're trained as Royal Guards." That was all the complimentary information that Gloom could think up for the two of them right now.

Shimmer nodded at what he'd been told, a serious, deeply considering look on his brow. Then his ear twitched in annoyance, "Atlas hurry up with that map."

"Sorry sir." The pegasus apologised, digging through his whole pack, embarrassment tinging the tips of his ears red in frustration. '-where the buck could it have gone? I *know* it was here-'

Shimmer sighed in frustration, and his horn briefly flashed, and Prey's heart jumping into his throat.

"Check zip on the other bag, left cheek." Shimmer said tersely.

'-I know I didn't put it in-Oh...-'

Atlas was left shame faced in front of them all as he came up with the map. This was a tense, deadly serious situation and he'd wasted precious seconds. They were supposed to be professionals, and he'd just made himself and his Corporal look bad.

"Sorry sir." Atlas said again, trying to offer the map as quickly as possible to make up for his previous blunder.

"It's fine. It happen's to everyone," Shimmer said tersely, not even looking at his subordinate as he began unfolding the map, "Just remember it in the future."

Atlas grimaced, not placated about his mistake. However, they had bigger concerns right now than his ineptitude. Shimmer levitated the map, and he, Gloom, Crimson, Scenic, and Lilly all crowded round.

Prey narrowed his eyes into slits. He didn't believe it. That whole thing seemed engineered. Shimmer must've staged it on purpose! But for what reason? To make his teammate look incompetent in front of the ISND and get Gloom to trust Shimmer over Atlas more, Prey was sure of it. It was all some plan to manipulate them. Prey

shook with suppressed anger.

'What kind of game is he playing? And how can I ruin it?'

Anything Prey could do to hurt the Border Guards and get away with it he was going to try.

"We're here, roughly," Shimmer said, pointing at a spot on the map, "Alfalfa Dale is there, and Mayflower is over here."

"How accurate is this scale?" Gloom asked.

"Very. Atlas Line is good at cartography even if he can't keep track of his work," Shimmer said, tracing a line down the map, "With the skills you listed for yourself and your team, I estimate our best chance for success is to track this scarecrow back to wherever it came from. You said it was...'made', am I getting that right?"

"Yes. It wasn't living. A golem of some kind." Gloom nodded grimly.

"Somepony evil made it. Nothing naturally has a carved pumpkin for a head and metal in its legs." Scenic put in. He didn't even notice the sideways look Shimmer was giving Scenic for cutting across his own commander.

"As I was saying, we need to find this scarecrow and track it back to wherever its lair is."

"Because that's where we'll find its creator, the same pony who kidnapped the villagers with the kindersnatches. I understand." Crimson said, nodding to himself. Prey noticed his shoulder plate had a disturbingly deep score down it, taken from the scarecrow.

Lilly decided it was her turn to join in too.

"And we can definitely beat them, who ever they are. They won't be able to hide behind their pet monster. We'll make them tell us what they've done with the villagers and then rescue them." She declared, already fired up and ready to go again.

So quick was she to forget the danger and approve of Shimmer's idea, merely because it promised the storybook defeat of the villain

she wanted. She'd completely missed the point that they didn't have a clue who the scarecrow's creator was, or how strong they might be, or even if this plan would work. In Lilly's head, success was already a given. It was a Plan, with a capital 'P', therefore it *had* to work.

"Well, quite," Shimmer said, "The best plans are simple. But, and here's the big but, we need to plant a tracker on the scarecrow first."

The unicorn patted his backpack, "I've got that bit more than covered for you, but finding the scarecrow again out here, in all these tree's and mist, that's going to be the challenge." Shimmer said, his eyes narrowing as he calculated.

The others wore similar expressions of serious contemplation mixed with worry, or outright fear in Scenic's case, although the stallion was making a masterful effort to control himself.

Shimmer and Atlas hadn't faced the scarecrow and kindersnatches, but the rest of them had.

Gloom's thoughts on the matter put it quite succinctly, '-we couldn't beat that scarecrow last time, so how will we succeed this time? However there's no choice but to try-'

Prey would've pointed out the rest of the abundant flaws in the plan, but he refused to interact or even indirectly help the Border Guards at all. The traitorous, vile, filthy, lying, zoma'grika, golom'die, *iz val hien-*

Prey broke off and spun himself to face the shadows of the forest instead. He didn't want to even have to look at them, and someone had to keep watch.

"Uh, how though sir?" Scenic asked, not even noticing as he rubbed at a small cut on his leg and made himself wince at the sting, "That scarecrow, I, I don't see how even if we can find it again we're gonna' be able to beat it up enough to put a tracker on it. All it wanted to do last time was rip us to pieces, and if it weren't for the ravine, it would've kept coming at us."

Scenic rubbed at the shallow cut harder, not realising he was doing so, "So what I'm saying sir is, uh, how are we going to get it to go back to its lair instead of madly chasing after us?"

'Or stop it from killing us. Or bringing backup along. Or its creator getting involved. Or the normal horrifying mix of forest monsters, or any number of other things.' Prey cut himself off and shook his head violently, twining his hoof around and around the end of his ribbon. Everything was making him so *angry*, so confused and scared. He hated them.

His list just grew two names longer.

Shimmer however had an answer to Scenic's question. He seemed to have an answer to everything, the infernal unicorn wouldn't shut up. Prey longed for the silence of a slit throat.

"I know how we can do it, but it's going to require trust on everyponies part. Taking into account all your strengths Sargent Gloom outlined, I believe our three flyers will be best at keeping the scarecrow distracted while me and Lilly do the job of secretly placing the tracker on it. Once that's done, you three just fly off to safety, and we'll all regroup later. If what you said holds true, the scarecrow will give up once it no longer has targets and I can guide us with the tracker after it."

No, the ISND hadn't said that, they were just making assumptions. Reasonable ones, but how dare Shimmer act as if it had anything to do with him?

"How will we get to that stage?" Crimson asked bluntly, "I mean, how will we find the scarecrow? Or is the plan to let it find us?"

Shimmer patted Atlas and Gloom on the shoulders, making Gloom's wings tense in alarm for a second in surprise, "That's something Sargent Gloom and Atlas will have no trouble with. If they put their special talents together, I'm certain you can pull it off."

Prey let out a bark of giggling laughter. It sounded completely false and forced, and he didn't care.

"There's no need to worry about that. he says? Good call, because here the scarecrow comes right now."

A second of frozen silence iced over everything, the mist a blanket of stillness. The second didn't last long.

Out of the mist came a sound, slowly getting louder, closer, a whirr-click skittering.

Louder, like a giant spider, moving closer. Everyone could hear it now, but none of them seemed able to move. How had it found them?

If they ran, would it simply follow them again? Prey's eyes were riveted on the direction of the approaching sound, but he was still able to pay just enough attention to his surroundings to hear that everyone had stopped breathing. He himself was also holding his breath, unable to help himself.

Louder. Whirr-click skitter.

Why were they all just standing here? Prey began to back up.

A flicker of orange light. It vanished, came back a second later, stronger. Then again, brighter, as the scarecrow came closer. It's body was still hidden, which made it all the worse. The horrible skittering noise sounded like it was on top of them already.

Gloom finally seemed to remember what was going on as he saw Prey backing past him. He snapped from whatever stupor had frozen him, "Get a grip, here it comes. Now's our chance Corporal Shimmer. We mark it, then we run."

With a **snick**, Crimson's wing blades flicked out as he moved forwards to place himself in the scarecrow's path. Atlas Line saw Crimson, and hurriedly followed his example, moving to block, '-whatever's coming out of this mist-'

"Here it comes," Shimmer said in a low voice, horn lighting up as he backed up to get some distance, "Brace yourselves."

Prey's mouth twisted in hate, 'Protected by a Border Guard? *Me*? I

refuse.'

The scarecrow charged out of the mist in all its awful glory, orange light still flickering on and off from the knife wound Prey had dealt it earlier. That damage looked no more significant than a bee sting.

It all happened at once.

Lilly let out a gleeful shout; "Come get it!" And fired.

Gloom, Crimson, and Atlas all charged. Prey heard Shimmer let out something that was probably a curse word, and Scenic froze up again.

The scarecrow didn't slow or hesitate in the slightest and charged straight into the midst of them.

In less time than it took to draw a shaky breath, everything had devolved into a fighting mess of chaos.

Atlas narrowly avoided being trampled, Crimson dashed around the scarecrows side and slashed ineffectually as he went, Gloom stabbed and backpedalled, and Lilly shot it with her useless concussive spell.

There was nothing Prey could do, he was helpless in this fight. Again. He had no resources or way to damage the scarecrow.

Atlas was good with his wing blades, but he was far below Crimson's skill. Indeed, he only just managed to knock aside a stabbing leg which sought to impale him. If not for the warning of their previous fight that Gloom had given him, the pegasus would've almost certainly already died.

"Take that, and that, and that!" Lilly was yelling.

Scenic looked around frantically for some way to help, spotted a fallen branch, grabbed it up and ineffectually bucked it at the scarecrow. It narrowly missed Crimson and bounced harmlessly of a metal leg.

Prey saw Gloom managed to duck in and score a strike on the

scarecrow's main body, but then the spear was almost wrenched from under his wing claw as the scarecrow spun around.

"Place the tracker already." Gloom shouted in a rasp.

Shimmer wasn't blasting the scarecrow or casting any other sort of spell like the unicorn should've been doing. Instead, he was digging in his pack.

"Buy me one minute!" Shimmer shouted back, pulling out something small and round, and beginning to focus his magic into it.

'Now would be the perfect moment.' Prey thought, 'Sneak up behind him while he's distracted, get my hoof on him, destroy his mind.'

The Border Guard was on Prey's list. He had to die for Prey to be safe. But Prey hesitated. He couldn't read the unicorn's mind. What if Shimmer noticed him? What if he knew what Prey had planned? The lethal fight with the scarecrow was still ongoing, Crimson was risking his life this very second, and Shimmer might have some way of impacting the fight.

But Shimmer was still a Border Guard.

But not a Border Guard from fifty-seven years ago.

'That doesn't matter, he still deserves to die.' Prey told himself.

"Any time now!" Gloom shouted.

"Patience!" Shimmer shouted back, as if they weren't fighting a terrifying, unliving construct and were instead baking bread, "It's almost ready."

Prey wanted to kill Shimmer. But he couldn't, not yet. He squinted at what Shimmer was levitating and focusing his magic into. Crimson wove around a tree and the scarecrow tore a splintered chunk out of the trunk instead of the nimble pegasus.

Something which looked like a mini compass but without the spindles started to glow as Shimmer's magic charged it up.

It must be a tracking device of some kind, Prey realised. But how was Shimmer going to attach it onto the scarecrow? It was insane, but without the scarecrow's kindersnatch backup, this was actually their best shot. Gloom would not get a better chance to enact their plan.

It was an awful plan. They were all going to die. And Prey would never get a chance to say "I told you so."

A tiny misstep, or maybe it was a moment of distraction, in the end it didn't matter. Either way, it cost Gloom.

One of the scarecrow's limbs lashed out low in an unexpected sweep. The blow was so fast it almost blurred. This time, Gloom didn't manage to jump aside and the strike went into his side.

Gloom was sent spinning off his hooves with a yell of surprise. When he landed it turned into a cry of pain.

"Sir!" Scenic shouted, galloping over in panic.

For a horrible moment, Prey didn't know what he felt. Then Gloom staggered to his hooves, and it didn't matter, because he was still alive.

That blow had been hard and fast enough to snap bones and rupture flesh. Gloom limped and staggered a couple of steps, trying to get his breath back, and as he turned to the side, Prey saw why the Sargent had been able to get back up at all. The armour plate on Gloom's upper right flank had taken the hit. It had saved the Sargent's leg, and quite probably his life, but even from back here Prey, could see the metal was badly misshapen.

Gloom let out a hiss between his teeth and pushed Scenic off. The thestral had managed to hold onto his spear despite getting knocked for a loop, and raising it, he started limping back towards the fight.

"Any time now Corporal!" He shouted again, voice hoarse with pain.

"I'm ready. Quick, keep it distracted." Shimmer called. Prey looked, and saw the unicorn with the compass object floating above his horn.

Keep it distracted? Much easier said than done.

Perhaps some unknown parameter in the spell matrix of what passed for the scarecrow's brain triggered, or perhaps the thing actually did have ears and understood words, because it abruptly switched from trying to violently kill Crimson and Atlas, and skitter-charged at Shimmer instead.

"Oh no you don't." Lilly shouted, and with suicidal stupidity jumped bravely into the scarecrow's path.

"Lilly run!" Gloom yelled.

Lilly stared into the rotting pumpkin face of the golem baring down on her and did not flinch.

Somehow over the sounds of panic, Prey heard her mutter to herself, "This'd better finally work. It's now or never."

The blue shine of Lilly Blossom's magic changed to a pink, and flashed right as the scarecrow reached her.

The vibrating, ringing *Clo*Oo*Oo*Om** sound, like a bird smacking into a glass window, but magnified a hundred fold filled the forest. The scarecrow rebounded backwards.

Underneath her shimmering pink shield still vibrating from the impact, Lilly had been driven to her knees, gasping. Prey hadn't thought the unicorn knew a shielding spell, yet somehow in the do-or-die moment, she'd successfully pulled it off.

"Ha! Take that, you overgrown straw bale." Lilly panted in triumph. Then the scarecrow regained its footing and in its single minded focus, instead of going around the magical pink barrier in its path, it simply charged again.

Beneath the smooth, pink tinted shield, Prey saw Lilly's ears fell flat, "Oh sugar!"

The scarecrow impacted Lilly's barrier for a second time, and this time, it didn't stop.

Lilly was harshly crushed flat to the ground beneath her own shield as the scarecrow went right over the top of her. Her shield was the only thing which kept the scarecrow's sharp legs from going straight through Lilly's head, helmet not withstanding, its legs finding purchase on the magical surface as the shield bowed inwards under the golem's weight.

"Lilly!" Scenic was yelling, forgetting about Gloom who he was supposed to be helping as he saw Lilly's plight.

The shield almost collapsed, *almost*. It bowed inwards to less than a few inches from Lilly's furiously sparking horn, the mare straining, but the scarecrow wasn't interested in finishing its trapped victim off. Its target was still very much Shimmer, Lilly had merely gotten in the way.

But now Crimson and Atlas were there too, Lilly's act of stupidity had delayed the scarecrow for the few seconds it took for both of them to get in front of the scarecrow again, and Gloom now stumbled back into the fight as well.

Scenic rushed over to where Lilly still lay stunned, her shield spell starting to flicker and die, "Come on Lilly, get up. Let me help you." He shouted, trying to get to Lilly out from under her shield while Gloom, Crimson, and Atlas surrounded the scarecrow.

Surrounded, what an inaccurate word.

The three of might have the scarecrow in their midst, but it was not it who was trapped. They were the ones in danger, yet Crimson did not hesitate to jump up, a flap of his wings giving him extra height, and slashed at the scarecrows legs, trying to hit something in the joint.

"Got it!" Shimmer shouted. Prey's attention darted back to the unicorn for a second to see that the compass tracker thing he'd held had split in two. One half remained with Shimmer, and the other darted forwards in his green aura. The little half wove above the scarecrows head, then jabbed down onto the middle of the golem's back.

'Why doesn't he use his sword and do the same?' Prey briefly wondered, before remembering that normal blades had so far achieved nothing.

The scarecrow didn't notice the tracker landing, and by some magical means, nor was the tracker shaken off when the scarecrow jerked forwards at Shimmer again.

The unicorn had a light of triumph in his eyes, but when the scarecrow charged him again, ignoring the other three Guards harrying it, his look vanished and he retreated.

"C'mon Lilly." Scenic was begging Lilly, pulling the groggy mare to her hooves.

"I've got this, I can do this, just watch me." She was mumbling, pressing a hoof to her horn.

And Prey? Prey was useless. All he was doing was hiding behind a tree and watching this all unfold. He was even less use than Scenic at this moment, but there was nothing he could contribute to the fight.

Now he could only watch helplessly as Crimson, the one person he owed, threw himself into the scarecrows path to protect Shimmer, a Border Guard, and a unicorn.

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[[[Reference Sketch - Kindersnatch concept art]]]

[image]

Author's Notes:

NOTE! Here is a cool piece of art someone submitted. Quite a lot better than my Kindersnatch scribble above. The scene is back dated to Chapter 34 with Garrow, (and I've linked it there), but I also want to link it HERE as the newest chapter so other people can also see it too! ✨

And, *And*! This one too of Garrow himself as well, if you want to see him in all his glory: Garrow Art

It was done by: GreatSpaceBeaver I think it's great, and it would be great to check out!

🍎 And of course, thank you to **Sweetolebob18** for his help in editing. There were a fair number of mistakes on this Chapter, so it was definitely needed.

If you spy anymore mistakes, please let me know, thank you.

And I should also thank sesquipedalian, for doing just that!

45.3 The Messages We Send Out

Prey could only watch helplessly as Crimson threw himself into the scarecrow's path to protect Shimmer, a Border Guard, and a unicorn.

Crimson was fast. He danced around the scarecrow's stabbing blows, flowing from one hoof to another. But all of Crimson's prodigious skill and countless hours of training in Equine combat meant little against the golem.

That was the reality of the world.

You could strain and fight and struggle, gaining every possible physical edge you could, reaching peaks you'd never managed before, but at the end, there was only so far you could go. You'd reached the top of your ladder, but when it came to facing monsters and magic, you looked up and found another whole ladder above your head.

Such as right now.

*Fi-*Ting*

Sparks flew as Crimson's wing blades grated uselessly off the scarecrow's legs. His attacks weren't working, and they never would. The scarecrow couldn't be beaten like this. It was a golem, it couldn't die. They were the only ones who were going to die at this rate. Prey knew that. It's why he was hiding. He didn't want to die.

Foul orange flickered. Crimson whipped his head to the side just in time. The scarecrow struck a tree.

Crunch

Prey cringed. Bark chips flew. Pine needles showered down.

From harsh experience, Prey knew there were only three ways to beat a larger monster such as this. Numbers, traps, or magic.

They lacked the numbers, and they hadn't had time to prepare a trap. That left only magic.

Prey could use runic magic, but not without hours of preparation. Mind magic was equally useless against something which didn't even have a mind.

That left only Lilly and Shimmer. Lilly Blossom was out, even if she hadn't been half stunned by being run over, her spells had proven completely ineffective against the scarecrow.

Could Shimmer do anything? If not, Prey was about to see him die within the next twenty seconds.

Shimmer had achieved the objective he'd been so keen on reaching. He'd tagged the scarecrow with a tracker, despite all of their warnings, but now how was he going to survive?

'He's going to run away.' Prey realised.

'Filthy, lying, *disgusting* Border Guard. All his bravado and magic, and he's going to run away and leave us. Again. Just like they always do.'

Prey himself wanted to run. They'd managed to outrun the scarecrow earlier. For a time.

But the scarecrow did not get tired, and they did. Prey knew it would eventually catch them. Which was why he was pressed up behind this tree, hiding, and not running. Shimmer's eye's flicked straight to Prey's hiding spot, just for a moment. Was that revulsion, disgust, or even something else? Shimmer squared his shoulders and faced the scarecrow head on as it approached.

What? Wasn't he going to run away? What was he going to do, cast a shield like Lilly? Or was Prey about to see the stallion ripped to pieces in front of him? Yes. *Yes*. Prey wanted yes.

Magic rushed to the tip of Shimmer's horn, coalescing into a disk of sparkling magic in less than a second. Shimmer braced his hooves, then magic shot from his horn, through the shining disk, and emerged from the other side as fire.

It wasn't a destructive fireball, or a huge wave of fire, but a thin stream of orange flame. However it was continuous, it didn't dissipate midair, and it was fast.

The stream of flame struck the scarecrow and splashed almost like water over its head. Nor was Shimmer stopping there, he wrenched his horn around and sent the stream of fire playing over the rest of the monster's body.

Immediately, the rags the scarecrow was dressed in caught ablaze. Vapour and steam billowed forth from the scarecrow's pumpkin head. But for all that, the scarecrow made not a sound nor slowed. Shimmer's fire had no stopping power, it was merely burning heat and flames, which the unliving golem ploughed straight through.

"No!" Atlas yelled as the scarecrow bore down on his temporarily immobilised Corporal. Atlas threw himself at the monster and grabbed hold of one of its hind legs.

His desperate attempt to halt the burning scarecrow's advance was not in vain. His grapple served to distract the scarecrow for a few moments as it turned to deal with the annoyance clinging to its leg.

Atlas's attempt at rescue didn't come without a cost though.

The scarecrow had already proved it could whip its legs about at lethal speeds. That didn't suddenly change just because Atlas was holding onto one end.

The scarecrow jerked its grabbed leg up and then threw it backwards into Atlas. The metal strut dug into Atlas's body as he was hurled off his hooves and sent flying, his grip completely irrelevant. Pegasi are better able to handle sudden acceleration and deceleration than other ponies, and certainly better than other races, but certainly not from being slammed.

Atlas went cartwheeling in a crazily flapping mess of cloak and limp trailing limbs. Prey knew the pegasus's whole world would be spinning, all his organs must be rattling, or possibly even ruptured.

Prey however didn't watch to see how badly Atlas landed, his attention was fixed on Shimmer still burning the scarecrow, and Crimson, the only one left to oppose the monster on the ground.

Grimly, Crimson raised his wing blades before the scarecrow.

Prey wanted to shout for Crimson to run, but he knew it would do no good. The pegasus would not step aside to let Shimmer die.

'Why why *why*? Why are you trying to save his unworthy life?'

Shimmer was still pumping magic through his magical array, shooting flames out to bathe the scarecrow. The magic he was using was terrifying to Prey, but the scarecrow was more terrifying still.

"No fair, why aren't you burning?" Lilly shouted uselessly at the golem, still fighting her own legs to stand up straight, her back pack hanging half off.

For a moment, the scarecrow looked down at the lone Night Guard barring its way, its body half obscured under fire, exactly like something out of a nightmare, and Crimson looked defiantly back up.

Now Crimson was facing down not just the scarecrow, but a scarecrow on fire.

Gloom was limping towards his fallen spear, shouting at Scenic to get Lilly clear, items spilling from his torn saddle bag. Prey's eye zeroed in on the glass bottle which fell with a thunk into the pine needles.

A green glass bottle glowing with slowly flickering internal spellfire.

Prey didn't even need to think, he dashed from behind his tree and sprinted for the fallen bottle.

Prey heard the whoosh of fire behind him as Shimmer continued to

flame the scarecrow with increased vigour, Gloom not five paces from him shouting at him to get clear, the whirr and click of the scarecrow.

Everyone else was occupied.

Nobody else could do this but him.

Prey dived, sliding in the dirt and leaf litter to scoop up the bottle. The smooth green glass slipped from his hooves, the bottle was too big for Prey to grasp in only one hoof. He needed both hooves. Prey almost screamed in frustration, he didn't have time for this!

'I*Hate*BeingARunt.'

Prey squeezed his eyes shut and focused. His hoof grew hot, and first one, then two, and finally a third rune slipped from his hoof onto the glass bottle. The effort was immense, rushing like this strained his mind and a pounding headache surged into existence, but it had to be done.

The message-in-a-bottle had fallen from Gloom's saddle bag, ripped open from where the scarecrow had caught the Sargent with its glancing blow. Any glass container should've completely shattered by the force of such an impact, but this bottle hadn't.

Seeing it, Prey had immediately known the answer why; the bottle was enchanted against breaking. It should've been obvious. The message-in-a-bottle spell was worth over a thousand bits, and held stabilised spellfire. Of *course* it was enchanted against breakages.

But Prey *needed* it to break, and he needed it to break against the scarecrow right now. But he was physically incapable of throwing it. It was just too big for him to grip in one hoof to throw, he couldn't balance on two hooves, and he couldn't turn and buck it now that he'd destabilised the spellfire even if Prey'd trusted his aim.

So how was he supposed to toss it at the scarecrow?!

Prey looked around frantically. How-?

Shimmer gave a strained cry of effort and the burning stream of fire sputtered out of existence. Gloom had finally retrieved his spear and was half hopping, half limping forwards to engage the scarecrow again, his deformed armour hobbling him.

Atlas Line lay unmoving where he'd landed, out cold, or maybe he'd snapped his neck. That only left-

"Lilly!" Prey yelled in his squeaky shout, even in the midst of panic hating himself for having anything to do with a unicorn. Lilly and Scenic's heads both snapped round, but neither had time to speak.

"Throw this at it!" Prey yelled, waving the message bottle in his hooves.

"But-"

"*Throw it*!"

For once, Lilly did as she was told. Her brow creased in effort, her magic obviously still strained, and got her blue aura back to life.

Prey couldn't help but shout in revulsion and fall back as he let go of the bottle, the 'Horrible*Foul* Disgusting*Dangerous*' magic taking the bottle from his hooves.

With a grunt Lilly jerked her head, and the bottle flew through the air following the arc of her horn, and straight at the scarecrow.

Three pairs of eyes were locked onto the flying bottle, breath stuck in the owners throats.

All Lilly had to do was levitate the bottle above the flaming scarecrow, and then smash it down against its back. Simple. That was all she had to do.

But being intelligent like that was apparently asking too much. Instead of levitating it high and hitting the main body, Lilly sent the bottle flying in a straight line, and one of the scarecrow's legs got in the way.

The reinforcing enchantments on the bottle were disabled, even if

only briefly. The impact with the fast moving metal leg shattered the glass.

Prey sucked in air to scream some obscenity at Lily for her utter incompetence, no matter if it was already too late, he was just so mad at the dumb mare.

There was a bright flare of white green fire, so bright it made everything else nothing but black and white shadows for a second. Prey heard Crimson and Gloom both shout. There was a muffled *thump*.

Black spots danced danced in Prey's vision. He squinted, trying to see what'd happened.

Light was the first thing to return. The bright orange of the still burning flames, but lower, on the ground. Prey blinked furiously, and as his vision returned, saw that the scarecrow was now down on the dirt, its three remaining legs scrabbling wildly, the fourth just a stump.

The remains of the leg was lying in the pine needles, but the middle section was missing, just completely vanished. It smoked. The scarecrow was lopsided, kicking pine needles everywhere as it tried to alternately stand and attack Shimmer.

"Yes yes! I got it." Lilly cheered.

"What happened?" Crimson asked blankly, still blinking and squinting, his wing blades poised.

"Stay back," Gloom called, waving Crimson back, "I don't know what that was, but it's still dangerous-"

There was another almost blinding white green flare of light. 'Not again.' Prey threw up his foreleg, but it lasted less than a moment. He half lowered his leg. A large chunk of something brown and smooth, the uneven edges blackened and smoking, had appeared in the dirt, covered in, of all things, sheets of flapping paper.

It only took a moment, but Prey recognised the brown wooden chunk as a sizeable portion of what used to be Nighthawk's desk.

All those scattering papers were reports. The message-in-a-bottle on the other end had been shattered by something larger than it could contain arriving inside it.

The others weren't so quick in catching on.

"What is that?" Scenic asked, a bit late.

No one got a chance to reply. The scarecrow raised its three remaining legs high, splaying them wide like a praying mantis, and then stabbed down into the dirt.

Shhunk

Slowly, like an obscene puppet on a string jerking and clicking, the scarecrow raised itself back off its belly.

There it stood. It was missing one leg and still on fire, its pumpkin head just a shrivelled, half melted mess by this point, but it still stood.

Everyone backed away as the scarecrow awkwardly scuttled around on only three legs to face them, using its remaining back leg to act as a rough counter balance in the middle.

"Sweet Celestia, that's just not fair." Scenic whined.

Shimmer and Lilly looked to be out of magic. Gloom and Atlas were both injured. Prey and Scenic were next to useless in a fight. In fact it was only Crimson who was still in anything resembling fighting condition.

A burning piece of something fell from the scarecrow's body and hissed out on the damp pine needles.

With a whirring of springs, the scarecrow turned about, and started scuttling off into the mist.

They all stared, lost for words as the scarecrow retreated back the way it'd come. The stump of its missing leg continued to move and rotate in sync as it began to fade into the mist.

'It's creator called it back,' Prey realised, 'Because it's damaged, they're recalling it.'

"It's... letting us go?" Scenic croaked.

Lilly stared, then shouted angrily, "Hey! Hey we're not done with you yet!" She took a step forwards, but Gloom's voice brought her up short like the crack of a whip.

"*What* do you think you're doing?"

"But sir, it's getting away sir." Lilly protested, weakly pointing after the scarecrow.

"Look around you Lilly! Do any of us look in any condition to go after that thing?" Gloom demanded.

He was angry, he was hurt, they'd almost been killed, *again*, and he was still as taut as a bow string expecting to die at any moment. And now Lilly was focusing on the wrong thing yet again.

"Look at us Lilly Blossom! We drew. Seven against one, and the best outcome we got was a draw. A draw! Just a draw!" He shouted at her, then staggered.

Crimson was at Gloom's side in second, "How badly are you injured, sir?"

Gloom shook him off, "Forget about me, help Atlas first. Prey, Scenic, who else is hurt?" Gloom called, raising his voice.

"Fine, fine. I'm still alive and fine," Scenic said faintly, then his pale lips started twitching:

"I can't believe it. I'm still alive. Still alive and fine. Twice in one day!" He declared, sounding disbelievingly happy.

"What just happened? What was that and how did it get here?" Shimmer asked, managing to point at the charred lump of Nighthawk's desk and paper strewn forest floor. The unicorn was having to brace himself to stay upright, breathing heavily as his camouflage cloak trailed in the dirt.

Gloom squinted at the mess, rather distracted by the pain from his hind quarters, before warily eyeing the twisted half of the scarecrow's leg where it lay in the pine needles.

"It is, well it *was* part of a desk. My captain's desk. I think, the message bottle, it sent the scarecrow's leg to Captain Nighthawk. But it must've been too big and broken the bottle on the other end, and this is what came back."

"What? Sargent Gloom, please explain this. I was not aware you had any magical weapons on you." Shimmer demanded between gasps for air.

"I don't, it's not a-it wasn't supposed to be. It was just supposed to send messages back, but Lilly threw it at the scarecrow. That was you right, Lilly?" Gloom checked, but his eyes were fixed worriedly on Crimson who was checking Atlas.

"Sir, yes sir." Lilly declared proudly.

"Quick thinking. Scenic, Prey, help Crimson. Hurry, we can't stay here." Gloom ordered, inhaling sharply as he felt at his own side.

Shimmer himself seemed to have finally gotten back enough strength to walk, because he hurried over to his downed subordinate. Prey, who'd reluctantly been going over like Gloom'd ordered, immediately halted and backed away instead of making even a token effort to help.

Everything still felt charged, like something else bad was just waiting to happen.

"Atlas is breathing. I can't find anything broken sir." Crimson declared, using his wing tips to cautiously probe the unconscious pegasus's head and neck.

"Let me see." Shimmer demanded, almost shoving Scenic and Crimson aside to get to Atlas, Prey barely contained a hiss as the unicorn barged past Crimson.

"We can't stay here," Gloom declared out loud again, looking around in worry, "That thing might come back. Or it might send the

kindersnatches instead."

"Where sir?" Scenic asked, "I mean, where should we go sir?"

Gloom winced and pressed a hoof to his side, "Anywhere but here, before whatever mad pony that's in control of the scarecrow changes their mind and sends it back to finish the job."

"Or another monster turns up," Prey joined in, looking warily around at at the trees, "We're still in the forest. There's plenty of the normal variety to go around."

Gloom was right when he'd said they needed to get out of here. The noise of their fight would've driven some monsters away, but also attracted others. Prey refused to be here when one of the latter turned up looking for a free meal. He pressed a hoof to his head. The headache was still throbbing away behind his eyes, and his legs still didn't feel completely solid. But excluding Scenic, he was probably the person in the best condition here.

"Just as Prey said," Gloom agreed, his mouth set in a grim line, "Corporal Shimmer, can Atlas be moved? We can't stay here."

Shimmer didn't look up from running his glowing horn over Atlas, "I'm still assessing him, and I've got almost no magic left. Please stop distracting me."

Gloom bit his lip instead of telling Shimmer to make it quick.

'-his friend might be permanently injured, and he's going as fast as he can-'

Prey knew they should either move Atlas despite any internal injuries, or just leave him. He was a Border Guard for one, and for another, staying here would likely mean death from one source or another.

Prey wanted to just leave Atlas Line. Let Shimmer stay behind too, that would be even better.

He sidled up to Gloom. The thestral was breathing slowly in and out, gingerly testing his hind leg. "We should just go. It's dangerous

here, and if Shimmer isn't willing to risk moving-"

"For Luna's sake Prey, can't you ever just-! Agkk." Gloom's breath left him in a rasping wheeze as he extended his leg too far and the deformed armour caught.

It took a moment for Gloom to get his breath back, and when he did, Prey saw sweat on his brow. He blinked at Prey.

"What were you-? Never mind. Help me gather everything that fell out of my saddle bag. We can't afford to waste anything right now, especially with your bag gone too. And grab those papers too. Captain Nighthawk isn't going to be too happy about me destroying his desk when I get back." Gloom said with a forced chuckle.

Prey wanted to protest that they didn't have the time to waste on something so trivial, but doing so would just waste that same precious time. Prey looked around at the shrouded forest. The trees seemed to be watching them reproachfully, disapproving of the mess they'd made. For a second, Prey even wondered if the trees were calling for more monsters to come and take revenge on the intruders in their midst.

The sooner he finished grabbing everything, the sooner they could get out of this mist and menacing forest.

"Leave that alone," Gloom ordered Lilly, who was poking at the severed scarecrow's leg, "Use your magic to break down or find two long branches. It look's like we'll need to make a stretcher for Atlas Line."

"No, forget that. There's no need," Shimmer announced, relief projected in his voice, "He's waking up now."

Prey could've told them that. When someone was knocked unconscious, usually they woke up within a few minutes. And if they didn't...Well, then the chances increased that they wouldn't wake up at all.

Prey heard Atlas make a noise that was probably supposed to be words, but ended up sounding nothing like the sort. His eyes

cracked open and squinted about him.

"Back up, give him some room." Shimmer snapped at Crimson and Scenic, who were bending down over the prone pegasus.

"Shimmer Corporal...You of two... Hm?" Atlas managed to slur.

"You took a bad hit from the scarecrow. I'm sorry I was not there to protect you."

"Wha...? No, that was my own fault." Atlas protested, already sounding much more lucid.

"No, I'm the Corporal. It's my responsibility. You did your best, and you were only trying to stall the monster for me. Unfortunately, we're in a bit of a bind now." Shimmer sighed, looking up and around.

"What?" Atlas asked, then suddenly sat bolt upright, "The Night Guards, they're-Arrgh!"

Atlas slumped back to the ground, his face screwed up and rapidly going white.

"What?! What's the matter?" Scenic demanded in panic, rushing forwards again, however a hoof in his path from Crimson stopped him:

"The Corporal is right. Give Atlas some room."

"Don't worry. The ISND are fine," Shimmer said, giving Crimson a nod of thanks, "Or mostly fine. But don't worry about them, worry about yourself. I don't want to rush you, but Sargent Gloom needs to get us out of here. How badly are you hurt?"

"I'll be fine, I just, I just need to get my breath back." Atlas managed to gasp out.

He wasn't fooling anyone.

"How badly are you hurt private?" Shimmer repeated, his tone no nonsense.

"I can walk sir, that'll have to be good enough."

"His wing is sprained." Crimson spoke up, pointing at the other pegasus's left wing where the cloak had ridden up over it.

"He landed on the joint and it bent backwards. It's sprained. Or maybe dislocated. Or broken." Crimson observed.

Shimmer frowned at Crimson for his seemingly callous tone, but he was far more interested in helping Atlas. "How does it feel? Do you think you can sit up?"

"I, I don't think it's broken. I can move it, just about." Atlas said weakly, "Help me sit up please?"

Prey tried to ignore them and focused instead on listening out for approaching danger, hurriedly running between pages and dropped supplies from Gloom's saddle bag. Why couldn't they hurry up? Or help him finish if it was so damned important? They were going to get killed if they stayed here.

'If another monster comes, I'm running and abandoning you all. I'll think up a believable excuse for Luna later.' Prey thought, grabbing another fallen report from off the kicked up dirt, bringing a hoof full of pine needles along with it.

Prey darkly considered that even out here in the middle of nowhere, the bureaucracy of Canterlot paperwork had somehow managed to follow them.

A shaky Atlas Line was back on his hooves by now, wing tightly clenched to his side. A pegasus's wings were often their strongest limbs, so it took a comparative amount of force to strain one. But it wasn't just that, the side of his jaw was slowly swelling up, he was holding his side, and one of his eyes was bloodshot.

Atlas didn't look healthy, (not that Prey cared), but Gloom decided it would have to do.

'-if we stay here, a sprained wing will be the least of our troubles-'

Prey viciously hoped Atlas would never fly again. He remembered

what they'd done in the Resistance to captured pegasi Border Guards.

"Is everypony able to walk?" Gloom asked them, "We can't stay here any longer. We need to get out of this forest."

"But sir, what about the scarecrow and rescuing the ponies from the kindersnatches sir?" Lilly immediately asked.

Gloom didn't give two hoots about confronting the scarecrow, but the villagers...

Gritting his fangs, Gloom could only bitterly shake his head, "We're in no condition to help anypony. We've got to recover first. If we go in now, we're only going to get ourselves killed, and then whose going to help them?"

"Agreed," Shimmer said, half supporting Atlas on his shoulder, "We can try again later. I still have my tracker on the scarecrow, so this wasn't a total failure."

Gloom blinked; '-oh yes. I'd quite forgotten about that-'

"Did it not get burned up by your fire?" Gloom asked.

"No, it's heavy duty. It'll take more than fire to destroy that tracker, and it's stuck on with magic. I can definitely still find it when the time comes." Shimmer replied.

"It's probably a good thing you only took off its leg with that bottle then Lilly. If you'd destroyed it, then we'd never be able to track it back to its lair." Scenic encouraged Lilly.

Yes. A good thing. Renaming failure as success. Prey despised Scenic, he despised Lilly for not throwing the message bottle right, he despised Atlas for still being alive, he despised everything right now. Prey had to close his eyes and breathed.

"Can you tell where the scarecrow is right now? Is it sneaking up on us?" He heard Gloom ask.

Prey opened his eyes to see that Shimmer was slowly shaking his

head, "My magic reserves aren't big to begin with, and what with checking Atlas just now and my fire spell, I'm completely out. Even if I had the strength right now..."

Shimmer didn't need to finish. They were still in the forest and in danger here.

"We're wasting time standing around. Sunlight's burning and danger's coming." Shimmer said instead, looking meaningfully at Atlas and Gloom, whose injuries were going to slow their pace.

Gloom wanted to curse at all of this, he really did. He wanted to kick whichever pony's fault this was in the teeth, or just collapse into a bed and sleep for a week. Unfortunately, neither was an option.

'-and swearing up a storm really isn't going to help calm anypony down-'

Gloom tested his hind leg in the deformed armour, and found he could bend it reasonably far as long as he didn't over do it, "Right, I can walk, so let's move. We can follow the old road safely out of here. At least one thing is as it appears in these infernal, Luna blighted, Moon rotted, *clan cursed trees*!"

"You're bleeding sir, under your armour." Crimson said.

"I know, I can feel it, but we can't stop here. It's not much, I'll be fine until we're somewhere safe."

"Are you sure-?"

"Yes. Keep going." Gloom ordered.

"Yes sir."

Crimson quickly took point to lead the way. He was the only one capable of that role right now.

Shimmer helped Atlas over some tree roots, "I'll wrap your wing when we get out. Just try and keep it still until we get out of here." He instructed.

Scenic looked between the half limping, half staggering Gloom, and then his own bulging back pack. He bit his lip, then quickly slipped his pack off and shoved it onto Prey, "I'm sorry, but here, carry this. I need to help Sargent Gloom."

Prey gasped and staggered under the sudden weight, unable to protest as he tried not to drop the overloaded back pack. It was far heavier and bulkier than his own had been, before it'd fallen over the ravine tangled around that kindersnatch.
What had Scenic packed, useless bars of gold?

Prey finally managed to get the backpack balanced on his back, and then promptly considered whether he should just dump the whole thing. Would it be worth lugging around when there might be something on their tails? Prey checked Scenic, and saw that the Earth pony was more or less half carrying Gloom over his back.

"This isn't necessary-"

"I've got you sir. Don't worry, I'm an Earth pony, this is easy."

'An Earth pony who'd just blithely dumped his heavy bag on the weakest member because he didn't realise his own inherent strength.' Prey thought, staggering as fast as he could after them. But there was no time to protest, as long as they were in the forest, their lives were in danger. He could complain once they were out.

Prey felt a shiver go down his spine and he whipped his head round, for a moment his own ears obscuring his view as they swung and settled.

Had he just heard something?

Grey mist, pine trees, thorny undergrowth. All Prey saw was the forest, the same as it had been all day when passing through its reaches.

Or perhaps it'd always been the forest's clutches.

Prey stared deep into the shadows and mist. Then turning tail, he ran, or rather stumbled to catch up with Gloom and Scenic who was helping the Sargent move.

"Hey?" Prey whispered, "Guys? I think we're being followed."

"Moon blight," Gloom hissed, and Scenic's ears went flat, "Are you certain?"

Prey refrained from turning around to check, "No."

His answer should've come as a relief. It brought none. It only made things worse.

Where can the line between safety and danger be drawn?

Prey had asked himself that question yesterday, and defined it as the moment you set hoof into the forest's shadow. But now the line had been redrawn.

Exiting out into the sudden openness, the crisp air of evening played over his sweaty face. It felt so wide without trees penning him in on all sides, and the much missed light of the sun greeted him. But even leaving the shadow of the forest and its watchful cloyingness, Prey no longer felt safer.

The air was chill. Mayflower lay in front of them, just as silent and abandoned as when last they'd seen it.

Yet now, knowing what had caused the inhabitants to vanish, the village felt even more tainted and wrong than before.

But no matter what it felt and looked like, it was shelter and a place to rest, and they were in no position to be picky. Need makes beggars out of everyone.

When your legs are shaking from a forced march, drained from running for your life, and you're hollowed out from fighting twisted, black magic creations, you'll take even a haunted ghost town.

They weren't safe, they knew all that. But this was as far as they could go right now.

Danger would have to wait, even discounting the two Border Guard

traitors in their midst.

Prey dumped Scenic's back pack in the middle of the hamlet, and made straight for the stream. The water cut right through the village, thus Prey didn't have to stray out of anyone's sight as he knelt and gulped the brackish water.

It was gritty and unpleasant, black fragments from the stream's bed mixing into it, but it was water, and Prey was thirstily gulped it down like it came from the purest glacier spring. Both of his canteens had been lost along with his pack, and besides, the villagers had no doubt used this same steam everyday, so it must be fine.

Only once his thirst had been quenched did Prey splash some of the cold water on his face, and sit back on the dirt to take in his surroundings afresh.

A few yards back, everyone else was doing the same, taking a minute to rest shaky legs and recover their wind. Their flight from the forest had been as tiring as it'd been nerve wracking.

Prey tilted his head back to look up at the closest house, for the moment ignoring the others, not wanting to have to think about the two Border Guards for now.

Dark ivy crowned the eves of the wooden home, seemingly even more advanced and wild than yesterday. Surely the weeds and mould couldn't have increased that much? Already he could see the ivy trying to force its way through even the smallest cracks in the planks.

Prey used the back of a furry ear to wipe lingering water droplets from his face, a bad habit, and sat up.

Prey saw the hated figure of Shimmer helping bind Atlas's sprained wing. Turns out it really wasn't broken, but they were still using a splint. The pegasus's jaw was clenched, and he was trying to remain still as Shimmer's aura bound the wing up with a bandage.

Prey shuddered in revulsion at the mere thought of letting anyone

use magic on you like that, even more so on an injured limb.

Prey's eyes sought out the other injured member in their party, one whom he didn't hate nearly as much. Gloom was lying down on his belly at an awkward angle, examining the deformed armour covering his injured flank. The rest of the ISND were crowded uselessly around.

"Look, go away. You're not helping." Gloom snapped.

"Bur sir, we can-"

"I get that you want to help, but I hardly need *all* of you. Scenic, go look through these houses and try and find the best one. We might be here a while. Lilly, I want you to keep watch on the forest. If something comes out, I want to know straight away. And for Luna's sake both of you, eat and drink something first before you collapse." Gloom shooed them away.

Prey could clearly see that the Sargent was just giving them orders to keep them occupied and out of his way.

"Not you Crimson, you stay," Gloom ordered, "I'm going to need somepony to help me get this armour off."

Prey waited until Scenic and Lilly had left before standing and approaching, dragging the heavy backpack behind him. Now that he was closer, he could see how tired Gloom really looked, at odds with the face he'd been presenting to Scenic and Lilly.

"Prey." Gloom grunted, barely glanced up at Prey's approach, focused on getting the straps of his armour undone.

Prey made a noise of acknowledgement, and peered closer at the deformed armour. The scarecrow's blow had hit the plate, called the crupper, off-center, and badly dented the piece of armour in. Its new shape was such that it didn't look like it was going to come off. At least, not without applying some blunt force. It also looked like it hurt.

"Need to get this off sir." Crimson said, stating the obvious.

Gloom grimaced, "It's stuck. You're going to need to pull it off."

"Yes sir," Crimson nodded, "Shall I do it now?"

Gloom let out his breath, "The sooner you start, the sooner it'll be done."

"I'll be quick sir."

"It's too badly dented. You'll need a lever of some kind." Prey observed.

"A broom or spade handle would do. One of the houses must have one. " Gloom said, speaking very matter of factly. Truth was, Prey knew Gloom was just tying not to think too hard about his injury under the armour.

"I'll go check." Crimson said, trotting into the closest house, stepping over the dense fringe of weeds growing at the door step.

A raven cawed sharply nearby, causing everyone to freeze for a tense second.

Gloom looked at Prey, keeping his tufted ears carefully neutral, "I didn't think about it before, we were too busy trying not to die, but did you say you pushed that kindersnatch off the ravine?" He asked.

There was silence for a minute.

"That I did."

There was another silence. Prey knew Crimson had definitely heard them from inside the house.

Gloom's jaw clenched and he looked away at the abandoned homes of Mayflower, "Again it's happened. Innocents, and my failings." Gloom muttered. Prey probably wasn't meant to overhear.

"He or she might've survived," Prey offered after a moment, "I didn't see the kindersnatch land, and there was water at the bottom."

Gloom pressed a hoof over his eyes, "I, you...that's not...The

responsibility..."

Gloom broke off and shook his head vigorously, "This, things can't keep going like this. When this is over, when we get back to Canterlot... We're going to talk."

'-I swear I'll stop putting it off and do my duty. But just this once, please let it wait-'

'If we survive to get back to Canterlot in the first place.' Prey couldn't help but think. The possibility of death seemed scarily real and likely at the moment.

Crimson emerged from the shadowed doorway, holding a well worn broom, the brush made from bundled twigs. He wordlessly held it up. Gloom nodded, "Alright, give it a try."

Crimson managed to wedge the end of the broom handle under the bent up edge of the armour, and began applying pressure to the other end. Gloom let out a rasping growl of pain, his neck muscles tensing up as Crimson levered the damaged metal free, but otherwise the Sargent didn't react.

The bent edge of the silvery armour finally unhooked from the upper piece it was deformed into with a scraping noise, and Crimson could then pull it the rest of the way off by hoof. Gloom had to take a moment to brace himself before he looked at his side, but when he did, he let out a breath of relief.

"Whew. It feels much worse than it is. Glad that's off."

The armour had no doubt saved Gloom from having his thigh broken in half, spreading the force of the blow across the whole plate of metal. However that did however mean the plate had been driven into Gloom's flesh, savagely bruising the entire area of course. A small price to pay.

Unfortunately that wasn't the extent of the damage. If it was, Prey knew Gloom wouldn't have raised such a fuss, or as much of a fuss as a clan thestral ever raised anyway.

In almost a perfect outline of the removed piece of armour, where

the plate had been driven in, the flesh had been cut. That must hurt, a wound on top of a bruise. The cut was crusted over by now, but it was on Gloom's flank and subject to splitting back open every time the thestral took a step.

Prey couldn't help but immediately analyse the injury. The blood needed to be washed out of the fur and the cut cleaned to prevent possible infection, but aside from one bit where the corner of the armour had been driven particularly deep into the flesh, so that was something.

'Wrong place to take a bandage, but a poultice to seal the wound and ease the swelling will be all that's required.' Prey thought critically.

Gloom sucked in air through his teeth in resignation, "Crimson, get the medical kit from my pack would you? It's going to need stitches."

"The unbroken one?" Crimson asked, reaching for the two saddle bags, one torn, that Gloom had dropped the moment they'd stopped and now didn't have the energy to reach for.

"Yeah. I know I packed one in there."

Prey thought of the two medical kits he himself had packed, and had been lost down the ravine. Prey frowned as Crimson searched, "Aren't you going to wash it out first?" He asked.

"Then get a cloth and water then and you can help me." Gloom said shortly.

'Physical contact with someone else?' Prey thought. No thanks. That was an unpleasantness he'd rather avoid. It was almost as bad as someone touching him, even if he was the one in control and with the ability to shred a mind with said touch.

That ability was one of the very reasons for his reluctance.

"I'll get you that, and make you a poultice instead." Prey offered.

Gloom almost refused on principle of poultices just being a dubious

folklore remedy, but it *was* Prey who was offering. "Does that actually work?"

"Yes. It'll disinfect the cut and help with the swelling."

Gloom was still sceptical. He looked around at the deserted village, "And you can make one right here? Nopony is leaving anypony else's line of sight until we're safely back in Alfalfa Dale, even to go to the toilet."

"Easily. The necessary plants are all around us. About the other bit though..." Now it was Prey's turn to hesitate, "I think it's a bit unlikely we'll make it back to Alfalfa Dale."

"Because you think I can't walk?"

"Yes," Prey said frankly, "And not just you. We're all worn down. We won't make it before dark."

"That's no problem, we'll walk in the night then. Moon light never hurt nopony. I'll manage, you don't have to worry about me Prey." Gloom said, as Crimson found the first aid box and brought it back.

'I wasn't.'

Prey had a different concern. Namely, what might come out of the forest after them. Mayflower had been the only place they could run to, and thus was also the first place the scarecrow's master would expect them to flee. If he or she had a *second* scarecrow they could send....

They hadn't been able to outrun the scarecrow the first time, nor the second. Now they were exhausted, and with Gloom injured, the chances didn't look good if it came down to a third round.

Gloom misinterpreted Prey's silence, "Go get the things for this poultice of yours Prey if you think it'll help. I'm not going anywhere just yet, we all need to recover for a few minutes."

Prey rubbed at his cheek in tiredness and did as Gloom ordered, avoiding Crimson's eye as the pegasus pulled out a sterilised needle from the box.

Prey knew what ingredients to look for. How many times had he made a basic healing poultice from whatever plant and herb components he could find to hoof? How many times had Snake for that matter?

When boiled down to it, every plant in the world was one of two things. Helpful or harmful. Sometimes both. All that varied was how far to one side of the scale the plant weighed. You just had to know which was which and what they did.

Prey only needed a few things for a basic poultice. An anti-septic, and a numbing agent. Prey easily found a Storm Wort bush and some stubby False Happledock. He would've preferred something stronger, like Hedgemares Horn, which also possessed anti-inflammatory properties, but these would have to do.

Grabbing a bunch of leaves from the first and the stems from the second, Prey hurried back, passing Lilly who was keeping guard and giving her a wide berth. He still hated the unicorn, her success in helping ward off the scarecrow not withstanding.

But his hate for her paled in comparison to the feeling he got whenever he saw Atlas or Shimmer. The injured pegasus was resting against a wall, grey faced and sweating, recovering after having his dislocated wing bound. Shimmer was keeping an eye on the other end of the village and going over his map again.

Prey dumped his finds onto the ground next to Gloom, where Crimson was bent over Gloom's side, thread and needle in the side of his mouth, and purposefully blocking Gloom's line of sight.

'-I hate needles, I hate needles, I hate needles-', Gloom was thinking.

"Have you finished sewing it up yet?" Prey asked, sorting through his finds while still keeping half an eye on their creepy surroundings at all times.

"He hasn't even started yet." Gloom said, not turning his head back to look.

"Sorry sir. This needle is too small. I mean, I can't get it right." Crimson said, staring hard at the needle as he tried to unsuccessfully thread it.

Stitching was not something made for pegasi or Earth ponies. They had to use their mouths to do the actual sewing if there were no hoof thimble holders. There wasn't one in this medical kit, a dumb oversight by the ponies who'd made it.

"Lilly would be better suited to sewing this sir." Crimson said.

"No," Gloom shook his head quickly, "I...don't trust her to stitch it properly, and then I'm back to square one all over again."

Crimson nodded, understanding exactly what Gloom meant. He looked over at the two Border Guards, "Corporal Shimmer would probably be the best then."

"No!" Prey immediately protested.

"They've done nothing wrong Prey!" Gloom growled, "Get over your silly prejudices-"

Prey shook his head. He didn't want Shimmer anywhere near. "No. I'll do it."

Gloom winced, "No thanks. I'll take my chances with Shimmer-"

"I know what I'm doing. Give it here." Prey demanded, holding his hoof out to Crimson.

Crimson refrained, looking to Gloom first for permission, since it was him who was about to have a needle stabbed into his flesh. Gloom did not look happy about either suggestion. "Shimmer will have finer control with his magic than your hooves Prey, and it's my flank, thank you very much."

"I know what I'm doing." Prey said, emphasizing his cleft hooves by giving them a wiggle, "I can grip the needle just fine without a thimble. Unlike you two."

"Do you know how to stitch up a cut though?" Gloom asked.

"I've done it before."

"Oh yeah? When."

"On myself. Now hoof me that needle please, we're wasting time."

"On yourself?"

Prey paused, "Yes, once."

"Why? And 'once' hardly counts as 'lots' of experience."

"I've stitched up other people a few times too." Prey said, choosing to only answer the second part of Gloom's question.

"That's just raising even more questions," Gloom groaned, "And why did you even have to stitch yourself up in the first place?"

"Because there was no one else around just then. I'd cut my leg on a piece of broken glass. I didn't have much choice if I wanted it to heal." Lie, lie, truth.

"Alright. Let's see the scar then." Gloom challenged.

"No! Don't touch me," Prey immediately shrunk away, "Look, do you want me to sow you up or not? We're on a deadline, in case you'd forgotten."

That was true. They didn't really have the time to be picky. Gloom silently nodded to Crimson, who just as wordlessly passed the needle and thread to Prey.

Prey all but snatched them, only refraining outright because of whom it was giving them. "Thank you Crimson." He said, then, speaking to Gloom:

"You might not want to watch. It'll make you tense up and then it'll just hurt twice as badly."

"I'm very much aware of that fact, thank you." Gloom rasped.

Prey shrugged as he deftly threaded the needle on his first try, "Suit

yourself."

Prey moved over to Gloom's side and gave the cut another once over. Crimson had brought Gloom some water and the Sargent had already washed it clean himself. Prey brought the needle close and Gloom couldn't help but flinch.

Prey jerked backwards and glowered at Gloom. Gloom forced himself to breathe out and relax, "Sorry. Alright, I'm ready now."

'You'd better be, because if you do that again I'm going to leave you with a needle and thread halfway through your flank.' Prey thought. Truth was, this was bringing back all sorts of bad memories, and he was too tired and shook up from the scarecrow to properly corral them back into the cage where they belonged.

'Six stitches at the deepest point. No more required. Easy.' Prey told himself, and made the first stab.

And it was easy. Extremely so. In fact, it went far better than Prey was expecting.

The thread was even, thin and strong, while the needle was sharp and straight, unlike the gut and bone needles he was so used to working with. Gloom had excellent skin too. It didn't break or tear, it had just the right amount of slack mixed with springiness. It was not the kind of thing a normal person would've appreciated. It was almost a pleasure to work with such tools.

Prey tugged off the last of the thread and wiped the smears of blood off his hoof tips on the dirt. Crimson watched him with a weird look in his eyes.

"What?"

"Nothing. That was... Fast. Very neat. Nice small stitches, I mean."

"Thank you." Prey said, already beginning to mash the Happledock and Wort between two stream smoothed stones. Snake had always been good at what he did, be it cures or poisons.

"You were good," Gloom agreed, soundly slightly disturbed but also

relieved, "I barely felt it."

"Well you're going to feel this." Prey said without sympathy, and slapped the greenish pulp he'd collected on top of the freshly stitched cut.

Gloom wheezed and his slit pupils shrank into black pencil lines.

"The burning sting is supposed to be there. It means it's working. Don't worry, it'll pass in a minute and go numb." Prey said, delicately using his hoof to smear the mess across the rest of the affected area.

"Glad to hear it." Gloom managed to rasp.

"Now you just need to pack it on. Crimson, would you please fetch me some of those large Rickshawl leaves?" Prey asked.

Crimson complied, and Prey placed the multi-haired leaves face down over the poultice. The fine hairs stuck to the mixture and Gloom's fur, making a rough seal. Prey nodded at the end result, satisfied.

"Don't move or overly jostle it, and it shouldn't fall off."

"Thanks Prey. That was oddly....Professional I think the word is. Did you want to be a doctor growing up?" Gloom asked, examining Prey's work.

"No, it was not what I had envisioned for my future." Prey said, turning away to eye the deserted village around them. Just then, his stomach gurgled. Gloom and Crimson heard it.

'-that's right, none of us have eaten-', Gloom realised. They'd been a wee bit occupied with not dying to think about being peckish.

"We all need to eat. We've got to keep our strength up." Gloom declared, carefully rising to his hooves. He gave the poultice a wary look, but true to Prey's word, it wasn't going to fall off just from Gloom simply walking around.

"Get everypony else together, we've got to eat. And plan. Ask

Corporal Shimmer and Atlas to join us if you would." Gloom said glancing at the sky and pretending not to notice the way Prey's face twisted at the two Border Guard names.

"And if Shimmer's recovered his magic enough to try and find his tracer, then all the better."

Prey turned away and marched towards the stream. He needed to wash the poultice juices and lingering traces of blood off his hooves. No doubt Crimson would still be able to smell the blood, but there was no reason he himself wanted to. And he wanted nothing to do with the Border Guard.

Gloom blankly watched him go, thoughts going back to a cellar full of; '-little rat eyes in the dark-'

Habit made Prey still keep careful watch out of the corner of his eye as Gloom limped over to Atlas and Shimmer, the later staring hard at the forest's edge, less than thirty paces away, and far too close for comfort.

It was quiet, very quiet, and Prey could hear what they said easily.

"Thank you for you help in the forest fighting that thing. Atlas, you put yourself in the line of danger and paid for it." Gloom said quietly.

'Help? What help? They did *nothing*, it was me who thought to use the message bottle and Lilly took the credit anyway. All those two did was make the situation worse.' Prey fumed, scrubbing his hooves hard in the unpleasantly cold water.

Surprisingly, it wasn't Shimmer who replied with the useless platitude Prey was expecting, but Atlas speaking for himself for once.

"It's an injury taken in the line of duty, I would do the same again. Besides, I was hardly the only one hurt, sir." Atlas added, shaking his head and looking like he was trying not to grimace as even the small movement transmitted back to his injured wing.

Shimmer himself was still staring into the forest, eyes narrowed,

and hadn't turned at Gloom's approach.

"Is something the matter?" Gloom asked, suspiciously following Shimmer's gaze.

"That's the question I'm working on." Shimmer slowly replied.

When Shimmer didn't elaborate further, Gloom just went ahead, "I came over to say we all need to eat and make a plan. If your magic has recovered enough to find the tracer you placed on the scarecrow, that would also be great."

Shimmer didn't stop staring at the forest, "Well you see Gloom, that's the thing... It already has, and I already did."

"And? What did you find?" Gloom asked with a sinking feeling.

"My spell is telling me the same thing it's been telling me for the last five minutes. That the tracer is sitting less than two hundred yards inside the tree line."

Fear.

Why was the scarecrow just inside the tree line? How had it followed them? Why was it waiting instead of attacking? What was the warlock controlling it planning? What was going on? Were kindersnatches coming in as scarecrow backup, and they were about to get swarmed?

None of them knew.

Lilly Blossom was raging, and not very privately either, "Buck this, buck the forest, buck the scarecrow and buck that! It's right there! Why aren't we going out there to blast it?"

She ranting was more or less just to herself by this point, and was getting ignored. No one had the time to pay attention to her. They were all a little bit too busy trying to prepare for whatever was about to happen.

"It's watching us. Somehow, it knows we're here. It's waiting for us to make the first move." Prey said.

"Why would it do that? Scratch that, *it* doesn't have a brain. Why's this bastard *warlock* having it lurk just out there?"

"Be calm Atlas. This warlock is obviously being cautious. Look what we did to their scarecrow last time. We blew its leg off. Obviously they're not willing to risk their golem again, at least for now. That might change if we make a move however."

"But we don't have any more message-in-a-bottles." Scenic said nervously.

"*Shhh*! They don't know that, do they? What if they have someway to listen in on us?"

Gloom's eyes never left the tree line, "We've already damaged and driven off the scarecrow once before. So they're just keeping the scarecrow back and waiting for now."

"Waiting for what, do you think sir?" Crimson asked, wings tensed.

"Reinforcements?" Prey suggested.

"Or just to make sure we don't leave Mayflower. It's probably waiting to attack if we try to enter the forest again." Gloom guessed.

Shimmer was periodically recasting his spell, each time confirming that the scarecrow was still in exactly the same place. Waiting.

"Yes, it's weakened. As long as we're in Mayflower, we have the terrain advantage and can use houses for cover. But if we try to go back to Alfalfa Dale, it'll run us down once we're out in the open."

"No, out in the open it would be us who, uh, held the advantage, wouldn't it?" Scenic disagreed nervously, chewing his lip, "Wouldn't we be able to outrun it on only three legs now? And it was only because of all the trees you couldn't fly around and beat it in the air like you did at the ravine, sir."

Shimmer made a visible effort to smooth out his scowl, "We're all

under pressure right now, but you're not thinking, Private. How many of us are able to fly or run now? Atlas is too injured, your Sargent is hurt too, and we're all the worse for wear. It's a three hour trip back to Alfalfa Dale. Do you think you could successfully gallop the whole way if the scarecrow is after you?"

"Oh."

They were in a bad position. The Border Guard Corporal didn't have to spell it out. Meanwhile, back in Alfalfa Dale, it was safe, with reinforcements set to arrive on the train tomorrow morning.

However the border town may as well have been a thousand miles away for all the good it did them right now. How were they supposed to get back to Alfalfa Dale with the scarecrow and who knew what else on guard?

They wouldn't make it back, not unless they all split up and went in different directions, but that would mean sacrificing at least one, probably two of their number. Those were not odds Prey was willing to take, especially since he was the slowest of them all over open ground.

It would be foolish to pit themselves against the scarecrow's greatest strength. It was a golem. It did not tire or stop. It would chase them until it was physically unable to, or its task was completed. Fifteen miles to Alfalfa Dale was a long way.

Prey imagined the scarecrow chasing them down and skewering them on its metal legs one by one.

'What do I do? How do I, no, how do *we* get out of this?' He stared unseeingly at the dark pines, expecting at any moment for the scarecrow to burst forth. He mentally did not include the two hated Border Guards in that 'we.'

Even if Shimmer and Atlas hadn't been filthy lying Border Guards, he wouldn't have trusted them. He couldn't read Shimmer's thoughts, those mental walls bounced everything back, and Atlas followed Shimmer's every instruction. Shimmer was hiding something, Prey knew it. Was the stallion even telling the truth

about the scarecrow waiting just out there?

Could he be lying? Could this could be a trap of some kind? Was Shimmer purposefully trying to keep them trapped here in Mayflower rather than returning to Alfalfa Dale ? Prey desperately wanted to torture the answers out of the hated unicorn.

He wanted them both dead.

Unfortunately, Prey was afraid they might *all* be dead soon.

Prey swallowed the dry lump in his throat, 'Don't you dare be a crybaby.' No. Even if everyone else died, Prey was going to survive this. And Crimson too. He owed Crimson. He wouldn't even be blamed if any of the others died. Luna couldn't blame him for this. Could she? Kindersnatches, scarecrow's, warlocks, golems, it was all way beyond his control. But would the dark alicorn see it that way?

Why was he wasting time panicking like this? Prey shook his head. It helped nothing. Either the scarecrow would attack, or it would not.

"We've got to make a decision, and we've got to make it right now," Gloom said, voice cutting through everyone else, "We know the scarecrow's out there, but not why. We've got to decide upon a plan, and go for it. We don't have time to second guess ourselves."

Shimmer looked sharply at Gloom, "As respectively the Sargent and Corporal, the decision falls upon both our shoulders, as does the responsibility. My job, first and foremost, is to get as many ponies out of this alive as possible."

It was clear who Shimmer was talking about, and where his priorities lay. With his wounded squad mate, Atlas.

'-if only I'd rolled with the landing-', The pegasus tried to hide his shame for being careless enough to get himself injured, putting them all in this dilemma.

"It is our duty yes," Gloom agreed, "But I want to know what my squad has to say. If they're going to be risking their lives beside me, they have the right to add their input."

'*Ha*. Take that. You'll not get your own way this time.' Prey thought, glaring at Shimmer's back. When the unicorn snapped his eyes around, Prey studiously went back to watching the tree line.

"Make it quick then," Shimmer said, returning his own worried gaze to the forest, "Celestia only knows how long that thing's content to wait."

"Uh, sir? Can I ask about that?"

'-we don't have time for this dithering, just speak your mind already!-', Gloom cleared his throat, as patient as he could manage, "Yes Scenic?"

"Don't we only have two choices sir? Stay here, or try and get back to Alfalfa Dale?"

Scenic was finally showing he had a functioning brain. He was completely correct. All their options and plans boiled down to those two choices. Stay or go.

Whether barricading themselves here in Mayflower, making a break for Alfalfa Dale, splitting up, sending only one of them out, or tried to hide, all their choices were merely a variation of one of those two options.

Gloom nodded silently, Crimson and Prey getting it too. Lilly wasn't as swift on the uptake, "What about fighting? We could definitely do that."

"That's the same option as staying. Think for once." Gloom said curtly, temper frayed to breaking, "I want everyone to *think*. We're gambling our lives here. So what is it going to be? Hold out here, or leave for Alfalfa Dale? What do we all think?"

Prey wanted to run. That's what his instincts were begging him to do. He didn't want to end up cornered. However running wasn't an option if they'd just get caught, and the horrible weight in his stomach agreed with his instincts that the scarecrow wouldn't let them run.

'It's just sitting out there, waiting for us to make the first move. If

we run, it probably has orders to chase us. But maybe it's just a guard to keep us out of the forest, and we can actually leave.' Prey wound the ribbon over and over his hoof as he thought.

Atlas was asking if they had any message spells on them aside from the spell fire bottles. Gloom answered in the negative, to which Atlas suggested that they just send Crimson, the only one of them able to fly right now, back to Alfalfa Dale alone. There was a nagging suspicion in the back of Prey's head. This wasn't adding up.

He surreptitiously looked looked around the abandoned village.

"Splitting up is a bad idea. Alone we are weak, but together we are at our strongest." Shimmer said, disagreeing with his subordinate.

"Right now we don't know why the scarecrow is waiting. Hopefully the pony controlling it is anxious not to engage us again after the damage we caused the first time. If we leave however, they might panic and decide to risk attacking us again regardless."

"Gloom." Prey whispered.

"What?" It came out hostile and angry. Gloom straightened himself and tried again, quieter, "What is it?"

"They know we're here, in Mayflower."

"Obviously. How else would the scarecrow have followed us after it ran off?"

"Exactly. How do they know our location? As in, still in Mayflower and not already on our way back to Alfalfa Dale?"

Gloom stopped. "Oh."

Gloom did not like those implications in the least. He peered into the dark trees, '-is he close by? Is he close enough to get?-'

He shook his head, all he could admit was, "I haven't a clue. Perhaps they're close enough by to see us?"

"I don't think that's it. I think they've got some way of tracking us.

Magically. We've already agreed there are only two options, stay or leave. But we're afraid to leave in case the scarecrow attacks. But we need to test what'll happen if we try. Let's pretend as if we are leaving Mayflower, then before we actually do, have that, that..."

Prey swallowed and forced it out, "Have Shimmer see if the scarecrow's marker moves to follow. If it doesn't, great. If it does... Then at least we know the warlock means to keep us trapped here."

"Shhh!" Gloom hissed, glancing around hastily, "You shouldn't have said that out loud. If it *is* magic, they might be able to hear what we're saying. Now they'll know it's only a feint."

"No. Whomever they are, and however they're tracking us, they can't hear us."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because they haven't already attacked. We know we can't beat that scarecrow a second time, even damaged. We don't have another message bottle spell to throw at it, and what's more, you've all been discussing this outloud for the last five minutes about how little of a chance we've got. If they could hear us, they'd already know they could just send the golem in and destroy us." Prey explained dispassionately. "You really shouldn't go around showing weakness like that."

Gloom was completely stumped for a moment by realisation. "Oh..."

'-Moon blight, that was so careless of me-'

"Conduct the test. If the scarecrow won't let us leave, then we're stuck here until we come up with some other way to escape." Prey told him.

"I agree sir. Prey has a point." Crimson said.

Prey started and twisted around. He hadn't realised Crimson was listening in on their hushed conversation. Now who was the careless one? But Crimson was good, and he owed Crimson, so it was fine.

Gloom nodded as he accepted the idea, "Yes, it's a good idea. Get Corporal Shimmer, Prey can quickly explain it to everypony-"

"No!" Prey drew back,

"Will you give it a *rest* already? I don't care why you think you've a right to act like this to them, but they've done nothing to you Prey."

"No. I don't care." Prey turned away and left. He didn't go far, only about five paces. Leaving anyone's line of sight was a bad idea right now, but he had no other way of making his position clear to Gloom.

He was disobeying what amounted to a direct order from Gloom, but he couldn't do it. Time cannot erase the past. Prey was aware he was burning bridges and raising red flags like crazy, but right now he couldn't find it in himself to care. Shimmer and Atlas were Border Guards, and he wanted them dead dead *dead*.

'What would Fleece say if he could see me now? Here in the company of two Border Guards and not attacking them?' Prey thought in shame.

Left with no choice, Gloom explained Prey's observations to Shimmer himself and proposed Prey's plan. The thought of helping or relying on the Border Guard in any way after all they'd done made Prey's stomach twist. So instead of focusing on that, he focused on their plan instead.

"Right. Walk to the other side of Mayflower, then we'll hold and see what happens." Gloom said.

"I've got the spell ready. Let's quit wasting time." Shimmer said.

Mayflower was a tiny village. It only held sixteen simple squat houses, now all unnaturally overrun by nature. The dangerous feeling of the place was mostly gone, or rather, smothered under the ominous feeling coming from the pine forest. What was a ghost village compared to that?

Jumping over the stream and reaching the far side of Mayflower took only a single minute. There they halted, all gazing expectantly and with no small amount of trepidation at Shimmer as his horn glowed.

"What's happening? What's it doing?" Lilly asked, unable to restrain herself.

Where they trapped here in this forsaken village or not?

"It hasn't moved. It's still showing as being two hundred yards inside the tree line."

Their collective shaky sigh of relief was cut short as Shimmer frowned, "Wait, no. No it's moved. It's coming closer, one hundred and eighty yards."

"Tartarus." Scenic exclaimed.

"We don't have a plan to fight it yet. Back into the village, use the houses as cover." Gloom ordered, already hurrying back in, despite how counter intuitive it was to head towards the approaching golem.

"It's still coming, one hundred and seventy." Shimmer warned, alarmed.

"But we're not leaving. We haven't left!" Lilly exclaimed.

"One si-one fifty." Shimmer said, his voice taking on a noticeable strain.

"Prey." Gloom demanded, as if Prey would somehow be able to make the scarecrow stop.

Prey agonised, was Shimmer lying?

'Is this all just some ploy to keep us trapped here?'

Could it all some big bluff? Could Prey really believe anything the Border Guard unicorn said?

"Still getting closer, one thirty," Shimmer announced, "Sargent Gloom, we have to do something."

"Into one of the empty houses, hide, barricade it." Prey declared.

"But-"

"Do it." Gloom ordered, silencing Lilly, "Quick, into that house."

It was their only option. Either showing the warlock they were staying put would make them call the scarecrow off, or if that didn't work, at least put a wall between them and the golem. And if holding out against the scarecrow didn't work, then they were back to option one and trying to run again.

Prey had suspected they were playing right into the warlock's hooves all along. It brought him no satisfaction to now know he'd been right.

Prey ran through the hanging curtain of beard moss which half covered the door of the closest house, leaving the pale sunlight behind outside. He dodged around the plain, worn table and a cluster of heavy timber stools as he made straight for the single shuttered window. He jumped up on the hard bed, ignoring the straw mattress as it split open, and shoved the mismatched slat shutters out.

Hooves clattered over damp floorboards behind him as the others rushed in, crowding into the house. The wooden rafters were less than a hoof's height above the tips of Crimson's ear tufts.

Prey paid the rest of them no heed. He stared unblinking down the weed strewn length of Mayflower's only street and at the forest, expecting at any second the scarecrow to come bursting forth.

"Corporal." Gloom demanded.

Shimmer's horn was already aglow, "Way ahead of you."

The unicorn focused. They all waited, staring. The spell faded Shimmer let out his breath, "It's stopped. One hundred and ten yards, and now it's just sitting there."

Gloom's lips pressed into a painfully thin line as he peered out over the top of Prey's head, towards the featureless borderline of pines. "Well...That proves it beyond a doubt. They do have some way of monitoring us, and they aren't willing to let us leave."

"Oh ponyfeathers." Scenic mumbled.

"Ponyfeathers indeed."

'-now what?-'

The old stone circle stood in its lone clearing. It was just as calm and unknowable as it had always been.

There was no mist here. Within the watchful circle of stone pillars, a peaceful stillness rested upon the vibrant bed of moss. Silent sentinels to the decades, to the centuries.

Even if the sunlight was slowly waning in the sky as clouds gathered against the horizon, the stone circle still seemed illuminated by extra motes of light. Those clouds would eventually blow in this way and meet the stone wall of the Ridgeback, either dropping their burden of rain there, or possibly carry it on further up to the passes to fall as snow.

Back inside the safety of the old stones, the fifteen withered wreathes sat, resting against the largest pillar's base. Reminders of the first villagers lost. A hope and a prayer, or possibly just tokens of sadness and mourning.

If there'd been anyone there to hear, which there wasn't, the soft sound of a stave tapping against the earth would've been heard approaching. Unhurried, but rhythmic, it soon reached the standing stones.

The gnarled end of a staff hooked the largest wreath, carefully lifting it into the air. There was a soft crinkle of long dead flower petals as the wreathe was dusted off and examined.

The world stilled, waiting.

Just as faintly as the wrinkling petals, came a gurgling sound.

Steadily, it grew louder, more sickly, getting closer. And closer.

The thrashing of approaching branches and jerking limbs was soon to join the din, increasing in volume and wrongness, driving the serenity of the stones away. From the left, from the right, from all directions, the gurgling filled the grove.

The ISND were trapped. Not in any tiny store room like back in the Lumber Yard, or any other type of cage. No, they could move throughout the village, but leaving it would bring down the wrath of the scarecrow.

It was a stalemate, and in this game they lost if they moved first.

It was evening, and they were still trapped in Mayflower. Daylight would soon begin fading. They were tired and sore. Two of their number were injured. The silence of the village was getting into everybody's heads.

It manifested in Scenic as him being unable to sit still, fidgeting incessantly as he kept looking out of the window every ten seconds or so at the darkening forest.

Lilly alternated between trying to refrain from snapping at Scenic, and trying to envision how they were going to conquer the scarecrow.

Crimson had unpacked his whetstone, and was smoothly working it in near circles down the length of his wing blades in the correct sharpening method.

Gloom looked like he would give an awful lot to be up and pacing, but he couldn't, not with his injured side. He was being forced to basically half lay over a stool. Gloom gingerly gave the dried poultice a prod, and would've been more pleased when he found it only hurt about half as much as it should've if it weren't for the circumstances they found themselves in.

Prey was sitting in the corner, his back to them all, fiddling with the tarnished bread knife he'd found on the worn table. No one had even thought to question him for taking it.

They'd eaten, breaking out rations from their back packs and saddle bags. Lilly's magic had recovered enough that she was able to refill all of their water canteens, those who still had them anyways. No one aside from Prey had been able to eat much. Gloom and Crimson had been forced to covertly drink from the blood flask, right there in front of everyone, but none of them had Crimson's special talent and so realised nothing.

"Will you sit still?" Lilly finally snapped at Scenic, unable to restrain herself any longer.

"Oh, sorry." He said, stopping.

Gloom's ears flicked in annoyance at Lilly's pettiness; '-doesn't she realise we're all on edge? Just let Scenic do whatever he wants already. Moon blight, now she's even got me doing it-'

"It's getting dark." Shimmer announced, standing watch at the window and staring out.

That was right, the two Border Guards were in the house with them. Prey dearly wished it was otherwise.

"Crimson and I are able to see in the dark." Gloom said in response to Shimmer's brilliant observation. The Sargent glanced around the room and at the house's two doors. Both were barricaded.

They'd moved into the most solid looking abandoned home they could find, dragging in wooden furniture from other houses to fortify against an attack. If it came to that. However they did have an escape route, and also a back up escape route prepared just in case. Prey had insisted.

"That's good, but the rest of us won't be of much use without some form of illumination." Shimmer replied.

"We could start a fire. That might also scare the scarecrow away." Lilly suggested, completely overlooking how Shimmer had set the

golem on fire and it'd done nothing.

"What, a fire in here?" Scenic asked, looking around the predominantly wooden house, roof included.

"No need. Me and Atlas have watch lanterns. They're standard issue." Shimmer said, halting their argument before it could develop.

'The Border Guard are just so superior, aren't they? *Better* trained, *better* supplied, *better* prepared for everything, except protecting the innocent it seems.'

"Bright lanterns will destroy our night vision." Gloom pointed out, shifting his posture.

Shimmer was silent for a beat, "Pardon me, but there are two of you, and four, sorry excuse me, *five* of us who can't see in the dark and need light. We need the light. Besides, the brightness can be adjusted."

Atlas and Shimmer each removed a small metal lantern from their packs. Both lanterns had four faces, each with a shutter that could be adjusted to either dim the brightness, or focus the beam out in only one direction. The whole thing could be hung from a hook, and looked light, compact, and of excellent quality.

Atlas gave a nod of satisfaction as he lit his and twisted the lid closed, a pale white light spreading out, "There."

No one really said anything as the sun began its final descent. The thought of the coming darkness was not one which brought any of them comfort, not even those with night vision.

But the scarecrow had held off attacking this long, so maybe it would hold off altogether?

Prey didn't believe that for a second. Happy endings only existed in fairy tales. Prepare for the worst, and then expect it to be twice as bad. They were trapped in Mayflower, which boded ill for their

future. They all knew that, but no one was saying it.

'-this is like a horror story-', Scenic was thinking. Then he stifled a groan and put his head in his hooves.

'-oh Celestia this is *just* like a horror story. Why'd I have to go and think that?-'

Slowly, the shadows in the house lengthened and the lantern light became their main source of illumination, serving to keep the stacks of pillaged bed frames and furniture blocking the two doors visible.

Through the window that squarely faced the forest, the glaring red eye of the sun sunk into the trees. The sharp heads of the pines stretched tall and black, framed by the last of the sun's rays.

What in the world had possessed this house's owner to build a window facing the forest, allowing the trees to stare in throughout night, Prey would never know.

Prey didn't know if he was going to survive this coming night. He was scared. It would've been stupid not to have been. And Prey was anything but stupid. He knew the odds.

They were outmatched. Prey had come to realise that while Lilly was a unicorn, and therefore powerful and dangerous enough to kill him without much effort, that didn't translate into having the power to slay non-equine opponents. And aside from Shimmer, who Prey wouldn't have trusted if his life depended on it, what did they have to threaten the scarecrow and its maker with?

The only ones in an even remotely safe position right now were Gloom and Crimson, because if everything else was lost, they could take wing and fly away.

Prey shot a glare at Atlas, the pegasus resting on a stool, and was glad for the stallion's injury. 'No longer so cocky now are you? You've no idea what it's like on the ground fly boy.'

Night fell, and the temperature followed.

The two watch lanterns sat on the table, providing pale illumination for the house. Outside, the night was silent and still. Everyone of them was listening, ears straining, and if they spoke at all, it was in hushed voices.

They waited, periodically rising and pacing to try and dispel the tension.

Occasionally, Prey glanced up at the table they'd set in the middle of the room. On it, they'd laid out whatever weapons and tools they could find to hoof. A couple of wood axes, a pitch fork, a mallet and a hammer, dented spades, large pruning knives, a trowel, and the like. In the corners of the room, buckets of water sat ready just in case fire was used against them. Aside from barricading the doors and windows, this was all they'd had time to prepare.

Preparations that were proving eerily unnecessary.

No attack, no scarecrow, no nothing.

Surely if something was going to happen, it would've by now?

All they could do was wait in tense silence, stewing in worry.

When it was coming up to an hour and still nothing, Gloom finally decided to make a decision:

"Alright, this is pointless. We can't keep this up all night, and we can't fight on no sleep. We all need rest."

"Uh, you're saying we should go to sleep sir? Like, right here? Now?" Scenic asked in shock.

"Yes."

"Sir, but what if the scarecrow attacks? We've got to be ready sir." Lilly said.

Gloom gave her a flat look, "We'll be setting a watch of course. And why do you think we barricaded ourselves in here in the first place? It's so we can't get snuck up on."

"I agree," Shimmer said, rubbing at the beige fur of his face, "We need to get as much rest as we can. Sleep in our armour and in shifts."

"Of course." Gloom said. That's what he'd been going to order anyways.

"Two ponies stay awake at all times. One and a half hour shifts. When it gets to the seventh pony by themselves, just start rotating through from the beginning again."

Gloom then indicated himself and Crimson, "We should be on different shifts to make the most of our night vision."

Now was no time to feel uncomfortable about the thestral's different heritage. They needed all the advantages they could get.

Shimmer agreed, shifting the sheathed sword across his flank to a more comfortable position where he sat, "That's the most sensible approach that I can think of. Do you want to flip a coin or call lots for the pairs?"

Gloom shook his head, "I'll take the first watch with somepony else, and Crimson will be on the second one. Other than that, it doesn't matter."

"I'd be honoured to take the first watch with you, Sargent." Shimmer said, standing up.

It was decided Scenic would pair with Crimson next, then Prey and Atlas, and finally Lilly would pull the last shift, and wake Gloom to pair with her again, followed by Crimson and Shimmer until dawn.

Prey, who'd opened his mouth, silently closed it. He'd been about to raise a fuss, because under *no* circumstances was he prepared to let the two Border Guards take a watch together while the rest of them slept. But for once, his warning was unneeded.

'I will not let them kill me in my sleep. I'll kill them first, I'll spill their blood, melt the hide from their bones, choke them on poison, I'll-'

Prey jerked his head up. Shimmer had been watching him out of the corner of his eye.

Had he known what Prey was thinking? Could Shimmer hear his hateful thoughts?

No, impossible. Prey had his own ways of keeping his mind hidden. But then why was he imagining it? Prey's hoof touched the blunt bread knife he'd tied around his leg with some fraying twine. It wasn't important that it was a knife, just that it was metal. Metal could hold the kind of runes he required. He'd use it on Shimmer if, or rather when he needed to.

"Right. Well, everypony heard that right? It's not exactly the most relaxed sleeping environment ever...." Gloom's morbid humour fell flat, "...But everypony try and get some sleep anyways."

Sleep was the last thing on any of their minds, but even surrounded by death and danger, bodily functions could not be put on hold.

Crimson's gaze passed around the room, "I suppose it is a good thing we dragged in those bed frames to use as barricade padding then, sir."

"We dumped the beds though." Lilly pointed out.

"Well, there's still two mattresses left." Scenic said.

"I call dibs on this one." Lilly immediately said, plonking herself down on one of the prone straw mattresses.

Prey ignored Lilly's childishness. He didn't need comforts or a mattress to sleep. Far better, he'd take a couple of blankets and make a nest in the most heavily fortified and structurally sound corner he could find. Prey trusted Shimmer as far as he could throw him, which meant not at all. The unicorn was going to be taking the first watch with Gloom, but even with Gloom to keep an eye on Shimmer, Prey wasn't pacified.

Gloom and Shimmer sat themselves down with their backs to the table and lantern light as everyone else quietly found somewhere to lie down. It felt wrong to be trying to sleep here, what with the

danger, and it was debatable how much rest any of them would get, but it was better than nothing.

Makeshift pillows were found or created. Prey wrapped the scratchy blankets about himself, tucking in his legs and settling down in the corner. The lanterns stayed lit and at maximum beam. No one was going to suggest they be extinguished so that they might fall asleep easier.

Prey heard Scenic silently offering up a prayer, '-oh Celestia, let me open my eyes again and not die in my sleep tonight-'

The small one room house settled into the silence of the damned.

Prey's eyes drooped for the hundredth time and he snapped them back open. He couldn't afford to drift off while it was only Shimmer and Gloom awake.

What if Shimmer decided to kill them all in their sleep? If Shimmer could take Gloom by surprise and silently, then there'd be no one between the unicorn and the rest of them. Not that Prey cared about anyone but him and Crimson on that list, even after the red pegasus's dismissal of his warnings.

Prey peeked out from the cocoon of blankets he'd woven around himself, serving to hide his face in shadow and make it appear as if he was asleep.

But no, Gloom and Shimmer hadn't moved from their posts, still sitting facing the barred window and doors. The white lantern light, which had first seemed dim, was painful on the eyes by now, and it was a wonder that everyone else had managed to get to sleep at all.

Prey's own eyes were grainy with tiredness, but he couldn't afford to fall asleep just yet. Once Crimson and Scenic replaced them on watch, yes, but not until then.

He had to guard against whatever Shimmer had planned.

But nothing had happened.

Shimmer hadn't made a move yet, and they were about to reach the end of their allotted hour and a half watch. Perhaps the unicorn was just biding his time?

Prey wanted to rub his eyes, but that would give him away. He was so tired. He longed to join the others in sleep, but not yet. Not yet.

'I don't want to end up sleeping the sleep of the dead.'

Finally, Shimmer stirred, and Prey stiffened in his blanket pile.

"Next shift." Shimmer spoke softly.

Gloom blinked, and then nodded and stretched, getting up off his stool. He winced, and then frowned at his side. Experimentally, Gloom moved his leg about, testing the range of motion.

"Huh. That poultice stuff actually works." He muttered.

Shimmer was already moving over to the sleeping forms of Scenic and Crimson to shake them awake. Crimson awoke before the unicorn's hoof even touched him, yellow eyes snapping open. He wordlessly got up without prompting, and moved to replace Gloom.

Scenic, despite all his perfectly justified fear earlier, was so tired he had to be shaken quite vigorously before he awoke, and then it was with a panicked yelp.

"Sshh!" Shimmer hissed at him.

"It's your watch Paint Spot." Gloom whispered to him, taking Crimson's vacated spot.

"Oh, right. Yes sir." Scenic whispered back, clumsily rising and yawning.

Crimson flicked an ear back irritably as Scenic pulled up a stool. Obviously, Crimson wasn't happy with the other stallion's alertness.

'But at least I can finally sleep now.' Prey thought as Shimmer lay down and ceased moving.

Since Prey couldn't read Shimmer's thoughts, he had no way of knowing if the stallion was really asleep, but with both Crimson and Scenic on guard, it was the best opportunity to sleep Prey was going to get.

Prey decided to wait ten more minutes just to be safe, not paying Scenic's restless fidgeting any mind.

The slow count of ten minutes passed. Still nothing from Shimmer.

Prey judged it as safe as it was going to get. He finally let his eyes slide shut, settling down into the blanket pile and feeling his own breath warm his face. However Prey found that his mind was reluctant to let him sleep. The near death experiences of today replayed themselves behind his eyelids, all mixed up with fear, hate, and nasty plans.

But even those had to pass in the face of biological need.

Just as Prey was finally starting to drift off for real this time, Scenic had to go and clear his throat.

"Erm, Crimson?" He whispered.

"What is it?" Crimson asked, immediate on alert.

"No no, it's not that, but... I, I just... Can I talk to you about something?"

"Maintain your watch. Don't become distracted." Crimson answered back shortly.

Prey thought that would be that, and after another two minutes he was nearly asleep again, drifting on the edge of welcome blackness.

"I really need to talk to somepony though. I just, I just can't not say it." Scenic blurted out, desperation in his hushed voice.

Beneath his tired eyelids, Prey's eyes rolled, 'Oh shut up and let me sleep already.'

"We're on watch. Our comrades lives depend on us." Crimson

reminded Scenic.

"I won't see anything coming anyway in the dark. I'm useless." Scenic muttered bitterly.

Prey's sharp ears heard Crimson shift, but besides that, the pegasus didn't respond.

Scenic apparently took Crimson's silence or lack of disagreement as proof that his fears of inadequacy were true.

"I'm sorry Crimson. I didn't mean for this when I asked to transfer to the ISND. I thought I'd learn how to help and get over my fear. But I'm just dragging you and everypony down."

"You are quick to give up. It has been less than a week." Crimson said.

"I can already see that I'm no use to anypony here. I haven't done a single thing to help solve anything. And all this it's just, just completely crazy. Scarecrows, kindersnatches, mist, forests, I'm scared all the time, I'm not cut out for this. I, I think I'll ask to be dismissed when I get back to Canterlot. If I survive that long..." Scenic mumbled.

Scenic said 'if' I get back to Canterlot, but inside he still really meant 'when'. He hadn't yet accepted the possibility that none of them might be making it out of this. Despite almost dying multiple times today and being trapped in an abandoned house, it still hadn't registered with the Earth pony. Inside, Scenic believed he was going to walk away from this.

That was the difference. Scenic thought he was going to get through this, and Lilly herself was still treating this all like one big story. The rest of them, Gloom, Crimson, and Prey, they all knew differently.

Scenic wasn't prepared to put everything on the line. He still didn't understand that terrible crawling dread of not know if you were going to live through the night.

Crimson gave a quiet snort, "You misunderstand me. It has been less

than a week. Did you honestly expect to find your place by now?"

"None of this is what I expected. I, well, I hoped I'd get better, face my fear and all that. Ha. Now I've just got brand new fears. And there's nothing I can do. What use am I? Even if I was a Guard for years, what could I ever do?"

"Same as the rest of us. Your duty." Crimson replied unhelpfully.

Scenic didn't seem to have an answer to that. Prey could almost see him hunching lower on his stool. 'Pathetic.' Prey thought, hoping they'd finally be quiet so he could get some sleep.

"I didn't in a week." Crimson unexpectedly said.

"What?"

"I mean, I didn't do anything to help in my first week. I was just as useless." Crimson explained.

"You don't have to try and make me feel better. I know I'm not as good as you guys are." Scenic mumbled.

"Do you think me a liar?" Crimson asked.

"No, that's not what I..."

"Do you think I would make false claims merely to spare your feelings?"

"Uh, no?"

"Then do not question me. I was of no use during our first week. It was...frustrating. I found I was merely a hindrance to Sargent Gloom and Prey."

"But, I saw you, you fought that scarecrow thing. I just froze, but you were all sorts of skilled. You've been trained to fight."

"Little use a warrior is unless your aim is to spill blood," Crimson stated in a low voice, "And that must always be a last resort. But I had few skills necessary for the ISND. Investigating, thinking,

paperwork, following clues. It was unpleasant to find I was even less use than Prey, a child."

Prey was shocked to hear this. Crimson was always so composed and focused on doing his duty. He never usually spoke this much, so why now to Scenic? Scenic was an outsider, why not speak to him or at least Gloom instead?

"Well that makes me feel better, I'm even less useful than a foal." Scenic muttered, showing a sharp sarcasm he hadn't displayed before. "Even he didn't freeze up like I did. He knows all about tracking and stuff and what can I do? Nothing."

Scenic's mumblings were withdrawing as the stallion began to loose focus on speaking to Crimson, and began speaking to himself as he grew more and more melancholic.

"I couldn't do anything. I just froze up again. Even after I promised myself from last time I wouldn't. Some Guard I am, first day on the job and I ran away from a murder scene and left you guys to solve it."

"Now you really are just being a fool," Crimson said calmly, "What training had you to deal with death? You don't. In the clans, it is different. We do."

"Yeah? Well Prey went down into that cellar just fine. I didn't even see anything, and I still get nightmares, that's how pathetic I am. Prey managed it just fine."

There was a long pause. "That is not a good thing." Crimson finally said.

Scenic seemed to realise what he'd just said, "No no, please, I didn't mean- Celestia, I'd never wish for a foal to-, that's not what I meant at all." He groaned, the sound muffled as if he was groaning into his hooves.

Crimson grunted and settled back into silence.

"What... Happened down in the cellar? No pony will tell me exactly, but it keeps getting mentioned. And the Lumber Yard?" Scenic

hesitantly asked.

"What happened down there is none of your business," Crimson replied sharply, then modified his tone, "I do not think you really want to know. It was bad, and evil, and wrong. Let us leave it at that. Things were... said and seen."

"How...?"

Scenic went quiet for a few seconds, before finishing his sentence in a hoarse whisper, "How did you move past that? I didn't see anything, but I still can't get past it. Please, tell me how."

"I don't know. For me, it was a decision I made when I was younger."

"What decision?"

"I cannot tell you. It is a secret." Crimson said simply, then added, "I'm sorry. But it's not a solution that would help you anyways."

"Oh..." Scenic mumbled, disappointment evident.

"You should speak to Sargent Gloom. He will have the answers to help you, I am sure." Crimson suggested.

"I suppose I could ask Sargent Gloom or Prey." Scenic reluctantly admitted.

"No. Do not ask Prey what happened in the cellar."

"Huh? No, I wasn't really going to- Why not?"

"Because Prey can be very cruel, and he might just tell you."

Prey twitched. Crimson thought he was cruel?

"So don't ask. I mean, I can't stop you, but I'd prefer it if you didn't ask Prey about the Lumber Yard either." Crimson added.

"What... Happened at the Lumber Yard?" Scenic asked hesitantly.

There was the faint whisper of Crimson's feathers rubbing together

as he shifted his wings.

"Nothing good." He said shortly, "You will... Probably learn about it regardless, but it would be better if you didn't. It is not fair to Prey if you think differently of him because of what happened. It was not his fault and he had no choice. It was self defence."

"Self defence?"

There was an awkward pause, "I have said too much already."

"Is Prey okay though?" Scenic asked guilelessly, "He's still a foal, and I have no idea how he's even in the Night Guard, but he's your friend, right?"

"Maybe. I do not know." Crimson slowly said.

"What? But he's in your squad and you guys work so well together all the time." Scenic protested, having completely forgotten they'd originally been talking about his own problems.

"That does not mean Prey is a nice po-sheep. I do not enjoy his company..."

Prey's stomach tightened, it was as he'd feared. He'd never actually asked Crimson, but he'd always suspected the pegasus didn't actually even like him. And that hurt more than he'd expected, because Crimson was different. Prey hadn't used to care, but now he did, because he owed Crimson.

"...However that does not mean I do not like him. Sometimes. It's not simple. We work well together, we're both similar, but we're also very different. But that doesn't make Prey a bad pon-person. If he is a bad person, then so am I."

Crimson wasn't a bad person, or at least, he was a better person than Prey was. Prey wouldn't have saved Crimson's life, in fact he'd twice left Crimson to die. Yet Crimson had still saved Prey's life. Nobody's innocent, but Crimson was better than Prey.

"I'm, I don't know what to say but I'm sure that's not true-"

Crimson cut Scenic off, "Before you make assumptions, remember that you know nothing about my history. Or Prey's. Or Sargent Gloom's for that matter. I do not know Prey's story, and I hope, no, I'm certain he doesn't know mine either. Probably. Maybe. You can never be sure with Prey."

"I think Prey hates me." Scenic confessed.

"No, he merely dislikes you. You would know if Prey hated you." Crimson dismissed.

"What do you mean?"

"If Prey hated you he would make no secret of the fact. Which is good. Because he hasn't. Which means he doesn't."

"Oh." Scenic muttered in the dark. "That's... Something I guess."

"Yes he probably won't do anything to you." Crimson agreed flatly

"What? That sounds, uh, like, really ominous? And that's really not a good thing right now, so could you maybe not say things like that?" Scenic said, trying for a nervous chuckle.

It came out strained.

"It's nothing," Crimson mused so softly that Prey could only just hear him, "But he smiled as he dipped his hoof in the b-... Sometimes I wonder. Just like the kindersnatch he pushed off the ravine."

"What kindersnatch?"

"Where you not paying attention? Prey told us all about that already."

"Wait, but a kindersnatch is a villager inside, so-"

"So nothing. Prey said he saw the kindersnatch survive." Crimson cut him off. Prey had not said that. He'd only said it'd maybe survived. Why was Crimson lying?

"But even then, that means he almost killed a-"

"Do you think Prey is unawares of that? He was the one who worked out who the kindersnatches were. How do you think that makes him feel?" Crimson said coldly.

"I, I'm sorry. I didn't... I really am useless aren't I? Always jumping before I think and making problems." Scenic said miserably.

"Don't be sorry to me. Rather, do not say anything that you would need to be sorry about to Prey. Then there is no problem. And you do yourself a disservice by judging yourself so poorly."

"How can you say that? I've done nothing to help, and if it comes to it, how do you know I won't just freeze up again?"

"Prey said it before. Survival is not pretty. But everypony wants to survive, it's instinct."

"But I froze up. I couldn't fight-"

"If it comes down to it, I am sure you will do whatever is necessary." Crimson said calmly.

"I... That does not make me feel any better." Scenic said hoarsely.

Crimson didn't grace such a stupid statement an answer. Why should he? Of course Scenic would do what was necessary if the time came. It was either that or die. And Prey knew that when push came to shove, people could and would do dreadful things to survive.

Since Crimson hadn't seen fit to respond to that, Scenic lost confidence and also finally went quiet.

Prey lay in the dark, thinking about what he'd overheard.

Dark in the blue, blue fading in the blackness. A tingling light was pulsing, getting louder as it turned into muffled sound. Prey felt the urgency before his sleeping mind fully understood the words he was

hearing; "…..-up, everypony wake up! They're attacking!"

---I---

Author's Notes:

Editor of this stuff: **Sweetolebob18** ☆

If you have spotted any mistakes in your reading of this chapter, please let me know, thanks!

------<O>------

Here is an awesome picture of the scarecrow: HERE. I wish I could say I had anything to do with it, but it was painted by GreatSpaceBeaver

46.3 Don't Play in the Cornfields after Dark

It was the feeling of panic thrumming through the air, and it woke Prey.

And then the panic was wiped away as Prey's back muscles decided, of all the possible times, *right now* was the perfect moment to cramp up.

'*Zoma'Grika*! Why now?'

Prey's back arched without his control as the muscles coiled in on themselves.

"Gha!" The coarse blanket tangled around Prey as he tried to fight free and jam a hoof into the agonising cramp. Around the room, figures were jumping to their hooves, Crimson had his wings flared, standing at the window.

"What's the situation?!" Gloom shouted, grabbing his short spear.

The watch lanterns were still burning, but next to them on the table the other half of Shimmer's tracking device was pulsing brightly.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no no no." Scenic was muttering.

"Get ready." Shimmer ordered, straw coloured mane sticking out wildly under his helmet as he gripped his sword hilt in his aura.

People were scrambling, grabbing things from the table. There was a rising gurgling coming from the night outside.

"Prey get up! We're under attack."

'I'm trying!' Prey internally raged through gritted teeth. He half made it back to his hooves, before the cramp ran down his spine and made his leg disobey, dumping him back onto the hard floor.

It didn't even register with Prey that everyone was seeing him in a moment of weakness, other things like pain, panic, and impending death had him a bit distracted.

"Get up!" Gloom shouted at him again, or was it at everyone? There was a crash from the barricaded front door, and suddenly everyone was a lot more focused on that.

It seemed to start coming from all sides at once. There were more crashes, banging against the walls and blocked windows, the horrible gurgling proof of the kindersnatches outside trying to get in.

Prey was scared, of course he was, but he was also desperately angry. 'Why now?! Why of all times do I have to get cramp now?'

He was wide awake, terribly so, but it didn't feel like it.

More loud gurgling, the thwacking sound of branches striking against wooden planks, and then, through the gaps in the single window's barricade, flickering orange light appeared out of the blackness.

The scarecrow was here.

"Aww *sugar*." Lilly cursed.

The orange flicker flashed, right outside. Then the door shook with an almighty bang, bowing inwards, sending the barricade piled against it rebounding backwards ten inches. But somehow the door didn't break.

"Destroy any branches that come in. Don't kill the kindersnatches. Keep the door braced." Gloom ordered over the din, leaping forwards to push the tables and logs back against the door.

Atlas dashed forwards to assist Gloom, but no sooner had they shoved everything back into place bracing the door, than another mighty kick from the unseen scarecrow outside made it all jump again.

__Thumk__!

Prey swore he heard the sound of splintering even over the gurgling and banging.

"C'mon c'mon." Prey hissed, tottering towards the table, back still twisted up. How could he let pain delay him at a crucial time like this? But it still did. Pain was pain.

The barricade at the window was taking a beating, the kindersnatches outside trying to force the makeshift blockade in. A thorny tendril, as thick as Prey's leg, squeezed inside and began to whip about.

Crimson's wing shot out and the tendril fell to the floor, still madly thrashing. It was terrifying, the blackness outside and the white light inside casting mad shadows.

Another huge crash against the front door, and the whole door frame vibrated. Gloom and Atlas kept re-bracing it.

"I've had enough of this!" Lilly declared, lighting up her horn.

Her pink barrier spell, the one Lilly had only successfully cast once in a combat situation before, popped into existence. A half dome appeared around the besieged door as Lilly magically braced the barricade from their side.

The next mighty blow struck, but this time, although Lilly staggered for a second, the barricade and door barely budged.

"Keep it up Lilly." Gloom called, his flank injury forgotten as he raced around.

"Sir, you can count on me sir!"

'Stupid, naive, brash, foolhardy, overconfident, idiotic-!'

Prey continued a silent stream of mental insults as he both tried to reach the table top and fight his own cramping muscles for dominance.

Crimson was holding the window, another wicker tendril whipped inside and was promptly chopped off like so much fire wood.

Gloom and Atlas had their weapons ready, Atlas only capable of using one wing blade, waiting to see where the next assault was going to come from.

Shimmer, where was Shimmer? What was the unicorn doing?

The unicorn was just standing calmly in the middle of the room, his sword floating and at the ready beside his head. He spoke loudly.

"They're not going to get in."

Who was the idiot trying to convince? Himself? The kindersnatches? The monsters outside wouldn't care, even if the person inside the kindersnatches could still hear and understand Shimmer.

The whip scar cramp finally decided it'd had enough fun with Prey and abruptly subsided. He gasped, finally able to reach the table top and grab the rusted pitchfork. The tool was far too long for him, and the end almost dipped to the floor as he struggled to right it, but he did and charged the window.

He jammed the pitchfork tines into the back of the chair that was just about to be forced out of the window frame, and braced the other end against the table leg. Prey ran back to the table, grabbing a spade this time and used it to jam another gap.

"Horseapples!" The exclamation came from Scenic. The Earth pony was staring wide eyed at a crack between two wooden beams in the wall. Spined wicker tendrils were worming their way through, trying to force the hole that hadn't been there a minute ago wider.

"Don't just stand there," Prey yelled shrilly at Scenic, "Cut them off!"

Scenic came to his senses, and dashed to the table and grabbed the axe. It was a wood axe, the blade half rusted, but it had been made with non-magical users in mind, with an iron loop for the hoof.

However Scenic was too slow, for Shimmer's sword flew through the air to hack and slash the squirming tendrils off, the magical grip allowing the unicorn to do so without getting in range of the danger himself.

"Remember the plan!" Gloom shouted over the noise. More blows were still making the shielded door shake.

And then came the sound of pounding on the back door. Not the shattering strikes of the scarecrow, but the continuous raining blows of the kindersnatches as they beat upon the wooden plank barricade.

"Here they come." Gloom warned.

There was a groan and a splintering from the wall next to Prey. He jumped back and saw a weaker section of plank being cracked and forced inwards. Abruptly it broke and a spiky kindersnatch leg punched through and then got stuck. The walls were not thin. Whomever had built this house had built it in the traditional farmer way and meant for it to last.

But it wasn't thick enough to stop the kindersnatch, but it was thick enough to for it to get stuck.

There was gurgling and thrashing as the kindersnatch tried to free itself. Prey backed up, nervously glancing to check where the ladder was again for when and if they had to make a hasty escape.

"They're going to break through the walls at this rate!" Gloom shouted. He pointed at the root leg, "Scenic, cut that off."

Scenic raised the axe and began hacking at the leg. It was much thicker and tougher than one of the thorn tendrils and Scenic couldn't manage to cleanly sever it before it was withdrawn, leaving a black hole out into the night.

The sound of wood being struck, gurgling, the pounding on the doors. Prey tried to keep everything in his field of view, but it was impossible. More crashing, more pounding. It was so loud and claustrophobic. It went on and on. Crimson was still fending off any overly ambitious kindersnatches trying to break down the barricade at the window, but they were relentless.

A kindersnatch tried to tear the small hole in the wall wider, or perhaps it was just dumb enough to try and force its body through

whole. Gloom reversed his spear and used the butt to shove it back out. Crimson sliced off more thorny branch tendrils and Lilly managed to continue holding the door with her shield.

Prey was scared, but they were holding out. Crying could come later, or never. They were trapped, but they were holding.

But the attempts to break in were not stopping either, and the strength of wood was finite. Would it hold out until morning? Would the kindersnatches even stop come morning?

Prey's mind was telling him something was wrong. There had to be more to the assault than this. He didn't know how many kindersnatches the warlock had out there, but he still felt there should be more than this.

"Everypony down!" Shimmer shouted over the noise, his sword dropping to the floorboards and his horn starting to glow with a white green light.

Prey's eyes widened as he and everyone else did as ordered and ducked.

A circular pulse jumped out of Shimmer's horn, trailing sparks. The pulse hit the walls and passed right through, disappearing outside. Prey didn't know what it did, but all the beating and pounding on the walls suddenly stopped.

"What spell was that?" Gloom asked, still crouched low.

"Breathing room." Shimmer answered.

But then a thud came against the wall, almost tentative. When nothing happened, it came again, harder, louder. *Thud*.

Then another, the scarecrow struck the door again, making it and Lilly's shield vibrate, and the siege started back up. Shimmer's spell had delayed the monsters for less than ten seconds.

"Damn," Shimmer muttered, "I thought it would deter them longer than that."

Fear. It did not sink in within the first minute. They staved it off, the walls and door were holding firm after all.

Nor did it come in the second minute as the continued to chop off any limb which made it's way inside and Lilly's shield still held.

The fear was there, floating in the air, but they were stronger.

The Scarecrow continued kicking the door, for some reason not moving onto striking the walls or window instead.

Five minutes, and still they were fine, safe inside their four walls and lantern light.

The fear began to loose its edge. It become easier to breathe. If they could hold out five minutes without issue, why couldn't they hold all the way out until morning? They could do this for as long as it took.

Irrational. Optimistic. Premature. Hope is a cruel thing.

Ten minutes, and the fear was back, choking in the air as the strain became obvious. The walls were starting to develop cracks. Not much, and only when that wall section was stuck did the fractures show, but they were there. And this was only after ten minutes. How could so little time have passed? Could they really hold out until morning?

The infernal gurgling and flickering orange light drilling in from outside never ceased. The things clear they were utterly relentless. They wouldn't stop. It was an inevitability.

"Leave us alone! Just go away!" Scenic yelled inarticulately as he madly hacked off another kindersnatches gnarled wooden leg that'd punched through. Timbers were groaning and wailing.

But Prey wasn't done, not yet. His pulse was racing in his throat.

'I will live.'

He'd survived worse odds before, he could do it again.

And then Lilly's shield started to flicker as she reached her limit. The fog of fear was thickening, oily and pervasive in the back of everyone's throats.

Shimmer sent out more pulses of his magic, buying them a hoofull of seconds each time, but they were just stalling and at this rate, soon his magic would be exhausted too.

The inevitable was stealing in, putting down rootholds, tightening its grip. But they were not about to give up, not yet.

They had an escape route prepared, but using it was more exposed to danger than simply staying in here. For now.

"They've got to give up eventually. Surely." Lilly groaned, horn sparking worryingly. Her eyes, which had been so brash and fiery, now held uncertainty. Even she was realising what kind of situation they were in. No one was coming to rescue them.

And the fear got in. It'd always been there, always inside them. They'd just been denying it until now.

The wall splintered as an entire section of plank was smashed in. Scenic yelled and stumbled backwards. Through the new hole, a shadowed kindersnatch sightlessly glared into the light with all the hate of its creator.

"Plug that hole!" Shimmer ordered.

Plug the hole? With what exactly?

Prey looked around. What could he use? There was nothing. Everyone else was busy.

There was nothing he could use, which meant only one thing. The house was breached.

No fort is impenetrable, no defence is absolute. And this house was hardly a fort. There was always a way to get inside any defence, as long as you were willing to pay the price. If you poked and prodded

long enough, eventually someone or something would give.

Never back yourself into a corner, always have a way out, a back up plan, somewhere to run when everything failed. Because it *would* fail.

The only way to win against a foe you couldn't beat was not to fight at all.

So when your walls were breached, when your defences caved in, there was only one choice left. Run.

Run.

Run. The kindersnatches had breached the wall. The house was as good as lost. It was only a matter of time. Prey was not going to stay here.

Run.

It was time to go.

"Prey," Gloom called as he spied Prey making for the ladder, "No! We're not running yet."

Prey ignored him and reached the base of the ladder. They'd dragged the ladder into the house, and it rose the short distance up to the low rafters. Prey grabbed the bottom rung.

"Not yet Prey!" Gloom shouted in a rasp, pushing back a kindersnatch through a hole with his spear.

"Yes now! They're breaking down the walls." Prey shouted squeakily back, already half way up the ladder.

Prey didn't hear whatever Gloom or any of the others might've replied, because the scarecrow smashed into the door again at that exact moment and drowned it out.

Prey reached the top of the short ladder, bracing his hooves on the wooden rungs. Dancing shadows blackening the rafters above him, and for a moment he couldn't make out the seam he was looking

for, but he knew it had to be right there.

Prey pushed up and butted his head against the roof planking. Prey heaved, and the section they'd loosened earlier tilted up. Pin pricks of star light appeared in a slot above Prey's head as he pushed himself up, the impromptu skylight riding down his neck and then onto his back as he pulled himself out onto the roof.

The gurgling was suddenly frighteningly loud. The wicker tops of the closest kindersnatch was less than five hooves below him in the night.

Prey couldn't see them or anything else for a moment, blinded as the white lantern light was cut off as the roof fell shut. But the kindersnatches couldn't see him either, they weren't tall enough to and he was near the middle of the roof.

But there was one source of light. The flickering orange on the other side of the roof, where the scarecrow squatted, battering at the door. Prey crouched as low as he could, the rough bark roofing tiles catching at his wool. The scarecrow wasn't tall enough to see over the roof's peak onto this side of the roof either, but who knew how the warlock had been watching them? Did their even method work in the dark? Could they see Prey right now?

Prey wasn't going to wait to find out.

Prey scuttled to the edge of the roof, to the place where they'd stowed the second ladder earlier. He almost tripped over it as his hoof hit the thing in the dark. Heart racing, Prey stabilised himself and groped around in the dark for the end of the ladder.

What was everyone else still doing down there? Were they going to commit suicide by staying inside?

Prey found the end of the ladder. He looked across, his night sight having recovered just enough for him to make out his target, the roof of the next house over.

Prey shifted the ladder to lined it up with the opposite roof's lip, took a firm grip on the ladder's bottom rung, dug his hooves into

the bark tiles, and pushed.

The ladder scrapped across the roof and slid out across the gap. The far end dully thunked onto the far roof, forming a bridge between the two houses.

A bridge full of holes. In the dark. Over a mass of kindersnatches.

"*Go already*." Prey spun around as Atlas hissed at him. The injured pegasus had been sent up next after Prey, but he'd barely registered the Border Guard's behind him.

Prey's distorted expression of hate was hidden in the night. For a brief second, Prey reached for the handle of the dented bread knife tied around his leg.

'No, now isn't the time.'

Prey twisted back around and gripped the edges of the ladder. Then quickly before he could lose his nerve or think too hard about how one slip would send him tumbling into the clutches of the kindersnatches below, Prey began shimmying across.

He was almost to the other side when he heard a tearing crash of wood breaking.

Prey almost looked back, but he didn't need to see to know that the scarecrow had finally broken down the door.

The breach should've been followed by a roar of triumph, but none came. The scarecrow was a golem, it didn't feel glee or hate. It just followed orders.

Prey rolled off the ladder and onto the bark tiles of the second house's roof. He'd made it. But what had happened to the others?

Prey looked back, and saw a second figure, then a third outline push themselves out onto the roof. Prey recognised the outlines by memory. Scenic and Lilly. Gloom had heeded his warning, and was ordering a full retreat as the scarecrow and the kindersnatches fought to break down the last of the door's barricade and get inside.

That'd been their backup plan.

Abandon the house and escape over onto this one while the monsters thought they were all still inside the first. Gloom and Crimson would escape last, holding out for as long as possible. They were the only two still able to fly, thus they had the best chance of escape.

A pulse of burning bright light flashed out from the house, phasing unimpeded through the walls and Prey got to see and feel what Shimmer's spell did. A sense of wrongness, a repulsing force slapped Prey like a physical strike. His hooves prickled all over like they were crawling with ants.

The pulse instinctively made Prey want to run away, his emotions seesawing out of control, but the feeling was just a compulsion, and those didn't work on Prey, even right now in his already fearful state. However it worked on all the kindersnatches below. In the fading flash of Shimmer's spell, Prey saw the wicker monstrosities all recoiling, gurgling and thrashing their thorny limbs.

Shimmer's spell was almost the end of his own subordinate, too.

Atlas, almost across the ladder for himself, staggered. Instinctively, the pegasus tried to spread his wings for balance.

Atlas let out a hoarse yell of pain, wobbling precariously. For a moment Prey's stomach leapt up his throat, not because Atlas might fall, but because he might fall and alert the kindersnatches to their escape.

Prey's warning shout didn't matter. It was lost under the drowning gurgle and sound of the scarecrow progressively smashing its way inside.

Somehow, Atlas regained his balance and tottered the last two steps and made it to Prey's roof.

The flash of light caused by Shimmer's ill advised spell had allowed Prey to count the kindersnatches below and see how screwed they were.

Thirteen kindersnatches, splayed in a ring around the house. More than last time. Did this warlock have even more more than these stored somewhere? Had he already transformed the rest of the captured villagers into more of his or her wicker army?

Lilly had made her own way halfway across the ladder bridge by now. Scenic, still on the opposite roof, was making pointless gestures of frantic encouragement to Lilly to hurry up.

Then Prey saw the house shake, the whole roof under Scenic's hooves shuddering. The kindersnatches and scarecrow were starting to tear into the walls now.

The roof behind Scenic banged open for what was getting dangerously close to the last time. The horned outline of Shimmer pushed free and jumped out onto the roof. Again, the house shook, and an ominous creaking noise sounded out.

Below, Prey could see the kindersnatches were now literally tearing through the walls. Zoma'Grika! They'd be inside in less than sixty seconds. From there, the scarecrow would kill Gloom and Crimson if they hadn't escaped, there was no doubt in Prey's mind about the warlock having any intention of taking them alive.

Scenic was now on the ladder. Prey flinched as he saw the left corner of the house suddenly bend over on itself like a reed, buckling in. The whole place was about to come down!

Cr-cr-rr-cr-rr-cr-craaaak

Prey stared, frozen. That wasn't supposed to happen.

'No. No it's too early. Crimson is supposed to get out first.'

The wall facing him began crumpling in on itself. More splintering and breaking noises, and the roof started to tilt dangerously forwards, Shimmer spreading his legs to stay standing.

This wasn't how the plan was supposed to go.

"Get out of there Crimson!" Prey yelled, high pitched.

There was no way for Crimson to hear his shout. Nobody could hear him over the din, not even himself.

Much like a cresting wave which had reached the breaking point, the roof started collapsing in on itself.

Why wasn't Crimson flying out? The ladder slipped and tumbled down between the two buildings as the whole house inexorably began to tilt backwards. Bark tiles cascaded off the roof and support posts snapping as they failed, yet somehow Shimmer kept his footing. The stallion telekinetically tore his cloak aside and ran and leapt.

Only a deer should've been able to spring across a gap like that. The house was falling away beneath Shimmer's very hooves, he was weighed down by his armour, but yet somehow Shimmer shot across.

In shock, Scenic's reaction time as he moved to catch Shimmer's hoof was too slow, but he wasn't even needed. Shimmer landed squarely on the roof, not even slipping on the sloping tiles.

But Prey didn't care about him, what about Gloom and Crimson? He owed Crimson!

'-oh my Celestia!-', Someone thought in shock.

Like a felled tree, slowly, then gathering speed the house fell. The already damaged walls ripped in a jagged line like wet paper, the roof went over, and with a rending splintering crash the house collapsed. The thump rattled the tiles under their hooves. Half of the kindersnatches were knocked over by the impact as debris and dust shot out.

"S-saregnt Gloom..." Scenic stuttered from next to Prey in the night.

"Celestia have mercy on them." Atlas whispered.

And there, in the suddenly cleared space in the night, stood the architect of the destruction. It was just a shadowy shape, lit evilly by the flickering orange light bleeding from its headless neck.

It had four legs again. Somehow, someway, the scarecrow had been crudely repaired. The new leg was rough, the joining bulky even in the dark, but the scarecrow was back.

Prey felt an intense surge of hatred for the thing which'd only been previously reserved for the one controlling it.

This thing just didn't stop! This was the third time it had come for them, like it couldn't take the hint it wasn't wanted. If only they'd managed to fully destroy it last time in the forest. If *only* Lilly had thrown the message bottle true, if *only*. But she hadn't. And Prey couldn't do anything. Only stare in hate.

The wreckage left of the house was little more than shapes in the dark. Although the building hadn't been completely flattened, it was near enough as made no difference. Less than a hoof's height of the walls remained standing above the foundations, a mess of broken off jagged splinters.

The roof itself had mostly stayed in one flat piece, detached from the four walls by the momentum with which it'd been thrown free as the house collapsed. Now the roof lay like a crumpled blanket, half covering the collapsed house, and the other half spilled out onto the dirt, folded over where the remains of the front wall propped it up in the middle.

Prey's mind raced in circles, looking for a solution. Could Gloom and Crimson have survived that? If so, they were now trapped and at the warlock's mercy. '*If*'.

Wait, twelve. There were only twelve kindersnatch shapes gathered around the wreckage. Where was number thirteen?

Prey spotted a cluster of broken wicker sticking out from under the edge of the fallen roof. The warlock had been fine with destroying his own creations to kill the people inside the house. The warlocks ruthlessness made Prey's throat constrict.

Because that was something he would've done.

"No..." Lilly mumbled.

"No... No no no No NO NO! That's not allowed to happen!" She shouted in fury

The scarecrow's body snapped around, jerkily tilting upwards as if to look from its headless stump straight at them.

'I'm going to kill her.' Prey thought with complete calm as everyone and everything froze for a moment.

A pause.

It was the breath before the blizzard.

The scarecrow and kindersnatches charged forwards in a skittering jumbled mass to surround their house, the scarecrow's longer legs carrying it at the head of the pack.

Prey had just watched them tear right through one house, and now here they were coming again. Fury and fear roiled in Prey's veins, 'You'll not take me too.'

Prey didn't look to see what the others were doing, it didn't matter, he just turned and jumped off the far side of the roof. Who cared about them? They were all useless betrayers. Not like Crimson and Gloom.

They *must've* survived. No way did having a house falling on them kill them both instantly. They had armour. The house was wooden. They'd survived the lumber yard. Surely they could survive this.

It was not a long drop, homes on the border didn't have the luxury of being built big. Prey rolled as he landed in the thick patch of weeds he'd aimed for. He got a mouthful of the gritty stems and dirt.

Spitting, he managed to roll to his hooves.

He didn't have time to check if any of the others were smart enough to copy him in jumping. He didn't care. The moment Prey got his bearings, he dashed around the corner of the next house before the onrushing kindersnatches could round the corner, see him, and trap him in their encirclement.

The never ending gurgling din followed him, tracking Prey as he dodged around a tool shed in the dark. To his mind, it sounded like they were right behind him, but he couldn't even tell.

He skidded around another corner, tripped on a thick mat of what felt like bind weed in the dark, and ran and jumped the knife slash of the stream as it appeared in front of his hooves.

Prey just needed a moment, a moment to think, to slip away and reset.

He needed a plan.

He needed to find and kill this warlock.

Was he being followed? Prey risked a wild look back over his shoulder, own ear nearly swatting him in the face, and and saw the lone kindersnatch which'd chased him blunder around the corner. It lurched the wrong way, seeking him.

Prey threw himself down into the weeds and dirt and held his racing breath. Under all that wicker and black magic, the thing was still operating off the senses of what'd been a normal person, now a victim. It shouldn't be able to see him in the dark.

Prey could've kept running, probably avoided pursuit from the kindersnatch, and escaped Mayflower under the cover of night. Maybe. Maybe not. But he didn't try. Because the more he thought about it, the more Prey was convinced Crimson must've survived. Yes. The Pegasus was just trapped back there under the rubble. Slowly suffocating.

The kindersnatch thrashed ineffectually at a wooden post in its way, twisting its bulbous upper body about as if searching. Prey covered his mouth to hold in his breath. It was less than ten paces away from him in the dark. He could smell the scent of mould and rot it gave off.

The kindersnatch turned back around, still gurgling, and scuttled back the way it'd come, splashing a leg in the stream.

Prey kept holding his breath for as long as he could, then let it out

with a gasp. His legs were shaking quite badly.

Prey had sworn to himself he wasn't willing to risk his own life for Crimson's, but, but, but this wasn't risking his life. If he could avoid detection, yes, then there was no risk.

He had the bread knife, already prepared with some runes. He had his mind. He had his ribbon. It would be enough.

It had to be enough.

Prey was scared. Of course he was scared. Prey was always scared. And he was also furious that this kept happening to him.

Prey closed his eyes for a moment, to breathe, to think.

'This is workable. I can manage this. Even in this tiny village, the scarecrow is no threat if it can't find me. The kindersnatches only have the dulled senses of people, and they're all focused on the others. Not me, the least threatening runt lamb. Now that I'm by myself, I can easily avoid detection. Yes, I can do this.'

Prey opened his eyes and cautiously got up from the weed bed.

From over the roof tops of the small hamlet he could hear the now oh so familiar sound of breaking wood, gurgling, see flashes of orange light against the night, hear Lilly shouting challenges, someone else trying to give orders. Prey pushed it all into the background.

If they died, he didn't care. But not Crimson. Crimson wasn't allowed to die while he owed him.

Prey moved around to the other side of the dark house, pressing himself up against the rough wood. He peeked his head an inch around the corner and took stock.

Prey saw he'd circled nearly completely around the stream and village center, and was now actually standing behind the warlock's minions.

Fifteen yards in front of him the wreckage of the first house they'd

tried to defend lay, and ten beyond that, the ring of kindersnatches and the scarecrow besieged the second house.

On this house's roof, lit by orange and sometimes white from Lilly and Shimmer's flashing horns, the rest of the crouched ponies were just visible. The kindernsatches longest thorn tendrils could only barely reach that high, but the scarecrow could reach just fine, and every time one of its long legs came stabbing down into the roof, someone had to dodge for their life.

They were fighting valiantly, trying to avoid blows and striking back as best they could, even if it was hard for Prey to tell who was who. They were only delaying the inevitable. The wicker monsters were already smashing and battering the house's walls and foundations in a pattern all too familiar.

In ten minutes or less, this house too would fall. And this time there was no helpful ladder to provide an escape route.

Prey took a deep breath, trying to dredge up some courage, and then dashed out from behind his cover and sprinted as fast as he could towards the collapsed house.

Prey threw himself flat and skidded the last few hooves to meet the edge of the collapsed roof, getting behind the remains of the wall. Sharp stings of pain stabbed him, his slide having taken him over splinters. It was nothing.

Had he been spotted? No.

In the dark, with the fight for survival going on less than ten yards away, one small lamb hiding behind them was easy to miss.

Prey felt the pulse of Shimmer's repulsion magic crawl over him as the unicorn drove the monsters back for a few seconds.

Lilly was yelling some kind of challenge to; "Bring it on!"

The ends of a splintered log next to Prey suddenly spasmed and curled in on themselves like a spider and Prey almost screamed.

He was right next to the crushed kindersnatches protruding legs,

the rest of it buried under the fallen roof and wall. Prey scrambled back, but twitching its legs was all the kindersnatch was capable of. It was trapped, crushed, and almost certainly dying. He couldn't even hear any of the omnipresent mentally screamed gibberish coming from under the rubble.

Prey didn't have the time to waste on putting it out of its misery.

Prey peaked as he heard a squealing crash, the scarecrow had punched a leg through part of the house's wall.

'Raven magpie fly away, scarecrow keep at bay~' The old ditty came unbidden to Prey. He gulped and checked he still had the bread knife. He did. Prey psyched himself up, then grabbed the edge of the fallen roof above him and jumped over it and into the open.

Prey landed on the collapsed roof tiles and immediately began casting about, trying to feel any flicker of thoughts under the debris which signalled trapped life, terrified that at any moment one of the kindersnatches might turn around and spot him.

Where were Gloom and Crimson? He was so certain that they'd survived. It had only been some falling wood.

The monsters were fixed on tearing down the other house and killing the cornered ponies, but one of them would have to notice him eventually. Every second was precious, he had to make them count-

Prey's head snapped up and he scrabbled across the bark tiles towards where he'd heard, 'Yes yes yes! Thoughts.'

Gloom's thoughts, and next to them, the mental walls he'd come to associate with Crimson.

He'd known it, he'd known they survived!

They were right in the corner. They must've dived for cover there when the house started collapsing. There was a pocket of space under there caused by the hoof or so of the still standing foundations.

Why hadn't they kicked their way free already? it was just a thin roof, they should've been able to manage it. Was Crimson injured and unable to move?

These worries flashed through Prey's head as he jumped across the uneven surface. He reached the roof section above the corner and pulled his bread knife free. He reversed the blade and stabbed in straight down.

The surface was solid, but the dull blade sank slowly into the wood as Prey lent his weight behind it. He began dragging the blade sideways, the knife juddering and fighting against his efforts for haste.

The thoughts coming from below changed, '-I hear.... something's coming-'

Prey managed to cut half a semi-circle before the runes on the knife were all spent and the blade snapped. Prey almost sliced himself open on the remains as he slipped.

He tossed the handle away, this would have to be enough. "Push up." Prey hissed through the crack he'd cut.

"Prey?" It was muffled, and almost drowned out by the gurgling less than fifteen yards away.

"Push! Now."

The roof section under Prey's hooves began to shift, and he jumped off. He heard what sounded like a strained grunt of pain. Fearfully, he glanced over his shoulder. The scarecrow was tearing down the house's side wall with frightening speed, the ponies on top trying everything they could think of.

He had to hurry. Prey grabbed at the tiles and strained to lift what he could to assist as Gloom and Crimson pushed for all they were worth from below.

The broken roof piece was stuck. It wasn't going to-

The cut section jerk free, homemade bark tiles breaking and Prey

falling back onto his rump. When he looked, he saw that the piece hadn't come all the way off, but instead had gotten stuck half up. A gap large enough to craw through was left.

Two cloud steel shod hooves were thrust out of the jagged hole, grabbing each side, and then Gloom dragged himself out, wriggling like a fish on his belly until he fell off the side onto the dirt.

Prey was at the hole in a heartbeat, going to stick his hoof in to help but then yanking it back away, "Crimson? Crimson? Can you get out?"

Gloom was standing back up and at Prey's side by the gap in an instant, making Prey flinch away.

"Grab my hoof." Gloom ordered, sticking his leg back into the gap.

Gloom's armour and helmet plume were covered in dust and bore numerous scratches. Gloom's stitches were leaking blood, and his reflective yellow eyes were slightly unfocused like he'd been hit on the head, but he still stood.

Another hoof emerged into the night and locked ankles with Gloom. The thestral leaned back, and Crimson was dragged out. The pegasus looked even more battered than Gloom, but it was hard to judge in the dark.

Once again Prey dithered, trying to decide whether to grab Crimson's hoof as Gloom strained or not. But he didn't want to touch. Crimson slithered free and flopped down on top of Gloom as they both fell back onto the dirt and splinters. Prey didn't waste any time dropping down beside them and out of sight, behind the ruins as cover.

Both Gloom and Crimson lay gasping for air. They must've been being crushed under there, almost unable to breathe. Prey saw a number of long splinters pierced right through the leathery membrane of Gloom's wings.

"What happened?" Prey hissed in a whisper.

"Jumped into the corner. Old clan trick to survive cave ins. Get

close to the wall, roof doesn't ever fully cave all the way in." Gloom wheezed, dazed.

Crimson finally managed to roll off Gloom and onto his back to face the night sky, chest rapidly rising and falling.

"Prey what's happening? I can hear fighting. Where's everypony else?" He gasped out.

Prey froze, 'Zoma'Grika.'

He *should've* waited. He should've waited to free Gloom and Crimson until after the scarecrow and kindersnatches had finished up. Now Crimson was going to throw himself suicidely at the scarecrow to try and save the others.

Prey couldn't let allow that, he owed Crimson, and he couldn't let the pegasus kill himself just after he'd saved him.

"It's... They are..." Prey fumbled for a lie that would work.

"Prey? Prey what's happening, I can hear them fighting."

"..."

"No." Crimson muttered, the yellow orbs of his eyes widening. He tried to sit up, using his dishevelled wings to help raise himself, sending wooden debris sliding off his armour and out of his bound mane.

"There's nothing we can do, they're done for." Prey hissed, trying to get Crimson to stay down, "Don't get us killed as well."

Crimson didn't seem to hear him as he continued trying to stand up, "No no no. The scarecrow, how did this happen again?"

"You're injured, you can't help them, stay down and be quiet. Gloom's hurt too, he needs help instead." Prey hastily whispered, trying to distract Crimson even while the gurgling rang in their ears.

"Forget me, I'll be fine. Help the others." Gloom immediately

protested, more lucid than he looked.

Just then came a rising cry of frustration and panic over the sounds of splintering wood.

"What's that? What's happening?" Crimson pushed himself up with great effort.

Prey couldn't stop Crimson from looking over the edge of the shattered wall and seeing the situation for himself.

The scarecrow was making rapid progress with dismantling the house with the help of its kindersnatch underlings. Already the roof was only half supported, the four figures on top of it crowded back onto the stable half. They were doing what they could, but it was only Lilly and Shimmer with their magic who were having any impact. Below, the kindersnacthes trashed and sort to snag stray hooves with their longest tendrils, waiting like a hungry shoal of piranhas. Had they gotten bigger in the night?

"They'll die." Crimson protested, "If I don't do anything they'll die."

"Yes they'll die, but we'll die if you do anything. Think, you know this. You can't save everyone." Prey tried to reason with him, pleading.

"I don't care about saving everypony. Just my father."

"What? Crimson, your dad's not-"

But the disorientated Crimson didn't seem able to tell the difference.

"I was too late. It's my fault. I, I already knew they were traitorous snakes. I should've known." Crimson's voice was raw. He was standing now, wingblades out.

"Please don't do this, you'll get killed." Prey was just considering laying a hoof on Crimson and forcibly knocking his mind unconscious, when Crimson's whole body just, 'stopped'.

He stopped moving, his eyes froze, he didn't blink, he ceased breathing. Like he was caught for a moment in time.

Prey took a step back, 'What's happening-?'

Crimson screamed.

It was so loud it hurt Prey's ears as he tripped over his own hooves in shock.

The scream was raw sound, hoarse, filled with pain and horror. Crimson, who had faced death, was staring and screaming at something Prey couldn't see.

Prey back peddled on the ground, casting about wildly for the threat. Crimson sucked in a deep breath that swelled his chest, and then he screamed again. Prey flinched and covered his ears. Prey had heard many screams, and he knew this one. It was the tortured scream of someone who'd just been killed but hadn't died yet.

Something in Crimson's tied back mane flashed emerald green. The jade ring that Prey had given him.

And suddenly Crimson's scream cut off and he coughed explosively, eyes rolling and sweat pouring down his face. Crimson gasped for air and cast wildly about himself, "What? Where? Prey-How? S-sargent Gloom? But y-you were all gone."

Prey stared up at Crimson completely lost for words, and on the ground next to him Gloom did the same.

Crimson's ears snapped upright, and his head jerked up as he looked over the prone Prey and Gloom, over the broken house to what lay behind.

Prey realised the splintering and crashing had stopped. The gurgling and clicking hadn't. And now it was getting louder.

Around Crimson's neck, a sheen of deep jade gleamed in the flickers of orange light. A thin chain of jade hung from Crimson's neck, the links looking like interwoven leaves of ivy.

Prey vaguely pointed, "You've got..."

"...A necklace." Gloom weakly finished from next to him.

Crimson's eyes flicked down in surprise, and then widened in realisation and possibly anger. "So that's what...I remember, there was a price. That's what I paid for? My mane tie?"

The sound of breaking bark and splintering came from the fallen roof next to them, making Prey shoot upright in fear. He stared up, and the headless body of the scarecrow loomed above him, flicking orange spilling from it's insides.

Behind the golem, half the kindersnatches followed, the rest remaining circled around the second house, trapping the other four helplessly on its roof. But the kindersnatches didn't matter, the scarecrow was going to kill them all by itself.

And then Crimson jumped in front of Prey, wide spread wings blocking his view in a feathery shield. Only now did Prey realise, as Crimson's coat was lit by another flash of orange, that his fur was deep red again. Where was the armour enchantments? Under his red coat, lean muscles bunched in Crimson's legs.

Crimson stood between him and the scarecrow. It was like something out of a story, a heroic stand, a knight in shining armour facing down the dark, but Prey knew heroes didn't exist.

Crimson was protecting him, *again*. He was trying to save Prey, *again*.

Prey tried to speak, staring at Crimson's straight back, unbowed, but no words came out.

A hero would've said something reassuring, promised it was going to be alright. Crimson made no such empty promises.

"I have to try. Run if you can."

The scarecrow launched itself at them.

Prey barely saw what happened next, the dark and orange flashes obscuring his vision.

A vibrant green energy seemed to frame Crimson's wings as he bent them for take off, the colour of jade and living water. Just for a

moment.

Crimson shot over the scarecrow's back, already in the air faster than Prey could track. He'd seemed to phase through the scarecrow's stabbing leg, such was his speed. Prey had never seen Crimson move so fast, his eyes couldn't keep up.

And then the after wash of air struck the scarecrow blowing in Crimson's wake, and sent it careening backwards. Streaks of living green danced in the wind for a moment, outlining invisible air patterns that struck the golem.

The back wash of air arrived in Prey's face, almost sending him from his hooves as his eyes were forced shut and his ears streamed out behind him. There should've been the roar of wind it was so strong, but all Prey heard was a gentle whisper of air billowing in his ears. The streaks of green wind did not harm him or Gloom.

When Prey was able to stand up straight again and open his watering eyes, Crimson had disappeared. Prey cast around for a full two seconds before he could even figure out what was happening.

'We need to get out of here, the scarecrow's going to kill us. We can't...'

Prey's thoughts gave a hiccup. It was a requirement for his mind to jump from one track to another as his eyes presented him with startling new information.

Crimson was fighting the scarecrow. Crimson was winning.

Crimson was little more than a blur in the night, trails of green light trailing out behind his wing tips. The green trail shot around the scarecrow following Crimson's blurring flight path, until about a second after Crimson's passing, those green streaks turned into waves of wind. These waves struck the scarecrow like physical blows, battering its huge frame left and right.

The scarecrow was scuttling around in a circle, limbs slashing through the air, but it was too slow. All of its futile strikes were at where Crimson used to be, and the golem didn't seem capable of

making predictions.

A green billow in the air marked the gust of wind that exploded against the golem's side. The construct's body jerked off balance, then was bent low as Crimson struck next from above.

The attacks weren't just wind, they couldn't have been. There was magic in the wind too.

Prey began backing up as fast as he could, looking for cover. If the wind was strong enough to knock the scarecrow about, especially where all their previous efforts had failed, getting hit himself would shatter his bones and pulp his insides.

How did Crimson know how to do this? Did he know how to control this magic or was he operating off instinct alone?

The jade band Prey had given him had turned into this chain necklace. It was the source of Crimson's sudden new found magical abilities. Prey hadn't planned for things to happen like this. He hadn't known it would activate into this. What happened if Crimson made a mistake with fighting the scarecrow and crashed?

At those magically enhanced speeds, it would kill Crimson.

Prey managed to reach one of the untouched abandoned houses and ducked behind the corner. It was foolish to look back out, he should've just kept his head down, but he *had* to know what was happening.

Steams of wind tickled Prey's wool, even crouched all the way back here as he stared wide eyed.

Crimson sent a blast of magic wind into the scarecrow's side, then immediately he was already on the other side and sandwiching it between another. The scarecrow's scything strikes which had been so devastatingly lethal in the forest now seemed so slow, so ineffectual. The orange pumpkin light was flickering faster, more erratically, the scarecrow's spider limbs having to brace much wider and lower to remain balanced.

Kindersnatches were getting bowled over by the wind as they

scuttled uselessly around the scarecrows legs, their top heavy wicker bodies blown first this way and then that until they fell.

A sharp ringing noise rang out, although Prey couldn't see what had happened. Another one, sharp, sudden, like metal.

Vibrant green trails twined around the scarecrow's repaired leg and then past it, and Prey realised Crimson had been cutting at the weakened leg.

More strikes, a flash of sparks as metal grated on metal. The scarecrow twisted and stabbed down, its leg impaling the ground. It had stabbed Crimson!

No, wait! It'd been too slow, Crimson was above it in the air. The after image trails of green had deceived Prey. Crimson however was backing off, apparently that had been too close.

Crimson hovered out of range, slowly flapping his wings as he reevaluated the situation.

Prey could almost feel what Crimson was thinking and feeling at that very moment, although Prey could not imagine wielding such magic himself. Despite their power, Crimson's strikes had done little, the unknown magic the jade necklace gave him did not enhance his wingblades or strength. He needed someway to actually destroy the scarecrow.

Scenic, Lilly, and the others were shouting something from the roof, pointing off into the distance, but Crimson couldn't turn his attention away for even a second.

Crimson's wing beats changed, from one to the next he blurred into motion again in contours of green. More of the trailing wind blasts hit the scarecrow from every side, but the warlock was apparently taking direct control of the golem, because unlike before, the scarecrow didn't try to fight, it just lowered itself to the ground, making the wind do almost nothing to unbalance it. The horrible thing was going to sit and wait him out, either for Crimson to make a mistake, or to exhaust himself first.

Powerful unknown magic like what Crimson had suddenly gained wasn't something that could last. Crimson wasn't even a unicorn. Surely the jade would run out of power or something?

The scarecrow was going to win again. The foul thing was going to outlast them again! The frustrating unfairness of it crashed upon Prey.

But life isn't fair, and there's a price for everything.

Prey waved his legs frantically and shouted, "Crimson! Crimson!"

But Crimson couldn't hear him.

"*Crimson*!" Prey needed to tell him they had to fall back, to run away again.

"Fly away!" Prey half shrieked, but it was hopeless. The blur that was Crimson was moving too fast for Prey to get his attention.

And then the scarecrow's leg fell off.

Prey stared at the stump, the metal sheared off at a sharp angle, clearly outlined in the night.

What?

A squiggle of green lines danced through the air and appeared as an after image going past the scarecrow's other leg on the suddenly disabled side. There was a screech of metal, and then that leg separated too and toppled over, and the scarecrow collapsed helplessly to the ground.

What?

Crimson appeared in a hover again over the downed golem. He was only still for a moment, but it was long enough for Prey to catch sight of the wisps of vibrant green wafting off the edges of Crimson's wing blades.

Somehow, someway, Crimson had figured out how to bend the jade artifact's magic to enhance his weapons into something which could

slice through steel with barely any effort.

Crimson blurred off around the scarecrow again, and in seconds the scarecrow's last two remaining legs tumbled free. There the golem lay, the thing that had almost killed all of them numerous times and driven them to the edge.

The twisted construct of black magic was now helpless.

But Crimson didn't stop there. The trails of green zig-zagged across the scarecrow's body, slicing and dicing, cutting, stabbing, making flickering orange light spill out.

The orange light flickered, grew more sporadic, guttered like a candle, and then ceased. The scarecrow, the monster which had haunted them, was finally dead. Even if it had never been alive.

A moment of stillness should've prevailed then, a silent moment of sweet victory, but there was none. The kindersnatches were not about to stop just because the scarecrow was gone. They gurgled and thrashed just as fiercely as ever, rolling around and rising back to their multiple root legs.

Crimson landed, probably harder than he'd meant to. The vibrant green light coming from the ivy like necklace was enough to dully illuminate his face, and revealed that he was gasping for air.

But it wasn't over, and he wasn't afforded a moment to rest. The kindersnatches all turned as one, both the ones who'd come with the scarecrow and those who'd been keeping the others trapped on the roof, and advanced on Crimson.

A figure stepped in front of the panting Crimson. Gloom was back on his hooves. Under his wing, he held a length of wood as a makeshift stave, his spear lost somewhere underneath the fallen house.

"My turn." Gloom announced, bracing himself to defend.

Crimson however managed to straighten himself up again. He tapped Gloom on the shoulder and shook his head.

"No sir. I've still got enough left to do this." Crimson managed, breathing ragged.

Before Gloom could protest, Crimson spread his wings and leapt into the air again. The streaks of green spun out behind Crimson like a spiders web in the night as he skimmed low over all the kindersnatches heads. A moment later the jade strands split, and the wind impacted the wicker beasts.

They all went down like bowling pins into the dirt, and then Crimson was dashing among them on hoof, still flashing by at that ridiculous speed. His wing blades sliced down on the first gurgling kindersnatch as he sped a ring around it and then onto the next.

"Don't kill them!" Gloom shouted in a moment of horror when all the kindersnatch's thorny tendrils abruptly went limp, but a second later it became clear why.

Crimson's enhanced wing blades had sliced all the limbs from the kindersnacth as cleanly as an apple, the root legs and branch arms landing on the dirt.

One-two-three-*four* kindersnatches Crimson managed to down and disarm in such a fashion before the first of the others managed to regain its footing. Crimson reared up and bucked it from behind, sending it back to the dirt before he repeated his work on it.

Six and seven, the remaining kindersnatches were all back up now.

Crimson leapt into the air and once again sped over them. A second later they were all down again in a silent gale of green laced wind.

Eight, nine, ten, eleven, and then the last one, twelve.

Twelve kindersnatches lay in a gurgling pile, rocking and rolling around uselessly on the dirt. Crimson skidded to a stop, neatly refolded his wings, and then promptly fell over onto his side, heaving and panting.

Prey and Gloom were the first to reach him, the others were still getting down off the roof, Lilly levitating the fallen, half broken ladder up. Their calls and shouted questions were only half heard

over the never ending gurgling, but they were ignored regardless.

Prey jumped over a pile of still twitching cut off thorn limbs and arrived by Crimson's side. His eyes immediately weredrawn to the chain necklace, jade green light still wafting from its links like smoke.

"What in Luna's starry mane was that? *Is* that?" Gloom asked, staring at it. The battering Gloom had taken from almost getting crushed by a falling house was still evident all over his body.

"I don't know," Crimson panted, "I was, just so, angry. And then, and then I wasn't, wasn't here anymore. It was like I was back watching my f-"

Crimson gulped and changed what ever he was about to say, "It's Prey's mane tie. I mean, it was the gift Prey gave me."

"It was just supposed to be a lucky jade amulet. I didn't know it would do this." Prey said before anyone could ask him.

"But are you alright Crimson? You were screaming. Are you hurt? What did it do to you?" Gloom asked urgently.

Crimson flinched and shivered convulsively, "It... this thing exacted a price from me. It took...I don't want to say. And then suddenly it turned into this necklace, and I felt fine again. Strong. I could fly, and make it do what I wanted it to."

He looked down at the chain links around his neck, "It all felt so normal to use, natural. I mean, it *still* feels so natural."

"You should take it off," Gloom urged, reaching to pull it free, "It hurt you and you don't know what it's doing to you. I don't know what sort of power it suddenly gave you, and it saved us, but all stories say it can't end well."

"No," Crimson almost snarled, drawing away, "I bought and paid the price. It's mine."

"Crimson that sounds dangerously like mind control," Gloom began worriedly, "Take it off-"

"I can take it off if I want to. It's not affecting my mind sir." Crimson cut him off.

"Please Crimson, you don't know what-"

"Sir, I know what I'm doing. Trust me." Crimson raised his head and levelly met Gloom's eyes. They held the look for several long seconds, during which Prey kept nervously glancing at the disabled kindersnatches, before Gloom slowly nodded.

"Alright."

Crimson let out his breath and his head slumped tiredly back onto the dirt. Gloom moved forwards again worriedly, but Crimson managed to roll onto his back and lay there staring up at the starry sky, breathing heavily.

Prey and Gloom hovered over him. "Prey?" Crimson asked after a moment when he got his breath back.

Prey had to force himself not to flinch, knowing what question was coming, "Yes Crimson?"

"Did you know what this would take from me? Did you...It hurt-Did you know?" Crimson demanded.

Why was it so hard to meet Crimson's eyes? He'd done all of this for Crimson's own good. He owed Crimson, and that meant helping him even if the pegasus didn't know he needed it.

"No, I didn't know." Prey said, projecting truth into his voice.

'It's not a lie. I didn't know it would do this. How could I know it would be this powerful of a magical artifact?'

"This thing, do you know what it is? I mean, what it does? I was just flying on instinct and doing whatever came naturally." Crimson said.

Prey vigorously shook his head in denial, "I don't know, but from what we just saw, I can make an educated guess. It's obvious a magical artifact designed to empower the wearer. It was dormant as

a ring until you did whatever it took to...'activate' it."

"But why? And how?" Gloom asked.

"I think I know the second," Prey said, then asked Crimson, "Quickly, how do you feel? Drained? Is it harder to breathe than normal? Your muscles should be screaming after moving so fast, but do they just feel sort of empty instead? Lethargic?"

"I, yes."

"When did it start? About half way through your fight with the scarecrow?" Prey quickly pressed on.

"Just after I finished. Before, I felt so strong, like I could fly for a week. But now..."

"To magically empower you, the necessary amount of magic has to come from somewhere, and it didn't come from the artifact itself. Instead, I think it draws the magic out from you and your environment."

"What does that mean?"

"Your natural magic. Every single one of you ponies has it," Prey couldn't keep the bitterness from his voice, "That necklace was using up all your natural stores, and then it was taking in the magic from the environment instead, which is why you felt so tired yet powerful at the same time, because it was foreign mana."

"What's the difference between-?"

"Another time. It'll have to wait." Gloom broke in. He looked to Prey:

"I have only one question. How bad is it for Crimson?"

Prey glanced nervously around at the prone kindersnacthes again as he answered, "It's not great for him per-say, but it shouldn't do anything permanent. I think. Even if it uses up all the mana close by and can't get any more, at worst all it should do is stop working. But I'm hardly an expert. I'm not even a pony."

Gloom let out a long sigh of relief, gingerly reaching to pull a splinter out of his wing membrane, leaving a tiny hole which bled slightly. "Well... I can't believe that any of that worked. Of all the times for a miracle, that was certainly-"

"Sargent Gloom!" Shimmer yelled, leaping over a kindersnatch and bursting in on the scene. Prey shrunk down and drew back.

"Sargent Gloom get your bucking subordinate back on his hooves, because he's going to damn well do his duty!"

Gloom was completely taken aback, and then he bared his fangs, "What in Equestria are you doing?"

"What am I doing?!" Shimmer spluttered in fury, and what looked scarily like desperation, "Your subordinate left us out to dry. Atlas almost got killed back in the forest and all this time he could've dealt with the golem at any time. And now-"

"-This was all complete luck. Crimson didn't know what the necklace did. You should be grateful, now we've destroyed the scarecrow and captured all these kindersnacthes." Gloom waved angrily about them to illustrate his point.

"-And now," Shimmer didn't look like he even heard, and that desperate look on his sweat streaked face was only growing worse, "They've destroyed them. While you've been sitting here on your tails, they've struck again!"

"Start making sense. They've done what? Who's they?"

"Sir, we've got to help sir!" Lilly shouted, arriving at a gallop, heedless of the downed kindersnatches she kicked on her way.

"Help who? *Explain*. Are there more enemies coming?"

"Yes, no*Yes*. Crimson needs to go do his flying magic thing again and defeat them." Lilly whinnied shrilly, her thoughts a mess of euphoria at being alive and dread at something else.

Crimson tried to sit up, still struggling to breathe, "I can try."

"Stay down. You're not going anywhere like that." Gloom ordered, pushing Crimson back. "Will somepony please speak plain-"

"It's Alfalfa Dale!" Scenic shouted.

The Earth pony was standing outside the ring of squirming kindersnatches, gesticulating wildly in panic, "It's burning! Mayflower was just a distraction. The warlock's hit Alfalfa Dale."

"What?" Gloom breathed, wings going slack.

"This, us, we were all just a distraction. The scarecrow was just keeping us trapped here!" Shimmer raged, "The warlock didn't wait to turn the rest of the villagers into kindersnatches, he's already done it. And he's not satisfied with those, oh no, now he wants *every*pony in Alfalfa Dale too."

"We saw it from the roof." Atlas had finally joined them, his face swollen and bruised. He looked around at all the downed kindersnatchs with disgust and sorrow, "Alfalfa Dale is burning, there's lights going back towards the forest, lots of them. It must be captured ponies."

A pall of shock descended, as if the ground had suddenly been yanked out from under their hooves as Atlas' words brought home just what had happened. While they'd been hiding here, the warlock's target had been Alfalfa Dale all along. And they'd been tricked into making a stand here.

'-no no no, not this, not now-', Gloom swallowed, and licked his dry lips. "Alfalfa Dale?"

"Y-yes sir, Alfalfa Dale. Those ponies. All those ponies..." Scenic mumbled hopelessly.

"All those ponies who we've got to rescue!" Shimmer said in a rising shout. He looked around at everyone:

"There's nopony but us! We're their only chance. They've been taken, so it's up to us. Let's go!" Shimmer shouted, wheeling around to to just that.

It hurt Gloom, Prey could see it physically pained him to say what he said next. "We... Can't."

Shimmer and Atlas froze. Slowly Shimmer turned his head back around.

"...What?"

"We can't." Gloom repeated, shame and failure burning in the thestral's thoughts, even while his mind laid out the cold hard facts of reality.

"Even if we headed to cut them off at the forest border, we'd arrive too late. They're at least an hour's gallop away. None of us can gallop for an hour, not in this condition. Or fly. Following them through the forest on hoof at night is suicide. We're all hurt. We don't have the numbers. Crimson is our best chance, but he needs to recover before he can do whatever it was with that shiny necklace again. And there's these captive kindersnatches here to free the villagers from. We can't do anything for Alfalfa Dale."

In a fit of helpless frustration, Gloom reared up and kicked a pile of severed kindersnatch limbs, sending them flying in all directions, then almost collapsed as his body protested, "We can't do anything." He spat.

Scenic and Lilly were appalled, speechless, and shocked. The idea of not being able to do anything to help was repugnant, *wrong* to them. But no matter how much their minds rejected it, after what'd just happened, the reality of Gloom's words couldn't be denied.

'-buck, buck, buckity buck. I can't reach those poor ponies in time-'

'-I'm useless, I'm still so useless. I'm a coward, I feel relived, I hate myself-'

Atlas stared at the ISND in disbelief, and wordlessly pointed the way with his mouth open. His face clearly expressed what he couldn't find the words for.

'-those ponies, they need saving. We *have* to save them. It doesn't matter if you think we can't, but we've got to go. We're needed

there, not here-'

Shimmer stared, looking between each of them. Then he shoved his hoof out towards Crimson, still lying on the dirt, "Give me that necklace then. If you're not going to help, give it to somepony who is."

"It won't work for you." Crimson said wearily.

Shimmer locked eyes with Gloom in the light cast by his horn, "Sargent Gloom. Order your subordinate to give us the necklace." He said in an even tone.

"Crimson said it won't work-"

"Cowards! The lot of you. Give it, and I'll go save the ponies you won't." Shimmer yelled, loosing control.

"It won't work." Crimson said sadly. But still, he forced himself to sit up and pulled the glowing green chain over his head and held it out.

Shimmer tried to snatch it with magic, but nothing happened. Shimmer snorted and hooked with a hoof instead, but the moment the twining links of jade chain left Crimson's hoof, the glow vanished. Shimmer stared at the inert necklace in his hoof.

"It won't work. You didn't pay the price to buy it and I don't know how to give it away to anypony else." Crimson said again, shoulders slumped.

That seemed to be the last straw. A hissing, furious note rose out of Shimmer's throat, like a kettle boiling over. Shimmer inarticulately shook his hoof at the necklace, at the ISND, at the disarmed kindersnatches, at the sky, at everything except Atlas. And yet even in his rage, Prey did not hear anything from behind his mental walls.

Shimmer flung the chain necklace back at Crimson.

"Hsss'*Useless*-You piece...Gha! Atlas, with me." Shimmer shouted. His voice was hopeless as he turned around and charged into the

night, making to intercept the captured townsfolk.

They all knew he wouldn't make it. But still the Border Guard left to try. Atlas Line did not hesitate. He galloped after his Corporal without a moments pause.

"No, wait! You're going to get killed!" Gloom yelled hoarsely, taking a limping step after them, "Wait!"

They didn't. Prey felt something dark inside him smile, and knew it was his heart. 'Yes, run off and die like the vermin you are.'

Lilly had one hoof raised and outreached, looking like she longed to run after them. But she bitterly knew, '-we wouldn't make it in time. I can't be the hero this time-'

The two Border Guards hoof beats quickly faded into the night, followed by the floating light orb spell as Shimmer dipped over the hill.

No one saw Prey's smile in the dark. Those who could've seen, weren't looking. The two Border Guards were running off to get themselves killed, while he got to survive. Right here and now, he was safe. They'd beaten the warlock's offensive, and all this had only been a distraction to the warlock anyway. Alfalfa Dale was the real target. This warlock wouldn't waste more resources trying to lock down the ISND now, especially since they'd just proved they could beat him or her.

'We beat their scarecrow?' Prey's smile vanished, 'No. They *sacrificed* their scarecrow.'

That was wrong. The scarecrow was their masterpiece, the commander of the kindersnatches so to speak. But the warlock had thrown it at them here in Mayflower rather than send it to Alfalfa Dale. Why?

"There's more than one scarecrow."

Prey blinked. He didn't say that, did he? Had he lost track of his mouth? Prey's ears finally deciphered the tone and matched it to a voice. Prey looked up. At the top of the rise, looking off after the

way Shimmer and Atlas had run, Scenic stood frozen, outlined against the stars on the horizon. His head was turned to stare at something they couldn't see.

"Scarecrow? Where? Is it coming here?" Crimson struggled weakly to his hooves.

"What do you mean, another scarecrow?" Gloom demanded, half limping, half running up the rise to get to Scenic and see what he was pointing at.

Prey wavered back and forth between staying down here with Crimson and going up to see for himself.

"Oh merciful Celestia." He heard Lilly whispered. That decided it. Prey dashed up the low hill to see.

And there, laid out like points on a map of black, Prey got to see what the others had seen when trapped on the roof. Prey couldn't see Alfalfa Dale itself, that would've been impossible. The small town was twelve miles away and blanketed under night. But there was no mistaking where Alfalfa Dale was, even from all the way out there. Tiny candle flames twinkled and flickered, nothing more than a swarm of fireflies.

Fireflies that did not move and burned in exactly the same spot as the border town.

And there, half way between Alfalfa Dale and where Prey knew the forest's border lay even if he couldn't see the tree line, was a trail of smaller lights, slowly moving. Shimmer had doused his light spell, and wherever he and Atlas where in the dark was an unknown. But it was what shone at the back of the afar off procession that made Prey's breath catch and his blood chill. An eerily familiar orange light, that hovered above the smaller lights below it, herding them ruthlessly forwards.

No details could be seen, only the presence of the lights, but one thing was clear. The burning orange light towered above the others, and so much brighter too. Prey's mind did a rough calculation. This new scarecrow which had just raided Alfalfa Dale was bigger. A lot

bigger. It was at least two stories tall at minimum.

Around him, despair stiffed the air and made the breath catch in every lung. They didn't stand a chance. They never had. They'd only ever been a distraction to the warlock.

Mayflower was only a stepping stone in their plan.

But there was nothing any of them could do about it. To Scenic, Gloom, and Lilly, it was like witnessing a natural catastrophe happening. It felt as unstoppable and removed from their control as an oncoming flood.

It was too late and too far away. All they could do was stand and watch. Like survivors on the high ground as the floodwater washed the valley away.

Perhaps if they'd ever met any of the villagers here, they might've learnt the story, found some crucial clue, how the warlock had been an abused child who'd run away and sworn revenge. But no. All the villagers they'd ever met were locked inside kindersnatches.

"The kindersnatches." Gloom tore his gaze away from the disaster happening in the distance, to look back down the rise into Mayflower.

There, twelve large shapes wobbled and rolled about gurgling in the dark. Crimson, who'd finally managed to rise, was standing guard over them.

"The...kindersnatches?" Scenic repeated emptily, as if the words were foreign.

The Earth pony was too slow on the uptake, because Gloom was already stumbling and sliding back down the hill.

Prey went after him, meeting Crimson waiting at the bottom. Gloom's eyes skittered over all the downed wicker figures, knowing that inside each one of the casket like upper bodies; '-a helpless villager is trapped-'

Gloom did not think about Alfalfa Dale and what they'd seen out

there. He didn't let himself. There was nothing he could do to help there, but he could save these ones here.

"Sir, what's happening at Alfalfa Dale-?"

"Don't ask Crimson, please," Gloom squeezed his eyes shut, "We lost. We've lost and I failed, but there's still one thing left to us. At least one thing we can do right."

"The reinforcements are arriving in the morning. Surely they'll be able to help sir?" Crimson suggested.

"It might be too late by then." Gloom said, but inside he was desperately hoping:

'-Luna please watch over them until morning. Let the warlock not touch them until then-'

"Kindersnatches. Freeing them. Here and now." Prey said, forcing them to refocus.

"Yes, freeing them. But how?"

"We'll have to cut them out."

"Yes, Scenic! Lilly! Find an axe, a knife, something."

"Sir, where are we going to find-?"

"Dig through the rubble. And find a lantern. We'll need light if we're going to see to do this properly."

"Sir, I have a light spell."

"You have enough magic to maintain it after all this? It needs to be bright. If we can't see properly, we might miss cut. Can you do that?"

"Er, no sir."

"Then we need to find a lantern. Hurry!"

"Yes sir!"

Desperate to focus on anything but Alfalfa Dale's fate, Lilly, Scenic and the rest of them threw themselves into digging through the rubble, lit by Lilly's weak horn light. Prey however didn't take a single step to help. He backed away from the kindersnatches, not wanting to be near them any longer than he could help.

Even if the others were deaf, he could hear them screaming. All around him, the gurgling was being drowned out by a noise only he could hear.

The sound of twelve minds wailing in wordless pain.

'-Hhh*hr*-_-_-Gaah*hh*-....Hissss...--_Aw*aaw*hahwh-'

Prey didn't hate the villagers, since they weren't ponies. But he didn't care what happened to them. An yet, even so, he wanted to shy away from what they were about to uncover. The villagers hadn't deserved this.

'But when is life ever fair?'

Prey found he couldn't look away from the closest kindersnatch as it rocked and rolled about on the ground. In the dark, it reminded him of a giant wicker slug. Or a living coffin.

This was going to be bad, Prey knew. Bad like a battlefield. Like a graveyard. Like the cellar.

'But it has to be done.'

Prey didn't want to hurt Crimson, and this was going to hurt Crimson. Because they were going to be too late. Because they were doomed to fail.

It was going to hurt Gloom too, Prey took no pleasure in that fact either. He would even have spared Scenic from this if it was his choice, but it wasn't, and this was going to hurt all of them.

Because they cared too much. Because they wanted to help.

Prey heard the gurgling and mental screaming, and shook his head. He was giving up before they'd even tried. 'Maybe I'm wrong in my

assumption. Maybe they can be saved, and their minds revived.'

When you have no other choice, attempt the impossible. Long odds are just that, odds, a chance to change the outcome.

"Here!" Scenic shouted, running out of a dark house, "I found a lantern."

It was an old style oil lantern, mostly empty. Lilly ran over and lit it with a spark of her horn, and Prey's vision flared as it caught. The light lit everything up in horrible contrast. It had been better when it was just shapes in the dark, because this left nothing to the imagination.

Every kindersnatch was revealed, splintered wicker and twitching thorns, like a perverse landed fish, quivering and laid out in the dirt.

"Help me." Gloom ordered, grabbing the end of the closest kindersnatch and straining to drag it away from the others. Crimson and Lilly immediately moved to assist, despite how wobbly the Pegasus was, and after hesitating and screwing his face up, Scenic joined in.

The kindersnatch didn't like their efforts. It started squirming and twisting even more fiercely.

"I don't know if you can hear us," Gloom said, raising his voice over the gurgling and speaking to the kindersnatch, "I don't know what they've done to you, but we're here to help. We're going to get you out of there. Can you hear me?"

The kindersnatch's efforts and rattling gurgling did not abate.

"We're going to save you," Lilly chimed in, "We're Night Guards, Princess Luna sent us here. We're here to save you and, and everypony else we can."

Even Lilly wasn't claiming they could save everyone anymore. How the mighty had fallen.

"We're gonna' get you out, just hold on!"

"Alright, hold him still." Gloom picked up the wood axe to begin cutting, but then hesitated, looking between the axe and the kindersnatch.

"I'll do it sir. My wing blades seem able to cut through just about anything now." Crimson said extending a wing, a green glow lighting around the wing blade's edge.

"No, you definitely shouldn't then. You'll have no idea when to stop if you cut too far." Gloom hastily stopped him.

"Then how are we supposed to do this sir? We can't just start hacking away with the axe." Lilly exclaimed.

It was Prey who spoke. He was avoiding looking at anyone. "Crimson, just make a cut down the middle. Then you'll have to peel it back by hoof."

Crimson look at Gloom, "I can manage it sir."

Gloom met Crimson's eyes and nodded, "Alright. It's up to you. Do it."

Crimson's wingblade tip glided vertically up through the wicker body without resistance. He flicked the blade shut, and they grabbed the splintered edges and dragged them back.

---I---

Author's Notes:

NOTE: In an earthquake, hunker down next to something solid like a sofa, or failing that a corner. That way, if the roof falls in, you'll (hopefully) be stuck inside a sort of triangle tent of space.

Editor and helper: **Sweetolebob18**

Also, for those who've been reading the AN recently, you're probably aware of GreatSpaceBeaver, Who's once again made a really

amazing drawing/funny interpretation of Prey: 🎨
See Here 🎭

47.3 Filled with Miserable Creatures

A corpse greeted them in a stench of mould and rot. A corpse that was still alive, thrashing, breathing, and trying to scream.

"Merciful Celestia!" Lilly reeled back in horror. Scenic spun around and covered his eyes.

'-no, this... no, this can't...-', Gloom couldn't move, Crimson neither, both frozen midway in pulling open the chest section.

Prey just felt extremely tired, seeing exactly what he'd feared. 'What's worth more? A pound of flesh or a gallon of blood?'

The kindersnatch had taken both from its victim.

In the oil lantern's shadowy light, the donkey's emancipated and twisted body was revealed. The jack's fur was missing in patches, matted and turned lifeless grey, the very colour leached from it.

But there was still life in the donkey, because the kindersnatch was forcing the jack's body to live on.

Roots grew into the donkey, grafted into veins, bulging beneath knotted and stretched skin. It was terrifying, wrong, disgusting to witness, but worse was the poor jack's head. The never ending gurgling was now even louder.

Prey realised what the kindersnatch was. A parasite. Not an evil spirit, but a magically created parasite.

'Black magic. Blood magic. Dark magic. Voodoo magic. Ritual magic.' Such a twisted creation could only come from one of those equally twisted branches of magic.

"No no nononono, this can't happen." Lilly was whispering in shock.

Prey heard Scenic gagging and retching, his stomach completely

beyond his control, '-how can anypony still be alive like that?-'

The reason for the constant gurgling was finally revealed. The donkey's frame did not look like it had the strength to breathe for itself. So the kindersnatch was doing it for the victim.

Thick roots grew down the donkey's throat and nose, forcing his airways wide and keeping the donkey's jaw permanently wedged open. Bundles of roots inside the lung sacks forced them to inflate and deflate, over and over. That gurgling was air being dragged ceaselessly in and out of his lungs.

A constant stream of drool fell from the donkey's mouth, tongue strapped down by gnarled tendrils. And his eyes. Red, swollen, sightlessly twitching, webs of hair fine roots ensnaring the orbs.

Lilly had begun crying, struck dumb by the brutality. Crimson's wings were shaking violently, the rest of his body frozen as he stared down into the kindersnatch.

Prey's face was empty. His heart matched. He studied the broken veined flesh, and thought about how familiar this was, in a far removed kind of way, to something from within the Deeper Green.

Prey'd predicted this was exactly what they'd find the moment he'd heard the broken mind of that first kindersnatch back at the ravine. They donkey before them was insane. The jack's mind had been shattered by pain and erased by suffering. This was all that was left.

What they were seeing in front of them wasn't an enslaved captive, or a mind controlled pawn, or even a victim. They were looking at a torture device, all opened up and its inner workings put on mind scarring display.

Gloom finally couldn't look for a second longer and staggered back, taking long, ragged breaths. '-evil flourishes where good withers. Oh Luna, it's disgusting-'

"Sir?" Scenic asked in a trembling voice, finally finished vomiting, "Can we... Can we even s-save somepony like, like this?"

Gurgling, in out, in out, it never ceased, it seemed to be deafening

now, the sound of agony.

Lilly couldn't look at the kindersnatch any longer either, she staggered over and with a choking heave, vomited up along side Scenic's puddle.

They were all stunned, minds backtracking to how they'd fought the kindersnatches, and how this was what they'd really been fighting underneath the wicker the whole time.

They may all have been frozen, but Prey wasn't. All of this, it was just one more horror and he wouldn't let himself flinch away from doing what he needed to understand their enemy.

Prey stood up on his hind hooves and stretched his hoof into the opened wicker cavity. He grabbed hold of one of the roots and pulled.

The root was tough, gnarled, and slippery. It was unwilling to come free, and took strings of flesh with it when it did.

The donkey weakly shuddered, his root infested eyes twitching about blindly. Crimson gaped at Prey, unable to even tell him to stop he was so shocked.

Prey ripped out another root, then a third, more blood and skin coming away as Prey ruthlessly continued.

"Stop it Prey!" Crimson finally managed to exclaim.

"I can't." Prey said, not looking up as he grasped the fourth root.

A barrier of feathers appeared an inch from his nose. Crimson's wing, blocking his view and forcing him to let go, "Stop it!"

"What're you doing Prey?" Gloom demanded.

Prey met their eyes, "What has to be done. We need to understand what's been done to these villagers. I don't want to do this anymore than you do, but this is the only way we can learn."

Gloom stared at the bloodied roots Prey had pulled out, bits of flesh

clinging on. Everything seemed so inevitable. The deer and the holt, the scarecrow, their failure. They'd had no control over anything from the start.

"But you're hurting him. You're killing him."

"Look at him," Prey said tiredly, feeling that same sense of inevitability, "Hurting him, killing him? He's beyond hurt and should already be dead."

Prey was only speaking the truth as he saw it. The gurgling donkey *should* be dead. No one should be able to survive this. How could this count as life? This was torture. Crimson still had his wing shielding the kindersnatch's innards, blocking the view, unable to bring himself to look for the moment.

Gloom swallowed, "This... We can't help. Anything we do will only make it worse."

"Yes," Prey agreed, "This will certainly make it worse, because we don't know what we're doing. But we're *trying* to make it better."

Pulling the kindersnatch out of the donkey would kill him, almost certainly. Prey didn't have to say it, they could all see the truth of that. Scenic and Lilly stared ashen faced at Gloom, unable to think for themselves and just desperately wishing for their Sargent to take the lead and work a miracle.

'-the road to Tartarus is paved with good intentions-', Gloom's ears were pressed to his head as he stared down at the trapped villager. Then he looked back over at the other eleven captured kindersnatches.

'-this is already Tartarus-'

"Perhaps..." Crimson's voice was strained, hollow, "Perhaps...If, if we knew more, it might help us save the other victims."

Sacrifice one to have a slim chance of helping the others. That's what was being suggested.

Prey could hear the thoughts racing through Gloom's head, a torrent

of them, like fish being forced through a funnel. Confusion, indecision, fear, horror, disgust.

'-but I don't want to be a monster-'

Guilt appeared and mixed into the shoal, '-but I'm willing to let Prey do it in my place? After how much I've already failed my squad and Luna? How is that any better?-'

It wasn't Gloom's call. Prey was going to do what needed to be done. But it would be easier if they would help, not hinder him. Because this was not going to be easy for anyone.

Gloom shut his eyes tight, "We try to help him. We try to help all of them."

It was terrible.

The three of them 'peeled' the kindersnatch away. It was horrible. Like pulling out barbs, the donkey's skin did not stay in one piece.

Gloom kept asking the donkey for forgiveness under his breath, even if it was clear the donkey was far past understanding.

Lilly couldn't watch for more than a minute before she vomited again and had to leave. Scenic had vomited three more times already, although by then he was doing nothing but emptily retching.

The Earth pony was now sitting on the ground his eyes tightly closed, covering his ears and humming as loudly as possible, trying to block it out.

Crimson sliced open the wicker beside the donkey's head. Prey pulled the piece away, and revealed more of the pale roots blocking the donkey's ears, looking like gnarled worms.

The gurgling now sounded more like crying and begging to their ears.

Prey didn't stop. He didn't need Snake to guide his hooves. He'd been forced to do all this before himself.

He kept pulling and cutting and peeling. And Gloom and Crimson helped.

They had blood on their hooves. The kindersntach's gurgling had grown even more strained, erratic. Bloody froth began to leak from the emaciated donkey's nose and mouth.

"Oh, Goddess!" Gloom had to turn away when he saw that, until he could steel his resolve again. Crimson was only breathing through his mouth, taking shallow sips of air, eyes half closed. As if that would help.

Prey didn't stop or rest. The sooner he could finish, the better it would be. Tainted blood seeped between his cleft hooves. He hated the sticky sensation. It was always nearly impossible to get out. Exactly like these kindersnatch roots.

They rolled the kindersnatch over, trying not to jar the donkey. It was a pointless effort. Every little movement brought the jack pain, one way or another.

Crimson sliced away the wicker mesh behind the donkey's head, piece by careful piece. Almost immediately however, the forced gurgling breathing grew even more strained and frothing. Prey's hooves were the smallest and most steady. He felt around under the cut wicker before slowly lifting it up. There, growing out the back of the donkey's withered neck, was a cluster of fine white roots, grafted into his spine. There must've been hundreds of the thread like roots.

The moment Prey saw that he stopped and let the piece go. He flicked blood droplets from his hooves and drew back, "There's no point in going any further."

"That's it?" Gloom asked emptily.

Gloom wasn't speaking to Prey, but he answered anyway. "It's

interwoven with his spine. Removing the kindersnatch parasite will kill him. Leaving the kindersnatch grafted in will kill him. No matter what we do, it's already too late."

"We haven't tried everything. Perhaps this necklace can save him." Crimson protested, "You said it was a powerful artifact, didn't you Prey?"

Prey simply shook his head. Crimson was grasping at straws that didn't exist and they all knew it. They didn't know what the artifact did, aside from enhance the wearer's strength, but they'd already proven no one else but Crimson could use it.

Still, Crimson tried.

He tried pressing the glowing necklace to the donkey's wounds, he tried ordering it to heal the donkey out loud, he even tried placing the chain over the donkey's neck.

Nothing, and the moment the necklace left contact with Crimson, its glow faded into inertness. Crimson slumped despondently to the dirt, his carefully correct and upright posture all gone. The way he gripped the jade necklace indicated he wanted nothing more than to throw it to the ground and crush it under hoof. Gloom looked away.

Prey heard Lilly choking back sobs. Scenic was still blocking his ears and rocking, helmeted head between his hooves.

Prey saw their despair, could taste it thick in the air. There was nothing he could do to help, so he didn't even try. There was only one thing Prey could do, one of the few things he was good at.

Prey looked around until he found the wood axe lying forgotten at the edge of the pool of lantern light. He went and picked it up, holding it awkwardly behind the axe blade head. He walked back to the cut open pile of gurgling agony, and positioned the blade against the cluster of root hairs growing out of the donkey's spine.

"Stop!" Gloom shouted, suddenly blocking Prey, wing claw gripping the axe haft, "Don't! You'll kill him."

"I know." Prey said simply, "Didn't we already agree? We knew this was going to be the outcome."

"No, that doesn't matter. You can't decide there's no hope for him. Never give up hope!" Gloom yanked the axe from Prey's hooves.

Prey let him take it, but kept speaking, "He's already dead. Worse than dead. After pulling out all those roots, he's not going to last much longer, and he's in agony."

"That's no reason to- You're promoting assisted suicide, no, what you're suggesting is murder, Prey."

"Murder?" Prey looked at the poor donkey, or what was left of him. "You would call this murder?"

"We're not doing that," Gloom turned and hurled the axe away into the dark, "Not now, not ever! I, I knew we weren't going to be able to help, but we tried. We tried, because we thought maybe we could learn how to help the others. It didn't work, we failed. But that gives us no right to finish him off. He might somehow live. Perhaps Her Majesty can save him, and the others too. We can't give up on them. No matter what, ponies never have the right to end another's life."

Prey was awed by Gloom's show of conviction. Awed and infuriated.

Prey knew Gloom was no naive fool. Gloom had realised the most likely outcome when he gave the order to try and cut the donkey out. Gloom knew the realities of death. But even now, he was still holding fast to his beliefs and would not permit anyone to take the last step, even if it would bring the poor jack's suffering to an end.

'Why does this even matter to me?' Prey asked himself. The donkey was going to die. Even with all the medical knowledge he had from Snake, Prey knew there was nothing he could do to save the donkey. Even if the kindersnatch wasn't grafted into the donkey's nervous system, it'd done too much damage for him to ever repair in time.

"Okay." Prey said and sat down.

His legs were tired. He was tired.

If he didn't have to kill the donkey, then good. Despite all the times he'd done it, Prey hated killing, although hate was too tame of a word for his feelings on the matter.

Prey made himself focus on something else.

He studied the scarecrow's corpse instead. Devoid of legs and the foul orange light, it was just a shadowy hump the size of a small cart. He saw no clue as to how the warlock had animated the golem, or been commanding it from afar as their weapon of destruction.

"Sir?"

"..."

"Sir?"

"Yes Crimson?" Gloom finally responded.

"It...would be an act of mercy."

"I know it would Crimson. But it wouldn't be fair."

'As if life is fair.' Prey thought, looking away. What about any of this was fair? Alfalfa Dale was burning, its citizen's taken to be turned into copies of this thing lying before them. Mayflower's villagers were already all lost.

"Sir?"

"We're not killing him Crimson."

"I know sir. Sir?"

"...Yes Crimson?"

"It's too late for that. He's stopped breathing."

Lilly Bloom exploded.

"Buck these sugar ponyfeather butterscotch horseapples, and, gha! It's not fair! Buck! Buck! *Buuuuck*! That's just not fair! He can't just die!" Lilly screamed in fury, her voice echoing loudly around the abandoned village.

Was Gloom in any state himself to comfort the distraught mare? No, he'd just helped inadvertently kill this donkey, his heart hurt, and his head was full of black noise. But the duty fell to him as the Sargent to try and calm Lilly down.

However, this time, Gloom was too slow in getting himself together and finding the right words to say.

"Lilly-"

That was as far as Gloom got. Lilly was a pony, and she'd reached her breaking point. Without regard for the situation or her surroundings, Lilly's mind fixed upon what it could understand and went for it.

'-this has happened. Impossible! I refuse! I have to stop it from happening-'

"I'll turn them back into ponies myself, I'll save Alfalfa Dale! Shimmer, Atlas, hang on I'm coming!"

With that, Lilly bolted towards the dark forest in a wild gallop.

Prey stared in shock. The unicorn had completely lost her mind.

Crimson and Scenic both leapt to their hooves, dashing after Gloom who was already chasing after her. "Don't go into the forest! Lilly stop! You're not thinking-"

"I'm not the hero. I've got to become the hero!"

"Stop! Lilly please come back." Scenic shouted.

The edge of the pine forest, from within which so much grief and fear had emerged, was only ten yards from Mayflower's border. Ten

yards was not far. Lilly crossed the gap in less than five seconds, still yelling about how she had to go and assist the Border Guards in saving Alfalfa Dale.

'Where is the line between danger and safety?'

Lilly was still shouting when the inky blackness under the trees edge whipped out tentacles of darkness and yanked her in.

Crimson could barely run, yet he tried.

"Lilly!" Scenic screamed. A moment later, his voice was drowned out by Lilly's own.

The Mama'duke reeled Lilly in, tightening its coils. It'd been hidden on the edge of the forest, no doubt drawn along in the wake of the kindersnatches and scarecrow, looking for a free meal. And Lilly had run right into its waiting clutches.

Lilly screamed desperately as the Mama'duke dragged her under its body, towards where its beak like jaws were hidden.

Scenic was sprinting to reach her. Gloom and Crimson were both injured and exhausted, and in that two second sprint they couldn't match Scenic's pace or keep up.

A lot happened in those two seconds. Scenic reached the oversized land octopus, and without slowing or changing direction was unceremoniously clotheslined by one tentacle faster than Prey could blink.

Lilly screamed for help again, trying to cast a shielding spell, "Help Help! Sargent Gloom please! Please don't let it*AAAAAIIiiieeEEE*!"

Prey heard a hollow *Clack*, like two blocks of wood banged together. It was followed by wordless screams of pain and agony.

Crimson finally arrived. His wing blades glowed jade green, blurred traces of light through the night.

The Mama'duke recoiled as its tentacles were severed, and tried to withdraw underneath the protective shell of its hollowed out rock.

It didn't even retreat half way in before it was dead, Crimson somehow cleanly slicing the whole rock shell in half with one blow like it was no more than an apple, a flash of green light extending beyond the length of Crimson's wing blade in an afterimage.

But it was too late. Prey could hear Lilly's screams. Those were not screams of fear. They were the animalistic screams of delirious pain.

Scenic scrambled to his hooves, "Lilly, oh Lilly. Shh! It'll be alright, it's-Oh Celestia no!"

"Get her out! Get her back into Mayflower!" Gloom yelled over the mare's screams, skidding up and grabbing at Lilly.

Crimson also attempted to bend and pull Lilly out and almost fell drunkenly over, heaving for air, the necklace having drained him even further.

Prey sat on the dirt, covered in blood and filth, and tiredly looked at them all. Behind him the captured kindersnatches writhed.

He hadn't moved to run after Lilly. He hadn't moved when the Mama'duke had grabbed her or when she'd started screaming. Prey felt like he'd foreseen it all, like he'd somehow known this was going to happen and it wasn't a surprise.

'Stupid foolish unicorn,' He shook his head, 'Why would you run off into the forest like that?'

The Mama'duke seemed to be clamped down firmly in a death grip, because as Prey looked on he saw their frantic efforts to free Lilly were failing. The severed head of the monster was still locked onto Lilly's upper body.

"Forget it, just drag it all back." Gloom ordered, "Lilly, hold on. Can you hear me? We're going to have to move you. It's going to hurt, but bear with it."

Lilly's scream's were already turning mewling in nature, growing quieter. To go so quickly from full blown screaming to weakening did not mean good things for Lilly Blossom's chances. It meant the bite was so serious that either blood loss or shock were already

setting in.

'Of all the ways to go tonight, by giant land arthropod was not on the list.' Prey thought, blankly watching them bringing Lilly back into the lamp light.

But that's what happened in the forest. Sudden unexpected violence, something needing to feed its hunger, and the survivors were left stunned and alone in the aftermath. It was just the cycle of nature taking its course.

In the background, the tortured gurgling of the other eleven kindersnatches went on, a prelude choir to accompany the inevitable outcome.

The three ponies almost tripped as they shuffled hastily back, trying to keep Lilly's body level and not drop her. The hunk of Mama'duke's flesh was half as big as Lilly herself, still suctioned onto her like some massive slug. In death, the monster's chameleon like flesh had turned grey and lost all pigment. Scenic bit ahold and tried to pull it off, straining with all his weight, but even dead, the Mama'duke was still all muscle and wouldn't relinquish its hold on its last victim. Lilly screamed shrilly.

"Stop it, you're only hurting her more!" Gloom snapped.

Aghast, Scenic immediately let go, falling back onto his rump.

"Stand back, I'll cut it off." Crimson said, presenting his jade enhanced blades.

In some twisted parody of what they'd just done with the kindersnatch, Crimson cut off slices and chunks until he could get down to Lilly, all the while her twitches growing slowly weaker.

"Hurry hurry!" Scenic pressed, beside himself.

"Stay out of the way."

"I'm trying to help-"

"-You're not helping. Stay out of Crimson's way."

"But I-"

"Find something to use as bandages."

"Moma'... where' you moma'..." Lilly moaned weakly.

"Moon rot, she's delirious," Gloom cursed, "She's in shock."

The Mama'duke's head was clamped down on Lilly's front, her head only half visible beneath the folds of its grey flesh, and with her front legs only sticking out from the knee down. One of the legs was at an odd angle, extended slightly beyond the other, and thick blood was running down its length and dripping from off her horseshoe.

Prey blinked. Why were they trying to save her? This was exactly the same situation as with the donkey. They had no medical supplies, and there was nothing they could do, except maybe delay the inevitable.

Although Lilly wasn't bleeding as much as she should've been, Mama'duke jaws could bite through stone. Lilly's armour wouldn't have been enough to protect her, and the damage was still going to be severe. Yet Gloom, Scenic, and Crimson were still attempting to save her.

Prey would never have tried to stop them though, even if it was pointless. They wouldn't stop, and he knew they needed to try to save her, for their own sakes.

Prey understood the need to fight against the inevitable, but he could already tell it was hopeless. Prey knew from Snake's memories that on top of being able to crush stone, the bite of the Mama'duke was also venomous. Lilly was already as good as dead.

And Prey felt nothing but mild relief and satisfaction.

Relief that it hadn't been him, satisfaction that the hated unicorn mare who'd pulled so many stupid stunts and almost gotten them all killed on multiple occasions was the one to die instead. He'd despised Lilly Blossom, but now she was finally going to be out of the picture and he could cross her name off The List.

"The jaws, they're struck in her shoulder and chest, and in the armour too. I daren't try and cut the jaws off. We need to pull them apart instead." Crimson said shakily, flicking dark blood from his wing blades. Cross sections of the Mama'duke's flesh lay scattered around his hooves.

Lilly was finally visible again, but her body was obscured by the cruelly curved beak biting lengthways into her chest and upper legs. Bit's of grey flesh still clung to the yellow beak.

Prey saw that the red leaking from around the embedded beak's edges was sluggish and clotted. The venom was taking affect.

"She's going to start bleeding everywhere the moment we pull these off. We need bandages, cloth, something to apply pressure with." Gloom said, casting about them in the dark, "Find a blanket or any sort of cloth."

"She won't bleed all that much." Prey disagreed.

Three pairs of haggard eyes in grime streaked faces fixed onto Prey, and he immediately wished he'd stayed silent.

"Why's that?" Gloom rasped.

Why hadn't he just kept quiet? "The bite was poisonous. Look, it's already making her blood clot. It's the only reason she hasn't bled out already, but the venom will eventually block her veins and kill her anyway. She has an hour at most. There's nothing we can do."

"She's going to die anyway?" Gloom croaked.

"After all we survived, and the kindersnatches, that's it?" Scenic whispered, legs starting to wobble.

"No. This can't be fatal. She can survive this. Ponies have been saved from worse." Crimson protested.

Prey drew his hoof through the dirt, "If we had an antidote, and operating tools, and some way to stop the bleeding, and could stop shock from killing her, then maybe yes. But we don't."

"You're giving up on her?" Crimson asked disbelievingly.

"There's nothing we can do. Just like the donkey in the kindersnatch, this is beyond our ability. That's just the way things are."

"You *are* giving up." Crimson accused.

"There's nothing I can do." Prey protested.

Gloom suddenly yelled at him, and Prey flinched, "Stop making excuses and help us save Lilly!"

"I'm not making excuses! What do you think I can do? I can't make the Mama'duke *unbite* her."

"You can help, I know you can. You fixed me up no problem, far better than I could've." Gloom jabbed a hoof back at his side where Prey had stitched his wound shut, and then at Prey, "You must know something. So do it!"

"Oh? And what do you suggest I 'do'?" Prey retorted, not caring the Gloom was only speaking out of desperation, "She's going to die whether you like it or not. Deal with it."

"How dare you?!"

Gloom growled, advancing on Prey, "You're going to let her die just because of some stupid, bucking hang up about unicorns you racist little shit?"

Gloom was moving beyond reason. He wasn't able to think straight; '-she *can't* die. She *can't*. Nopony else is going to die on my watch-'

"Is that true Prey? You're trying to murder Lilly?" Crimson demanded sharply.

"Don't be absurd! She's poisoned, that's not my fault." Prey hissed back, glaring into Gloom's blazing yellow eyes. "I'm not taking the blame for Lilly's stupidity in running into the forest. She lost her head, now she'll lose her life."

"There's some way to save her. I *know* it." Crimson insisted, eye's boring into Prey, "There's always a way. Think Prey, there must be something you know."

"Why would I know? What do you think I could possibly know that you don't already-?"

"Because you always know something! You're always keeping secrets. There's got to be a way to save Lilly, just figure it out."

"I'm not an alicorn!" Prey shouted right back at him, "I don't have the secrets to immortality. I'm not a unicorn white mage! I'm just a runt lamb who couldn't, who can't save anyone."

"I don't care what you think's impossible, only what I know *is* possible. And I know Lilly can be saved." Crimson declared, voice suddenly calm.

Prey glared at him, eyes cold. Why? He hadn't fought this hard to deny reality with the donkey in the kindersnatch. In the end, they'd all seen the truth and given up, so why couldn't they see it now? Just because they personally knew Lilly, did they somehow think it made her special and immune to death?

"Listen to what I'm saying Crimson. I. Can't. Do. It."

"But you *will* do it." Crimson stressed, "Because you said you'd do anything I asked of you. So I'm asking you to save Lilly Blossom."

For a moment, Prey couldn't speak, "That's, I, you can't- I can't do the impossible! I'd need magic, potions, tools, ingredients, time! All I have is dirt and a deserted village in the middle of the wilds."

"So tell us what you need," Gloom broke in. For a moment Prey had forgotten there was anyone else here but him and Crimson, but Gloom and Scenic were there too. "You've just admitted you can do it if you have the stuff. So tell us what you need, we'll find it, and you save her."

Prey threw up his hooves, "You think I want to see more death, is that it? That I'm some heartless monster with no concepts of morality? You know nothing! Crimson, please, believe me, I'd help

you if I could. But this place just doesn't have what I need, or any way to get it in time-"

"Stop wasting Lilly's time. We'll be the ones to decide if it's impossible or not. Just tell us, and don't lie, I'll know." Gloom cut him off.

"It's not as simple as that!" Prey seethed in frustration, "Forget her injury, the venom itself will kill her. If I had the right herbs, yes, I could counter it. But I only know some of what this forest has. There's Happledock again, Brittle Cap, Felidar thorns, I know those are in the forest, but even then, those wouldn't be enough by themselves, just delaying the inevitable. There's meld wood, but it's impossible to get."

"Stop. Right there, meld wood. What's that, where can we get it, and will is save Lilly?" Gloom demanded.

"For a given definition of 'save' yes. But we don't have any, and it can't even be retrieved."

"So where is it?" Crimson asked.

"What?"

"The meld wood! You saw some. Where?"

"In the Wolfing Wood, but it may as well not exist because nobody can go into..." Prey's eyes slowly widened as the blood drained from his face, "Oh no, No! Don't even think about it."

"What does this meld wood look like? And how much of it do you need?" Crimson asked unblinking.

"You can't get it. It's in the Wolf Wood, it's beyond suicide!"

"What does this meld wood look like? And-"

"No no NO!"

"-how much of it do you need?"

"No, not now, not ever." Prey shook his head furiously, own ears flailing, "Put the idea out if your head right now!"

"What does the meld wood look like?" Scenic joined in, advancing on Prey.

"You can't fetch it. You'll die and get us all killed too in the process. I won't let you go."

"You can't stop us Prey. We're bringing it back, and then you will use it to save Lilly." Crimson said.

"You can't get it. It's way out in the middle of the forest-"

"I have my magic necklace you gave me."

"You're exhausted-"

"I'm well enough to get there and back." Crimson was unmoved.

"You won't make it in time!"

"You saw how fast Crimson could fly with that amulet. He can make it." Gloom said, gesturing at the necklace.

"Yes, I can fly faster than I ever have before in my whole life. I can feel it."

"It's pitch black, you won't find the place again-"

"I can see in the dark and I remember where the wood is. It's in that clearing by the hill we rested on."

"You'll die, it'll kill you. It's hungry, you'll get eaten!"

"I'm prepared for that possibility," Crimson said seriously, "But I will still try."

"I won't tell you," Prey tried in desperation, "I won't tell you what meld wood looks like. So you can't go."

"You'd deny Lilly the chance to live?" Gloom spluttered in outrage, wings snapping open as he bore down on Prey in fury. "You're

trying to kill her, you're *actually* trying to kill her right in front of us."

"Don't touch me." Prey spat, scrambling backwards, but Gloom, Crimson and Scenic kept advancing as he retreated.

Crimson glared down at Prey, anger replacing the stoicism Prey knew so well, "What right have you to say who I can and cannot try to save?"

"But you'll *die* if you go to the Wolf Wood. I'm not going to let you kill yourself Crimson."

"Whatever is in the Wolf Woods, I will overcome it."

"This isn't something you can fight!" Prey yelled at him in a squeaky pitch, pressing his hooves to his head, "You don't understand, you don't know what's in there."

"Then tell us! Stop wasting time and tell us. It's your duty to Prey. No, it's more than your duty." Gloom shouted, voice hoarse as he got right up in Prey's face.

"I don't know what's in there. I don't know, I never saw, I don't have words-"

"So there might not even be anything dangerous there in the first place. That's even more reason to try."

"Please Prey, " Scenic begged, "Please, tell Crimson. Let him save Lilly."

Crimson stepped around Gloom and lowered his head to Prey's eye level, forcing Prey to hold his rigid gaze, "I saved your life Prey, and now I must try and save Lilly's. And I will try. Were you lying when you told me you'd do whatever I asked of you?"

"Anything but sacrifice my own life," Prey moaned, "You'll bring it back, it'll follow you. It'll kill us all."

"If you don't help us save Lilly, I'll, I'll..." Gloom sought for a threat, even considering violence for the briefest of seconds, "I'll tell

Princess Luna what you've done." Gloom threatened Prey, unable right then to feel any guilt about doing so.

Prey recoiled. He gulped, hesitated, but still shook his head stubbornly, his eyes too wide and his breathing ragged, "No. I won't tell you."

Prey knew there would be terrible repercussions for this, but he was too terrified to care what punishments those might be. Because the Wolfing Woods... No, Prey trembled, they couldn't afford to disturb whatever was in those trees, no matter what.

Crimson's eyes flicked over Prey's face, "You're really that scared?" He asked slowly.

"Scared? Only scared?" A hysterical giggle slipped out.

"Khe-khe, *scared*. What a tame word! You don't know what I know, don't know what'll happen. But I do, I've survived it before. And, and, and I'm not going to tell you what to look for. I won't tell you what meld wood is, so there's no point in you going. So there!"

He was not about to die for Lilly, nor for anyone else.

Gloom was stunned, furious, upset, angry, and despairing all at the same time. His fangs were gritted in a silent snarl, but he didn't say a word. In that moment, he seemed to realise that there was nothing he could say or even do that would convince Prey. It was all up to Crimson now.

Scenic's entreaties to Prey, Lilly's moaning, it didn't factor into that moment as Crimson held Prey's eye.

Crimson spoke quite calmly, like he was merely informing Prey about how the weather was going to be tomorrow, "If you won't tell me what meld wood looks like, then I have no choice. I'm going to fly into the Wolf Wood anyway and grab whatever can I find and hope. If you tell me what meld wood is, then I won't have to guess. But I'm going to make the trip either way."

Prey's eyes took on the appearance of saucers, "But you can't! You'll fail, and the entity will follow you back."

"If there is a monster, then yes, I guess it will." Crimson nodded.

"You're trying to kill us all, you're so selfish! You'd trade all our lives for just hers." Prey accused.

"Don't you dare use a word like selfish," Crimson's mouth curled with disappointment and disdain, "You have no right. I am going. At this point, you have two options Prey. Either you can make my trip mean something, or you can keep quiet and I'll make the trip anyway. But I know you. You aren't evil. You won't let Lilly die out of spite, not when I'm going anyway."

Prey stared up into Crimson's face and saw only sincerity in his glimmering yellow orbs. Prey couldn't hear his thoughts, but he could still see. Crimson meant every word of what he'd just said.

Prey's hind legs finally folded and he fell onto his rump. Crimson was going into the Wolfing Wood.

Why?

Why was he doing this for Lilly? He wouldn't have done it for one of the Mayflower villagers, would he?

So why?

'Why why why?' Prey thought in despair. He felt his eyes stinging. He was absolutely terrified.

Why?

"Please Crimson, don't go. It'll follow you back." Prey begged.

Crimson began pulling off his armour to fly faster, "I'm sorry Prey. I may not know what you know, but I know what *I* know. And I know this is the right thing to do."

A pit felt like it opened under Prey's hooves and he was helpless to do anything about it. He couldn't stop Crimson. This was going to happen no matter what he did. Everything was beyond his control, he was going to fall into this hole regardless. All he had left was how he chose to react when he finally hit the bottom.

Prey hung his head, addressing the dirt in a monotone as he recited; "Meld wood is a dark grey tree with yellowish streaks. If you can tell with your night vision, the sap is amber green. Thick, stocky trunk and branches. Small oval leaves. Very smooth bark. The wood is dense and heavy. I'll need a branch about the size of your leg. Don't let any of sap get into your mouth or any open cuts. Try and get a fresh branch from near the tree's crown."

"That's all I need to know," Crimson said, quickly opening his wings, "I'll need a rope, or something to tie the branch onto my back with. I'll be flying too fast to stop in time to find it again if I drop it."

Scenic immediately began running about, looking for rope.

"That's not all," Prey continued talking listlessly to the dirt, forcing Crimson to halt and lean in to listen, "Felidar thorns. While there, there's another tree, one with huge thorns, about four inches long. You can't miss them. There's also another tree, with branches all twisted up and black seed pods in bunches of five. They'll rattle when you shake them. And lastly, a tall thin tree, looks like a pole. Spiky leaves at the top. The bark is a husk and peels off like an onion. Bring back as much of those as you can safely carry with you too."

"You said you only needed meld wood to save Lilly." Gloom stated.

"Those'll also help." Prey said, not looking up.

"Only if I can find them straight away. Lilly doesn't have time." Crimson said, looking at the sky above the forest.

"Here, rope, take it!" Scenic shouted, running up and shoving a tangled coil of rope into Crimson's hooves.

Crimson threw the rope around his neck, snatched up a ragged cloth bag for the rest, and began taking deep breaths, preparing himself. The jade necklace's glow began to strengthen, quickly making Prey back up. Crimson took one last breath, and then snapped his wings open and took a running start.

Halfway through the short take off run, living green light surged

along Crimson's legs and down the lengths of his wings.

Crimson disappeared into the night in a blur and loud clap of air, however there was no huge backwash. Prey tried to follow the green blur through the night against the stars, but already he'd lost Crimson.

Those speeds were unreal. Crimson would make it to the woods and back in less than thirty minutes. Would Lilly survive that long? Probably. Prey hoped she died. He didn't care about her. But what kind of toll was this flight going to exact from Crimson?

'That's not the price that matters,' Prey thought in dread, 'What about the price for breaking the Wolf Wood's boundary?'

Crimson was going to be back in less than half an hour. That meant he had less than that to prepare for what would be following behind Crimson.

Prey sat down and balled his shaking hooves into his eyes.

"Oh zoma'Grika, zoma'grika, zoma'grika." He was going to cry. He was so terrified.

"Stop sitting there Prey, and help me get Lilly stable! She needs to hold on until Crimson can make it back." Gloom ordered him harshly, still desperate and furious at Prey, but his anger took second place to helping Lilly.

Throughout all this, Lilly had lain on the ground, the source of the whole argument but only acting as secondary importance. That was wrong. A fading life should always be the utmost importance, but it wasn't, not for Prey.

Prey hated Lilly. He hated all she was going to cost him. Prey glared at her twitching form, feeling the hate churning together with the panic in his gut.

"There's nothing more we can do but keep her warm until Crimson gets back." Prey wanted to spit the words, but they just came out weak and shaky, "Pulling the Mama'duke's beak out at this point will do more harm than good. Try and keep her still. Make her

drink if she'll take it."

The panic was gradually rising, brimming up. He tried to force it down. 'Focus Prey, focus.'

"She's in so much pain, there must be something we can do for her." Scenic tried, cradling Lilly's head to keep her still. Gloom was dragging out old mouldy blankets from the abandoned houses.

"Didn't you hear a word I said?" Prey refused to even look at the pathetic stallion, "I told you I don't have what I need to do anything. Nothing. I have n-nothing. T-That includes an-anaesthetics."

He was breathing too fast.

The panic was bubbling up the back of his throat now, like hiccups, but he couldn't afford to give into it. He had to focus, he had to prepare. Why was he just standing here? Why wasn't he doing anything?

Gloom began covering as much of Lilly as he could with the blankets, pulling off the lower pieces of her armour that he could without touching the bits the Mama'dukes jaws were stuck in. He flinched ever time he made Lilly twitch or moan, but he continued working as fast as he could.

'-she just has to survive until Crimson gets back and Prey can save her-'

"What are you doing Prey? Stop just sitting there, help us!"

Prey started in shock, and then leapt to his hooves. Gloom was right, *what was he doing*?

"Fire!" Prey squeaked, "We need wood for a fire."

"We've got the oil lantern for light. Or is the fire to keep Lilly warm-?"

"Forget about her, she's stable! We need a fire ready for when Crimson returns."

"A fire? What's-?"

"Wood. We need wood. Lots. As much as we can get!"

Prey started grabbing bits of broken timber from the fallen house, completely uncaring of the gurgling kindersnatches he dashed around, blocking out their mental screams of anguish. It was too late for them now.

Gloom had made his choice. He'd chosen Lilly, not the villagers.

Prey began throwing all the bits of wood he could find in a pile beside beside Lilly and the lantern. First just small scraps, kindling really, but bigger pieces too, broken planks, even half a support beam, anything he could physically drag. He ignored Scenic and Gloom's demands to know what was going on, just rushed back out for more wood. Why were the two of them just sitting there?

"Leave her, get more wood! We need as much wood as we can get. Unless you want to die, *do as I say*."

Prey strained to drag a splintered roof beam three times his size through the dirt and weeds. He struggled and pulled and pushed. Scenic appeared to try to grab the other end to help but Prey shouted him away.

"No! Go get other wood, bigger pieces. As big as you can carry. We need more."

"More for what?" Gloom asked, refusing to leave Lilly and having to shout over the kindersnatches; "What is-?"

Gloom broke off in a rasping cough, throat parched; "What do you need so much wood for? Do we need to melt something? Metal? There's enough fuel there to last three day's already."

Prey was pillaging the half empty wood shed for ready cut logs, pulling aside the vines and grass which were trying to overgrow it. "No it's not enough. We need more spare wood. We have to keep the fire burning bright throughout the night!"

"Prey there's already plenty, but Lilly needs-"

"It won't be enough, and there won't be time to fetch any more once it arrives." Prey denied frantically as he dashed back for another load.

"When 'what' arrives?"

"W-when Crimson arrives!" Prey corrected, "When Crimson arrives back we must light the fire straight away."

"Lilly is the priority. She comes before the fire. You will save her first." Gloom ordered.

"Yes, yes, I'll work by firelight. But the fire *must* be lit and kept bright." Prey panted, dumping the logs off his back onto the growing pile. He was breathing erratically, and it was only partly because of the exertion.

"Is this enough?" Scenic gasped, tipping a huge pile of broken planks off his own back.

Scenic was like a dyed piece of cloth that had been wrung out so tight there was no colour left in him. He didn't even know how think for himself right now, he was just following instructions. All this, everything, it was just too much for the Earth pony.

But apparently Scenic's Guard training had been good for something. Even though Scenic was dazed with indecision, his body was still responding to orders without him at the helm.

Prey barely glanced at the wood Scenic had just added, "No, we need more. As much as we can get. Hurry!"

Prey wasn't satisfied until they'd accumulated all of the wood they could gather. What they didn't take was only what couldn't be lifted.

His legs trembled, shivers running up his spine. He felt hot and cold and he kept having to swallow down the pathetic sounds of weakness crawling up his throat. His eyes darted about. They'd collected all the wood he could find. But would it be enough?

The eleven kindersnatches thrashed on the ground and gurgled insanely, and were ignored, although Gloom cursed himself for his heartlessness even as he prayed to Luna for forgiveness and tried to tend to Lilly.

Prey thoughts kept going to Crimson, out there somewhere blitzing through the night on magic enhanced winds.

What would he awaken in the Wolf Wood?

Prey looked at the wood pile. They had enough wood.

Or at least, he prayed they did. Not that praying would help. There were no gods for what was coming.

Prey didn't *know* what was coming, but he feared he had an idea of what it was, and that gnawed away at him like a weevil burrowing into his heart.

Prey didn't have the words, nor knew if it had an actual name, but the description for what he feared was this; a Hungry Thing.

But no, it couldn't be that, Prey tried to reason with himself. Not even whatever the entity from the Wolfing Wood's was.

Right?

Or was it simply different from what he thought he knew, which was next to nothing, and it instead obeyed some sort of rule set? No, that made no sense, it *couldn't* be a Hungry Thing.

But Prey didn't know with any surety what was which, and he was scared.

They had wood. They would have a fire. Crimson was coming back. And he'd have to save Lilly in there somewhere. It was just an afterthought by this point to Prey, even if saving Lilly was the be all and end all for the others.

There was nothing more he could do to prepare.

Prey sat down in the dirt, wool filthy, and stared into the dark

depths of the forest. He didn't listen to Gloom and Scenic behind him pointlessly comforting Lilly, who was delirious and couldn't even hear them anymore, nor to the wailing of the kindersnatches.

Prey's eyes felt raw and hot. He stifled a hiccup. He was so stupidly afraid right now.

Why did he have to be such a damned coward? But a leopard doesn't change its spots, and Prey couldn't stop being afraid.

So he sat alone on the edge of the lantern light in the ruins of Mayflower, deaf to the kindersnatches, and quietly cried where no one could see. The godless wastes damn it, but he was so scared. 'Spineless, useless, vile, disusing, sniveling, bucking crybaby.'

He was scared.

Up in the infinite sea of night, a flash of green light streaked between the stars. Prey only saw it because he'd been watching. It was almost already on top of him, rapidly approaching the earth. Prey jumped to his hooves, and Crimson shot by over his head, a shadow in the night, and almost crashed somewhere behind him next to the others.

"Crimson! Did you-"

"-Find it? Quick-"

"-Prey get over here!"

Prey furiously scrubbed at his eyes with an ear like a rag, wiping his nose with the back of his hoof and ran towards the others.

Crimson was heaving for air, unable to speak, his whole body darkly matted with sweat. Prey had feared this would happen.

Gloom and Scenic were physically having to hold Crimson upright as he sagged into them, "Hey, easy. Easy. Did you get it?" Gloom asked.

'Stupid question.' The thick branch of meld wood was plain as day, tied across Crimson's back in a sling of rope. The other things Prey'd told him to get were in the cloth bag he'd taken, discarded and forgotten in the dirt at their hooves.

"Light the fire!" Prey shouted as he ran up, "Light it straight away. Don't wait."

"Lilly and Crimson come first-"

Prey snatched up the lantern and before anyone could stop him, he smashed it over the already laid fire. Glass shattered, and the oil splashed out onto the dry wood.

"Prey!" Gloom shouted, but couldn't let go of Crimson to stop the lamb. The pegasus was no longer able to support his own body weight as his legs gave out.

"Crimson!" Gloom called in alarm, "Don't you dare go out on me too."

"Lay him down," Prey yelled, rummaging frantically in the cloth bag as the flames started to flicker up, "All his natural magic is burnt up. His body is going into sudden magical withdrawal." He'd *known* this was going to happen.

"What's that mean? Lilly needs-"

"-Help. Yes, I know, I know! You keep saying. But Crimson has to be dealt with right now or he might go into a coma and die."

"What?!" Gloom and Scenic both exclaimed.

Prey ignored them, pulling out the black seed pods and thorns Crimson had retrieved on his instruction. "The fire's lit, keep it going. No matter what happens, keep it going. Understand?"

He blocked out their questions, he couldn't afford to deal with them right now. He gripped the enormous Felidar thorn in his mouth, the wood startlingly cold. The thorn was well over five inches long, with a thick bulge at the blunt end. Cracking open one of the seed pods, Prey rushed back over to Crimson's form, Scenic stumbling to

get out of his way.

He spat out the thorn, "Crimson, can you hear me? Are you still with us?"

Crimson's eyes were half shut and glazed, and his ears barely twitched when Prey called him again. That was a "no" then. Prey grabbed three of the black seeds in his hoof and shoved them into Crimson's mouth, ignoring the saliva or chance of Crimson reflexively biting him.

Crimson choked, but Prey expertly pushed the seeds over the back of his tongue and made him swallow before Crimson's body could react. Because of his small hooves, Snake had always made him be the one to force feed medicines to the injured or unconscious wounded. He'd need more of the Snake taught expertise before the night was out.

"What were those seeds-?"

Prey ignored Scenic and picked up the giant thorn.

"Hey wait a second-"

Prey stabbed the thorn into Crimson's leg, just deep enough so it stuck there by itself when he let go.

Gloom physically had to restrain himself from immediately snatching the thorn out, hoof stretched half way there, "What does this thorn do Prey?"

"Too long to explain, too complicated. It'll help keep him alive, that's all that matters," Prey answered, anxiously eyeing the fire, "Keep the fire going. Don't let it die. And don't go out into the dark. Keep it burning big and bright."

"Lilly. Now." Gloom ordered.

Prey gave Crimson one last look to calculate if he was stable. There was no way to be sure, but it was the best he could do for the Pegasus right now.

"Bandages, knife, get me the axe and the meld wood." Prey snapped out his instructions. Scenic and Gloom leapt to obey.

"Bring Lilly closer to the fire. And get me that bag. I'll need one of you to hold her down while the other pulls the beak out. Once that come out, her leg will have to be-I'll have to work quickly."

It was best they saw it for themselves rather than him saying it.

Lilly let out a high squeal of agony as she was dragged nearer to the growing fire, Prey throwing on more kindling to get it burning faster. Then he grabbed the rest of the Felidar thorns from the bag, and another seed pod.

Gloom tried to lay Lilly out as gently as he could, "We've got her. We need to start pulling the jaws out, they're stuck in her armour-"

"You'll do what I say when I say. I'm the only one who can save her, understand? I'm the only one who knows what to do. If you mess it up, she'll die before I can rectify your mistake. Understand?"

"We understand, we're your assistants. What do we do?" Gloom immediately agreed without pause.

"Get as many of those down her throat as you can," Prey said, throwing the seed pod at Gloom, "Once we begin, she'll be in no condition to take them after I...just afterwards."

He was slipping, letting words out before he could properly think. Bad. Bad.

Prey took more of the bulbous thorns and and began driving them into Lilly's flesh, sticking them in around the site of the embedded Mama'duke jaws. The moaning Lilly didn't even seem to feel it. She was whispering intelligibly to someone who wasn't here.

Prey risked a glance out into the night. He saw nothing, just blackness. It wasn't here yet. He hoped, he *prayed* to anything which might be listening that meant the entity wasn't coming at all. But he knew it was in vain. You didn't go into a Wolf Wood and get to walk away afterwards.

Prey snapped himself back to Lilly and what was happening. 'Yes, focus on that, not on what's coming.'

Prey shoved the last thorn into Lilly's upper shoulder, noting how only the barest trickle of blood welled up from the puncture. She didn't have long left before the venom fully clotted her blood and killed her. Already he could tell from the skin coloration under her fur that she'd lost most of the circulation in her outer extremities. The bitten leg in particular. It was grey blue.

Or maybe that was just because she was going to lose that leg.

This wasn't going to be pretty. Prey made himself focus on thinking about that and only that.

"Cut the meld wood branch in half lengthways. It doesn't matter if it's rough. Gloom, undo the straps on her armour. When we pull the beaks out, the armour is coming off at the same time."

Scenic began hacking the length of meld wood into two as fast as he could with the axe. The wood was heavy, but it came apart very easily, thick sap still leaking from in. "Finished!" He panted the second he was done.

"Alright. Next, pull the jaws out."

"What about infection?"

"That should be the least of your concerns right now. Those seeds she ate will help with that."

Prey pointed, "Once you start pulling, don't stop. Can you do that? Don't stop. She's going to scream, there's going to be blood and bone, but it'll be even worse if you stop half way through. Understand?"

Scenic nodded shakily as he bit hold of the lower Mama'duke's dismembered jaw.

Gloom took the other, using his wing flaws for grip, face grimy and pale, "Ready."

Prey suppressed a shiver of revulsion and grasped either side of Lilly Blossom's head to keep her still, carefully not looking at her horn that was so close to him. However this was the best place to be in. If she instinctively tried to use magic to defend herself, he could punch her in the horn before she could finish.

"You ready? Good. On the count of three. One. Two. Three."

The Mama'duke jaws came out unwillingly. Just as Prey had said, Lilly screamed, and cried, and thrashed, and begged in garbled words, and then screamed some more. Gloom and Scenic's ears were pressed flat to their heads, but they didn't stop.

Lilly's chest plate and shoulder pauldrons came off with the oversized beak, the sharp cartilage having bitten straight through the enchanted steel and wedged there.

What also almost came off was most of Lilly's left leg. The limb twisted and started coming up with the armour, and Prey saw raw leg muscles cut from the bone being pulled out.

Prey let go off Lilly's head and lunged forwards, pressing the leg back down. Lilly was still screaming.

Scenic and Gloom finally freed the beaks from Lilly's flesh and threw them away, which revealed the damage to them both in all it's terrible light. There was no more hiding it under the armour.

"Her leg, it's... It's.."

"It's been bitten through." Prey said, "The tibia bone is completely severed, the shoulder joint is also badly damaged. It'll have to come off."

"That's Lilly's leg!"

"You can't-"

"You'll do as I say. Look, it's already held on by little more than skin."

"There must be some way to save it!"

"Not with what we have and not if you also want me to save her life before the venom kills her." Prey said, ruthlessly pressing on and not giving them a choice. This had to be done. "Apply pressure. Keep it stable, and keep her still."

Lilly should've bled out already or died from shock, the Mama'duke venom be damned, but she hadn't. The Felidar thorn's were helping, but they were not miracle workers. He had to work fast.

Prey grabbed the knife from the fire.

Scenic and Gloom both started, they hadn't seen him place it in there. Its tip dully glowed red. Before either could stop him, Prey jabbed it into an exposed blood vessel. There was a thin hiss as it was seared shut. Prey kept going, working with the swiftness that could only come from experience and failure after failure.

He sealed the blood vessels he could, having to stop to reheat the blade twice, before cutting mercilessly through the few strings of leg muscle holding the limb on. He sawed the blade through the tendons, catching them before they could roll up into her shoulder and tying them in an overhoof knot, wishing he had a sharper knife.

Gloom and Scenic were nothing but background noise. Prey's whole, complete, and total focus was on his work, and Lilly's horn in case it lit up. And the fire. The all important fire.

Lilly's leg came off and fell to the dirt with a thud that was far louder than it should've been. Prey avoided looking at it out of more than the corner of his eye. He'd seen far too many severed limbs and the pathetic story they told to ever want to see or hear any more.

If she survived, if any of them survived, Lilly would hate him like nothing else for this.

Next came the meld wood.

Prey hadn't told the others what exactly he needed the meld wood for, but now they would get to see for themselves. Dimly, he was aware of Scenic again being sick yet again on an empty stomach,

but the stallion was still keeping his grip on Lilly and holding her down, so that's what mattered.

Prey took the split half of meld wood in one hoof, and lined it up with the other. He took a breath, and shoved the exposed side of the meld wood into Lilly's open wound.

Prey held it there, pushing it in and making it take. The thick amber sap mingled with the blood, and then before his eyes, blended into one substance. The blood which had kept leaking from the wound despite the venom and Prey's work with the heated knife suddenly seemed to be caught in a drain, as it was sucked into the meld wood.

Prey saw the red raw flesh darkening as the sap reached it, oozing out of the wood as blood was sucked in to replace it, and then under his very hooves, the wood began to shift and change.

The stripes in the wood began to warp, and Prey hastily let go. Rather than fall out, the meld wood stayed firmly in Lilly's shoulder. The half a branch began to twist and bulge. Slowly it stretched out, growing and branching into twigs.

"It's replacing her leg." Scenic gasped, face palid.

It was true. Lilly's missing leg seemed to have been fully replaced by a living tree branch, twigs breaking out of the wood. In a minute, the twigs would begin to start sprout leaves. Prey gripped the knife tightly. He'd have to act fast once they did.

"Not just her leg, keep her still." Prey ordered. The meld wood wasn't done.

Having finished regrowing the bulk of Lilly's missing leg, the twigs began to bud, everything moving in sped up motion.

Prey grabbed ahold of the unnatural limb replacing flesh and bone, and began stripping the leaf buds and twigs as fast as they formed with the knife. The growth had to be controlled or it would completely take over, immobilising and then killing Lilly. That was how meld wood worked, and how new trees grew.

After a minute of frantic pruning work, the bud growth finally slowed, and then stopped. Prey let out a sigh of exhaustion and let the wooden thing now grafted to Lilly's shoulder drop.

Lilly was silent. She'd finally fallen unconscious. A small mercy.

"I've never seen anything like that." Gloom whispered, "I had no idea anything like this was even possible."

"Losing the leg wasn't necessary to save her, but since she did it made it the easiest place to apply the meld wood. It's not over though. I've pruned the outward growth. Next comes the inward growth." Prey said emptily.

"Wait-I thought the meld wood was only needed to replace Lilly's leg." Gloom said.

Prey looked at him like he was an idiot. Did he think the venom was only confined to the leg? If that were the only problem, Prey would've just amputated and have been done with it. But the venom wasn't even the extent of it, there was the internal damage caused by the crushing bite to take into consideration too.

"Meld wood is a parasite." Prey said outloud, "A special kind that keeps its host alive for as long as possible to feed off. It'll force her to live as long as possible, replace her blood with a mix of sap, and bond to her internals. It'll do everything its name says. Meld."

Gloom drew the wrong connections; '-wood, kindersnatch, wicker. It's happening again-'

"You're turning her into a kindersnatch!"

"No," Prey quickly cut Gloom off before he could go any farther down that path, "It's not like that. She'll still be Lilly Blossom. Her mind, such as it is, will be exactly the same. Her body though, that's another thing. But it'll keep her alive. For a while longer at least."

"A *while*?"

"It's a parasitical growth. Even if it tries to keeps its host alive, it will still drain her." Prey answered, not looking at them. Lilly's skin

was changing colour as he watched, slowly taking on the colour of bark, spreading out from the initial site of the now fully melded wooden leg. Slight movements showed where things were shifting under the skin's surface.

Gloom took a deep breath, which turned into a gulp, "How... How long has this bought her?"

Prey shrugged hopelessly, "Truthfully? No idea. Meld wood needs magic to survive. For a normal person, that means one, maybe two years at best. However Lilly's a unicorn, which is why I thought of meld wood. I estimate anywhere from five years all the way up to a full life span. Maybe. I just don't know."

"How is this 'saving' her?" Scenic shrieked, appalled.

"I said it would save her for a given definition of 'saved'," Prey repeated, "She'll live. A half life. Maybe they can fix her in Canterlot, I don't know."

It was something they'd done back in the Resistance. Meld wood was hard to find, but when they had any of it on hoof and a fighter was fatally injured but had survived long enough to be dragged back to camp, Snake would force the meld wood into them.

'Borrowed Warriors' they called them, borrowed back from death for a time. Dead people walking. They were fighters with nothing left to lose, just how the Resistance liked it. The Resistance took everything from you, even your death.

"That's not... This is hardly-You can't call this saving her." Scenic almost pleaded.

Prey didn't look at him. He glared instead at Gloom, eyes angry and scared, but not scared of them, "You told me to do whatever it took to save her. Well here you go, now you'll have to deal with the consequences. Everything has a price."

Gloom was staring down at Lilly's form, his face drawn as he watched the changes taking place, "...She'll live. Everything else comes secondary to that."

"Exactly. She'll live. Desperate times call for desperate measures. Meld wood. As long as she prunes off the leaves and twigs whenever they grow. That'll keep the meld wood's size in check. If it grows too large then it'll start petrifying her body."

When Gloom tore his eyes away he found Prey was throwing more wood on the already bright fire, heedless of splinters. There was a sickly, hunted light in Prey's eyes as he stoked the flames, hardly even feeling the heat burning his face.

'-he doesn't even care about the life he just saved. Or about the suffering he just caused Lilly-'

Gloom was right. Prey didn't care. There was something far more important to care about.

He'd done what they'd forced him to do, and now came the price. There was always a pr-

Something soundless chimed in Prey's head and reverberated through his soul. It was the feeling of a claw at your throat, of hot breath on your neck, the silent regard of the hunter judging your worth as a meal.

Prey tried to remember how to breathe. It was here.

The entity from the Wolfing Wood had finally arrived.

"It's here." Prey croaked.

It took the exhausted Gloom and Scenic a long second to figure out what he was talking about. "The monster from the Wolfing Woods you were worried about?" Gloom asked, a sinking feeling in his hooves.

'-and Crimson's out cold and here I am weaponless-'

"Where is it?" Gloom put Crimson and Lilly behind him, his ears swivelling, "I can't sense anything."

"Can't you feel it?" Prey whispered. How could they not feel it in the air? "It's gotten awfully dark, hasn't it?"

Gloom opened his mouth to say something. He didn't finish. He tried to peer into the dark. It was pitch black out there. It hadn't been that dark a minute ago.

Gloom was a thestral, he could see in the dark.

So why couldn't he see now?

Unconsciously, Gloom took a back step closer to the fire.

Scenic licked his dry lips, cringing like what he was about to say was somehow his fault, "I, uh, I just realised I can't see the stars anymore."

Gloom looked up, and found all the stars gone. Even the moon was missing.

"Is it just cloud cover?" Gloom asked uncertainly, finding himself whispering the ridiculous question. The only clouds gathered were against the Ridgeback. He knew that. He was a flyer. Taking note of the weather was second nature to him.

It was dark, and startlingly cold. When had it so abruptly gotten cold?

Or was it really actual cold, and not just a chill in his bones? Because it was cold either way.

Now that you were looking at it, the circle of firelight seemed alot smaller and weaker. How could it suddenly be so dark? That's not how night-time worked.

The same fear of certainty that'd gripped Prey now gripped them, and they knew the reason why.

"This...monster. How do we fight it-?"

"-Don't. You don't. You c-can't fight it." Prey's legs were shaking. He didn't dare turn around to look out into the suddenly very dark night.

"Like Tartarus we're just going to sit here and let it eat us."

"It can't be fought or beaten. I t-tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen. We-we-" Prey swallowed down the whimper, "Magic. We can only protect ourselves with magic."

Scenic stared at Lilly, the only unicorn here, "But, but, but..."

"Not with her filthy unicorn magic." Prey hissed, fear making his tongue bitter.

"They all think mastery is their right. That with magic everything should bend to their rules. None of that will help you here. Magic won't work. It's not allowed to work, not here, not now." Prey's voice was cracking at the edges. It scared Gloom in his bones to hear Prey's tone.

"It's old, it doesn't listen to anyone's magic. It doesn't obey any rules. M-monsters come from b-before rules. But there are laws. M-maybe it'll be enough for us to survive. If we follow the laws right. Old laws."

"What laws?" Gloom hissed urgently, "Prey, what laws?"

"The oldest law of all."

With a sudden feverish burst of energy, Prey grabbed a log half as big as himself and hurled it into the fire. Sparks shot up, and were immediately swallowed by the night, "Fire. Fire is our only defence against the dark."

Gloom and Scenic both felt it in their bones and knew with dread certainty Prey's words were the truth, the only truth that mattered tonight. The only thing standing between them and whatever was lurking out there in the dark was the fire. It was the most primal need of all. Fire to fend off the terrors of the night, dating back to when their ancestors lived in caves. No matter how far you go, or how high you reach with civilisation and invention, that one law remained.

"No matter what, keep the fire burning. The fire must stay lit. Do you understand?!"

"We understand, the fire, the fire must stay lit. We understand.

Calm down, we mustn't panic Prey." Gloom swallowed, backing up closer to the fire.

'-I'm... scared. I feel so small, weak. Vulnerable-', Gloom realised.

"But we have the fire, right? As long as we don't panic and keep the fire burning, it won't come in, right?" Gloom's instincts understood even more clearly than his mind did.

"Yeah, we have enough wood to last until morning, definitely. Total. No two ways about it. Plenty of wood." Scenic's smile was a frozen rictus, "We *do* have enough wood, don't we? Because, because if we... if we don't..."

"We've got lots of wood. A pile that size is enough to last for three days and nights." Gloom declared, hastily measuring the pile.

"No we don't. We only have enough to last until dawn. M-maybe." Prey stuttered.

Prey was breathing too fast, almost panting, the shortness of breath catching somewhere in his chest. But he couldn't control it. He was right on the edge of panic.

Memories of surviving this same night once before were clawing at the back of his mind, and for once he was having no success in locking them away again.

"What do you mean, only until dawn? Don't say things like that. There's loads of firewood here." Gloom denied, shaking his head.

"Don't let the fire die. Quick! Pile on more wood, keep it bright."

"Don't. We need to ration it, pace it out." Gloom quickly blocked Prey. Behind Gloom, without his notice, the ring of fire light was slowly shirking.

Prey's eyes grew even wider, "Throw more wood on the fire!" He squeaked, trying to get past Gloom.

"We have to ration it. Don't panic, you're panicking Prey," Gloom spread his wings in front of Prey, holding him back. Inside, Gloom

could feel himself teetering on the edge of panic too:

"We need to keep our heads, as long as we don't waste it, then-"

There was a crash of sparks behind him, and Gloom whirled to find Scenic dumping more wood on the fire.

Gloom shot across the distance and grabbed Scenic, wing claws hooked under the other stallion's chest plate, "What are you doing? You're wasting the wood!"

"It, it, the fire was dying sir." Scenic stuttered.

"The fire's fine!" Gloom shook him roughly, "It has loads of wood, it can't burn through three whole logs in only... five..... minutes....."

Gloom was standing less than a yard from the fire. So why was it cold? His eyes turned down.

The flames flickered less than a hoof high in a mix of embers and ash, the logs that'd been piled so high only minutes ago almost gone. Before their very eyes, the end of a log broke of and disintegrated into sparks and charcoal at a terrifyingly rapid rate.

"Keep the fire alive!" Prey shrieked at them.

The blood drain from Gloom's face and his head snapped around to look at the wood pile again as his mind automatically did the calculations.

'-oh...-'

What'd once looked like an enormously excessive pile of wood now looked frighteningly small.

In a frantic rush, more wood was piled onto the fire, driving the darkness back out by a hoof's length, but no further. The wood was disappearing even faster than Prey had feared. He stared at the pile, tying to estimate. It should still be enough, shouldn't it?

"What... what happens..." Scenic cleared his dry throat.

"...What happens if the fire goes out?" He whispered into the dark silence.

Prey stared at him, breaths coming too fast. "What happens? What happens!? It'll eat you. Chew your skull and grind your bones, and leave nothing but your hooves on the b-blood soaked m-moss, all n-n-neatly laid out." Prey was almost crying again by that last part.

It was only then, hearing Prey's words, that Gloom finally noticed something he should've already known. '

-It's silent. Why's it so silent?-'

"Where's the gurgling gone? The kindersnatch villagers..."

The terrible clarity of what had just happened just out there in the dark while they crouched safe here in the ring of fire light struck Scenic and Gloom at the exact same moment.

It was like a hammer blow to the bale of straw already bowing the camel's back, and it drove both stallions off their hooves. They didn't rage, there was no room left for rage. Just a moment of terrible realisation of failure.

'-they're dead, they're dead, it just ate them, it ate them alive-'

'-while saving Lilly, I forgot about saving the villagers-'

"We... we left them out in the night to die." Gloom moaned, wings covering his head. It was too late to save or help, the damage had already been done. They were all dead.

'-and it's all my fault-'

"I didn't think, I didn't think. I c-could've pulled them in here, kept them in the f-fire light." Scenic began bawling.

Guilt, shame, self loathing, Prey heard it all echoing in their heads.

Prey turned away. He piled more wood on the fire. He couldn't do anything to help. He was just trying not to break down himself, rocking back and forth and hugging his legs. He still had splinters in

his side, dirt stung his scrapes and cuts. It was easier to focus on that.

But he was terrified. Just the merest sliver of control held it all in right now.

He checked that Crimson was still safely unconscious by the fire. Lilly was lying there next to him too. Prey hated her, this was all her fault. If she had just died on time, like she was supposed to, then he wouldn't be in this mess.

What they would never know and Prey would never tell them was that he had not forgotten the kindersnatches in the panic of trying to save Lilly. He could never have forgotten. Their mental gibbering screams had never ceased in his ears. He could've told Gloom and Scenic to drag them closer to the fire, he'd known what was going to come out of the Wolf Wood. But he hadn't said a word.

Prey had sacrificed them. He'd heard their silent screams being silenced one by one out there in the pitch dark, and he hadn't been able to let any of it show on his face.

The others didn't know what he knew, which was that even if the villagers bodies were somehow restored against all odds, their minds were already gone. It was too late.

So Prey had weighed the scales, and made the choice to sacrifice their empty husks to feed the entity's hunger, to provide it with alternative prey, so that he might have the chance to live on.

Scenic, Gloom, even Crimson could never have understood. Their greatest desire was to save lives.

Prey's greatest desire was to survive, and he was prepared to do whatever it took.

But the kindersnatches were not enough to satisfy the entity. Nothing would ever be enough. Prey had sacrificed all the kindersnatches just to take the edge of the things hunger, to stop it from *having* to eat the ISND. Because that was another law. Hunger *had* to be fed, and the entity *would* eat tonight, one way or another.

Prey knew a little of hunger. Not much, but more than anyone else.

And he knew that it could never be satisfied, only delayed.

Hunger consumed your thoughts, ate at the back of your mind, ravaged your self control. You pleaded with it, made promises to feed it, threatened, wheedled, tried to ignore it, control it, tried to fight it off or deny it. But in the end, no matter what, hunger always had to be fed.

The entity *would* eat tonight. The only question was; would it be eating them?

Would the kindersnatches be enough to tide it over and the fire keep it back until the sun rose and the hunt ended?

Gloom's thoughts were black. Prey listened to him hating himself, because Gloom couldn't make himself run out there into the dark to try and find if there were any kindersnatches left to save.

'-it's less than five yards, just five yards-'

But he couldn't make himself leave the fire light. Because something he didn't understand was out there. So he lay in the dirt, despairing at his failure.

'-Mayflower is gone. Alfalfa Dale is lost. Shimmer and Atlas were braver than us. I failed them all-'

The only other thing Gloom could make himself do as he lay slumped there surrounded by the dark was be mindful of the fire. Because Prey had said it, and Gloom knew it for himself even in the pits of despair. He didn't want to die either, and the fire couldn't be allowed to go out. Or else.

Sparks spat into the cold dark.

Prey was wholly transfixed on the fire. It was all that mattered. On the other side of the flames, Scenic was lost In his own little miserable world, slumping lower and lower, swaying with exhaustion. It was obvious he was done. Simply done. Everything had finally become too much. That someone like Scenic had lasted

this long was far beyond what Prey had expected.

The dread and fear was simply too much for Scenic's body, and it was shutting him down. It was illogical, against all chances of survival, but Scenic's mind cared for none of that as he finally slumped all the way into the dirt and let dreamless unconsciousness claimed him.

And then it was just Gloom and Prey left awake, attention riveted on the fire, warding off the dark and hoping not to die.

The night was so black, that the darkness hummed.

A minute, and hour, an eternity stretched into the night. It pressed down upon them, promising death and rest in such twisted terms that it began to sound preferable to the endless dreading. Better than the fear.

Was the darkness coming closer? Was that a wet panting sound on the edge of his hearing?

Prey covered his ears, but he didn't dare turn to look.

"Prey?" Gloom suddenly croaked, "Prey, I think it's right behind me."

The words made the life drain from Prey's heart, and the the fire took on a grey tint as he suddenly felt dizzy and nauseous. There was a ringing in his head.

"There's nothing there." Prey whispered.

"Prey, I, Prey it's *behind me*."

"There's nothing there, there's nothing there."

"I, I can feel it. It's right behind me." Gloom's voice held that raw primal dread that could not be described.

"It's not there. Repeat after me Gloom, it's not there."

"It's behind me-"

"It's *not* there. Repeat after me. There's nothing there."

"But it's-"

"Say it. Say it's not there."

"It's, its..."

"Say it."

"It's...not there?"

"It's not real." Prey insisted like their lives depended on it.

"It's...not real."

"Again. Repeat it."

"It's...not real."

"Believe it. Say it. It's not there." Prey hissed.

"It's not there."

"And it's not behind me."

"It's not behind me."

"Again."

"It is not behind me."

"Again.

"It is not behind me."

"*Again*.

"It is not behind me."

Slowly, terribly slowly, like pitch dripping off his neck, Prey felt the

pressure gradually withdraw. But no further than than the edge of the fire light.

Gloom began to shake. Prey was already shaking.

"Don't ask." Prey ordered before Gloom could say a word, "It wasn't there. It isn't there."

"What...what...what was..."

"Close your eyes and count to three, and if they pass they'll let you be." Prey recited.

It wasn't a dream, because Prey wasn't asleep. His body was drooping and wanting to drop, but if he slept, the fire would die.

He wasn't sleeping. But he was caught in a never ending cycle of piling wood on the fire and unblinkingly watching the flames briefly strengthen before sinking again. His mind was foggy with exhaustion, the adrenaline of terror long burnt out.

At his back, the dark waited, hungry and insatiable. Nothing tangible stood between him and it. His skin crawled. The others were just background by this point. It was just him, the finite wood pile, the fire, and the dark.

If this was a dream, then it was a nightmare. But Prey wasn't dreaming.

So why then could he hear Gossamer talking to their mother?

He could hear them as clear as mud, almost understand the hazy words, nearly hear what was being said. But his mother was dead. She'd died in the smoke. Prey knew that. He'd never had the chance to bury her body. Hers or Fleece's. Because Fleece had died and become Breaker, just like Gossamer had died when Prey took his place.

Yet he could hear Gossamer talking to their mother, even if he couldn't make out the words. That wasn't fair, why couldn't he

hear? Maybe it was because he didn't deserve to hear, not after all he'd done. Prey blinked, his eyes burning from the fire smoke.

'All it takes is one or two breaths.'

Why couldn't he hear what was being said? It was a memory, it had to be, so why couldn't he remember the words? Prey's memory was nearly eidectic, he could remember everything. Except this.

And why did the memory only come now, when he was so scared and tired and in such peril?

Prey stained, trying to remember or pick up the faint tells of sound in his head. Was this maybe a memory back from when he was still a baby? Is that why he was getting nothing?

He didn't deserve to hear his mothers words, but still he tried. 'No, not my mother. Gossamer's mother. I keep forgetting. She would never have had a son like Prey.'

He strained, desperate to remember. Faint, oh so faint. Half a sentence.

"*You're my sweetie, my only sweetie, when skies are grey..... and when the stitches fall apart, you'll be hanging by a thread.....*"

Nothing more came.

Prey's eyes snapped open, jerking his body ram rod straight. Terror coursed through his veins. The fire!

Gloom had piled wood on the fire, it was still burning. The thestral was slumped despondently by the fire in abject misery.

Prey kept his eyes as wide open as he could manage after that, repeatedly stabbing himself with a splinter to stay awake as he watched on into the endless night.

---I---

"But the wolf... The wolf only needs enough luck to find you once."

[[[Bonus Picture - I Found Something in the Woods Somewhere]]]

https://imgur.com/wljtcLg

Author's Notes:

Hello to everyone! So, maybe I should've put this A.N. at the top with a warning about vivid depictions as a warning that the chapter was going to be dark. Err, my bad. [image]

Also, if the quote at the end had you confused, it is the second half of the quote from the end of Chapter 40. Back at the start of this Arc III. 🎃 Here it is in full:

"Oh but you must travel through the woods again and again..." Said the shadow at the window,
"...And you must be very lucky to avoid the wolf every time."

"But the wolf... The wolf only needs enough luck to find you once."

48.3 Invasion and Evasion on Occasion

There is a quote famously attributed to Celestia, "*The darkest hour is before the dawn.*"

It's supposed to mean there is always hope, no matter how bad things may appear. It was a lie. The darkest hour may be before the dawn, but that does not mean there is anything worth hoping for. The sun will still rise over your bloodied corpse as easily as not.

So the dawn came, Celestia raised the sun, and light returned to the world. Even the towering spires of the Ridgeback and the gathering cloud banks couldn't more than briefly delay the sun's rays from breaking over the land.

Birds stirred in their nests, morning dew cobwebs waited to be burnt away, and wild flowers spread their petals.

The sun wasn't quite as big and bright on this side of the mountain range, where the winds blew in a chill, but it was still the sun. The giver of life. The source of warmth. The bright bringer of hope.

Its light revealed the smoking remains of Alfalfa Dale as the ISND trudged or staggered in, the sun not letting any stark detail of the ruin go unmissed.

This scene felt so similar to one Prey had seen before. Of a different village sixty-one years ago.

The still glowing gutted homes reduced to smouldering charcoal, a child's strangely unburnt wooden ball lying abandoned in the middle of the road, the way the slightest breath of wind carried hot smoke into their faces, and underneath it, charred meat. So familiar.

It was still too hot to venture in further than the outskirts of the border town. Prey thought it was better that way, so they wouldn't recognise places they'd walked.

Like the old ram's shop from which they'd bought ink and parchment. The roof had completely collapsed into the small store, crushing everything inside into still glowing coals. The blackened corner posts still stood, grasping at the clear sky like burnt talons. The ram's livelihood, now nothing but ash. And possibly him too, if he hadn't been taken. There was no way to know.

Even only staying here on the edges, they still needed to be careful of the danger the fire posed. Alfalfa Dale had only burned about six hours ago. It felt far, far, far longer.

Surviving the night, huddled around their own waning fire in the remains of Mayflower, while praying whatever had come out of the Wolfing Wood's would stay away had extracted a heavy toll.

Prey's whole body was sore and drained. He was filthy and smoke stained, and his eyes would barely stay open. His hooves felt hot and ached from the forced walk out of Mayflower, over the grassy plain, and back here to Alfalfa Dale.

Scenic and Gloom looked every bit as bad as he felt. Scenic's eyes were red and swollen, and he stumbled on almost every step as he pulled the makeshift litter with Lilly on it behind him. His mane and coat were matted with dirt, smoke, and hardened pine sap. His armour was stained and scuffed.

Worst was the hopeless *Clop. Clop. Clop.* of his plodding steps.

---That Morning---

When the sun had finally risen over Mayflower and the darkness had retreated under the trees, only Prey and Gloom had still been awake to sob in relief. It was over. They'd survived. There'd been barely four logs left in the wood pile.

The entity, whatever it was, had vanished.

And there in the morning light they'd found the remains of the

kindersnatches. They were gone. All of them. Gone. Everything. Both the wicker kindersnatch bit, and the tortured villager the parasite had contained inside. It was all gone, eaten, even the thirteenth kindersnatch who'd been crushed under the fallen house.

Or rather, *nearly* everything. There remained thirteen dark patches of soaked dirt, along with heavy grass blades sticky with blackened red.

That, and thirteen grisly lower jaw bones, all neatly lined up neatly in a row.

Gloom had cursed foully and quickly shut his eyes at the sight, but it was too late and couldn't be unseen. He'd stood frozen like that for some time, eyes closed and just trying to get his breathing back under control. Prey looked at the arrayed jaw bones, the remains of the people he'd purposefully sacrificed to live, and quietly went to clear them away with a stick.

"What are you doing?!"

Prey jumped and dropped the stick, the elderly sheep's jaw bone he'd been lifting falling back with a soft squelch onto the stained earth. Why the entity had left these trophies lined out like them for this, Prey had no idea. To further taunt them? Did it even have a mind to think of doing that?

"Drop that, don't touch-Just... just leave them Prey. I'll... I'll do it. It should be me who has to do that. Before the others wake up." Gloom hoarsely croaked.

And Gloom had kept his word. He collected up all thirteen jaw bones, even if he had to stop and be sick once and had to pause longer and longer between each one. Prey'd dug a small hole, and they buried them there.

Only then, once the jawbones were gone, had Gloom woken Scenic, the Earth pony still lying slumped where he'd fainted from exhaustion and fear during the night.

Filled with shame, Scenic staggered upright and tried to apologise,

but the words stuck in his throat and wouldn't come out.

Dead eyed, Gloom had just shaken his head. An apology wasn't necessary. He knew what Scenic wanted to say.

Not a word was spoken what had happened last night. The hunted look they all saw reflected in each others eyes was enough. Nothing would ever be said about what happened that night. Even in the privacy of their own thoughts, both Gloom and Scenic tried to put it from them. They didn't feel safe even thinking about it.

Scenic had been woken up. Crimson and Lilly had not.

Crimson was still in his coma like state following his collapse after driving himself beyond his limits with the magical necklace. The magical jade links still rested around Crimson's throat as he was pulled on the second makeshift litter behind Gloom. It faintly sparkled with a deep internal light every now and again, but it looked duller than it had been.

Crimson wouldn't wake, even after they removed the huge thorn Prey had stuck in his leg to stabilise him last night. He hadn't twitched or made a noise when they'd rolled him onto his litter. However, his breathing was stable and deep at least.

Prey feared Crimson's continued unconsciousness might have something to do with the hidden "price" Crimson had mentioned he'd had to pay, as a result of that abrupt screaming fit he'd suffered. He shouldn't have ever given the stupid thing to Crimson.

That Lilly Blossom had also refused to be woken was another bad sign.

The mare looked to have lost two stone overnight, and that wasn't some ill favoured joke about her amputated leg. Her skin seemed drawn under her peach fur, her flesh withered, and she looked scarily reminisce of the poor donkey they'd found in the kindersnatch. She was nowhere even close to the brittle emaciated husk they'd found inside, but the resemblance was close enough to make both Gloom and Scenic feel sick just looking at her. Even Prey found the similarity disturbing

And then there was the meld wood.

The heavy length of wood had grown into the swollen shoulder socket of Lilly's missing left foreleg looked horrifying in the daylight. It was not a peg leg, and could never be mistaken for one. It grew into the flesh, bulging under the skin and warping its colour.

And then there were the places where the shoots of meld wood had grown through Lilly's body and broken out of her flesh entirely.

Lilly looked like she'd been in a splinter based explosion, but one in reverse. Shoots sprouted from a number of veins around her shoulder, but were not wholly confined to the area. Perhaps most disturbing was a gnarled coil of root which sprouted from under her chin, then branched up over the corner of her closed left eye, and finally wrapped around her horn, the source of her magic. The meld wood root looked almost like half melted cheese or rubber with the way it conformed to her face.

Gloom and Scenic were both horrified by what had been done, but more horror after everything else? It was just pressing further into numbness.

Prey had warned them that it would only save Lilly for a given definition of 'save'. Now they knew why he'd been so specific.

The unicorn mare's armour had been removed and discarded so as to better wrap her in blankets and padding. No one cared one whit about the miss-appropriation of Guard equipment. All extra weight needed to be left behind.

Now she rested on the rough litter Scenic drew, made of two long branches with strips of cloth bound between them. Lilly's head lay elevated. The litter's end dragged two shallow furrows behind Scenic and bumped at almost every step, but Lilly hadn't stirred once.

Those twigs growing out of Lilly's flesh would need to be trimmed every so often, lest it overtake her body completely. It didn't look like that was going to be a concern though.

Prey'd felt he had to inform Gloom of the chances of her not waking up at all, because they were high. Prey didn't want to be blamed later for withholding information, especially when he was the one who'd operated on her, forced to or not, so Gloom should know the odds. Even if it was information Gloom did not want to hear.

Because despite all he'd done, grafting the meld wood into her leg and saving her from the Mama'duke venom, it probably would not be enough to save the unicorn mare in the end. Lilly's body might live, but if the meld wood had also bonded with her brain, then she would never reawaken, and become little more than the twisted tree she now appeared.

The stump of her leg where the wooden limb grew was badly inflamed and hot, despite the amber sap flowing through it that should've enforced healing. That was a further bad sign.

"If she hasn't awoken by noon, her chances are less than twenty percent of ever waking." Although he hated Lilly, Prey had not found any joy in being the one who had to convey the news to Gloom, who did care very much.

The already almost broken down Gloom and Scenic had not taken Prey's frank summary of Lilly's chances well. To Gloom, it was proof of one more failure to add atop of his already heaped pile.

Gloom was desperately hoping the Night Guards coming on the train this morning had brought along a medic who could help Lilly where they had failed.

'-if she lives, what state will it even be in?-', Gloom couldn't help but ask himself.

It was just one of the many painful questions Gloom had asked himself on the silent trudge back to Alfalfa Dale, having left Mayflower the moment they thought it safe to do so.

And now they were back in Alfalfa Dale, and looking at the ruins and further proof of their failure.

Prey had ruined many lives, some he'd meant to, others he hadn't.

Alfalfa Dale however wasn't one of them. It was the warlock's fault, not his. Prey would not accept responsibility. He knew whose fault this really was.

When the Night Guard arrived on the train this morning as per Nighthawk's return message, and saw the situation, he would *not* let them place the blame on him. Or the rest of the ISND either, because he was part of that too. He would *not* be answering to Luna.

If they tried to accuse Gloom, Prey was ready to step in and argue in defence of their choices. With the state Gloom and Scenic were in at the moment, they'd probably accept any punishment they were feeling so guilty. Survivor's guilt.

Since the train tracks had never entered Alfalfa Dale, having been laid around the town's edge, they were able to trudge over to it without having to pass through the still dangerously hot ruins of town.

That was where they now stood, on the train platform, waiting for the promised Night Guard backup to arrive.

Despite being wood, the hoof high platform that served as a train platform was untouched by the fire, being detached from the border town. Both Crimson's and Lilly's litters had been laid out on the boards, and now they lay there unresponsive as the three conscious members of the ISND waited. And waited. And waited.

Nighthawk had said that the squad of Guards would be arriving first thing in the morning. It'd taken the ISND almost three hours to slowly get here from Mayflower, carrying Crimson and Lilly as they were.

It was now roughly nine o'clock.

No Night Guards had arrived, and there was no sign of the train appearing from over the Ridgeback pass.

It was entirely possible they'd been delayed. Requisitioning the

train which was only supposed to run once every two weeks, getting the right specialists in, or anything similar could be the cause.

"They probably had to stop to clear a tree from the tracks." Gloom spoke into the quiet.

No one answered. All of them either slumped or just lay on the platform, too tired to stand but also to tired to fall asleep. Even in direct sunlight and with the heat still coming off Alfalfa Dale's ashes, it felt chill to them.

Blackly, Prey considered it certainly possible that the warlock had destroyed the train tracks somehow up in the mountain pass. He didn't know how the warlock would've gotten up there so fast last night and back, but the world was against Prey.

The minutes slowly continued to tick past, one slow protracted second at a time.

Still no sign of any train.

Prey's stomach grumbled painfully. He'd quenched his thirst at Mayflower's stream before they'd left, and they had managed to recover their canteens too, but hadn't eaten anything. Prey was hungry, but he only had to think about the hunger he'd escaped last night and he suddenly didn't feel like eating anymore.

'Fishez would be nice, yez?' The mental remnant of Garrow unexpectedly whispered.

In a fit of fury, Prey shredded the memory of the taste of fish the violent griffin had been so fond of. How dare Garrow's remnant rear its head now? The griffin was like a worm, only coming out once the blackbird's shadow had passed. Wonderful. Now Prey's headache was even worse.

Prey's drooping ear twitched, and he looked around to see that Gloom had gotten up, but the thestral wasn't going anywhere. Gloom was just checking on Crimson and Lilly, like he did every ten minutes. Lilly's state hadn't changed, but Crimson was showing

signs he might soon awaken. Hopefully.

'-what are we going to tell him when he does?-', Gloom wondered.

Prey didn't know the answer to that question either.

Where *was* the train? And where were the Night Guards Nighthawk had promised?

'They aren't coming, are they?' Prey thought. He didn't know why he'd expected anything different. The only person you could rely on was yourself.

"Why aren't they here yet? How long does it take to send one train?" Prey heard Scenic mumbling to himself.

They waited.

And then waited some more.

"Something must've gone wrong," Gloom eventually said, "They're not coming."

"Maybe, maybe they'll come later though?" Scenic suggested.

"Maybe..." Gloom echoed but without any hope, "But we can't just keep sitting here waiting."

They continued to sit there silently waiting. The sun continued to beat down on the open platform.

Gloom had said they had to do something, but what? Where were they supposed to go? What could they possibly try or do which hadn't already failed? They had injured, exhausted, without supplies, leads, or ideas. So while saying they couldn't just keep sitting here fruitlessly waiting was correct, what were they supposed to do instead?

They were on their own. No one was coming.

All their plans had failed and now they were stranded on the wrong side of the mountains, trapped and indecisive. The warlock was still

out there somewhere with an army of kindersnatches and another even bigger scarecrow of some sort. Shimmer and Atlas were gone, the villagers were gone, the deer holt was gone, Alfalfa Dale was gone. Everyone but them was gone.

So what were they supposed to do?

If there'd been a telegraph station this side of the mountains, perhaps Gloom could've flown to it but there wasn't. Lilly was in a catatonic coma, and Crimson was...

Crimson was waking up.

Prey jumped to his hooves as Crimson groaned, heedless of the sharp pain such a rapid movement caused him, "Crimson's waking up!"

Gloom limped over as fast as he could to the litter, "Crimson? Crimson can you hear me?" He asked anxiously.

Crimson twitched, his eyes moving under their lids. He was lying on his front on the litter to keep his wings free, and even unconscious, Crimson had them neatly folded against his side.

"Crimson?" Gloom tried again.

"Is he waking up sir?" Scenic asked, hobbling over anxiously.

Crimson's eyes cracked open, then immediately screwed shut as the sun blinded him. He groaned and weakly raised his leg to shield his eyes.

Gloom hastily spread his wings and held them up as shade as he leaned over Crimson, "Can you hear me? How do you feel?"

"That you Gloom? I mean, sir?"

"Yes Crimson, it's me. And Scenic and Prey-"

"How do you feel?" Prey broke in, "Any severe muscle pains or cramp? Trouble breathing or hypersensitivity?"

Crimson blinked, able to more fully open his eyes in the shade cast by Gloom's wings. In places, tiny speckles of sunlight dotted the ground where it shone through the splinter holes in Gloom's membrane.

"I, no, none of those." Crimson frowned and shifted, just about managing to roll onto his side, "Just generally tired and sore. I feel like it should be worse though. After that flight and using my necklace..."

Crimson's eyes flicked down. There, the jade chain links still rested around his neck.

"We didn't know if we should remove it, or whether it was doing more harm than good." Gloom said.

"I think it's fine sir." Crimson gave the ivy like necklace a poke, a dark frown on his brow, "I don't think it helped me recover though."

"That was Prey. He made you eat some strange seeds. Said it would help or else you might permanently go into a coma because all your natural magic was exhausted." Gloom explained tiredly.

"You helped me?" Crimson asked, head jerking around towards Prey, "Did you help Lilly? Lilly. What happened to Lilly? You saved her didn't you."

Crimson wasn't really asking. His eyes were locked with Prey, wanting an affirmative.

'Does he honestly expect to hear the answer he wants?' Prey was a mess. They were all a mess, and plainly looked it too.

"I did what I said I could do. Lilly Blossom is alive." Prey said. And then he felt he couldn't lie to Crimson about this, and had to add, "For now at least."

"For now?" Crimson echoed.

It was Scenic who answered in the silence that followed, "Lilly's in a coma. She's alive, but, but she won't wake up. And...we had to, that is to say, Prey had to...."

Gloom took over when Scenic couldn't finish, "Lilly's alive, that's what's important. But what happened after though, Lilly's... 'condition'... It's not Prey's fault."

"What isn't Prey's fault?" Crimson asked, beginning to manoeuvre his legs under himself to push up off the litter.

"It's not Prey's fault, it's mine. I'm the Sargent, I'm the one who asked him to save Lilly. But she's... You should probably see for yourself. She's behind you." Gloom gave up and just pointed hopelessly.

"No, whatever happened is my fault too sir. I insisted Prey tell me where the meld wood was-"

Crimson's voice cut off as he turned and saw Lilly's litter lying next to his own. His eye's widened and his breath caught as he took in the meld wood grafted into her body and growing from her face.

Crimson sagged and his face greyed, "She's like a kindersnatch victim."

"She'd already lost the leg. That bucking octopus bit right through her leg. Prey managed to, to... To seal the wound and then do that. She's stabilised, but..."

"But she's stabilised like that." Prey finished.

Crimson sat down hard on the now unneeded litter. His mental walls were squirming. He looked at Prey, "Was there really no other way to save her?"

"Not with what I had to hoof. I warned you against meld wood, but you forced me to do it anyway." Prey said bitterly. They'd all almost died because of Crimson's stubborn insistence in saving Lilly, and now Crimson wasn't happy with the result?

"She's alive," Gloom stressed, "That's all that matters. We can help her get through whatever comes next."

'-if she ever wakes up-', His mind added traitorously.

Crimson could only nod, not quite able to look at Lilly. His hoof tugged at the jade necklace, no doubt agonising over what he could've done differently, and then he stiffened, "Where are my father's wing blades? And my armour. And where are we, sir?"

"Your armour and blades are over there." Gloom said, choosing to answer the easier of Crimson's questions, "We're not sure if your armour works anymore though. The enchantment bit at least. It should still serve adequately as regular armour, though."

Crimson spotted the wood of the train platform beneath him and looked around. He sniffed, the scent of smoke and ash laying thick everywhere.

"Where are we?" Crimson asked slowly, already knowing but asking for confirmation.

"In what's left of Alfalfa Dale." Prey said bluntly. He sat down, not facing Crimson. He strongly didn't want to look at Crimson at the moment. His anger had flared up out of the pool of defeated apathy.

"Oh." Prey heard Crimson say blankly behind him, "So it is all gone then."

"We're here waiting for the train to arrive. But, uh, we don't think it's coming." Scenic told him miserably.

There was a long pause.

"I see. Sir, do we know why not?" Crimson asked.

"What do you think?" Gloom snapped, suddenly angry.

"I failed. We failed. Mayflower is gone. Alfalfa Dale is gone. Atlas and Shimmer are gone too. I've got no plan, and it doesn't look like Captain Nighthawk is going to make it for whatever reason. We carried you and Lilly here to the train station hoping, hoping-It doesn't matter. We're on our own, but we've got nothing left to give. No plan, no leads, no nothing....I'm sorry all of you." Gloom slumped.

"What about the kindersnatches we captured, sir? If the train

arrives, they'll have medical unicorns who might be able to help were we couldn't. Did you properly secure them in Mayflower before coming here?"

Dead silence.

Prey hunched lower as Crimson's words pulled at the memory of last night. From the corner of his eye, he could see Gloom and Scenic frozen too.

"Sir, what happened?" Crimson asked, sensing something was wrong.

Gloom made an effort to clear his throat, but it still came out as a dry rasp, "Last night, after you got back with the meld wood, you fell unconscious. Prey lit the fire, and... And after....."

Gloom didn't finish. His eyes were glazed.

"Sir?" Crimson prompted.

Gloom opened his mouth. He stared at Crimson, tried to find the words to put voice to the memory swirling in his head, but he failed.

'-darkness, fire, shrinking woodpile, the fear, jawbones in the morning-'

"Gloom sir?"

Gloom's mouth hung open, but nothing was coming out, "....."

Crimson switched to Scenic, "What happened? Did the monster Prey was talking about follow me back to Mayflower?" He asked in alarm.

Scenic's ears were straight back, pressed so tightly to his head they looked like part of his skull. He tried to speak, swallowed, and tried again, "Yes. It...The....."

Crimson stared at him. Scenic stared back, not able to find any words, breathing rapidly, "....."

"Somepony, speak to me. What happened? Prey?"

Without turning, Prey just shook his head and remained silent. Words were inadequate, and they could not convey what none of them had seen, only felt. Crimson had been unconscious at the time, he didn't remember what they did.

"The eleven other villagers trapped in the kindersnatches. They're gone, aren't they?" Crimson asked.

"Yes." Gloom finally managed to answer something. "They're gone, all of them. Every bit of them."

Prey caught the look Gloom threw at him. It was unnecessary, Prey hadn't been going to tell them about the neat line of jaw bones. Crimson and Scenic didn't need to know those details.

He watched the smoke and fine ash drifting out of Alfalfa Dale, occasionally hearing the distant creak and pop of embers.

"So they're all gone." Crimson stated after a minute, "The warlock got everypony. He's made another scarecrow and used it to burn Alfalfa Dale down. He took everything from Mayflower and now he wants more."

Crimson's words should've been angry, but they just sounded hollow.

The answer was self evident anyways. It was yes. The warlock had gotten away with everything.

They'd successfully carried out all of their killing, kidnapping, torturing, and maiming, all while remaining hidden in the shadows, safe from danger. They'd taken everything they wanted by force, and the ISND were no closer to knowing why or what the warlock's ultimate goal was.

And they were all still in danger. Lilly was deadweight now, just a comatose patient, against the warlock with a small army of kindersnatches at their disposal, and now after last night, a soon to be bigger army. And to top it all off, the warlock even had another, *stronger* scarecrow, and who knew what else?

Right now the ISND were relatively safe here in the ruins of Alfalfa Dale, but come nighttime, when the warlock's forces ventured out from the forest again...?

Prey sat and thought of backup plans and schemes to escape and to get himself, or them, out of this predicament.

Fight or flight, that's what their options boiled down to. And fighting had so far proven ineffective. That left flight, but flight to where? A good defence was a strong offence, but Prey knew the best defence was to simply not be found. You couldn't kill what you couldn't find.

'Fight; if so, how? Flight; if so, where? Combine both? Neither?'

"We can't stay here." Gloom eventually said again.

No one moved on the platform. Again, Gloom was just stating the same obvious hopeless reality.

They continued to look up the train tracks, the metal rails disappearing into the mountains. No train came. No one was coming to help, it was just them.

"What are we going to do?" Scenic eventually asked in a small voice.

'-yes, now what...?-', Gloom repeated in his head, thinking of all the wrongs the warlock had done to everyone.

Prey let out his breath and leaned back. His legs were wobbly and sore. He rubbed at his gritty eyes and then tugged at his ribbon as he let his tired hoof drop. He remembered why he wore the embarrassing length of silk.

'To remind me of all those who laughed at me and who are now dead.'

"...Now what?" Gloom repeated slowly, ponderously. Prey could almost feel the slow building of black anger in Gloom's thoughts, mixing with hopelessness to become a sort of dark fuel burning in the Sargent.

"Now what?"

Prey knew those feelings, and knew where they led. He bit his lip, feeling the butterflies start to squirm in his stomach.

"You want to know now what?" Gloom got to his hooves. Crimson and Scenic looked up at him. Prey looked down at his hooves.

"I'll tell you now what," Gloom hissed, "Now we fight back."

Revenge. That's where those feelings led.

'And so hunt begins all over again.'

There is a saying about revenge, not a pony saying, since they abhor the idea of revenge, but a saying from other races.

"Before embarking upon the path of revenge, first dig two graves. One for them, and one for yourself."

Prey thought it was a stupid saying. Why only two graves? It almost never stopped at only two graves. And who decided what counted as revenge and not justice anyways? Righteous anger, indignation, a proper and lawful punishment of rebellious traitors wasn't revenge. Those'd been their exact excuses for the eradication of the Resistance. "Justice and punishment!" They'd cried.

The Resistance had said much the same about the Border Guard and their tyrant mistress, the Sun Wolf.

Gloom wanted justice to be meted out upon the warlock, but in the end it boiled down to the same thing as revenge.

Revenge. *Revenge*. It was a concept deeply embedded within Prey, but it had never existed in Gossamer. Revenge was the exact same thing as war, and war never ends, the battlefield just changes. Hurt me, and I'll kill you so you can never hurt me again.

Ponies have a saying, "It's never too late to say sorry."

For this warlock, it was now too late to say "sorry". Gloom had finally dropped his last barrier in retaliation to all of this, and now he just wanted the warlock dead. Crimson and Scenic too, no matter the shame it brought to them to think like that.

Prey had known it was going to come down to this. It always did. Garrow had pushed Gloom and Crimson over the edge last time, enough so that they'd been mentally prepared to kill the griffin, although they hadn't needed to in the end. Now again, they were resolved to end this warlock's evil, even if that meant killing and regretting it for the rest of their lives.

Prey shook his head. Scenic thought he was prepared to kill, but Prey sincerely doubted he actually was. Prey could only hope that when he hesitated, it was only himself Scenic got killed.

Crimson and Gloom though, they were a different story. To stop the warlock, they said they were ready to do whatever it took.

'Let's hope you know what you're getting yourself into,' Prey thought, 'If you're letting go of the leash.'

"The warlock has to be stopped no matter what. We can all agree on that?"

"Yes sir."

"Yes sir."

"Yes."

"The bastard no doubt has traps and hostages, so we can't fight him head on. We have to fight dirty. No matter what. No matter how long it takes. No matter how many skirmishes and hit and runs we need to make. Even... Even if we have to destroy his enslaved troops where we can't subdue or capture them, but only as a last resort. Whatever it takes, but the warlock dies. As long as we're all agreed that no one cares...? Good."

They had until tonight at the very least. The warlock would be busy consolidating their abundance of new captives into kindersnatches. Or hostages. Or whatever other dark purposes they had in store for the captured townsfolk. Gloom and Scenic tried very hard not to think about that. It wasn't much of a stretch of the imagination to guess Crimson probably was too.

But it gave them some time. How much time wasn't clear, but they could prepare, scavenge up supplies, arm themselves, and make a plan of attack.

Prey estimated the earliest the warlock would try to track them down would be tonight. The ISND were, after all, the only unaccounted for force in the area, aside from the deer holt. Possibly. Prey wondered what'd happened to the deer. Had the warlock captured them too?

All of Mayflower was gone, Alfalfa Dale too. The deer holt had either fled or been captured. That only left the ISND, and the train tracks as a possibility of bringing in more reinforcements for the warlock to worry about. And Atlas and Shimmer, if those two were still alive. Most likely they weren't.

They'd run off to confront an army of kindersnatches and a huge scarecrow after all. Prey hoped the two Border Guards were as dead as the odds said they should be.

So, the ISND had until tonight at the very least. However, Prey actually estimated the warlock wouldn't end up coming after them until tomorrow or even the night after. Everything Prey had seen so far and what his instincts were telling him suggested there was only one warlock. Practitioners of dark magic were not renowned for their ability to work with others or share.

That meant the lone warlock was, as Prey had already stated, very busy at the moment. Nor was this warlock stupid enough to rush into things. While they were overly ambitious, bold, and aggressive, they were also cunning, as Prey had already seen plentiful evidence of.

The warlock had thought their first scarecrow would be enough to

beat them in the forest, but when instead they'd burnt off the scarecrow's leg, the warlock had retreated. They hadn't tried again until after they'd repaired the scarecrow and could send in kindersnatches as backup to go along with it.

With the knowledge this warlock had at the time, that should've been enough to defeat the ISND. They couldn't have predicted Crimson suddenly gaining a magical artifact.

For now however, the warlock was going to go on the defensive. They'd lost all the forces they'd sent against the ISND, which would make the warlock much more cautious in committing to anything further until they either had more information, or were sure of winning with sheer overwhelming numbers.

On top of that, hopefully they didn't even know where the ISND was right now. The warlock seemed to have eyes in the forest, but outside of it they were almost certainly limited. That provided further incentive for the warlock to retreat and stay on the defensive until they were absolutely sure of victory.

Likewise, the ISND would also be preparing as best they could, getting ready to pit their lives in a battle to survive and hope they emerged on top.

Gloom took Prey aside. Prey knew what Gloom was going to ask. He was going to ask Prey to kill the kindersnatches. A child should not have to kill, but somehow Gloom didn't doubt Prey would either have some twisted way or could invent some cruel method which would work.

'-there is so much I don't know about Prey-'

So now Gloom wanted to specifically ask Prey to kill the kindersnatches.

But he couldn't manage it.

Gloom just couldn't get the words out. So Prey sat there waiting for five whole long minutes in silence as Gloom internally wrestled

with himself.

'Just get on with it.' Prey thought, flicking away a buzzing fly from his face as he sat there on the uncomfortably hard platform. He was tired, hungry, he had a budding headache, his wool was greasy and stunk of wood smoke, and his various scrapes and cuts itched and stung.

He knew what Gloom wanted to ask of him, but Gloom had no right to ask. Prey was going to complete the request anyways, but not because Gloom asked, but because he wanted to survive.

In the end, Gloom couldn't manage it. He couldn't ask Prey if he knew some method or trick to kill all the kindersnatches with.

In the end, all Gloom said was, "Prey, you do... whatever you feel you need to do."

Even if it amounted to asking the same thing, it helped Gloom's already ragged conscience.

Prey sniffed and turned his head away.

He waited until Gloom went back to the others as they tried to scavenge supplies from the smouldering remains of Alfalfa Dale, Lilly's stretcher placed in the shade and tended to as best they could. Then he opened the dirtied cloth bag which Crimson had brought back with him from the Wolf Woods, and retrieved a hoof full of the one plant he hadn't used last night.

The fibrous outer husk came from a Zachuran'da tree, as the zebras called it. It was a fairly rare tree to come across, but Prey had seen plenty of the tall, unmistakable trees before. In the Deeper Green.

However he'd only seen one here in *this* pine forest, and it was the one he'd caught a glimpse of inside the Wolfing Wood. Thus, he'd told Crimson to bring a decent swathe of the bark back. Quickly he pushed all thoughts of the Wolfing Wood out of his head. He had the bark, that's what was important.

Prey bent the flexible outer husk between his hooves. It was like gritty cardboard, and smelled faintly of something rotting. Prey'd

had more than his fill of that scent by now. Everything about this mission was rotten.

Prey stuffed the bark back into the bag. There was plenty there. He only needed a small piece to make one mine.

The rest of what he needed Prey already knew he could find in the area. Prey weighed up the amount of bark in the bag and in his hoof, 'Let's see... Assuming no mistakes, there's enough for nine full sized Bone Rot mines.'

Even last night, Prey had always suspected it would come down to this.

The sun rises. The sun sets. But we all have to cross the river some day.

Crimson approached Prey, looking over the four bubbling basins set over small fires he was maintaining. Acrid fumes drifted off the see through yellow green liquid, and Prey was being careful not to breathe any of it in.

Prey had told Scenic not to come anywhere near his work, before promptly going off to start brewing this.

Gloom was flying high above in the sky, slowly circling above the pine forest's border in the distance. He was looking for signs, tracks, anything that would point them in the direction the kindersnatches and the unknown scarecrow had taken the townspeople of Alfalfa Dale.

Lilly still hadn't awoken. It didn't look like she was ever going to.

Prey stopped poking the fire with a stick and looked up at Crimson.

Crimson pulled a bundle of leaves and plants off his back. "Food." He said.

Prey nodded and kept waiting.

Crimson looked around at the small fires with their bubbling contents. "Are you making poison?" He abruptly asked.

"Something like that."

"Is it lethal?"

Prey nodded slowly, "Yes. Very."

Crimson stood for a while longer, looking at the bubbling bone rot. He had his wing blades reattached, and most of his armour too, aside from his helmet. He was still his natural red colouring though. Around his neck, the jade necklace softly glowed. Prey couldn't hear anything from behind his mental walls.

"There was a monster inside those Wolfing Woods." Crimson blurted out.

Prey shivered, "Yes, there was."

"It followed me back. It almost killed you all. You warned me against going."

It hadn't been a question, so Prey kept quiet. He carefully stirred one of the basins with a blackened metal spoon he'd dug out from under the ruins of a smoking house, making sure to keep the bone rot evenly heated.

"I'm sorry. That I brought a monster back. But it was the only way to save Lilly. But I'm still sorry. You were right."

Prey didn't respond.

After a while, Crimson turned and hurriedly left the area.

It was evening.

Hours had passed in the way time did. More dark clouds were

accumulating up against the walls of the Ridgeback in the distance. In another three to four hours time, the sun would set, and it would be night again.

Very carefully, Prey tipped the bone rot from the last basin out into the hollowed out sac of the water flower's flotation sac. Bone rot melted through anything organic, except these. Not because this water flower was special, but because of the runes Prey had placed on the hollowed out plant stems.

He didn't have any glass jars, so he'd had to improvise. The plant's skin stretched alarmingly, thin enough to clearly showed the poisonous yellow-green liquid contained inside, but it wouldn't burst. Not if Prey didn't want it to or unless it was purposefully popped.

With a deft twist of his hoof and some brief concentration to form the sealing rune, the water balloon like weapon was finished. Prey placed it on the ground, finishing the pile of fifteen identical makeshift bone rot mines.

He'd had to make them smaller than a full sized bone rot mine, and the effect would be less impressive, but it would still kill. To be more accurate, it would only kill three people at best, instead of the larger area of effect splash which could wipe out a whole clumped up patrol of Border Guards.

Prey looked at his bone rot mines. It had been fifty-seven years since he'd made one of these. And he'd performed the brewing process flawlessly.

The knowledge of using water plant air bladder sacs as replacements for a glass containers came from Snake's expertise. It was something the voodoo witch had done before. In many ways, Snake had been very much like this warlock they were up against now.

The thought made Prey's stomach churn.

Under lock and key in the back of Prey's mind, the remnants of Garrow stirred and whined that they wanted in on the coming

violence too.

For once, Prey let the remnant's whispered memories and recollections remain. Bloodshed and killing was coming. Prey hated killing. But here he was, expertly making bone rot mines once again.

'The Resistance told me to kill the Guard. Now the Guard is telling me to kill the Resistance. Makes sense.'

When Gloom landed breathing heavily, the first thing he asked was, "Lilly?"

Scenic looked at the dirt and Crimson slowly shook his head, "No change sir."

Gloom grimaced, it was what he'd known he would hear, but still he'd hoped... "I see. Make sure she's wrapped up warmly and ready to be moved."

They would not be remaining in the ruins of Alfalfa Dale overnight in case Gloom's takeoff and landing points had been watched from the forest. Not to mention, Alfalfa Dale was the only landmark out here aside from Mayflower. This was likely to be the first place the warlock checked tonight.

"Did you find anything sir?" Crimson asked.

"Yes," Gloom said darkly, his answer very unexpected, "My special talent came through. Get me a stick and a clear piece of dirt. I need to draw us a map."

"Right there," Gloom said, tapping his stick on the 'X' he'd drawn on his rough map in the dirt, "There's our target tomorrow."

Represented on the dirt was a non-scaled sketch of the pine forest's border, Alfalfa Dale, Mayflower, the stone circle, and where the ravine roughly lay. Leaves, grass, and stones had been used to make

the map more accurate.

"What's there?" Scenic asked. The Earth pony had retained the wood axe from Mayflower, and was now sitting inexpertly sharpening it as he looked at Gloom's map. The thought that he might actually have to use the axe left Scenic feeling queasy.

"Something. That's all I know. From the tracks, it looks like the warlock had his kindersnatches and new scarecrow take the captured townsponies in a straight line in that direction."

Gloom's teeth ground together as he thought of what might be happening to those people even now, "I know they might've changed direction once inside the forest, but I just don't feel so. Doing so would not have been the 'right path'."

'So we're just going off a feeling in your flank again.' Prey thought. He was not happy with that. Gloom's cutie mark was by no means foolproof, and he hated relying on any of the special talents Harmony had only seen fit to gift to ponies.

But without following the tracks himself, it was the best they were going to get.

"What are you hiding there? Why are you doing this?" Gloom muttered, yellow eyes narrowed as he glared at the cross drawn in the dirt.

The 'X' was situated on this side of the ravine, off to the left and quite far away from where Prey knew the deer's holt used to lie. It made sense the warlock would stay on this side of the ravine for convenience sake.

At least they wouldn't have to cross the ravine to get there, but the base, or lair, or whatever it was the warlock had there, was rather close to the baloth's territory. It looked to be right on the edge, in fact.

"So we have a target. What do we do now sir?" Scenic asked.

"I say we should enter the forest at first light," Crimson spoke up, "We can follow the old road to the glade of standing stones. Then,

we circle round through the forest and sneak into the warlock's lair from behind."

"Circling around takes us dangerously close to straying into the baloth's territory." Prey interjected.

The last time Prey had warned them of danger, he'd gone ignored, and whatever that thing was from the Wolfing Wood's had followed Crimson back. Now they heard Prey's warning, and rightly feared it.

"We'll be careful, as long as we don't cross its territory we'll be fine, right?" Gloom asked after considering.

"In theory."

Gloom grimaced, "It'll have to do."

Scenic's voice was small; "Sir, what...What about Lilly?"

Gloom went quiet. Yes, what about Lilly, their invalid? They couldn't carry her with them. Not only would it be impracticable and dangerous, they had to be able to move fast. There was only one option.

"She stays behind." Gloom said heavily, "There's no way we can carry her."

'Finally showing some intelligence.' Prey thought.

"But if we leave her she'll die sir!" Scenic protested.

'So what?'

"Scenic, look at Lilly. *Look* at her." Gloom said. He did not feel any better about this than Scenic did, but he was the Sargent and had to make the choice.

"She's in a coma, and only Luna knows if she'll ever wake up. As heartless as it sounds, at this point it's out of our hooves. Nothing we do will have any impact on Lilly now. But we have to stop the warlock. Whatever it takes, remember Scenic?" Gloom added softly.

Scenic looked around at them for help, tightly gripping the wood axe and looking very much like a scared child. Prey snorted and turned his head away from the pathetic stallion.

"Alright." Scenic swallowed

He repeated Gloom's words to himself under his breath, "Whatever it takes."

"We're not going to leave Lilly in the middle of the forest," Gloom assured him, "We'll find somewhere safe under shelter and hide her there. We'll wrap her warmly in blankets and leave food and water. I'll write a message with her location and leave it on the train platform for anypony to find, if they ever turn up. In case we don't make it."

Scenic nodded shakily, "I understand sir. Whatever it takes."

'You say those words, but you don't know the meaning of them.' Prey thought darkly.

Scenic now intimately knew horror and fear, beyond what any of his fellow ponies back in Canterlot could imagine. But he didn't know desperation yet. 'Me or them.' It hadn't come down to that for Scenic yet. Not really.

If Scenic was lucky, it wouldn't either, and Prey and the others would handle all the killing for him.

"What happens when we get to the warlock's lair?" Crimson asked, disgust evident in the way his wings lay as he pointed back down to the 'X' on the map.

"Then we'll have to see and improvise from there. Depending on what we find, it could become a rescue mission. I *hope* it becomes a rescue mission." Gloom said.

'-there's only a tiny chance, but maybe the townsponies are still untouched-'

"This other scarecrow..." Prey started.

"We avoid it at all costs. If we do have to fight it, it'll be up to you Crimson. You're our best and probably only chance."

Crimson gripped the jade necklace with a hoof and nodded.

"We go in, keep low, get out again once we're done. In and out. I don't think we'll manage to bring down this murderous torturing traitor on the first try, but no matter how many times we have to try, we're putting a stop to him permanently." Gloom growled, and stabbed the stick into the middle of the 'X' so hard it snapped.

Still the train of promised reinforcements did not turned up. What was happening in Canterlot? What was Nighthawk doing? Why had they been forgotten?

In the end, the reasons didn't matter. Just that the train wasn't coming.

A little before sunset came, the four of them limped out of Alfalfa Dale and into the rocky grasslands to hide.

Lilly Blossom was left behind, hidden in the branches of a tree by Gloom and Crimson. They'd flown her litter up, and secured her as gently but firmly as they could manage. Then they'd marked the base of the tree with a scored cross and left.

Guiltily, and with much shame, Gloom thought how this might be; '-Lilly's final resting place. Will she survive? Will we survive?-'

Scenic for his part didn't look up from his hooves as they left, carrying the supplies they'd managed to scavenge or create.

In the grassy plains, as the sun sank into the pine forest which'd been the cause of so much of their misery, they found a sheltered dip in which to hide, and all but collapsed. They lit no fire nor lights.

For the second night in a row, Prey lay in a rough, salvaged blanket, sore and filthy, and wondered if he would live to see the morning.

Prey stared up into the night, unable to close his eyes.

He started to shake. Now that'd he'd stopped moving, the paralysing memories of crawling fear came back in full, terrifying clarity.

Whatever the others were feeling, they kept silent and laid still, battling their own private fears. Prey covered his eyes. Crimson had been unconscious at the time, so he couldn't know what it had been like. But the rest of them did.

He'd been so scared. He was still so scared.

Prey curled up tighter. It'd been so close. It had almost eaten him. And so for the second night in a row, Prey cried bitter tears in fearful memory.

If anyone dreamed that night, well, they didn't share them when they awoke, sometime before dawn. Prey himself had been too tired to dream. Probably the others too. Because if they had, it should've been nightmares, and if there had been any nightmares, why hadn't Luna turned up yet again?

Actually, why hasn't she sought to contact Gloom out as a matter of course to demand a status report?

The only time in the whole world Prey was anxious for Gloom to be in communication with the dark alicorn, but had she deigned to visit? No. No she hadn't. Maybe she'd just been busy elsewhere, or Nighthawk hadn't informed her of the situation, or there was a limiting factor to her dream walking powers, like distance?

Or maybe she just didn't care.

It wasn't worth dwelling on, it was a question they couldn't answer. A dreamless sleep had... The word wasn't 'helped', but it had done something, let them recover enough to not simply collapse at the mere idea of what was to come, at least.

As the first sliver of sun was being raised above the mountain peaks at their backs, the four of them silently entered into the vastness of

the pine forest once more, or Scenic gave it his best effort.

Again, they crossed the line of the forest's border, from safety into danger. The shadowy depths of the trees, obscured in hanging mist, eagerly welcomed them back into its embrace.

Prey could feel the weight of the pine needle canopy settling back into place over his head, and the carpet of fallen ones beneath his hooves. He felt trapped, caught in the middle. Like he was going to get squashed between earth and sky. He sniffed the damp air, and wished he was not entering into the gloomy darkness again. But 'I want' rarely gets.

He hiked the bulging satchel of bone rot mines higher, their weight heavy on his back. He made himself focus solely on where he was, and where they were going, putting all other irrelevant distractions from his mind.

This was still the forest, a lesson Lilly Blossom had learned too late. If they weren't careful, it would kill them long before the warlock took another shot at it.

Knowing where the remains of the old stone road lay, they made straight for it, Crimson taking point. With the strength and speed his jade necklace granted him, he was the best choice in case they ran into anything.

That wasn't to say they weren't cautious as they advanced through the shadowed mist and undergrowth.

They were *extremely* cautious.

After the terrible consequences of yesterday, and with their warlock target waiting somewhere in here, how could they not be? And this time, they didn't have a deer to act as their guide either.

Everyone was tense, wound as tightly as a coiled spring, fearful of ambush at any moment. It felt like another Mama'duke, or scarecrow, or some other monster, was just waiting to leap out from behind every tree.

Crimson held up a wing and they all froze in mid step.

Dead silence gripped them as they all listened and strained their ears, trying to spot why Crimson had halted them.

Without moving his head, Prey's eyes flicked around the surrounding trees and undergrowth.

He couldn't see anything. What had Crimson sensed? Prey dearly wished to know, but right now he barely dared breathe, so he was left in frozen indecision.

Prey had counted ten of his breaths before Crimson lowered his wing, and he heard Scenic let out a shaky sigh of relief.

"What was it?" Gloom whispered, now that Crimson had signalled there wasn't an immediate danger. If there had been danger, they would still all be standing frozen, hoping not to draw the attention of whatever it was.

Crimson nodded ahead at the ground. Looking closely through the mist, a patch of darker grey could be discerned, half obscured by dead pine needles.

It was the old stone road.

But that couldn't be it. Prey knew Crimson wouldn't have alerted them like this just because they'd reached the remains of the road.

"And?" Prey prompted in a whisper.

"What else is it?" Gloom also asked, ears still turning this way and that.

Crimson twitched, as if he was stopping himself from looking in Scenic's direction, before he whispered back, "My special talent. I smelled it."

Those words were all that was necessary. Prey immediately knew what he meant, and Gloom did too. Crimson had scented the invisible traces of of blood in the air.

"Where?" Gloom whispered.

"Around us. I can't tell from which direction, but it's lingering in the air and we've just entered the...cloud trail I guess you'd call it. It's not too fresh, but I can smell many different twists of it in the air."

"That means you're smelling different types, meaning different people, right?" Prey asked, avoiding using the word 'blood'.

"Yes. A lot of ponies came this way. All hurt." Crimson confirmed, his mouth turning down.

Scenic was listening, trying to keep up, and eyes flicking between Crimson and the remains of the road ahead of them, "So, so what does that mean?" He asked hoarsely.

"That the warlock either brought the captured townspeople back this way, or that the kindersnatches passed here on their way to Alfalfa Dale last night." Prey answered. It seems they weren't the only ones using the stone road as a convenient land mark.

Scenic looked around fearfully, ears flat, "And, uh, what does that mean for us?"

"It means we have no idea what we're going to run into up ahead. My cutie mark is giving me nothing." Gloom adjusted the self made replacement spear under his wing, the fire hardened end shifting to more firmly point straight ahead at whatever they were going to find.

"Be ready for anything."

"Stay off the road. Follow alongside. If the warlock used it once, they'll likely use it again." Prey whispered.

They did not want to run into a patrol of kindersnatches coming the other way. With Crimson, they could definitely deal with them, but then the warlock would know they were coming.

Gloom jerked his head to the side and into the shadows, "Do as Prey says. Off the path." He rasped.

First came the faint sound, which Prey heard through the mist.

Next came the small pockmark holes in the leaf litter, which Gloom spotted in the shadows.

Last came the change in the air as the circle grew closer, a heavy oppressive feeling which they all felt.

Kindersnatches.

It was more than enough to stop them creeping towards the stone circle, and make them start moving from tree to tree in a zig-zag instead, pausing behind each trunk to look and listen.

Pressed up against his tree, Crimson motioned with his hoof, minutely tapping his chest and then pointing it upwards into the canopy, cocking his head at Gloom.

Gloom shook his head, wiggling his ears, '-no. The trees will make too much noise-'

Prey made a motion behind his own tree. When their yellow eyes fixed on him, he pointed ahead and shook his head, then made a wide circling motion indicating they should sneak around behind where they knew the stone circle to sit.

Prey didn't know what waited ahead, but he knew if it was anything to do with the warlock, they didn't want to go in head first. But he remembered the solemn feeling of purity the old druidic stone circle had emitted. It'd repulsed Prey, so what could the warlock want from such a place?

Gloom hesitated, their limited options running through his mind. Right now they could at least see the old road, but if they left, they might overshoot or worse, undershoot and walk right in on whatever was happening at the stone circle.

In the mist and shadows, every tree looked the same. It was all too easy to get lost.

Gloom tried to feel anything from his special talent, but he got nothing.

'-I'm on my own for this choice then-'

He grimaced, then he nodded in agreement to Prey. They would circle around.

Weaving between thorn bushes and carefully placing their hooves around gnarled roots, they silently cut off at an angle into the forest, relying only on their memory and sense of direction.

A large boulder drifted into sight out of the mist between the trees, and all of them tensed up. But they couldn't halt, they had to keep going. The mossy boulder didn't move as they approached, but all of them were just waiting for it to lash out and reveal itself to be another Mama'duke.

Of course, it wasn't, and they crept around the worn boulder without incident, but what about next time? And the time after that? Memories of Lilly's screams ran all too loudly through Gloom's head, and Prey was forced to relisten to them all.

'-this is what I've been reduced to, terrified of rocks-', Scenic couldn't help but think, miserable and scared with his heart racing a mile a minute. He silently vowed to himself that if he lived through this, he would never set hoof outside of Canterlot again.

The trees silently watched on and laughed to themselves, mocking them. 'Next time...' The mist seemed to taunt, 'next time...', 'next time...', 'next time...'.

Crawling on their bellies through the damp pine needles, the four of them came upon the stone circle.

Ahead, through a gap in the trees and mist which served to provide a straight line of sight, Prey saw the stone circle. He couldn't see all of what was happening, as it only provided a small window, yet it was enough to see that the stone circle had changed.

The tall stones which had stood watch for centuries now no longer stood alone. A mess of jagged branches and dark wood had been piled up around the stones, ends stabbed into the ground and jutting out like enormous thorns. Or teeth. It wasn't until the second glance that you saw the driftwood mess seemed to be roughly interwoven with the stones. It looked vaguely like...a larger wicker version of the upper casket body of a kindersnatch.

And there were kindersnatches aplenty here to make the visual comparison easy.

Around the stone circle kindersnatches, enslaved *victims*, lurched in and out of his line of sight. Some carried more jagged posts and branches in their thrashing thorn tendrils. Others just thrashed. The warlock was forcing them to build something. They were desecrating the stone circle, although Prey didn't know why. If he wanted to see, he would have to get closer, and without more information that was risking death. Or worse, being put into a kindersnatch.

And he was getting a very strong sense of danger coming off this place.

That faint feeling of tranquillity he'd felt that first time from the ancient stones was gone. It was still there, but different, twisted. Like the tranquillity of death and decay instead of life.

'What are they making? Is it a ritual of some kind? And why does it look so similar to a kindersnatch?'

Prey's instincts were telling him it was something different, but the twisting in his gut was *also* telling him it was just as bad whatever it was.

Just what he needed, more existential dread, unknown fear, and twisted horror in the making. It never ended, it was just one thing after the other.

Gloom and Scenic were thinking along the exact same lines, '-more evil again. Over and over again-'

Well, the remaining ISND had found part of the warlock's forces, again taking action motivated by something they didn't understand. What was the overall goal here? What was the warlock hoping to achieve by enslaving all these people?

Surely the warlock must realise being so brazen about this would attract the attention of the Guard, and by extension, eventually the Sun Wolf? If he or she had just continued operating small and stayed secret like with the original fifteen villagers, they could've remained undetected. But attacking and burning Alfalfa Dale? Even if the ISND weren't here, this would've warranted a full response regardless. Prey knew from experience.

The stakes must've changed. Something which made keeping a low profile no longer matter to the warlock. Time, restraint, patience. One of these factors had evidently run out. So what was it they were in such a hurry to achieve?

Prey didn't know, but he had the feeling that what they were seeing happening in front of them in the stone circle was just a piece of the puzzle.

A twisted, blood soaked piece.

"What're they doing?" Scenic whispered, barely audible as he slightly raised his head from the ground to try and get a better look.

Gloom shoved his head back down.

"I don't know," He whispered back, pained eyes fixed on the kindersnatches, "But it can't be good."

"It does not matter," Crimson's voice was devoid of life, "It's the warlock's evil work. And our first fight."

"I count at least ten kindersnatches. Maybe more. Try and lure a couple out before charging in?" Gloom suggested. He'd been prepared for this, but the thought of the coming fight still twisted in him like a knife.

"No, don't attack. We should continue on deeper in." Prey whispered.

"We agreed. No matter how many fights it took, no matter the danger. Here's the first." Crimson's voice did not change from it's flat determination.

"We only get one surprise attack, and then the warlock knows we're in the forest." Prey disagreed, "Find the warlock, or his lair. Those are better targets. The kindersnatches are coming from somewhere, we can follow them back."

A kindersntach lurched across the gap in the trees, and they all froze until it had passed.

Gloom very slowly raised his head once it was gone to look at the desecrated stone circle, agonising over the decision.

"Prey's right. We only get one good ambush. And this isn't even the warlock's base. We should try for that first. If we can't find it, then we'll come back."

No one felt like arguing. Gloom was in charge, and besides which, no one knew what the correct choice was here either. They might die, the captured townsfolk might die, they might *all* die. With those sort of stakes, no one could confidently make the call. So they went with what seemed safest and silently withdrew, crawling back over damp pine needles until Gloom judged it safe enough to rise and sneak away.

The kindersnatches hadn't arrived at the stone circle by following the old road, or else the would've seen the tracks. Which meant they'd come here through the forest via a different path.

They crept back in a wide loop around the stone circle through the mist, aiming to find the kindersnatches trail on the other side and follow it back to wherever it came from.

Visibility was as low as it'd ever been, the mist making every distant tree look like a lurking kindersnatch. It was nerve shredding, and Prey secretly expected to come face to face with one as they stole through the shadows, looking for the little pockmark holes that indicated a kindersnatches passing.

But it was a better option than attacking the stone circle and whatever was being constructed there.

Not launching an ambush went against all of Prey's experience though. It was the opposite of how he'd fought in the Deeper Green.

Back then any target, no matter how small, had been valid, and every dead Border Guard was another victory. Privates, Sargents, Corporals, medics, non-combat supply trains, Prey hadn't distinguished between their lives. He'd just killed as many as he could. But that wasn't going to work here.

Prey had never expected to win in the Deeper Green, but he'd kept going regardless. Because he knew the ultimatum of war, of his *solo* war. Fear. He'd known he could never defeat the Border Guard, not all of them. Unified, he just couldn't beat anything on that scale, so he tried to break them each individually.

With fear. That'd been his goal.

Make them each individually not want to fight, because they knew they could easily be the 'unlucky-one-in-ten' who died to a bone rot mine, or poison, or a pit spike trap, or rune fire, or any of the other myriad of ways Prey had found or invented to kill ponies. All were methods to create fear.

If you kill enough of them, they'll stop fighting. That had been Prey's war.

But that wouldn't work here, even though there were less kindersnatches than there'd ever been Border Guards. Picking off the kindersnatches one at a time, no matter how slow, would still be a valid strategy, but it wouldn't be the best one.

Prey's former strategy of fear wouldn't work against things that didn't feel fear. Kindersnatches had no self preservation, only following basic instincts and the warlock's commands. The people trapped inside, the ones who *did* feel fear, were nothing but puppets.

The second reason that wouldn't work was because of how the

warlock had ramped up their schedule. Everything indicated they were urgently working towards something big. The ISND didn't have time to hunt down every single kindersnatch, plus, the warlock would surely just withdraw all his forces into a defensive formation around him if he became aware the ISND were out to get him. Or just up sticks and flee.

That was another reason Prey's old strategy wouldn't work. Back then, he'd been the defender. Here, he was having to be the aggressor.

Thus, their opening attack had to in some way strike a crippling blow against the warlock.

Gloom stopped, making them all immediately follow suit and also causing Scenic panic for a moment in dread, until Gloom pointed at the ground ahead.

"There. Tracks. They came from that way." He whispered quietly.

Running between the trees and back passed the way they'd come, the scuffed up leaf litter clearly showed the path the kindersnatches had taken.

The tracks lead them deeper into the forest in almost a straight line. They followed.

Prey started to see what might've been faint signs of something large passing this way. A half broken twig above head height, a chipped off piece of bark, young plant fronds bruised and brushed back in one direction.

He could be wrong. It could just be the kindersnatches. Or it could've been the second massive scarecrow the warlock had created. Seeing these signs could be either good news or bad news.

Good if the scarecrow wasn't waiting wherever they were heading. Bad because they hadn't seen it back there at the stone circle, which meant they didn't know where it really was.

Prey decided to say nothing. He didn't know anything for a fact, and all voicing his speculations would do was make everything that

much worse.

And then another kindersnatch trail joined the one they were following, branching off into the forest. They only stopped for a minute to examine it, but it allowed them to see that their first trail was older. Fallen pine needles lay across the second set of the tracks in places.

A bit further on another older trail joined the main one they were following, then a third and a fourth, varying in freshness. That proved it. They were definitely on the right track towards wherever the warlock kept the kindersnatches when they were not out doing his bidding.

Sneaking careful and slow, all of them were braced, just waiting for the first gurgle to reach them out of the mist.

When the inevitable scare came, it wasn't with the well known and feared gurgle of a kindersnatch.

Ahead, the squat trunk of a tree in the mist unwound itself and an enormous brown snake, at least fifteen hooves long, slithered down and wound its way off into the undergrowth. Their approach must've disturbed it.

Scenic stared wide eyed at where it had vanished into the mist, hoof pressed against his chest.

He was not the only one. Crimson's feathers still had yet to lay themselves down flat again. Prey stared unblinking after the snake, wondering if it was actually a sentry of some kind for the warlock. He wasn't ruling anything out. The warlock had been able to observe them inside of Mayflower, after all.

How had the warlock been doing that, anyway? Some kind of hidden totem inside the village? A floating eye spell? Obviously they had a way of commanding the kindersnatches from a distance, so maybe they somehow linked with the wooden parasites?

Did the warlock see or know what had eaten their kindersnatches the night before last? The Wolf Wood entity. Now that Prey thought

about it, maybe that had something to do with the warlock's sudden haste and lack of caution.

Or perhaps it had nothing to do with that.

The snake gone and the scare over, Gloom signalled, and they resumed moving deeper into the trees.

Slowly, just as when Fallen Leaf had been guiding them, the floor of the forest began to change under hoof. It grew more uneven, with deep furrows and sudden rises cutting up the ground, and more overgrown rocks and boulders appearing. But Fallen Leaf had not brought them this way, and now they had no guide. Now it was just them.

Just the four of them creeping through the trees, looking for a war and ready to kill.

More old and faded kindersnatch tracks kept joining into the path they were following, then later breaking off. Surely that meant they must be getting closer?

And then they finally came upon what could only be the site of the warlock's lair.

Stakes. A zig-zagging line of jagged posts driven into the soil every five yards or so, right across the path. The stakes were uniform, and something seemed to be tied around the top of each. The mess of tracks led directly through the picket line.

Hiding behind a pine tree, examined Prey the closest stake, the mist making the details slightly hazy. He squinted, concentrating until the outline and details finally settled and he could identify what he was looking at on top of each stake.

A mess of bird skulls, of all different types ranging from sparrows to crows, all bound up with tufted bundles of ragged feathers to the top of each stake.

Just bird skulls. After everything else they'd witnessed, this just

seemed kind of tame. As if secretly, they'd been expecting the severed villagers heads, although that thought was sickening.

Prey understood what he was looking at though, and knew what it was for. Black magic. Animal sacrifice was one of its simplest components.

There was a tainted feeling in the air, like the breath of disease. The empty bird skulls stared in every direction, keeping intruders out, and also the warlock's forces in.

"It's a barrier." Prey breathed, Gloom barely catching his words.

"A barrier shield?"

"No, like a marker. You can feel it right? I think it's to keep the kindersnatches inside the marked area. Or let the warlock know if anyone crosses inside."

Gloom's eyes flicked to Prey, "How do you know that?"

"I don't. I'm just guessing. But after everything we've seen, do you really think it could be anything else?" Prey whispered back.

"No. You're right. It all reeks of the same twisted mind."

"Revolting." Crimson observed quietly, glaring at the stakes with their remains of dead birds tied to them.

Scenic couldn't even imagine himself ever hurting a harmless animal, let alone dismembering one to get at its skull to do this with.

Gloom checked all around them as he tried to clear his mind, having made himself the promise to; '-not let us get surrounded and caught out helpless ever again-'

"If we cross the line, you think it'll alert him? Or her?" Gloom whispered.

Prey wasn't actually sure, but he answered; "Yes."

On hearing Prey's answer, Gloom didn't immediately start trying to think up an alternate plan as would've been the smart move. No, he had not met his daily quota of insanity. Instead, he just continued to study the picket line and weigh up whether he felt it would be worth risking going in anyways. Lilly and the kindersnatches weighed heavily on the scales of Gloom's fury.

Even now, Gloom's heart was telling him to rush ahead and try to save the townsfolk of Alfalfa Dale before they could end up like the people of Mayflower, Scenic the exact same. But Gloom was forcing himself to refrain.

Instead of rushing in and likely getting themselves all captured or killed, he was compromising. He was making himself think first.

Prey didn't say anything to try and curtail Gloom's plans, not yet. He waited while Gloom simmered, minutely shifting the weight of the bone rot mines on his back.

"We don't know what's in there," Gloom eventually whispered, "But it doesn't really matter. We were going to reach a point where we had to take a risk eventually anyways. We continue on."

"There will be a response from the warlock." Crimson stated, but wasn't disagreeing with Gloom in the slightest.

"You said whatever it took, didn't you?" Prey whispered, catching Gloom's eye, "No matter how long or what we had to do, right?"

"I did," Gloom answered without hesitation, "Why? What've you thought of?"

Prey nodded towards Crimson, "He's right. There will be a response."

He then flicked his eyes towards the border line formed from stakes, "And it'll be coming from out of there. So we prepare the ground ahead of time."

The pack was gone from off Prey's back, and nothing but the water

canteen and nearly empty rolled up cloth bag weighed him down as they snuck through the line of stakes. The four of them moved as one body, swiftly skirting a path between the stakes, figuring going in fast was better than going slow if the warlock was going to know all about it anyways.

The bird skulls almost seemed to swivel in the corner of Prey's eye to watch them pass. He held his breath, not wanting to breathe the tainted air around the stakes. There were still scraps of blackened skin clinging to the skulls he saw.

Was the warlock being alerted right now? He'd answered Gloom 'yes' despite believing the answer to be 'no', however there was no such thing as certainty.

Crimson had his wing blades out, leading the group, but nothing suddenly sprang out to attack them. All of them were scanning in every direction, Prey also looking up and watching the trees, but he didn't see, hear, or feel anything.

If the warlock had any sentries, either they hadn't been alerted, or they couldn't sense them.

Either way, staying here now that they'd crossed the picket line was a terrible idea. Their best chance to avoid detection was to stay low and keep moving around.

Gloom signalled with his wing, and pointed forwards and to the side, '-that way-'

Prey slipped around the undergrowth and over the gnarled tree roots, his heart thumping at an uncomfortable rate and his eyes peeled for traps. Since entering, he'd been constantly scanning for trip wires, trigger leaves, pit falls, everything and anything he could think of. He avoided patches of ground where he couldn't see clearly before he placed his hoof, and made damn sure Scenic walked ahead of him.

If he were the warlock, this whole area would be one big mine field. And this warlock had frighteningly proved they thought similarly to him in a lot of areas.

Then, coming to the crest of a small rise in the ground, they heard the sound of gurgling, a whole cacophony getting louder as they approached.

When they crawled to the top of the rise and peered over, they found they were over a flat basin of land.

There were still trees of course, but the forest floor below them was almost uniformly level, the reason unknown since the forest terrain they'd just passed over was so different. Perhaps it had something to do with the muddy stream which wound its way through the middle of the basin. Maybe it had once been a huge pool which'd drained over the decades? Now, Prey guessed that the ugly stream flowed out and down into the ravine somewhere in the forest.

But analysing the terrain for possible advantages came secondary to all the kindersnatches in the basin below them.

What did the warlock have the kindersnatches do when his enslaved force was on standby? Did they just stop moving? Lie down? Did they even have a need for sleep? The answer to that question was that the wicker parasites stood in the stream, their multiple root legs soaking up the muddy water.

Prey's mind immediately tallied up their numbers and came to the answer thirty-four, although there were certainly more of them he just didn't have sight of right now.

Thirty-four. You could forget what kindersnatches were if you weren't careful and only thought of them as 'enemies', and not what they represented.

Enslaved, tortured, and miserable people. If you killed one, you were killing a hostage. Even if they couldn't be saved, that did not make it any better.

Prey looked at the gurgling kindersnatches, gently thrashing their limbs even standing still in the stream like they were, and then passed them to what lay in the basin.

Past the stream, half hidden by trees, Prey made out some kinds of

four low buildings, mud walls only a hoof high, with rough roofs made of heavy pine branches. A second later he realised he was looking at four large covered pits.

What could be in the pits? There was only one possible answer.

Next to him, Crimson's eyes locked onto to the covered pit as he obviously reached the same conclusion as Prey. He nudged Gloom, indicating the four pits.

Gloom's eyes narrowed as he looked at what Crimson had pointed at, then they widened, '-the captured ponies from Alfalfa Dale-'

They may not know how kindersnatches were made or how long the process took, but even adding up the herd before them and the number they'd skirted around at the stone circle, the numbers didn't even come close to all the townsfolk from Alfalfa Dale. These pits could probably hold up to two hundred people between all four, if there was no consideration given to space or relieving themselves. And they had no reason to believe the warlock cared about the townspeople's conditions.

Scenic almost jumped to his hooves as he made the connection for himself, and only just managed to keep himself down. '-how could they?!-'

How could they? Quite easily. After all Scenic had seen, did he really think the warlock cared about concepts like morality?

But why weren't the covered pits being actively guarded? There were kindersnatches all around, true, but why were none specifically stationed around the four pits? Perhaps these holding pens were much deeper than they appeared from up here, or the captives were drugged, but there was no way to tell.

Prey's focus didn't stay on the four pits for more than a second. He kept looking everywhere. This land was obviously the warlock's territory, but there was something important missing. The warlock, or the warlock's lair.

And Prey wasn't seeing either.

The warlock obviously survived and carried out their dark work here inside the forest. They couldn't do that on the forest's floor. A proper workspace, tools, and shelter were necessary. But Prey didn't see anything that could classify.

Gloom silently crawled back from the rise, and they followed him. Prey cringed as he waited for Scenic to mess up and let his armour clank as they extricated themselves, but somehow the clumsy Earth pony managed to follow without giving them all away.

"Change of plan. Those covered holes," Gloom whispered urgently the second they were clear, "The townsponies, they've got to be down there. Getting them out is now the plan."

"How will we get to them without all those kindersnatches noticing us sir?" Scenic whispered, terrified inside that he might actually have to; '-use the axe I'm carrying-'

"We're not. I'll be sneaking closer, you won't."

"Sir, it should be me. I have the necklace." Crimson whispered.

"No, it'll be me."

"How?" Prey challenged.

"I'll fly in." Gloom said simply.

Ah, Prey understood his plan. There was a gap in the canopy above the four covered pits, the trees having been felled to make space to dig. Gloom meant to loop back and then takeoff, fly over the pines from above until he came to the gaps in the canopy, and then glide down.

Could he manage it silently though? And all it would take was for one kindersnatch to use the stolen eyesight of its host to look up, and then that would be that.

'There's not a chance of pulling it off.' Prey thought. Besides which, how did Gloom plan to get a hundred plus possibly drugged townspeople out of the pits without getting caught? The idea was lunacy from the start.

"It won't work sir." Crimson said blankly, giving voice to Prey's thoughts.

"You're right, it won't." Gloom admitted, "At least not without distracting all of the kindersnatches first."

'This...' Prey thought, '...Is an awful idea.'

How many times in his life had Prey thought that, but been forced to follow through anyways? Too many. Far too many. Prey thought of all the Resistance fighters who'd burned in the ill-fated attack on the hill, who'd 'gone along with the idea'.

So why was he going along with this idea? Honestly, there was only one reason why.

Prey wasn't the one acting as bait.

That role belonged to Scenic and Crimson, but when it came down to it, Crimson was only in minor danger. Scenic was the one most likely to end up dead if something went wrong.

Hidden beneath a tangled mess of a dead bush and vines, Prey used one hoof to slowly move a branch an inch higher so he could see out. Prey was a runt. Scenic could run faster than him, and Crimson could fly. Thus, it was decided he would make poor bait, and would instead hide while Scenic and Crimson tried to draw off as many kindersnatches as possible on a wild goose chase.

'And hope the warlock doesn't take the opportunity to pincer them between his kindersnatches here, and the ones back at the stone circle.' Prey thought, unable to see any but the worst possible outcomes.

Always expect the worst, and then you were halfway there to how bad it will actually be.

Thus, when he'd hidden here under this bush, erasing any scuff marks he might've left crawling in and stuffed his wool full of dead pine needles so as to blend in, he already had an escape route

planned out in his head.

Peering out from under the tangled bush, even from here Prey could see that Scenic was shaking. Prey could also hear the wood axe across the stallion's back under the make shift cloak rattling against his armour as he shook. The stallion was afraid, and he had every right to be afraid. It was his job to walk out into plain view of the kindersnatches, and then make them all chase him back into the forest.

Even though the plan was for Crimson to switch roles as bait, because he was the one with the magical necklace and could fly, Scenic's task was not an enviable one.

'Will he really do it?' Prey thought, studying Scenic. Would the Earth pony actually have the courage to go through with it?

There was a rustle of pine needles and a creak of branches. Scenic flinched and looked up to see Gloom sticking his head back beneath the tree canopy. He gave Scenic the nod.

To give Scenic his due, he only hesitated. He hesitated, but he still did it. Visibly gathering his courage, Scenic marched forwards to the rise and then over it, at which point he left Prey's line of sight.

Twenty seconds later, there was the frantic muffled galloping thud of hooves on pines needles and Scenic reappeared.

Only Prey's eyes turned to watch him as Scenic raced past, whites of his eyes wide, but Prey could hear the rising gurgling coming after him from over the rise just fine.

Scenic dashed behind a knot of three tightly packed pine trees and was lost from view for a second. Then, out the other side, Crimson appeared, the ratty cloak now over his shoulders. Crimson glanced back to ensure he was still being followed, then took off into the forest at what looked like a dead sprint but what Prey knew to only be a run for Crimson.

It wasn't perfect. Even with the cloak on to hide Crimson's pegasus heritage, it wasn't a perfect deception. Crimson had even exchanged

his armour with Gloom to get the coat changing colour enchantment back to match with Scenic's coat.

This ruse was done because maybe the warlock remembered Crimson, the one who'd taken down their first scarecrow, and thus maybe wouldn't let their kindersnatches give chase. But Scenic was just an Earth pony. Although maybe all the kindersnatches would've instinctively chased anyways. They just didn't know. So much they didn't know.

Loud gurgling and thrashing undergrowth was speedily rushing towards Prey's hiding place under the bush, and for that terrible moment Prey was left to helplessly wonder if his hiding place was good enough. And then came the broken mental screaming and deafened Prey.

'-Aaa-ArRar*ARG*_ggHHHh_AIIiIii*EE*aaRRAAHhhgh-*HhA*-'

The kindersnatches swarmed past, root legs stabbing into the dirt and the scent of rotting mould chasing along in their wake.

The tortured gurgling was nothing. The mental screaming was almost deafening. but none of the wicker parasites stopped, all lurching madly after Crimson into the mist.

Prey remained still as the gurgling and rustling undergrowth faded. Crimson would be fine, Prey was sure. Almost sure.

He *should* be fine, he could fly, and even if it came down to a straight fight, Prey thought it almost certain Crimson could take out all the kindersnatches on his own with the magic of that jade necklace. But doing so would likely leave Crimson completely drained once again, and unable to move afterwards.

And what if Crimson stumbled into some other monster while he was at it? Prey had warned him not to stray into the baloth's territory, but there were plenty of other dangers out there. Prey hadn't forgotten or forgiven Crimson for the Wolfing Wood, but he still dreaded the thought of Crimson maybe dying.

No, enough of that. It was all beyond Prey's control now. Prey

needed to stop focusing on Crimson and start being more concerned with himself.

Prey waited, counting his heartbeats. '...Sixty-seven, sixty-eight, sixty-nine...'

Scenic's head emerged from behind the knot of trees where he'd hidden, frantically glancing around in every direction before ducking back. When still nothing happened, Scenic hesitantly emerged, ears straight back and tightly gripping the wood axe in his jaw.

Prey waited to see if anything jumped out on Scenic.

Only once Prey was completely sure he was unobserved, did he very slowly and cautiously crawl out from under the bush and vines, hugging the dirt to stop branches getting caught in his wool and whipping noisily back.

It was eerily still and quiet. He couldn't hear any gurgling coming from over the small rise.

Had all of the kindersntaches really run off after Crimson? Did none stay to keep guard on the basin?

That made no sense, not unless the warlock wasn't actively controlling these kindersnatches right now, or....

Or Gloom was about to be deeply disappointed. Damn. Now Prey would have to make sure Gloom didn't react in despair and give *another* hasty order. Gloom just might try and lash out at the warlock when he found his hopes once again dashed.

Hope really was the cruellest. It built you up, just to cut you down.

Prey pointed a hoof at Scenic, making sure the clearly still strained Earth pony noticed, before he pointed up towards the rise. Gloom was already supposed to be flying over there right now and descending through the gap in the canopy.

And also very shortly discovering the townspeople of Alfalfa Dale were no longer imprisoned in those four holding pits.

Prey coldly considered what he might have to do if Scenic and Gloom completely broke down and became unstable.

The basin was indeed completely abandoned. Not one wicker kindersnatch was left drinking from the stream, just the muddy streaks where they had charged out of the water after Scenic.

Kicked up pine needles, trampled bushes, and the pockmark track holes everywhere.

And there by the pine bough roof of the closest pit, was Gloom.

Scenic rushed down the small rise and straight towards Gloom.

Prey wanted to shout at him for being so careless, but shouting would be bad. Just because it looked like all the kindersntaches were gone, didn't mean they really were.

Ducking behind a tree and circling round, Prey took a more circumspect route down and around the side of the basin, making use of cover and his small size as much as possible.

How long would it be before the warlock realised his base camp had been infiltrated? Those bird skull stakes would've certainly done something when all the kindersnatches chased out after Crimson.

Prey had the dreadful feeling an invisible hourglass was trickling down towards something going horribly wrong.

Prey arrived as Gloom was letting the branch of the last pits roof he'd levered up fall back into place. His face and body posture said it all.

"Nothing. They're gone."

Scenic's ears fell, "Gone?" He asked hopelessly.

"As in, they *were* here?" Prey asked, never ceasing to keeping turning and watching.

"Yes. They were in there. They had to...relieve themselves in the pit. But now they're gone."

"So where are the tracks?" Prey asked.

It was a good question. There was a huge mess of hoof tracks in the kicked up pine needles leading to the four pits, but Prey couldn't see a coordinated line leaving the now empty pits. How had the townsfolk been moved? Not that it really mattered. They were already gone.

Gloom raised a trembling hoof, then punched the hoof high mud wall that ringed the closest pit with all his might. His hoof went halfway through the crumbling dirt, "Too late. Too late again." He hissed.

Now what?

That was the question. Go wait at the rendezvous point at the ravine to meet backup with Crimson once he'd shaken off the kindersnatches? The longer they stayed here doing nothing, the greater the risk. They needed to be doing something, moving, planning, taking action, anything.

Never stop moving, keep the enemy guessing.

Prey's eyes passed over the far side of the basin, at a point with a particularly steep bit of earth and rock, and then snapped back. There, beside that tree, exactly what he'd been looking for. A dark entrance.

Prey pointed, "In there."

The warlock had to have a workspace and a place to sleep somewhere, and Prey hadn't seen anywhere else in the basin that fitted.

Gloom immediately zeroed in on where Prey was pointing. "A cave."

He pronounced the words like he meant to commit murder inside that cave if he was lucky enough to find the warlock hiding in there.

"I think I see it too" Scenic whispered, squinting, however Gloom had already started forwards, making straight for the rough stone entrance.

"Wait, it might be trapped." Prey hissed, darting in front of Gloom. How had the pony race survived this long?

"If that is indeed the warlock's lair, they're not going to trap their own dwelling." Gloom said, not slowing his stride.

"That doesn't mean it can't still be a trap. In fact, it's the perfect place to set a trap since there's only one entrance."

Gloom simply levelled his spear and sped up.

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Author's Notes:

Hello to all readers. A bit more quiet after the last chapter, and despite everything, they *still* haven't managed to achieve anything yet. If you've spotted any mistakes, could you please let me know? Thanks. 👍

Also, at the time of writing this Note, I have a question to readers: What do you think should happen to Lilly Blossom. I am undecided yet. If you have a great idea, feel free to share. I may not use it, but I'm open to suggestions here. 🤔

Editor: 🍓 **Sweetolebob18**

49.3 Just a Falling Leaf in a Falling Forest

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The stone hole in the basin wall was indeed a naturally formed cave, the entrance roughly triangular. It was a lot deeper than it looked from outside, because it sloped steeply down for about ten hooves before levelling out under the roof's overhang. That was as far as Prey could see down into the blackness.

It was also immediately obvious that this was indeed the warlock's home of sorts. A bucket of water sat just inside the cave entrance, along with a twig broom. It was so out of place, so ordinary and not twisted and vile like everything else they'd seen from the warlock. But even practitioners of the foulest black magic needed to sweep the floor, Prey knew from suffering under Snake's hoof.

At the roughly triangular tunnels peak, the roof was high enough that Gloom wouldn't need to duck. Gloom didn't pause. With his spear pointed straight ahead, he strode down into the cave's depths before Prey could stop him.

Prey jumped back from the entrance, cringing and waiting for a trap to go off. Scenic looked just as terrified that Prey's worries would come to pass, or perhaps it was just because of the blackness down there, but a few seconds later, when nothing happened, Prey peeked his head back into the cave.

Whether Gloom had been confident or foolhardy in his assumption, he seemed to have been correct. The warlock had indeed not boobytrapped their own shelter. Gloom had stopped at the bottom of the deeply shadowed incline, and Prey couldn't see what he was doing down there.

Prey didn't dare call out after the thestral, but he wasn't going down there after Gloom like this.

A scrape, a clank, a click, and then white light blossomed brilliantly in the darkness below. Gloom held up a crude, homemade lantern, the twine handle looped over his wing claw.

Again, it stood to reason. The warlock had to be able to see in his own lair after all, so of course they would have a lantern set by ready. However, Prey took note of something else. The lantern was one of those containing a magically charged crystal, not a candle or oil. That was bad. It increased the chances of this warlock being a unicorn.

Gloom turned his head to look back up at them, and gestured that it was safe to descend. Cautiously, Prey stepped into the cool air of the cave's mouth and started down the uneven slope. The temperature instantly dropped, and even under his wool his skin prickled with a shiver. Prey looked back to see Scenic hadn't moved. He was teetering on the edge of the cave's edge, his face all screwed up.

'-back into the dark again. No, no. No I can't do this. I can't do this-'

'Oh. So that's going to be one of the lingering scars from last night it seems.' Prey thought.

"I, sir I... I could guard the entrance here. I, I'm not, I'm sorry sir I can't-"

Gloom blinked, then shook his head, "It's okay Scenic. I get it, it's okay. Stay here and alert us if the kindersnatches come back. We'll be trapped in here if that happens."

'-underground in a narrow space and without a weapon, there isn't much Scenic could do to help anyway-', Gloom thought.

Scenic ducked his head in shame, "I-Yes sir. I'll guard here. I'm sorry sir." He almost whispered.

Gloom glanced down to see Prey, who was hugging the edge of the cold stone tunnel. Prey looked back at him warily, then flicked his eyes ahead down the rough passage way.

Gloom's lips twitched up into a humourless smile, as he lifted the pilfered lantern higher with one wing and gripped his spear tightly with the other, "Let's go see what treasures we can find, how about it?" He asked with faux brightness.

Prey stuck close behind Gloom as the two of them ventured into the warlock's lair, but not too close.

This wasn't a cave formed by water. It looked more like one which'd come into being by a random shift of the earth hundreds of years ago. Or perhaps as little as one year. Prey didn't know how to judge. Maybe Gloom did? His clan lived in caves.

They didn't have to go far in. After half a dozen yards, the rough tunnel bent sharply to the right, and from around it, came a soft red glow. It didn't flicker like firelight would've done. They stopped and listened. There was no sound from around the corner, no breath of life that Prey could hear. No warmth from whatever was casting the red light either, the air was still chillingly cold.

When Gloom cautiously rounded the corner, spear point first, they found, in the stark shadows cast before them, the warlock's

workshop.

It was almost everything you could've feared to find, but worse.

Not because the grisly body parts, both animal and equine, were so much worse to see in person. Not because of the twisted witch lights that lit up and splashed pale red light across the walls when they entered. Not because of the dark vats blasted into the stone floor filled with writhing wicker worms and water. Or because of the saws, the knives, the dried blood circles, or the unidentifiable spiked tools and items of evil magic permeating wrongness.

It was more horror, more evil, more memories to fuel his nightmares with.

Once you'd already seen so much, one might think there was no horror left that could phase you. They would be wrong. Pain is pain, suffering is suffering, and evil is evil. Each instance was different, each time renewed your horrified disgust afresh. Muted or not, suppressed or faced head on, each and every horror was another crack in your soul.

But those things weren't what made the warlock's lair so much worse. What made it so was the little bouquets of dried flowers and sweet smelling herbs hung about to mask the rotting smell. The freshly brought in and raked over dirt under a rickety table with remnants of blood still on it. A mat of rushes placed on the floor to wipe your hooves clean on before you left.

Little things, small details that made it all the worse because it showed the warlock wasn't just some sick, sadistic, monster who loved murder.

No, it proved they were a person who wasn't fond of blood and gore, but was carrying on with their black magic practices anyway.

That made it worse, because they knew what they were doing was evil.

'Just like Snake,' Prey thought turning his head away from the red, witch light illuminated work space, 'Just like me.'

Turning away left him looking at Gloom's face. Prey looked away from that too.

'-all of this, came from the mind of a pony? Somepony could actually think this? It's, it's...-'

Gloom's spear suddenly lashed out, sweeping bowls, jars, tools and unidentified paraphernalia off the table and shelves to clatter on the cave floor.

'-it's so *wrong*!-'

Prey jumped, the noise incredibly loud in the confined red lit space, but he didn't say a word. He stepped away from the panting Gloom and waited for the thestral to work his way through his anger. Gloom would not listen to any warning not to touch the unknown substances, he needed to work through his sickened anger. Prey examined warlock's workshop instead, peering into all the dark corners.

Something set into its own private little alcove on the back wall caught Prey's eye. With extreme caution, Prey took a step closer so he could see into the shadowed pocket of stone.

It took him a second to realise what the dark, rectangular object he saw in there was; a book.

Gathering himself, Gloom took as much of a calming breath as he could manage, and lifted up the lantern again.

'-little rat eyes in the dark, jaw bones on the dirt*No*! Need to focus. Anger and breakdown later, investigation now-'

They were down here for a reason, to find and kill the warlock. The warlock wasn't here, but perhaps there was some clue as to their location, or at least the new location of the captured townsfolk. Gloom forced himself to look around and study the grisly workstation, no matter how sick to the stomach it made him.

The two vats dug into the stone floor by some unknown means drew Gloom closer. He slowly lent over, wings outspread for balance. The much brighter and purer white lantern light

crystallised the details of the wicker worm like things squirming beneath the water's surface.

It revealed that the things weren't so much worms, as stick insects, but Gloom didn't have to put two and two together to know what he was actually looking at. Infantile kindersnatch seeds.

The sight of the squirming mess was enough to disgust and horrify anyone, even before knowing what those things did once introduced into a helpless victim.

For a moment, Gloom had a terrible vision of the things crawling out of the vats and trying to latch onto him and Prey, but no, if the things could climb out, they would've done so by now. The vats didn't even have a lid of any sort covering them after all.

'-just don't fall in-', Gloom thought, swallowing thickly.

What were kindersnatches really? Where did these things even come from? Gloom had no idea such parasites could even exist. There was no way these could be natural, they belonged solely in the realm of horror stories.

How did the warlock control them? Where had he gotten them? Gloom looked around the workspace of evil, and had no trouble in believing the kindersnatches had actually been made by this warlock.

'-they kill and torture. Murder and defile. They made the scarecrows. Why wouldn't they stoop to creating monsters to enslave ponies with?-'

These kindersnatch seeds? They were dead. Gloom was going to destroy them all. Before he left this cave, each and every one of those vile squirming things would be dead. They would never claim another innocent.

Gloom cast about the cave, looking for something to do it with. How? How to destroy them? Was there some sort of poison in here that would work? Just dump all the foul concoctions and objects he could find into the vats and hope the resulting reaction blew up?

'-good enough-', Gloom thought angrily, and began sweeping all the items he'd knocked onto the floor towards the vats, kicking the bowls and jars into the water with plops and splashes.

Within moments, the waters turned mixed shades of blacks and greens as some of the objects sank, and others floated. Gloom began kicking and sweeping everything else he could find in the workshop into the vats in a frenzy.

Splash Splash *Plop Plop*.

Gloom tore down one of the witch lights and threw it in. It continued to glow, a dull red light somewhere at the bottom of the vat. No good. Gloom grabbed a twisted branch with dried mushrooms and tufts of blackened animal hide clinging to it and hurled it in next.

'-die! Those things have to die!-'

Gloom didn't stop there. He started striking out at everything in the cave, kicking down home made shelves, breaking wooden shelves and makeshift tables, crushing bowls and jugs under his horseshoes.

The only section Gloom couldn't bring himself to smash was the table in the corner with the half a nanny goat's withered body preserved in dirtied strips of cloth. Gloom couldn't make himself do that, but he rampaged through the rest of the warlock's laboratory until finally, he stood panting in the middle of the wreck, the remaining witch lights casting jagged shadows formed by broken objects in deep red.

'-I...I lost myself there-', Gloom realised. Suddenly all he wanted was to get out of here as soon as possible.

Gloom blinked, and slowly turned his head to the side to look at the back of the cave.

Prey had the lantern beside him. At his hooves lay an open, ragged book. The pages were curling, brown with age and stained nastily. Prey was methodically turning the pages, crazy looking blotchy script, and badly drawn diagrams were briefly seen before Prey

flipped to another page.

Old stories of possessed tomes of ancient dark magic flashed through Gloom's head.

"Prey no!" He shouted, leaping forwards to either kick the book aside or drag Prey away.

"Whoa! Stop." Prey shouted.

"That's evil black magic. Don't you know anything?! That stuff can possess you!"

"I'm not possessed. It's not an enchanted tome, it's just a book with dark magic written down in it." Prey said.

"That's completely reckless. You had no way of knowing that."

"Well I'm fine. Nothing happened. I was just-"

"Wait, you trying to learn black magic?!" Gloom gaped.

"Of course not," Prey snapped, pointing at the book, "I was looking to see if there was anything about what the warlock's plans might be, or where they might've taken the captured people from Alfalfa Dale."

For a second Gloom was about to say; '-even reading an obviously dark magic text is illegal-', but after everything else, was he even really concerned about that?

"Well did you find anything to make it worth it?" Gloom asked instead.

Prey turned the book around and held it up instead of answering. Gloom hesitated because despite knowing on every level that this should be the least of his concerns, the book was still black magic, before getting a hold of himself and peering at the page.

"Oh," Gloom said, staring at the blotchy chicken scratchings, "What language is that?"

Prey shrugged minutely and let the battered book carelessly fall, "Whatever it is, it's not Equish."

"Horseapples," Gloom hissed, suddenly back to being furiously angry, "There's nothing here. Nothing! How are we supposed to catch this warlock now?"

Prey was going to suggest they could just trap the cave's entrance and leave, since the warlock would be returning here at some point, and it would be as good a chance to kill him or her as any, but just then Scenic's voice came echoing down the tunnel.

"Gloom sir! Sargent, Prey!"

Scenic's call might've been muffled by stone but it did not have far to travel, and it spurred Gloom and Prey into immediate action with its urgency.

"BackUpTheTunnelNow." Gloom ordered in one breath, grabbing up the lantern and turning to dash out.

Prey paused for just one second.

He grabbed the warlock's book, and tossed it underhoof through the air to plop into one of the vats, the now sludge like water swallowing the book immediately.

That done, Prey was right behind Gloom in charging back up the tunnel, uneven stone hurting his hooves as he ran.

Gloom reached the bottom of the slope and charged up it back into the grey light, replacement spear at the ready. For a moment, the misty gloom of the forest was blinding compared to the darkness of the cave they'd just left, and Prey couldn't see.

But he could hear, and he didn't hear gurgling.

"Crimson? What are you doing here?" He heard Gloom exclaim, "You were supposed to meet up with us at the ravine."

A flash of shadow briefly relieved Prey's vision long enough for him to regain his eyesight. The source of the shadow was Crimson. He

was standing over Prey. His yellow eyes glared.

Prey stumbled back, but Crimson was much faster. A strong wing hooked Prey out of the caves entrance before he could flinch, and Prey found himself with his back to a tree and with Crimson's drawn face far too close.

"What were those traps?" Crimson hissed, his voice oddly wavering.

"Which traps-?"

"Those traps you made! Those weren't poison, those were some kind of insane acid."

"You went through the minefield? I told you to stay away from those." Prey shot back, "That was supposed to be our escape route!"

"You lied. I almost died in there, I had to fly out of there."

"You never asked what those mines did, you said you didn't want to know! I told everyone to stay away from those, so why didn't you listen? You could've *died*."

"I know I almost died! The kindersnatches...", All the anger drained out of Crimson. One second it was there, the next it was gone as if it had never existed, and the sadness it'd been masking was all that was left.

"The kindersnatches all died. Every single one of them. That was... they melted. Into a pools and... bones. Your mines exploded and the acid just went straight through them, like they were paper." Crimson shuddered violently.

Prey imagined Crimson, who hadn't been aware of the large splash range of the Bone Rot mines, running through the area they'd trapped before going through the bird skull picket line. That was supposed to be their escape route, with a safe path through the minefield Prey had memorised. Crimson would certainly have almost died when the very first mine triggered. From there, Crimson must've had to have flown like crazy to avoid the chain reaction.

"I told everyone not to go there, to only follow the safe path." Prey mumbled defensively.

But why had Crimson decided to led the kindersnatches through there at all? That was supposed to be their escape route, but now it was used up.

"What do you mean Crimson? Those traps Prey set up? And why'd you have to retreat through that area?" Gloom asked in concern.

"Those plant sack bombs that Prey made were some kind of acid, not poison," Crimson answered Gloom, "They melted through the kindersnatches and the pon... the people inside like they weren't even there."

"You said you didn't want to know." Prey repeated stubbornly, "Why're we just standing here? This is the middle of the warlock's territory. We need to get into cover."

"Because all of the kindersnatches are *dead*. They're not coming back. They are no longer a threat, just as you wanted Prey." Crimson said, teeth clenched.

"No, only the ones which were waiting here are dead. The warlock has more of them. And why're you upset?" Prey demanded, looking around accusingly, "You said no matter what or how many kindersnatches we had to kill, the warlock had to be stopped. I'm just doing what you all said."

Crimson's mouth hung open as he stalled, "I, you, we did agree that. We did. You're right, I'm sorry, it's just that... I just didn't want any of this..."

Crimson's gaze fell to the ground, and in doing so onto the jade necklace. "...I keep forgetting. I'm not alone, it's not just me..." He whispered to himself.

Prey looked away too. He knew what Bone Rot mines did to flesh. He'd made them after all. In a flash, he could see it all in his mind's eye.

Crimson must've been running with the kindersnatches chasing

behind him, always being careful not to draw too far ahead. The kindersnatches would've been trying to get ahead of Crimson by cutting turns.

Maybe Crimson had simply run out of other routes to lead the pack of gurgling kindersnatches down. Maybe they'd actually been succeeding in herding him. It didn't really matter. Either way, Crimson had run into the trapped area, seeing the carefully broken twig Prey had propped on an exposed pine root to mark the safe path.

Prey had set the Bone Rot mines by himself while the others kept watch on the forest. They hadn't seen how Prey had hidden the mines or the triggers he'd rigged, merely the areas where he'd pointed them to; "Stay away from there if you don't want to die."

Crimson must've been expecting cleverly concealed trip wires or trigger branches hidden under pine needles and thorn bushes.

Prey had used none of those. He'd used invisible runes.

Those first few seconds running into the area, Crimson must've been unsure if he was on the right path, worried that he might've forgotten the landmarks.

He must've just been considering whether or not to use the magic of his necklace to deal with the kindersnatches, despite Prey and Gloom's repeated warnings to save his strength if at all possible. He likely slowed down, indecisive, and the first closing in kindersnatch must've hit the first trigger rune.

The Bone Rot mine would've burst with a loud sucking *_Pop_*, like a hoof pulled free from mud.

Prey could clearly imagine what Crimson had seen out of the corner of his eye. He'd seen it often enough himself.

A thin sheet of smoking yellow-green liquid, expanding through the air like a popping bubble.

The Bone Rot would've hit the first kindersnatch, and any other kindersnatch within about five hooves, and then the liquid would've

gone straight through them.

There would have been this huge sizzle, a hiss, and the wicker section of kindersnatch the splash hit would've simply vanished, along with any attached body part of host within.

It would've looked like it was simply gone, that's how fast Bone Rot reacted when exposed to living matter and air. Like someone had taken a giant invisible spoon and scooped a chunk out of the kindersnatch.

Flesh, organs, bones, wicker, and all.

The Bone Rot mines Prey'd made had been small. The splashes wouldn't have been concentrated enough to dissolve the whole victim. Maybe only half. Crimson would've been left staring halfway into a suddenly opened up body.

A fully sized Bone Rot mine with the correct density of liquid wouldn't have stopped only half way through. Prey had seen the splash wave of one wash over the front half of a Border Guard and make him vanish.

The back half of the Guard, with organs and spine severed as cleanly as could be, had remained standing there for a full horrifying second. Then it'd overbalanced forwards into the pool of unspent Bone Rot on the ground in front of it, and vanished in a hiss like it had plunged into a deep lake, and not a puddle a centimeter deep.

The likes of that is what Crimson would've seen when Prey's Bone Rot mines exploded.

His eyes had likely widened, he'd probably lost his footing and took a wrong step, and then all of the other kindersnatches were running into the mined area, triggering more sucking **Pops** and explosive hisses all around him, and Crimson was madly dodging spatters of Bone Rot, staggering about as droplets of vicious green liquid pattered down all around him.

And somehow, Crimson must've avoided every single flying drop.

Prey sucked in air sharply over his teeth as he realised Crimson had every right to be angry with him, even though Prey had warned him. Crimson's anger wasn't wholly about killing all the kindersnatches, it must be because he'd nearly died too. If it weren't for Crimson's incredible reaction speed and jade necklace, he would be dead right now.

But that little quiet voice in Prey whispered, 'But he didn't listen to your warning about the Wolfing Woods.'

"Later," Gloom interrupted, not even able to focus on the lethal traps Prey had created in lieu of what he'd just seen down in the cave. "All this can wait until later. We need to get out of the area. I have every reason to believe the warlock knows we're here now. North West, move."

Crimson's head snapped up, "If the warlock is returning, then this is the best opportunity to ambush him we're going to get. He doesn't get to walk away from this again."

"He'll *know* it's an ambush," Prey immediately protested, "We'll be the ones who get ambushed. We're in the middle of his territory. Feel that evil in the air? There's no way we'll successfully pull off-"

Prey stopped speaking. He quickly spun around, scanning the trees on the far side of the basin. He swung his head back and forth, trying to hear what that noise was again.

It had sounded like a heavy, distant thump.

Everyone else had frozen too. Everything about where they were and what they were doing was suddenly driven to the forefront of everybody's mind and into stark focus.

There, distant, faint, a heavy thump.

Thump... It came from somewhere deep in the shadows and mist.

Thump Like something heavy impacting something soft, an exhalation or whoosh of air.

Thump Gloom and Crimson heard it too that time.

A long stilted pause, *...Thump*

Ever so slightly louder, *Thump* Came again.

'Zoma'Grika.'

'-it's coming this way-'

"Retreat," Gloom ordered bitterly, "We've spent our one surprise attack. Pull back, regroup, we'll return later."

"Sir, but, what was down there in the cave-?"

"You don't want to know Scenic. Now move!"

Breaking into a run, stealth abandoned in favour of getting out of the warlock's area of control as soon as possible, Gloom led the way out of the basin, gaining speed.

'I'm not getting left behind!' Prey ran as fast as he could to keep up. If the warlock was smart, they were no doubt trying to encircle the area right now. The ISND needed to break out of the tightening noose before it could finish closing.

Prey could only hope they hadn't overstayed their welcome.

'Sloppy. Amaturish.' This was the exact opposite of how Prey wanted things to go.

Hadn't they learnt anything? Had surviving the night in Mayflower meant so little?

Their one surprise attack had been wasted, his prepared killing field had been all used up by Crimson on accident, and now worst of all, the warlock knew their position. And for what? To destroy the warlock's workshop? If they'd trapped the cave instead of Gloom just trashing the place in a fit of rage-But no, that option was gone and there was no use dwelling on it.

'It all was for *nothing*.'

So Prey ran behind the others through the misty forest, breathing

heavily and grimly alert as they made haste to escape the area. Whippy branches, thorn bushes. Cuts and scrapes cracked open afresh, and painful bruises were gained, but they couldn't afford to slow down. Faster. They needed to get out.

Prey did not want to meet whatever was large or strong enough to have been making those, *Thumps*

So he ran.

Prey had a stitch in his side when Gloom finally cantered to a halt and let them stop. He gasped for air as quietly as he could, leaning heavily against the craggy bark of one of the pines while trying to press the stitch out of existence with a cloven hoof.

Still gasping, Prey glanced warily back the way they'd come, but of course he didn't see any sign of pursuit. It was impossible to know if they were being chased, but they couldn't run forever, especially not with the ravine somewhere up ahead. The only way to tell was to halt and see.

If they weren't being chased, great, but if they were, then at least they'd gotten a moment to rest.

Right now, Prey was ridiculously glad he'd lost his heavy backpack, despite losing everything it'd carried. All he had weighing him down currently was a nearly empty rolled up cloth bag, and his single water canteen, which he now uncapped and swallowed from. The water was gritty and brackish, taken from the little stream in Mayflower, but that hardly mattered.

Water was ten times more valuable than food.

Prey wiped his mouth and tried to think, anxiously staring back the way they'd come.

How could they turn this situation around? Perhaps if they really were being chased, they could set an ambush to whittle down the warlock's forces before running away again? Unfortunately, Prey doubted the warlock was dumb enough to be tricked into straying

into the baloth's territory to the West. Perhaps he could work out where the warlock was right now if he-?

Prey stopped halfway through screwing the canteen's cap back on. His droopy ear twitched towards the depths of the forest.

...thump

Prey didn't wait to hear the second thump to confirm it, he immediately spun the canteen's cap shut and signalled Gloom.

"We're still being followed." Prey hissed.

"Up," Gloom whispered, hastily gesturing Scenic and Crimson up, "Up up. As discussed, we make for the ravine."

The plan here was simple. The ravine had been set as their rendezvous point for a reason, and it was the same reason they were fleeing in this direction.

How had they lost their pursuers last time? By crossing the ravine. The kindersnatches and the scarecrow had lacked the necessary dexterity to climb across, and hadn't even tried.

Thus, they now continued making straight for the ravine at a swift pace, alternating between a run and a canter. If they galloped, then they'd likely get run down once they ran out of stamina. Or Prey and Gloom would. Gloom still had his flank injury, and Prey was a runt.

Replicating pines trees seemed to appear ahead and disappear behind in an endless loop.

Prey breathed hard, pine mould clogging in the back of his throat. It was nerve wracking, having to pace themselves like this instead of fleeing at full speed. And what if they ran into another monster en-route? Like another Mama'duke?

'But something's been clearing the large beasts in this area.' Prey remembered the deeply misted dell Fallen Leaf had led them to, with the mysteriously slain beasts and monsters. Was that only two days ago?

The deer and his whole holt were probably dead now, just like so many others. By monsters or warlock, it made no difference.

Prey pulled up short to prevent himself from tumbling down the hill that marked the descent to the ravine, hidden in the mist below. Without time to spare, he began winding his way down the slope, Gloom and the other two ahead already of him.

He jumped over a tree root seeking to twist his hoof, dodging thorn patches as best he could, but just taking the sting where he couldn't. His breathing was ragged, despite having pacing himself.

But they'd made it, and with no sign of their pursuers.

The plunging steep rocks of the ravine gaped open in front of them, the depths hidden in mist. Prey stumbled out of the trees at the bottom of the slope last, and saw Scenic casting back and forth at the ravine's edge looking for a good fallen tree trunk to cross with.

"Here, this one, it looks stable." Prey called out, panting and beckoning. Prey was selfish. He was sending Scenic first to test the tree trunk.

"Not happening." Gloom grunted. He grabbed Scenic under one front leg, just like he'd done last time, and without any pause Crimson grabbed the other.

Their wings opened wide, and they tipped forwards over the ravine's edge before Scenic's eyes could fully widen or he could freeze up. They briefly plummeted and then Gloom and Crimson caught the air, and they swooped back up and over the ravine's far edge.

'Zoma'Grika.' Prey thought as he realised in panic they were going to try and carry him across too. He was not doing that.

No way, no how. *No* one was going to touch him.

But Gloom and Crimson were already flapping back over the plunging drop to death, having not even landed after unceremoniously depositing Scenic on the other side.

"No no, I'll cross by myself-*Donttouchme*!"

Prey spun around. Before, at this same ravine, Prey had considered the choice of fleeing back into the forest and going it alone, the best he knew how to. He could fight the warlock on his own terms. Now Prey had the same choice.

But just like last time, he hesitated too long on deciding if to run. A foolish mistake, but one he kept making. You would've thought he would've known not to hesitate by now.

With a whoosh of air and feathers, Crimson's forelegs wrapped tightly around Prey's middle from behind and jerked him into the sky.

Prey left his stomach behind, and then it snapped back in with a lurch so violent he felt like he was going to vomit.

Prey gagged, back legs kicking wildly as they suddenly found themselves unsupported and his ears flapped in a rush of air. And then he started to thrash and shriek.

"Let me go let me go! Don't touch me!" Prey squeaked in high pitched outrage.

Thankfully, Crimson did not listen and didn't let him go. They were flying over the ravine.

"Let me go!" Prey's small hoof punched Crimson wildly in the cheek.

"Ow! Stop it Prey," Crimson yelped, "Stop wriggling, I'm trying to-"

Just then Prey looked down. Staring green eyes in a withered face and bared teeth starred straight up at him from out of the ravine.

Prey did what anyone else would've done under the circumstances in his situation. He screamed.

"Watch out!"

"Stop struggling Prey."

"No, below!"

"You-" Gloom looked down and let out a shout of surprise.

There was a flash of green light and Prey felt a rush of acceleration, as he was simultaneously blinded by air blasting into his eyes.

The landscape blurred, Prey heard from somewhere the distinctive *snick* of Crimson's wing blades flicking out, then Crimson was no longer holding him and Prey was stumbling as he was deposited on the dirt at speed.

"Corporal Shimmer, you're alive!" Gloom exclaimed in utter shock.

'*What*!?'

Prey stared. There at the edge of the ravine, stood the Border Guard, Shimmer. That haggard face Prey'd seen staring up at him was Shimmer's.

The Corporal's face was a frightening sight to behold. Drawn, pale, and wide eyed. His helmet was gone, along with half the brown armour he'd worn the last time they'd seen him, and the remaining pieces were torn. His straw coloured coat was matted and stained with dirt. There were smears of dried blood mixed in there with the dirt too. He stood on the edge of the ravine, having climbed up from somewhere, and now stood staring at them.

Even in such dire distress, Shimmer's mind was still a black hole to Prey's mental perception, which was why he hadn't sensed the unicorn until he'd looked down and gotten such a fright.

That, and Shimmer was supposed to be dead.

Where had he climbed up from? How had he even gotten here? Where was Atlas? What had happened?

'How? How is he still alive? That's not fair.' Prey internally raged.

"Follow me." Shimmer croaked.

"Follow where? You're hurt, you need attention-"

"Follow me now if you want to live!"

Shimmer spun around, right on the brink of the ravine's edge, and pointed down into it. "Down there, hide before it gets here. Follow me."

The instant assumption was that Shimmer was gesturing for them to follow him in jumping to their deaths, but since Shimmer had somehow just clambered up from the ravine, obviously that wasn't the case and it was something else.

Prey wanted to say that they shouldn't trust someone who should be dead, but that wasn't logic anyone here would listen to.

Gloom tried to approach the battered unicorn, "What's coming? Corporal Shimmer, what happened to you? Where's Atlas?"

'Yes let's just keep stupidly standing here instead of running or hiding.'

Shimmer flinched from Gloom. He hurriedly glanced across the ravine, looking at the misty forest from whence the ISND had just come.

"Atlas is...gone." Shimmer's voice cracked. He pointed down into the ravine again; "If you want to live, follow me."

With that, Shimmer turned and slid down off the edge.

"Wait-!"

All of them jumped forwards to the edge to see. Shimmer was gone. There was no sign of him. Where had he gone? There was no way he'd fallen all the way down the ravine in only half a second.

Then Shimmer's head popped out of the rock, his haggard face staring up at them. "Hurry up." He hissed.

It was a tiny overhang. Prey saw how the stone's shade and the shadow of the ravine all conspired to make the narrow entrance nearly invisible. Another cave, barely three yards below their hooves. How had Shimmer discovered this? Would they all even fit

inside?

Gloom reached a speedy decision, '-whatever Shimmer is running from, I don't want to meet, and we can't abandon him-'

"Crimson, you go down first and hover outside in case Prey or Scenic slips. It's not far." Gloom ordered, his own bat wings spreading out taut.

"Yes sir." Without even pausing Crimson dropped off the sheer ravine edge, powerful wings snapping open to hover. Shimmer's horned head ducked back into the hidden cave to get out of the pegasus's way as he flapped in place.

"You're next Scenic." Gloom ordered.

Scenic gulped, closed his eyes, and turned around to let himself slide over the edge backwards, rear hooves first. He successfully hit the ledge and then tipped forwards into the narrow cave and out of their sight. Crimson checked he was okay in there as he hovered, wings beating, then gestured back up for Prey to hurry.

Prey tried to protest, "We don't know what's down there, or even if that's the real Shimmer. It could be a trap of the warlock puppeteering his body-"

"Prey, not *now*. It's obviously the real Shimmer, get down there before I push you." Gloom ordered.

"No, this is a bad idea-"

Gloom moved to push Prey.

"Don't touch me!" Prey spat in fury, backing up, but Gloom kept advancing.

"*Now* Prey. We're being chased, and Shimmer's got us a hiding spot."

Caught between getting stuck up here with Gloom going to push him off, along with whatever the warlock had chasing them, Prey made the decision and jumped over the edge. Crimson was already waiting down there, and Scenic probably would've triggered a trap

going in first if there had been one.

He slid down the ravine's steep side, dirt and pebbles scraping his wool, stomach jumping into his throat for one horrible second as he started to gain speed and still hadn't arrived, and then his back hooves hit the ledge.

Prey teetered for a second, front hooves frantically waving for balance. He had a horrible moment as he stared down down into the ravine, foreseeing Shimmer giving him a nudge with magic and sending him plummeting to his death, but Crimson was already moving forwards to catch him.

Prey flinched and jerked himself away from Crimson's extended hoof, which proved enough to let him overbalance backwards and sprawl into the darkness of the cave, tail first.

Lying on his back, Prey looked up, seeing the shadowy outline of a unicorn upside down. He rolled over and scrambled away to the side of the narrow cave as fast as he could. Broken shards of small stone shifted under him as he put his back to the uneven wall. The air smelled of earth all around.

This small cave was very much unlike the one the warlock had commandeered. This one was low, narrow, and cramped, more a hidden opening in the ravine's face than an actual cave. There was next to no light either, and it was only Prey who could stand up, the others would either have to sit or bend double.

What little light there was abruptly cut off as Gloom joined them, folding his wings before ducking and shuffling deeper inside to admit Crimson's own stooped figure a few seconds later.

Prey didn't like this in the slightest. He had a bad feeling, and it had everything to do with Shimmer really being the same unicorn from before. The blank walls of Shimmer's mind were exactly the same as last time, he'd merely been trying logic to reason with Gloom.

Shimmer should be dead, but here he was. What had the unicorn done to survive? Everything comes at a price.

Gloom wanted to know that too.

'-how is he still alive? Does that mean not everything I thought was lost is? There might be hope yet-'

"How are you alive? What happened that night?"

"*Shh*," Shimmer hissed, flinching. "Keep your voice down. Do you want it to hear you?"

Gloom had been keeping his voice down, but apparently not far enough for the frightened Shimmer. Still, Gloom lowered his voice even further, "Are you injured?" He whispered.

Prey saw Shimmer's head shaking back and forth in the near darkness, "Nothing that you could help with."

"Let us try. We can help. What are we hiding from? What happened that night?" Gloom pressed, desperate for answers.

Shimmer's outline seemed to deflate in on itself, as if every cell in the unicorn's body had simultaneously sagged. When he spoke, his voice was just a tired whisper.

"We lost. That's what happened. You lost, I lost, Atlas lost. I tried to follow after the foalnapped ponies into the forest, but the warlock's foul creations were moving as if the very hounds of Tartarus were on their heels. Atlas was already injured, and... I should've ordered him to fall back. He would never have listened though, that stubborn sentimental loyal fool."

"I'm sorry for your loss. Atlas is, was a good pony from what little interaction we had. But why are we hiding down here Shimmer? Keeping moving would-"

"-And then it would get you. Nopony's leaving until it's gone."

"The scarecrow?" Scenic guessed.

"Yes the scarecrow you talentless blank flank," Shimmer hissed, broken anger in every syllable:

"I ran. It chased me. I meant to lose it over the ravine like you did the first time. But it followed me across. I fell down here, it's only complete blind luck that I landed in this tiny cave. I should be dead. I'm sure the warlock thinks I am."

"W-what happened to, to Atlas?" Scenic whispered haltingly.

Shimmer didn't answer for a moment. "We finally caught up with the foalnapped ponies inside the forest. His injury...Atlas couldn't fly. We got split up in the dark. I didn't see. We were trying to keep up with the lights, and I could hear ponies shouting for help. And then I heard him shouting too, and then screaming for me to leave him and go on. I think those twisted kindersnatch zomponies got him."

"Oh." Scenic mumbled in a small voice.

"I don't want to talk about it." Shimmer said.

No one made any mention of what they'd found when they cut that one kindersnatch open, even if Gloom and Scenic were loudly thinking about it, and fervently trying not to.

'I hope Atlas really is dead. Unlike Shimmer who doesn't have the decency to obey the odds and die.' Prey thought viciously, glaring for all he was worth at the Border Guard's outline. The unicorn wouldn't be able to see his glare in the dark.

"Did you see where the townsponies were taken, perhaps?" Gloom prodded as gently as he could manage. Having to ask after hearing of Atlas' death made Gloom feel like manure. He could only imagine; '-how much worse it must be for Shimmer-'

"You think I didn't try?" Shimmer growled, temper suddenly blazing up. It guttered out and died just as quickly as it'd reared its head, "No. No I didn't see. What I saw was the warlock's new scarecrow."

Crimson shifted in the shadows, and a trace of jade green light drifted off the magical chain around his neck, "What can you tell us about the combat capabilities of this new scarecrow?"

"What's it to you?" Shimmer demanded coldly in a whisper, "Even

with that fancy new necklace you pulled out of nowhere, it won't help you."

"I'm sorry that I wasn't able to lend it to you, but we're here to stop the warlock. This new scarecrow-"

"I was also there the night before last, I know your limits," Shimmer cut across, "You won't beat this scarecrow. It isn't like the old one. This ones huge, as tall as the trees, and it's got some kind of dark magic protection."

"Well that's just perfect." Gloom muttered to himself. The warlock had an even *stronger* black magic weapon roaming around on the lookout for them.

"Quiet!" Shimmer hissed.

Everyone stopped moving and stilled. Prey strained his ears, trying to hear what was happening out above on the ravine. Did he hear anything? No, nothing, there was no gurgling, nor any sound of approach that he could hear.

There wasn't- *thump*

Everyone froze.

thump, Thump, Thump

It was hard to tell from underground, but the deep, soft, impact sounds seemed to be coming from the far side of the ravine, where they'd just crossed over from.

Everyone stopped breathing too.

They were trapped down here in this tiny cave. If they were discovered, there was nowhere to run. Prey childishly covered his mouth with both hooves, as if it would make any difference.

The scarecrow had followed them this far. Did it have some magical means of tracking them? Could it see through stone and see them cowering down here? No, no, that couldn't be. Shimmer had hidden down here before and hadn't been discovered, so that couldn't be

true. But Shimmer was a liar and a Border Guard. This could all be one huge trap.

'And I walked right into it like a fool.'

thump, thump... thump

It was shifting around up there, casting about on the ravine's edge. Possibly staring down with stolen eyes at their hiding place right now.

Prey slowly curled his legs under himself, getting ready to launch himself at the traitorous Shimmer. At this range, he could touch Shimmer before the unicorn could cast anything. Maybe. No, he could do it. Maybe. But he couldn't read the unicorn's thoughts.

Thump

Prey felt a tiny trickle of rock dust sprinkle his face. That had come from above them. The scarecrow, it had just leaped across the ravine.

In the dark, Prey saw the outline of Scenic covering his mouth, and the faint yellow sheen of Gloom's slitted eyes as he stared up at the ceiling.

Prey's lungs were hurting, but he didn't dare breathe. He was scared.

Thump....Thump.

They were completely trapped down here. There was no backup escape route. He was completely blind as to what was happening up there, with no way to tell if the warlock had discovered the hidden cave. Why had he let Gloom force him down here? He should've fought back, refused, and taken control of Gloom's mind.

'Never back yourself into a corner.'

Was this like the night in Mayflower? No, not even close. But it didn't need to be some unknown ancient horror, the tail soiling terror of discovery was just as real. The warlock had already killed

many people, and Prey could easily become one of their number.

'-I've come so far, we've survived so much. Please Celestia, not like this, please let me make it back home again-', Scenic was silently praying.

Thump Thump... thump.....thump.....thump

The movement up above, it sounded like it was leaving, the tiny tremors Prey could feel transmitted through the stone under his hooves growing weaker. The scarecrow was leaving.

Or was it just the oldest trick in the book?

No one moved, they barely breathed. They might not have had as good hearing as Prey, but they could still think. Two of the minds in here were shielded or blanks, but the two Prey could hear were thinking the exact same thing as he was.

'-has it really left? Or-'

'-is this it a trap? Toying with us?-'

In tense silence, they waited. And waited.

An hour they waited, cramped into that tiny cave, hunched over in the dark, ears straining for that soft reverberating thump of the enormous scarecrow returning.

It didn't.

In the dark and silence, Prey slowly began tracing out a number of runes on a broken off chunk of rock.

"I think it's gone." Gloom finally whispered.

"You can't possibly know that for sure, Sargent." Shimmer whispered back.

"You're right, but we can't just sit here waiting to be found. We have

to do something."

Shimmer didn't answer or otherwise give any indication he'd heard the thestral's words. He continued to just sit there unmovingly in the darkness of their tiny cave.

"Shimmer?" Gloom prompted, "Corporal Shimmer?"

"I am sorry for your loss," Shimmer abruptly said, "Lilly Blossom, that was her name, right?"

"How did you know?" Scenic gasped. What a stupid question.

"If she's not here with you, then that must mean..." Shimmer trailed off.

"Lilly isn't...'dead' per-say." Gloom admitted hollowly. He cleared his throat, it sounding like he had something painful trapped in there:

"But, well, we couldn't wake her after the Mama'duke. We had to leave her behind. She's hidden up in a tree to the East of Alfalfa Dale, or what's left of the town. There's an 'X' marked on its base. If you make it and we don't, could you...?" Gloom asked, his guilt over asking this of Shimmer when the Corporal had lost his own subordinate was outweighed by his want to help Lilly if, as in all likelihood, they died.

'Why you have to tell him that?' Prey thought. They shouldn't be telling the Border Guard anything. Not that he cared what happened to Lilly. She was a deadmare walking. Or not walking.

"Noponies going off anywhere to get killed," Shimmer denied, "We're all staying right here until help arrives."

"Help? What help? We cannot cower in here like rats waiting to be found, it is all up to us if we want to live." Crimson whispered, speaking up for the first time in an hour.

"You didn't see what I saw," Shimmer hissed back, "This isn't a fight we can win. We need reinforcements, backup, mages. You said your Captain was supposed to be sending help. Where are they? Why aren't they here yet?"

After a long pause, Gloom shook his head, crushing whatever hope Shimmer might've been holding out on, "Nopony came. We've waited a whole day. They were supposed to arrive by train yesterday, but..."

"What? They'd just-? How could your Captain abandon you like this? The Border Guard would *never* leave a pony behind."

'You filthy racist liar,' Prey seethed. It almost seemed like Shimmer was looking mockingly at him in the dark, 'You say you Border Guards don't leave ponies behind, but you left all of *us* behind. You abandoned us to the Resistance.'

Prey took some deep breaths. Shimmer may be a filthy unicorn liar, but his point still stood. Why hadn't Captain Nighthawk come like he'd promised?

Gloom couldn't answer either, "I... I don't know."

Inside, Gloom was certain Nighthawk wouldn't have just abandoned them, even if a little voice in the back of his mind was pointing out all the evidence to the contrary. That wasn't how the clans worked or thestrals thought, but Gloom sadly doubted the worked up and afraid Shimmer would listen.

What Gloom didn't realise was that Scenic Paint was desperate to hear an explanation from Gloom too. He wasn't a thestral, he didn't come from the clans, and didn't understand what Gloom and Crimson understood. Inside he still wanted to know; '-why? Why has the captain abandoned us? What did we do? I'm scared-'

"So it's true. We are on our own. We're staying here. Nopony leaves." Shimmer muttered, turning away.

Prey bit his tongue, glaring in hateful silence.

"The warlock will win if we do nothing," Crimson stated, "And we can't do anything if we stay in here. Even running away is better than doing nothing." He said without any shame.

"No," Gloom said softly, his rasping voice turning it into a growl as the fresh memories of what they'd seen in the other cave flashed in

his mind, "Corporal Shimmer is right, we should stay here. For now. Wait until the warlock gives up and recalls his abomination. Then we'll sneak in and hit him again. Remember, no matter how many fights and skirmishes it takes."

Prey did not want to stay here, here was bad. There was no escape route out if they were found down here, not inside the very ravine itself. Not unless he was prepared to jump.

Prey glanced at the caves entrance. Outside, all that could be seen was the opposite wall of the ravine, partly obscured in mist. Far above them somewhere, it was afternoon.

Another hiding place would be better, one without a Border Guard in it. Surely Gloom couldn't mean to wait in here until night fell, could he? If they were really going to stay hidden in here, they'd have to stay here all night. Look what had happened the last time one of their number had ventured into the forest during the night. Lilly had gotten bitten by a Mama'duke. And...what had come after.

Gloom had said they were going to fight the warlock. This wasn't fighting, not how Prey knew how to fight. It was all going wrong.

If they'd just set up traps in the warlock's cave and left like Prey had wanted-

'This is all being done so wrong. It's wrong, all of it. Gloom doesn't know what he's doing. Even Crimson doesn't know what he's doing.'

It seemed only Prey knew.

'So why am I just sitting here, letting Gloom mislead us? Why do I allow him too? I owe Crimson, not Gloom. And after what happened and Mayflower... Do I really? He made a mistake, I made a mistake, Gloom made a mistake, mistakes all around. But then there's *him*.'

Prey paused in secretly laying runes and fixed Shimmer's outline with a look of pure venom in the dark. 'A unicorn *and* a Border Guard. Why is he this close to me and still alive?'

Prey felt the smooth gold of the tracer bands around his forelegs,

'Oh right. Because I'm just a slave.'

Prey had made those Bone Rot mines, but it hadn't been enough. He'd saved Lilly like they'd forced him too, and also he'd saved them from what came after, but it still hadn't been enough. It was he who'd come up with the idea to throw the message-in-a-bottle fire at the scarecrow. It was him who'd talked to the deer and secured them a guide.

It was Prey who'd stopped Garrow, it was him who'd led them to the correct Lumber Yard, him who'd devised the plan to discover Wheat Plow and catch Copper Pot.

And before that, it was him who'd tracked down Night Watcher when the Solar Guard and Captain Valour had all failed. Him. All him.

And after all that, after *all* he'd been forced to do in service, he was still a slave.

Prey's teeth ground together, tighter and tighter. 'Still nothing but a two bit, second rate citizen under a sun tyrant and her demon sister.'

Luna had lied. Nothing he did would ever be enough to earn his freedom.

It was him who'd done everything. Only him. The others were all worse than useless, what were they without him? What had anyone else ever done?! *Nothing*! They owed everything to him, and yet they still constantly got him into these dire situations because ponies always thought they knew better.

'Crimson saved my life.'

That little reminder made Prey stutter to a halt. Because Crimson had done that. He'd saved Prey without any thought of fairness or reward. Without Crimson, Prey would be dead.

'So what?' Prey thought, anger flaring back to life, 'He also went into the Wolfing Woods and risked all of our lives when he should've listened to me!'

But even so... he still owed Crimson.

Prey's head jerked up as the shape of Shimmer moved, and Prey was just about to leap forwards or possibly backwards when he saw Gloom's shape was wordlessly offering Shimmer his water canteen.

'-why didn't I think to offer sooner?-'

Shimmer took it, slowly unscrewing the lid to prevent noise. Prey had not seen any supplies on the unicorn, almost everything having been lost under the collapsed house in Mayflower, but even so, Shimmer did not gulp the water. He took slow, measured sips, and stopped after only four and hoofed the canteen back to Gloom.

That meant Shimmer must've had some way of procuring water himself, because he should've been as dry as a bone after nearly two days. Since he was a unicorn, he must know some spell. Another clue to Shimmer's abilities.

Gloom was just wasting his water on the Border Guard. Prey would never do that. If Shimmer was on fire and Prey had a glass of water-

.....thump.....thump...Thump, Thump

Everyone froze, back to not breathing as they stared up at the ceiling.

Thump, Thump

Getting closer.

Thump Thump

Almost right on top of them.

Thump...

And there it stopped.

Somewhere above them through the stone, likely less than ten hooves away, stood the scarecrow.

Scenic was covering his mouth again, whether to muffle his breathing or to stop himself from screaming if something suddenly happened, Prey didn't know.

'-I never said sorry to ma' or pa'. Oh please oh please no-'

A spark of green light came from Crimson's necklace. The pegasus was tensed to spring, and next to him, Gloom was trying to think of a plan, '-why's it halted? Isn't it just returning the way it came? Why hasn't it jumped back across the ravine yet?-'

Prey desperately wanted to know the same thing. Had the warlock somehow discovered them with some dark magic Prey didn't know of?

They all waited with baited breath, tensed for another thump of movement. But it didn't come.

Had the scarecrow suddenly become stealthy? Changed how it moved perhaps?

A minute. Two minutes. Five minutes. With each crawling second, the stale air grew tenser. Why wasn't the blasted scarecrow moving?! It couldn't be a coincidence that it'd stopped right above them.

But if they moved or did anything, they'd give themselves away without a doubt.

Six minutes. Eight minu-

Prey felt a foul presence pass over him, like flies crawling across his face. It was perverse, and it seemed to emanate from the very stones of the cave's ceiling.

At the exact same time, there was a painful tingle in his hooves and Prey knew that the perverse feeling was magic.

Shimmer flinched, and Crimson's necklace suddenly flared bright green in the dark.

__Thump__

They'd been discovered!

__Thump__ *Creeeaaak*Crunch*

The noise from overhead shifted and suddenly it was the cave that seemed to be shifting. Prey stumbled as the sound of rocks grinding together deafened him. He barely heard Scenic give a yell of fear over the din. Stone breaking.

'My runes-!'

-Were unfinished and useless.

He hadn't had enough time to finish the array. Why did it *always* happen when he wasn't ready?

The whole cave was juddering. Stone shattered with an enormous *_Crack_*, falling pieces narrowly missing Prey.

Prey had to get out of here. But they were trapped, the only way out was a lethal plunge down into the ravine, and rock dust and dirt were falling from the roof and blinding him, getting in his eyes. He couldn't see.

Instinct made Prey try for the cave entrance anyways, it was the one and only exit. However there was someone faster than him. Green light raced down Crimson's limbs and in a blur he grabbed a hold of the closest person to him, Scenic, and dived for the exit.

But even Crimson was too slow.

Something, three somethings, black in the dark, long, jagged and curled burst out of the ceiling at one side of the cave, showering stone splinters everywhere. Prey fell over as the small cave shook, colliding with Gloom's leathery wing in the cramped space.

Prey tried to scramble to the other side of the cave as the three root-like things curled up and gripped the roof, and then three more things burst out of the ceiling on the other side of the cave, and missed skewering Shimmer's head by perhaps inches. Prey shoved himself free of Gloom with a heave of disgust and tried to crawl for the exit.

Then the two sets of worm root things hooked up into the ceiling and *pulled*.

Everything became deafening noise and breaking stone, the cave ceiling ripped away. Prey was blinded by grey light, sky, mist and falling dirt as he frantically tried to shield his head.

In the sudden lull as the rending of stone ended, Prey stared up from between his hooves.

Above him, a pair of massive claws grasped the chunk of stone and dirt that had been the cave's roof.

Above that, framed between the broken walls of the cave, the upper body of the shadowed scarecrow loomed. It was huge.

For two whole seconds Prey stared up as the giant construct ponderously lifted the chunk of stone away.

It wasn't shaped like an equine at all, not like the last scarecrow had been.

It was gigantic. Wreathed in tattered mist, it had an upright upper body, and wide, wicker spined shoulders. Set between these shoulders was a spiked metal cage thing, in which a disproportionately small pumpkin head sat, that familiar foul orange light spilling from the carved, leering face.

Just one of its arms was the length of a tree.

It could squash him like a fly.

Prey saw few other details in that brief fraction of time, the mist clinging to the construct of twisted magic obscuring it further. What he did see was more of the ragged cloth wrappings, blackened bands of iron bolted along its chest to reinforce the two arms, and more crazily gnarled wicker.

It was huge. It was terrifying. The mist stank of rot. Its arms were long, thick, knobbly, massive. Was that how it moved? Swinging itself forwards on its two enormous arms?

Dazed, Prey tried to roll to his hooves amidst the rubble.

He had to escape. He was vulnerable, exposed, helpless.

His only hope was to jump, try to slide down the ravine's walls to slow his fall, and hope he survived the landing at the bottom.

Red wings shot open above Prey's vision, green light dancing between the long pinions. Crimson was standing up, no, he was actually hovering! His forelegs were hooked around Scenic's barrel, the armoured Earth pony somehow being lifted solo by the pegasus.

A silent whoosh of air sent dust and rock dust billowing in every direction like a smoke screen. Prey squeezed his eyes shut as the cave and his surroundings disappeared, but at the last second he still saw what had caused it.

Still somehow lifting a stunned Scenic all by himself, Crimson shot off into the dust in the direction of the far ravine edge.

Crimson was getting them to safety? Prey couldn't see for all the blinding dust. What was happening?

He stumbled against stone. Was the huge scarecrow about to bring the stone slab back down and squash them into smears?

"Prey! Scenic!" He heard Gloom shouting hoarsely from somewhere right next to him.

Prey managed to open his eyes in the stinging dust to look where his mind sense was telling him to look, and he saw the dark olive green of Gloom's tail.

Prey lunged forwards and grabbed a hold of it with both hooves, "Fly!" He just had time to shriek before biting down to help hold on.

Gloom understood, or perhaps it was just the reaction of having something grab his tail. He leapt into the air with bat wings spread wide.

Prey was not Scenic Paint. He was a runt lamb, who barely weighed anything. Even swinging wildly from Gloom's tail over the open

ravine as an ungainly counterweight, he was light enough for Gloom to carry across.

The gaping chasm spun sickeningly below Prey as he spun on the end of Gloom's tail. Air rushed in his ears, his heart raced, the feeling of touching someone never mind tasting was disgusting, and when solid ground appeared beneath him Prey let go.

Hard earth and dead foliage broke the short fall. In a second he was back on his hooves, aggravated bruises completely ignored. Two yards from Prey, the stunned form of Scenic lay sprawled, his mind a daze of disjointed thoughts to Prey. Scenic must've taken a blow to the helmet in all the falling rubble.

There, across on what was now the far side of the ravine, stood the scarecrow in all its awful glory.

It was even larger than Prey first realised. It had been hunched over, half obscured by mist, but at full height, the caged pumpkin head would brush the tips of the dark pines. He finally saw that it did indeed have legs, three gnarled claw like root things in a tripod shape.

Glaring orange light blazed from the leering pumpkin face and froze Prey where he stood, the horrible sensation of insects crawling under his wool assaulting him once again.

And who should be hovering above the open ravine and facing down this new scarecrow, no, it was too big for a scarecrow, this 'reaper king'?

Who else could it be, but Crimson? Green after images of light flowed behind his wings as he flapped to hover in place, glinting wingblades extended.

There was no way the warlock, somehow seeing through their golem created out of the murdered remains of villagers, didn't recognise Crimson as the one who'd taken down their last scarecrow.

As Crimson faced off against this reaper king, Prey felt a flash

of...dread, panic, fear, thrill, anticipation?

There was no prelude. Between one wing beat and the next, Crimson became the green blur of light and speed Prey remembered.

It was the exact same dance as before. Crimson was simply too fast to be tracked or struck, his magically enhanced blades could cut through steel, and here in the open air above the ravine, he had the whole sky to maneuver in.

A trail of green arced forwards, blowing aside mist, and zipping behind the massive golem before it could turn. Crimson slashed faster than Prey could follow, shooting past back up into the sky and out of reach before the reaper king could react.

And then it did react. It straightened, its massive frame unfolding to even new heights, its shadow seeming to stretch and fall over everything. In its two clawed arms, it still carried the huge chunk of rock it had ripped so casually from the earth. It shrieked, a deep horrible sucking sound that was both an endless inhale and an endless exhale all at once, like a storm rushing through the hollow trunk of a rotting tree.

But it wasn't just a roar, or an intimidation tactic. What use had the reaper king for air or breathing? What was the use of simply making noise?

The feeling of crawling insects suddenly swarmed across Prey's face and his front hooves stung as the reaper king continued its terrible roaring inhale. It felt as if the thing was trying to inhale the very oxygen out of the air itself.

'Inhale, hurting hooves, magic, inhaling magic, mana. It's gathering all the ambient mana in the area!' Prey realised in a flash of horror.

Prey went to shout a warning to Crimson, but he never even got the first word out.

The scarecrow stopped inhaling, and then an invisible wave of force blasted out from it, the surrounding mist thrown off. The magic's

effect was almost immediate.

Crimson had wisely been circling around for another pass from the reaper king's blind spot, but that was when something suddenly wrenched him violently out of the air.

With no grace or control whatsoever, Crimson plummeted, red feathers scattering in the air behind him. One wing was clamped down to Crimson's side, then it flapped free but now it was the other wing and his leg trapped. He spun over in the air, no longer falling but now suspended, gripped in place.

It was like he was being grabbed in an invisible giant claw, one that was ever reforming as Crimson tried to break free and it sought to retain its hold.

"Telekinesis." Prey whimpered. The warlock had made a golem that could use auraless telekinesis.

"Hang on Crimson!" Gloom shouted, spreading his own wings and leaping up to fly across the ravine. No sooner had Gloom taken off, than the reaper king's pumpkin head swivelled in their direction and foul orange light flared. Without warning, there was a rush of air and Gloom was struck backwards, like he'd been hit in the face with a door.

There were no words, but the warlock's intent could not have been more obvious if they'd shouted them through a megaphone. Crimson was their target. Everyone else was but mere interference.

Crimson struggled in midair, tangled in invisible strings. The telekinesis was seeking to drag the pegasus down close enough for the reaper king to reach, and then that would be the end, but the Crimson was not making it easy.

He bucked and kicked, fighting against air, flashes of green light strengthening his efforts as he jerked about. But Crimson was losing.

"Keep struggling Crimson!" Prey shouted as loudly as he could, voice shrill, "Fight it, fight! The magic will run out, it's not a living

thing!"

If Crimson could just outlast the ambient mana the reaper king had sucked up, or if someone could distract the warlock long enough for the telekinesis to be broken, then Crimson could get out of range-

"Hey! Hey you!"

Shimmer, the left behind Border Guard who'd been forgotten in the terror of the reaper king's appearance, raced out from the dust of the broken open cave.

The unicorn sprang up the side of the ravine, somehow sticking to the almost sheer rock face like a mountain goat. His already tattered armour was now in pieces, dirt and dust coated him from mane to tail.

"Monster! Thief! Down here!"

Again, that familiar green disk of magic sprung into existence just above Shimmer's horn. He pointed it at the reaper king towering above him, like a cat over a mouse, and fired.

A stream of flames shot out from the disk of magic, and just like what'd happened when facing the lesser scarecrow, the flames washed across the reaper king's body like water. It may as well have been water for all the damage it did.

"That's right! Over here, Me!"

Mist dissipated and rags caught alight, but the flames did nothing. The reaper king was too huge. The flames looked like little more than a candle against its bulk.

But it did the one thing it needed to. It distracted the warlock, or perhaps the gathered ambient mana simply ran out at that exact second anyway, Prey would never know. The invisible claws grasping Crimson vanished, and the pegasus managed to right himself and shakily flap free before he hit the ground.

Shimmer had done it. He'd successfully managed to annoy the warlock.

Task accomplished, Shimmer spun on his hoof and raced off along the ravine's edge like his life depended on it, which it did, galloping unimpeded by armour or injury.

The reaper king still held the cave's roof.

It swivelled on its tripod legs, its huge clawed arms coming around, and with an underarm throw, it hurled the slab at the fleeing unicorn.

The slab of rock seemed to travel almost slowly. Shimmer turned his head at the last moment as the shadow fell over him.

The slab hit Shimmer, not even slowing, and continued over the ravine's edge, Shimmer crushed beneath.

For a moment of breathless stillness, the forest was quiet. Then a smashing *crack* boomed up from the ravine as the stone, which must've weighed over a tonne, bounced off the ravine wall.

"No." Gloom croaked.

Crimson hovered in the air, just as stunned, staring down into the misty depths which had just claimed Shimmer's life.

It was so sudden. So...real.

The reaper king loomed above the ravine, like some monolith wreathed in mist, as tall and unstoppable as it had first appeared. It had the power to rip tonnes of rock apart with its claws, use magic, and was unliving. It could not be killed.

'And it has already leapt across the ravine once, it can do it again.' Prey should've realised what that meant sooner.

'Oh Zoma'Grika.'

"We need to run, scatter! Stay out of range of it's telekinesis. Fly away Crimson!"

Prey's warning was drowned out under the terrible rattling inhale of the reaper king as it straightened and began to once again suck in

all the ambient mana. Prey physically felt the air getting dragged past his face, and saw mist and fallen leaves swirl through the air.

Crimson shouted something, gesturing as he tried to fly towards them, but whatever he said, Prey couldn't hear over the roaring inhalation in his ears.

Prey turned to run, but he couldn't help looking back at Crimson, and then past him, at the terrible reaper king.

He saw Gloom dragging Scenic upright. Idiot, he should've just abandoned the useless Earth pony.

Sudden stinging pain in Prey's forehooves and the crawling sensation of swarming flies.

The rattling shriek of inhalation stopped at the exact same moment Prey's hoof missed the ground. He was falling backwards. No, wait, he was being pulled backwards in a swarm of invisible insects. It was like gravity had simply shifted ninety degrees, and there was nothing he could do about it.

His hoof tips scrapped uselessly at the ground as he sought for a hold. He was being dragged back over the ravine's edge!

'NonoNo**No**!'

Prey thought he screamed. Scenic certainly did. Gloom tried to fly and help Scenic at the same time, and it wasn't working.

"Moon rot!"

Prey couldn't turn himself around, he couldn't catch a hold of anything! Grass, tree roots, thorn vines, dirt, rock, anything. Then suddenly there was no longer any ground beneath his back hooves and Prey's stomach plunged as he started to fall.

At the last second before Prey fully went over the edge, his scrabbling front hooves hooked onto the ravine's lip and his muscles were wrenched as his fall halted.

He panted with fear, desperately clinging on and kicking, rear

hooves trying to get any sort of traction on the almost sheer rock face. He was a runt, but the crumbly edge could barely take even his weight.

Prey heard Scenic and Gloom falling behind him with a despairing shout, but he couldn't look, he had to hold on. Where was Crimson!? He'd saved Prey before, swooped in at the last second, he could do it again.

The rock edge broke up in Prey's hooves.

Prey stared in frozen disbelief as he tipped backwards and went over, and all he could think was, '*Really*?'

Prey fell, sliding down the ravine's wall on his front. Rocks, dirt, cold stone flashing past, his wool getting torn off, bouncing off protrusions as he fell. He got smacked in the jaw, his teeth cracking together. He bit his tongue, his ear got crushed under him and scraped raw.

The opening in the sky, the ravine's edge, they vanished above him into mist and shadow as he desperately sought to stop falling away from them, 'NoNoNo!'

It just wasn't fair.

There was a rising roar. Prey plunged into freezing cold water. The world disappeared, bubbles and muffled noise. Prey flailed as he was snatched away by the current and whisked away. Bubbles flashed past in the dark water and went up his nose as he was flipped upside down.

Prey struck something so hard that he couldn't even tell where he'd been hit, everything just suddenly flared numb. He couldn't breathe. He tried to struggle for the surface and his head broke clear.

He gasped and coughed in the freezing water, spinning around in the speeding current as air burned his soaked face. Everything was cold and dark in shadow. Waterlogged wool sought to drag him back under as he kicked.

He may as well not have bothered for all it helped.

His lungs were burning savagely for air by the time he next came up from the dark water. A black, slick boulder shot past and he ineffectually grabbed for it, and then the river dunked him again.

Prey couldn't kick free to the currents edge, it was flowing too fast. The river was narrow, deep, and swift. The sheer ravine walls towered up from the water, offering no chance of being scaled.

The river abruptly plunged downwards, and just as he was going over the peak Prey saw Gloom and Scenic up ahead, clinging together and getting battered around and around in sprays of white water. Prey dropped and went under again. His back hooves managed to hit the bottom and he kicked upwards.

He broke from the river's surface again, still speeding along in the biting air and bitter water. He gasped and coughed.

More half submerged boulders shot past, and Prey tried to line himself up with one as he was getting spun around and around.

This one! Okay the next one. The next one. No this one.

A big boulder loomed ahead of Prey, and he hit it. The air left Prey's chest as he was flattened against the slick boulder by water pressure, but he was just able to hold on.

Prey tried to breathe as the freezing water continued to pound into his back, only his head above the dark water. He rested there, his cheek against the cold stone and panted, taking the moment's respite to catch his breath.

He couldn't stay here. He needed to get out of the river as soon as possible. Somehow. The longer he stayed in the water, the weaker he would get

'But in a minute. I just need a minute.'

Everything was numb and cold and hurting at the same time. Prey blinked water from his eyes as it streamed down his brow. A few inches below the end of his muzzle, the river rushed past, and his ears were caught in that flow, streaming out in the racing current.

Slowly, Prey managed to raise his head and lever himself half up out of the water, enough to be able to see over the top of the boulder at what lay ahead down the river.

Of Gloom, Scenic, and Crimson, there was no sign, just sheer rock walls, water, mist spray, and shadow. It didn't matter, he couldn't afford to focus on anyone but himself.

Ahead, Prey saw that the river curved to the right, and through the splashes and mist, Prey could make out the edge of something which looked like a flat bit of grey on the right. Was that a beach of some kind?

If it was a beach, and Prey desperately needed it to be, he had to get over onto the far side of the river. Opposite the beach and on this the left hoof side, the river would run fast and deep enough to drag him under.

Prey took as deep a breath of air as he could with the river hammering into his back, and then let the river drag him around the side of the boulder. Just as he was leaving contact with the slippery stone, he kicked off as best as he could manage into the river.

Immediately the current seized him for its own again. Prey tried to float and kick out as he was dragged along gathering speed again. Water splashed in his eyes and he only narrowly avoided getting brained against more boulders. The river bend was coming up very fast and the drag was getting stronger. Something cold and slimy touched his hoof.

The river whisked Prey around the bend before he was ready, and he kicked for all he was worth to stay on the right side. It *was* a beach, a narrow strip of land made up of a tangle of boulders, shattered tree trunks, and driftwood branches wedged between the rocks.

Prey's hooves touched rocky bottom, but he didn't manage to catch on, and the river sought to suck him back out into the middle. Prey gritted his teeth in panic and kicked. The bottom reappeared beneath his hooves and he caught hold.

On bruised and battered legs, coughing up water and shivering, Prey staggered out of the river.

He was freezing, and his waterlogged wool dragged at him as he carefully limped onto the uneven beach, dripping ears sodden. Boulders ranging from the size of Prey's head to ones as big as cottages lay jumbled all across the dirty grey sand.

Shivering, Prey hugged himself. He was cold, wet, exhausted, bruised, and stuck at the bottom of a sheer ravine.

His legs and shins especially hurt from where he'd banged them against any number of submerged rocks in the racing water, but Prey tried to push that aside for now. He was still alive.

He shook himself like a dog, trying to get rid of even some of the water. It didn't help much, he was still soaked. And cold. He'd lost his canteen at some point in the river, but water was the least of his concerns right now. Prey's eyes widened.

His hoof flew to where his ribbon should be. A sigh of relief left his mouth when he found the soggy piece of silk still there. Only then did Prey think to check if the rolled up cloth bag was still wrapped around his middle.

It was, and it was just as soaked as him, but what was inside the bag didn't matter if it got wet. Shivering, aching, and teeth beginning to chatter, Prey pulled the rolled up cloth loop over his head and shook it out.

He pulled the sopping drawstring open and shoved his hoof inside, digging right down into the bottom corner for what he sought. While doing so, he glanced nervously around the boulders and tree skeletons.

The beach felt desolate, hidden, and unsafe. This deep down the ravine, dark shadows were cast everywhere and the thick mist made outlines blurry past ten yards. The rushing river hid any sounds of approach that someone or something might've been making.

Prey's questing hoof found the lone item the soaked bag contained

right at the bottom and he pulled it free. The last two remaining black seed pods. Now shivering hard enough that he almost dropped them, Prey broke open one of the pods. Water had gotten in, and the white pith inside had turned slimy, but the black seeds were just fine.

Prey threw the empty pod away and took the two seeds, swallowed the first whole and then forced himself to bite down and chew the second.

It was foul, even by Prey's standards. He gagged, and rushed to the river and washed the taste down. Then he sat on the sand, hugging his legs to himself and shivered. He looked around, but saw no sign of the others. They must've been swept past this grey boulder beach and further down the river.

Within two minutes, the seed he'd chewed up had started to kick in. An uncomfortable feeling spread out from his stomach, like he'd swallowed something bad, but it brought with it a jumpy kind of heat, and at least it helped deal with the shivering. Prey got back to his hooves, the nervous energy flushing through his legs and lending him the strength to ignore the way they twinged and shook.

'Priorities. Find some way out of the ravine. Get somewhere safe. Find shelter. Then worry about what happened to Crimson and finding and murdering the warlock.' Prey thought.

He stood back up, grey sand sticking to his wet wool and fur. He didn't bother brushing it off.

The beach was fairly narrow, no more than nine yards across at its widest point, although that could change up ahead in the obscuring mist. Prey had to pick his way across the ranging boulders, avoiding deep cracks that would twist his ankle as he picked his way over towards the ravine wall. He ducked under a twisted tree trunk, suspended where it'd jammed between two huge boulders.

Prey tried looking upwards, but although he knew he should be able to see the top of the ravine, all he could see was the grey of mist. It could be ten paces or a hundred to the top, but he didn't see any way to climb up either way. It was too steep, and in his current

condition and with nothing like convenient hoofholds on the hostile face of rock, it would be basically impossible.

Prey shivered again, and paused to wring some water from the ends of his ears. His hooves were numb, but from the nervous energy of the seeds he'd eaten, not the cold. 'Well there's no getting out here. Only choice is to continue travelling on down the beach and keep looking for a way up and out.'

There had been rain clouds building up against the Ridgeback mountains for days now. It would be just typical if a freezing flash flood came roaring down the ravine to dash him to pieces against the rocks. He needed to get out of the ravine. And desperately hope the warlock didn't know some other way down here, or where this beach ended up so they could send the reaper king to wait. The warlock would come looking for bodies. They were methodical.

That golem of theirs was an utter monster. It went so far beyond the capabilities and limitations of the previous scarecrow. What they'd desperately fought so hard against back in Mayflower to survive had been nothing more than a prototype. The test model for the reaper king. The warlock had merely been perfecting their craft with the scarecrow.

And now they had a huge, unstoppable, magic wielding, undead construct capable of ripping untiringly through solid stone, created using the minds of some poor murdered villagers. The only thing the reaper King couldn't do was fly, but with the magical means of ripping any airborne opponent out of the sky, it didn't even matter.

The warlock had wanted to cover every weakness of their twisted masterpiece.

And they were sending it after Prey, hunting him down like a rabbit. Like he was nothing more than a fresh piece of quarry. If Prey found this warlock, they were dead. Dead a hundred times over.

'I'll kill you, I'll *kill* you, just you wait.'

Prey stopped and dropped down behind a low boulder. What was

that he'd seen by the water up ahead?

Something dark, lying low, details obscured by the mist.

Prey pressed himself up close against the cold stone as he looked out again from his hiding spot.

That dark shape, lying at the lapping waters edge half in and half out, it looked like...Yes, it was a body.

Prey scuttled closer over the traitorously uneven stones, the rushing of the river picking back up as he sought to get closer. Who was it? It was darkly coloured, was it Gloom?

Prey's hooves slowed, and then came to a stop.

This wasn't Gloom. Nor was it Crimson. In fact, Prey didn't know what it was lying smashed and broken before him. Prey knew *who* it was supposed to be, but as to *what*?

Prey had no clue.

The mist parted to reveal a black, pony shaped body. But that's where the similarities ended, and not because its back half was a shattered, squashed mess of green mush and black shards.

A heavily fanged maw gaped open in a soundless snarl, a long tongue lying limp from its broken jaw. Green seeped from the cracks in its shattered head, dull, solid blue eyes sightlessly staring into eternity.

Its body looked like it was covered in some sort of black plate armour. Or like an insect's hide. Smooth, hard and glossy, like a wasp's carapace.

It had wings to match a wasp too, but what Prey's eyes gravitated towards was the twisted horn upon its head. Wings and a horn. If it weren't for the fact this twisted thing was clearly dead, Prey would've been terrified this was some sort of alicorn. That didn't mean he wasn't afraid of what he'd found. It was unknown, alien, strange, dangerous.

Prey lifted a foreleg to cover his nose. Even in the cold and wet, the sour acidic stench of the green pulped innards rose above the mist and sought to get into his lungs. It really was just like a giant cockroach.

'A cockroach. How...Fitting.' Prey recognised that battered Border Guard armour the broken thing was wearing. This was Shimmer. Or the *real* Shimmer.

And Prey had no idea what he was looking at.

What was it? How dangerous was it? How had it looked like a pony?

'Some kind of illusionary disguise? But I never felt any ongoing magic surrounding Shimmer. Some kind of afflicted unicorn species in hiding like the thestral clans did perhaps?'

Was the unicorn somehow turned into this by black magic? No, he'd been hit by a tonne of stone, not magic, so Shimmer had always been this...*This*.

Prey's face contorted in disgust. All that time, the filthy Border Guard unicorn had been even more wrong and twisted than he'd even imagined.

How many more of these things were in the Border Guard? It was a sentient monster, making it incredibly dangerous with its ability to disguise itself so well.

'I could never get past Shimmer's mental walls to read his mind. Is this why?' Prey asked himself, although he had no way of knowing.

And the hooffull of other people Prey had encountered before whose minds he also couldn't hear, did this mean they were each one of these monsters to? Prey's thoughts immediately flashed to Crimson. But no, that couldn't be true, could it?

He didn't know. There were so many nasty questions laid before him, and threats he hadn't even been aware existed.

Prey spat on the insect thing's face. No matter what it was now, it'd

been masquerading as the Border Guard unicorn called Shimmer. Prey decided to dub the thing a Mimic until he learned otherwise.

Prey had no idea where this Mimic came from, what its objective had been, or what it would've done to him in the end. He only had his observations from what Shimmer had displayed, and who knew how much of that was an act?

Steeling himself, Prey grabbed a hold of the Mimic by its head and began dragging the top half of it's remains away from the water as best he could. The sour stink kicked up a notch immediately, but Prey breathed through his mouth as he wrestled the Mimic between boulders and over the rocks. The green mash of organs stayed behind.

The thing's skin was cold and hard. Looking closely, he saw lots of fine joints covering the Mimic's carapace and hinging all the smaller plates. He left a thick trail of green on the stones, which sluggishly trickled down into the cracks.

It was only a few yards, but Prey was panting hard by the time he got to a suitable crevice under a huge boulder, and his shoulders were burning with a numb pain. Those two seeds had only granted him some extra energy and fooled his body into thinking it was warm, they hadn't actually healed him in the slightest, it only felt like it.

Prey rolled the Mimic's remains into the crevice, and then went about firmly wedging it in there with rocks and driftwood. It was unlikely he'd be able to come back, but if he survived and had time, he might be able to retrieve the Mimic's body.

Prey straightened up painfully, and took a deep gulp of air. It stunk. Prey ignored that, and started picking his way down the beach again, travelling quicker than was actually safe over the slippery smooth stones.

Every minute lost was one minute closer to an untimely death, and he still hadn't seen any clues for how to get out of here yet. Boulders loomed unsettlingly in the mist ahead, each appearing as the outline of the waiting reaper king. Prey feared the beach would

narrow off and come to an end before he found a way out of the ravine, and he'd be left with no choice but to re-enter the freezing river. He wasn't sure he would survive a second dip.

But the boulder beach didn't end. In fact, it kept widening, the ravine walls growing further and further apart and losing detail in the mist on either side of him.

The mist dampened all noise. Prey had expected there to be swarms of biting insects this close to the water. There were none. It was eerily silent.

Prey slowed his pace as he entered the widening beach, placing each hoof with care to prevent any hoof clops in the rocks. He was still dripping water, but he couldn't do anything about the wet trail he left. Prey tried to compensate by sticking to the large boulders for cover.

When Crimson suddenly swooped out of the mist, calling, "Prey, Gloom, anypony! Please, answer me!" Prey nearly had a heart attack as he instinctively dived beneath a scoured tree trunk. But it wasn't an enemy, just Crimson.

The red pegasus banked in the air, twisting about frantically as he searched, sending huge plumes of mist silently shooting up, "Anypony? Please answer."

Prey couldn't see Crimson's expression as he wheeled above, but his voice sounded as desperate as Prey had ever heard it. He must've been flying up and down the beach for the last quarter of an hour, trying to find anyone.

'He's scared we're dead and he's all alone.'

Crimson flapped further up the beach, passing almost right over Prey's hiding spot, calling uselessly into the mist, "Scenic, are you out there? Gloom sir?"

Prey was about to step out and join back up with Crimson. But he stopped before he left the tree trunk's shadow.

'Hang on, why should I?'

If Crimson was so worried about him, then he shouldn't have trusted Shimmer, or Lilly, or gone into the Wolfing Woods, or any of the other dumb things he'd done to throw Prey's life into jeopardy. Why should Prey rejoin Crimson?

'Because I owe him?'

It was a question. Did he still owe Crimson? He'd be better off doing this himself and going it alone. Prey knew how to fight solo, how to lay traps and hide in the shadows to pick off his enemies one at a time.

'I could fight this warlock better by myself.'

In a few seconds Crimson would be gone; "Anypony? *Anybody*?"

Prey winced. It would hurt Crimson, but it was for the best. It's not like he was running away, since he couldn't with the tracer bands still on him, and Luna would never know he'd deliberately split off from the others.

'If the others even survived the river, that is.'

Wait. If Crimson kept flying up the river, he'd find the Mimic's body Prey had stashed. Crimson's special talent let him scent even the smallest traces of blood. There was no way he could miss the smashed open Mimic, even if the blood was green and alien. A flash of panic jumped through Prey's chest, 'He can't know that I also know about Mimics!'

"Crimson!" The faint rasping shout drifted out of the mist, back from the way Crimson had come.

Crimson spun around in the air, "Who's there?" He shouted back in hope.

"It's me Gloom. I've got Scenic here with me." Gloom's faint voice drifted out of the mist again, sounding strained and bone weary.

"I'm on my way sir." Crimson called, stooping forwards in the air

and speeding back the way he'd come, in less than a heartbeat vanishing in a swirl of grey mist.

'Gloom and Scenic also both survived the river?' Prey thought with some shock, 'Odds were at least one of us should've drowned.'

That didn't mean Gloom or Scenic had survived without injury though.

But this was his chance! Crimson would be too busy occupied helping Gloom and Scenic to keep searching for him. Prey could slip quietly away.

'Except I'll still be trapped here in this ravine either way.' Prey thought dully.

Prey knew the ravine walls had to eventually open and level off, allowing him to climb out, in fact the steep walls were already starting to do just that. The question was, would this strip of beach stretch as far as that? If the beach ended before the ravine also ended, then Prey would be forced to re-enter the dark water. And a second time would just be suicide.

'I'll be trapped down here.'

Prey was better off by himself, he knew that without any doubt. It was the way it'd always been.

But...But Crimson could fly. He could get out of the ravine at any point, and with the magic of his jade necklace, he could carry Scenic and Gloom up one at a time even if both were too injured to move from the fall.

Crimson could...carry Prey up too?

'No!' Prey recoiled from the very idea of anyone ever touching him, even Crimson. The mere thought was repugnant. Even the memory of those insensate fools thinking he must be some touch starved foal filled him with revulsion.

'No. No way, no how.'

Even in a life or death situation such as this, trying to mentally prepare himself to let anyone touch him made Prey feel physically sick, his stomach roiling, 'No. No no nope no.'

But the mist, the reaper king, the warlock, him being trapped down here, the Mimic and what had happened with the Wolf Wood, all of that...

Prey's head slowly turned to the side and he stared up into the grey mist. Somewhere above, the ravine's edge lay.

.....thump...thump... Softly getting louder, and closer.

The warlock had not trusted gravity and the river to finish the job. They'd sent the reaper king to follow and make sure. And Crimson and Gloom's shouts just now had drawn its attention through the mist.

Thump

---I---

Author's Notes:

Hello to anyone who read this chapter! Hope you liked it. We've finally gotten to see (read) what the reaper king looks like. The new big bad is here. 🎃

Also, who saw the signs of Shimer being a changeling? [image]

Special thanks to the editor: **Sweetolebob18**, and also everyone else who helps by pointing out mistakes. So if you see any mistakes, please let me know. 🎃

Thank you for everyone who left an idea for what to do with Lilly Blossom. I have taken them into account and made my plans.

50.3 Sing a Song for your Reaper

Author's Notes:

It's been advised to me that this Arc is really depressing, and is starting to drag. unfortunately, I've done so much set up that I'm kinda' trying to write myself out from a corner and just get events over with. Mostly managed it. There will only be one more chapter in this Arc!

Also, I've gotten to 600K words, so yey for that too.

Editor: Sweetolebob18

P.S. Sorry for the delay, due to reasons of me messing up. [image]

Raven magpie fly away, Scarecrow keep at bay~

Wheat n' barley dance and sway, Harvest king, come to play~

When Gloom saw Prey running out of the mist, the first thing the thestral felt was plunging relief. He swayed on his hooves for a second, so strong was the surge of relief at seeing the last unaccounted for member of his unit still alive.

"Prey?" He exclaimed.

Crimson's head whipped up from examining the soaked, unconscious form of Scenic, Gloom having somehow managed to keep both himself and the Earth pony from drowning in the speeding river current. Although how he'd managed it, Gloom

would never know.

"Prey! Oh thank Luna."

That feeling of relief changed as Gloom realised Prey wasn't slowing, and as he fully emerged from the mist, the lamb's expression became clearer.

"Prey-?"

"It's coming, the reaper king." Small stones clattered as Prey skidded to a stop, "It's here!"

Gloom didn't even have it left in him to be surprised that anything further could go wrong, "How, how did it find...?"

"With you shouting out your position of course," Prey spat in accusation. His glare was hot, "I shouldn't have come back. I should never have *cared*."

"We need to get out of here right now." Crimson said grabbing Scenic around his chest and with a heave, lifted the Earth pony, armour and all, onto his back. With the borrowed strength of the magical necklace, Crimson didn't more than grunt as the weight settled.

Gloom stared in worry at the unconscious Scenic, still dripping water, "Can you fly him up out-?"

"Up and out is where the reaper king is waiting," Crimson interrupted, shaking his head, "And if I get caught in the air by its magic aura again..."

"Then-"

"Up the beach," Prey hissed, jabbing a hoof ahead, "Our only hope is that the ravine levels out up the beach."

Prey didn't wait to see if they listened to his warning, he was already moving. He shouldn't have come back. Why had he?

They couldn't hide, the reaper king had its foul magic to scan for

them. Nor could they fight back. They were in no condition to do so, and had no hope of winning.

The only option left was to flee and pray they could ran fast and far enough.

Slipping over spray drenched boulders, the mist hindering their vision, they cantered, ran, or tripped as fast as they could down the beach.

The reaper king was coming. They needed to get out and back up into the forest before it trapped them like rats down here.

Even if the warlock could track them through the forest, as long as they could keep moving and stay just ahead, they had a chance. A slim chance, but a chance. It was one of the rules of war, one which Prey had learned through harsh experience. Never stop moving, never back yourself into a corner, and always have an escape route.

Not following this rule was how they'd ended up in this mess in the first place.

They shouldn't have stopped and hidden with Shimmer in that cave. It had been a fatal mistake, Prey had feared that all along, and it'd cost that Mimic masquerading as Shimmer his life in the end.

'Why did the Mimic try to distract the reaper king? Why didn't it just run and leave us?' None of it made sense. Shimmer had acted as a distraction for Crimson right at the end. But why?

Prey didn't know the answer. He didn't know a lot right now.

Prey was tired. He was so tired. The energy from the two seeds he'd eaten did not help the leaden drag in his limbs, or the raspiness in the back of his throat as he hurried.

If he just had the time to prepare an area with enough runes, he could beat the reaper king and the warlock. Twenty-four hours alone, and he could do it.

'But no, you spent the time making bone rot mines instead didn't you?' Prey berated himself.

If he had the materials, the energy, the time-! But he didn't. Instead here he was, running for his life, terrified, likely to die, and being hunted.

'Why did I step out to warn Gloom and Crimson? Why didn't I just split off like I meant to?' Another question Prey didn't know the answer to. He should've run. He'd meant to, but he somehow hadn't.

He hadn't wanted to run again and leave Crimson behind.

'Zoma'Grika, foolish, sloppy, Glom'die, sentimental, crybaby.' He should know better. He *did* know better. The Resistance had taught him better.

The river seemed to be slowing, or the turbid rushing of water was getting weaker at least. Prey tried to pick up his pace. On either side of him, Gloom and Crimson did the same as the boulder beach began to broaden, Scenic's head lolling up and down on Crimson's back.

Was it getting lighter? A brightening from above? It was hard to tell in the grey mist, but if it was, it might mean the ravine walls were receding.

.....ump.....thump*...Thump*

Prey slipped on a smooth stone as his head whipped around and stared up, even if he knew he wouldn't see anything through the mist.

Crimson's wings, which he was using to keep Scenic on his back, began to bristle all by themselves. Gloom's ears had gone back and his slit pupil's shrank to razor blade edges. But they didn't stop, slow, or speak.

Thump, *Thump*

It was coming from somewhere up on their left, on the other side of the river, reverberating thuds as the reaper king swung itself forwards on its huge upper arms.

Ka-thump, Ka-Thump

It sounded like it was gaining speed, it was right alongside them now.

Ka-Thump,Ka-Thump,Ka-Thump

It was going to outrun them. The noise was pulling ahead, their efforts for speed useless.

"Turn! The ravine wall's getting lower on our right." Gloom rasped, voice desperate.

Prey kicked off the cracked boulder he was on to change direction, doing as Gloom had said and making for the right. His spiked heart was thumping in his throat.

Then, from on the left side of the ravine, the pounding run of the reaper king ceased. A silent breath. There was no time to celebrate, for it was immediately replaced by the almighty din of collapsing rock and tumbling earth crashing into the river.

Crimson faltered for a fraction of a second in his run, "It...fell?"

"No. It jumped." Prey whispered as realisation dawned.

Behind them, came the sound of a huge fountain of water surging onto the stone, as something large heaved itself out of the river.

"Wha's...What was that?" Scenic blearily asked, as he chose this exact moment to return to semi-consciousness.

"Stay still Scenic!"

"Wh-wha's happen-Sir? Gloom?"

"I said stay still, that's the reaper king we're running from!"

More loud sounds of splashing and sloshing behind them in the mist, mixed with the grating shifting of stones as the reaper king climbed from the river.

"We need out of the ravine right now!" Prey squeaked, throwing his caution about twisting a leg to the winds and just flat out sprinting.

"What! What's happening? Let me down I'll run on my own." Prey heard Scenic struggling in fear, huge boulders looming all around them as they raced through the maze of mist.

It wasn't just Prey's imagination, the mist *was* getting lighter in tones of grey. The ravine was opening up, they just had to find a way out in time. The right hoof wall of the ravine was right alongside them now as they raced, but there was no sign of it getting low enough to climb.

Why wasn't there a way out, a path down that animals came to drink from? Something, *anything*. There had to be, Prey was running over splattered bird droppings.

No.

Oh no. No no no!

The ravine wall was curving back towards the left, the sound of the river getting closer again. The beach was narrowing back to a point and they still hadn't found a way out. The reaper king was behind them, they had to get out-

Crawling invisible insects suddenly washed over Prey's face and squirmed in his ears. The reaper king had just used its foul scanning magic again to locate them!

In the mist behind them Prey heard the crunching of rocks and then a huge groaning of stone.

"It's no good, we'll have to fly out." Gloom grunted.

"We can't, its magic will-"

"Dodge left!" Prey screamed.

Without question, Crimson and Gloom followed Prey in diving to the left. If they'd hesitated for even half a moment, the enormous boulder which sailed out of the mist would've crushed them.

*Kra-**CAAck***

The impact pelted them all with flying bits of rock and nearly knocked them from their hooves. A flying pebble cracked across Prey's jaw with bruising force and he yelped at the sudden shock of pain.

"Ponyfeathers!" Scenic yelled in fear from atop Crimson's back as he saw the size of the boulder which'd just missed them.

'It's become a mobile siege weapon!' Prey thought, gasping for breath.

Prey's ear twitched, "Right!" He yelled at the same time as Scenic unhelpfully shouted, "Dodge!"

Another boulder hurtled out of the mist, spinning end over end. It hit to their left with another deafening smash of stone on stone. It didn't bounce or ricochet, it sunk exactly where it landed so heavy and large was it.

"That's it! We're flying, magic be damned." Gloom exclaimed.

The rattling whirlwind inhale started up behind them in the mist, like a hungry gale as the reaper king began to suck in all the ambient magic in the area.

"We're not flying." Gloom immediately changed his mind, "Run!"

'Are you blind? What does it look like I'm doing?!' But they were running out of beach and were almost back at the river already, and there was still no sign of a way out and the reaper king was just about to use its magic again and Prey didn't want to die and he could tastebloodin*hismouthand*-

"Here!" Crimson suddenly shouted jerking to a stop.

'Wha-?' Prey almost fell as he tried to turn as sharply as Crimson had, cleft hooves skittering for purchase on stone.

Gloom's wings flared against the air as he teetered off balance on only two legs as he also sought to stop, "W-?"

"An exit." Crimson shouted. "Way out!" Scenic whinnied.

Prey saw it. In the ravine wall lay a sudden split, a missing triangular wedge of stone. A crack fromed the wedges peak, zig-zagging up the ravine's face and was lost in the grey mist above.

The opening formed a jagged tunnel sloping steeply upwards, but it wasn't a cave because up at the other end, grey light coming through. It was a way out, and too low and narrow for the reaper king to ever follow them through!

Crimson was already tipping Scenic off of his back as it was too narrow for anything but single file, all the while gesturing frantically at them two, "Go!"

Prey hadn't waited to be asked. He'd dashed headlong up the rocky tunnel the moment he'd spotted the exit.

The world closed above him, his harsh panting echoing back to him. Prey legs burning as he tried to power along up the steep tunnel as fast as he could, hooves sinking into a mess of sharp rock shards as he struggled upwards. He gasped for breath, and he felt water trickling underneath the loose stones every time his hooves sunk into the sharp gravel.

He could see the lopsided grey wedge of light above him getting closer. He pushed his legs harder, breath sawing in the back of his throat.

There was only one goal. 'Get out before the reaper king uses its gathered magic.'

Prey staggered out of the tunnel, and almost immediately slipped on a mist dampened moss. There was the trickle and splash of of water into a small pool very close by, and once Prey had managed to regain his footing, he saw he was actually in a tiny rock grotto.

It was an open pocket of space, about ten hooves deep. Moss and wet vines trailed all over the water smoothed stone walls and dripped into the pool by his hoof. Tiny natural milky crystals speckled the walls. Centuries of erosion had dug out this grotto, and the tunnel he'd just climbed up from was where the water had cut a drain.

In another time, in another place, the appearance of such a grotto within this dark forest might've been breath taking.

All Prey saw was the open top of the grotto and the shapes of trees above. The way out back into the forest. Even with all its dangers, Prey couldn't think of a more beautiful sight in that moment.

Sliding shale and stones, and Gloom kicked his way up out of the tunnel into the grotto. He slipped on the wet moss and fell into the shallow pool with a splash of cold water which hit Prey in the face before he could turn away.

Gloom's exclamation of pain as he landed on his stitched up flank was ignored by Prey.

It was all secondary to the sounds of scrabbling echoing up the tunnel, along with the heavy muffled crunch of the reaper king swinging its way over.

'-oh mother oh Celestia oh Tarturas-', From the hole, Scenic's helmeted head popped up, panting and eyes wide in his ashen face. Gloom locked ankles with Scenic and hurriedly pulled him up, and they both slipped and fell into the pool again with a splash and clatter of armour. Scenic frantically struggled to get up, his thoughts a panicking mess.

"It's coming after us!"

"Not possible, it can't fit up the tunnel." Gloom protested, muddy and dripping

"It's-" Traces of orange light spilled up the tunnel. Prey's heart nearly jumped from his throat and out of his mouth. The reaper king had reached the other end of the tunnel and was crouching down to look up the other end! But there were only three of them up here.

'Where's Crimson?'

Prey dashed to the hole and was promptly knocked over as Crimson shot out of the steep tunnel like a cork from a bottle. Crimson almost seemed to flow like water as he contorted his body for

purchase on the moss and jumped to the side and out of the line of sight from the hole.

Not a moment too soon. The skin crawling sensation of the reaper king's auraless telekinesis swarmed past Prey as it grasped at Crimson's tail, half a breath too late.

"Stay back from the hole! It'll try to grab you." Crimson exclaimed, in case it hadn't been blindingly obvious.

Below, there was a scraping crunch as the reaper king's enormous clawed hands tore at the entrance down on its end. However the slanted tunnel of rock was at least twenty-five hooves in length. As far as the golem's long arms could reach, there was no way for it to reach up this far.

Prey felt light headed so intense was his relief. They'd escaped the ravine in the nick of time.

"Still alive." He sagged against the damp, vine strewn wall. Just for a moment. Then, he could start climbing out of the grotto. All of them could. The warlock was still hunting them, they were still trapped in the forest, and the reaper king would climb out of the ravine eventually, but for the moment, they were still alive. Still alive!

The orange light was still shining up the tunnel's hole. The reaper king had stopped tearing at the entrance and gone quiet. And then came the deafening rattle of inhaled air, vines on the walls swaying as the air was sucked down the hole.

But that didn't affect them, the grotto was open to the air, it wasn't a cave so they couldn't suffocate. And if the warlock had some other kind of ranged magic aside from telekinesis, surely they would've used it by now instead of inaccurately launching boulders at them on the beach-

In one long stretched second, in that tiniest seesaw time between when the reaper king switched from inhaling to exhaling, there was a tiny pause.

In that sliver of time, no more than the shaving off a second, Prey *knew*.

It wasn't a thought, or a connection, or putting the pieces together. It was a flash of remembering something he'd known all along. He hadn't forgotten, but he hadn't realised what it meant either. Until now.

The dell Fallen Leaf had lead them to through the mist. The dead forest creatures sprawled in the water. Rotting flesh. Dried, bloody froth leaking from the boar's cracked lips and nostrils. Blinded white eyes. Poisoned.

Later, Prey didn't know why he shouted the warning. He could've taken that precious second instead to try and get out of the grotto. He'd been about to abandon them all back down in the ravine anyways.

Prey would later rationalise he'd done it because his best chance of survival lay with help from the others. That he did it for his own benefit.

Perhaps he even really did, because Prey never risked his life for anyone but himself.

In that moment before the milky white cloud of poison rolled up the tunnel and billowed out into the grotto, Prey screamed out his warning even as he dived onto the moss; "Poison! Cover eyes, block nose, hold breath. If you breathe, only sacrifice your throat!"

The last thing he heard and saw before he pressed his own floppy ears over his eyes like a makeshift blindfold, was a hollow whooshing followed by a burning wash of billowing white. Then there was only the blackness of his own eyelids, and the thudding of blood in his ears.

Prey squeezed his eyes shut as tightly as he could manage. Blackness. He could see nothing. The warmth of blood running under the skin of his ears pressed up to his face, his mouth and nose buried in the crook of one leg. Wet moss and slimy mud under his belly. He couldn't see or couldn't feel it, but he was surrounded by

poison.

He couldn't breathe, he just had to hold his breath and wait.

But his heart was pounding and already his mind was trying to trick him into believing his lungs were burning. 'Don't breathe. Don't breathe. Don't breathe.'

Perhaps the cloud of poison had passed them by? Floated out up into the forest? The grotto was open after all.

There was no way to tell.

He couldn't feel anything different in the air, it was just as cold and damp as before. His fur was standing on end, but he couldn't actually tell anything.

He was trapped in his own dark little bundle of fear of his own making. It was just him, he hadn't a clue if the others had managed to heed his warning. He could only lie on the grotto floor, holding his breath, and covering his eyes.

How long could the poison linger in the air? How long could he hold his breath?

'Thirty-three...thirty-four... thirty-five...'

Prey wanted to breathe. It was like being submerged in the river all over again. Prey needed to breathe.

'Sixty-three...sixty-four-"

Someone rolled into Prey, thrashing about. Prey curled tighter into a ball, all his thoughts consumed with breathing and not breathing.

His eyes were squeezed so tight shut they were hurting. And then they began to sting, and then burn.

It felt like just smoke in his eyes at first, or an eyelash, then suddenly it became sand, then burning sand. A whimper of fear and pain built in the back of Prey's throat.

He clenched his eyes as tightly shut as he could, driving his ears tighter against his face to try and make a seal. And then a needle was being driven into the corners of his eyes as tears began to steam. And he needed to breathe!

He *had* to breathe! Muffled, he heard a gurgled scream of agony from somewhere. He hardly even registered it because; 'AirAirAirAirAir!'

'-hurts hurts breathe pain hurt-'

'-don't need to breathe, don't need to breathe, don't-breathe! AgghHHhHAA-'

Shuddering mental walls, crumbling as they were undermined by the all consuming need; '-I am the master of my body. I am the master. I control me, not my instincts-'

But everyone has to breathe. It was the truth every drowning victim learned at the end. Eventually, you had to open your mouth and breathe.

With a cry of frustration and despair, Prey gasped.

Prey tasted numbness on his tongue, and then his throat was burnt dry and then scoured open with with a broken glass bottle.

Prey screamed through gritted teeth, digging his face even harder into the crook of his leg. He couldn't open his eyes, he couldn't be blind as well!

Then he began coughing and choking. His throat was cracking open, it was so dry and it burned. it hurt, it hurt and he couldn't breathe again because his throat was closing over and it *burned*.

And every time he breathed he sucked in another gasp of burning poison.

'Burning, need water. *Water*!' The slain animals in the glen had all dragged themselves to the water, desperate to make the burning stop.

'The pool of water,' Prey's mind screamed in pain at him, 'Get the water.'

Prey heard splashing, coughing and chokes of pain. Someone else had realised the same thing as him. Still blind, with his eyes squeezed shut, coughing and whimpering, Prey pushed himself across the pulverised moss to the pool of water and plunged his face it.

Prey sucked in water, and got a mouth full of mud to go along with it, but he gulped it down heedlessly. It didn't help, his throat was still dry agony. He had to breathe, and drink, and breathe, and drink-

No! Prey turned his head and puked out the water. Then he shoved his face back into the pool, took anther gulp, swirled it around his mouth and then spat it out to the side, water dribbling down his chin as he did so again and again.

Gulp, rinse, puke, repeat.

His gut hurt, his throat hurt, his eyes hurt, but with each repetition he washed more traces of the poison from his savaged throat. He swallowed mud, he swallowed water, the pool began to run low as everyone desperately did the same, until Prey couldn't do it anymore.

He lay on his side, rasping, throat a tight ball of pain, and weakly panted for air.

It slowly dawned on Prey through the grey tinted pain of his mind that he was breathing. Badly, with his throat swollen half shut, each breath like a wire scourer, but breathing nonetheless.

The cloud of poison must've dissipated into the air, carried out of the open grotto and into the misty forest above.

Slowly, jerkily, Prey rolled onto his back, still trapped in the dark behind his own eyes. He felt utterly sick. And his throat hurt. Slowly, he cracked open swollen eyes, just a tiny sliver.

His eyes felt peeled raw the moment the cool air hit them, and fresh

tears immediately started to flow. But there was no fresh burn of poison. He squinted, desperately hoping his already less than perfect eyesight hadn't been further destroyed.

Grey mist, the edges of the grotto's top above him. It was all blurry, but he had no way of telling if it was just the pain or if it was permanent damage. He whimpered again, just for good measure, and then sat up.

His head swam with the action, and he was sure he was going to be sick again. The thought of stomach acid coming up his ravaged throat at that moment was...horrifying. He'd likely choke to death.

But he hadn't breathed in even once through his nose. Only his mouth. It was only his throat that'd been destroyed, he could now still breathe through his nose.

'How long?' Prey muzzily wondered, 'How long was that? The poison couldn't have lingered in the air for more than two or three minutes... Was that really only three minutes?'

But Prey knew how pain could obliterate time, make it's passage inconsequential.

He blinked raw eyes, face screwed up as he tried to clear his swimming vision. He looked towards the tunnel through which the poison cloud had billowed. The orange light was gone. The reaper king had left.

'Left to find a way out of the ravine and come up here to make sure of its kills.' Prey realised in fear. It never ended, it just, never, *stopped*. The warlock would just keep coming and coming and coming and *coming*. They would never stop.

Prey finally turned his stinging eyes on the others. He'd been hearing three different ragged sets of breathing even as he lay, each distinctly different in the way it caught and the tone of its painful hitch.

Gloom, Scenic, and Crimson.

Gloom was lying with his hooves under him, wings wrapped around

his head so Prey couldn't see his face. Mud and pulverised moss were smeared all across his body and armour.

Scenic lay on his side, half in the remains of the pool, now nothing but mud, his helmet thrown off. He moaned with every inhale of breath. His face looked horrible. His eye were swollen up alarmingly in their sockets, and the skin under his eyes where the tears had run was blistered, like he'd been crying acid instead of salt water.

'The poison was washed away in concentrated form in the tears.' Prey's mind automatically analysed. Actually, because they'd held their breath for the first minute, they'd likely each only gotten a diluted dose, the poison having already half drifted out of the open grotto by that point.

But even with their eyes tightly closed, traces of the poison cloud had still managed to creep in.

Very, very gently Prey used just the very tip of his hoof to lightly brush at his own tear ducts.

He choked as it felt like his hoof peeled his cheek open to the muscle, so raw was it. Prey's hooves hovered just in front of his face, desperate to touch and find out the damage, but just as desperate not to cause himself that pain again.

'Don't touch, don't think about it. What about Crimson?' Yes, what about the person Prey owed? What about the pony who'd thrown them all to the wolves with the Wolfing Wood?

Prey painfully turned his head to see. Crimson was slumped against the grotto wall, the only one of them who wasn't lying on the floor. He looked...Much like Scenic. Muddy, filthy, face swollen, cracked bleeding lips, and blistered tear tracks. But not quite as bad at the Earth pony, like Crimson had been able to better protect his eyes. He was sitting upright, at the very least.

Around Crimson's neck, the twinkling jade necklace sat glittering. Prey wondered if it had anything to do with Crimson's relatively good condition. Relatively meaning 'probably not blind for life'.

"...uys'." Prey tried to speak, and then clutched at his throat and moaned.

It hurt to breathe, but it hurt even more to speak. But Prey had to speak. He had to get them moving. They had to leave the grotto before the reaper king climbed its way out of the ravine and came up here.

His chest throbbed. That was his lungs.

Each time he swallowed was raw agony, and the more he tried not to think about swallowing the harder it became. Prey tried to speak again, "Cr'mson? 'Loom? ...Any'ne?"

No response. Scenic and Gloom's thoughts were a hazy, incoherent mess. Prey forced himself to try raising his voice, "Cr'mson? 'Loom? ...Any'ne? Poison's gone, floated out...Op'n your 'eyes."

Prey forced himself to stand up. He was so drained and miserable and battered, but he somehow made his legs obey him. 'I can still move. I can't speak but I can move and walk. The poison didn't ruin my body. So stop sitting around and do something you idiot before the reaper king comes to kill us all.'

Prey stiffly scooped up a hoof full of gritty mud, and threw it on Gloom's wings, currently spread over the thestral's head. Gloom twitched.

"G'it' up." Prey wheezed.

"G'it up. Can't stay 'ere." He tiredly scooped up more mud and began weakly tossing it at the others, the effort of walking over to them almost too much to face right now.

"G'it up!"

Slowly, jerkily, Crimson pushed himself off from the stone wall, caught vines trailing in his feathers.

" 'rey...?" Crimson croaked. His swollen eyes cracked open, and Prey saw the whites had turned red with burst blood vessels, with the familiar bright, golden yellow of his eyes gone cloudy and

unfocused. But he focused on Prey, so he could still see.

"Yes Crimson. 'S me," Prey waved a limp hoof, "C'mon. We got to...'go. C'n't stay 'ere. 'Eaper king 'iz coming."

"...'eaper king?" Crimson mumbled, standing upright now but swaying.

Prey screwed his face up in pain as he tried to get the words out clearly, "The reaper kin'g iz' coming. Got to es'ape right now."

One of Gloom's wings withdrew from over his head, revealing the thestral's screwed up face to the world. His face and eyes looked worse than Crimson's, but better than Scenic's. His cracked and bleeding lips were pulled back from his teeth, and the fangs he usually so carefully hid in others company were fully bared in pain.

"W'at...?" Gloom rasped, squinting around and trying to get his bearings.

'-where am I? Where are we? The...cave thingy...my throat, it hurts-'

"Up." Crimson walked over with stilted steps, and started pulling the sprawled thestral up. His magic necklace let of a flash of green, and Crimson hauled Gloom up to his hooves in one go. They both staggered.

"S'rry." Crimson mumbled, trying to steady Gloom.

" 'm okay. Okay... 'm 'kay." Gloom tried to say, definitely not okay. None of them were okay. All of their breathing was ragged and pained, and worryingly, sounded like it might stop at any moment.

Gloom took a deep, rattling breath, teeth bared against the pain it caused him. " 'M okay. He'lp 'Enic. *Scenic*. Fly 'im out." And then he broke off into a full on hacking cough.

In alarm Crimson tried to support Gloom, but there was nothing he could do. It was agonising to listen to, because Prey knew exactly how much that coughing would hurt. When it finished, Gloom's streaming eyes were squeezed shut and he could only breathe in ragged pants.

"...'nc." Gloom couldn't speak anymore, he could only shakily point at Scenic, then at Gloom, then up at the forest above them.

Crimson knew there was nothing he could do. He moved over to Scenic, half in the pool of mud. "G'it up Sc'nic, get up'."

A moan of pain was all the response Crimson got, but he wasn't asking for permission. With the jade magic necklace empowering him, Crimson was the one in the best, or rather, the least *bad* shape here. He stooped and scooped up Scenic like the Earth pony weighed no more than a foal. Then, spreading his wings, he began to beat them rapidly until he was ascending out of the grotto.

Prey shielded his watering eyes, even the kicked up breeze too much. When next he looked up, he saw Crimson crouching at the edge of the grotto to jump back in, having lain Scenic off to the side somewhere. But Gloom snapped a wing open to halted him.

"...'ic....'ere."

Words failed Gloom. In frustration, he resorted to shaking his head and pointing at Crimson to stay up there. He was trying to tell Crimson to; '-watch the forest and Scenic, I can fly up myself-'

And then Gloom turned to where Prey stood, drooping against the grotto's crystal studded wall, and beckoned him hurriedly over. His intention was clear.

'-I may not be able to carry Scenic, but I can still carry a little lamb-'

Eyes half swollen shut, Prey stared blankly up at Gloom. The thestral who was supposed to be his Sargent, someone who he'd worked more closely with than anyone in over sixty years. In just the last few hours alone, they'd been through so much. Shared so many trials, survived so much danger. Despite everything Prey might think about the alicorn whom Gloom served, he knew Gloom was a good person inside. Crimson too. They'd fought together. They'd bled together.

But willingly take Gloom's hoof? Let the thestral carry him out to safety?

Gloom could go to Hell. No one was *ever* touching Prey.

Prey turned around to the wall and wrapped his hooves in the trailing vines, thorns ignored. He painfully began to climb out of the grotto himself, without Gloom's help.

Gloom didn't get angry, but perhaps that was just because he couldn't right then. He only seemed sadly disappointed, like he'd just realised something; '-so even under these circumstances he won't....-'

Gloom opened his wings and flew himself out. It wasn't far. The grotto was only about ten hooves deep. Prey felt air buffet his back as Gloom ascended past, but he didn't turn his head. He could climb out himself.

And he did, shying back from Crimson's hoof when the pegasus lent over to pull him up.

The familiar pine needle strewn forest floor touched Prey's hooves, the mist and dark tree canopy grimly welcoming him back with wide open forelegs and glinting teeth.

Prey's legs, which had been wobbling badly already, abruptly folded and he sat down on ground, brown pine needles sticking to his mud smeared wool. Even that short climb left Prey gasping for breath, feeling like his swollen cracked throat was only giving his lungs half as much air as he needed.

'I can't keep this up,' Prey thought, '*We* can't keep this up. Each survival saps our strength further, drives us closer and closer to the edge.'

They were going to fail, and fail soon. The warlock was going to win.

'The next attack will be our last.' Prey thought, wearily raising his head to look at the others.

In each of their faces, even the only half conscious Scenic whom Crimson was supporting, he saw they'd realised the same truth too. It was like looking up into the faces of three corpses.

Drawn skin over pale flesh set in exhaustion. Sunken cheeks, blistered tear tracks, swollen eyes, mud, dirt, and grime streaked. Small cuts, scabs, and bruises of every variety. Lips peeled and bleeding. Those with longer manes had them hanging lank, filthy and matted, plastered to foreheads.

Desperate, spent, and defeated.

Gloom's ravaged throat wouldn't allow him to speak, but he could point. And he waveringly pointed out into the forest, the unspoken message was the same as if it'd been said. They were leaving. Running away. Fleeing. Or whatever you wanted to call it, but they were getting out of this grotto and out of this forest.

It was too much, the warlock's dark creations were too strong. They'd lost. They did not have what it took to do whatever it takes.

Would they even be able to make it out of the forest with their lives? Maybe. Maybe not. There is a price to pay for winning, and an even steeper one for losing.

They could still move and still walk, or in Crimson's case even more than that, but fly? Gallop? While barely able to breathe, frozen, exhausted, and soaked?

No.

They were beaten. They'd lost.

'-again and again and again, I failed again-', Gloom thought in despair, but all he managed to force out was:

"...'...'eed to go'."

Crimson held Scenic to his side with a wing, pulling the Earth pony's foreleg over his neck, and Prey got back to his hooves on his second try.

Gloom limpingly led the way into the shadowy mist.

It was slowly getting darker under the trees. Evening was here. Night would be following. They needed to be out of the forest

before then.

'If we can't, I doubt we'll be leaving at all.' Prey thought. His breath sawed in his throat, burning and hurting, but all he was doing was limping along at a walking pace. If he was forced into trying to *run* though...

The reaper king was still out there somewhere, finding a place to climb out of the ravine and take up following their trail again. The kindersnatches too. Plus whatever the warlock had done with all the captured townspeople of Alfalfa Dale. Prey didn't want to think about what new dark horror the warlock was getting ready to inflict on them.

Unbidden, that old foal's rhyme rose in the back of Prey's head. If it wouldn't have caused him agony, and he wasn't being hunted through a forest actively trying to kill him, Prey would've let out a bark of laughter, 'Of course that comes to mind right now, just like in all those half-a-bit creepy campfire stories.'

Prey wasn't laughing though.

'~Raven magpie fly away, Scarecrow, keep at bay.'
'Wheat n' barley dance and sway, Harvest king, come to play~'
'~Straw the barn n' reap the hay, Sickle slice, fell and dice.'
'For winter's bite comes cold as fright, Hungry wolves, in the night~'
'~For farmer knows to plant and grow, Fallow fields, barren rows.'
'Summer passes at its height, Reaper king, laughs delight~'

And Prey still wasn't laughing.

It wasn't funny, because this was real. The pain, the agony, the fear, it was all so terribly, terribly real. It wasn't just some scary story round the campfire. Or even a surreal memory.

And it wasn't funny, nor was anyone laughing. Except the warlock. Prey's breath came faster, burning his aching throat. Somewhere out there, the warlock was laughing at him. Because Prey was stuck with these ponies who couldn't do what it took, and the warlock was free do do whatever they wanted, and now they were *laughing*

at him!

Prey limped along in the deepening gloom, throat a choked ball of pain, and phantom mocking laughter ringing in his memories, the cruel laughter of the Resistance. They were laughing. They were laughing at him. They always laughed at the runt lamb crybaby. They never stopped laughing, even after all these years.

There was only one warning, half a second in length, and it was only Prey that noticed. Even Crimson, with his special talent, couldn't scent anything but their own myriad hurts and blood.

There was no tell-tale gurgle. All Prey felt was a sudden painful tingle in his hooves mid step.

His head jerked up and his swollen red eyes widened.

"Kinder-*Gack*!" Prey choked out the warning.

Kindersnatches swarmed out of the darkening gloom from the right, and the silencing spell over them popped like a bubble.

Rushing noise. Gurgling, the thrash of whipping thorn branches and trampling roots cut into existence at deafening volumes.

As Prey futilely turned to flee, knowing he didn't have the strength to outrun them, he caught a wild glimpse of bobbing animal bone charms dangling from sticks jammed into gaps between woven wicker. The warlock's spell anchors. But Prey was too slow, a kindersnatch stretched out its thorny tendrils to grab him.

A squiggle line of green light danced before Prey's vision. As Prey fell back, the thorn tendrils kept flying at Prey, and then past him. The severed limbs tumbled to the dirt, no longer attached to the kindersnatch.

"Wa'ch out!"

Crimson, reliable warrior outcast Crimson, bared his wing blades edged with green light, barring the kindersnatches way. Scenic's foreleg had been thrown off, and now Crimson stood before the oncoming rush of kindersnatches to protect the rest of them.

Gloom reached for the staggering Scenic, Prey pushed himself back to his hooves, Crimson drew back his wingblade and shrewdly lined up his first slash to take off the legs of the foremost kindersnatch. The wave of wicker rushed onto them and split around Crimson.

Prey threw himself under a thorny whip which blurred in a **whiiish** above his head. He rolled through the pine needles. Dirt- kindersnatches- tree canopy- dirt- kindersnatch legs- tree canopy- dirt- roots- tree trunk.

'-Aar--_RAga-*hhH*_hIiIiei---IeiI-_iE*Argh*-'

" 'imson 'elp us!"

Rasping gurgles everywhere.

More kindersnatches tried to snatch Prey as he scrambled up behind the tree, air catching in his burning throat and muscles like water.

The world was all a blur, plunged into a mess of noise and fighting. Why couldn't the warlock just leave them alone!?

Prey tried throwing hoofulls of pine needles and dirt, but kindersnatches didn't have external eyes. Prey ran round and around the trees as he was chased, desperate, hurting, and knowing that at any second, his weak body would prove too slow and he'd be caught.

Prey leapt over an exposed pine root and a kindersnatch appeared from nowhere, lurching in front of him. His eyes widened, he couldn't turn aside or the kindersnatch behind him would get him!

Prey slipped passed by the skin of his teeth. Somehow. He scrounged the energy from somewhere to lengthen his stride and slip passed just before the wicker monster could fully block his path. He ducked around the main body, but the kindersnatch's grasping tendrils were still reaching after him.

With a stupid sort of twisting skip, Prey managed to pull in his hind legs and avoid getting snagged at the last second, but it cost him his momentum.

Out of the corner of his right eye, Prey saw a flash of slicing green light. Without stopping to properly look or think, Prey threw himself to the right without any sort of plan.

There wasn't time to think or see if Crimson could help, Prey just acted.

He rolled across the dirt, feeling pain and his skinned face burning, seeing sharp kindersnatch legs stabbing down around him. A cloud of mouldy pine needles was kicked up into Prey's face as he rolled past. He spat, trying to see.

Crimson's wing blade slashed at a kindersnatch, and green light extended the blow past the actual blade's length. The kindersnatch reeled back, missing a number of tendrils and a leg.

Even now, Crimson wasn't using killing blows. He placed his hooves precisely, controlled the space around himself, and kept moving forwards. Poisoned, injured, and weakened, yet the jade necklace made up for Crimson's failing body and allowed him to fight as if at normal peak condition.

But how long could the strengthening magic of the necklace last before it drained Crimson dry again? It could not be long.

Prey got up, fell back down, ducked left then gasped and immediately changed that to ducking right as a gurgling kindersnatch appeared from around a tree trunk from that side.

Above the wicker casket heads of a gaggle of kindersnatches, he saw leathery wings beating the air, mist plumes billowing in response. Prey couldn't see what Gloom was doing or if he was getting surrounded, nor did he have time to look.

'I have to hide, I have to hide, I have to hide!'

Prey cast about wildly and found he somehow had a second to breathe. Had he broken out of the swarm? Had he somehow been missed in all the noise and chaos?

Then he realised the kindersnatches were grouping up on Crimson, trying to overwhelm what the warlock had identified as the biggest

threat with numbers.

'Or stall us until their reaper king arrives.'

'-*Gghh*HG-ARr_-HiII*iIS*--'

But not all of them were. Raw eye's streaming, Prey twisted, and saw Scenic trying to hold off a kindersnatch. Somehow, the Earth pony had not only succeeded in not immediately dying, but had even somehow gotten one of the kindersnatches to chase him between a split trunk pine tree and gotten it jammed.

That wasn't doing anything to deter the second kindersnatch from attempting to either catch Scenic, or flay him alive.

The stallion was utterly on his last legs. He was backed up to a tree, bucking wildly behind him at the kindersnatch to keep it at bay. Some of his kicks managed to strike the kindersnatches upper body, briefly knocking it back, some of kindersnatches heavy whip blows were being landed right back, loudly smacking against armour.

But the difference was clear. Each blind kick was likely to be Scenic's last, each buck a desperate, exhausted effort.

Sweating, panting through a ragged throat, Prey cast about. But there was nothing to use, and for these brief few seconds he was unmarked by any kindersnatch. Now was the best time to flee.

'And so Scenic goes the same way as Lilly Blossom went.'

Scenic didn't deserve this death. But life isn't fair.

Sides heaving, Scenic gathered all his energy bucked again, and by pure chance this one buck hit a weak point in the kindersnatch's wicker. With a crunch Scenic's hooves punched the wicker casket, and kicked the victim imprisoned inside.

The slavering gurgle emitted from the kindersnatch seemed to turn into a wet cough and it lurched about wildly. Scenic seemed even more terrified that he'd actually hit something because he broke into more frantic blind kicking.

Prey saw his chance. He bowled into the kindersnatch's two rear root legs as hard as he could. Prey was a runt, but it was enough when combined with the Earth pony's wild batterings. The top heavy kindersnatch overbalanced and tumbled down.

Prey scrambled away from the downed kindersnatch, the thing's legs were still stabbing and clawing, its tendrils still flailing about at bone cracking speeds. It was down, but it was only temporary.

The kindersnatch succeeded in rolling itself onto its back, gurgling viciously, and Prey saw the section of splintered and broken wicker exposed. He caught the briefest glimpse of broken skin and hairless withered grey flesh through the hole.

Scenic reared up above the downed kindersnatch, front hooves pawing the air, ready to crash down on the exposed weakness.

In a moment, the kindersnatch would get back up, but Scenic continued to balance in the air, hooves ready to smash down, blistered face all twisted up.

'-I, I can't-'

"Do' i't." Prey gasped, horrified that Scenic was hesitating. The fool!

"Do' 'it Scen'c!"

"N-no." Scenic gasped, and fell backwards. He crashed to the ground spreadeagled, chest heaving and didn't get back up.

But the kindersnatch did, rocking back to its multi-root legs.

Scenic weakly raised his head, then let it fall back as the kindersnatch loomed up above him. His chest was heaving, and through half blind eyes Scenic stared up as the kindersnatch filled his vision. The Earth pony wasn't even able to raise a foreleg to cover his face. Scenic let his swollen eyes slide shut.

Prey heard the slap of wind in leathery sails, and Gloom came powering out of the shadows in a flying jump. A broken branch was clasped in his jaws, and in a move so smooth it could only be complete luck, swooped over the kindersnatch's head with a

downbeat of his wings, and plunged the splintered end in through the broken gap of wicker.

Half of the kindersnatch's limbs and legs abruptly went limb, and the kindersnatch fell over as its remaining legs failed to support it.

Gloom landed clumsily, only able to refold one wing. His legs were streaked with his own blood in the darkening light, mixed blackly with mud. And he seemed to be screaming through teeth still clenched around the splintered branch; "NNNnnnnggggggh!"

Gloom spat out the branch, "-nnnnnggGGHH!" He finished in a hoarse exhale of pain.

Then he began coughing and trying to breathe.

"S'r?" Scenic croaked.

Prey staggered up next to the prone Earth pony and glared down at him through red rimmed eyes and utter contempt. "You 'diot." Prey gurgled.

Scenic chest was still erratically heaving in and out, but he had this stupid hopeless grin on his face despite all odds. "Couldn't 'do i't."

"Fool. 'You were de'd." Prey sneered.

"Didn' do it. In 'da' end, I couldn' kill." Prey saw a serene expression of utter relief underneath all the grime, blood, and pain. "I'm not a kill'r."

Gloom staggered up behind Scenic, and dragged the Earth pony up into a sitting posture, "Git' up. Up! Up Sc'nic." Gloom wheezed, jaw clenched, "Pl's... 'git up!"

"Leav' me sir. 'eave me." Scenic weakly protested.

"No. G'it up!" Gloom heaved, tendons standing out in his neck. Prey stepped back, seeing kindersnatches bearing down on them. If Gloom didn't leave Scenic, then both stallions would die.

But Gloom would never leave a Guard behind. He'd sacrificed too

much, lost too many people to the warlock already. '-it's not happening again!-'

Green light flashed from the rear of the approaching rush of kindersnatches. It danced above their casket bodies, dancing and swirling and cutting its way through.

And Gloom and Scenic saw hope. Hope to live a few more seconds.

A squiggle of green light traced through the foremost charging kindersnatches legs. There was a pause, then the kindersnatches legs parted and it tumbled down, sliding forwards, tendrils thrashing up a cloud of rotting pine needles.

Crimson vaulted over its face down body, landing in a crouch with his wings spread low. His red squinting eyes met Prey's for a brief moment, and Prey saw in them rapidly approaching exhaustion, along with rising fear as Crimson felt that moment rushing upon him.

Crimson had once again come to their rescue, bought another moment of survival, but he couldn't keep this up. He would fail soon.

But despite his exhaustion, despite the necklace draining the magic from his muscles, Crimson stood straightened up once again and bared his wing blades.

Gloom raised himself back to his hooves and took a wobbling step forwards to stand beside Crimson, "Stand toge'th'r," He coughed, "Fight togeth'r."

Idiocy. Heroics. Suicide.

A last stand was just that, the last thing you ever did.

Surrounded by kindersnatches, injured, tired beyond all belief, there wasn't really much choice. Gloom would not leave Scenic behind, and nor would Crimson. So they stood and fought.

For a minute. Then two.

Prey did what he could, throwing dirt and sticks at the kindersnatches, trying to croak out warnings to Gloom and Crimson when a kindersnatch snuck around, and even burned off a kindersnatch's tendril at one point with a desperate rune. For ten or maybe even twenty seconds afterwards, all Prey could see and hear was grey fog as the world drained away around him.

When he came to himself, he was astonished to realise he was still alive. Crimson was doing almost all the work, his wing blades and necklace making him the most capable.

Scenic was...still almost completely unable to stand. And it was too much.

They broke and lost. It was inevitable.

The number of kindersnatches the warlock was throwing at them were simply too great. From the very first moment, Prey had known they weren't going to win. That if they fought, they would end up dead on the cold forest floor. But still he tried. He fought, because he was terrified and didn't want to die.

A gurgling kindersnatch, bigger than the rest of the foul pack, broke past Gloom and Crimson and made straight for Scenic where he leaned against a tree, standing about all the stallion was able to do. The Earth pony couldn't more than turn his head away to guard it as the kindersnatch barrelled towards him.

"Scen'c!"

Crimson tried to rush after the large kindersnatch, but he was growing slow. Too slow to stop it in time.

And then, wonder of wonders, horror of horrors, the kindersnatch did stop. It stopped going after Scenic, turned, and went after Prey instead.

Prey looked up at the massive kindersnatch, not as large as the reaper king or the scarecrow, but that didn't matter because it was about to kill him. Prey ran. He was so slow. He was so tired. His legs were weighed down by leaden weights.

Prey thought he heard of the pounding blood in his ears the cracked voice of Gloom calling to Crimson, " 'elp Prey. Go!"

It was going to catch him. Prey couldn't outrun it. He could hardly breathe, he panted but couldn't get enough air. The gurgling was right behind him! Reaching out with those thorny arms to grab and tear him.

For five seconds, desperation lent Prey enough strength to somehow speed up.

But then he couldn't, he just *couldn't* keep it up. His body slowed back down without his control and the gurgling reeled him in. He was so tired and sore and he couldn't run forever and it just wasn't fair!

Prey started to choke on sobs, but his half blinded eyes couldn't find anywhere in the trees to run or hide.

He was going to be caught.

He was going to lose.

He was going to die.

Everything narrowed down to that. He was going to die. Blackness danced around the edge of his streaming eyes. There was a dull roaring in his head.

He was going to be caught.

He was going to lose.

He was going to die.

'No. *No*. **n***O*!'

The kindersnatch was going to catch him any second. It was going to tear him apart at the seams. It was going to squeeze him like a doll until his stuffing burst out. And then the warlock was going to sow him back together as some twisted scarecrow-

In the depths of Prey's subconsciousness, more felt than thought, rusted bars bent and eyeless heads turned towards the bright surface above.

'If I die, so does **e*V*erY**On*e* E*ls*E**!'

A huge gust of air blew over the back of Prey's head, the silk ribbon streaming out in front of him for a moment and in his periphery he saw a dance of green light.

Gurgle.

Snick *Slick*

A thump followed by a heavy patter, like rope hitting the dirt.

Prey stumbled to a halt, throat cracked, panting, gasping, and turned. Crimson stood, legs braced over the cut down kindersnatch, and heaved for breath. The kindersnatch had been de-legged and armed. Crimson had not gone for the kill again, and the kindersnatch rocked about on the forest floor still trying to attack them.

Prey couldn't see any other pursuers emerging from the mist behind the pegasus. Had they really escaped?

Crimson managed to lift his eyes to look at Prey as he gasped and heaved. He had blood dripping from an ugly cut on his forehead. He tried to speak, and then promptly fell over sideways.

"Cr'msn." Prey didn't rush over, he couldn't. He hobbled.

"No more...pursu'rs?" Prey managed to rasp out, throat feeling like he'd swallowed a razor blade.

Crimson couldn't get a word out, only shake his head.

"Gloom an' Scen'c?" Prey tried next, having to speak up over the disarmed kindersnatch's gurgling.

Again, Crimson could only miserably shake his head. There was blood leaking from his cracked lips he was panting so hard.

Prey's heart did...nothing. It did nothing. It was grey. "They're-*Cough*-They're de'd?" He managed blankly.

Crimson gave his head another quick shake. He hesitated, but then kept on shaking it. He gulped, and managed to rasp out, "Don' know."

Prey sat down. It was that or fall down, "So they're not de'd?"

Crimson shook his head yet again, "Don'...th'nk so. Didn't see. Got spl't up. Gloom took Scen'c an' ran. I th'nk." He repeated.

With a super equine effort, Prey struggled back to his hooves, fighting through everything his body did to make him want to stay down. To stay here was to die. The effort made his head swim with dizziness though.

"We hav' to go Cr'mson," Prey forced out. He limply indicated the disabled kindersnatch, "Warlock know's we're her'e."

"Cou'd-" *cough* "-Could...k'll it?" Crimson suggested weakly, eyes looking away.

"W'll you?" Prey challenged, raising his chin, "Or you tellin' me to?"

Crimson squeezed his swollen eyes shut, "I...I...no-"

"-Dos'n't matter anyway," Prey broke him off, "K'll it. Don't k'll it. Warlock still k'nows we're 'ere."

Crimson's body slumped down even further. He closed his eyes, still trying to breathe properly.

"Stan' up Cr'mson." Prey told him, although it came out more as a hesitant suggestion. Could Crimson even stand up?

Crimson struggled, somehow got his hooves under him, and did. Prey didn't know what it cost him, but Crimson did it and stood again.

Wordlessly, Prey lead the way as he began to limp off between the ever darkening trees and shadows. Crimson followed, stumbling

after him into the mist.

Prey's head was throbbing. He was sick to his stomach from regurgitating poison and muddy water. His body was weak too. The energy from the two seeds he'd eaten earlier had worn off and left him even weaker than before. It felt like he was walking on a lake's surface, bouncy and wobbly, yet solid at the same time, like he might fall through at any moment. He knew that was his muscles were not so slowly failing.

But why wasn't the warlock chasing them? Prey didn't know for sure, but he had a guess mixed with a dreadful feeling.

If he'd been in the warlock's place, he would've sent the kidnersnatches after Gloom and Scenic, whereas Crimson, who'd proved multiple times he could deal with kindersnatches, would require the reaper king to finish him off. Once the golem got out of the ravine, that is.

Prey stumbled over a bare patch of nothing, his legs only ever one step away from giving up. He himself also felt like giving up. It felt hopeless. He didn't have the energy to create enough runes to deal with the reaper king when it inevitably came. Not that he had close to the time needed either.

It could be hours or mere minutes before the reaper king was upon him and Crimson. Running away felt so pointless, but he kept placing one hoof in front of the other.

'Have to keep going. Have to put some distance between us.'

He could hear Crimson shuffling along behind him. Gone was the pegasus's almost silent warrior's gait. Prey didn't have the energy to turn and look.

If they ran into a monster right now, they were utterly done for. Both of them were too weak to achieve anything more than a shambling run while this injured, hungry, and thirsty. Prey tried not to think about it.

Or about whatever had happened to Scenic and Gloom.

'Gloom...and even Scenic. I, I don't...How do I feel about that?'

Was it an hour, or only ten minutes before he and Crimson had to stop? Crimson stood, resting all of his weight against a sloping pine tree, wings sloppily draped over his back.

Prey slumped into the crook of a jumble of hard tree roots. They felt almost pillow soft. Breathing was such an effort. He was hungry, and cold. His eyes were raw, and he desperately wanted to shut them, but he knew if he did he probably wouldn't open them again.

'That's probably the reason why Crimson hasn't lain down yet.' Prey thought distractedly. He was so tired. He was even having trouble thinking, but he could still remember how he'd very nearly made a huge mistake back there with that kindersnatch.

Prey held his hoof before his eyes. It trembled, although whether tiredness or fear even he couldn't properly tell. 'I'm taking everyone with me? What was I thinking?'

He continued staring blearily at his hoof. It wasn't coming into focus properly, still blurry at the edges. Not with the clarity he was used to. 'My eyes are permanently damaged, then?' Prey thought.

It was stupid considering what he'd just survived, but the realisation still made him feel cold inside.

"Pr'y?"

Prey blinked. He'd lost a couple of seconds there. Had he fallen asleep?

"Pr'ey?" Crimson repeated.

With a lot of effort, Prey turned his head to look at Crimson. The pegasus was basically asleep on his hooves, still leaning heavily against the tree.

"You r'dy to move?" Crimson coughed.

It took Prey a second longer than it should've done to process even that simple statement.

"No cho'ice." He shrugged wearily, climbing up. He swayed.

Crimson still lent against the tree. "Giv' me...fiv' seconds."

Prey sadly examined him and their chances in the darkening forest, "Take....ten."

Ten seconds. Prey tried to come up with a plan during those ten seconds. It was just him and Crimson, the two most capable out of the original four ISND. Or five, if you counted Lilly, but she was gone now.

Unless Crimson wasn't really Crimson but another Mimic like Shimmer had been.

'Does it even matter if he is?' Prey asked himself. Even if Crimson had never really been Crimson, Prey still owed him. But if he was indeed a Mimic, Prey would...

Prey didn't know what. He was too tired to think right now. But he had to think, because he needed some way out of this.

Ten seconds were up, and Prey still hadn't thought of any plan. Giving up was not a plan.

Prey belatedly realised Crimson had come up to stand alongside him. He met Prey's eyes with an exhausted gaze. He spoke through a cracked throat, "Pr'y I'm...lost. Ev'ryth'ng has failed, all our pl'ans. Nothin's worked. My best ef'forts w'ren't good enough. I'm...lost. Even 'dis-"

Crimson flicked the jade necklace twinging around his neck.

"-Not en'ough. Me, not en'ough. My best eff'rts, not en'ough. My ideas, not en'ough. Not en'ough. Never en'ough."

Prey felt his bruised stomach churn as Crimson looked at him with a mixture of defeat, resignation, smouldering anger, and fading hope.

"But you' Pr'y?... You c'n think of som'thin'. I know you c'n. You alw'ys do. Som'thin' cruel. Som'thin' evil... A pl'an that'll work."

Crimson broke off to cough horribly, face screwing up in pain until the coughing passed, "I saw it. Those tr'ps you made. You don' ne'd me to lead, you ne'd me to follow your pl'ans. I've jus' be'en holdin' you' back, I see 'dat now."

Crimson took a ragged breath, "So, c'n you'...? Make a pl'n, an' I'll do whatev'r you need me to?"

"You ov'r estimate me." Prey said tiredly. "I hav' no plan. Nothin' to stop reaper k'ng in time.....Wa'it....."

Prey paused. He paused for a long time. The forest leaned in to listen and held its breath.

"I... do hav' a pl'an actually."

The white capped Ridgeback peaks glittered like glass in the last rays of the setting sun. On one side lay the prosperous realm of Equestria. On the other, the wild border lands, dark greens fading to black in the waning light.

If someone had been there standing high enough up on the Ridgeback to look out, down the rolling slopes and out onto the sea of the great pine forest, perhaps they might've appreciated the rugged natural beauty sprawling on towards the horizon. What lay beyond the great pine forest? What undiscovered lands? What secrets waiting to be found?

The last caws of crows. The stiff wind. The cold of coming night. The deepening ever blue of the night sky, the rich fading into purple velvet as exquisitely bright crystal gems began to speckle the heavens.

Such a person, if they'd stood up there, would've been rewarded with the silence of the mountain night and a star field that had never looked closer.

But never let the beauty fool you. Nature is cruel in a way that Ponykind, with its tamed weather and cultivated lands, can never understand.

Nature. Does. Not. Care.

And it never will.

Prey and Crimson had spoken but briefly.

"The reaper k'ng is com'ng. It'z' only a matt'r of time. I hav' a pl'an, but only you' can do it Cr'mson."

"What do I hav' to do Pr'y?"

"Leav' me."

"Bu-....Okay."

"Leav' me an' go into baloth terr'tory."

"Tell me what I mus' do."

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They met again in the fresh darkness of night, halfway between where the now desecrated stone circle lay, and the invisible border of the baloth's territory.

The stone circle to the East, the baloth's vast territory to the West. The ravine to the North, and the warlock and reaper king somewhere to the South.

Surrounded.

Odds dictated they should've died ten times over. The forest was cruel and hungry. In the state they were in, a monster should've gotten at least one of them, what with them splitting up like that in the face of the coming night.

Or the reaper king should've found them. Or the remaining

kindersnatches which could occasionally be heard off somewhere in the distant trees. Or they should've simply fallen unconscious from exhaustion.

The odds had not been in their favour. There were so many basic points upon which this plan could fail before it even began, and even then, the end result was as likely to mean their deaths as their survival.

What if the baloth was on the other side of its vast territory? What if the reaper king had some other ability it had not yet displayed? What if the warlock was cautious? What if? What if, if, if, if if *if*!?

Always "What if"?

What if Gossamer had been stronger all those years ago?

The world was full of 'what if's?

Prey was hiding behind a bush in the dark, almost comatose with exhaustion. When the reflective yellow of Crimson's eyes had glimmered in the dark ahead, he'd almost jumped out of his wool.

"Pr'y?...Pre'y?....Pr'y?..." Crimson was quietly calling out over and over as he plodded along.

Prey had to swallow a few times before he could get his throat to work enough to croak out, "Here Cr'mson."

"Wher'e?" Crimson asked, casting about.

Prey didn't have the strength to get up. Biting his lip at the pain in his side, he weakly raised a hoof from behind the bush, "Her'e."

Crimson stumbled over, "I did as' you' said. K'lled a bird for bl'ood." He said, voice projecting bone weariness.

'Good. Will it be enough though?' Prey thought. He swallowed drily again and gestured Crimson closer so he did not have to raise his voice even slightly. They were in enough danger as it was already.

"Here," Prey whispered, pushing a hoof full of stringy, half crushed

mushroom caps towards Crimson, "Eat 'em. Will help wi'd the tiredness."

It couldn't be seen in the dark, but the button mushroom caps would've been a dark, glossy brown in the daylight.

"These s'fe?" Crimson mumbled, not even waiting for a reply before chewing and painfully swallowing them.

Prey gave a small shrug, "No. Mildly poisones's. But w'll giv' you som' energy."

Crimson briefly paused, then put the rest of them in his mouth and ate them anyway. "Wha' about you'?"

"Alr'edy ate all I can safely eat." Prey shook his head, then winced and clutched at his lower half, "Didn' help much."

Those mushrooms were probably the only reason Prey was still conscious right now. They were nowhere near as strong as the black seeds he'd eaten earlier, but he had none of those left. If only Crimson had brought back more of them with him from the Wolfing Wood.

'If if if all over again.'

Prey closed his eyes and leaned back into the bush, the prickly branches supporting him and tried not to whimper while he waited for Crimson to finish. His guts were really hurting right now.

And his conscience. *Oh* how that was mercilessly savaging him right now.

'Gloom said do whatever it takes. I'm merely doing that.'

But Prey had never agreed to that. Just because Gloom had said it, didn't make it okay for Prey to actually do. And since when did anyone else ever tell Prey what to do?

'Never. I belong to no one.'

And he knew when Gloom had made that statement, he could never

have envisioned Prey's actions.

No. Prey's choices, and the black bubbling pitch of guilt they brought, belonged to him and him alone.

Prey tried to force his tired mind to think about something else. Like the lethal danger they were in here in the forest at night. Actually, that didn't help in the slightest.

Crimson swallowed the last stringy mushroom, "Now what Pr'y?" He managed, slowly flexing his legs as the effects of the mushrooms must've began to manifest.

Prey knew the energy the mushroom caps gifted didn't actually help. They just tricked your body into thinking it wasn't as tired as it actually was. And then made you sick.

"Now try an' surv've the night." Prey groaned, getting up, his insides twinging unpleasantly. He couldn't see more than six yards in the dark. It would be up to Crimson for that, he was the eyes, and Prey would be their ears.

"Jus' need to wait. Hold ou't until...until.... u-until....."

Prey stuttered to a halt. His cracked checks shrieked as his eyes went wide. He did whimper now, because he as their ears heard it.

.....thump.....thump.....thump*.....thump*...*thump*...*Thump*...

'No....No it's too soon! We needed time for the baloth to come!'

But plans never survive first contact with the enemy, and nature did not care what you needed.

"Pr'y?" Crimson asked cautiously, staring at the end of Prey's ribbon, which was trembling as if in a wind. There was no wind.

"Tim' to run!"

And they ran, or hobbled, or stumbled, or fell and got up again in the dark, but they run they did, fleeing into the forest as the reaper king closed in.

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It was now.

51.3 Baked in an Oven of Black Ice

It was now.

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The reaper king crashed through the last flimsy barrier of saplings, sending splinters flying through the night as it swung its massively oversized claw through the trees. A horrible orange light burned from within its metal caged pumpkin head, like a glowing blister.

The stars wheeling in the clearing sky above seemed to shrink as a horrible gurgling roar rose from the split in the reaper king's chest. Why such a thing had been created to roar was beyond Prey.

It had been created solely to break, to destroy, and to kill.

Prey shrank back behind the boulder in the darkness, slimy moss sticking to his already filthy wool. The ravine lay behind him, with its rotted tree trunk strewn length gaping blackly in the night.

He could try to cross the ravine and keep running, but even if he managed it, the reaper king had already proven it could leap the ravine.

Prey was limping and wheezing horribly, he had a hoof pressed to his side, and blood trickled from any number of scratches and cuts.

Beside Prey, Crimson's normally placid eyes were wide, red, and running as he grimly prepared himself for a fight they both knew he would not win, not even with the magic of his chain necklace. Blades could do nothing against this monster either. Nor would there be any flying out of this.

The Border Guards were gone, who knew where. Likely dead. Lilly Blossom might be dead too, her injury had been mortal. They'd been split from Gloom and Scenic earlier somewhere in the cloying

mist, separated by the kindersnatch victims.

The reaper king lumbered forwards, the horrible noise still seeping from its chest and foul vapours rising from its head, as it swung itself into the clearing. Two enormous claws dug into the ground, its three stubby back legs trailing, black against the sky.

Their call for help to Canterlot had gone unanswered, no response coming through the message bottle flames. There was no time to consider what that meant.

"Split...up." Crimson managed to cough out, voice mangled as the reaper king crossed the the clearing in four great strides, "Sorry...Prey."

"No...not...y'et." Prey managed to gasp back, eye streaming. '*Crybaby*.'

And then when it didn't seem like things could get any worse, an answering roar sounded in the night, a terrible rumbling shriek that made the heart seize as it ricocheted around the darkened trees.

Crimson breathed, "Pony...'eathers."

Prey didn't even notice the use of bad language from the pegasus. "Zoma'...'rika."

The reaper king turned its huge body towards the West, and out of the dark trees shifted a deeper darkness. Massive. A glint of claws and teeth in the moonlight, as tall as a house, but it barely rustled the pine branches as it moved.

The baloth emerged from between the trees, features revealed in the orange light as it prowled into the small clearing. It did not creep, it did not slink. It *prowled*. It was the king of the forest. It had nothing to prove. It just *was*.

It walked on four powerful legs. Green speckled leathery hide, brutal upper body and chest ripping with muscle. Claws as long as swords and as thick as posts effortlessly sliced the dirt and scored tree roots as it came to a stop in front of the reaper king, The baloth examined its competition. It could look the reaper king dead in its

carved pumpkin eye, and it did not look impressed.

Prey could smell primal power in the air, it was a scent which could not even be described. Everything about the baloth screamed raw power, from its thick jaws and fangs, to the heavy tail lazily waving in the air. It was like a dragon crossed with a cragerdile. Terrifying and brutal. There was something calculating and merciless in its pupilless four eyed gaze.

For the first time the reaper king, or the warlock controlling it, shuffled backwards.

The single movement was not missed by the baloth, but it did not suddenly spring in the explosion of savage power that it so surely was. The baloth seemed to radiate cold, reptilian contempt for the retreat. It was The King. It would attack when it felt like it.

Slowly, contemptuously, the baloth sat back on its haunches, and its massive chest began to inflate. Scaly lips peeled back, glistening ivory teeth the size of tusks parted, and then the baloth let loose its attack screech.

Sound disappeared from the world.

Prey had his hooves pressed into his ears, but it didn't matter. His whole body was vibrating, the air shook, and the roaring shriek kept on going and going and rising and rising.

It had to end, please let it end. Prey's head was swimming. Was he shouting in pain? He couldn't even tell. The bowel loosening shriek of promised death shook the whole forest.

Why wasn't it ending? The roar wasn't stopping. The terrifying sound consumed Prey's whole mind. Primeval, raw, and it shook you down the generations back to when your ancestors cowered in caves and prayed to the fire.

His very eyes felt like they were vibrating in his skull as Prey tried to look up over the rock. The baloth's jaws had unhinged, its face sliding back along the skull, and all that could be seen of its head was a gaping mouth of roaring death.

Finally, it ended.

The jaws re-hinged themselves, the skin sliding back down, and the baloth sat itself forwards to examine the effects of its roar.

The reaper king hadn't moved, just hunkering down and bracing itself. The shriek which would've shattered the resolve of any living creature, here had failed. Because the reaper king was not a creature, it was a thing. A golem. A construct of unnatural magic. It couldn't be intimidated.

The baloth seemed put out, and it smacked its massive jaws. But hesitate? Reconsider? Never. It was the king of the forest. Prey could tell it'd never known a moment of fear in its life. To the baloth, there was only what it could do, and what it could not. It had challenged the reaper king, and the golem had not backed down. This may not have been the baloth's hunting range, but that only mattered to it if it ran into another baloth. The reaper king was a competitor.

And to the baloth, that was unacceptable.

The baloth attacked.

It was horrifying. Five tonnes of muscle, green leather hide and claws should not be able move that fast. How fast? Prey didn't even see the baloth spring. He hadn't seen it bunch its muscles, or twitch its tail, or brace its legs.

It was half way through the air in a blur of open jaws and reaching claws by the time Prey's eyes registered it'd moved.

If the reaper king had been organic, it would've run. However, if it had been organic, it would've also had instincts and might've been able to react to the attack.

The reaper king's tripod legs and long braced arms made it a solid wall. It didn't matter. The baloth bowled it over in a whirlwind of muscle, jaws biting and crunching and tearing and rending.

Metal rivets popped. Steel rods cracked. Wicker splintered and flew as the baloth bore the reaper king to the ground, a pine tree

crushed beneath the two titans like a mere sapling.

Prey yanked his head back behind the rock outcrop in fear. He cowered, covering his head as the deafening sounds of battle rose from the clearing. Reverberating growls, rending, splintering trees.

And then the rattling inhalation of the reaper king rose up. Air dragging past Prey's face as the reaper king gathered up all the ambient magic, pressure building in the air. Invisible insects danced across his face.

"We'v' got to mov'e!" Crimson tried to shout at him. Prey only saw his lips move, he couldn't hear a word the pegasus said.

Yes, Crimson was right. They needed to go, needed to get far away from here.

Then the night turned to day, just for a moment. White flashed and Prey went blind.

Then there was a roar and Prey realised he was lying on the dirt.

He was dizzy, disorientated, he couldn't see, couldn't tell where he'd fallen.

What had been the light and the noise? His head was buzzing.

Another air vibrating roar, a hiss of outrage like the worlds largest snake was right next to Prey's ear. Thudding stomping and the **Whump** as something huge was thrown into the ground.

Blindly Prey crawled away, still too dizzy to stand from whatever spell it was the warlock had used. Spots of metallic light danced before his eyes, and Prey hadn't a clue where Crimson was or if he'd had the same idea.

'Get into the forest. Find cover.' That was Prey's only goal. If he stayed here, he would get crushed, if only by accident.

Prey's fumbling hoof touched tree roots, thorns, a tree trunk, and he dragged himself behind it. There he huddled, hooves over his head, curled into a ball and unable to do anything until his vision

returned, as around him it sounded like the forest was torn apart.

Dark outlines in the night were the first to return. His eyes hurt even worse than before, and he blinked them rapidly, trying to restore vision. He couldn't afford to be blind right now.

More shapes, flashing orange light spilled long shadows out in long, radiating lines from the clearing. Within the circle, he could see the blur of two titanic figures whaling in on each other.

Green hide bound muscles against iron and wicker.

The baloth was all savagery in motion. Its almost casual swipes were just blurs of massive claws which ripped huge gashes into the reaper king's body and arms.

The reaper king was an unfeeling, undead construct, the peak of the warlock's ingenuity. It held its massive arms up defensively in front of it, turning around and around to keep its guard facing the baloth as the beast circled, never letting up its relentless assault for even a moment.

However, as Prey's swimming vision slowly returned, he realised the baloth hadn't gotten away completely unscathed in the reaper king's blinding assault earlier.

A huge chunk of flesh, gouged in the shape of the reaper king's claws was missing from the baloth's chest. Dark blood rained down from the gaping wound, dark drops as large and glistening red as rubies fell in the orange reaper light.

But the wound hardly slowed the baloth. It struck again, and Prey held the impact in his bones as the creature's huge forelimb met the reaper king's arm. Dark green leather hide shivered under the impact, tonnes of force behind the blow.

The reaper king did not fall, its widespread tripod legs providing too much stability, but its legs were being driven deeply into the earth. At any second the reaper king threatened to fall under the baloth's tireless savagery. Nothing could survive under that relentless assault. And then came the rattling inhale and crawling of

insects across Prey's skin.

'Here it comes again!'

It all happened in an instant.

Prey didn't work out what happened until after it had, having covered his eyes in preparation.

There was a blinding flash of light that Prey saw even with his eyes shut, his back turned behind a tree, and his hooves covering his face.

Less than half a second later and Prey was peeking out from behind the tree again. Less than half a second. That was how little time it took.

The baloth had seen the attack coming. It'd remembered the warlock's trick the first time. It may have just been a beast, but it was cunning.

In that moment the reaper king had stopped inhaling and before it could cast the gathered magic, the baloth spun.

Its broad back was presented to the golem as the blinding flash went off, and its thick tail smashed into the reaper king with a devastating blow that could've shattered boulders.

The reaper king lifted off the ground. Its enormous, giant body left the earth, just for a few hooves of height, but the tonnes of metal construct was actually lifted by the blow.

The golem toppled into a pine tree and snapped the trunk in half. Pale splinters showered the area. The baloth was upon the reaper king before it could move, crashing down on top of its toppled foe.

The baloth's huge clawed hind legs pinned the golem's lower body, its half-a-meter long foreclaws disappeared into the reaper king's chest, and its gigantic jaws unhinged wide.

With a crunch such as a mighty ship breaking apart on a reef might've given, the baloth sheered off the front reaper king's upper

chest and pumpkin head, cage, and all.

Prey could only stare. The baloth lifted its massive head, and then spat. Metal, cloth, wood, and unidentifiable bits tumbled free.

From the gaping tear in the reaper king's suddenly open front, steel cables, wicker, springs, a glistening something and intermittently flickering orange light spilled. The flickering foul orange strobed the clearing, getting more and more erratic. The reaper king's body was shuddering and jerking, and the baltoh almost casually tightened its clawed grip in the golem's chest and *wrenched*. There was a crack, and the reaper king's upper body half deformed and splintered.

The reaper king stopped moving.

The sudden silence was deafening, all Prey could hear was his own ragged breathing.

The baloth lowered its huge head and sniffed the still form of the reaper king, then it snorted in disgust and turned away, tearing its claws free. Twisting, it brought its head around to examine the ragged wound in its barrel chest.

The reaper king came alive. Its long arms whipped around and it enveloped the baloth in a bear hug before it could twist back around.

The baloth's reaction was immediate, and violent. It roared loud enough to make the pines shiver and thrashed like a live quarry eel. Its foreclaws may have suddenly been trapped between its and the reaper king's bodies, but its jaws were free, and it used them.

It bit and crunched into the reaper king's body again, its broad muscled shoulders bulging as it flexed. The reaper king hunched closer and sank its curved metal talons into the baloth's back and anchored themselves there.

Shrieking in deafening outrage, the baloth leapt back, and the reaper king was lifted up with it, but still the golem's headless body stayed firmly attached. And squeezed.

Bones and flesh creaked as long limbs of wicker and steel tightened.

The baloth had decimated the reaper king. It had savagery, speed, power, and instinct. It outmatched the warlock's puppet in every way. It was living, the reaper king was not.

But it was still living, and the reaper king was not.

Slower, shambling, unskilled, outclassed in every way, but despite all that, the reaper king's greatest weakness was also its greatest strength. It wasn't alive. It couldn't be killed.

An undead could be burnt, frozen, speared, shot, beheaded, poisoned, dismembered, and impaled, yet it would not die. But a single arrow could slay the living.

The reaper king was not alive, and thus could not die. The baloth was alive and could.

In the end, that was all that mattered.

The baloth had the strength to tear trees apart on a whim and pulverise granite. But with its forelegs trapped and no way to bring its vast strength to bear, it was slowly being crushed. Just like how a cragerdile's jaws could bite through stone but could be bound shut with a simple noose of rope. The baloth's application of strength was different from that of the reaper king's.

The reaper king's arms and claws tightened and began to split leather flesh and crack bone. The baloth's jaws could rip and tear at what it could get to of the reaper king's upper body, but it couldn't stop the golem's inexorable grip from tightening. The golem did not feel pain, it did not bleed.

Bones began to crack, and blood began to pour. From out of the baloth's snapping jaws, from the splits in its skin, its thrashing throwing both giant monsters about like rag dolls but never getting free of the reaper king's death grip.

And the golem crushed tighter and tighter.

Ribs snapped in the night like the squealing drawn out crack of

falling trees. Tighter and tighter.

The reaper king's arms now formed a circle of blood, almost completely sunken into the baloth's body they clenched so tightly. Tighter and tighter.

nnnaACCK**!**

The baloth's spine finally snapped.

The mountain of muscle, the king of the forest, fell with a shudder that shook the pines.

The reaper king straightened back up to its full height, pulling its arms free of the baloth's flesh with a sucking pop. It loomed up in the night, flickering orange light making shadows writhe as it stood.

Unbeaten, unstoppable, and as terrible as the death it so surely represented. A nightmare of dark magic and witchcraft. Broken, damaged, what did any of that matter? It was unliving. Prey and Crimson may as well not have baited the baloth here for all they'd achieved.

And now that their ploy in summoning the baloth had failed in a mountain of dead muscle at the reaper king's tripod feet, it was now back to hunting them instead.

Hopeless. It was all hopeless.

There was a small shuffling movement from the shadowed base of a tree at the clearings edge. Slowly, Crimson emerged into the clearing and flickering orange light. Prey stared from around the tree trunk. What was Crimson doing?

Crimson came to a stop and his head tilted back to see the towering reaper king above him, its now headless body looking back down at the impudent pegasus. Exhaustion hung in every line of Crimson's body.

The jade necklace briefly sparked green, but it was hopeless against the reaper king. It could've been a piece of dirty string for all the good it would do.

Defiant, and utterly hopeless.

Very deliberately, Crimson raised his wing blades. He didn't turn his head as he called out as loudly as he could in his cracked voice, "Run Pr'y. At least... least one o' us mite' live."

One massive dark, blood soaked arm rose, claws framed black against the moon as it paused at the height of its arc. Crimson braced himself.

But the arm didn't come swinging down, because something else crawled out of the night.

There was no roar, no crash like which had heralded the baloth's might. It crawled out between the trees on dozens of unerring legs. A deep mottled green carapace glimmered wetly like armour in the night.

It was an insect, but one forsaken by any gods, for only a demon could've created the unholy abomination of giant centipede blended with teeth. It was as long as a train carriage and thick around as two Earth ponies. Hooked, red spines gleamed along the creature's segmented length.

Its many legs almost seemed to bite into the ground, a row of teeth, as it undulated its way into the clearing. If it had eyes, they were hidden somewhere under the tick armour plating of its head and multiple massive mandibles. Instead, it had four whip long, feathery antenna which moved interdependently of each other, delicately feeling and tasting the air.

And then you looked closer and realised those feather like edges were actually formed from razor sharp barbs made to encircle and tear.

The insectile monster entered the clearing and then it turned sideways, many undulating legs carrying it clockwise for a half turn around the clearing's circumference. And there it stopped.

What was this thing? Where did it come from?

The reaper king took a lumbering step closer, using its one arm to

swing itself forwards while the other stayed raised to come crushing down. As skin writhingly horrifying as the centipede thing was, it did not look a threat to the reaper king. It may have been the same length as the golem laid out, but it had nowhere near the bulk or brawn, and once again, it was living and the reaper king was not.

And then a second insect crawled out of the darkness behind the reaper king on the other side of the clearing and crawled counter clockwise to match the first monster. They encircled the reaper king between them. Silently, their antenna waved hypnotically in the air as they communicated.

The warlock had the reaper king pause, the puny red pegasus who'd challenged them completely forgotten. What were these monsters? How much of a threat were they? Which one should they attack first?

In silent sync, the two giant insects began to circle, each perfectly matching the other as they tracked around the clearing. The only sound they made was the faintest whisper of many jointed legs brushing against each other as they circled.

Around they went, fully circling the clearing as the reaper king turned to try keeping track of them both. Around again, and the distance between the end of each centipede and the head of next began to shrink as the circle tightened inwards. Tighter, closer, faster, around and around.

The warlock stuck first. Its clawed arm came crashing down like a stone launched from a siege engine. But it missed. The targeted insect's segmented body jackknifed around the fist as the blow slammed into the earth, dirt getting flung into the air.

The reaper king did not get a chance for a second blow. The moment it attacked and missed, the two insects moved like skittering lightening.

A cyclone of made of frenzied legs and red armoured spines engulfed the reaper king and swarmed over it like one body, where one insect ended and the other began indistinguishable.

It was like seeing a quarry eel strike the unsuspecting fox as it trotted past. Nothing, and then gaping jaws shooting out of the darkness in a blur.

In as little time as it took for Prey to draw breath down his blistered throat, the reaper king was bound under coils of gleaming insectile armour, spines, flaying antenna, and scores of tightening barbed legs.

It was what the reaper king had done to the baloth. Now it was the golem's turn as the coils tightened. The mandibles came into play, and the insect monsters began to strip the struggling reaper king's body to shreds like giant caterpillars. But they were not chewing leaves, they were biting through wicker and metal. Around and around the jaws raced, biting and chewing and shredding.

The flickering orange light was almost completely distinguished, trapped under the coils of legs. The three monsters became little more than a huge enshrouded shape in the dark, rocking and heaving as the centipede creatures tightened their hold.

The reaper king heaved and shook, but it didn't even slow the insects down. They were insects, and they had a firm hold. Undamaged, perhaps the reaper king could've broken free, but in nature weakness and injury are mercilessly exploited. The reaper king stopped, and then, from beneath the crush of chitin, the rattling inhale of absorbing magic came once more.

Prey never found out what spell the warlock was intending to cast with the inhaled mana. Because it never finished.

The inhalation abruptly cut off. The squirming mass in the night broke apart, but no orange light spilled out as the two monstrous insects unwound. In the middle of their coils, there were only pieces left, black in the star light as the reaper king's frame disintegrated.

It was gone. It was finally destroyed.

The undead cannot be killed. Only destroyed.

The shapes of two insects flowed off each other, just spiny outlines

with highlights of red and reflections of deep green in the dark. There the two creatures paused, antenna passing through mandibles one at a time to be cleaned while the rest waved around lazily, sensing the air.

The frozen outline of Crimson, so small against the monsters which had just clashed, took a single step backwards.

The waving antenna in the air instantly reacted. Two circular maws of teeth in eyeless heads turned unerringly towards Crimson. Waves of spined legs began to undulate forwards and the razor edged antenna reached out.

"Cr'mson run," Prey now squeaked, throat feeling like it was cracking open and bleeding, "Flee. I'll fin' you'. Run. Mayflow'r. Mayflower!"

At the sound of Prey's voice, one of the two massive insects changed direction, blindly powering towards Prey's position in a rush of many legs.

Crimson jolted, and then tried to dash towards Prey so they could flee together, but he was already too late to slip past. Antenna whipped in a blur through the air like a net, tearing up everything within an eight yard bubble of the thing's head. Crimson could not get past his centipede, nor could he get enough space to back up and take to the air. He had to immediately run or be snared and dragged into those same jaws which'd so effortlessly dispatched the reaper king.

"*Mayflower*." Prey shrieked one last time, and then turned and stumbled off into the pitch black forest with his own centipede from hell after him.

"Pr'ey!" Came the lingering cry from behind him in the night. But it was too late they'd been split up.

They were each on their own.

Prey tripped over a vine in the dark and fell into the hard embrace

of a pine tree's roots. He hurt, and was so tired. The mere act of breathing hurt, and his side was a constant blaze of cold-hot pain. Panting, he pulled himself closer, shuffling back into the knobbly tree roots, resting there for a moment.

He couldn't get back up. His trembling legs refused to lift him again.

This wasn't what Prey'd had planned. He'd hoped the reaper king would fall to the baloth.

It hadn't. What'd come next hadn't been according to his plan either.

Prey closed his eyes and drew a ragged breath, head lolling back against the rough pine bark as he panted. When that first insect monster had crawled out of the forest, and then a second had appeared from nowhere. It'd all gone askew.

It had been an unexpectedly welcome surprise.

A scrapping chitter came from less than five hooves away in the night.

Prey cracked up eyes that felt sandpapered with tiredness. Less than an inch from his face, the ends of the four antenna waved and traced the outline of Prey's body. Only the very tips of the feelers brushed against his fur, feathery light instead of razor sharp and rending.

At the other end of the antenna, the veropede, the one hatched from the very egg Prey had been carrying, stood motionless in the night.

It'd worked. The blood magic and runes Prey had inscribed on the egg had worked!

Prey could reach out and extend his will to the veropede. Its body was bound by runes, its instincts warped by blood magic, and reinforced with his will. He could give it an order, and it would follow it as best its animal mind could.

He could feel the beast's mind with his own. Animistic, unfeeling, and uncaring. It did not know right or wrong, fear or enjoyment. Like almost all animals, it was driven exclusively by hunger, the need to breed, and survival.

If it weren't for the constraints of blood magic and the runes which'd transferred from the egg sac over to the veropede at its birth, it would be devouring him right now.

But all the veropede felt was a vague sense of interest and the savage need to protect Prey as if he were its own life.

It didn't understand words, but it would follow any instructions he gave it that could be interpreted by its instincts. The veropede was female, and as far as it was concerned, Prey was another veropede. Probably a male veropede, because he was so much smaller than her.

Prey felt like giggling madly, if it wouldn't have been agony on his throat.

Prey had never meant to hatch the egg in these circumstances. He'd meant to have a controlled and safe environment, but the warlock had forced his hoof, and so, in desperation, he'd extracted the egg from his side via rune magic and hatched her. And it had worked!

Everything hurt and he was so tired, but it had worked.

And that second veropede that had appeared out of the forest? Prey hadn't predicted that, but he'd felt the same subtle magic coming from off its mind that he felt from his own enslaved veropede.

Lemon Pink had arrived in the forest, and she'd had the same idea as him.

How had she got here? When? Why? How'd she known where he was? Where was she now?

Prey didn't know the answer to any of those questions, and the answers weren't important either. Lemon was here. She'd followed him over the Ridgeback somehow, and she was here, close by somewhere in the forest and waiting to help him. He finally had an

ally.

This time Prey did crack and laugh, the heady mix of relief and deliverance making him giddy.

'Still alive, and it worked. Lemon Pink is here to help me, the reaper king's been destroyed, and I know where the warlock is hiding.'

Lemon Pink must be having her veropede chase Crimson through the forest and back to Mayflower at this very moment, just like he'd wanted and shouted out loud for Lemon to hear; "Mayflower!"

Because what came next, Prey needed to do by himself.

But in a minute though....He just needed a moment to rest. Prey weakly sighed and let his head fall back.

The veropede wound its segmented length around Prey's pine tree, making a protective armour plated wall about him before it settled down. A guard dog, but one made from the worst entomphobia in the world mixed with a suit of armour and blended with spines, centipedes, razor wire, and teeth.

It was...beautiful, in a terrible way Prey supposed. Perfect. No conscience, no remorse, no unnecessary parts or emotions. Just an apex predator.

And the funny thing was, it it made him feel safe because the veropede's instincts and will was irrevocably bound to Prey's own by his runes. Same again with Lemon Pink's own veropede, and she in turn was bound to him.

'Who knew that those old blood magic titbits from Snake would result in my very own personal killing machines on a leash?' Prey thought.

But...There had been a cost, as there always was.

The egg, when it phased out of the skin of Prey's side had been no larger than a plum. So how had it resulted in a monster the length of a small train carriage, and probably weighing at least two tonnes?

Part of it was the natural magic of the veropede's egg, and part of it was the runes Prey had placed on it during it's incubation, and a third part was the result of the veropede's natural biology.

On hatching, a veropede would rapidly swell to about a meter in length within the hour, and then in another few, its carapace would harden. That had already happened here.

The runes and the effects of the blood magic woven into the veropede had hijacked this first growth cycle, and further forced it to take the veropede up to almost full maturity. But doing so should've resulted in instant starvation and death, as the veropede's bodily stores utterly failed to provide enough energy, magic or no magic. But everything has a price.

To put it bluntly, food.

A veropede has two ways it can hatch. From a nest, or from an animal. In the first scenario, the veropedes fight to the death and only the winner survives, eating the fallen bodies of its nest mates, thus fuelling the remaining veropede's first growth spurt and molt. In the latter instance, the implanted animal is killed and swiftly devoured from the inside out.

Neither case had happened here.

Prey's original plan was to have Lemon Pink acquire a large number of pigs before taking out the eggs and hatching them, since he sure as hell wasn't going to let them kill and eat him.

But where was Prey going to find a herd of neatly penned pigs in this forest?

He hadn't. But he had found another source of caged in meat. He'd known where to look. And how it made him hurt.

Crushing guilt... What an inadequate term to describe what he'd done.

The townspeople of Alfalfa Dale.

Prey knew where the warlock was going to move them to. He'd

discovered it inside that dark magic book from the warlock's lair, the one which Gloom hadn't been able to read. But Prey had never actually said he couldn't read the book, Gloom had just assumed, and within its pages, Prey had discovered what the warlock was making at the stone circle. And also what they needed the kidnapped townsfolk for.

For that reason had the warlock removed the prisoners from those empty capture pits the ISND had discovered, and moved them elsewhere.

Prey'd found it, sneaking through the dark forest towards the desecrated stone circle. A large, if shallow, freshly dug pit, covered with a crude wooden grate, made from felled tree branches and lashed together with spliced vines.

Guarding the pit had been a number of kindersnatch sentries. Their horrible gurgling was actually how Prey had found the pit in the darkness. But the people inside had not been making any sound.

Lying on top of the mound of wet, freshly excavated dirt, Prey had looked down into the darkened pit and seen unmoving bodies. Not a shout, or cry, or a single attempt at escape.

There had been nothing from the captured people, and Prey had known his old guess about the warlock drugging them had been correct.

Here the townsfolk all were, as docile as hens in the coup waiting for the axe. They would go to the death the warlock had planned glassy eyed and without a twitch, unwitting sacrifices.

Pigs to the slaughter indeed.

The pit had been large enough to hold fifty people packed together. Where the rest were, Prey hadn't known, but probably scattered around the stone circle in similarly guarded holding pens. The warlock was not putting all of his eggs in one basket. Prey's hate for the warlock and their practicality swelled and surged, until it was lapping against the back of his throat. Because despite what Prey was about to do in his desperation, it was the warlock who'd made

this opportunity possible. And Prey hated them for that almost as much as he hated himself.

But only Prey could ever be held accountable for his choices. No one ever made you make your choices. That was all on you.

Prey had done something like this before, but only to his enemies. His insides hurt, and it had nothing to do with the physical pain as he lay there atop the dirt mound.

Prey wasn't capable of freeing the people in even just this one pit. Even if he'd had some way of counteracting the drugs in their system, he didn't have the time. He was injured, desperate, suffering from the after effects of poison, and those kindersnatches would catch him the moment he tried.

Prey couldn't save them from the warlock.

But he could use them to obtain a way to stop the warlock instead.

Prey buried his face in his hooves. One minute. That was as all that Prey allowed himself. It was important to take that minute, to make absolutely sure there was no other option. It would help him later. A little. If there was a later.

One minute. Then he scooped up the black tide of guilt swirling inside him, locked it away, and did what he had to.

Prey had removed the veropede egg, set off the hatching rune, and tossed it over the kindersnatches heads and through the grate down into the pit. To wake. To grow. To feed.

Then he'd crawled away, leaving the veropede to its grisly hatching.

'I wonder how Lemon Pink hatched her one?'

Prey groaned and sat up slowly, even that small motion a gigantic effort. He hurt, and he knew he couldn't keep going like this. Prey knew although he didn't have any obvious big injuries, but he was covered in small ones and exhuasted. His body was going to give

out at some point. And it *really* did hurt.

It should've been a small pain compared to the guilt, but it wasn't. Because pain is pain.

Prey breathed deeply, and then closed his eyes and sent an order to the veropede. It couldn't understand words, but he could make its instincts understand simple concepts. 'Move here. Go there.'

The armoured plates of the veropede encircling Prey uncoiled, and the veropede's many legs carried its head around to Prey's side. He tried not to look too closely at the circular jaws, or the flaying antenna. Instead, he grabbed ahold of one of the jagged spines on its side and laboriously pulled himself upright.

The spine was cold and as hard as metal under his hoof, but far more organic. The rest of its exoskeleton had finished hardening by now, and the outline of the veropede's whole armoured body glistened in the night, waiting to guard Prey to his destination.

Maybe he should give it, her, a name?

No, the veropede wasn't a dog, or a pet, or even tamed. It was a monster. He could never forget that.

'It really is a beautiful creation of nature. And terrible.'

Less than three hours old, and already it was a beast of nightmares, enhanced with blood magic and runes. And space for lots more runes.

Slowly, leaning upon the veropede's slick side for support and being careful not to impale himself, Prey began limping forwards.

Crimson, Gloom, Scenic, Lilly, Shimmer and the Mimic he'd become, Garrow's remnants, Snake's, even the tracer bands and Luna, none of them mattered here and now. It was just Prey. Just him, the forest, and somewhere close by, the warlock.

'I don't care who the biggest bear in the woods is. I'm a whole

different animal.'

---III---

The forest was brooding tonight. It had witnessed bloody death, and if it had its greedy way, it would witness a lot more before the night was out. Dark pine trees seemed to lean in closer, eager to see what happened next.

The site of the old stone circle, made in centuries past by an ancient cult of druids, had only a single rusty crystal lantern to chase back the shadows. It hung alone high up on a gnarled post, swinging ever so gently.

The lantern light did not fall as far as it should've. It only half illuminated the desecration which'd been wrought on the standing stones by the kindersnatches. The construct the warlock had been having them build was finished.

The wicker and jagged posts had fully been formed into a twisted sort of hollow, splintered ends of dark wood interlocking crudely together but somehow still making a pattern, radiating outwards from the circles center.

In the middle of the standing stones, where the web of sharp branches originated from, there was a hole, like a ragged doorway. Only about a yard wide, but the way all the sharp ends of branches encircled this hole like jagged teeth, the upright opening ended up being only about half of that.

This was what the kindersnatches had been building, a twisted web of sharpened wooden stakes, atop this ancient naturally occurring mana well.

There was nothing inside the jagged wooden mouth. Nothing that could be seen anyway, just a piece of empty cold air. Very cold.

It was just about possible to pick a path through the stakes to reach one side of the hole. But on the other side, a pit had been dug. A pit which was full of unmoving, cooling corpses.

Rams, donkeys, sheep, goats, cows, young, old, the guiltless, the

innocent, the pitiable, the forsaken, reduced to lumps in the dark. They lay with their eyes closed, dead flesh carelessly stacked in a final resting place. Aside from the odd scrape, there was not a mark on them. Just frost rimming some of their mouths and eyes.

If someone had undertaken the grief filled task of pulling out each body, they would've counted forty-one of them.

Another forty-one wild flower wreathes to be made and laid. Forty-one more murders. Forty-one sacrifices.

It had not been enough.

"It still wasn't enough." The hunched figure of an Earth pony sighed. A ragged but thick brown woollen cloak was draped about them, and they sagged, leaning heavily upon a gnarled wooden staff.

Behind them, five kindersnatches gurgled, standing stationary, limbs writhing ceaselessly in the dark.

The Earth pony jerkily turned around. His face was not creased with age and wrinkles, but still it looked old, the pale blue eyes heavy. With a frown of concentration, the warlock waved the staff at the kindersnatches, the controlling charms driven into the end of the staff with an iron nail swaying.

The kindersnatches did not understand words, but as one, the wicker parasites turned and lurched off into the trees, in the direction of the pit Prey had hatched the veropede from. Doubtless to collect more victims.

The Earth pony didn't watch them go, his gaze going back to the web of sharpened stakes, and what lay in the middle, "It wasn't enough," He mumbled, "All that pain, all those sacrifices, it should've been enough. The ratios should've been satisfied."

There was deep frustration and weary sorrow in the stallion's voice, along with desperation.

And why wouldn't he be desperate? His reaper king, his greatest creation, was gone. Another one could be made, but the cost in resources, time, and lives would be great.

The warlock suddenly stabbed the end of his staff into the earth in fury, "Bucking baloth and bucking deer with their bucking useless warnings and bucking chicken speech! Buck!"

Unheeded, the dirt beneath where the end of the staff had struck split and blackened. Uncaringly, the warlock pulled the staff free. They didn't look at the pit, they only had eyes for the circular hole of wooden teeth.

"Five more at most. Ten. Surely it can't be more than that. Their life magic isn't as strong, but the mana well should've compensated. The ratio calculation was right, the size too. The ritual? Is the effigy too potent? Celestia, I hope not." The warlock muttered to himself, flipping from anger back to worry in a heartbeat.

He continued to stare at the empty patch of air with something approaching unholy longing, and his hoof clutched at something hung from a loop around his chest in the dark.

"Surely no more than ten more." He muttered again.

Something slipped over the warlock's head, and then it yanked back and the stallion could no longer breathe.

Much like anyone would do when something suddenly strangled them out of nowhere, he panicked.

There was a light weight on his back, the Earth pony tried to flail at it, tried to pull at the smooth band of iron cutting of his air supply, tried to buck and rear.

It didn't work, the weight stayed firmly on his back and the loop only tightened. Air! Burning lungs! Why wouldn't the strap break?!

'-use magic!-', The warlock fumbled at his belt, even as his head was dragged upwards. Breathe, he needed to breathe!

The Earth pony's hoof came up, and from it hung an old severed unicorn's horn on a strap, animal bones and feathers bound to it. In desperation, the warlock waved it and called up the dark magic stored inside of him.

The magic reacted, like a snake it slithered from its hole to his call. He reached for it, but it slipped from his grasp. He couldn't touch the magic, it was just beyond his reach.

The world was fading, his head was swelling up. He needed to breathe! Why wasn't the magic working? Please! His tongue was swelling up in his mouth, his whole head was full of blood.

The detached unicorn's horn fell from numb hooves. The warlock thrashed with his rapidly fading strength. He tried to strike at what was behind him, but for some reason his legs wouldn't reach. Just like the magic, his own body wouldn't obey him. Pins and needles raced through his extremities.

'-air, air, need air, a-air....air...-'

---III---

Prey leaned heavily against one of the stakes, and coldly watched the warlock thrash in the dirt, hooves ineffectually pawing at the ribbon loosely looped around their throat.

They gasped and wheezed, hooves unable to interact with the blue piece of silk apparently choking them.

'So, this is the warlock.' Prey thought, observing the Earth pony which'd done so much damage. The remnant of Garrow stirred in excitement, 'Now they die screaming, yez?'

Prey crushed the remnant and pushed it away. Killing could come later. Prey looked behind him, partly to check on the thing the warlock had built, and partly to check on his veropede.

He'd encountered five kindersnatches on the way here. The veropede had ripped them apart with its antenna without even slowing. There were splatters of blood across the giant insects front where the dismembered pieces had been fed into its maw, black in the night.

Prey was aware each kindersnatch he destroyed might trigger some

witchcraft alarm. But he was even more aware how on the verge of total collapse he was. He needed to finish this before that happened. Had to see this through. He hurt, he was tired, he knew he should try and meet up with Lemon Pink first. But he wasn't letting the warlock slip away. Prey had his veropede, if he was fast enough, any alarm wouldn't matter.

So he'd gone ahead and had it destroy the kindersnatches anyway. Now the veropede stood guard against any more which might arrive, the armoured length of its body faintly gleaming in the dark. As far as Prey knew, there was nothing the warlock had left that it couldn't handle.

And Prey was dealing with the warlock himself.

With a pained groan, Prey limped forwards to the weakly struggling warlock. He leaned over and gave the loose end of the ribbon a flick, "There, I've loosn'd it so you c'n breathe' now." Prey croaked.

Immediately the warlock sucked in a huge gasp of air, as if he could only now suddenly breathe. He lay in the dirt, covered in leaf mould and panted weakly, the dark purple flush across his face slowly fading back to a more normal hue.

Prey waited for them to finish gasping. "How did you mak' th' scar'crows?" Prey asked once he was ready.

The warlock jerked, and tried to leap to their hooves. It didn't work, and they fell back into the dirt, their limbs unable to support their own body, "Urg!"

"How did you' mak' the scar'crows?" Prey repeated.

"You!" The warlock coughed, "But you're just the bucking lamb, where's the bat and the feathered rat-?"

"You' can't breathe." Prey intoned.

Immediately the warlock's breath cut off and he began thrashing again.

Prey cruelly waited until a count of thirty before relenting, "You

can' breathe now."

The warlock heaved in a great shuddering breath, "B-bastard child." They wheezed, saliva dotting their chin.

This time, Prey waited until a full count of sixty before relenting.

"How did you' mak' the scar'crows?" Prey repeated a third time. Prey had to hurry, he knew he might collapse at any moment, but the warlock couldn't be allowed to know that. Never show weakness. It was the same reason why Prey wasn't just invading the warlock's mind and directly ripping the answers out himself. In the weak, decrepit state he was currently in, that would be a huge risk. A person was always strongest inside their own mind.

So Prey was going about this the old fashioned way.

"M-my creations?" The warlock coughed, "I made them, built them from nothing. They're mine, my creations! The last one was almost perfect, if those two bucking Tartarus bugs hadn't appeared. I pray to Celestia that all you bucking Border Guards get eaten by those two horrors-"

"You th'nk I'm a *Bord'r Guard*?" Prey hissed.

"Buck you, you little bitch, that's what I think. Buck you, and buck whoever else is hiding behind me-"

Prey snarled. It wasn't a scary sound by any means, but when the veropede reared up into the night above Prey, *that* was scary.

The warlock's face went white, "S-sweet Celestia!"

"Do I lo'k like a Bord'r Guard to you'?" Prey demanded again, throat cracking.

"You, you, those bugs where-?" '*-buck buck buck*!-'

Now *there* was the fear, the uncontrollable quivering in the limbs Prey had been expecting to see.

It had taken the shaking stallion this long to catch on and realise

what Prey was. It was understandable. Prey looked like just a lamb. The warlock's focus had always been on Gloom as the leader, and Crimson with his magical necklace.

But there was no one else here, only Prey. It was Prey who'd summoned the veropedes, monsters capable of destroying his reaper king where even the baloth had failed. The warlock cringed back in the dirt.

'Where you belong.'

"No that's not- You're just a filly. Where are the others? Where's the bat pony?!" The warlock tried to scramble away, but their legs weren't working for them.

"Sorry. I'z only me m'afraid." Prey smiled sickly, "Now tell me, how'd you' make the scar'crows?"

"I, I made them with the use of a magic tool. I learnt how from my book, it's all listed in there. The books back at my workshop." The warlock hastily answered, shying back as the veropede's barbed antenna started to probe closer and closer to his face.

"A dark mag'c tool? Interest'ng. An' the dead for parts. Tell me more."

The warlock was staring, "You, you're not...?"

'-not horrified by my work? By what I've done? They should be afraid, they should fear me-'

Prey tilted his head, eyes half closed with blistered tear tracks tracing down his cheeks, "Afra'd? Afraid? Once. But now?"

The veropede loomed behind him, an armoured shadow in the night; "Now I'm not afra'd. Iz' you who's afra'd."

And the warlock was afraid.

"I, yes, I made them, a dark magic artifact. The book, it told me how to make a Gnarled Effigy, and it showed me how to use it to make puppets, I was just following the instructions-"

Prey held up a hoof and the warlock almost bit their tongue shutting up.

'Gnarled Effigy. That's a type of dark magic tool, the name rings a bell.' Prey thought, his hazy mind taking a while to dredge up the memory. He tried not show it on the outside, but his whole body felt like it was on the verge of collapse.

Not that the warlock probably couldn't tell just by looking at him, but fear and the ribbon were keeping him docile. 'I should probably find out his name.' Prey thought belatedly.

But back to the Gnarled Effigy, *now* Prey remembered. He'd seen references to such a thing before, but not how to make one. It was a type of dark magic catalyst, somehow used to create meat puppets. Like the scarecrows. Except those had not been meat puppets. They'd been more than simple meat puppets, but the warlock had taken the horrifying art in a different direction and improved on it somehow.

Prey opened his tired eyes to look at the warlock again, 'Cruel, petty, evil, but competent. What a vile combination.'

"How'd you' make the Eff'gy? No, never m'nd, you'll tell me lat'r," Prey paused to cough and swallow, "Wha's your name?"

The warlock lifted his chin, "Hard Baked. I did what I had to, the village ponies of this land only reaped what they sowed-"

"Stop breath'ing" Prey interrupted.

Hard Baked choked, and began thrashing in the dirt again, uselessly pulling at the blue ribbon around their neck.

"I don' care abou' your life story. I don' care why you did it. I don' care abou' all the people you killed. I don' care abou' your justificat'ons or reasons, I already know them. An' your reasons 're *pathetic*. Only answ'r my questions, an' I'll let you live. Understand? Oh, you' can breathe now."

Hard Baked gasped hugely, "I, I got it." He panted. There was blood on his lips. Seems he'd bitten his tongue.

Throughout all of this, Prey had been keeping an eye on the patch of air in the mouth or doorway of the wooden web. It was just a blank bit of air, yet it made the back of his mind crawl like something was trying to get out. To run away or get closer, Prey didn't know. He licked his cracked lips, "First quest'on. What's this all for'?"

"It's, I made it because that's what the book listed. I needed it if I was going to make the Effigy stronger, like the book said. It needed...souls, it said souls, but I don't know what it really uses, that's just superstition. There's no such thing as a soul, just life force magic-"

"Keep to th' point or you' can stop breath'ng."

"It's a bridge, or, or something. It wasn't clear, b-but that's not important. It concentrates all the life magic into one point, and then when it's at the critical mass you pass the Gnarled Effigy through the opening and it'll absorb it all and become more powerful," Hard Bake babbled, "Powerful enough to make multiple greater puppet ponies."

Powerful enough to make multiple reaper kings is what Hard Baked meant.

"An' for that you' were...just sacrificin' peopl's souls to an unknown?"

"There's no such thing as souls-I mean!" The stallion shrieked when one of the veropede's antenna quested towards him, "Sacrifices have to be made. It's the only way."

Disgusting. Vile. 'Whenever anyone ever says that, they always really mean 'sacrifices made by others'.'

Prey stared at the dark patch of empty air, and realised why he was so unnerved. Because it was very close to approaching something he'd almost seen, once before. Down in a cave of twisted earth, where once he'd mistakenly strayed.

"You just...kept feed'ng them in one aft'r another?" Prey whispered.

"Sacrifices have to be made, it's the only way to enhance the Effigy enough to get it able to do what I need." Hard Baked repeated.

'-I had to make more wreathes, but their parents deserved it-'

Prey switched to staring at the prone Earth pony. A voice was screaming in the back of his head to kill Hard Baked, both for what he'd done and for what he'd been trying to do.

'This, this...' Prey didn't even have a word to describe the warlock and his stupidity.

"You' don't hav' a clue what you' made do you'? What you' almos' made." Prey gritted out. He shook his head, "No, of course you' don't. You' wer' just' feed'ng them in one aft'r another like candies."

Prey raised a shaking forehoof and pressed it to his chest. He wanted so badly to rub his eyes, but he knew the raw agony touching his face would bring.

Hard Baked had tried to kill him, he'd tried to kill them all, and not just with the kindersnatches and scarecrows. He'd been trying to kill them all and he hadn't even realised it.

This, this, this piece of filthy meat, he'd tortured so many, and the poisoning he'd inflicted upon the ISND was only the least in his list of crimes.

And what got Prey, what *really* got him, was that nearly everything Hard Baked had done, aside from what lay in the desecrated stone circle in front of him, Prey had done too.

Every torment the warlock had inflicted here in this forest, Prey had done to someone else in the past. Prey hate hate *hated* Hard Baked. Everything he hated about himself Prey saw reflected in Hard Baked and he hated it.

'How dare he? How dare he murder all those ponies and think he's justified? How dare he think he's better than me?!'

It was like a broken, salt addicted tramp, reeking of filth was condescendingly looking down on him and lecturing him for

stepping in a puddle. Like they were grinning at him with cracked teeth and listing all of his failings, pointing out in excruciating detail every single way they were better than him, while being too lazy to even hide the blood stained knife behind their back.

It was a mirror, and Prey hated mirrors.

The arrogance, the sheer unprecedented and undeserved arrogance of Hard Baked! He was the same as Snake!

"You' Zoma'grika'er, you kl'ack da' gresh'na zimda' a *glomdie' ezmu'trocity*-"

"Prey."

Prey spun around, but so unbalanced was he that he fell over.

A figure emerged from out of the shadows in a long black cloak. There was only one person, or pony, in this forest that it could be. Who else would be searching for Prey? Who else would be able to approach Prey's veropede without being ripped to pieces?

"Lemon P'nk." Prey wheezed, and his head swam for a moment.

The deep hood went back and the heart shaped face of Lemon Pink was revealed, her sharp horn glimmering with a touch of silver.

There were so many questions Prey needed to ask her, but he was still reeling from his own fury at Hard Baked. "Wha' took you' so long?" He coughed. It was such an inadequate question.

Lemon Pink dropped her head, "I am sorry Prey. Securing passage across the Ridgeback was harder than anticipated. I tried my best, but even money would not get me across any faster. There are no teleportation beacons over this side even if I were to approach a mage tower to request-"

"Enough," Prey coughed again, still lying on the dirt where he'd fallen, "Too lat'e now. Jus'...just..."

Prey was so tired. He was having extreme difficulty even thinking. This, *everything* hurt, he wanted to sleep, he was just

so...so...so.....

Weakly, Prey raised his hoof to Lemon Pink. She understood.

She stepped swiftly over, paying no mind to the veropede's curious antenna that danced around her head as she did so. Where was her own veropede? Must still be somewhere in the forest, probably secretly guarding Crimson. Prey hoped the pegasus had done as he'd said and gone back to the ruins of Mayflower.

Lemon Pink knelt beside Prey, glancing pitilessly at the wide eyed Hard Baked, "Should I dispose of him first, Prey?"

Lemon did not offer to help Prey up. If that was what Prey'd wanted, he would've said so. Even if it was Lemon Pink, Prey couldn't stand the touch of another unless there was no other choice.

"No," Prey wobbly shook his head. By Tartarus, it was all swimming, "He's contain'd."

Lemon Pink sent one last look at Hard Boiled, violet eyes nothing but cold glimmers of indifference, and then reached out and let Prey touch her hoof.

Prey's mental defenses were non-existent. Even if he hadn't been inviting Lemon Pink in, he couldn't have kept her out. But he wasn't trying to, he was showing Lemon Pink what had transpired and what he needed her to do. He didn't give her the packet of memories, again he couldn't have even if he'd wanted to. She didn't need those memories to become hers, to feel what he'd felt, but he showed her flashes of what had happened so she'd understand.

He showed her Alfalfa Dale on their arrival, what the ISND had found in Mayflower. The forest, the old road, the deer holt, the kindersnatches and scarecrow, how Nighthawk and the promised reinforcements hadn't come. The ravine, the cave, bone rot mines, Crimson, Lilly, the reaper king, Shimmer and the Mimic, and culminating in the baloth in the clearing tonight.

It was so much, and so little, and Prey just wanted to sleep.

'So how did you get here?' Prey mentally asked at the end of it.

'A splinter pack of Diamond Dog smugglers and opportunistic slavers I employed/enslaved.' Lemon Pink flashed the memory. Prey had never met a Diamond Dog in real life. He didn't know how Lemon Pink had tracked down a pack of the reclusive people. Diamond Dogs were...simple. Not exactly stupid, but simple.

Prey saw a pack of fifteen of them in Lemon's memory, different sizes, breeds and colours. He saw that the pack had slowly been growing desperate over the months after being driven out of their warren by the Royal Guard from near some pony village. Their pack had splintered, and this group had tried to turn to smuggling. It had not worked out well, hence their desperation.

When Lemon Pink had approached them with an offer of a large payment for speedy and secret transportation across the mountains, they'd accepted. Lemon Pink had also secretly mind controlled the pack's new alpha, an older but still spry mastiff, thus guaranteeing their help and support.

'So that's what happened to those Diamond Dogs evicted from near the Everfree, or part of them.' Prey thought. Not that it mattered.

Prey also saw the fate of the splinter pack and their enslaved leader.

Lemon Pink had needed to feed her veropede something on its hatching.

More murder. More sacrifice. What had the Diamond Dogs done to deserve death? They'd genuinely been going to honour their agreement with Lemon Pink too. And she'd poisoned them all and then hatched the veropede when they were too weak to move.

Prey and Lemon Pink, master and servant, they were both really no better than Hard Baked. If Prey had been free, he would've simply stayed out of the warlock's way if possible, and kept out of his business. But he wasn't free, Luna held his chain.

Lemon Pink was just a tool, Prey knew that. Everything she did was on his own back. An arrow doesn't kill, the person who fired it does.

'I am sorry I took so long,' Lemon Pink apologised, not phased about having murdered fifteen people just for convenience sake, 'Their tunnels through the mountains were old and unmapped. Nine times we had to stop and clear cave-ins, or go above ground and walk through the snow to find the next tunnel. Nor were there any trains coming for another week at the earliest. I heard nothing about the Night Guard getting another one to run early either.'

This was unlike Lemon Pink, she was explaining everything like she wanted him to understand why she'd taken so long. She'd already shown him the clips of memory, did she think he was so out of it that he couldn't understand what was going on around him?

Or was she just desperate in her own emotionally stunted way for him to know she'd tried her best? This wasn't what Prey expected from Lemon Pink at all. It was wrong. She was a tool. She didn't need to explain, he already knew she wouldn't have done anything but her best.

'And she judged killing fifteen people was the most efficient way to do it. And no one will ever know or care about the Diamond Dogs because they weren't ponies.' Prey thought to himself, hiding it from Lemon Pink.

He made himself focus and sent his next thoughts to her; 'It's fine Lemon. It's fine. You did your best. I know. Better late than never, and you made it here in time to help me now. Whatever you did to get here as swiftly as possible was necessary.'

The words were hollow, but Prey presented them as truth within his outer mindscape, and Lemon Pink believed them.

Fifteen people, but Prey was no better. Nature is cruel, and there's always a price.

'I'm just like Snake,' Prey thought in the disgusted bitterness of his heart, 'I'm exactly what Prey always was always meant to be. A murderer. Another wooden mask, just like the Resistance wanted.'

Prey hardened his heart, lest the cracked thing break and let out all the black slime it was overflowing with. It could come later, or

never. He could rest when all of this was over.

'The warlock, go deal with him. You know what to do.'

'Yes, Prey.'

And with that finality, Lemon Pink disengaged, and their two ashen grey outer mindscapes drew apart.

Prey blinked fuzzily and opened his eyes. He realised he'd missed Lemon Pink getting up, she was already striding towards Hard Baked. Thirty seconds was all that'd past out here in the real world. The dark forest still waited, the veropede still kept guard, the wooden web of stakes still stood, the pit full of murdered people still lay full, and the warlock was still sprawled powerless in the dirt.

Nothing had changed. Everything had changed.

"Leave me alone you spike headed *horse*!" Hard Baked spat, but his defiance was filled with fear, "Thieves, all you spike heads know how to do is steal. Go back to the Sun Wolf and lick the mud off her hooves."

Prey coughed in shock, but couldn't speak. His throat had finally closed up. Lemon Pink stopped. "How do you know that name? The Sun Wolf?" She demanded.

Hard Baked stared up at her with eyes filled with hate and fear. He clamped his lips shut. Prey felt sick and filthy as he realised once again how much alike he was to the warlock. He hated it so much.

Lemon shrugged her cloaked shoulders, "Fine, stay quiet. It matters not. I will know it all before I am done."

Lemon Pink's horn began to glow with red light. Hard Baked cringed and made one more valiant effort to stand and throw off Prey's ribbon, but it was in vain. Terrified thoughts of oncoming horrendous torture flashed through the stallion's mind, memories of people he himself had cut open and infected with kindersnatch seeds.

He squeezed his eyes shut and curled up defensively, "Buck you both, you horses. Do your worst!" He screamed shrilly.

But what Hard Baked was expecting never came. Lemon Pink did not start flaying the warlock alive, no matter what he'd done to deserve it. She instead cast her spell and entered his mind.

Prey watched through grainy eyes as every tendon in Hard Baked's body went rigid. Lemon Pink also fell into complete stillness where she stood, black cloak turning her motionless form into a mannequin. Neither moved, nor would move for some time. Lemon Pink had a mind to thoroughly crack open and read, and that took time. Prey wanted to know what Hard Baked knew, and what else had been in that dark magic tome. Lemon Pink would learn all of it for him.

Prey did not torture. Never just for the sake of pain.

Prey was terrified of pain, and while causing it was infinitely preferable to suffering it, pain was something he did not want to be around. Either experiencing, or witnessing. It made him sick.

Too often he'd had to saw off a limb under Snake's eye. To often had he cowered at the mere threat of it from Torment and Stinger. How often had he woken up to the whip scars feeling like they were splitting open his back afresh?

Prey was terrified of pain.

Prey did not torture for the sake of torture. He had murdered people with traps and poison in some of the most painful manners he could imagine, but the pain had never been his goal. Their deaths had always been his aim and what he'd been satisfied with.

If he killed someone with pain, it was always for a reason. A bad, inconsequential reason, but a reason nonetheless. When a Border Guard lay screaming in agony because he'd poisoned their water, it wasn't because he wanted them to die in pain.

Maybe he hadn't had another poison to hoof. Perhaps they'd grown wise and learned how to identify his other poisons. Or it was

because he'd wanted to scare the other Border Guards.

Because the only thing worse than dying, is dying in agony. And anyone could be next.

He'd been trying to send a message. Prey'd done it to make the survivors afraid. To make them run away. To make them stop hunting him. To survive.

Fear was a powerful tool, Prey knew that first hoof, and so was pain.

Prey was scared of pain. He was scared of dying. He was scared of dying in pain. In the past, sometimes he'd worked himself up into a black state of such fear of being tortured to death in the Resistance, he'd worried and cried himself into unconsciousness at night. Because back then it had been an inevitability, not just a possibility. Torment, Snake, Stinger, one of them would get him in the end.

"I don't want to die in pain." Gossamer had sobbed.

However that's precisely what Hard Baked had done to the people he'd captured, and what he would've had in store for Prey too.

But Prey never tortured for the sake of torture. Never had, and never would. Prey hadn't even tortured Fire Strike at the end. But this warlock, this mirror of himself, had tortured. Hard Baked was everything Prey hated in himself, both what he was, and what Prey knew he could become. And it burned Prey that even now, Hard Baked was still better than him. And worse, but also still better. But yet worse. Two sides of the same rust cankered coin.

Good, bad, worse, it all just blended into one giant mess and both of them were so far below the mark of anything that was good or wholesome. Like Crimson.

Prey sometimes felt like he was trapped and drowning under a pane of black ice, helplessly beating against the frozen barrier, while above him in the light, others unknowingly walked over the ice, unable to see beneath.

In a shocking moment of clarity, Prey saw himself interchanged

with Hard Baked a year, a month, a *day* from now. The difference between the two of them was so small. All it would take was a tiny switch, barely any effort, and there would be no difference at all.

The singular, lone, and only reason Prey was not Hard Baked was because Luna was inhibiting him. If it weren't for her hated tracer bands, Prey would have nothing holding him back.

'I just want to be free.'

That was all Prey wanted. To be forgotten and left to go wherever he wanted.

If that happened though, would he really quietly fade away? Or would he do what Hard Baked had done and try restarting his own private war against anyone and everyone?

But it was a pointless question. He wasn't free. He was a slave in Luna's Night Guard. He could run, but he'd never escape.

Prey's head drooped onto his hooves. His eyes burned and he wanted to rest so badly.

But he wasn't free. He had to go back to Luna. And now Crimson and Gloom knew about Bone Rot mines and they'd want answers and he didn't have any he could give them and he couldn't run away and he was going to get thrown in prison and interrogated and the SunWolfwasgoingtogetinvolvedandHe*Didn'tWantToDie-*

Prey woke up. He realised he'd blacked out for a moment. Lemon Pink was crouching down in front of him, dark cloak trailing in the dirt.

"Prey? Prey?" Lemon was patiently repeating.

Prey shifted and tried to croak something, but his throat was still a closed off ball of hot pain and refused his efforts.

Lemon seemed to understand though, because she switched to yes or no questions, "Are you conscious and cognitive?"

Prey nodded twice.

"I have finished taking all of Hard Baked's relevant memories. Shall I save them for a later date?"

Another nod. Prey weakly leaned past Lemon Pink to see the warlock. He was lying unmoving in the dirt, unconscious. Now that he'd stopped moving, it was possible to tell that the Earth pony stallion was thin and bony under his raggedy cloak and gear. It was a bit hard to tell in the night and weak light from the single lantern, but he also looked very pale.

Lemon Pink magically pulled out a flask from under her cloak, unscrewed it, "Water," She said simply, "Do you want to drink, Prey?"

Prey nodded and sat up with much effort. He swayed, hooves trembling, but he managed to take the flask and sip, only spilling half of it when he began coughing horribly.

Prey's red eyes were streaming by the time the coughing fit subsided, and his throat felt like he'd just been poisoned afresh. Prey forced himself to take smaller sips until he finished the whole flask.

"The Gnarled Effigy?" Prey whispered hoarsely when he could speak again.

"It was the bundle of bones and charms at the end of the warlock's staff." Lemon Pink answered, levitating said staff off the ground from beside her for Prey to examine.

Prey wasn't in the best condition to do so, but he still blearily took a look at it. He didn't recognise the wood used, but some of those bones looked distinctly like someone's teeth, and the bindings smelled like they'd been dipped in blood.

So, this was the Gnarled Effigy. This was what the dark magic tome had held instructs to create, and out of greed Hard Baked had murdered so many people to obtain.

It didn't look the part. The jumble of bits nailed to the staff looked

like something a Giant Sky Owl might cough up. Prey could barely even sense anything dark coming from off it. It felt...brittle and spent, like all its power had been used up in the creation of the reaper king.

Prey was just about to tell Lemon Pink to bring it when movement past her caught his attention.

'No,' Prey mentally ordered, suddenly breaking out a whip of steel, 'Stay back.'

The veropede, which had been approaching the unconscious Hard Baked, immediately lost interest in the potential meal and shifted back into its resting position, antenna forever lazily waving and tasting the air.

Prey shakily let his mind unbend. Doing that had been far harder than it should've been. He looked back at the Gnarled Effigy, which was still levitating. Prey hesitated.

It was just a tool, not any more evil than a knife was.

'Leav' it." Prey rasped.

Without even a shrug, Lemon Pink tossed the Effigy aside. It landed at the base of one of the re-purposed standing stones with a gentle clunk in the dark, coming to rest a yard out of Hard Baked's reach.

'And now to deal with the warlock himself.'

Hard Baked was dead. His body may have still been breathing, and Lemon Pink may not have shattered his mind, but his fate was sealed.

Prey had the warlock captured, rendered harmless and docile. Gloom and Crimson might've wanted the warlock dead, but captured? That would also work. Neither of them could ever bring themselves to kill a prisoner, Prey knew without a doubt. No, they'd drag Hard Baked back and throw him before Luna. Even now, Prey could do the same, erase all the warlock's memories of this meeting, implant false ones, and bring him back.

But this was reality, not an idealist's dream, and there had never been any chance of Prey sparing Hard Baked's life.

Prey never forgave, and he certainly never forgot.

Prey shifted one hoof and flicked it at Hard Baked, like the warlock was a thing. "Deal w'th it."

"Yes, Prey."

Lemon Pink's horn glowed, and a knife slid out from a hidden sheath sown into the neck of her cloak. Without getting up, Lemon Pink sent the knife zipping through the air. It came to a stop above Hard Baked's throat. It paused for a moment, tilting this way and that as Lemon angled it for a better stab down into the jugular.

"Wait."

Lemon blinked, "Yes Prey?"

"Make it mor' fitting," Prey's head turned to the center of the web of stakes, "Let 'im be the last sacrifice."

"Yes, Prey."

The knife zipped back through the air and slotted away into its hidden sheath, and then the belt around Hard Baked's middle glowed silver as he was dragged up. His limp body unerringly began to float towards the jagged wicker hole.

The empty patch of space received its last victim like it had the forty-one others before. Another victim, another death. The process took less than three seconds.

There was no flash light or roar as another life was snuffed from the world. Just a moment of deafness, a sense of in drawn breath. The shadows cast over the stakes of wood flickered for a moment. Then the colouring of the wood returned to normal, the empty doorway of air became just that, empty, and Hard Baked floated dead in the air. He, *it,* hung as limply as when Lemon Pink had first lifted Hard Baked, but there was just something different about the body in death than there had been in life.

Prey had always thought it was the way the muscles slackened in death.

Below the warlock's body in the dark pit, the dead townspeople waited for their murderer to join them in stillness. The ribbon unslithered from around Hard Baked's neck, and Lemon Pink let the body drop into the mass grave.

The ribbon fluttered out through the air like a snake as Lemon Pink's magic floated it back down to Prey. He held out his leg, and it flopped over his hoof.

Prey blinked down at the blue length of silk, almost as black as the night sky in the dark. There wasn't a smudge marring the silk. 'They laughed at me, a runt, and now they're all dead.'

Prey blinked again, then bent his head and tried to re-tie the ribbon with legs covered in cuts and scratches. Every inch of him felt like it was covered in cuts and scratches, really. His hooves shook, and he had to stop and try tying it again. Then again. And again. Prey hissed in bubbling frustration and tried a fifth time, but he *just* couldn't do it! The ribbon wouldn't go on.

He just wanted to leave the stone circle with all its dead behind, take his veropede, and get out of here.

"Shall I-?"

"*No*." Prey hissed.

But he still couldn't do it. He couldn't make his stupid hooves co-ordinate properly!

The ribbon slipped from his hooves. Prey stared uncomprehendingly as it fluttered to the pine needles. Slowly, painfully, Prey picked it back up. He almost couldn't manage even that.

'Oh, yes, right. Almost died, lost a fair amount of blood to the veropede egg, and I'm also tired beyond belief.'

He was on the edge of full collapse. His body just couldn't keep

going. Mushrooms or no mushrooms, there is a physical limit. 'I'd quite forgotten what it feels like reaching the ragged edge.'

Trying to tie a fiddly bow in this state? Next to impossible.

Walking back through the dark forest? Utterly impossible.

But getting back with help? Much easier.

Prey steeled his mind and sent a command to the veropede, 'Come.'

The armoured head of the giant insect came closer in the night, and its four antenna extended down towards Prey. Delicately for something of its size and hideous appearance, the veropede's barbed appendages loosely wrapped under Prey and gently lifted him into the air. The touch of a terrifying monster under his control did not make Prey freak out, it was preferable to even Lemon Pink's touch, who was someone he knew would never harm him. Because it's only people who want to hurt you with a touch. A monster does not torture. Only people torture.

Prey was settled between the red spines behind the veropede's head. The dark armoured carapace was cool and smooth as the antenna slid out from under him and let him slump. If it weren't for the spines around him, he would've slid off, not even feeling like he had the strength to hold on.

Everything was slowly becoming more blurry and unfocused, along with hurting more.

Prey found Lemon Pink at his eye level as he lay. She stood beside the verodede, waiting for his orders. She'd rushed across the Ridgeback, press ganged a pack of Diamond Dogs, and risked her life to be here. Just as his note had ordered her to. Prey had to actually focus to be able to think what to say.

"Find a way back to Cant'rlot, but take all the time you need an' rest first. Bring both veropedes back w'th you'. There's still som' k'ndersnatches out there, so stay safe. An' fetch the Mimic too." He hesitated, then quietly added, "An' thanks L'mon."

As said, the darkest hour is before the dawn. The night may be black, the danger perilous, and the threat all too real. But the sun will always rise.

However, will the uncaring sunlight reveal a triumph, or a tragedy?

Crimson stood on the edge of Mayflower, the overgrown ghost village to his back, and the black forest before him.

He stared into the pines trees, tear tracks blistered and face swollen, but still staring unblinkingly.

Posture rigid, he look as if he were preparing himself to launch into the dark forest at a moment's notice. Or perhaps just fall over. Crimson was filthy, Gloom's borrowed armour dented and stained, feathers a mess and wings drooping, but he did not allow these exhausting weaknesses to break his vigil.

Just the faintest touch of the coming kiss of dawn showed on the horizon behind the rigid pegasus, bringing barely enough light to frame the jagged outlines of the Ridgeback. Crimson did not glance back at the long promised dawn for even a moment.

The pegasus had barely escaped from the enormous insectile monster, galloping through the hungry trees on exhausted legs as the creature pursued him. He didn't know when exactly he'd lost it, just that he'd almost been out of the forest by then.

From there, he'd limped his way along the border of pine trees until he came to the silent ruins of Mayflower. That's what Prey had managed to brokenly shout just before the two of them had been split up. "Mayflower!"

It was just Crimson left.

No Gloom. No Scenic. No Prey.

Lilly might have succumbed to the meld wood and died by now too for all Crimson knew.

But it was obvious that Crimson couldn't leave and return to Alfalfa Dale to check on her condition. He couldn't leave. Not yet. Not until he knew for certain no one else was coming out from the forest.

Every so often, a shiver passed up the pegasus's legs, but Crimson didn't move to relieve his body, or even to sit down. Call it stubbornness, hope, or desperation.

Prey knew what the word was. Defeat.

"Cr'mson."

Crimson jerked, stumbling as turned on uncoordinated legs that looked like they were threatening to fold at any moment.

There, at the corner of one of the houses, a lamb stood, or rather leaned against the building, just a small shape in the night. But even damaged by poison, Crimson's eyes could see in the dark.

"Prey?" Crimson croaked.

Prey tried to offer a smile, but he was so tired and he couldn't even get his face to move.

"Iz' me." He confirmed. He swayed, the building proving not to be enough even when taking all of his weight.

"Th'nk I'll jus' sit down now." Prey said, and then collapsed.

"Pr'ey. T'ank Luna, thank Luna, t'ank Luna." Crimson exclaimed, stumbling over as Prey struggled to sit up, before giving up entirely and just lying on his side, breathing deeply. He rolled a blue eye swollen red towards Crimson as the pegasus reached him.

"You' look as b'd as I feel." Prey croaked drily, voice barely above a whisper.

"Don' move." Crimson said, trying to check Prey over.

"No probl'm."

"Where're you' hu'rt?" Crimson lent down for a closer look and

almost fell on top of Prey.

"Same as you. Ev'rywhere."

A choked sound escaped Crimson's throat, "Thoug't you wer' dead. Thought I was alone. Thank Luna."

"You' ok'y?" Prey asked, still lying on his side.

"Are you'?" Crimson responded.

Prey's gaze slid away and broke eye contact, "...No."

"No." Crimson answered Prey's own question just as simply. The pegasus swayed worryingly.

"Thoug't...thought I failed aga'n. Thought it really happen'd this time. That you' were all...all..." Crimson shook his head, "Here, let me'." He reached for Prey.

Prey shrank away from his hoof like it was a live snake, eyes widening.

Crimson jerked his hoof back, "I...sorry, didn't mean...." He trailed off, "...Sorry."

Crimson swayed again, and then very abruptly sat down next to Prey. He stared out into the trees.

For a long time, neither spoke, each just silently enduring.

" 'm sorry too." Prey eventually croaked.

There was a few seconds before Crimson even heard him. He blinked, turning his head slowly to Prey in confusion, "For w'at?"

Prey looked at Crimson's dirt smeared face, mane matted, but worst were the burnt and blistered tracks under his eyes. Half of that was Prey's fault. He should've pushed harder to not trust Shimmer, he should've found a way to force them to listen to him. He should've tried. But now he just didn't have the words to explain that.

" 'm sorry."

"I should've... should've..." Crimson vaguely waved a limp hoof, "You' know... Should've listen'd to you'. My team. But I thought I waz' strong. This-"

Crimson let out a hacking cough, and tapped the jade necklace around his neck, "-Thought I was strong. W'at it...w'at it show'd me, made me too scared to rely on you' guys. I was wrong. I'm s'rry."

"Wha' did it show you'?" Prey asked.

Crimson lowered his head, "My father an' all of you. An'...an'... an' you all died. It was so real, like I was there, an' I believed it. That was the price it want'd from me, what it took fr'm me. Bought an' paid for."

"I didn' know you' cared that much." Prey eventually rasped.

Crimson jerked, "Of cours' I care. How could you' not know that?"

"I... b'cause, b'cause, I never know what you're think'ng."

"I *do* care, I do. If'n I didn't, I would've... I would...." Crimson trailed off, and his mental walls shuddered horribly. Prey waited, desperate to hear the reason, but Crimson didn't finish. Prey's mind began to drift, floating on a haze of tiredness and pain.

Almost without realising it, Prey started speaking again, "I was so close to makin' a horr'ble mistake. Hav' been for a long time, an' I didn' even realise it until I was looking in the mirror. Horrible."

"I've...already made my mistake."

Crimson tiredly shuffled one wing around to spread out before him. From the angle of his head, Prey could tell he was looking at the wingblade on it. Only because of Prey's exceptional hearing did he hear Crimson whisper; "Too little, too late."

"It's always too late," Prey coughed, "For peopl' like us, iz' always too late."

"Ain't that the truth of it," Crimson muttered, "Thought I was special. Thought I could sav' m'father. Just made it worse. It should've been me, I should've fought in th' gauntlet. Why'd you have'ta go an' take my place?"

Prey barely registered that Crimson had said 'gauntlet', not 'duel' like he'd originally assumed. Crimson's words triggered his own memories. Old mistakes, past pains and scars. His greatest failure.

"Failed them all too. Mother. Fleece. Ev'n little useless Gossamer."

"Gloom, Lilly, Sc'nic, I should've stuck closer wiv' them." Crimson croaked.

"I keep mess'ng up. I don' know why I lie all the time. The warlock got to me. An' now Lemon's hidin' someth'ng from me an' I don't now what." Prey slurred, hardly listening to what Crimson was mumbling about.

"Myrrdon clan's plann'ng something, I jus' know it. There's no way they just...just leave like that. I'm always gonna' be looking over m' shoulder."

"Got Garrow and Snake, they won' leave me alone. Won' stay dead. Why? I just want..."

"I'm fail'ng Pr'nc'ss Luna too. She told me to put aside m' revenge. But I didn'. I didn' do what she said. An' I hate them so much."

"...I jus' want to be left alone. Jus' wanna' be free. Iz' that too much to ask?"

There was a minute of quiet as each of them trailed off into their own inner turmoil. The faint light in the sky slowly grew over the mountains, the first tentative touch of soft pale orange, but the shadow of Mayflower still sat squatting over them.

"Need t' get back. Need t' check Lilly. See if she, if she, if..." Crimson's throat worked, "Can't stay here."

"I can't move." Prey bitterly admitted.

"I'll hel'p you." Crimson uncertainly said. Would he even make it back himself, let alone carrying Prey?

"Don' touch me."

"I won't." Crimson wearily promised. Then; "...Why not Prey? Why you nev'r let anyone... 'S not healthy. Mentally. We're a herd spec'ies. Everyone wants to be shown they're loved."

'He said 'anyone', not 'anypony'.' Prey blearily thought. "Like you's one to talk." He muttered in reply.

"Ev'n, even I give a pat on the back or a hug. Least, think I do?" Crimson's ears quirked as he appeared to be trying to remember, "Yes, 'm sure I do."

Prey didn't answer that. His eyes were so heavy, but he couldn't go to sleep, not yet. He still had something he had to say to Crimson. He gathered up his courage and spoke.

"You' know I'll snap one day...right?"

Before Crimson could respond to that, Prey quickly drew in a breath that was agony on his throat and spoke on; "I don' wanna' hurt you. I don't wanna' die. Neither of us. I owe you. An' I don't want to hurt you."

Prey was babbling, making no sense. He stopped and tried again, but when he spoke he somehow found himself moved onto a different subject.

"It...hurts. To live. Hurts. How do you' deal with the hurt?"

Prey wasn't asking for help. He didn't want or need pity. No, he was just asking a fellow exile for their coping mechanisms. Prey didn't expect the answer to help him, he'd survived well enough on his own for sixty-one years, but he still wanted to know Crimson's answer. He knew he was asking something deeply personal and offensive of Crimson, but Crimson would understand. He too knew what it was like to be trapped under the black ice and feel like you could never break free.

Crimson's shoulders hunched, "I don't. I run away. I, I lie to m'self. I lie an' lie an' lie!"

Crimson's hoof struck the ground, but Prey was too tired to even flinch, "I lie. I'm a hypocrite an' a liar. I hate liars. An' I'm a liar."

"Ah." Prey murmured, like that answered it all. And it did.

Crimson did not deal with the hurt. Prey had been foolish to ask. He'd forgotten that he was, in fact, older than Crimson. He was mentally a child, but yet also more than just a child. He'd had longer to deal with this than Crimson had. He'd had fifty-seven years in Dreverton with nothing to do but think. The wine of regret had aged, but it was still wine. Just as bitter though. Age just made it another kind of bitter.

Crimson was still choking on his own wine cup which'd been forced onto him. He hadn't yet mastered the art of swallowing the vinegar and telling himself he was used to it. That it no longer burned. That it was just water.

"How... How d'you deal with it Prey?" Crimson tentatively ventured, voice wretched.

Prey didn't have the answer Crimson wanted any more than the pegasus had an answer for him. Still, he gave it his best shot; "The first ti'me I thought I'd die. But 'm okay. I've gotten pretty good at tell'ng myself 'm okay."

"Ah." And that said it all, didn't it?

" 'm sorry."

" 'm sorry too. For both of us."

The light of morning slowly dawned over the Ridgeback, but Prey didn't see it. He couldn't muster the strength to open his eyelids anymore. Lemon Pink was still out there in the forest somewhere, but he didn't have anything left to give. He couldn't muster up even one iota of energy to open even one swollen eye.

He was so tired that he no longer even hurt. He could barely feel it.

Not the blood, the cuts, the bruising, the cracked bones or his damaged insides or even the poisoning.

But he shouldn't sleep, should he?

But it would be so nice and he was so tired.

Very distantly, nothing more than a whisper on the edge of the blackness, he heard Crimson speaking to him. "Sleep Prey. I'll keep watch.

Prey sank into sleep. Down past the deep blue, the dark indigo, past the deeper violet, and vanished into the back of total unconsciousness.

---I---

End Arc III

[[[Bonus Concept Picture]]]

[image]

Author's Notes:

So that's the end of Arc 3 finally. Hope everyone enjoyed it, next time, Arc 4. It was rather grimdarky and such, but I hope it was fun anyways. [image]

Climatic? Not climatic enough? Too much foreshadowing right from the get go?

As always, Editor: Sweetolebob18

And as always, if you do spot any mistakes, please let me know. Thank you all.

As for the picture, I was just trying out something new. A different style, for those of you who are in

to art. But if you want to see a much better picture done by someone else in the same sorta' style of Prey: Art Here. It's much better, definitely worth a look. 😊 Kindly shared to me by GreatSpaceBeaver

52.4 The calm After the Storm

[Beginning of Arc IV]

-An extract on the Institution of the Grand Galloping Gala-

For centuries, the Grand Galloping Gala has rested as the pinnacle of Canterlot celebrations. Happening only once every two years, it is often judged as the be all and end all of high Canterlotien society.

The richest of the rich, the most famous of the famous, the best of the best. Magi, high noble houses, and royalty, such things are the baseline norm when speaking of the Gala.

Nobility alone doesn't grant you a ticket. Wealth doesn't grant you a ticket. Being famous doesn't grant you a ticket. Often all three combined aren't enough. You had to stand out, be more than just those things, or had to have caught Princess Celestia's eye personally. It was an internationally famous event, one whose notoriety was not confined solely to the pony lands of Equestria.

It was not uncommon for Gala tickets from past years to be framed and put on display by their owners, and the invite to be spoken of as a grand achievement for the rest of that pony's life.

If one were to mention the Grand Galloping Gala to the average citizen, they would sigh with wistful longing at the gold, glamour, and glitz, knowing they would never attend, but all dreaming that someday, it would be them who was famous enough to receive one of the most prestigious golden tickets.

Music, dances, famous celebrities, dazzling gold, decorations, unveiling of timeless works of art, performances like the Wonderbolts, and food from the best chefs in the entire world just to name a few events. Who wouldn't be envious?

However, that was only on the face of the Gala. It was so much more than that.

The Gala cost hundreds of thousands of bits to run, but many more hundreds of thousands were made at the event.

Massive business deals were made or broken. Priceless diamonds, exotic jewels, and magical artifacts all found prices and were auctioned. Why, at the last Gala, Lord Triton Fell had off hoofedly bought eight separate holiday mansions from Lord Golden Star, reportedly just so he'd have one for each of his grandfoals.

Money the likes of which would boggle even the most avarice High Lord could be spent or earned.

However, the Gala was still more than even that.

Off the marble dance floors, backstage in private, velvet cushioned rooms studded with diamonds, a different sort of dance took place. The one of politics and nobility.

Alliances were subtly made, dignitaries entertained, international trade brokered, stances probed, offers extended, promises of votes and support bought and sold. The face of the whole government would emerge different after every Gala. Sipping their century aged wine, finely dressed ponies would decide upon new laws and policies which would affect the lives of tens of thousands.

And where there is politics, there is political treachery, backstabbing, and betrayal.

-Extract end-

---<<<O>>>---

A shift in the blackness of unconsciousness. Prey's limbs were leaden, and to move was completely beyond him. He felt warm, muffled, and not in pain. How strange.

Was that movement? Was he moving? Was he being carried to his doom? He was still so tired.

Prey drifted back down into the blackness.

He stirred. Now there was pain, but faint, far off, and detached, like it was happening to someone else. He hurt, but he was also still warm and tired.

Was that...noise? A rhythmic clacking sound and a rocking motion?

'....Train?'

The word slowly drifted across his mind. But it was all happening so far away, and his eyes may as well have been padlocked shut.

'But... how's there a train...?'

Prey sank once more into the dreamless depths of muffled purple and black.

When next Prey drifted up to the surface, something was different. Wrong. He couldn't feel any pain from his insides or poison burnt face, but then again, he couldn't feel anything. That made him scared.

He could smell sterile rubber, and he was lying on his front, limbs all neatly tucked under him. There was something over his back. It felt smothering, he wanted it off right now!

His panic proved to be too much strain, because for the third time, Prey was dragged under.

Voices. Murmuring from high above him and far away. Or perhaps they were just whispering? It was hard to tell.

Prey felt sleepy. Very sleepy. Artificially sleepy. That should've worried him more than it did. He still couldn't feel anything, and *that* did worry him, but he couldn't move to do anything about it either.

So instead of dwelling on that, he focused instead on trying to decipher the familiar sounding voices.

One of them sounded like Gloom. It was raspy, but shouldn't it be all...damaged and stuff? From the, the er, what was it? The poison cloud, that's right. The poison.

But it sounded like Gloom was just back to his normal rasp. And he sounded angry.

"...all those ponies are dead! All of them, Mayflower, Alfalfa Dale, they're all dead. Shimmer and Atlas gave their lives trying to save them, and where were you? Why didn't you come like you promised?!"

Who was Gloom speaking to? He sounded really angry. Usually thestrals were so composed.

"You're right, Sargent. I failed you. I failed all of you. There are reasons for why we couldn't get there, but that's no excuse and I won't insult you with them. However if you still want to hear my poor excuses, I will give them to you when you're ready."

That was Nighthawk? Gloom was shouting at *Captain* Nighthawk? And Nighthawk was letting him get away with it?

There was a growling sound. Prey assumed it came from Gloom; "Tell me. Sir."

"You'll be discharged tomorrow. Waiting would-"

"No I don't want to wait to get out of this bed! Prey and Scenic are unconscious, and nopony knows what's going to happen to Lilly. I need answers now."

"Very well." Nighthawk didn't try to further delay, beginning to speak calmly and clearly. Wherever the two were standing, Nighthawk and Gloom were both outside of Prey's perception range so he had no choice but to listen to the words only.

"There's a number of contributing factors. First, the Gala was a complete mess, and I'm not referring to the Element Bearers unrestrained ill-manners."

"Element Bearers? What do you mean?"

"Ah yes, you don't know about that yet. It's not relevant, those six were just a side note. What's important is that a large number of Lords and nobles tried to underhoofedly discredit Princess Luna politically. It was slander, plain and simple, but they stopped just short of anything illegal. Her Majesty herself forbade us from making any reprisals, but then a number of grand fraud attempts happened on the same night, and it devolved into a huge mess requiring all available Night Guards to sort out. I only found your first message an hour or so before the Gala began, and didn't know any of that was coming."

"Second, the damned inspectors. They've been getting our way at every turn, and Princess Luna has ordered me to give them my full cooperation. They're a bunch of self conceited pencil pushers of the worst kind, scrutinising and impeding our every action. I sent the ISND out of Canterlot for this very reason."

Nighthawk paused to breathe deeply, "Third, we simply couldn't get a train engine to get over the Ridgeback. Not for love of duty, money, or authority. There simply was no way to physically get a train onto the connecting train tracks. A bank holiday, a union strike, and then a breakdown. Fourthly, there was an accountant who didn't think the expense was warranted. We didn't find out he'd denied the request until a *further* day had passed. And lastly, because we were lead to believe the Border Guard had already sent you reinforcements."

"What?"

"I received a signed communication from the Border Guard command saying they had a unit on the ground who were aware of the situation, and had sent an additional full platoon to Alfalfa Dale, and would the Night Guard kindly stay out of their way."

"But there were no Border Guard reinforcements." Gloom protested.

"I know," Nighthawk growled, "After twenty-four hours I asked them for an update on the situation. They came back and said they didn't know what I was talking about. I sent back their first communication, and they said nopony ever sent that order."

"They're lying!"

"*Some*pony's lying," Nighthawk corrected, "I doubt it's their command. But one of their underlings is. But as to why, I haven't a clue, and nopony can trace anything. Can you think of any reason this Corporal Shimmer or Atlas might've wanted to keep the Night Guard away?"

"No sir, and I can't believe it was them either. They both gave their lives trying to save the pon- the people out there. They were both good Guards." Gloom said.

"And there's no way we'll ever be able to ask them ourselves now," Nighthawk said grimly, "May they find rest in the stars of Luna's mane."

"Night watch over them." Gloom echoed, much more subdued. Like he was remembering.

Prey vaguely heard the clop of hooves as Nighthawk moved closer to Gloom's hospital bed. "Gloom, tell me what happened. What really happened. Crimson wouldn't tell anypony more than an overview. What happened to you all?"

Who would've thought it? The gruff, iron bound, unflinching Captain was actually concerned about them. But then again, this was an unprecedented incident, a military bungle of epic proportions, and what'd happened to the ISND was deadly serious.

Even a hardened senior thestral like Nighthawk hadn't faced anything like this before.

"I....I don't even know if I have the words. It was Tartarus sir. Pure Tartarus."

"Then don't tell me about those bits. Tell me the facts instead. What happened?" Nighthawk pressed, but not unkindly.

"I...No. No I don't think I want to tell you actually." Gloom responded.

Strangely, Nighthawk just accepted that, "Alright. It can wait until

you feel more up to it Sargent."

"...But you'll want to hear it later anyway is what you're saying?"

"Yes," Nighthawk said bluntly, "You're going to have to tell the story to many ponies before this is over. But it can wait until later."

"No, no I may as well get it over and done with now. It...might help." Gloom said taking a deep breath.

Slowly, and with much backtracking and pausing, Gloom began to lay out their tale. Prey felt betrayed that Gloom would tell Nighthawk anything. Nighthawk was the one who'd sent them out there to almost get horrifically killed. That they were all still alive was no thanks to the Captain either. After that, Nighthawk didn't *deserve* to know their story.

Nighthawk didn't interrupt Gloom's retelling or ask any questions until after he was finished.

Prey also got to hear what'd happened to Scenic and Gloom after they'd been split off from him and Crimson by the kindersnatches. Apparently, Gloom had staggered off into the forest towing Scenic with the kindersnatches right on their tails.

Eventually, right when it seemed like they were done for, a mare's voice had whispered Gloom's ear from out of thin air, giving him directions. Thinking he'd gone mad but without any better options, Gloom had listened, and somehow, the mare's voice had led them to safety. The kindersnatches hadn't seemed able to see them either, flailing and crashing about blindly in the undergrowth despite Gloom and Scenic still being plainly in their view.

"We had help. From whom, I don't know. They didn't stay around to be thanked." Gloom summed up.

'Lemon Pink.' Prey thought. Seems he owed his servant additional thanks for saving Gloom and Scenic, despite him having given her no orders to do so. He hadn't forgiven Gloom or Scenic for nearly getting them all killed on multiple occasions, but still.

"We crawled back to Alfalfa Dale in the morning, and saw the train finally coming down the mountain. We found Crimson carrying Prey when we got there, and when the train arrived, well, you know the rest. You whisked us into medical care, and to be honest, it's a blur after that sir. I should be dead ten times over. We should all be dead." Gloom finished in a hollow voice.

There was a silence as Nighthawk no doubt digested Gloom's story. The Sargent had left out a lot of the fine details, and skipped a couple of parts, but it was an almost complete retelling of what had happened to the ISND.

"You did the best you could Sargent," Nighthawk eventually said, "You can't be blamed for the warlock's actions. You and your unit were all very brave."

"I wasn't brave. Crimson was brave. Lilly was brave." Gloom murmured.

Nighthawk didn't try correcting Gloom. He probably knew Gloom wouldn't believe him. "There are some parts I want to ask for clarification on if you're able to answer, Sargent."

"Which parts?"

"How did you know about this meld wood? How did you make those acid traps Crimson mentioned? And what happened that night after Crimson returned from these Wolf Woods? Crimson said he fell unconscious and doesn't recall."

"It's not real." Gloom whispered.

"Pardon?"

Prey heard Gloom start in fright, "I, we, it was....."

There was a long silence.

"...I can't tell you sir. I just can't. Please don't ask me again what happened that night, because I can't tell you."

"I see..." Nighthawk said, "And the rest?"

"My fault. I claim responsibility for the call to operate on Lilly and for what Prey-I mean, what offensive actions we took against the warlock." Gloom said quickly.

"I see." Nighthawk said again. There was another long silence, so long that Prey was beginning to drift off again by the time someone spoke again.

"Can you...convey my thanks to Princess Luna when you report to her? For helping with my dreams." Gloom hesitantly asked.

"You can thank Her Majesty yourself Sargent. You're to report to her tomorrow when you're released."

"Oh. Yes sir."

Prey heard a deep sigh, "I'll be blunt Gloom, when you get out of here, things are going to get rough. Those inspectors are hounding me to speak to the ISND now that you've returned, what with what happened to the salt trade and all. The Border Guard wants answers too. And to be honest, none of you are fit for duty any longer."

"Captain-!"

"No, be quiet Sargent. Listen first." Nighthawk's tone was iron:

"This is not about your performance, because you have always performed beyond my expectations. This is not about failure, because you have not failed, do you understand that? You didn't fail. Nopony could expect anymore from any of you. Clear? This is about what's best for you, and everypony under your command. You *need* to stop. You *need* to rest. You have a command to look after, and all of them but Crimson are still in hospital. They come first. I will *only* allow any of you back onto duty when you're *all* accounted for. Understand?"

"Yes sir, I understand." Gloom said quietly, sounding crushed and relieved all at the same time.

"Do you really understand why I'm doing this?" Nighthawk repeated.

"Yes sir."

"I'll ask you thrice Sargent, do you understand why I'm doing this?"

"Yes sir. You were right. It's because we need it, and none of us are fit for duty anymore."

"At the moment," Nighthawk corrected him sternly, "None of you are fit for duty *at the moment*. You'll get through this, all of you will. I'll see to it, just like you'll be seeing to the rest of your unit."

"I'll, I'll do my best to do right by them sir."

"Of course you will." There came the sound of Nighthawk trotting for the door, "Try and get some more rest Gloom, I'll send the nurse back in. If you can, you should also write a letter back to your clan. It might help."

"I'll... see if I can find some paper and a quill."

There was the sound of the door swinging open, "Oh and Sargent?" Nighthawk asked loudly, pausing with the door half open. Obviously, he meant for whomever was outside to hear his next words:

"All information of what happened on your mission is restricted. If anypony not me, either of the Lieutenants, or Princess Luna asks any of you any questions, you are to tell them in no uncertain terms to get lost. Can you do that?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. Try and get some rest." Nighthawk said, and left.

Prey heard some other pony come back in, must've been the nurse, but things got a bit fuzzy after that. He wasn't sure when he drifted off again.

Prey dreamed.

He was back at the desecrated stone circle, but the wooden stakes were bone and the trees were ash. The sky was boiling purple.

But there was no bound veropede, no Lemon Pink to aid him. It was just him, with his ribbon wrapped around his neck, tightening, tightening, *tightening*.

And then in an awful rush of dream realisation of something he'd known all along, Prey knew he was Hard Baked. He was the warlock. He was the one who'd sacrificed all of those villagers. It was all him.

He was scared.

Why was the ground freezing over into black ice? Why couldn't he move? The ribbon was tightening, tightening, tightening into his flesh and was was he getting so hungry *hungry* HuNGry-

A rush of star light, dark blue, and a sensation of warmth and safety. "There now, rest faithful servant. T'will be naught but a bad memory when morn comes."

Utter dread froze Prey's soul. 'Nooooo-'

"-oooooo!"

Prey stared at a white wall. He was lying on his side. There was a colourful cutout foal's mobile hanging above him for some reason. For a heart pounding second, Prey didn't know where he was or what was going on.

He could feel, and see, and move. The numbness was gone. He still hurt, but nowhere near as much as he should be hurting, and he could breathe. 'What about the poison? The warlock and-'

Prey threw the blanket off his back as he shot upright, his hooves flying to his side, seeking out the cuts and injuries. He found the padded softness of plasters and gauze bandages. That proved it. He was definitely in a pony hospital, and if he hadn't imagined the whole conversation between Gloom and Nighthawk, he was back in

Canterlot too.

'Back in Canterlot.' Prey lip twisted. He was back in Luna's domain again. That had been her invading his dreams just now.

Prey flopped back down onto the big white pillow and glared up at the stupid foal's mobile above his bed. Who'd thought hanging that up there was a good idea anyway? And why'd they gotten an *actual* foal to colour in the smudgy cartoon birds?

His cheeks felt like they had some kind of thick cream smeared across them, and just under his eyes there was the fuzzy outline of two gauze patches stuck to his face. Tentatively, he poked at his face. A mistake as it turned out.

Prey screwed his eyes shut until the hot spike of pain passed. "O*www*." He blinked watering eyes as he stared up at the insulting cutout mobile.

He frowned. Were those birds really that smudgy? Surely not, and why did what should be a solid outline look grainy? Prey's stomach felt like it fell away as he realised it wasn't the hanging mobile that was grainy, it was just his vision.

His eyesight was damaged. The reaper king's poison had indeed done permanent damage.

Prey just lay there for a while, feeling resentful and angry. It should've been a small price to pay for surviving what by all rights should have killed him, but he didn't feel grateful.

It could've been worse. He could've been fully blinded. Instead, he could still see relatively well.

But he still felt bitter.

It wasn't just about his impaired vision, but about everything which had happened in the forest.

'Has Lemon Pink made it back across the Ridgeback yet? Did she manage to conceal both veropedes?'

That was another huge complication looming on the horizon. How to keep two giant centipedes from Tartarus hidden and fed? Prey hadn't wanted to hatch them early for this very reason, his preparations weren't complete. Well, Lemon Pink was the one doing the actual preparations, but it amounted to the same thing.

Chained or not, both veropedes were a huge liability. This was going to be a massive undertaking, and definitely a lot more responsibility than a puppy.

'Actually, how much time has passed? How long have I been unconscious?' Prey wondered, gingerly rubbing at a string of bruises running down his shoulder and across his thin chest.

Two days, three? It couldn't be much longer than that.

At least he only felt like he'd been mauled a week previously by a timber wolf, instead of being in the process of being mauled. 'I wonder what pain relief I'm on?'

He didn't like it. Someone had administered drugs to him while he was unconscious and vulnerable.

'Hang on, I'm not filthy. Someone washed me too!' Prey shuddered in disgust. Someone had touched him, or just as bad, used magic to cast a cleaning spell on him. He would've preferred to still be covered in slime and mud.

'At least I wasn't awake at the time.' Prey tried to comfort himself.

He looked around his hospital room again. It was small, with another empty bed opposite his. Seems Gloom had already been released. There were a few colourful pictures tacked to the walls, and even a stuffed cat plushy sitting on the window sill, the blinds drawn. It was early morning, or perhaps just before.

Prey tried to reconcile the clean, white, well organised hospital room with the cramped filthy operating tent he knew so well from the Resistance, and couldn't help but let out a twisted chuckle at the difference.

Prey sighed tiredly, and let his eyes slide shut. He wasn't going

anywhere just yet. He still felt raw and drained. The throbbing in his face and side were particularly distracting. But currently, there was nothing more he could do. Not for Lemon Pink, or himself.

Before he drifted off, Prey checked what he really should've checked sooner. He reached up and tugged at the cool silk of the ribbon behind his ear. Good, it was still there. No one had tried to remove it.

'Lucky for them.'

It was a fitful, unhappy sleep, and this time, Prey made sure not to dream.

Prey opened his eyes, blinked up at the stupid foal's mobile, and then remembered his vision was damaged. He was much better prepared for it this time though. His body told him it had been less than two hours.

As weak as he currently felt, Prey was extremely relieved not to have woken up to back cramps.

Then he stiffened. Someone else was in the room. Someone else whose mind he couldn't hear.

'Another mimic's come to finish the job.'

No, he was being stupid. He knew the familiar feel of these smooth mental walls. So why then did they feel so twisted up and so, so...foreign?

Prey sat up slowly. At the end of his hospital bed sat Crimson on a small stool. Prey may no longer be able to see fine detail, but he could still see, and his eyes immediately darted over the pegasus to assess his injuries.

Crimson was out of armour and back to his natural deep red colouring. It made the white of the multitude of small bandages and plasters stand out starkly. He had a large number of them across the front of his neck, upper legs, and wing edges. But they were still

only small bandages.

'Nothing too serious then.' Prey was taken aback by the strength of the surge of relief he felt.

And clearly displayed around Crimson's neck, the jade necklace sat, just a bit too vivid and green to be natural. Crimson wasn't wearing his wing blades though, likely because he was off duty, and thus wouldn't have been allowed into a hospital while armed. But with the magical jade necklace, he may as well have been.

Last of all Prey looked at Crimson's face, and he flinched. Not because of the familiar thick gauze pads tapped under Crimson's eyes, but because of the yellow orbs themselves.

Crimson was just looking at Prey. He didn't speak, his hooded eyes just watched Prey. And his mental walls still felt all tight and twisted up. Prey struggled for something to say. Why was Crimson looking at him like that?

Prey cleared his throat, and suddenly became aware of how desperately thirsty he was. His throat was so dry he couldn't even croak.

Wordlessly, Crimson pointed to the table beside Prey's bed, but other than his foreleg, nothing else moved.

Prey looked and found a large glass of water, with a straw poking out of it. Prey took a tentative sip, then a long pull when he didn't taste anything off and his body didn't reject it.

All the while Crimson just kept looking at him. Prey hoped Crimson's vision hadn't been damaged any worse than his own. That would be awful.

It looked like he was going to have to be the one to speak first. But what should he say? Something sarcastic? No, he should try something hopeful.

"Good to see you looking...well." Prey said. His throat still hurt, but nothing like the raw, swallowed-broken-glass feeling from the reaper king's poison. And he could actually speak real words, not

just gargle letters. In the back of his mind he wondered what medicines they'd forced on him while he was unconscious.

There was a long moment before Crimson stirred, "Me? You say *I* look well?"

"Um, sort of? You're not in a hospital bed for a start."

"It's yourself you should be worried about." Crimson said flatly and Prey saw his jaw clench, "You wouldn't wake up. Not on the way back, not on the train, not even when they rushed you three into intensive care."

"Us three?" Prey dared to ask.

"Scenic. Lilly. You."

Why was Crimson so angry? 'I survived, that's good right?'

But surviving didn't mean it had ever been okay. And there had been so many people who hadn't survived the warlock. So many of the villagers and townsfolk. Some of which Prey was responsible for having killed himself.

Prey didn't deny or hide from that fact. He was a murderer. He knew it, and he'd been one for over sixty years.

But that was probably why Crimson was so withdrawn and brittle. Because they hadn't won. There are no winners in war. Only survivors.

There were many questions Prey needed answered, but he couldn't ask them of Crimson. Not here or now. So Prey cleared his throat again and sought for the least wrong thing to say to the upset Crimson;

"Lilly and Scenic, they're both still alive, right?"

Asking after your teammates, even ones you hated, was surely the expected 'right' thing to do.

"Alive yes. Scenic will recover. But Lilly... She woke up briefly,

once, but she was delirious. She wasn't aware of her surroundings but she begged..." Crimson broke off, eyes flicking away. There was a sag in his wings.

"...She's back in a coma. Gloom is with her and Scenic all the time he can spare, but he's not okay either." Crimson muttered that last part.

"Gloom? Not Sargent Gloom?" Prey asked. It seemed a safe thing to ask about.

Crimson's expression did not lighten even one iota, "Yes. Just Gloom. All of the ISND are on enforced leave until further notice. Starry Wing conveyed the order this morning."

"Let me guess, because we're not fit for duty anymore?" Prey asked, remembering the conversation he'd overheard between Gloom and the Night Guard Captain.

"Because we have too many problems, yes." Crimson stated flatly.

"Starry Wing said it that bluntly?" Prey asked, a bit shocked.

"No. Captain Nighthawk did."

Prey thought about that for a moment. Medical leave. Or possibly enforced leave, it hadn't been made clear which it technically was. He wasn't sure what that meant for them. Not having to work every waking hour of every day sounded wonderful, but what would the ISND be doing then? It sounded so impossible, so novel, that suspicion immediately wormed its way into his thoughts.

It sounded like a punishment for failure. But at the same time, it also seemed to be a reward.

Was this some kind of trap or test he wasn't aware of? His breath froze, was this Luna's doing?

Prey tucked his hooves back under the blanket to hide the tremble. Surely Luna wouldn't throw them away after just one failure? He'd shown he was valuable when he stopped Garrow, the salt dealers, and Wheat Plow. Surely one failure wasn't cause for his disposal?

'But this failure was a big one.' Prey couldn't help but think.

Crimson was still staring at him with that look in his eyes. Prey instinctively wanted to smile, to put on a mask. But no, this was Crimson. He wanted to be honest around Crimson. Or at least *more* honest. And he knew Crimson wanted him to be more honest too.

They'd spoken in Mayflower. When they'd both been injured and at their most vulnerable, they'd each bared something of their souls. Shared secrets they perhaps shouldn't have.

That had changed things, but Prey exactly wasn't sure how yet.

So he took a deep breath and asked Crimson, "So how much trouble am I in?"

It was apparently the wrong thing to say.

Fire flashed in Crimson's eyes, along with betrayal, "How much- you? Not *us*? Where's the *us*? Were we ever a team? Why didn't you tell me? After what happened, with the warlock, we spoke and you could've told me, but you, you-You hoard the truth like it's some kind of secret and you can't, no, you *refuse* to tell anypony!"

Prey flinched back as Crimson continued to rant.

"You think I want to have to drag you around by the hoof and make you speak, is that what you think? Is this how you think I want to learn things? To be the last to know the truth?!"

'Zoma'Grika, what's he found out?' Prey thought, stomach clenching.

Prey licked his dry lips, "I honestly have no idea what you're talking about."

Crimson gave Prey a long look, "This is a hospital. You were badly hurt, how badly we didn't know and you wouldn't wake up. What do you think the doctors did?"

"What?" Prey asked, the word tasting like ash.

"The doctor scanned you of course."

'*No*.' Prey's hoof tried to automatically rise to his chest, as it felt like his heart had stopped beating in horror.

But that was of course physically impossible. Prey's heart could not stop beating.

'They know! They scanned me with their disgusting magic and found it.'

Because Prey should be dead.

Prey was a lamb. He was over sixty years old. So how could he still be a lamb? How could he still be alive?

The answer was simple, yet complicated.

A black magic witch's ritual, a curse, and a dark magic artifact. All of which Prey had chosen to inflict upon himself.

Black, dark, and blood magic were easy, too easy, and they could be used by non-unicorns. It's part of what made them so alluring. Easy power. For a price.

It wasn't the easiness which made them forbidden magic. It was that last bit. The price.

Because everything has a price.

Normal magic usually just used up the caster's mana along with the mana in the area. Perhaps it consumed prepared resources too, such as metals and alchemical fuels like those used in a spell furnace. In essence, all magic consumed resources of one kind or another.

It was just that forbidden magics usually required something a little less innocent as their fuel. Blood, body parts, a sacrifice, pain, dark emotions, life force, and even at times souls.

Snake had been a voodoo witch, and terrifyingly proficient in his twisted craft. Prey had learned under Snake's merciless hoof, and what he hadn't learned, he'd torn from Snake's remnant. And he'd

used that knowledge to curse himself.

Back then, fighting in the Deeper Green, things had been different.

Back then, Prey had been alone, just him left against the might of the Border Guard. Fire Strike had yet lived, Prey had been, and still was, terrified of dying. He'd seen things he couldn't reconcile, committed atrocities he couldn't take back, and so he'd done something he shouldn't have.

He'd been in a dark place at the time, with so much bitterness in him he'd genuinely feared it would kill him. So he did something no sane person would've done.

Bitter bitter bitter bitter bitter *sweet* hate.

Careful, madness is catching.

'This isn't real. None of it is. I'm not a lamb, or a person. I'm just a thing. Merely Prey.'

'Well then, I'd better take everyone with me, hadn't I?'

A witch's ritual, a curse, and a dark magic artifact.

The ritual came from down the centuries from a coven of witches. The coven's name was faded, tattered, and lost to history, but it was rumored the Great Witch Selenia herself had descended from their line.

The ritual was dark magic in every sense of the word, for it was a ritual that the vain witches had created to halt the process of time. They did not want to go the way of all the earth, to grow old, withered, and ugly. They wanted their maiden youthful beauty to never fade.

So through sacrifice and much experimentation, this nameless coven had devised a ritual. For the cost of a body part, it would halt all external ageing. Sure, they were not immortal. Internally, their bodies would still age and die at the normal rate. But to remain as fair and attractive as ever for all their natural years? Who could resist?

They should've resisted.

The ritual wasn't all they thought it was. Forever young and healthy, but only on the surface. Everything has a price, and the witches were not as powerful or clever as they'd thought. To keep up its unnatural health, the body had to work harder. Or in other words, it burned itself up twice or even three times as fast to maintain the facade.

And the coven didn't realise a thing was wrong until years down the line, when their older members, who'd halted their body at ages of fortyish, started dying before sixty. Those who halted at thirty died at fifty. Those at halted twenty died in their late thirties.

Fear, panic, despair. Failure.

Too late they'd learned their vaunted ritual could freeze time and allow you stay physically young, but at the cost of more than half your remaining life.

And so the coven had died, goals unfulfilled, dreams shattered, and been all but forgotten.

But the ritual hadn't. The zebrican shamans of the past had learnt of it too, but they hadn't used it. Why would they? Halving your own life for vanity's sake? What foolishness.

Still, Snake had known of the ritual, and thus Prey had also known the ritual.

And Prey had sacrificed his, as of yet at the time still forming horns, as the price to activate the ritual. That's why he had no horns like a ram should.

So why wasn't Prey long dead? He'd sacrificed over half his life, and a normal sheep's life span was short enough already as it was, only seventy years at most. Prey should've died long ago in a cell in Dreverton. But he hadn't. Why?

Because of the dark magic artifact.

A ritual, a curse, and a dark magic artifact. That had been the ritual, this was the artifact.

Prey had stolen it from a Border Guard secure transport, who in turn had taken it from a dark magician they'd apprehended hiding on the edges of the wilds.

The artifact looked like a set of cruel iron teeth, called a Jaw of Heart's.

It was one of at least twenty such artifacts created by the mad warlock, Cyrix the Flayer, nearly two hundred years ago. Who Cyrix was, his real name or even species, was not clear. One thing was clear though, and that was the fear he had spread.

Cyrix had been mad, and loved to torture, devoting himself entirely to his craft. Cyrix the Flayer.

Many nightmarish torture devices never before seen came out from Cyrix's workshop, and hopefully never would be seen again. Cyrix had been an evil upon evils, and one thing had apparently irritated the Hell out of him. And that was when his victims expired too soon, their hearts giving out under the agonies he inflicted upon them.

At least, Prey *assumed* that's why Cyrix had created his Jaw of Heart's. Because the jaws, once shoved into a cut open victim's chest, bit into their heart, and then forced the heart to stay alive. To keep beating and pumping blood until there was no more blood left to pump.

In essence, it was a device designed to prolong Cyrix's sick pleasure.

Once the Jaw of Heat's bit into its victim, it would never let go. It would bite and chew and force the victim to keep living in utter agony as their heart was pierced by jagged metal. Their body could literally break into pieces, but their heart would beat on.

Prey had intended to fight his own mad little war for however long it took. So when he'd opened the raided strong box, Border Guard blood still wet on the lid, and figured out just what he was looking at, he'd put one and one together and made two.

The ritual would keep him from ageing and physically healthy, but

kill him early.

The Heart of Jaws would keep him alive, in theory, until his body collapsed in on itself from old age.

Put together, each would counteract the other. As long as he was prepared to live in agony. Which Prey obviously wasn't. He might've wanted to stay alive to fight the Border Guard, but he was almost as scared of pain as he was of death. But Prey was nothing if not resourceful, and he'd found a work around.

The answer? Runes.

Runes could solve almost anything, given enough creativity and time.

Rather than cut open his own chest to get at his heart, he'd used runes to phase the Jaws of Heart's through his flesh and bones, much like he'd done with the veropede egg, and he'd placed more runes upon the metal teeth to cancel out every nerve they touched.

And it had worked. He'd tested it on a drugged Border Guard first to be sure, but his theory had proven correct. Prey couldn't feel a thing from his heart. Nothing physical anyway. But runes couldn't erase the hurt of a child's shattered heart.

So Prey had performed the ritual for himself, and taken in the Jaw of Heart's. That was how he was still alive, and also why he was still, and would be until the day he was killed, a lamb.

But as always happens in every cautionary tale about dark magic, something unforeseen had gone wrong.

There are three reasons a type of magic could be classified as forbidden. The first is what it cost, the second is the magic's intended use, and the third was the risk it posed to the caster.

And that was where Prey had made two mistakes.

First, he'd been too impatient and performed the ritual too early. He forever froze himself as a lamb, and a runt lamb on top of that. If he'd just waited until he grew even a little... But no. He hadn't been

thinking clearly, his hatred of Fire Strike and the Border Guards goading him into performing the ritual anyway, so he could continue his one-sheep-war forever.

It wasn't until later Prey realised how badly he'd stunted his own potential. But it was too little, too late, and he sat in Dreverton for fifty-seven years stewing in his regret.

And the second mistake was not trusting in his own hoof work enough.

Prey had wanted insurance, a back up. He might've tested the Jaw of Heart's and runic combinations before performing the ritual on himself, but it still hadn't been enough to reassure him. Prey wanted to be certain he could kill Fire Strike before he died.

So he'd made one of the biggest mistakes of his bitter young life. He'd looked into a Lich's Mirror.

That one horrified moment of staring into the Lich's Mirror had broken him again, and he'd fled screaming into the depths of the Deeper Green. Those had been...dark days.

And now Crimson and the doctors knew about Prey's self use of dark magic. They'd scanned him with magic to see what was wrong, taking a look inside. And what had those scans found? A pair of metal jaws clamped around his heart.

Prey was shaking. He couldn't speak. How was he going to talk his way out of this?

'They know, they know my secret!'

Prey was going to have to run, to escape. But he was too weak to flee, still hurt and vulnerable. Crimson was staring him down with betrayal in his eyes. And even if Prey ran, he did not yet know how to outrun Luna.

He was caught. Trapped. Helpless. It was too late to catch and mind wipe the doctors, they would've already told everyone by now.

'I can't escape, I'm trapped. They're going to kill me, cut open my chest, throw me back in Dreverton!' Prey was having trouble breathing. And Crimson was still staring him down, waiting for Prey to offer an explanation.

Prey clenched his jaw tightly. His eyes felt hot, but he refused to cry. Not now.

He raised his chin and matched Crimson glare for glare. He would not cower, not before Crimson. He would remain brave for as long as he could. Or that was Prey's intention, but the moment he opened his mouth to hotly spit back a retort, his voice wavered.

"I thought you, y-you, after all that's happened...I thought you were finally my f-friend."

Zoma'Grika, that wasn't what he'd meant to say at all! Was this an after effect of the pain medication?

Crimson rocked back on his stool like he'd been kicked in the face. Crimson's yellow eyes could only open so wide, but they went as wide as the bandages would allow.

"No no, that's not what I meant at all Prey. I swear, it's not you I'm angry at. I didn't mean, what I meant was, I just...Why didn't you trust me? Why didn't you tell me about this?"

And didn't that just throw Prey for a complete loop as effectively as if Crimson'd just declared Hard Baked was simply a misunderstood individual?

"What...are we talking about here?" Prey ventured.

Crimson hesitated, and then very quietly pointed at Prey, "Why didn't you tell anypony about somepony whipping you?"

Prey blinked stupidly, 'What? Oh. Ohhh.'

Relief flooded Prey, and suddenly he felt like the light was shining again. He could get out of this. 'I'm not sure how they missed it, but they don't know about the Jaw of Heart's, just the scars. Ha! Wow, that really had me worried there for a second.'

After the arrow he'd just dodged, Prey wasn't even particularly outraged over how his privacy had been invaded and how utterly rude Crimson had just been by asking him about his scars.

"Oh, they're nothing for you to concern yourself with." Prey said dismissively, almost cheerfully.

Crimson surged to his hooves, and was standing beside Prey's bed almost before he could blink, "No, you *don't* get to say 'forget it' this time Prey. You're my squad mate, my, my friend! I'm not going to allow you to let some twisted person destroy you just because you're afraid to ask for help. This stops now. Tell us, and Gloom will make sure this person is punished."

"I'm not telling Gloom anything. This has nothing to do with him." Prey snapped.

"Then tell me Prey. Tell *me*."

Prey's lip turned down, "No Crimson. I'm not sharing my scars with anyone. No one has the right to judge."

"Then if not for you, think about another lamb. The pon-person who did this might do it again to another innocent child. Think about them." Crimson tried, almost pleaded.

Prey didn't like the tone in Crimson's voice. It reminded him too much of how he'd begged the world to stop being unfair. 'Pointless.'

"You don't need to worry on that account. The person who did this-" Prey waved a hoof back over his shoulder, "-They won't be doing it to anyone else ever again. Just forget about it. It's been taken care of."

If anything, that just seemed to make the anger in the back of Crimson's yellow orbs blaze even hotter. Not anger at Prey, but on Prey's behalf. Which provoked a very strange feeling in Prey's chest, but it changed nothing. Crimson was sixty-one years too late to help.

Prey looked off to the side, studying one of the foals' coloured in motivational posters about 'Never Give Up'. He didn't want to speak

about this subject any longer. Just because it was in the past didn't make it okay.

He spoke quietly, "So what Crimson? They're scars. By their very definition, they're here to stay. I have scars, you have scars. There's nothing you or I could do about it. What is talking about it going to achieve?"

Crimson's wings twitched at his sides, "Just because you survived doesn't mean it was ever alright."

Prey glanced back in shock. That was almost an exact copy of his own thoughts just now.

"And speaking about...these things is supposed to help?" Crimson suggested, not sound very sure.

Prey met Crimson's eye and held it. "You know as well as I that's a lie. You've learnt the lessons too. All these sentimental ponies who think you can't keep a secret forever? That if you don't tell someone about your pain it'll build up until you break? Deluded weaklings."

Crimson grimaced and looked away, conceding the truth of Prey's words. He knew exactly what Prey was speaking about. Crimson obviously held his own secrets, ones which he held close and would never tell anyone.

Sharing a secret did not always make things better. Sometimes, the truth only made it worse. Some things could not be forgiven.

Having a secret could sound so innocent. It was anything but. Sometimes, you knew you should tell, that if someone else knew it would help, but still you wouldn't, *couldn't* ever tell. The secret was all twisted up inside you, burning in your brain, blistering on your lips, but no matter how bad it was, you just couldn't tell. Never. You'd rather lie and cheat and hurt forever, because you simply couldn't tell.

That's what a secret could do to you.

However, the secret of Stinger was not one of Prey's untellable secrets.

But there was also no way Prey could explain how he'd gotten the ropy whip scars criss-crossing his back without also alluding to some of the things he couldn't risk Crimson finding out about. Like the Resistance, how old he actually was, or why he was still alive.

So despite him owing Crimson, despite how much the pegasus cared and wanted to know, Prey couldn't tell him the truth.

"It's not someone you can ever bring to justice Crimson. And they won't be doing it again to anyone ever again. But thank you for caring. The dead know, no one else does." Prey muttered.

Briefly, Crimson's twitched forwards as if to rest a wing over Prey's back, but he wisely stopped himself just as quickly, "That's not true Prey, your mother also still...cares...about..."

Crimson's brows shot together, "Wait... Luna's mane! It was your parents who did this!"

"You take that back! Don't you dare, don't you *dare* ever say that about my mother!"

Prey was nose to nose with Crimson, standing rigidly upright on the hospital bed. He didn't even feel the pain from jumping upright in his anger, "You eat your words right now and don't you ever, ever, EVER say that again!"

Prey's voice was high pitched in his outrage, squeaking all over the place but he didn't care, "You want to talk about scars do you? You wanna' point hooves? Then how about those self inflicted scars of yours, *huh*?"

Crimson's hoof involuntarily jerked up to the underside of his left foreleg. There, mostly hidden by his fur, there was a small, straight scar. But what made it stand out was the similar six fresh wounds in parallel, newly stitched shut and still swollen.

"Keeping a tally of your body count are we? Why, do you have that little faith in your own conscience that you'll forget if you don't maim yourself? As if! You're just collecting scars because you want proof you're learning from your mistakes, that you're sorry for being

a murderer like me! You just think you're any better, you think you can ever be clean again, you think, you you think-kh*aGK*."

Prey's recently healed throat could only take so much, and that was its limit. A hacking coughing fit struck out of nowhere, leaving him wheezing and unable to articulate his fury.

Crimson was openly shocked into speechlessness. No more rigid self control, no more masked emotions, Prey could see it all in his lowered ears, hunched wings, and wincing eyes. Crimson was completely mortified and struck with shame.

'He should be! Would I ever have said something like that about *his* father.'

How dare anyone ever say his mother would ever do something like that? His mother had loved him and his brother more than life itself!

'No,' The horrible little voice of himself spoke up in the back of his head, cutting through the rage, 'She loved Fleece and Gossamer. But I'm not Gossamer. I'm Prey.'

"You think..." Prey's legs wobbled and he collapsed onto the bed. He blinked down at the mattress, surprised by his own weakness. He drew a ragged breath.

"I'm sorry Prey, I shouldn't have said that, it slipped out-"

"Leave me." Prey croaked. He turned his face away from Crimson.

"Not until I apologise-"

"Leave me. Please. Come back in a few hours, I'm... tired. I'm not thinking straight, let me cool down first. I'm overreacting and being completely unreasonable. Just...come back later."

After a moment, Prey saw Crimson give a nod out of the corner of his eye. "A few hours. And I'm sorry."

"Nothing's changed. I still owe you Crimson. What you, what I said at Mayflower...Y-you, you're still my friend right?" Prey mumbled.

He held his breath for the answer, ridiculously scared he'd just ruined everything.

"I...don't have any friends. Never before, I mean." Crimson said.

"Me neither." Prey admitted.

"After everything, I don't think we could not be friends. Am I right?" There was a desperate kind of hope in Crimson's voice that matched his own.

Prey let out his breath. Of course, how foolish it was for him to ever think that. If nothing Crimson could say would drive Prey off, why would it be any different the other way around?

"Yes. More than friends," Prey agreed shakily, "But... Yes, friends."

“Friends.”

And perhaps, one day, maybe even something like brothers.

"I'll leave you alone for now. I'll come back later." Crimson told Prey.

"Yes. Later." Prey agreed weakly, settling himself back down, a small, uncertain, but real smile on his face. And he didn't even notice.

Crimson returned a quick, if hesitant nod, then another much more certain one, "Yes. Later." He echoed, smiling back just as uncertainly back, before exiting and quietly shutting the door behind him.

For a full two minutes after Crimson left, Prey just continued to lie there on his oversized hospital bed, sightlessly watching the door and running over what had just happened. What the both of them had just said and admitted. 'Friends.' Prey thought.

He liked the sound of that word. And better yet, Crimson wanted to be friends with him.

'My first friend.' It sounded exactly like the sappy sentimental drivel ponies spouted non-stop, friendship this and friendship that,

however almost all who proclaimed friendship were shallow. Crimson and Prey had both killed people, seen and done horrible things in and out of each other's company.

And each of them knew it, and although nothing about that was okay, they both understood it too.

It was a terrible basis upon which to form any friendship, but again, they both knew how unfair life was. They were both guilty, both unclean, so why not be friends then? Life would win, it would break them, because life *always* won in the end, but until that time came, why not be friends?

Prey ignored the whispers of the remnants of Garrow and Snake. They were both dead and had no say in this. He would live his own life as Prey.

Luna had him enslaved, but only for now. There was always the future, and one day Prey would be free, because he would never stop searching for a way to escape.

Hard Baked had not stopped him, despite the warlock's best efforts. Garrow had not killed him either. Captain Valour and the Solar Guard had failed too.

Night Watcher had been turned to his cause as Lemon Pink, who must be even now making her way back across the Ridgeback with their two ensorcelled veropedes in tow.

Dreverton, which haunted the back of his mind every waking day, and which'd slowly tortured him into insanity. *Insanity*, not madness. Dreverton, with its unchanging nothingness for fifty-seven years was now in the past as well. The Resistance, Snake, Torment, Captain Firestrike, each of them had failed to put an end to him too.

That did not make anything better.

There would still be questions from Gloom about what had happened in the forest, demands from Nighthawk, threats from Luna, danger from the ISND's job, and pain from himself.

All in all, not much had changed. The only difference was, now

Prey had a friend.

It was okay. It was not okay.

It changed nothing. It changed one thing.

Prey didn't understand, but he knew he wanted this. One hoof in the whole world to hold onto, someone else also trapped under the bitter black ice. Even if they couldn't speak as they drowned, Crimson and Prey both understood.

Metaphorically of course. No way was Prey holding anybody's hoof. Oh, and the drowning was metaphorical too.

This didn't make anything better, but it helped.

But it still didn't make anything better.

So once Crimson was gone, and Prey was sure the door was firmly shut, he pulled the blanket over his head and cried.

Because he had almost died horribly so many times, because he was still alive, because he was a stupid crybaby, but most of all, because Crimson's words had brought up the truth Prey thought he'd finally managed to bury under numb apathy.

Which was that Prey really, really, really, still wanted to just be Gossamer, with a loving mother and brother, living far away from Equestria and the big world, safe on their own little farm.

But it was impossible. So Prey cried for that impossibility, hating himself, until the painful wishing finally faded away again and was replaced by the empty sting of time he knew so well.

Feeling much worse and better at the same time, Prey sulkily wiped the last tear from his sore eyes.

'Why couldn't the reaper king's poison have done one good thing and burned out my stupid tear glands?' He thought mutinously. Prey hated giving anyone any hint of an actual excuse to call him a

crybaby. The Resistance was supposed to be in the past.

The bandage pads across the poison burns on his checks were now damp too. 'Wonderful.'

With a huff, Prey rolled over. Then he grunted in annoyance and untucked his ears from under his head on the pillow, so they didn't lose circulation when he went to sleep, and closed his eyes.

Crimson did return, but when he did, he brought back with him Gloom and a doctor.

The doctor, a blue spotted unicorn with a pair of ridiculous wire rimmed spectacles which made him seem like he was peering through two magnifying glasses, wanted to check Prey's stats. Temperature, pulse, resting heart rate, along with examining his various bandages and stitches while asking him how he was feeling.

He did so by speaking to Prey very slowly and asking him over and over, "Does this cut hurt? Does this? And this one?"

"It's fine, don't touch me." Prey muttered, jerking his leg away as the doctor reached for it yet again.

'I'm far better experienced to make a judgement about my own health, you quack.' Prey thought.

But at least the misguided stallion with his 'foal speak' served to delay the upcoming conversation with Gloom. The thestral was standing against the wall, waiting for the doctor to finish first, and wearing a very worrying look on his bruised and drawn face. He, like the rest of them, also had the bandages taped around his eyes.

Crimson stood next to Gloom watching the proceedings, patiently waiting for the doctor to leave so they could talk again.

"There there, it'll be okay," The stallion soothed Prey for the umpteenth time, "Alright, I won't touch, I'll just point. Can you please describe how the cut there feels? Aching, hot, itchy, or just sore?"

'-how did these Night Guards get so careless as to catch a foal up in their operation?-', The doctor thought as he examined Prey, '-notes said he doesn't have any parents either. Poor lamb, it's so sad whenever I have to treat an orphan-'

'Ah, so the doctors and nurses have only been told a part of the story.' Prey noted. That was good.

Half-fed the truth, and then left to make up the rest themselves while probably being told it was a; 'Confidential Night Guard matter', and; 'Highly restricted information relating to an ongoing investigation' Prey bet.

"Very good, you're doing very well. I just have one more question okay?" The doctor said with a big fake smile. He waited for Prey to acknowledge him.

"Okay." '*Get on with it*!'

"Have you noticed any problems with seeing?" The doctor asked.

It was an unpleasant splash of cold water, because the answer was yes, and unlike the rest of his injuries, his eyesight was not going to recover.

"A little." Prey said flatly. He caught the grimace that shot across Gloom's face as his ears fell.

"Oh..." The doctor hesitated, because he also knew there was nothing that could be done about that, "Well I'm sure it will go back to normal in time." He lied. He adjusted his spectacles.

'-must make a note for Prey's guardians to gently suggest glasses for him. Prey, that's got to be an alias name-', The doctor thought, levitating his clipboard up.

"Try and get some rest if you're tired. If you're hungry or thirsty, you can call the nurse with that little bell over there. There are also some games and children's books I can get you. Would you like that?"

"Maybe later." Prey answered neutrally.

He managed to get rid of the misguided doctor a few minutes later, with a little assistance from Crimson, who stonewalled the white coated unicorn by pointedly holding the door open until he finally left.

The door closed with a click, and suddenly it was just the three of them. The original three. Bandaged, hurt, injured, but still alive.

"So." Prey said.

"So." Crimson agreed.

Prey hoped he could at least get the answers to a number of pressing questions out of this. Along with some reassurance that Nighthawk wasn't going to use them as a scapegoat. Not something he would normally think the Night Guard Captain capable of, but after how he'd abandoned the ISND over the other side of the mountains, valid reasons or no, Prey wasn't putting much faith in the good Captain.

Gloom didn't speak, he glanced over Prey, then to Crimson. He grimaced again. Why was Gloom being so silent? The silence was getting uncomfortable.

"What's wrong, s-Gloom?" Crimson asked.

Gloom sucked air over his teeth, went to speak, and then deflated.

Crimson prompted him; "You... said you wanted to say something to Prey. And to me too, I mean."

"Just say it." Prey said, bracing himself. He had his excuses and explanations all prepared.

It wasn't just him either, Prey could see from the set of Crimson's wings that the pegasus was also bracing himself in apprehension for whatever Gloom was building up for.

Gloom's tail swished in agitation, but he was obviously putting a lot of effort into controlling his expression, because his face and ears stayed a rigid, stony mask. Even Prey couldn't pick out what exactly Gloom meant to say or ask. His thoughts were too much of a

churning mess, made up of unasked questions, worries, fears, and inconsistencies about their disaster of a mission.

'-what really happened that night around the fire? Those traps, and Prey killed them. How many did Crimson kill too? This is all my fault, I should've done more. All those ponies are dead. Do they know that I could've done more? Why is Prey so racist? The deer, the Border Guards, why? Nothing makes sense. What do I say? What do I ask? What do I do?-'

The storm cloud of Gloom's thoughts was so turbulent that Prey actually had to school his face into blankness as he listened in. Although with all the bandages on his face, that wasn't hard to do. But he could hear how badly Gloom was cutting himself on his own sharp thoughts.

Prey could take the initiative and speak first, but...No. Better to just resign himself to getting shouted at and accused some more. He hoped it wouldn't go any further than that though. 'As long as he doesn't try to escalate this up to Luna's level, it'll be okay. You'd better not try that Gloom.' Prey thought warningly.

Gloom didn't deserve any of this, but none of them did either, so Prey certainly wasn't going to take the blame. Crimson neither, Prey would make sure of that. He owed Crimson so much.

The tension abruptly snapped.

Gloom wheeled on his hooves and jerked the door open, so he didn't have to face them as he spoke. Gloom's voice trembled.

"I'm sorry both of you. I should've done better. After, when all of this, the investigations and everything else is properly over and finished with, I'm going to hoof in my resignation. I'm sorry."

And with that, Gloom fled out the door before either of them could find their voices. The door swung shut on its own with a soft click. Prey was shocked. Crimson was also struck speechless.

That's what Gloom wanted to say? He was giving up? Just like that?

In retrospect, it shouldn't have been as jarring as it was. How many

times had Prey overheard Gloom brooding on his failures and blaming himself for not being able to save the people of Mayflower and Alfalfa Dale? Prey knew well the crushing weight of guilt and how heavy it could be.

But even so, Prey wouldn't have guessed Gloom would actually quit. Gloom was a Night Guard, and more importantly, a thestral. Giving up under the pressure of your responsibilities was not something you did in thestral culture. It was an unspoken rule.

But Prey understood why Gloom had done it. People break. After everything which had happened in the forest, no one could blame Gloom. And those who did, they had no idea of what they were judging.

Prey still felt like he'd just been betrayed.

After all he'd done, after all *they'd* done, Gloom was abandoning them to let some unknown officer take over leadership of the ISND?

Prey looked to Crimson. Crimson looked to Prey. How had this happened so suddenly? What were they supposed to do now?

The uncertain moment stretched and twisted as it grew painfully fragile.

"I...should go after him. Surely Gloom can't have really meant that." Crimson said, uncertainly taking a few steps towards the door.

That feeling of betrayal suddenly crystallized and turned into glass. Crimson was choosing Gloom over him.

Then Prey immediately felt stupid. Why was he reacting like this? Crimson wasn't making a decision of life and death in favour of Gloom over him.

'I'm acting like a desperate little child.' Prey thought scornfully. He was being ridiculous.

But for some stupid reason, he still wanted Crimson to choose to stay here with him, his first friend, rather than going out after Gloom.

It was pure selfishness, Prey could admit that, but he was a selfish person.

And because Prey wasn't paying enough attention, and was still sluggish with whatever painkillers they had him on, he wasn't fast enough to stop Crimson seeing all his thoughts reflected on his face.

Prey flinched guiltily, and Crimson frowned his disapproval at being so selfish. Prey lowered his eyes, looking down at the sheets instead. He didn't have to say it, but it was a silent apology for letting selfishness get the better of him.

Crimson sighed, and his wings slumped. He made as if to rub his bandaged face, but wisely thought better of it.

Glancing furtively up, and saw understanding in Crimson's eyes, and, by the tilt of the pegasus's ears, a similar selfish desire of Crimson's own to stay here rather than make the harder but right choice to go after Gloom.

Their positions were reversed when Crimson realised Prey had just seen the same look on his own face, and it was Crimson's turn to flinch in guilt.

Now they were both left feeling guilty, tired, worn, and perversely amused by the whole situation they found themselves in, while conveying all this with mere looks alone.

Part of Prey idly noted that Crimson really was becoming more expressive and less of a blank faced wall. Or perhaps it was just he'd become better at reading Crimson's slight tells? He felt proud if that was the case.

Prey gave a sigh of his own in resignation and lay back down on the pillow. He nodded at the door. The motion said, without actually admitting he was still feeling selfish; 'Go on then, I won't hold it against you.'

Crimson gave a quick nod and pulled the door open, but paused to give Prey a different kind of nod that said, 'Don't worry, I'm not going back on my word. I'll come back later.'

An entire conversation had been held without the need for words.

Crimson's black tail disappeared and the hospital room door clicked quietly shut for the second time.

Prey wished Crimson had stayed. Without distractions, his various hurts wasted no time in clamouring to regain his attention. He shifted and tried to find the least painful position to lie in.

'Once again, I get left with nothing but more questions to stew over, all with uncertain and dangerous answers.'

What was Nighthawk going to do about Gloom's sudden decision? Who would he appoint in the First Sargent's stead? Would Nighthawk even accept Gloom's resignation in the first place? Far more importantly, would Luna?

Also, would Lilly Blossom regain consciousness, and if she did, would Prey have to deal with her coming after him seeking revenge? And above even that, what was going to happen to him? Was he going to be blamed? Placed on trial, accused, imprisoned in Dreverton again?

And those questions were just the start.

What about Lemon Pink, the veropedes, Alfalfa Dale and Mayflower? The scattered and surviving kindersnatches, if any? The revealed existence of mimic's and if there might be any more hiding around? The List and Prey's other projects. What had really been in the Wolfing Wood, and how to never ever have to talk about it again? What he'd half-dreamt, half-remembered that night, had it been real? His own struggles with self hate for the people he'd killed. How similar it made him to the recently deceased Hard Baked, and where that now left him?

The same old questions as before, round and round they went in Prey's head as he lay in bed.

Great. Just what he needed. More cracks in his mind from an existential identity crisis.

'I really do need to get those under control. Once a month is more

than enough.' Prey thought humorlessly.

'Mirror mirror off the wall, am I the one who'll kill us all?'

It was just meant to be a rhetorical thought. It didn't mean anything really. But unfortunately, to Snake it did. And just like that, the remnant of the voodoo witch was suddenly there in Prey's thoughts.

'You are weak. Nature abhors weakness. The Deeper Green eats the weak. It will eat you too.' The cold, unfeeling whisper slithered through Prey's mind.

Immediate anger was Prey's response. He clamped down, reaching out to ensnare and strangle Snake's hated remnant back into nothingness, 'I may be weak but I'm the one who's still alive. You're dead, you're nothing. This is my mind, I'm the one in control.'

Snake's remnant didn't resist as he grabbed it, but it kept hissing away in disdain, words freezing squirming worms; 'Look at the warlock's work. Inefficient. Brittle. I could do so much better. So many wasted resources. Scarecrow was so inefficient. You know how to improve and do better.'

'Shut up and stay dead where you belong. I don't need your poisonous ideas.' Prey hissed back, hooking in all of the trailing wisps of Snake he could find so as to crush them all at once.

'There is no good or evil. Nature only cares for strength. You know the law, the strong take, and the weak suffer. If you are stronger, then it is not wrong to do so. The Deeper Green does not know good or evil. It is merely the cycle of nature. Scarecrow, reaper king, kindersnatch. These are merely tools. Tools are made to be used. Like your enslaved unicorn servant.'

Prey crushed the cold remnant of Snake with all the mental force he could gather, 'You're not real, you're nothing. A bad memory. I don't need you. I've *never* needed you. Be gone.'

Snake went without another sound, crushed like an egg shell at the bottom of a black lake.

The zebra's remnant wasn't conscious, it was only made up of memories. Snake hadn't actually been there talking in his head about the reaper king and scarecrow, because Snake was long dead. But the twisted collection of memories that remained were enough, when mixed with Prey's own, reacted how Prey knew Snake would've done. Prey wished he could stop Snake, stop himself, but the remnant always came back no matter what he did.

And the sad truth was, Prey knew inside that Snake's words were true. He'd seen himself reflected back at him when he had looked at Hard Baked, the defeated Earth pony lying there in the pine mould. Except Prey knew he could be worse. Had *been* worse. Having seen the reaper king and kindersnatches, Prey knew that with a bit of experimentation, he could replicate them. Improve them.

All that would be needed was more innocent lives to sacrifice. Like the Diamond Dogs. Like the villagers in the pit. More mothers, fathers, sons and daughters cruelly murdered all for his own gain. If he were willing to pay that cost, it could be done. Everything has a price. And so too in a sense, everything can be bought.

With runes, time, secrecy, and the stolen flesh of murdered innocents, Prey could buy another reaper king. He had two veropedes, but he could have two veropedes *and* a reaper king. He knew he could do it. He'd seen how.

'But I'm not Snake. I'm not Hard Baked. I am Prey. With enough time, I could be so much worse than either of them ever were. But so what? I'm not them. I'm Prey. They're all dead, and I'm the only one still alive. Last runt standing. I win.'

---I---

[[[Bonus Picture - Veropede concept]]]

[image]

Author's Notes:

So looks like FiMFiction is back up and running.
This chapter was ready to go yesterday, (I even had

the veropede picture ready and everything!), but then, life, internet, crashes, stuff, and.. yeah...

But anyway start of Arc 4! There's gonna' be some clean up coming for the ISND after the huge mess with the warlock in Mayflower.

Editor: ⭐Sweetolebob18⭐

53.4 Well, What can you do?

'Mirror mirror on the wall, am I the one who'll kill us all?'

Prey's worries about Gloom turned out not to be groundless.

It took over two hours for Crimson to return, quietly opening the door and slipping back inside, during which the doctor had come by again accompanied by a unicorn nurse. Prey was highly uncomfortable and nervous in their presence, as the doctor once again insisted on checking his vitals and the nurse brought him some pills with water to take.

It was only because Prey read the nurse's thoughts and saw the pills were indeed painkillers, and not secretly poison, that he swallowed them instead of hiding them under his tongue. That, and his weak body was still adamant about hurting at every possible opportunity and would quite like those painkillers. The ungrateful runt thing.

"You're a very lucky filly," The nurse had told Prey with an encouraging smile, "Don't worry, you'll be out of here in no time."

The doctor had given a cough, not looking up from scribbling down his readings on his clipboard, "Colt. Not a filly." He'd surreptitiously tried to inform the nurse.

"Oh I'm sorry dear, silly me. I swear, I'd forget my head at home if it wasn't screwed on. Here, let me take that glass back for you."

"Thank you very much." Prey politely answered without meaning a word of it.

Mercifully, the two unicorns left soon after, and a little while later Crimson had returned.

Prey didn't ask him about what he'd gotten out of Gloom. The Sargent had decided to walk out on the ISND, not the other way around. Nevertheless, Crimson still filled him in on what'd

happened, although it really wasn't much.

"He still intends to hoof in his resignation. I, I failed in talking him out of it." Crimson spoke reluctantly, "I'm bad at talking."

That was all Crimson said about it, and really, it was all that needed to be said too.

After a few minutes of silence, Prey tentatively suggested talking about something else rather than Gloom's impending abandonment of them. About what he didn't care, just talk if Crimson wanted to talk, because Prey sure as Hell didn't know what to say, and by the sounds of it, neither did Crimson.

Crimson's tightly folded feathers relaxed at the offer, "Yes, let's do that please."

Prey and Crimson really were both completely and totally out of their depth about what their friendship was supposed to entail, but were feeling the pressure to reaffirm their newly confirmed friendship.

So the two of them spoke. Their conversation was awkward, stilted, halting, and probably extremely boring to listen in on by any third party. It was about stupid, inane things which in the past would've bored Prey to tears if he'd ever even imagined himself chatting like some kind of pony civilian. Which he hadn't imagined, because it would've been a stupid thing to imagine.

But that was in the past. Right now, Prey didn't give a flying toss about what Past Prey or anyone else might've thought. To him, speaking about such trivial things with Crimson was as fascinating as any high magical science lecture. Because it was Crimson, his new and only friend.

Dumb things. Like favourite colours.

("Blue of the night sky." "A white cream.")

What painkillers the hospital had them each on.

("I don't know the name, but it's some good stuff.")

The ridiculousness of the foal's mobile above his bed.

("I could take it down for you Prey, if you find it that insulting.")

Wondering if the two flats they'd been forced to rent were still open.

("Considering we're paying, the landlord better have kept them both open.")

Explaining to Crimson why the nurse had tried to make small talk about hoofball teams.

("Well you see, ponies in Equestria have this weird obsession with sporting teams.")

How bad Cookie's cooking really was, since even *hospital* food was better.

("I know you're her favourite Prey, but really, how did she get her job?")

Crimson saying how he'd always thought owls were pretentious birds.

("Why does everyone always revere them as wise for some reason?")

Speculating on how much paperwork Taffy had in store for them.

("I don't know the exact amount, but I bet it's a mountain.")

Prey mentioning the fizzy taste of lemon sherbets.

("I'll get you some next time Crimson.")

Silly little random things. *Ridiculous* things. Prey didn't care, because this, talking about trivial things with a friend, was something he'd never had the chance to experience before.

It was brand new and strangely exciting, for all it should've been deathly boring. And unspoken was that neither of them wanted to speak about the far more weightier, darker topics of what their

futures might hold, or speculate on what the hidden costs for their actions in Mayflower and Alfalfa Dale might be.

But of course it couldn't last. They might've been distracting themselves from the seriousness of the situation they were in, albeit a less immediately life threatening one, but others had not forgotten.

Prey's door was pushed open and a chestnut furred unicorn walked confidently in. He was wearing a wide brimmed hat with a split in the front for his horn, and his eyes took in and judged the whole room at a glance.

Prey had never seen the pony before in his life, but the unicorn certainly wasn't a doctor. Crimson rose from his stool as the stallion kicked the door shut with a back hoof, and strode straight over to the foot of the bed.

"May we help you?" Crimson asked, moving just enough to block the stallion's path. The jade chain necklace sparkled around his neck.

"Yes actually. You can help me by giving us some privacy." The stallion announced. He had the sort of tone that was only just off a bark, like someone not used to wasting time.

Crimson blinked slowly at him, "Pardon?"

The chestnut stallion gave an impatient flick of his hoof, "Wait outside. I'd like to speak with this minor privately."

"And who are you supposed to be?" Prey asked suspiciously. Internally, he was frowning as he tried to hear this intrusive pony's thoughts.

"Strange Happenstance, private investigator, pleased to meet you both." The unicorn snapped open a badge and flashed it in his aura while simultaneously offering a hoof to Crimson.

Crimson took it on reflex, and Strange locked ankles with Crimson and gave it a very firm shake.

"Charmed," Strange Happenstance said, and pulled Crimson towards the door, "Now wait outside, I need some time to discuss a sensitive matter with this foal."

Crimson stopped letting the stallion move him, "No."

"I was merely being polite by asking, you don't really have a choice. I'm a legally appointed investigator. Are you going to make me institute the statutory law?" Strange asked coolly, dropping Crimson's hoof.

Prey's eyes went wide, making the poison burns wrapped up under the bandages on his cheeks stretch painfully, but his reaction had nothing to do with this investigators threat of legal powers.

'I can't hear his thoughts. They're locked away.'

Fear slipped down Prey's spine, cold and icy as the possible implications flashed through his head.

Prey couldn't hear this supposed investigator's thoughts. Was this Strange Happenstance actually a Mimic in disguise and not a pony? Was there a secret society of Mimics, and had they somehow tracked Prey down for knowing about the one pretending to be Shimmer?

Prey hid a swallow, his eyes drifting towards Crimson for a second. He couldn't hear Crimson's thoughts either. But that didn't mean anything, he knew Crimson well. Sort of. Or he hoped he did at any rate. Crimson couldn't be a Mimic, because sometimes he still picked up flashes of thought. Surely not, right?

But this investigator? What were the chances of running into so many ponies with hidden thoughts in such a short space of time?

The threat of legal pressure didn't move Crimson. "Who gave you permission to come in here? This is supposed to be a restricted area of the hospital." Crimson challenged.

"Who do you think?" Strange returned flippantly, "Your officers did. Go ask them if you want confirmation, or just wait outside for the five minutes this'll take, I don't care."

When neither Prey nor Crimson moved, Strange raised one eyebrow under his hat brim, "Are you refusing to comply with a legal demand? I checked, and there's no witness protection injunction order. You have something to hide?"

"Of course not. But we have orders not to answer any questions." Crimson told the investigator flatly.

"Even if there was a witness protection order, which there isn't, the witness is still legally obligated to provide answers to authorities or face prosecution. I have questions that *he*-" Strange Happenstance waved a hoof at Prey, getting his gender right for a change, "-As a witness has some of the answers for. But you, as an off duty Guard, have *no* authority."

Prey did not trust this stallion any further than he could throw him. And since Prey was a runt who could now never physically grow up, he couldn't throw the stallion at all.

There was no guarantee that this Strange Happenstance was who he said he was, and how had he even learnt about the ISND in the first place? Didn't Nighthawk say he was keeping everything under wraps for now? Or was that part of what Strange Happenstance wanted to question him about?

The investigator still hadn't actually referred to Prey by name yet. Logically, that indicated he saw Prey as just a minor, and was therefore treating Crimson as the current legal guardian. Which would mean he really *was* an investigator following legal procedure, and not a Mimic in disguise bent on revenge for Shimmer. Unless this all too was just a ploy.

Prey weighed it up and made a quick judgement call, "Thank you Crimson, but it's okay. I can talk to the investigator-"

"*Alone*." Strange stressed.

"-After all, you'll be waiting just outside the door, right?" Prey prompted, not dropping Crimson's gaze. He silently conveyed the message to 'stand-guard-at-the-door-and-listen-in.'

Crimson hesitated, then shifted out of his defensive posture, "Alright, if you're sure." He said, speaking only to Prey.

Prey smiled brightly, "Thanks. I'm sure I can manage to stay in one piece."

"It's not you I'm worried about." Crimson muttered as a bad joke, but his expression conveyed an undertone of caution to Prey.

Nevertheless, Crimson still walked past the chestnut unicorn, giving the other stallion a blank look as he pulled open the door. Strange Happenstance gave him a measured stare in return, then used his magic to firmly shut the door behind Crimson before the pegasus could change his mind.

"Now," Strange said, pulling up Crimson's vacated stool and wasted no time in getting started, "I want you to answer all of my questions to the best of your abilities. And the 'I-don't-want-to talk-about-it' excuse is not good enough, understand?"

Prey was a lamb covered in bandages and in hospital. So he decided to act like it.

He blinked tiredly at Strange Happenstance, slumping back against the pillow, "Kay'." He muttered.

Strange didn't seem to have paid any attention to how Prey had casually untied the silk ribbon from behind his ear, and was now winding one end around his hoof. If this unicorn really was a Mimic, or even just a hostile pony, they were going to find themselves in for a nasty surprise.

The most dangerous thing about Prey had never been his non-existent physical abilities, so even laid up in hospital like this, he was ready and more than willing to defend himself.

"What was the Night Guard doing over the mountains?" Strange demanded. That was rather more direct than Prey had been expecting. No false prelude or build up, just straight in.

Prey went for a cautious, non-answer, "What Princess Luna ordered them to do probably. I don't know."

"Not good enough. You were there, weren't you? Why are you avoiding a simple question?" Strange Happenstance immediately responded.

Prey shrugged uncomfortably, "Well whatever the Night Guard went to do, they didn't do a very good job of it, did they?" He said, looking around his hospital room. He also said 'they', not 'we', since it wasn't clear yet if Strange actually knew he was a participating member of the Night Guard or not.

"Why haven't your parents demanded you back from the custody of the Night Guard? Child employment is illegal. Your records show you came from across the Longridge. That's just a bit further on from the Ridgeback. What are you doing here?"

Zoma'Grika, so Strange did actually know. That was a lot closer to home than Prey was comfortable with, literally. Since when did he even *have* records? Gloom must've seen to creating some. Prey made himself stay calm, but there was no point pretending he wasn't a part of the Night Guard anymore.

"Orders from Captain Nighthawk to investigate a request for help from the villagers living there." Prey said.

Strange's heavy set brows drew together in a scowl, but about which bit of what he'd said, Prey didn't know, "Seems a bit strange to send a purely investigatory unit all the way across the mountains to help, don't you think? For what reason were you all taken out of Canterlot?"

'He hasn't mentioned anything about Mayflower or Alfalfa Dale or all the dead people. I don't think he knows about them.' Prey thought. Because if Strange did know, surely he would be far more outraged. Prey decided to make a subtle test of his next answer.

"If you have to ask, you already know the reason." Prey said, turning away petulantly. Strange gave him a sharp look.

"I know all about the ISND's role in overstepping their bounds in investigating the Royal Guard, but you and I both know that's not the reason you were sent, don't we, Prey?" Strange Happenstance

asked, using Prey's name for the first time as he leaned forwards.

Prey's grumpy mask didn't falter for a second, even as his ribbon bearing forehoof shifted marginally closer to the unicorn, "What other reason could there be?"

"Does a certain lumber yard fire ring any bells?" Strange said knowingly.

Prey felt torn between laughing and tensing up. Laughing because Strange knew nothing about what had really happened over the mountains, and tensing up because the ISND's role involving Garrow and the lumber yard were supposed to have been covered up.

Strange Happenstance went on relentlessly; "Hundreds of thousands bits worth of damage was caused. The official story was one of the arrested salt dealers started the fire, but that's just a pretty excuse. Who gave you the order, Prey?"

"Me?" Prey exclaimed.

"The ISND," Strange snapped impatiently, "Who gave you ponies the order?"

"No one told us to start any fire."

"Then how did such an enormous blaze start? Why didn't the Night Guard do anything to stop the fire since you were already on scene, hmm?"

That fire had been started by Prey, but if all the Night Guards hadn't managed to draw the connection, there was no way for Strange Happenstance to know that either. "It was a fire. No one *allows* a fire to do anything, in case you haven't ever seen one."

"Mind your manners, or I'll mind them for you," Strange Happenstance said warningly, "Ponies died at the lumber yard, ponies that the Night Guard failed to save."

'Don't you mean two ponies and one griffin?' Prey thought, although the pegasus Oyster Pinion technically hadn't died at the Lumber

Yard. Nor had Seashores for that matter actually, she'd died later in hospital.

"You're the one making light of their deaths with your false accusations." Prey shot back.

Strange gave Prey another look over as Prey's response was perhaps more grown up than one would've expected.

"False, am I? Then tell me, who gave the orders and who were the first officers on the scene?" He returned in a measured tone.

Prey didn't know precisely what Strange Happenstance was trying to investigate here. His questions had been wide ranging and rather more well informed than Prey would've liked, but with no clear aim that Prey could see. It made him all the more cautious.

"Well?" Strange barked, trying to startle a reactive answer out of him.

"Captain Nighthawk, and by extension, Her Royal Majesty." Prey said, another non-answer. Let this stallion try investigating Luna and see how long he lived.

"And the officer first on the scene?"

"I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to give out that information. Especially to you." Prey said.

"Ponies died at the lumber yard," Strange snapped hotly, eyes hard, "And before that, one Oyster Pinion was shot dead in his own flat which the Night Guard were occupying at the time. The ISND made a huge mistake that night, and you're all covering for each other. It's just one cover up after another."

Prey was watching the unicorn's horn for the first spark of magic as Strange rolled on, "The official story is Oyster Pinion was brazenly murdered by the same salt dealers who employed him. But that would mean they managed it with the Night Guard in the very same room. That's gross incompetence at the very least, yet no charges have been brought forward. If that story's even true."

"There was nothing anyone could've done. I don't know what you think really happened Strange Happenstance, but that's the real story." Prey said flatly. He did not add that he'd been one of those in the room at the time.

"If you don't have the talent to lie at least have the decency not to try. The truth always wins, it's only a matter of time until I find out what all the Night Guard is covering up and then-"

The door was shoved open, interrupting anything further the investigator had to say. Prey glanced up, expecting Crimson, however it wasn't just Crimson who came through, but Lieutenant Screech and another Night Guard too.

Screech's glare could've cut glass, "Who are you and how did you get in here? This is a restricted area."

Strange Happenstance leaned back on the stool, "Ah, the Night Guard, better late than never I suppose. I'm Strange Happenstance, Private Detective." He answered unconcernedly, flashing his badge.

'Private detective? He said he was an investigator. I thought he was part of the official investigators reviewing the Night Guard.' Prey thought. With how Strange Happenstance had gotten in this far, Prey had just assumed the unicorn had the authority to be here.

Screech's brows snapped together as he noted the implications too, "A private detective?"

"You introduced yourself as one of the investigators." Crimson accused flatly.

Strange smiled thinly, "You must have misheard me."

Crimson's face stayed blank, "I don't like liars."

"Neither do I. So as I said, you must've misheard me."

Strange Happenstance didn't seem at all worried about the Night Guards now surrounding him, merely waving them away, "If you could all kindly leave again, this witness hadn't finished answering my questions yet."

"Get out before I have you arrested." Screech growled, fangs showing.

Strange tiled his hat brim back, seemingly having expected this, "For what? I'm a private detective. I haven't broken any laws, I'm just doing my job."

"Wrong. Stretching the law by interpretation is still reasonable grounds for arrest." Screech said, slit eyes challenging Strange to try him.

The unicorn slowly reviewed the room, then just as slowly got up and adjusted his long coat, "I see. I'll take my leave from this misunderstanding and come back later."

"Misunderstanding my hoof. You're not to enter these premises again." Screech ordered, with Crimson on one shoulder and the thestral Night Guard mare on the other backing.

"As I said, a misunderstanding." Strange repeated, unperturbed.

"Then to prevent further misunderstandings, Private Briar can see you out of the building," Screech returned, "Bramble Briar, see him out immediately."

The second Night Guard stepped forwards and roughly pulled Strange Happenstance towards the door with a wing. Wisely, Strange went along without struggle. But at the door he turned back for one last parting shot, "I *will* find out what you're covering up. Set your clock by that, because it's coming."

"Keep moving, or I will move you." Bramble Briar ordered.

The door clicked shut, the muffled sound of departing hoof steps filtering back into the room.

Screech waited until the sound of hoof steps faded completely. Then he let out a long breath. He looked tired. Not nearly as tired as the five ISND members had looked very recently, (that number currently up for re-adjustment), but still tired nonetheless.

"How did that pony get through security? How did he even know

about the ISND being in the hospital?" Crimson asked Screech, not deigning to use Strange Happenstance's name.

"I don't know, I'll have to talk with the staff and give them a firm reminder what 'restricted' means. It's only luck I was on my way here already."

So Crimson *hadn't* fetched the Lieutenant, although that was fairly self evident with how swiftly Screech had turned up.

"Do you think he'll try getting in again?" Crimson asked.

"I doubt it, but he'll not get the chance regardless. Just forget about him, he's nopony important." Screech advised, "You didn't tell him anything, right Prey?"

"No." Prey said, then thought it best to add, "Sir."

Screech shook his head, "I'm not sir to you at the moment. You're all on extended leave, I'm sure Crimson must've told you."

"He did, but he wasn't able to tell me the reason for our suspension."

"It's not a suspension, all of you did nothing wrong. It's *not* your fault. Nopony could've possibly foreseen Alfalfa Dale or Mayflower. You were not prepared or equipped to deal with something as messed up as that."

"Everyone's been telling me that ever since we arrived back here." Crimson spoke, catching both Prey and Screech slightly off guard.

"Telling you what?"

"That it's not my fault."

"Because it's not," Screech stressed, "That's a self destructive path, don't go down it. No clan elder could've done any better in your place. Sometimes there are no right choices, and you all did the best you could."

'-all those murdered ponies. When they found that mass grave, and those kindersnatch parasites...-', Screech forcibly broke off that train

of thought with a shudder. "None of it's your fault."

Prey didn't echo the platitude. He knew as well as Crimson that logically knowing whose fault it was meant nothing for your conscience. Words were just words, and sorry didn't fix anything. And while Screech insisted it wasn't their fault, would everyone else see it the same way? How about the other Night Guards? Luna? The judges? Had Nighthawk meant any of what he'd said to Gloom, even?

So Prey just looked away and quietly retied the ribbon behind his ear, where the silk reminder firmly belonged.

"That said," Screech sighed heavily, "That's more or less the exact reason why I'm here. Gloom, or rather Sargent Gloom, is blaming himself. As his squad, and the only ones who were there when it happened, it's your duty to pull him through this."

'*My* duty? Duty? It was *your* duty to come to our aid. Why's it suddenly our duty now that you've failed yours? Where were any of you when we were bleeding and crying in the forest, huh?' Prey thought in a sudden flush of anger.

"Gloom deserves our help." Crimson said. It was a statement. But there was another hidden statement in there, one that only Prey got. Crimson wasn't agreeing that this was their fault, or assuring Screech that he hadn't failed them, Crimson was merely agreeing with the goal; help Gloom and stopping him from resigning.

But depending on how things went, perhaps resignation might be the best Gloom could hope for.

Screech hadn't meant any accusation or offence, but without having been there in the forest, he was still in the wrong for having not thought before he spoke.

"Gloom deserves our help," Crimson repeated, "As do Scenic and Lilly."

Yes, that was right. Scenic Paint and Lilly Blossom had both been there too at Mayflower. Thinking about the inevitable meeting

where Prey was going to have to face and deal with the both of them was already making his stomach hurt. For now though at least, those two were both still confined to their hospital rooms and not allowed any visitors.

And Crimson so obviously wanted to help all of them.

'You're a better person than me Crimson.' Prey thought bleakly. He still felt like Gloom had betrayed them somehow, but since Crimson wanted to help, Prey would follow along and try his best to help. Prey owed Crimson and friendships were supposed to be give and take, or at least that's what Prey had heard.

Crimson wanted it, so Prey would gladly give him the help, even if he personally didn't want to see Gloom right now.

"Okay," Prey nodded to Screech, "I agree that they need help. What do you suggest?"

Screech gave a frustrated shrug of his leathery wings, "That's what I don't know. No clan has ever found a tried and true method of helping somepony who's... gone through something like this. What worked for one won't for another. Each pony's solution is highly individual."

"Gloom is from clan Myrrdon, same as you, is he not?" Crimson checked. It was strange to hear him off duty but having to talk to an officer on duty about work without adding the word "sir" onto every sentence.

"That's right. I knew Gloom when he was just a foal, but not well," Screech's tone was laden with regret, "I wish I could say I knew what's best and what would help him, but I don't think even Gloom's grandfather would know what to do to help him get past this."

"What about a kind word from his parents?" Prey suggested, already guessing the answer.

Screech blinked at them, "Gloom's parents both passed away over seven years ago. He didn't ever mention that?"

Prey had suspected as much, but Gloom had never actually verbally confirmed it to him. Maybe he had to Crimson, but that wasn't the sort of thing Gloom would've told Prey, and Prey would *never* have asked anyone such a question:

"He didn't, no."

"Would returning to visit the Myrrdon clan caves help?" Crimson suggested.

"I'm...afraid returning to the clans is off the table for the moment." Screech said delicately, but he didn't move to elaborate on why that was. Prey caught a flash of the reason in the Lieutenants thoughts, though:

'-the Border Guard have stepped up patrols, can't risk giving away the clan's location by visiting. Is it really just bad luck they stationed a reactionary force in the valley below our caves? Restricted information, but Princess Luna said she would see to it-'

'So you don't trust us with even this small truth. You shouldn't be surprised though Screech. It's the Border Guard. They're disloyal, lying, murdering traitors.' Always, now and forever, it was the damned Border Guard causing problems. Hadn't they caused enough harm already? If there was one thing Prey didn't regret about everything that'd happened, it was the deaths of Atlas and Shimmer.

Or Atlas and the Mimic *pretending* to be Shimmer.

"I hope you realise what we're doing now isn't just for Sargent Gloom, Lilly, and Scenic," Screech said, seriously looking at each of them in turn, "This is to help them, but it's also for the two of you. To get you both ready for... Whatever comes next."

Screech was saying both of them breaking down was a 'when', not an 'if'.

Well Screech wasn't wrong. No one just walked away from the sorts of things that'd happened in Mayflower unscathed. Prey and Crimson were no exception, however Screech was a bit late on the

scene. They were already both cracked, and had been damaged since long before being forced to join the Night Guard. Prey knew it. Crimson knew it. But that was not something that anyone else needed to know. That was private.

"Hmm." Prey said.

Crimson just barely nodded.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," Screech said, sounding very relieved that they were both taking his words so well, "But it is something to be controlled. And if you can't control it yourself, you need to ask for help."

'Wow. So simple. So... *ponyish*. Why didn't I think of that before?' Prey thought sarcastically.

Crimson's wing gave a flick. Screech winced as he caught the curt, displeased motion; "Look, I'm not good at speaking, you need Starry Wing for that. But that aside, we're here to find a way to help Gloom, Scenic, and Lilly."

Crimson briefly looked down at the jade chain around his neck and, if Prey was right, wished that this situation was one which could be solved with brute magical force, "I'm... not much better at talking either, si-I mean Screech. But Prey and I will both give it our best."

"That's all anypony can ask," Screech inclined his head, "However maybe if we were all to brainstorm some ideas that would help. Can either of you think of something?"

Prey made himself as comfortable as he was able to get on the bed, what with being a hospital patient and in this bed for a reason, and settled down. He had the feeling that this discussion was going to take far longer than the clock said it should.

So they sat, or lay in Prey's case, and talked, discussing what to do. Although it was mainly all Screech doing the talking, trying to galvanise them both into miraculously hitting upon a solution.

But what good could talking really do for Gloom, Scenic, or Lilly? But that's all they could do, which was, at Screech and Crimson's insistence, to *try*.

So after discussing and rejecting idea after idea, they decided it was best, (as if they had any experience to know what was best, but since no one else was stepping forwards, the decision was on them), to start by just trying to talk to all of them. And when that inevitably failed, to force Gloom, Scenic, and Lilly to talk some more.

Scenic and Lilly were Canterlot citizens, each with family in the city. Screech informed them that Nighthawk had already been in touch with both families, but Lilly was still in no condition to be seen by anypony. The mare was still in a coma, and the doctors still weren't sure if she'd ever wake up. It went silent after Crimson haltingly related that piece of information, tufted ears lowering in a public display of shame.

Prey bit his tongue feeling the almost irrational urge to comfort Crimson, because Crimson was openly signalling his feelings of guilt to Screech like this on purpose. Usually Crimson's emotions were only evident if you watched his wings. This was like him declaring what'd happened to Lilly, both with the Mama'duke and the meld wood, had been his fault.

Screech's warning about having to watch out for each other was coming true a lot sooner and more jarringly than the Lieutenant had expected. And that self same conversation hadn't even finished yet.

Prey knew it would be inappropriate to point out that if Lilly never woke, then the problem would take care of itself. Lilly had been a danger to all of their survival with her uncontrolled recklessness. He'd only saved her life with the meld wood because they'd forced him to.

"The doctors are trimming off the flower buds that are growing out of the meld wood, right?" Prey eventually asked, just to end the silence.

Screech was a sturdy pony, having come from the clan of blood

drinkers after all, but even his thoughts turned queasy when he thought about Lilly Blossom's state.

"Yes, Gloom was very insistent that they... remember that detail." Screech said.

Good. So Gloom had at least been listening to Prey's explanation on meld wood. If the meld wood's growth wasn't kept in check from now on, it would eventually overtake the whole of Lilly's body. Again, not something he really cared about, but the rest of them did.

"That does raise another question..." Screech began, looking hard at Prey, "Nopony knew about meld wood on our arrival back in Canterlot, even the experts on magical flora and fungi we brought in. They only found it after a lot of digging in old outdated botanical guides. From the restricted section. Where did you learn about meld wood, Prey?"

'And there it is.'

Prey had known these problem questions were coming, and also that if he couldn't provide satisfactory answers, he would end up locked away again. However he wasn't expecting for Crimson to sharply cut in and defend him before he could even start his answer.

"Lieutenant Screech, you're overstepping. All of us would've died without Prey and everything he did which Sargent Gloom and I approved, or even forced him to do. If you want to blame somepo-someone, you'll have to blame us all." Crimson snapped.

Screech was stunned at Crimson's reprimand. Stunned, affronted, and a bit impressed. Technically, since Crimson was off duty, he could express any opinion he wanted, but it was more than that. Crimson was confronting and reprimanding a senior thestral. In the clans, a junior would only dare to do so if they were convinced their elder was completely in the wrong. And that's what Crimson was doing here.

Screech dipped his head after a moment, "I apologise and retract my

question. Sorry Prey."

'-perhaps that was indeed a bit too aggressive of me. They've both been through a lot, and I'm judging something I wasn't there for-'

'At least that's put him off for now. But that question is going to get asked eventually. If not by him, then someone else. It's just an unfortunate matter of when.' Prey was certain of that.

Eventually, it was decided there was very little Prey and Crimson could do, aside from just trying to talk Gloom and Scenic around. And Lilly too, if she ever awakened.

Because really, what else could Prey or Crimson do? There was no miraculous solution to the problem. Hugs and friendship didn't solve anything.

Thus, they could only try talking it out, attempt to get Gloom to see sense and reconsider his resignation, and keep him from dwelling on what'd happened as much as possible. Because it was impossible to stop anyone from dwelling on something like that, even if the victims themselves wanted nothing more than to forget.

Life is cruel, and it loves to sting most viciously those who've already been stung once.

Finally Screech left, dissatisfied and worried, and all the more concerned because of some of the deeper details Prey and Crimson had alluded to.

Prey's throat was sore and dry after all that talking, and he reached for the glass of water, holding it between both hooves. After surviving poison though, Prey would gladly take a sore throat over the alternative. Crimson moodily picked at the bandage on his foreleg, apparently deep in thought and not liking what he was thinking about. Prey's eyes were drawn once again to the jade necklace Crimson wore. Without the power of that magical artifact, they would've all died back in Mayflower.

Prey took a sip of water, "Could I ask a bit more about your magical necklace, Crimson?"

Crimson blinked, returning his attention to the room, "Of course you can, although I'm not sure what I can tell you."

"I've seen what it can do, and I've theorised on its limits. It burns through the natural magic in your body, and then draws in ambient mana when your natural stores run out. And when those stores do, it leaves you exhausted and on the point of collapse without warning."

"Yes. It wasn't... pleasant." Crimson agreed.

"But it's still a marvellous artifact. It saved our lives. If you hadn't unlocked it when you did..."

Prey didn't need to finish. Crimson nodded solemnly, "We'd all be dead. It was very, very, very lucky that jade mane band turned out to secretly be a magical artifact. Luckier than I had any right to be. I find it hard to believe you really bought something as powerful as this off a trinket seller in the market."

Crimson looked intently at Prey when he didn't say anything in response. "Did you really Prey?"

It wasn't an accusatory question. Crimson would not report anything Prey said, he just wanted to know. Prey briefly hesitated, "I knew it was magical when I bought it, but never did I imagine it would be able to do all... whatever it does. It was old, and the vendor was trying to sell it off. He just said it was just a magical protection charm."

"Ah. So that's how it was."

All of that what Prey had said was the honest truth. The only thing he'd neglected to mention was the price.

Six-thousand, seven-hundred bits. Even in Canterlot, that was more than enough to buy a small house outright.

He felt guilty about hiding that fact from Crimson, but not about

the money he'd spent on it. Back then, he'd owed Crimson. Now it went beyond merely owing. Besides, the spent gold was all stolen from Garrow anyway, so it was kind of fitting really. And considering everything he now knew about the jade necklace, if it wasn't stolen property in the first place, then Prey had robbed that underground market vendor blind.

"Could you tell me a bit more about what powers you think it gives you?" Prey asked.

"Aside from strength and speed, I'm not too sure. It did let me control the wind better and enhanced the edges of my father's wingblades, but all of that was unconscious. I don't know how I did it. It just happened." Crimson recalled, lifting the jade chain from his neck so that it twisted and sparkled.

"So that's a no then. It's all unconscious." Prey considered his next words carefully, "Would you lend it to me for a moment?"

Crimson tensed up. "Never mind," Prey said quickly, "I was just testing you, sorry."

"Testing? For what?"

Prey grimaced, "Magical artifacts, especially powerful ones, have been known to mentally corrupt their users and make them unwilling to give the artifact up."

"Is that happening to me?" Crimson asked, feathers bunching up.

"That...depends. What are your reasons for not wanting to lend the necklace to me? Despite having proven that only you can access its magic?"

Crimson thought deeply on his answer. "It wasn't that I was afraid you'd steal it, I know you wouldn't..." Crimson began slowly, "...It's just that it's mine. I paid the price, and it's mine. But that's the only reason. I mean, I think so at least."

Prey remembered what Crimson had said the necklace had done to him. The price it had extracted seemed to be a purely mental one, but not one to be paid lightly. Prey wasn't even a hundred percent

sure what had initiated the thing activating in the first place, outside of maybe just Crimson being in need.

"It's precious to you." He noted simply.

"Very. After what I paid for it, and how it saved us all, how could it not be?" Crimson said simply, "Could you any more give me your ribbon?"

Prey's hoof flew up protectively to the length of silk without even meaning to. Crimson nodded, "Exactly. I don't know why a ribbon means so much to you, I just know that it does. I... would be honoured if one day you would tell me?"

"Perhaps one day." Prey agreed slowly.

"Thank you," Crimson said, just as seriously as Prey had spoken, "But my point is, I feel the same way about this necklace." He finished, raising a hoof to the jade chain.

Then unexpectedly, he pulled the necklace over his head, leading to his mane getting all mussed up, and held it out to Prey, "Here, take it for a moment."

"Why?" Prey asked, not making any move to do so, "You just said it isn't mentally influencing you, so there's no point in testing."

"I need to make sure. Please take it from me." Crimson insisted, giving the outstretched necklace a shake.

Cautiously, Prey did so, his hoof passing only inches from Crimson's as he took it. The moment the chain left Crimson's grip, the green light deep within the jade went out. Prey held it delicately, feeling dirty for touching something so obviously precious and private to Crimson. He didn't think he could've so easily hoofed over his ribbon to Crimson if their situations were reversed.

"Well, do you feel anything strange?" Prey asked.

Crimson closed his eyes and looked like he was focusing inwards. Eventually he opened his eyes again.

"No," He said with a touch of relief, "No weird dark compulsion to snatch it back. Just my own concern for my possessions."

"That is a relief." Prey said, quickly passing the necklace back, and it was a relief. He didn't want to think he'd given Crimson a mentally corrupting artifact even by mistake, the pegasus's impressive mental walls notwithstanding.

"It certainly is." Crimson agreed with feeling, ducking his head to slide the chain back on. The green light in the jade's depths sparkled back into life immediately.

Was it just Prey, or was Crimson openly displaying more emotion recently?

"I should go." Crimson said after a minute.

"You don't have to. I mean, you could stay and... we could talk more?" Prey offered.

"I do have to go. You are not well, and I do have things I am supposed to do. I'll try and find Gloom again. And the doctor insisted you shouldn't really be having visitors. So Screech politely told him he didn't know what he was talking about." Crimson added as an afterthought.

"Alright. Come back again?"

"Of course. I mean, I look forward to it." Crimson said. Prey was also already looking forward to Crimson's next visit too, and not just because he was stuck in a hospital bed with nothing else to do.

"Thank you for coming by. Until next time, I guess."

"Yes. Until then. I will see you then, yes. Goodbye Prey." Crimson said, somewhat awkwardly as he stood to leave.

Prey smiled as widely as the bandages would allow, feeling silly and not caring, "Yep. See you next time."

It's a boring truth, but there is precious little to do in a hospital. After all and at the end of the day, no one actually *wants* to be in there.

Aside from eating at meal times and sleeping whenever possible, all you can really do is wait in discomfort to heal. And the more intense the discomfort or pain, the slower the time drags.

But Prey had experience with being trapped in a small room with nothing to do but wait. Fifty-seven years of experience to be precise, unwillingly gained in Dreverton.

Prey was hot and tired. He was also having trouble falling back to sleep after already sleeping for fourteen hours, and his bandages and stitches stretched painfully every time he moved. On top of that, he'd developed a headache for no reason he could identify, and every now and then, off and on, his eyes and blistered cheeks started stinging savagely.

But all of this was a hundred times better than even one day spent in Dreverton.

In there he'd just been a number, 452, a prisoner locked away and forgotten. Whereas out here he was, well not *free*, the gold bands on his forelegs ensured that, but he was sort-of free.

The doctor had come back seven more times through the course of the evening to keep taking Prey's readings again. He was still seeing black spots from the doctor shining a light in his eyes. The same nurse also came back with a bunch of foals' colouring books which she'd thought; "You might like."

Prey shoved them to the side the moment she left and went back to mentally making plans. When Lemon Pink got back, the veropedes would need to be sheltered and fed, plus, he needed some kind of work space or secret lab where he could study the Mimic's body Lemon was also bringing back. There were, of course, all his other projects from 'The List' ticking along too, but Lemon Pink's imminent return was the most pressing issue at the moment.

'For a good lair, the key aspects are space, security, accessibility, and secrecy. Hmm. Where to get those?'

The dinner trolley came around at some point, delivering the evening meal to all the patients. Prey checked his dinner for poison, his latest uncomfortably close brush with poisoning at the forefront of his mind.

The tomato salad really was awful. Better than Cookie's, but then, since mouldy hay dipped in pond water was arguably better than some of Cookie's experiments, that didn't count for much. It reminded Prey of the tasteless blocks of food served in Dreverton. Prey ate the salad anyway, and then lay down patiently waiting for another three long hours before sleep came.

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Prey briefly dreamt of the reaper king hunting him through the pine forest, before deciding to take control of the dream and change it to something more pleasant.

His outer mindscape bulged thinly, like a balloon with too much air in it, before collapsing back in on itself and settling down into a different scene.

There, a more real dream, one without any true rhyme or reason. One where birds flitting through pine trees hiding from the sun. Some carried ribbons in their beaks, and others red feathers. Having succeeded in their unknown goals, the birds morphed into giant, ponderous woodlice and ambled away.

Satisfied, Prey left himself drift in the deep purple waters of his inner mindscape, half conscious mind continuing to plot and plan in the background. Like ants, marching up and down the ant hill, carrying one pebble at a time. Time. Time.

'You could've taken Hard Baked for your own, yez'? Iz' lonely in here. How about some company?' Garrow whispered gleefully.

Prey wasn't awake, but he felt nothing but annoyance for the

malignant suggestions mixing into his mindscape and dream. Angry annoyance. He'd dealt with Snake's remnant only recently. Now Garrow's remains decided they wanted a turn too.

'Take what waz' hiz'. Make it ours, yez'? Iz' the right of the victor, take from the defeated. Sweet sweet *sweet*. Sweet iz' victory. And revenge. Revenge iz' the sweetest.'

Make it shut up and it goes away. Prey was sick of hearing a dead griffin's mad suggestions, and worst of all because they came from inside and were part of him, they somehow sounded like good suggestions.

'Sweet blood on my clawz' and on my tongue. Oh iz' sweet. Pony blood sweeter than griffin, yez'?'

Prey's dreamscape shook, purple storm clouds blooming and turning black. Within his head, the foggy taste of ashes began to blanket everything, 'Be silent dead crow. You're nothing, a bad memory only. I am the only one in control.'

The taste of distant ashes on the grey wind faded away, and the deep ocean waters calmed. The griffin's remnant went without a sound, and the peace of the nonsensical dream returned.

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Prey awoke on his back, and very surprised he hadn't woken up to whip scar cramping.

The lack of such a delightful wake up call, *or* Gloom's infernal alarm clock, was definitely a positive way to start the day. Even Garrow's petulant demand for a turn hadn't been that bad once he'd banished it again. Why, he'd even gotten a peaceful night's uninterrupted sleep afterwards.

Then of course reality noticed this discrepancy and immediately jumped in to correct its oversight with a swift buck to the back of the head.

Oh yes, that was right. He was still in hospital, he was still in some amount of pain, his eyesight hadn't gotten any better, and he was

still a prisoner of Nighthawk and Luna, both of whom would come demanding answers at some point.

Besides, how positive a start to the morning was that anyway?

If you're waking up and gratefully counting the things which *haven't* gone wrong yet, as opposed to the things which *have* gone right, you're using a flawed measuring stick to begin with.

The other, and perhaps much more influential reason for why the day speedily went downhill from opening his eyes, was because despite Crimson coming back to visit like he said he would, the doctors also deemed Prey well enough to take short, supervised walks for exercise.

This was a problem because after breakfast, it was decided that Prey should be taken to see Scenic Paint and Lilly Blossom.

Lilly lay unmoving under the hospital blanket. There was a white curtain drawn around her bed, although she had the room to herself. A number of unknown machines with magical crystals housed in them were hooked up to the prone mare's body. The only sound in the room as Crimson, Prey, and the one orderly who'd escorted them stood there was a quiet little *blip* from one of the magical devices every second or so.

It felt like they were in the presence of a dead person, like this was a funeral wake, and the Lilly before them was already a corpse.

Prey had seen corpses which looked better too. True, he'd also seen many which were way worse, but that did not change how bad Lilly Blossom personally looked.

Her missing leg, or what had replaced it, was suspended in a sling out to the side of the bed. The leg could've been a peg leg or part of some fancy dress, if not for the way it was sickeningly grafted into the shoulder's stump. But worst of all was still Lilly's face. The roots which grew out of the flesh, up her face, and looped around her horn really did look reminiscent of the grisly spectacle they'd found

inside that one kindersnatch. And all those white bandages and dressings which sought to cover up the meld wood somehow just made it worse by focusing the eye.

Prey examined the work of his own hoof. Without it, Lilly would be dead. But if she awoke, would she see it that way? Or would she seek revenge? Prey was determined it wasn't going to be his problem.

Gloom had ordered him to operate, and Crimson had flown to bring the meld wood. But even so...

Prey had hated Lilly for her arrogant behaviour, (still did actually), but it was more a worn, simmering sort of hate, no longer hot and fresh. Right now, knowing that Lilly would likely never cast another spell again even if she regained consciousness, he couldn't help but think about what he would feel in her place.

Prey turned away and hobbled out the door to wait outside. The orderly started to protest that he should stay and talk to Lilly, even if she wasn't awake. Prey ignored him, and Crimson told the orderly to; "Leave Prey alone."

Crimson himself did choose to stay in the room for a while longer, although Prey didn't hear him saying anything to Lilly. When Crimson finally emerged, neither of them said anything and instead wordlessly headed towards Scenic's room with the orderly guiding, their pace painfully slow to accommodate Prey's limp and frequent rest stops.

Prey despised showing weakness in front of anyone. Not so much Crimson anymore, but because of the orderly, even if the stallion was a hospital worker and no doubt saw this all the time.

No, Crimson wasn't the problem. Prey just wished Crimson didn't keep anxiously glancing at his back every time Prey stopped, as if his whip scars were going to go burst into spasms at any moment. He wasn't about to suddenly keel over, thank-you-very-much.

In hindsight, admitting to Crimson that, yes, he did get cramps when the red pegasus had pushed to know hadn't been the smartest

idea.

"So how bad are they?"

"Oh, you know, have to lie still awhile and wait for the cramps to pass. Just when I wake up sometimes."

Prey really should've thought a bit harder about so blasély admitting that. But since Crimson, and by extension everyone else the doctors had told already knew, he hadn't seen much point in denying it since anyone could've figured out as much themselves.

Internally, Prey was still furious with the doctors for having examined him and spread that information around without his permission. Those scars were private, and no one else had any right to know about them, especially not soft privileged doctor ponies.

However Prey couldn't do anything about that now, the information was out in the open. The chance to contain it by wiping all of the doctors' memories had passed. Plus, that option would've involved editing Crimson's memories too so he wasn't keen on it. At least Crimson knew better than to openly bring the matter up again, just as Prey knew not to ask about Crimson's new scars again either.

Presently, they arrived at Scenic's room. However, it was obvious before they got there that Scenic already had visitors. Which was strange, because Prey *distinctly* remembered being told all visitors were banned from seeing any of the still healing ISND.

Mentioning strange, could it be Strange Happenstance had snuck back into the hospital to try again? Or perhaps an overly ambitious reporter?

Prey flicked a glance up at Crimson, conveying his suspicions with a look. Crimson's expression hardened and he strode ahead before the orderly could stop him, and shoved the door open.

The three ponies inside froze as they turned to find Crimson

standing in the doorway.

They were definitely not Strange Happenstance, nor reporters either for that matter. Reporters generally aren't Earth ponies, or middle aged, or a couple from the way the mare was clinging to the stallion, or had cutie marks depicting painting, or, from comparing their features to Scenic Paint's own, were family.

There was a frozen moment as everyone stared at each other.

The stallion, a deep green pony wearing a puffed silk shirt and dark waistcoat, was the first to react.

"Excuse me, but this is a private family meeting with our son. If you're sharing the room with Spot, kindly wait outside until we're quite finished." He said, a curt snap to his voice as he obviously mistook Crimson for just another patient because of the bandages and stitches still adorning the pegasus. The waistcoat the older stallion wore was crumpled, and his shirt had what looked suspiciously like tear stains on the shoulder closest to the mare.

Crimson ignored the stallion, looking instead to Scenic.

"Is everything under control?" He asked Scenic. The Earth pony was propped up in bed, but he was almost as heavily bandaged up as Lilly had been, with his left hind leg and right foreleg both in splints. His face was sallow, and the gauze pads under his eyes were the thickest Prey had seen out of all four of them who'd suffered the reaper king's poison.

Scenic was wearing a frozen smile that looked as fake as the potted plant in the corner. "Uh, hey Crimson. Thanks for coming by. Mom, dad, this is Crimson. Crimson, my mom and dad."

The mare with eyes gone pink from crying sniffed, "Crimson?" She asked in a warbling voice, "Crimson, as in the pony from your squad who-"

The mare's brows abruptly snapped together, "You're the one who let Paint Spot get hurt!"

Her husband's strong hoof on her shoulder stopped the mare from

leaping up, "Dear, we've been over this." He muttered in an undertone, but his wife was having none of it.

"You come in here after what you did to my son? The gall! You force him to join your Nightmare Guard, you throw him to the wolves, and then you won't even let him out of your watch long enough to let him talk to his own blood family?"

To say the mare was upset would be an understatement. She was basically hysterical, the large pearls around her neck getting tangled with her bushy purple mane as she shook her head like a fox with a rat.

"And you Scenic Paint! No contact in over a year over some stupid disagreement about your arts degree, like a foal who doesn't get his way and then this is what finally gets you back in contact!" She shrieked at Scenic.

"Wha-? Me? You're the ones who refused to speak to me-"

"Don't you dare try to put this on us and your mother!" The stallion barked, and Scenic flinched, "We won't take the blame for your poor life choices, no matter how much it pained us to have to watch you make them."

Prey did not know what to think as the room descended into a hoarse shouting match between the three Earth ponies. Well, two of them shouted, while their son mainly just looked miserable and tried to get a word in edgeways.

Prey could not imagine ever saying a word back to his mother, never in a thousand years. No, not *his* mother, Gossamer's mother. While he knew there were many dysfunctional and strained familial relationships out there, and each was its own minor tragedy, he just couldn't ever see himself in their place.

Gossamer's mother had been kind, loving, and gentle, and everything she'd ever cared about in the whole world had been Fleece and Gossamer.

But this, the argument happening in the room before him while

Crimson just looked on and the orderly cringed and hid out of the line of sight, Prey just didn't get. Logically he understood, but anymore than that? He just didn't get it. How could your parents not love you? And you them?

And yet somehow, they managed. Scenic's mother still had tears in her eyes as she yelled at her son, but there was no sign of her anger turning into a teary reunion:

"I begged, begged you as your mother to reconsider this Royal Guard fad. This is what I knew would happen, you're lucky to be alive. Do you want us to have to bury you?"

Her thoughts were just as twisted with anger, '-I brought you into this world, nopony has the right to stop me from saving you from yourself-'

"You didn't ask me nothing!" Scenic protested, "You just signed me up to the university-"

"And if you'd gone like we'd paid for-!"

"You're rich, this was never about the money dad and you know it." Scenic tried to cut across.

"It's about what's right! You're our son and you have a duty to us, just like we have a duty to you. You are a painter. It is your heritage and your mark, and by Celestia so help me you are going to do it!"

Scenic's thoughts were showing him to be mortified, angry, and scared all at once to be having this argument while Prey and Crimson looked on; "I told you dad, I don't want to be a painter just because my cutie mark says so. I want to make my own way in life. I'm grateful for everything you've done for me, but-"

"You're not grateful!" His mother screamed, "You give up this poisonous dream and you come home right now!"

"What, just get out of bed and walk home?" Scenic shot back, "You, you, you blind bat! I'm in hospital! I almost died! You don't even know what I, what we saw, you don't care about... Y-you're just

jumping on the first opportunity to make me do what you want and be a stupid painter!"

Scenic's father reached out a hoof and sharply smacked Scenic's splinted hind leg. Scenic let out a wordless shout of pain as his father glared, "No matter the circumstances, I will not have you bad mouth how we raised you. Even if you try to run away, you *will* speak with respect for the noble profession your mother and I have laboured diligently in our entire lives."

Scenic glared at his father, eyes only slightly watering, "I love art, I always have. What I hate is you two forcing me to spend my whole foalhood in boarding school just to become some stupid painter like *your* parents forced *you*-"

The older Earth pony stallion's hoof shot out to smack Scenic's injured leg again, but he found Crimson's wing suddenly blocking him.

"Your son is injured. Refrain from making it worse." Crimson said calmly as he pushed the stallion's hoof back down to the floor.

"Or else what?"

"Or you will be removed from the hospital until you're both better able to control yourself next time." Crimson responded calmly.

"You know what?" Scenic raised his voice, "Just get out now! Don't come back, there won't be a next time!"

"You are not in control of yourself either Scenic." Crimson tried to say, but it was pointless, because Scenic's words incited them all into descending into shouting over one another again.

Prey winced at the volume assaulting his ears. None of the Earth pony family were even listening to each other, just trying to shout the loudest. Prey noticed another three orderlies and nurses hurrying up the corridor towards the source of all the shouting.

"What's going on here?"

None of the shouting participants stopped or even acknowledged

the new orderlies. The orderly who'd accompanied Prey and Crimson tried to explain; "I don't know, they were arguing when I got here and then they just started shouting."

The lead nurse who'd arrived quickly made the decision.

"This is a hospital, not a rodeo. You, take these two patients back to their rooms," She ordered, meaning Prey and Crimson, "Everypony else, help me escort the parents to the lobby."

Crimson wasn't actually a patient at the hospital, although he sure looked like he was still one what with the bandages. Wisely, he didn't add to the mess by trying to point this out, and instead let the assigned orderly lead or rather limp him and Prey away without protest. The shouting and outrage faded behind them as Scenic's parents, whom Prey hadn't actually gotten the names of, were gently but firmly herded down a different corridor.

"Well..." Prey said after a minute, "If it wasn't clear before, I think we can say for certain why Scenic joined the Guard."

Crimson's wings shifted restlessly at his sides, "I thought, I mean, how can Scenic not be on good terms with his parents?"

"You didn't know? He never hid the fact." Prey said.

"No. I had no idea."

"Alright, Scenic never hid it *well*," Prey amended, "Still, I didn't expect them to be... quite so hostile and fiery with each other." He admitted, pausing to rest.

Crimson looked back the way they'd come, speaking in a low voice so their orderly escort wouldn't hear, "How could a family let itself grow so twisted over merely painting? That's beyond petty."

"Petty is the right word, but here in Canterlot profession and heritage can be a big thing. Bigger than family apparently." Prey said, letting his disdain clearly show.

"Petty," Crimson agreed again, "But that isn't our concern. Only Scenic's recovery is."

Prey hadn't expected Crimson to say anything else, "Of course." He agreed.

The only person missing from their little cake walk of emotionally unstable people for today was Gloom, but the Sargent opted not to come by again.

Eventually, Crimson had to leave, both to get himself some lunch, (since he wasn't actually a patient here), and to try again finding Gloom to talk some sense into.

Prey asked what Crimson was doing outside of the hospital, since he was on enforced leave, and thus didn't have any Night Guard related obligations.

Crimson admitted he'd tried to get Screech or Starry Wing to let him back into work as a Night Guard, even if it was just doing paperwork, but they'd both kicked him out of their office and told him not to come back until the whole of the ISND were all healthy again.

Screech had allowed Crimson to keep using the ISND's old bunk room though.

"We do have those flats we were forced to rent." Prey had pointed out.

It was a side note, but he'd also left his potted plants and Crimson's Blood Fern behind to be looked after by Lemon Pink. Except she'd come across the mountains after him, so the pot plants were probably long wilted by now, but hey, it was a small price to pay for still being alive. He'd need to find Crimson a replacement Blood Fern to say sorry though.

Crimson had twitched at Prey's suggestion, before reluctantly admitting; "I know. However... I don't want to go there by myself."

Well, that had been that, and Prey certainly wasn't going to push Crimson if the pegasus didn't want to. It may have been a childish fear, like being scared of the dark, but only to people who hadn't

been there, who hadn't survived what Crimson had survived. He was more than entitled to his small fears.

"Well, okay. So, what do you do with all that free time then?"

Spare time was a dangerous thing after what had happened. It gave you the opportunity to stop and think. If you were strong enough to stay firm, you'd come out the other side of the experience better for it. If you weren't, then the time of reflection would break you instead.

The way Crimson paused told Prey that while he was not breaking, it was still hard. "I... fly."

"You fly?"

"Yes. I go flying. Lots."

"During *all* that spare time?" Prey asked.

"Yes. Flying helps, and it is the one thing I am good at that isn't fighting. I need the exercise, and it sets me free."

Prey had heard pegasi and thestrals speak of flying before, and it sounded like something he, as a non-flier, could never fully appreciate. There seemed to be something freeing in flying beyond what he, as a ground-bound species, could ever understand.

Hearing someone like Crimson use words like "love" and "sets me free", Prey felt a pang of jealousy that he would never get to know it for himself simply because of how he'd been born. He was a sheep, and a runt sheep at that. Flight was a gift forever beyond his reach.

"I'll be back later today Prey." Crimson said, saying goodbye.

Back in his bed, Prey tiredly waved Crimson goodbye. Even that short, and admittedly very leisurely walk around the hospital had left him feeling exhausted, "Sure. And I'll be here. Waiting."

'There isn't anything else to do in a hospital but wait.'

For the eyes of Sr. Captain Nighthawk of the Night Guard only:

Please see attached report. As per your instructions, I have completed a review on the physical and mental state of ISND following the debacle on the Equestrian border.

Lt. Screech

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I am no psychiatrist sir, but bluntly put, my evaluation of the ISND has left me concerned. Reasons as follows:

Sgt. Dusky Gloom - He feels incapable of completing his duty anymore. Feels responsible for not stopping the murders carried out by the warlock Hard Baked. Takes the blame for the state of his unit, (see further details attached below). Sgt. Gloom has confided in me he intends to resign. I strongly urge you not to accept his resignation sir. He is a good Night Guard, and further, I do not think quitting will help him recover in the long run.

Physically, Dusky Gloom will make an almost full recovery. He sustained no major wounds, a small miracle in itself I am told by the hospital.

However, each ISND pony (aside from Prv. Lilly Blossom) has sustained lingering eye damage. Cause: an unidentified airborne poison. Without being a doctor, I do not know if this eye damage could simply be remedied with spectacles.

Conclusion for Dusky Gloom: It is not his physical health I am worried about.

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Private Lilly Blossom - Condition still uncertain. Comatosed. Physical condition appalling. Doctors have concluded she will never be able to use her magic again. The parasitic meld wood absorbs her magic and life force, but at present, operating to remove the wood will result in her certain death.

The meld wood was introduced into Prv. Lilly Blossom's system to

save her life I am told, on the orders of Sgt. Dusky Gloom. However the ISND are reluctant to provide details. I have not pushed at this time, but Prey seems to have been involved with the process somehow. It is worrying. (See details on page 2)

Prv. Lilly Blossom's family are being forbidden to visit by the hospital. I am almost certain they intend to sue and make problems for Princess Luna and the Night Guard. (See details on page 3) They've threatened going to the newspapers. I do not know what will happen if/when we grant them permission to see their daughter. I can see no happy outcome.

Conclusion for Lilly Blossom: If she ever awakes, she will need a long time to recover mentally and physically. I am sad to write that I fear it may be never.

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Private First Class Crimson Trace - Physical condition is the best, or rather the least injured out of the ISND, (aside from eyesight once again). A reason both Crimson Trace and Dusky Gloom attribute to the unexpected and lucky find of a magical artifact. (See details on page 4).

I do not think the artifact is dangerous, but I am not a unicorn. The artifact still remains unidentified at this time, but will not work for anypony but Crimson Trace. I strongly advise having an expert check it as soon as possible. Prv. Crimson Trace seems very possessive of the artifact. Cause for concern?

Conclusion for Crimson Trace: Physically the same as Dusky Gloom but better off. Mentally, I am not even sure sir. But taking into account his history before induction into the Night Guard, I estimate not well. Crimson just seems to be burying it deeper than Sgt. Gloom. I am unsure which is worse. I do not know what, if anything, can be done to help.

Further note: Prv. Crimson Trace has openly admitted he is unwilling to share some details. My recommendation: Do not push.

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Private Scenic Paint - Physically will recover, but possible lingering effects. Eyesight also damaged. Likely to suffer the worst facial scarring out of the four poison victims, as previously highlighted. Sadly, I am led to doubt these scars will only be confined to the physical.

Mentally, I am once again deeply concerned. Scenic Paint feels he is useless, and due to lack of experience and training, is traumatised. He is also observed by doctors to be unable to sleep in the dark anymore without a night light.

Prv. Scenic Paint, like everypony else, has not been able to elaborate in detail on the events of how exactly Lilly Blossom came to be in her present condition. Specifically, the night it happened. He refuses to discuss it, same as Sgt. Gloom.

The only details all the ISND agree on is that any such place coming under the name or term "Wolf Woods" or "Wolfing Woods" must be avoided at all costs. I strongly recommend adding this warning to the file. Details diverge between individuals on what happened that night. If not for their firm testimonies, I might suspect exhaustion or possibly a hallucination. But it is not so.

Conclusion on Scenic Paint: Longer physical recovery required for legs to heal. Seemed to indicate he might resign too. Mental state is, in a word, sadly: bad.

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Private Prey (No family name) - I'll start with the physical sir, as that is the easiest to assess here. It is still most disturbing.

Prv. Prey shows previously unknown signs of physical abuse, namely multiple deep whip scars. This only came to light when doctors were performing a full examination. Twelves whip scars, at least two years old, putting Prey's age at eleven or twelve when receiving them. Nopony was aware of these scars before the doctors uncovered them. Prey will not say. Sir, I have no idea how to proceed. Strongly recommend getting in contact with Prey's family immediately and asking them some strong questions.

Current injuries are in line with those also received by Scenic Paint, Crimson Trace, and Dusky Gloom. Eyesight also damaged.

Conclusion on Prey: Physical, see above. Mentally, I am at a loss. And worried. Following the Garrow salt trade incident, warning flags were raised by Sgt. Dusky Gloom. Now, even more so. Sir, I can no longer in good faith suggest employing a foal, but I do not have the authority to make that decision, only Princess Luna does. The only redeeming point of this situation I can find is that Prey seems very close with Crimson. They will help one another get through this.

I haven't yet broached the topic of how Prey was able to construct a mine field of lethal traps, again on Sgt. Dusky Gloom's orders.

Recommendation: A very close watch needs to be kept on Prey and his actions in the future as he grows up, even after/if he is discharged from the Night Guard.

Final note on Prey: There is something missing which for the life of me I just cannot put my hoof on sir, although I have no grounds for my speculation.

Signed,
Lt. Screech

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Author's Notes:

Well, it's time for more clean up in the Night Guard and ISND in this chapter. If you spotted any mistakes, please let me know so I can correct them thanks.

Wonder who this mysterious 'Strange Happenstance' character is though? [image]

Editor Sweetolebob18

54.4 Take a Breath and Breathe

There was a knock at the hospital room door. Prey looked up from the newspaper he had spread open on the sheets. His eyesight wasn't so badly damaged that he couldn't read, although he did have to concentrate harder to see the words on the frankly oversized pages. With that said, this newspaper was also utter drivel, but they were easy to get a hold of, and Crimson had kindly grabbed all the morning ones for him when he came by.

Prey considered the papers worth exactly what he'd paid for them. Nothing. But he was utterly bored so read them regardless.

"Who is it?" Prey called.

It wasn't time for the doctor or nurse to be doing their rounds, and Crimson had just left. Perhaps it was Lemon Pink, coming by to inform him she'd successfully returned from crossing the Ridgeback?

No such luck.

"It's me. Uh, Scenic," Came the muffled voice through the door, "Can we come in?"

"Who is 'we'?" Prey asked cautiously. Last he'd checked, Scenic was still confined to his hospital bed.

"Uh, well me and Carton Juice. You haven't met her yet. Is, is it okay if we come in?" Came Scenic's hesitant voice.

Carton Juice. Prey's mind immediately did a search and pulled out the relevant information. Carton Juice was supposed to be the name of Scenic's marefriend.

'What's she doing visiting Scenic, weren't they trying to ban all visitors? And for what possible reason could he think I'd want to meet her?' Prey scowled.

He almost told Scenic to get lost. Almost. However after Screech's visit, it would be expected of him to at least make an attempt. So instead, he quickly rolled up the large newspaper, or large for him at any rate, and shoved it behind his pillow.

"Alright, you can come in."

It took a few seconds longer than necessary before the door actually opened, but when it did Prey saw why.

Scenic was in a wheelchair, courtesy of his two stiff plaster legs, although the casts were only the start of his bandages, bruising, and stitching. Seeing Prey sitting up in bed and waiting, Scenic hurriedly dropped his gaze, like he was ashamed. Or perhaps scared.

Behind Scenic, and pushing the wheelchair, was a hulking, massive, orange dappled Earth pony stallion, with hooves the size of dinner plates-It was a mare. Holy Hell, it *was* a mare.

'*That's* Carton Juice?'

The mare was huge, bigger than most stallions Prey had ever seen, Earth pony or not. She had muscles *on* her muscles by the look of it.

She had three interlocking amber hexagons for a cutie mark, wore a huge turtleneck sweater and a friendly smile on what, based on the fact it was on the front of her head, was her face. Prey assessed the threat she posed but decided it was no worse than the average Earth pony. An average Earth pony could crush Prey's skull with one kick, so Carton's extra hulking size meant little.

"Well don't just stand there. Do come in."

Carton Juice didn't notice her coltfriend's hesitancy and smiled widely at Prey as she pushed the wheelchair in, sympathy practically radiating from off her.

'-oh what a poor lamb, just like Scenic told me. At least he didn't get as badly hurt as my Paint Spot-'

A few of Prey's bandages had been removed, and some of his

smaller bruises and cuts had faded, but Prey knew his face still looked a lot worse than it really was. Although it would've looked even worse *without* said bandages. Prey put the bare minimum effort necessary to return a 'tired-but-still-friendly' smile to the huge mare, but his attention was mainly on Scenic.

The wheelchair bound stallion didn't want to be here. In fact; '-only here because Carton dear insisted I see my squad mates. But Celestia, after all I did, after all he did, I don't want to see Prey. And I'm sure as hay he doesn't want to see me-'

"Hey there big guy," Carton Juice gently said as she pushed Scenic up to the foot of Prey's bed, "How're you doing?"

'None of your damned business, shove off.' Prey thought, "I'm in the hospital. How do you think I'm doing?" He deadpanned.

Carton's gentle smile didn't fade, taking it for genuine humour, "Paint Spot told me you saved his life. I wanted to say thank you for getting my big lug back home safely."

"Actually that was Crimson." Prey said. He hadn't done anything to save Scenic. In fact, Prey distinctly remembered leaving Scenic behind fully expecting the Earth pony to die.

"No, you did save me Prey," Scenic unexpectedly spoke up, "Uh, I mean, Crimson saved me too yeah, but you all helped save me at one point or another."

"So you came here to say thank you, yes?" Prey asked. If that was all, then hopefully they'd leave once Scenic had said his piece.

"Of course! How could we not?" Carton Juice responded, "Gratitude should never go unspoken. So thank you Prey, thank you, thank you, thank you, from the bottom of my heart. This is the first time they've allowed me in to see my darling. If I'd known about you, I would've brought you a thank you cake with honey from my own bees."

Prey barely looked at her. Her thanks meant nothing, she hadn't been there. Scenic however had yet to say thank you himself. *Did* he

feel thankful? Was he now scared of Prey? Both?

Carton Juice was still talking, expressing her heartfelt gratitude and pity for his situation; ("I know! I'll give your parents the honey cake and they can save it for you.") Prey tuned her out. His attention was on Scenic.

'-what do I say? What can I say? Prey's a killer now. He's killed ponies where I could not and that's why we're still alive. How can I possibly say thank you for that? How can I possibly *not* say thank you?-'

The soft blue of Prey's eyes did not change, but there was something different hidden behind his mask when he turned and smiled sweetly at Carton Juice. "Thank you for saying all of that. You're too kind."

"No, thank *you*. Really."

Prey kept the smile up, "You're welcome. But I think Scenic has something he wants to say to me in private. Could you please give us a few minutes?"

Carton's ears went up in faint surprise at the unexpected 'grownupness' of Prey's request. She was standing behind the wheelchair, so she didn't see the way her coltfriend swallowed either, "Oh? What do two you want to talk about?"

"About something that happened. I just want to ask Paint Spot something. In private, please."

"Oh, right, private, duh! That was silly of me to ask." Carton laughed lightly. It was a good laugh, cheery and positive, and big enough to match her size. Prey was amazed that it didn't shake plaster flakes off the ceiling. She leaned way down and gave Scenic a quick peck on the tip of his ear, about the only unhurt bit of his face.

"Back in a few sweetie." She said, and left before Scenic could call out to her what he was really thinking; '-don't leave me alone in here!-'

Carton shut the door. Prey turned his friendly smile on Scenic. The Earth pony was looking anywhere but at the lamb. His breathing had become slightly elevated. He looked scared, although Prey hadn't done a single threatening thing yet. Although what could possibly be threatening about a runt lamb all bandaged up and stuck in a hospital bed?

Presently Prey asked, "I think there's something you want to tell me, don't you?"

Scenic's ears went back and he shivered, "Uh, **ehem** Is there?"

"I don't know," Prey's sweet smile widened, "But from the way you came in here, if I didn't know better, I'd think you were terrified of something."

Scenic tried to shift backwards, but he was trapped in the wheelchair, "Prey this isn't-"

"I think there's something you want to tell me." Prey repeated.

"W-what-" Scenic coughed, clearing his throat and gathering his courage, "What might that be?"

Prey's smile vanished, "Saying thank you."

"Thank you?"

"Yes, saying thank you. To me, to Crimson, and even to Gloom. And do you know why?"

"I-"

"Because without us you would be *dead*." Prey spat the guttural word out, "I can see what you're thinking, it's as clear on your face as those bandages. You're thinking that I can't be trusted, that I'm some kind of monster because I was willing to kill in self defence when you weren't."

"No no, I'm not." Scenic protested weakly, '-horseapples! How did he know?-'

"Is this the thanks you have to offer? For being willing to walk into the swamp, so you could stand on my back and stay clean? The Wolfing Woods, the kindersnatches, the reaper king, who saved you? Who defended you?"

Scenic found some courage from somewhere, "Those acid mine things weren't self defence, you made them purposefully to kill ponies!"

"Everyone agreed on our course of action, 'whatever it takes', remember? You agreed just like the rest of us. But! I can be a better person than the likes of you." Prey's voice dropped, forcing Scenic to hold his breath to hear, "I'm not an ungrateful selfish hypocrite. I won't use someone else as my excuse. Can you say the same?"

Scenic flinched as each of Prey's accusatory words hit home. The names hurt, because they were all things Scenic had already been calling himself inside. Ungrateful, betrayer, selfish. And yet at the same time, Scenic's morals were also crying out in protest that this was *wrong*.

'-ponies don't kill. I'm a Guard, I signed up to save lives, not end them. Wrong is still wrong-'

"So that's it, huh? I'm weak because I'm not a murderer like you?!"

The moment the words left his mouth, Scenic slapped his unbroken foreleg over it in instant regret, "I, I'm sorry, I didn't- I didn't mean that."

But Prey had heard it all before. Coming from Scenic, the Earth pony's ungrateful words were barely even offensive anymore, but Scenic still expected them to. So Prey let his muzzle wrinkle up into a half snarl as pretended to be angry instead of merely just annoyed:

"No no, do go on Scenic, tell me what you *really* think. Perhaps we should get Carton Juice back in here so she can hear how thankful you are to me for saving your life?"

"I'm sorry Prey, you're right, I shouldn't have said... have said....."

"Go on. Shouldn't have said *what*?"

Scenic took a deep breath and shut his eyes, "I'mSorryICalledYouAMurderer!"

Prey made a show of lifting a small hoof to rub his chin, "Saying sorry for calling me a murderer, but you don't take it back do you? Because you still mean it. You still think I'm a murderer."

There was a pause, before shame made Scenic square his shoulders and face Prey head on rather than hide his face, "Yes Prey. I do think that. And I shouldn't, I'm sorry, it's just that-"

"-Just that murder is still murder. Killing is still killing. Well you're right." Prey said unexpectedly.

Scenic's ears jerked straight up in surprise.

Prey airily gestured with a hoof, "Everyone wants to be a warrior, until it's time to do what a warrior does. Because you come from Equestria, you think it's all easily definable right and wrong, all black and white. Like knights defeating villains in fairy tales, heroes driving off the dragon. But believe me, outside the borders of your peaceful Equestria, we tell *very* different fairy tales."

Prey stopped. He looked down at his hoof, "What am I even doing? Monologuing? This is stupid. There's no point." He muttered. Prey turned away and pulled the hospital blanket up.

He vaguely waved a cloven hoof blindly towards Scenic, "Just...go away. We've had our talk and you've made your feelings clear. You're grateful, but you're equally horrified. That's fine. I'll see you at work. If I'm not thrown in jail by the time we've all healed."

Prey waited with his back turned, listening, but Scenic didn't call out for Carton Juice to come and fetch him.

'Waaaait for it...'

'-Prey's a foal, he saved my life, how can I be like this? But it was still murder, Prey even said so himself, but he's just a child. None of us had any choice. I'm scared, a foal shouldn't be a killer, it's all so

wrong and Prey scares me. No no, you're so selfish! Think about how Prey must feel-', Scenic wavered.

'...Annnnd bingo.'

Scenic cleared his throat, then cleared it again, "No that's, uh, that is to say, this is my fault Prey. I know it's not fair, and I don't think you're a bad pony, er, bad person. You guys all saved my life and I'm really thankful. But I'm also not a killer and I'm happy about that. You killed and I didn't have to. I'm proud I'm not a killer like you."

'-wait, no, that came out wrong!-'

Scenic hurried to adjust his words, "I, uh, what I mean is, I'm not judging you. Well I guess I am just a little, but I know I'm also wrong to judge you guys for saving me. But I *am* right in not wanting to kill. But I'm really sorry you had to kill is what I'm saying. And, uh, it's, I, you, j-just..."

Scenic's spiel was a sign that Prey had succeeded in his aim of inducing guilt. Guilt could change a lot of things. Here, it had made Scenic twist his own views around until he'd convinced himself he was just as much in the wrong as he was in the right. Prey had presented himself through the lens of a victimised child, one who'd been forced to make an impossible choice. Yet at the same time, Prey hadn't made himself look weak. Instead, he'd make Scenic think he himself was the weak one by not being strong enough to make the hard choices.

'All Scenic needs now is a bit more pushing, and guilt will corner him into feeling like he's indebted to me.' Prey thought.

Which was only fair, since Prey had put up with so much from Scenic. The soft moron had almost gotten them both killed when he refused to finish off that kindersnatch as just one example. All it required was a bit more manipulation. Prey just needed to appear insulted by Scenic's apology, although not by *too* much since he didn't want Scenic to flee the room, *just* enough for him to agree to whatever Prey asked.

'Easily enough done. I'll simply pretend I didn't do it just for him, but for all of us. That's suitably noble and guilt inducing. I'll also point out Crimson has done the same, so that way he'll owe Crimson too.'

Yes, that was a good idea. Prey needed to start working on securing Crimson's own interests too. As a friend. That's what friends were supposed to do for each other, right?

Although that wouldn't be *quite* as effective a stimulation. A large part of the reason for Scenic's inner turmoil came because Prey was a child in his eyes, who looked the picture of an innocent, tragic victim, while Crimson was a full grown stallion, and a rather intimidating warrior to boot.

Still, it was good enough of a plan to take advantage of this spontaneous opportunity.

Prey rolled back over on the bed, a worn and tired expression carefully fixed on his face and ready to start spinning words. Then he stopped.

There was a look in Scenic's eyes, hidden behind the guilty conscience and pent up ball of emotions. One Prey had never actually witnessed, but recognised anyway. Prey remembered a little runt lamb, sobbing in a bush, as a merciless zebra voodoo witch forced him out onto the rocky path to carve rune traps. Gossamer hadn't wanted to be a murderer. Prey had done the deed in his stead.

He hadn't seen that look himself before, but Prey imagined that if he'd been able to look into Gossamer's face back then, he would've seen the same desperation now glinting in Scenic's eyes.

Scenic had been allowed to stop right on the brink, whereas Prey had always wished he could've halted.

Could Prey really despise Scenic for not wanting to be a murderer and not finishing that kindersnatch off? At wanting not to sink down to Prey's level? There was no ladder out once you fell into that pit.

'Can I hate him for not wanting to be like me?' Prey asked himself.

No. No he couldn't.

Prey needed to remember what innocence looked like sometimes. Not childish innocence, which only lasted until it met reality, but real innocence. The kind which saw the evil and the dark, and still chose to remain pure.

Prey let out a silent sigh. "I accept your apology Scenic. But I'll be absolutely clear, I'd do it all over again in a heartbeat if it meant survival."

'A beat of my twisted little heart.'

"Uh, good, I guess? That we could resolve this?" Scenic said uncertainly. Scenic was no Crimson. The words spoken and unspoken did not go as far with him. There was still much Scenic did not understand, and because of his peaceful disposition, never would either.

'-feel so sorry for Prey for being a murderer. Celestia, being a Guard isn't what I imagined at all. Ever since I met the ISND everything has gone so wrong. They may all be stronger than me, but I can look myself in the mirror and know I'm still true to Harmony. I can be proud of that if nothing else-'

"You're still so young." Prey said, wryly shaking his head.

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean? You're much younger than me." Scenic protested.

Prey just shook his head again, letting the wry smile grow, "Am I? Huh, I suppose I *am* only barely a teenager."

"Uh, yeah? That's how age works."

"So now that we've established I'm an unrepentant killer, what was next on the agenda?"

"Hey, that's not okay Prey. Don't ever flippantly say stuff like that. It isn't a joke." Scenic protested, genuinely offended.

'Who said I was joking?' Prey thought, but didn't say.

"So what's next on the agenda?" He repeated instead, his smile fading.

Scenic winced, regretting voicing it like that, "I didn't mean it like that. I, well, uh, nothing I guess. I just wanted to say thank you. And sorry."

"Sorry? Are we referring to...?"

"Sorry for not being able to kill that kindersnatch. But I don't regret it." Scenic raised his chin, as if daring Prey to contradict him.

"Yes, we've already established your shiny morals. Your heart is pure and your head is empty. Was there anything else, or should I call your marefriend back in?" Prey paused, raising one eyebrow delicately.

"No. I mean yes! Yes, it's about Carton Juice actually. I, uh..." Scenic hunched his shoulders.

"I swear if you're about to ask me, a lamb, for relationship advice-"

"No it's nothing like that! It's... She doesn't know about what happened. I, um, haven't told her and she hasn't asked. Yet. But she'll want to know eventually, I know Carton. And there's no way I can tell her about what...what really happened. I mean, some of it's restricted anyways, but she'll want an overview at least. What do I tell her? How do I explain all the, all the... like, all the scars?"

"Why're you asking me?" Prey asked incredulously.

"Because, because... Because I've got to ask somepony!"

"Well I've got some good news and some bad news."

"Uh, I'll take the good news-"

"The bad news is I have no idea how." Prey said, turning to plump his pillow.

"But I said-"

"The good news? You get the chance to figure it out with her yourself. Like a good couple is supposed to." Prey cheerily said, lying back in the bed. He raised his voice before Scenic could protest, "Miss Carton Juice? Can you please come back in? We're done now."

It was early night. The blinds had been drawn by the nurse, and the room was cast in a comfortable darkness. Outside the hospital walls, somewhere, there was a dog which either needed to be let outside, or brought inside. Or hit on the head with a shovel. It'd been happily barking every five seconds on the dot for the last hour like clockwork, and sounded like it meant to go on happily barking every five seconds for the rest of eternity.

Rarff! Pause, *Rarff!* Pause, *Rarff!* Pause, *Rarff!* Pause, *Rarff!*

Prey's eyes flicked open as the door softly clicked.

Prey sat up as the dim light from the corridor was allowed in. If this wasn't Lemon Pink coming to report in, there was only one other person Prey wanted to see coming through that door, and so-help-him if it was anyone else with funny ideas he was going to shatter their mind-

A pair of familiar amber yellow eyes shimmered softly in the low light, and a gleam of green hung around his neck. Prey smiled in welcome, but then his smile fell as a second pair of reflective yellow eyes, these ones slit, appeared behind Crimson and followed him into the room. No greeting was offered.

If this were a normal child's bedroom, this would've been a terrifying encounter for said child. Hell, the parents wouldn't have been too thrilled at meeting two glowing eyed ponies in the dark either.

Gloom, without looking at either of them, rounded the bed and took

the seat. Prey affixed a neutral expression on his face. Just because he couldn't see their expressions in the dark, didn't mean they couldn't see his expression. Once again, the fortunate few with night vision didn't appreciate their advantage.

There was a long silence as Gloom continued looking at nothing and Crimson stood at ease on the other side of the bed.

Prey waited. Crimson waited. The dog continued to bark somewhere in the background every five seconds.

Rarff! Pause, *Rarff!* Pause, *Rarff!* Pause, *Rarff!*

Gloom sighed and finally spoke, "Crimson's talked me into reconsidering. I'm going to stay on as your Sargent."

Straight to the point. Seemed Gloom didn't want to have to discuss his decision, he just wanted this over with.

Prey nodded once, knowing the other two would see it in the dark, "So the ISND is going to remain as a unit and not get disbanded?" He checked.

"It was never going to be disbanded. What gave you that idea?"

Well that was good to know. It seemed Luna wasn't dissatisfied enough to throw them all away, at least not yet. Prey just shrugged in answer to Gloom's query and returned it with one of his own.

"Why?" He asked, not needing to clarify. 'Why did you change your mind?'

"Because." Gloom said.

'Oh, well that explains everything doesn't it?'

Crimson shifted in the dark, and Prey saw Gloom's head briefly turn in the pegasus's direction before looking back down. There was the sound of Gloom sighing, and then he expounded:

"Because of Princess Luna. Her Majesty spoke with me, actually in pony, not just in my dreams. She told me to reconsider. How could I

not stay after Her Majesty herself asked me to remain in the ISND?"

So all it took was a few words from Luna, not even a conversation by the sounds of it, just her giving him an order, and just like that Gloom completely turned his resolve around? What had Luna ever done to ensure such loyalty from the thestral clans? Prey genuinely didn't have a clue, even after what Crimson had somewhat explained. Luna had dragged the clans down with her when she'd given in to Nightmare Moon, and they'd joined her in exile for a thousand years. If they were only following her now because of threat or force, that didn't explain their fanatical devotion.

"Okay," Prey said in acceptance, "So the ISND will remain. Is Nighthawk going to be springing any more surprise recruits on us to replace Lilly and Scenic?"

"No, definitely not." Gloom said vehemently, "Not after... Not after what happened the last time. The ISND is no place for greenies and the inexperienced. That's been proven beyond all doubt."

Gloom fell silent again. The annoying dog kept barking in the distance, but what more was there to say really? The future was still unknown and uncertain, but at least a part of it had been stabilised. And although Gloom still hadn't actually apologised, at least he hadn't asked Prey about the Bone Rot mines like Scenic had. Or about the other things. Prey thought it likely Gloom honestly didn't want to know the answer.

Crimson, ever unpredictable Crimson, finally spoke up, "I saw Taffy up at the Palace today."

"Taffy Hopes?" Gloom asked, breaking from his brooding in surprise. As if there could be any other eccentric unicorn by that name out there, but it really did seem out of joint with what they'd been talking about.

"Yes," Crimson confirmed tonelessly, "She says she has a quintuple mountain of paperwork waiting for you. Her words."

Gloom groaned, and then snorted a laugh, "Of course she does."

"And she also said she would bake us a tray of sorry-toffee. Because she's sorry about us all being in hospital."

'-typical Taffy. She thinks all the problems in the world can be solved with enough paperwork or if that fails, sugar. If only-', Gloom thought with a small sigh.

"Oh, and Lilly Blossom's parents are suing us." Crimson added.

"Pardon?"

"Well, they're *trying* to sue us. Or sue the Night Guard. It wasn't that clear. But I don't think they care which."

"Can they even do that? And sue us for what?"

Crimson's feathers rustled as he shrugged in the dark, "Don't know. But they're suing for what happened to Lilly with the meld wood."

"Oh. I see." Gloom said, sounding suddenly sick.

"Captain Nighthawk told me to tell everyone not to talk with them or their lawyers at all. He said the Night Guard would deal with it."

"Do you think that's who really sent Strange Happenstance?" Prey suggested. This was another factor thankfully pointing towards the private detective not secretly being a mimic in disguise.

"That... would make a lot of sense." Crimson agreed after a moment's thought.

"Strange Happenstance? Who's that and what happened?" Gloom asked, lost.

Prey left it to Crimson to fill Gloom in on the brief encounter Prey'd had. Gloom knew he should be more worried, and also outraged at the detective's insinuations, but; '-I just can't stir myself to care enough to worry-'

Rarff! Pause, *Rarff!* Pause, *Rarff!* Pause, *Rarff!*

"Well," Gloom eventually said heavily, getting off the stool, "I've

kept you from your rest long enough Prey. Just... focus on getting better and ignore this other stuff about the detective and Lilly's parents. It'll all work out. Probably."

But inside, Prey could read that the Sargent didn't believe his own words. And how could he? The thestral was still saturated with guilt and feelings of failure. What'd happened over the mountain range hadn't been erased, and all those deaths weren't something you could just move on from.

Without saying goodbye, Gloom pulled the door open and hurriedly left. He hadn't actually said sorry once for planning to abandon them in the ISND. While Prey knew this was all very difficult for Gloom, it was also difficult for everyone else.

Prey considered the closed door in the dark, absently smoothing down an annoying tuft of bandage under his eye which kept sticking up. It was a strange contrast between Gloom and Scenic when you compared the two. Scenic had started out weak and uncommitted, but somehow the things he'd seen, in a way, had strengthened his resolve. Broken it in other ways, yes, but strengthened the rest of it. Whereas Gloom had been fully committed and dedicated, but what happened had diminished his will instead.

Out in the darkness, the dog finally ceased its tireless yapping.

"I think it best if I leave you to rest." Crimson said.

"Oh, thanks. Goodnight Crimson."

"Night watch over you." Crimson said goodbye.

"Until tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

Five minutes... Ten minutes... Fifteen minutes...

Prey was just drifting off towards sleep, when the feeling

approaching his door made him sit up.

He smiled as the door gave a soft, almost imperceptible *click* He'd had a feeling that tonight was a night of happenings, and he'd been right.

"Welcome back, Lemon Pink. Come in, we have much to discuss."

Prey's smile was long gone, as was something else very important.

"Gone?" Prey repeated, just to be absolutely sure.

"It was not where you stashed it. The mimic's corpse had been removed when I got to the ravine." Lemon Pink repeated in her blank voice. She stood at the foot of his bed, looking the worse for wear from her travels back across the Ridgeback, but patiently waiting.

"No chance a flash flood could've washed it away?"

"None. The corpse was purposefully removed by an unknown party."

It really was gone. Prey didn't bite his hoof or curse, despite how bad this was. Instead, he closed his eyes and tried to think. The mimic's body was gone. Prey had wanted to study it, but somehow a third unknown person or persons had retrieved it first. Since he'd hidden the mimic's body himself at the bottom of the ravine, the only way it could've been found was if the person already knew what they were looking for before hoof, meaning this person or persons knew who or what mimics were. Which meant they already knew more than Prey did.

It couldn't have been the deer holt, nor was it a scavenger. First, the deer had already fled the forest by that point, and second, Lemon had related how even the dried green blood traces had been carefully removed from the rocks.

'Someone knew what they were looking for. Did another mimic come to retrieve their fellow? Nighthawk never found out who sent

those false orders from the Border Guard. Have the mimics infiltrated the Border Guards' command structure? Or are they willingly co-operating and trying to cover this up?'

Prey didn't know enough to rule out any of those possibilities. Two things were for certain though.

One, there was someone out there who wanted to keep the existence of mimics a secret, and two, they were now aware that someone else also knew about mimics. And if they'd been keeping an eye on the forest, they had a very short list of who that 'someone' could be. Gloom, Crimson, Lilly, Scenic, Hard Baked, or Prey.

Who had *really* sent Strange Happenstance? Lemon's revelation threw the private detective's real intentions and origins back into immediate question.

There was no beating about the bush. This was bad. The sort of bad that would end with Prey being hunted again, because this person or persons had two options now. Hope whoever had found out about Mimics, (Prey), kept their mouth shut, or to try silencing the person who knew. Again, that being Prey.

The world wasn't fair, but Prey felt this was really exceptionally unfair. He'd only just survived getting hunted by an abomination constructed by a crazy warlock, along with kindersnatches, a Wolfing Wood, a Mama'duke, and poisoning. He wasn't even out of hospital yet from that last encounter, and already there was another unknown enemy lining up to try and kill him.

If Prey's new enemy was another mimic or mimics, with their disguise abilities, they could be anyone. And even if it wasn't mimics, well, his enemy could still be anyone.

Prey lay back on his pillow with gritted teeth, raising his hooves to massage at his ears, 'Back to being hunted again at every turn, never knowing when an attack might come. It's almost as bad as the Deeper Green. Traps, poisons, a knife in the dark.'

Prey halted for a second, hooves mid-circle, 'Actually, now that I think about it, this changes very little.'

Prey was always on guard for poisons and traps, that hadn't stopped just because he'd come to Canterlot. Nothing was going to change there, he was still going to be as on guard as ever. It wasn't paranoia if they really were out to get you.

'If they want a war, then a war we'll have. I didn't survive the Deeper Green for nothing.'

Except now Prey didn't just have himself to worry about.

Crimson had to be kept safe too at all costs. Or at *nearly* all conceivable costs.

Prey opened his eyes with a sigh and stopped working circles into his floppy ears. Lemon Pink leaned slightly forwards, ready to hear his orders. She, like him, was perfectly aware of what the missing body of the mimic Shimmer meant, and she'd had the whole trip back across the Ridgeback to consider the implications.

Prey cleared his throat and spoke clearly, "New orders. Finding a secure base is now our top priority after survival and secrecy. Ideally it'll be a place where the veropedes can be housed too."

An old thought came back to Prey, "Try the sewers, perhaps they'll serve. I do know the main pipelines are large enough to admit a pony, and are usually only inspected by magical scans rather than in person. The overflow pipes would be a good place to start."

"Yes, Prey." Lemon nodded, accepting the suggestion.

"Returning to the matter of the veropedes, do you have anything to add from your observations while bringing them back through the Diamond Dog tunnels?"

'The same Diamond Dogs you sacrificed.' Prey silently added.

"Yes, Prey. The beasts do not like the cold, but can withstand it even better than I can. Although dangerous to ride because of the spines, they make decent transport as they are nearly tireless. They also grow harder to control as they grow hungrier."

"What do you mean? Did they try to eat you?" Prey asked sharply.

"No, Prey. The veropedes did not break free of the runes binding them, even when I was not awake to reinforce my commands. It is just harder to get them to correctly interpret the commands you give. They keep defaulting back to searching for prey."

'As it was always going to be. Hunger can only ever be delayed, never satisfied.' Prey let out his breath, thinking of the two giant armoured centipede monsters, "That's good. What else, and where are the veropedes now?"

"Hidden in one of the woods at the base of Canterlot mountain, burrowed underground and in torpor. The largest, the one hatched by you, seems to be inquisitive. It examines almost everything and I had to almost constantly keep its instincts in check whenever we encountered something new."

Prey thought about the enormous insect encountering some random woodspony, and being inquisitive with its flaying antenna, and didn't bother hiding a shudder.

"The smaller one, hatched by me, seems to be the alpha of the two. It is only because of your runes that they do not try to kill each other for dominance, I think. They are obedient tools. Both are female too." Lemon Pink added on the end, stifling a yawn.

"Mentioning them being hungry, they need to be fed. I know they can enter an almost hibernation state when not active, so there's that, but even so, they need to be fed, and soon."

"Yes, Prey."

Prey would've liked to go and see his two new tools of mass destruction and fear himself, but for now, Lemon Pink would have to look after the two beasts in his place. He absently tugged at a knot in his wool, "The plan for feeding the veropedes once they'd hatched hasn't changed. We will be utilising the meat farm industry."

The meat industry in Equestria was something not many knew about. Ponies didn't eat meat, and very few non-ponies lived among the population. Thus, the topic was not something which would

ever be mentioned in polite conversation. It disgusted ponies, but there were more than a few Earth pony farmers who quietly took advantage of the meat trade. Pigs could be raised on waste and slops, and then carted off by train to Griffonia for a tidy little profit. For gold ponies were willing to do it, but not speak of it.

Oh, the farmers didn't *kill* the pigs themselves, and would shudder whenever they thought about what those feathered savages did across the border, but needs must and it put gold in the pocket and bread on the table.

Fish was the only animal eaten by ponies, but only by pegasi and even then, only rarely and it was still considered primitive and uncultured. Unless it was in a restaurant of course, and then it was classy.

But the good news for Prey was that there was a source of meat available for his veropedes, one that didn't involve risking discovery by letting the two monsters out to hunt. Which would definitely happen when the remains of some unfortunate farm house a hungry veropede wandered across at night was found.

The bad news was there was still a low level risk of a connection being drawn by the farmers. Disguise or no, all it would take was one overly curious farmer asking lucky or rather unlucky questions about where their pigs were *really* being sent.

Oh, and the price, but Prey was never overly concerned about bits.

"Take however much you need out of the gold stash. Keep both the veropedes well fed." Prey ordered, uncaring of the cost.

"Yes, Prey."

"And there are going to have to be some changes in security. Here, come see." Prey ordered, holding up his hoof.

Lemon Pink stepped forwards, the now rather dirty cloak shifting around her shoulders as she raised her own hoof to meet his smaller one. The outside world faded into a mind bridge. Prey felt the familiar sensation of Lemon Pink's mind, that of cold, dry sand,

while Lemon felt Prey's, that of barbed razors. Linked like this and without any walls up, Prey got the unique experience of both points of view, as did Lemon Pink.

Prey took note of how Lemon's outer mindscape, an ashen courtyard, felt a little more stable than last time. Which was good. It meant she was slowly returning to Night Watcher's former strength.

'Here.' Prey mentally sent across to Lemon, bringing up his memories of everything relevant which'd happened since he woke up here in the hospital.

The important points as far as they pertained to Lemon were about the ISND's new precarious position within the Night Guard, both because of outside investigator scrutiny, and the inspectors from within. Prey knew it was only a matter of time until Nighthawk started asking exactly *how* Prey'd done everything he had in Mayflower.

He also shared Strange Happenstance's suspicious visit, Gloom's reluctance to serve as the ISND's officer anymore, his own speculations about Luna, and everything about the Mimic Shimmer he'd considered. Just because Lemon Pink already knew everything he did about the Mimic was no reason not to double check they were on the same page.

And of course, Prey heavily emphasised just how important Crimson now was. A friend. His only friend. 'Crimson is no longer just an asset. He is a priority. No matter what my new enemy in the shadows sends against us, he needs to be kept safe. Understood?'

'Yes, Prey.'

Did Prey just catch a flash of something from the depths of Lemon Pink's mind? A dissatisfied twitch? Prey gave no indication he'd noticed anything, but he would not forget it.

It wasn't really a concern anyhow, since Lemon Pink could not betray him.

'I don't know how or when the first strike against me might come, but we need to be ready. I need defences, runes, a safe place, and secrecy. For all I know, they might be bold enough to attack me within the Royal Palace itself.'

'Yes, Prey.'

'And from now on, whenever we meet, you will have to do so in disguise. And once we've met, go somewhere public before you discard the disguise in case we were somehow being watched.'

'Yes, Prey.'

Prey was silent for a thoughtful moment. He was still thinking about the veropedes. He may not have fully realised all the details, but Prey knew those two leashed monsters were going to drastically influence his daily life. And no, not like having a puppy. They were weapons, not pets.

However there wasn't much Prey could do while he was still in the hospital, since preparing runic defences around the room would be a waste when he was going to be gone in a few days. Hopefully gone, anyway. Besides, he was in hospital for a reason, and preparing even a basic set of proper runic defences would take twelve hours of solid work. Minimum. And that was only for the bare basics. Being without this a defence was not at all comforting to Prey, but there was no way to get that much unobserved time in a busy hospital anyway.

That struck off a parallel thought in Prey's head.

'What happened to the plants you were taking care of?' Prey asked, remembering the carefully selected potted plants he and Lemon Pink had picked out from the underground market. The kind with some very interesting properties if prepared right. Interesting, and deadly.

'I left them attended to by the house owner of the room I am renting. The mare believes them to be her own pot plants.' Lemon answered.

Meaning Lemon Pink had invaded the mare's mind, and left behind a mental compulsion to water the plants. It was rather extreme, where politely asking the mare to do so would've almost certainly yielded the same result. Ponies were always happy to help a fellow pony.

But Lemon had gone for the extreme option, and on her return to her apartment, would erase the mare's memories of the pot plants all together. After Mayflower, Prey wasn't sure how okay he was with the casual creation of victims for convenience sake.

'It's fine, the mare won't even know anything happened once Lemon gets back. It's not like I'm injuring or robbing her.' Prey rationalised to himself without letting his thoughts leak over to Lemon Pink.

He refocused and broadcast his next thoughts to Lemon, letting her know he considered not needing to replace the plants a nice bonus, but not that important, 'If there is a next time, just abandon the plants if it isn't feasible to arrange a caretaker. Those plants are replaceable, lives are not.'

'Yes, Prey.'

'And you.'

'Pardon, Prey?'

'You. You need to take care of yourself now. You are no use to me if you can't function. You've lost a fair amount of weight from crossing the Ridgeback. Twice. You haven't washed, and your memories shout you've been running a mild fever for the last two days.'

'What shall I do, then?' Lemon Pink asked, completely willing to do whatever Prey ordered.

'Go rest and sleep until noon tomorrow. Get some medication. *Then* take care of the most pressing issues; the veropedes and finding a lair. Refrain from travelling out of Canterlot otherwise. I've ordered you to take at least an hour each day to relax. Until you are fully recovered, increase that to three. Understand?'

'Yes, Prey.'

Giving Lemon those three hours when they so desperately needed all the time they could get to prepare was a strain, but Prey needed Lemon Pink recovered as fast as possible. Tools work best when sharp. He could only hope the time wouldn't cost him too much in the end.

'Prey, there is another matter.' Lemon Pink sent, the feeling which accompanied the thought indicating it wasn't something good either.

There was no point stalling. The sooner Prey knew the bad news, the sooner he could start planning around whatever it was; 'Show me.'

The memory was called up and displayed before Prey across their linked mindscapes. It was a memory of Hard Baked's terrible workshop. Before Lemon Pink had left to return to Canterlot, she'd gone to the warlock's old lair to salvage a few items of interest left undestroyed by Gloom's fit of anger which she'd noted from Hard Baked's memories.

Prey remembered what the lair looked like just fine. The red witch lights, the foul stench masked under bundles of sweet herbs hanging from the cave ceiling, the dark vats dug into the floor, and of course the shelves of bones and dead flesh.

That wasn't what Lemon Pink's memory was showing him. The cave had been ransacked, cleaned out, and then cleansed with fire. The lingering smell of smoke was strong in Lemon's recall, and in her place Prey felt the blackened stones still hot beneath her hooves.

It seemed the mimics, or whomever had retrieved Shimmer's corpse, hadn't limited themselves to just retrieving the false Border Guard's corpse. They'd wanted the warlock's work too, or at the very least, to stop anyone else from getting their hooves on it.

'Unfortunate.' Was all Prey said. It was inconvenient, but not that unexpected. Because of course this new enemy in the shadows wouldn't have stopped with just Shimmer's corpse when the

opportunity presented itself.

'They left no clues you could find as to who they may be?' Prey asked without any expectation.

He wasn't disappointed, 'No, Prey.'

Prey briefly wondered what the Night Guard had made of the burnt out lair which, to their knowledge, should've been untouched, Gloom's minor destructive spree notwithstanding.

Prey put the lair from his mind since it was a dead end, and Lemon did the same, dismissing the memory. It all faded back to grey ash and a starry courtyard. Prey observed the transition, thinking and judging.

All of Prey's other projects would have to go on hold. And until Lemon Pink, Crimson, and himself were safely protected, those projects would have to remain that way. Not that Crimson would be aware of Prey and Lemon's work. The danger was very real, and not something Prey was taking lightly.

However, Prey himself did have a bunch of free time on his hooves. Since he was the hospital and lacked the time and privacy to build any set of runes even resembling a proper defence, that meant he had nothing to do while lying here waiting to heal.

Aside from caring for the two veropedes and keeping them hidden, and most importantly fed, there were only two, no, *three* projects that Prey didn't want to put on hold, and which could be worked on while he was wasting his time here in hospital.

Well, two of them he could. The third wasn't so much a project, as the outline of a plan. One which Prey was not looking forward to, but needed to be done. The encounter with the reaper king proved that. If Prey could steel himself to go through with it, that is.

Prey shuddered and quickly turned his thoughts towards the other two, much more *measurable* goals, letting Lemon Pink see his thoughts.

'If I am to sit here in hospital, I may as well spend my daily strength

and time doing some useful rune work. I think solving the newest additions to The List, don't you?'

It would be better than just sitting and anxiously waiting for whatever Nighthawk or Luna decided to do with the ISND.

Lemon Pink caught on immediately, 'Yes, Prey. The lure totem needs a mundane base. What would you like me to get?'

Prey thought for a moment. But in the end, despite his distaste, there was only one item that would be fitting.

'Find and buy me a little Celestia figurine. No more than five inches high, solid copper, iron, or silver. Plated will do if there's nothing else. Not any other metal. Unpolished if possible. Unenchanted in every way too. Just the sort of normal ornamental statue ponies put on their mantle piece. No one would suspect a statue of their beloved Sun Wolf.' Prey thought darkly.

'Yes, Prey.'

'Second, go to the underground market, or even one of the famous Magi tower shops. Get me some electrite. I've never worked with it before, but for what I plan that'll do. About nine ounces of the metal ought to do it.'

'I estimate it will not be so simple, Prey.'

'Why not?'

'Electrite is very rare and even more expensive. I estimate the sellers will not merely be satisfied with an exchange of money. They will not sell unless they are sure of the buyers intentions and legitimacy.'

'That bad?'

'I predict so, yes, Prey.'

Prey was not pleased. He was prepared to actually pay rather than *steal* the electrite, but for some reason it seemed taking the honest route would actually garner more unwanted attention than not.

'Ponies and their incessant need to stick their unwanted nosy muzzles where they don't belong.'

For some reason, ponies seemed incapable of understanding when something wasn't any of their business, and just had to get a slice of the pie. They poked and prodded and demanded, and then were horrified when they lost their hoof at the ankle. The saying; 'Curiosity killed the cat', should be 'Curiosity killed the pony'.

'Fine, we're doing it this way then. Find a thief in the underground market, anyone shady will do. Visit the market in disguise and walk around scanning people's thoughts until you find a good candidate. Invite them to discuss a business opportunity over coffee or something. Then stun them with the mind blank spell, and insert the compulsion to take the job no matter what, with the job being stealing enough electrite for my uses.'

'Yes, Prey.'

'If they succeed in stealing some electrite, good. If they fail, make a new disguise and find someone else. Repeat. If they succeed, stun them again, take the electrite, and implant a false memory about them finding the electrite already stolen when they broke in. Oh, and place a false calling card too.' Prey added in a moment of flippant inspiration.

The notion was completely ridiculous, but because it was so outlandish and stupid, the enraged owners who caught Lemon's thief, (and Prey was certain they *would* eventually track down and catch the thief), they'd be completely baffled by the story the thief told.

Even if they tortured the thief, or dug up an illegal mind mage from somewhere, however unlikely that was, the thief's story would hold true. Because the thief would *believe* it was true.

The angry owner would be left chasing a ghost which didn't exist, like some kind of daring cat burglar in those ridiculous fictional pony stories.

'Once you have the electrite don't touch it or use it. Scan it for

enchantments, and even if you don't find anything, hide it somewhere for a full week. Only if no one's recovered it by then are you to bring the electrite to me. Clear?'

'Yes, Prey.'

'Good. Oh, and what's the going rate for electrite?' Prey asked, mildly interested.

Lemon Pink's memory was almost as eidetic as his own, so she had little trouble recalling the prices from when she was in the underground market a month ago, 'As of one month ago, it was nine-hundred bits for a ten centimeter spool. Or two-thousand eight-hundred and fifty per ounce.'

And Prey wanted nine ounces of the ridiculously precious magical metal. While Prey still had a great deal of money from Garrow left over, it was not an unlimited resource. Perhaps stealing it really was the best way to go after all.

'See to it,' Prey ordered, 'But only after the veropedes are taken care of, you've rested, and seen to your own safety first.'

'Yes, Prey.'

'Good. And... Thank you. Again. For coming when you did to Mayflower.'

'I... yes, Prey.'

Prey kept his mindscape blank for a long moment as he reviewed everything they'd just exchanged. 'That's all for now.'

Prey broke the mental connection and let reality wash back in. He blinked around the dark room. Lemon didn't waste time saying goodbye, she was already heading back for the door, stifling a huge but silent yawn of her own.

The door shut after her, and that was that. Or he hoped it was.

Prey didn't get much sleep that night.

Lemon Pink may have made it back to Canterlot, bringing the veropedes and removing some of his problems, but she'd brought back with her a much more serious one. The mimic or mimics, and what that meant for him. They were already circling out there in the murk somewhere, like an angler shark.

It's cold out there in the middle of the ocean, cold, dark, and lonely. There's nowhere to hide. You can't out swim the shark. All you can do is defensively draw in your limbs to present no easy targets and try to be facing it head on when the attack finally comes.

Which was what Prey was going to do. He was preparing his defences and getting ready.

'But I have teeth of my own now, and I'm not afraid to bite. If you want to swim in the same waters as me, you need to watch out for the whirlpools first.' Prey thought darkly, grimly promising no mercy for whomever or whatever came for him. Sometimes it doesn't matter who the bigger shark is, but which is hungrier. Only time would tell if Prey was the one.

Nighthawk came the next day, with all the authority of Luna behind him, looking for answers. And this time, he wasn't going to take no for an answer. It was just what Prey had been dreading.

The day started the same way. He woke up in the same bed, the same annoying doctor with those glass bottle spectacles had come and did the same morning check of Prey's vitals. ("You're doing great. In fact, we can take out some of those stitches today for you. Won't that be great?")

Following that had come a truly terrible breakfast, almost as bad as one of Cookie's, and then the start of a long, boring morning where Prey had nothing to do but stare with distaste up at that stupid foal's mobile. He'd already finished all the newspapers Crimson had

kindly brought, (Lemon not having gotten him any of the materials he'd requested yet, nor did he anticipate she would for several days yet), and there was nothing to do but lie here. His healing wounds felt itchy and scratchy, especially the poison burnt skin under and around his eyes.

Prey was lying restlessly in bed, worrying and uncomfortable, still being peeved over his damaged eyesight, when Crimson arrived.

"Crimson!" Prey exclaimed, sitting up enthusiastically, irritation wiped away. "Come in and talk with me, *please*. I'm so bored."

Crimson half cocked an ear and obliged, shutting the door and taking the stool once again; "Did you sleep well last night? After we disturbed you, I mean."

"As well as could be expected. Well done on talking Gloom around by the way. I would strongly prefer not to have someone else as our Sargent." Prey said, kicking aside the blanket so he could more comfortably fold his legs and lie down on his front to talk with Crimson.

"Me very much too. I cannot imagine serving Princess Luna without Gloom as the Sargent."

Prey didn't agree with the 'serving-Princess-Luna' bit, but Crimson and him were each different people with different goals, and that was okay. It didn't matter to Prey if they didn't both see everything the same way. What's more, he didn't have to agree, and Crimson wouldn't take offence over that.

"Well, last night was hardly the time to ask, but what's happening out there at the moment? Anything important?" Prey asked. Lemon Pink, only just having returned from trekking across the mountains last night, understandably hadn't been up to date with what was happening in Canterlot. And anything reported as 'important' in the newspapers was almost exclusively drivel. Actually, you could remove the 'almost'.

Prey was finding this so novel. To ask a question, and actually have to *wait* for it to be answered out loud instead of hearing the answer

in their head, and not being annoyed by the wait at all.

Crimson gave a wing flick of disdain; "Yes. Something did happen." His tone said all there was to know about his own opinion of what he had to say next:

"After that Gala dancing party which so delayed the Night Guard-"

"It's a little bit more than just a party. It's a huge political gathering. Oh, sorry, please continue." Prey quickly apologised when he realised he'd interrupted Crimson.

Crimson just shrugged his wings to show he wasn't bothered, "After that Gala, where those cowards tried to discredit Princess Luna, the vote finally happened. The Crop Holders won."

The Crop Holders? It took a moment for Prey to recall the distant seeming problem with the Crop Sharers and Holders following Wheat Plow's trial. The riots seemed such a distant memory.

"Oh. So Green Fields won, did he?" Prey asked contemplatively, twirling the end of the ribbon around his hoof.

Crimson tilted one ear, "Was that the Crop Holder leader name?"

"Yes, that's him, the one Wheat Plow was planning to frame."

"Oh. Then yes, he won." Crimson said with disinterest.

A major political victory and loss, a paradigm shift in power to the Crop Sharers, and the dedicated efforts of hundreds of ponies who wholeheartedly believed in their party, all reduced to a disinterested; "Oh".

"Anyway, the Night Guard has arrested two of the lords."

"Pardon? Which lords are we talking about?" Prey asked.

"The lords who tried to blackmail Princess Luna, of course." Crimson answered.

"I thought she said to ignore them and not make repercussions?"

"Well, they've been arrested now, so the Night Guard must've discovered them doing something criminal not related to the Gala," Crimson flicked his wing again, "A lord Raspberry, and somepo- somebody called Duke Stroffanhoof. I don't know what they did. Because we're on medical leave I mean, so the ISND haven't been told yet."

A duke was not a lord, but Prey got the point of what Crimson was saying, and he couldn't help but smile cruelly at the news. Both the duke and lord the were rich, privileged ponies who'd been greedy enough to grasp for more. Hearing about their misery amused Prey. Although he wouldn't have been pleased to be told that, on him, the smile actually looked like one a small child who'd wandered into a candy store and found it was a free taster day might wear.

Prey didn't know about anyone else, but he'd been personally stunned at the audacity, the sheer unprecedented arrogance of the nobles when he'd heard how they'd tried to blackmail Luna. Were they dropped on their heads as foals? Had they gone selectively blind to the fact that Luna was an alicorn? Couldn't they see her horn and wings? Had they really beloved such an insane scheme would work, and regardless of whether it did or not, that they'd get away with it?

'Did they meet and plan in secret, pat each other on the backs and stoke themselves up until they believed their own lies about it being for the best? That Luna would hesitate if there were enough of them opposing her, just because of 'law', 'equality', and 'freedom of speech'?'

Was it something in the water that made politicians think themselves so smart? So untouchable? So above reproach?

Prey could only shake his head at their stupidity, 'I can scarce believe it took them this long to learn what all people living across the border know. That ponies only care about their own, and by opposing Luna, they showed themselves to be traitors. Abject failures, the lot of them. Their parents should be ashamed.'

Prey was halted from speaking with Crimson further, as he would've liked to have done, by Nighthawk arriving.

Captain Nighthawk didn't knock. He just opened the door and marched straight in.

Nighthawk paused briefly on seeing Prey and Crimson both in here talking.

"You visiting Crimson? Never mind, this actually saves time." Nighthawk said with gruff briskness.

Prey hadn't really been expecting to see the Night Guard Captain. The sun was up and it was halfway to noon. Nighthawk's work day was long over, he should be in bed right about now. Not to mention, Prey didn't want to see Nighthawk either. This boded ill.

Behind Nighthawk, Lieutenant Starry Wing followed him inside, and Prey saw a further two Night Guards standing outside in the hallway. Why had Nighthawk brought so many Guards? Was this all a prelude to arresting him and Crimson? Prey sat up on his haunches rather than continue lying down. He wanted to be ready.

"Captain Nighthawk." Crimson nodded, standing and addressing the Captain formally even if he wasn't on duty at the moment.

"What've you come for?" Prey finished, eyes flicking to Starry Wing who stood blocking the closed door.

'-answers-'

"Answers." Nighthawk stated just as plainly as his thoughts. No subterfuge. No one could ever accuse the Captain of not being to the point.

"Ah, answers. I see." Prey repeated, smiling pleasantly. 'You come in here and demand answers, and think I somehow owe them to you. I see.'

"But I already gave my report sir." Crimson said.

"You did. I'm here to get Prey's own report."

Prey's small smile stayed firm, taking on a slightly confused edge. "Me? What could I tell you that Gloom, Scenic, or Crimson haven't

already?"

Nighthawk's yellow eyes did not waver for even a second, "That's what I'm here to find out."

Prey let his eyes slide away, but not lower. He wasn't going to cower before Nighthawk, unless he had to. 'Until then, act like you've done nothing you had any choice in, no matter how disreputable those choices were.'

When Prey didn't otherwise respond, Nighthawk grunted, "Let's not waste any time then and get started."

Prey was a master at lying, but what was the saying? 'What a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.' It's commonly accepted that a liar will eventually be the cause of their own fall. Give them enough rope and they'll hang themselves when they forget a previous lie and contradict themselves in the future. Prey's memory however, was near eidetic. But that's not what made him such a good liar.

Prey lied by avoiding lying. As in; he rarely told an outright lie. It was much simpler to read a person's thoughts and use misdirection to subtly direct them however he wanted. Recently, (or at least since coming into the ISND), he'd been avoiding telling direct lies when at all possible. Gloom's special talent had an annoying habit of catching lies half the time.

But Gloom wasn't here, and Prey had a whole host of lies and misdirection prepared for Nighthawk.

'Your name's not on The List Nighthawk. Keep it that way.'

Swim or sink. Prey was used to those being his only two options and being thrown in at the deep end. So he was very surprised when Nighthawk didn't proceed in the manner he'd been expecting at all.

"These questions are for Prey, and Prey only. Unless I ask you something directly, do not interfere Crimson."

"I understand." Crimson said, eyes flicking sideways to Prey for just a moment. Translation; Crimson was being ordered not to help Prey nor to give him any hints. If it were anyone but Crimson, Prey would've been able to hear what they didn't say regardless, but not this time. Things could never be simple.

Nighthawk caught the exchange of looks of course, '-both have grown closer after surviving adversity. Perhaps they've learnt the hard truth of being a team. But they can't be a team for these questions-'

"Let's make something very clear first Prey." Nighthawk said, leaning forwards.

Prey braced himself, "And that is?"

"This is not an interrogation. Nor are you being accused of anything."

Prey didn't think he gave any outward sign of his surprise, but perhaps Nighthawk was expecting surprise anyway, because he explained anyway, "I find it best to make that clear from the very beginning. I am not the Royal Guard. I am Captain Nighthawk of the Night Guard, and you are a Night Guard."

'-I'm not Shining Armour reaching above my station. Nor do I not misuse my authority-'

"Ok*ay*." Prey acknowledged slowly.

He didn't look at the Lieutenant standing behind Nighthawk, but he listened and Starry Wing's thoughts matched what Nighthawk was saying. If this was a trap, they were both rigidly not thinking about it.

'This is... not what I expected.'

Sometimes, Prey forgot Nighthawk wasn't Valour. Both had known/ knew Prey was a criminal, having both pulled him from prison to recruit, and yet while Nighthawk was far more pragmatic than Valour had ever been, Prey still couldn't envision the Solar Guard ever having had any understanding of Prey's actions in Nighthawk's place.

Sure, Valour had also known Prey was a mind leech, but on the other hoof, Valour hadn't known Prey was a killer, while Nighthawk was the reverse. He knew Prey was a killer, but not a mind magic user.

But surely each of those two things cancelled the other out? Yet here Nighthawk was starting out interrogating Prey by assuring him he had no plans to punish him. And Prey couldn't catch anything in his thoughts to the contrary either.

'How strange.'

"So, uh, what did you want to know?" Prey asked, letting himself visibly relax a tiny bit. Just a fraction, barely enough to be noticeable.

Nighthawk was a thestral though. Of *course* he noticed the slight shift. Just as Prey had intended.

"Give me your perspective of what happened from when you first got off the train in Alfalfa Dale. Thoughts which stick out. Strange impressions. Anything that might be important."

'-I've heard from Gloom. I've heard from Crimson. I've heard from Scenic-', Nighthawk thought as he spoke.

'-each pony has raised points the others missed. What does Prey have to unknowingly add to this sordid mess?-', Starry Wing finished.

Prey paused to gather his thoughts, but not long enough to be suspected of doing any more than that, "Well, it went like this..."

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Nighthawk paused Prey in his retelling, "You say the villagers were not happy to see the Night Guard. Why?"

"Well, without being able to read their minds, I'd have to guess it's because we were outsiders. They didn't trust us or want us there. We were just intruders who they rightly feared were going to make things worse."

"That's not why you were sent there."

"But why would they believe any reassurances we might've offered? Did the Guards who came before us help them at all? Did the ISND for that matter? Looking at the outcome now, I can't believe they were wrong. Sir."

"Hmm. I see. Continue on Prey."

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"A deer holt."

"Yes, holt is the name of a small deer tribe. They're nomadic."

"The clans have encountered deer before, we know what a holt is. But what was one doing in Mayflower?"

"They weren't. They were in the forest. Fallen Leaf offered to act as our guide."

Nighthawk narrowed his brows in consideration, "Where were they when we arrived?"

"Gone. Fled. They may even be dead for all I know." Prey said flatly. He didn't say the rest; 'And it's all your fault for not coming when you promised.'

"Unfortunate." Was all Nighthawk could say. Prey was sure the deer holt had thought so too.

'-they might've been able to provide us with valuable insight-'

"Continue with your recounting please Prey."

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Nighthawk held up a hoof to halt him. He examined Prey with a heavy gaze. Prey stared back, face empty.

"This meld wood... How and why? Please explain."

Prey played with the end of his ribbon dangling from behind his ear. The blue silk drew the eye as it twisted about distractedly. It was pleasant, calming, the sheen of light almost hypnotic to look at.

"Well, as I've said before, a couple of zebra's used to pass through my village off and on, and they knew all about obscure plants and things within our local forest. Sometimes they hung around, and used to tell cautionary tales about the horrors of the forest. You know the sort, to impress the locals and awe the children. Meld wood was one such tale, about how if you so much as brushed up against it with an open cut, you'd be forever stuck to the tree."

Prey gave a wry quirk of his lips as he continued to twirl the silk ribbon, "I was a curious little lamb, or littl*er*, and when I asked, they told me all about it in great detail, both what it looked like and what it did."

That explanation was not good enough for Nighthawk. He wanted accurate details, and Prey's words were not enough to convince him that was all there really was to it. It was all too convenient, real life did not work that way. Nighthawk opened his mouth to ask Prey to explain further as the lamb continued to play with that ribbon of his. But yet-

"Alright, carry on with your story."

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Starry Wing and Nighthawk were both staring hard at Prey. He'd just covered the night where they'd survived whatever-it-was that'd come out of the Wolfing Wood visiting. Or rather, he *hadn't* covered it. None of the others had given Nighthawk a straight answer about what had really happened either, and thus, the Captain and Lieutenant had been keen to finally hear what had taken place.

But Prey'd refused, saying only; "At the end of the night the fire was still burning, and in the morning, all the captured kindersnatches were gone."

That was more or less the extent of what Gloom and Scenic had said as well. Since Crimson had been unconscious that night, he hadn't been able to add anything more than speculation in his own retelling.

Starry Wing shifted, '-that story sends a chill up my wings, but the details could be so important-'

"Sir, if I might interject," Starry Wing spoke up, "I would like to ask Prey how he knew fire would work. And why didn't you think to bring the captured kindersnatch villagers into the firelight too?"

'-that sounds too much like an accusation-', Nighthawk thought, but looked to Prey and waited for his answer rather than reprimand Starry Wing.

"As you said. We just didn't think of it. We were so focused on trying to save Lilly Blossom and we were all so tired, it just didn't occur to me. We forgot, and twelve victims died."

Nighthawk and Starry Wing hadn't been there, they weren't the ones suffering, terrified, and on the brink of exhaustion. They couldn't say; 'If I was there I would've done such and such.' They couldn't judge and they both knew it. And Prey's retelling had given them both a sense of unknown, untold danger.

'-I can't put my hoof on it. It's just a retelling, but it feels like...-', Starry Wing broke that thought off with a shake of his head; "Everypony regrets once it is too late. As they say, hindsight is more often a curse than not. But making a fire, how did you know to suggest-?"

"It worked," Prey cut him off, "That is all I know, and all I'll say."

After Gloom and Scenic had both refused the same, the Captain and Lieutenant could hardly try to force Prey to speak of it either.

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And then, of course, they eventually came to Prey's creation of the Bone Rot mines, although he was careful never to actually name them as such.

Nighthawk had spoken true when he said this wasn't an interrogation, even if it had the hallmarks of one, but that was just an unfortunate appearance because of the nature of the questions Nighthawk was asking.

But when it got to this part of the tale, Nighthawk's grim face grew even grimmer.

Prey's hoof reached up for his ribbon, but he stopped half way. Scenic, Gloom, and Crimson had all already given an account of what he'd done, so trying to gloss over this bit wouldn't work, and might make them think he was callous and unrepentant. Or worse, trying to hide something. That wasn't something he could afford when they were already so worried about his capabilities. 'If they only knew what I else could do and have done with my runes...'

"You made magical acid traps." Nighthawk stated.

"I did." Prey said simply.

"You knew how to make them."

"That's right."

"And you could make more at any time."

"Yes, and no. Not without the ingredients and reageants I couldn't."

"But you could if you had the ingredients."

"Yes." Prey raised his head. He would not let them mistake him and think him ashamed. He had fought to survive.

'-those are weapons for killing, not defence. Stealth weapons. When it came down to it, Prey reached for his knowledge to kill, not disable. Why did he not hesitate?-', Nighthawk thought shrewdly.

Once again Nighthawk was not horrified like any normal pony

would've been, but he was still a pony. Thestrals may accept violence as a sometimes unavoidable necessity, but death and killing was still something to be avoided if at all possible.

Next to his Captain, Starry Wing couldn't help but think, '-acid traps that can kill a whole group of ponies in moments. It's horrible. I don't want to even think about what something like that in the wrong hooves could do-'

"And what made you think such weapons were appropriate to use Prey?" Nighthawk asked. He did not say it in an accusatory tone. Just a request to know the blunt facts.

"Sargent Gloom made the call. His words were; 'whatever it takes'. The warlock had to be stopped." Prey answered, keeping his gaze straight and not sneaking a glance at Crimson like he wanted to.

"I know it was Gloom's orders. But I want to know why you used them." Nighthawk repeated.

"The warlock wasn't going to refrain from killing us just because we'd return the favour. There's no such thing as collateral damage in those circumstances." Prey said unflinchingly.

"You felt it was your responsibility to make the call on using lethal force?" Nighthawk asked next.

There was no point repeating that it was Gloom who'd given the order, "I made my decision with the potential number of lives I might save in mind, not the number I might kill."

Prey'd been having an awful lot of these conversations with far reaching consequences in this hospital room. He felt there should've been some kind of evidence of that, something grim and stern about the room, not the colourful foal's mobile and motivational posters stuck on the walls instead. It felt deceptive when if he gave one wrong answer, it might have him thrown back into prison with no escape this time.

"Alright. You did what you felt you had to. I am neither agreeing or disagreeing, since I wasn't there. But who taught you how to make

those acid traps?" Nighthawk asked seriously.

In the space of the breath Prey drew to answer, he weighed up the best thing to say. This was one of those times it would be best to outright lie. The 'mystical travelling zebras' weren't going to fly again.

"My father did. Before he died."

Like Prey had predicted, he'd gotten a surprise, but instinctively, Nighthawk accepted that answer on a base level. In the clans, it was usually the fathers who taught their sons or daughters the way of the warrior. Not exclusively by any means, but it was more common than not, so it made sense to them. Still Nighthawk asked; "Your father taught this to you, a foal?"

Prey gave a small shrug, "I didn't think it was strange at the time. What child doesn't want to be just like their father when they grow up? Of course, by then, it was too late. And no, I don't know where my dad got the recipe from. And now I'll never get the chance to ask him."

"You do your father proud. I'm sure he'd tell you that if he were here." Nighthawk said gruffly.

Prey didn't say anything.

"And...What did your father do with this knowledge?"

"With these weapons, you mean?" Prey asked bluntly. He wasn't an idiot and Nighthawk knew that well enough.

"I'm not accusing your father of anything. I'm sure he had his reasons. But I want to know what he was doing hoofing out such dangerous knowledge to a foal." Nighthawk said unflinchingly.

"My dad didn't teach anyone else if that's what you're asking," Prey affected a harsh snap in his tone and anger in his eyes, "He was trying to protect the family. My dad only wanted what was best for our family."

That lie burned on Prey's tongue, but it was necessary.

"We lived on the border, like the village of Mayflower we've just come from. You've seen it, you know what it's like living on the edge of the wilds. It's dangerous. Timberwolves and Lesser Basilisks are the least of your worries out there. We've no Guard force or rangers, we're not a warrior clan like you thestrals, we don't even have a militia. We haven't got weapons or armour, we can't even fly, so how else do you think we survive monsters? We fight monsters off our way, or we die! *That's* how."

"You're not in the wilds anymore." Starry Wing told him.

"Same to you. But you didn't stop being a warrior the moment you came to Equestria, did you?"

"You're right. I didn't consider how that would sound. I apologise Prey." Starry Wing dipped his head.

'-I don't like doing this, Prey is in the service of Her Majesty, but it can't go unaddressed-', Nighthawk thought. "Crimson, you were the only one to see the destruction these acid traps can reap. Is there any way you could say they are not a danger?"

Crimson stirred at being unexpectedly addressed, since he'd been informed this conversation was for Prey only. "No sir, I can't. I saw them melt through flesh and bone like water. If I'd been splashed, or been any slower..."

Prey's shoulders hunched at Crimson's shiver. Crimson was not meant to have been in the minefield.

"I'm not sure I could've gotten out alive if it weren't for my necklace sir. I don't blame Prey for that, he warned us against going in there. It was my fault I didn't listen, not yours." Crimson said, speaking that last bit directly to the Prey.

'-that's another unpleasantness I'm going to have to unfairly address-', Nighthawk thought, sounding unhappy.

"Prey, I'll be blunt," Nighthawk lent forwards and rapped a hoof on the floor to regain their attention, "This isn't something I like doing, but it's the law. You must realise Prey, that your knowledge now

represents an active threat to public life."

"I haven't done anything-"

"Listen to what I have to say first," Nighthawk interrupted, "There is a law in Canterlot whereby ponies with the ability to pose a credible risk to pony life are placed on a watch list, with some exemptions. The higher the potential to cause loss of life, the more closely they are watched. Above a certain level, they are actively restricted."

Crimson looked like he strongly wanted to object, but Nighthawk beat him to it. "I know. How is this any different from any single pony in Canterlot who owns a sword? Well for a start, weapons are restricted unless you have a license, or are a Guard. But you *are* a Guard serving the crown, Prey. So why aren't you exempt? Unfortunately, it's because of the threat scale."

Nighthawk pointed at himself, "If I were to go mad with a wingblade, I would be a danger. I could easily kill multiple ponies. Perhaps multiple Guards even, if I were also in armour at the time."

Nighthawk said it heavily, without any pride in his prowess, merely stating the facts, "It's the same for any Guard really. The difference is; they're one pony, and the threat begins and ends with them. But these acid weapons? Not that you would, but you could rig multiple traps anywhere. You could commit mass murder before anypony could stop you, all without even being in the area."

"So what are these exemptions you mentioned?" Prey asked with an unpleasant look in his eyes.

It was Starry Wing who gave the explanation; "Usually ponies whose evaluation comes up clean, or are certified mages or magi, or who cannot be held responsible for the position they find themselves in are exempt. Like ponies whose special talent is pyromancy. They didn't choose to be a potential threat, that's just the gift Harmony granted them. Inherently powerful unicorns cannot be blamed for being born."

Nighthawk's thoughts added on, '-looked at that list. Princess

Celetia's prodigies have always occupied a full exemption rank on the watch list. That pet baby dragon was on there too if I remember correctly-'

Both Night Guard officers paused there, waiting to see how Prey would take this.

This shouldn't anger Prey, it really shouldn't. He was already a prisoner being tracked and monitored by Luna anyways, so what did some additional restrictions matter? Prey had already guessed that this exact situation might arise, since he hadn't ever expected anything better of ponies. As such, it shouldn't anger him. It shouldn't. But it still did.

"This is my thanks? When any single unicorn in the whole city could go out and learn lethal spells, and you're saying *I'm* the danger?"

"That's enough Prey." Nighthawk said.

Prey disparagingly waved his forelegs, showing off the gold tracer band still on them, "Wasn't one forced conscription and collaring good enough-?"

"I said, that's enough." Nighthawk repeated gruffly.

Prey shut up, but not because of Nighthawk's command, but because he'd realised it was a pointless waste of his breath to argue.

"I don't like this either Prey. It's not fair, or just. But it's the law. Being placed on the exceptions list is also out. For now. But maybe in the future..."

Prey didn't buy a word of it. 'In the future *nothing*. My plan hasn't changed, if I can find a way out of these tracers and away from Luna, I'm still going to escape and disappear before you can blink.'

Crimson's wings were clenched tightly to his sides, and he looked outraged, (or as outraged as Crimson visibly got anyway), on Prey's behalf. Nighthawk was drawing a line here; him and them, and Nighthawk was placing himself firmly on the 'them' side.

Nighthawk seemed to catch on to this for himself, and his frown deepened, "I hope you realise I don't want to do this, it's not my choice. You are Night Guards. You both deserve better."

'-this is the thanks Canterlot gives us for protecting them against the dark? Cowards, the lot of them-', Nighthawk thought. He took a breath and spoke on:

"There is a list of the restrictions and circumstances on you and places you are not allowed to go into, Prey. Starry Wing will bring you the paperwork for the waiver later. You don't have to sign it, in fact, don't. But you are expected to follow the rules listed there. Most of them won't matter to you since being in the Guard overrides them, but when you leave the Night Guard and go back to civilian life, you're going to have problems."

'*When* I leave the Night Guard?' Prey thought in surprise, and deep suspicion, 'Not if, but when? Does he honestly think Luna will ever let me go? There's no way that's ever going to happen. Luna is immortal, what does she care about those who age and die in her service?'

Except Prey wasn't going to age either. For now, it wasn't a problem, but if he still hadn't found a way to escape from the Night Guard in a few years time, people were going to start to notice.

'And at the current rate the ISND is hurled without a care into danger, I'm liable to be killed long before I have to worry about anyone noticing I don't age.' Prey thought, the knowledge of those odds doing nothing to comfort him.

"And me sir?" Crimson spoke up, voice surprisingly stiff, "Since I am now in possession of this necklace, does that make me a threat to civilian life too?"

"No idea," Nighthawk said bluntly, "I don't make the call, and I didn't make the one for Prey. It's up to Princess Luna."

There was a very subtle warning in Nighthawk's words: '-you've had it rough, and this isn't fair, but it's the law, and there's only so much insubordination I will tolerate-'

Crimson's teeth clacked together as he shut his mouth. There was a period of silence after that. Nighthawk and Starry Wing on their side, Prey and Crimson on theirs.

Starry Wing eventually cleared his throat, "We've gotten a bit side tracked with this unpleasantness. Nopony's questioning the contribution the ISND has made. Perhaps Prey could finish his retelling of events from his point of view?" The Lieutenant suggested, looking to the Captain.

"A good point. Continue on Prey."

The angry part of Prey wanted to refuse and sneer at Nighthawk, but he was far more sensible than that. He still was, and would be until the day he escaped, a prisoner. Prey only had as much slack in his chain as Nighthawk, either through inattention or willingness, could be persuaded to give him. Because at the end of the day, Prey still had a chain about his throat, with the other end going back to the foot of Luna's throne.

'Pride is for the strong. Surviving is all that matters.' But showing weakness was also a bad idea.

So Prey folded his hooves and waited until right before Nighthawk was about to repeat his order, just to prove his discontent, before re-continuing his story; "We fled through the forest towards the ravine, and unexpectedly, the Border Guard Shimmer was somehow still alive and there when we arrived. After that..."

Prey paused and cocked his head towards the door. A second later there came the muffled sound of rushing hooves. Whomever they were got halted by the Night Guard who'd been left outside to guard the door.

Nighthawk didn't even twitch at the sound of hurried and urgent voices outside, but Starry Wing frowned and reached for the door handle, "Report. What's this disturbance?"

The two Night Guard thestrals turned in the doorway. Prey was interested to see they both were armed with sheathed griffin claw boots on their hooves, whereas the Captain and the Lieutenant bore

no such armament.

"Sir," Both Night Guards came to attention in the doorway, and saluted to Nighthawk, "Private Lilly Blossom, she's just awoken."

---I---

Author's Notes:

Well, here we go with another chapter. Thoughts on the situation with the Guard restrictions? And also, please if anyone spots any mistakes, please let me know!

Kind editor once again Sweetolebob18

55.4 A Visit to the Hospital

"Sir," Both Night Guards came to attention in the doorway, and saluted to Nighthawk, "Private Lilly Blossom, she's just awoken."

The blinds in Lilly's hospital room were drawn, the light dimmed on purpose. Apparently, this was because the doctors wanted to test if they could either stop or slow the meld wood's budding if they cut back on the exposure to sunlight. Prey knew this because he was eavesdropping on the thoughts of the four different doctors fussing around Lilly Blossom.

Prey, Crimson, Nighthawk, Starry Wing, and even Scenic were here, silently crowded in the doorway. Since Gloom wasn't in the hospital at the moment, he didn't get to be here, but Starry Wing had gone and fetched Scenic himself, rushing the Earth pony over in a wheelchair. Not one of them said anything, just stood peering in through the doorway. Because Lilly hadn't said anything either.

The mare was sitting upright in bed. Her shoulders were hunched, and her head hung, eyes staring at nothing. Or perhaps at her hoof. Singular. One hoof and one meld wood stump. There was little trace of the aggressive, energetic, and angry mare Prey remembered sitting in the bed before him.

She'd been sitting there unmoving for the last five minutes, either completely oblivious to the doctors or ignoring them entirely.

"Lilly Blossom, do you know where you are? Can you hear me?"

"Her heart beat is elevated, but not climbing."

"But her pulse is still slow. It should be higher. Here, get me her chart."

"Where's the floor nurse? When was her medication changed?"

The doctors may as well have been background noise. The waxy

root which sprouted from under Lilly's jaw and ran up her face to encircle her horn looked like some kind of huge earthworm. The other twig protrusions running up the right side of her body and neck could've been the worm's smaller brethren. And the branch in place of her leg was their much larger twisted sire.

Prey coolly evaluated his own hoofwork yet again and remembered the rushed field operation he'd performed to leave Lilly in this condition. He was just out of perception range, standing here at the door's corner, and couldn't hear what Lilly was thinking. He didn't go closer. He knew it wouldn't be anything good.

However Prey could hear the thoughts of everyone else around him, excluding Crimson. It made for grim and depressing listening.

'-I can't imagine waking up and finding myself in Lilly's position-', This was from Starry Wing.

Scenic's thoughts were filled with a mix of revulsion and pity; '-all of us have been scarred by this dumb mission, but nothing like Lilly. At least I'm going to get out of my wheelchair, but *her*...-'

And Nighthawk was considering if it was possible for Lilly to recover. Not physically, because removing the meld wood would certainly kill her, but mentally recovered. He'd already decided that; '-stay or go, the Night Guard will support her. We look after our own, thestral or not-'

Prey rubbed at the bandages under his eyes, using the movement to look at Crimson out of the corner of his eye. The pegasus was simply looking at Lilly, face blank. Prey couldn't figure out what he was thinking.

'Perhaps it would just be best if we were to leave. Should I suggest doing so?'

Lilly jerkily raised her head and everyone stilled, even the doctors. The peach fur of her face and solid blue of her mane were somehow greyed, like the giant worm of a root was leeching the colour from them. But it was the hopeless look in her eyes which really finished the picture of despair.

They stared at her. She stared back, and her pale eyes found Scenic, Crimson, and Prey.

"What is this?" Lilly croaked.

She raised the meld wood peg leg, "What is this?" She repeated in disgust, voice hollow.

"What happened to me? Why am I... like this? Why am I alive?"

It was Crimson who answered without hesitation, doing what he thought was right no matter how difficult it was to say; "Your leg was bitten off by the Mama'duke. You were poisoned and about to die. This was the only alternative. We performed an emergency field operation to keep you alive."

Crimson didn't specify it'd been Prey who'd performed the *actual* operation, he merely said 'we'. They all held just as much responsibility as Prey did.

One of the doctors tried distracting Lilly, "Please remain calm. Breathe deeply and lie back down. Do you want something for the pain?"

Lilly didn't even look at the doctor. She raised her remaining hoof and trembling, pointed at the root growing out of her face along with the twigs sprouting from her flesh, "What is this, this, this stuff in me?"

Prey saw Scenic look at the ground, wishing he was anywhere else but here. Prey stayed where he was. Too many times had he seen this before. Too many times had Snake forced Prey be the one to tell the patient when they woke up that a limb or wing had been amputated. Twice the unfortunate patient had still been strong enough to beat Prey into bloody unconsciousness in the desperate blind rage which followed.

"It's meld wood. It kept you alive." Crimson answered.

The doctors were waving frantically at Crimson to shut up.

"Why did you do it? Why did you do this to me? I don't want to be

like this." Lilly's voice cracked.

Crimson's jaw worked for a second. It should be Prey answering, but Crimson was selflessly doing it in his stead, "It was the only way to keep you alive. I'm sorry."

"Why? Why would you save me to turn me into a, a, a bucking twisted tree?!"

"Please Miss Blossom, you need to calm down. You've been in a coma and you need to rest." One of the doctors pushed Lilly back down, but she thrashed and fought him off, making the stallion flinch away.

"Tell me! Why would you do this to me? You should've let me die in my sleep!"

"Don't say something so foalish." Nighthawk snapped, "You're still alive, that is all that matters. You have your life, and another chance. Don't think for a moment it would've been better if you had slipped quietly away. Everything happens for a reason, and that includes you surviving."

"This isn't living, I'm not a pony anymore. I'm a monster. My m-magic, it's gone, I can't use it, there's nothing left for me."

"It is too early to give up-"

"No! You don't know. No! I hate this!" Lilly cried, and bared her teeth to bite down on her wooden limb.

"No!" The doctors cried, horns lighting up. A moment later Lilly was lying back down flat on the bed, restrained under a pink glow.

Prey flinched away from the magic display. Lilly continued to weakly struggle, but only her head was still able to move as the doctors magically held her down.

Captain Nighthawk stalked over to Lilly as Prey looked on. The Captain shoved aside a doctor who tried to stop him and glowered down at Lilly Blossom.

"Nothing worth living for? Would you like to tell that to your parents?" He demanded.

Lilly blanched and sought for something to say, but Nighthawk wasn't done:

"I'm not saying you don't have a right to feel this way Lilly. After what has happened, you have a right to feel however you damn well please. If you want to end it all, fine, I won't even stop you."

Scenic gasped loudly, and the doctors all cried out in anger and protested, "How dare you say such things to her? Get out of the room this very instant-"

"Shut up."

Nighthawk didn't raise his voice, but the tone and accompanying flash of fangs silenced the doctors as effectively as any gag. Nighthawk looked back down at Lilly where she was restrained under the pink magic.

"If you want out, if you really want to give up after surviving so long, then I'll fetch you the dagger myself. But only after you try to live. And I can promise you, I won't be the one making pretty lies to your parents. If you want to die, you've got to look your parents in the face and tell them first. That is my final word."

'That's low,' Prey thought, 'And probably not all that effective. Her family isn't exactly fond of her, nor she of them.'

But against Prey's expectations, it did seem effective, at least for the time being. Lilly went still, and stopped trying to break free of the pink magical cocoon protecting her from herself. Then, much as Prey had been expecting, she started to cry.

It was not a pretty sight. Her nose ran and her body shuddered with ugly sobs. With the doctor's soft pink magic restraining her, Lilly couldn't even turn her head away.

"Come on, it's time we left her." Starry Wing said quietly, taking hold of the handlebar of Scenic's wheelchair.

"Lilly is part of our squad. I mean, we're supposed to be there to help her." Crimson protested.

"Yes, but later. Right now, what she needs most is some time." Starry Wing said, beginning to wheel the unprotesting Scenic away. The Earth pony's ears were flat and he was still looking fixedly at the floor.

'-poor, poor Lilly. I wish I could help her-'

Crimson hesitated, glancing between everyone as Lilly continued to cry, the doctors continued to fuss, and Nighthawk marched out after Starry Wing. Prey strongly disliked Starry Wing, but in this instance, the Lieutenant was right.

"There's nothing more we can do here right now. Lilly doesn't want to speak with us. We should go." Prey muttered to Crimson. But Prey didn't start limping away himself until Crimson left.

Crimson looked back as they went around the corner. Prey didn't.

They didn't return until that evening, 'they' being Crimson, Prey, and Scenic.

Prey didn't want to see Lilly again, the sight was an unpleasant reminder of the Deeper Green and of his own twisted hoofwork, but Crimson wanted to try again. So Prey hadn't spoken a word of protest and had limped along behind the pegasus as they first stopped by to pick up Scenic in his wheelchair again, and then onward to Lilly's room.

'I could order Lemon Pink to slip in and give Lilly poison in her sleep. It would even be what Lilly wants. Would that be so wrong?'

Prey knew inside that was only half his real reason though. The other half was that he didn't want to deal with Lilly possibly moving on from despair to vengeance. Prey was the one who'd used the meld wood on her after all. People were dangerous when they had nothing left to lose.

He'd tentatively shared this concern with Crimson earlier, not something he would've ever done before. But now things were different, and Crimson understood that life wasn't clean.

---A few hours ago---

"Crimson?"

"You have that look Prey. There's a problem. What is it?"

"I... am concerned about what Lilly Blossom might do, or attempt to do. To us."

"In what way, Prey?"

"I operated on her. You fetched the meld wood. Gloom gave the order. Scenic looked on. She's already expressed the wish to die rather than live as she is now. She's distraught right now, but it's only a matter of time before that grief turns to rage."

"Lilly would not attack us, surely. And, I mean, how would she even do so in her current condition?"

"She was *very* hot headed if you recall. Not so sure about now though, but desperate people do desperate things. Just look at what we did when having to fight the reaper king."

"You're right Prey. But, if she wants revenge on us..." *sigh*, "...Then we will just have to live with that, I suppose. I don't know what else we can do."

"But what if she-?"

"I don't know Prey. But Lilly is our teammate, she is weak, hurt, and alone. You and I both know what that feels like. But Lilly does have some support we don't. Her family."

"...I don't think her family is going to be as helpful as everyone is hoping for, Crimson."

"They must. They are her family. You don't mean you think they'll abandon her, do you Prey?"

"They might. I don't know the details, but they are not on good terms with Lilly. And they're planning to sue the Night Guard."

"Really? How did you hear-? Nevermind, but who are they even going to sue? Us? Captain Nighthawk? Princess Luna?" Crimson asked in complete bewilderment.

"*Ha*. Sue Luna! Now that would be something worth seeing." Prey had muttered darkly.

They'd had to leave it there though, because neither of them had an answer to Lilly's dire problem. Or perhaps each of them both privately had the same answer, but could not speak of it for fear that the other would be horrified and disagree. Or even worse, agree. Or perhaps it was all just Prey.

So here they were again at Lilly's room. Scenic privately did not want to be brought again, but; '-how can I say no to visiting a sick teammate?-'

'She's not sick you idiot, she's crippled. This is how Lilly's going to be for the rest of her life.' Prey thought.

"Here we go again." Scenic mumbled as Crimson stepped around the wheelchair and knocked softly.

Crimson blinked in surprise when the door was actually opened instead of them waiting to see if Lilly called them in. A pudgy unicorn nurse blinked up at Crimson, and then at Scenic and Prey. Prey tried to look harmless in front of the unicorn.

'-ah, these were all the ponies brought into the hospital at the same time as Lilly Blossom-', The nurse remembered.

Crimson cleared his throat, "Hello ma'am. We are here to see Lilly. If we are allowed. Is she awake? Will she see us?"

"Umm..." The pudgy nurse looked back over her shoulder, absentmindedly stopped her little white hat from falling off. She made a face, and then stepped aside, "I suppose it couldn't do any

more harm if you saw her."

Lilly was just an indistinct shape under the covers as they stepped into the room, but she was awake, Prey could've told that from her breathing even if he couldn't hear her miserable thoughts.

'-why have they come back? Why them? Just buck off, leave me to die-'

Prey looked at Crimson and gently tapped one drooping ear, then nodded at Lilly's bed, signalling she was awake and listening. Crimson nodded, then took a deep breath, "Lilly. We've come to talk with you."

No verbal response came from under the blanket. '-go away damn you, I don't want anypony to see me, I'm a horrible freak, just go away go away go away-'

The nurse shook her head at them and mouthed; "*She hasn't talked to anypony. Keep trying.*"

"Gloom isn't here, he's been released from hospital already. But when he hears you're awake, he'll come to see you. He was very worried if you'd be alright. I mean, we were all worried. *Are* worried. Not that you're alright. But you're still alive." Crimson looked to Prey for help before he tied his words into any more knots.

'-go away go away go away, I hate you, I hate me-'

Prey looked up at the ceiling. There was nothing he could say which would help here. Words were just words, and this was something only actions could fix. Lilly wasn't in any state to listen regardless.

'The only way to turn her around at this point is either invading her mind and changing it, or if she changes it herself. But there's very little we can do to make it happen.'

Nevertheless, for Crimson, and not for Scenic or Gloom, Prey gave it a try.

Prey spoke, putting on a contemplative air; "Hello Lilly. Still alive, I see. They want us to speak with you and try to make you feel better."

'-Prey too, go away you nasty little lamb, I hate you, you're still healthy and going to grow up whole-'

"But I'm not going to try and convince you. Talk is cheap and the supply exceeds the demand. Words are just a bit a bushel. They're easy to say, and easier to forget. Ha, what good can words do? None. If you'd wanted to hear words, you would've listened to the doctors telling you to not give up. But what do they know? They're not you. They don't understand what your life is now, do they Lilly? They're shallow, privileged, spoilt, empty *fakes*, am I right? They don't understand."

Scenic was staring, but Crimson waved him and the aghast nurse to be quiet and let Prey work.

'-what... How did he know that?-'

"Words are just noises in the air, anyone can make them, and they mean nothing if you don't want them to. So when or if you want a whole bunch of useless words, I'll fetch you a newspaper about some super model busting the Gala or other such rubbish."

The blanket shifted a tiny bit, '-...what?-'

Prey yawned loudly on purpose so Lilly would hear, "Well, I'm tired and it's getting late. I don't have anything for you but words. If you want anything more than words, you're going to have to physically get up out of that bed and take it. Although, until you're ready to take things for yourself, you're only worth words. Cheerio for now!"

Prey finished with very obvious fake cheer, and limped out the door.

Lilly Blossom was too stunned to know what to think before Prey left her behind and she was out of his mental perception range. He'd said his piece, and he wasn't interested in sticking around to see what the outraged nurse had to say. Much like Nighthawk, Prey's

words were chosen to stir Lilly's broken spirit back up, not to comfort her.

Either it would work, or it would fail.

Or that was the excuse Prey was going with. He didn't see why he'd even had to try fixing the ex-unicorn mare. But he'd been forced into so many dumb and tedious conversations since he'd woken up in this hospital, so what was one more snowflake in a blizzard?

Prey waited outside the door to the room, seated against the wall until Crimson and Scenic both finished up for themselves and Crimson wheeled the Earth pony back out.

"I can't believe you said that to Lilly, Prey. That was so *mean*." Scenic said in a hushed voice.

Prey flicked a sideways glance at him, and Scenic flinched. "I said what I thought would work. Or what I thought had a decent chance of working anyways." Prey answered, although it was more for Crimson's benefit than Scenic's.

Crimson just gave a single nod of understanding, "I hope your words will work. You were always the best at getting people to think what you want them to think."

If Prey didn't know better, Prey would've thought Crimson knew something he shouldn't. But it was just Crimson speaking the truth as he saw it, as always. He hoped.

Scenic was the outsider in this conversation, and the Earth pony knew it, but that didn't stop him from trying to join in as they wheeled him back to his hospital bed:

"Poor Lilly Blossom, I can't imagine what pain she must be in. To wake up and find out you'd been turned into *that*, I just... I can't even... I mean how does somepony even *deal* with that? I know I couldn't. I'm lucky, I'm going to heal but she's not. She's stuck with freaky roots growing out her fur forever. I have Carton Juice, she's so good to me, but Lilly doesn't seem to have anypony. Why haven't her parents come? I know she has an older brother and sister, so

what about them too?"

Scenic rambled on while Prey and Crimson kept their peace. Scenic kept up the nervous stream of chatter all the way up until Crimson had helped him back into bed, (an effortless feat with the jade necklace), and they'd left again.

Outside, Prey winced and leaned against the wall to rest for a moment. He was a lot better, but still not back to full strength yet.

'And I had precious little of that to begin with anyways.' He thought morosely.

Crimson waited for Prey to get his breath back, not offering a hoof because he obviously knew by now that's the last thing Prey would want.

"Do you really think Lilly will still commit suicide? Or try to?" Crimson eventually asked.

Prey huffed out a breath, "Maybe. She's not like you and me. She's a Canterlot pony, or *was*, I guess. I think there's a three out of ten chance she tries, and manages to succeed."

Crimson's wings went stiff, "That chance is too high."

Prey had nothing positive he could say to that.

"Alright, that's it, just pull it off gently." Doctor Humphrey encouraged.

Prey opened his eyes as he pulled the last bandage from off his cheek. He grimaced and blinked, feeling the strange tingle of open air and the unexpected lightness of his face now that the annoying padding was gone.

"There, much better," Doctor Humphrey, the name of the unicorn with the massive round spectacles, said, "Let me have a look and check it's all healed up."

Reluctantly, Prey turned his head to the side under the light so the doctor could examine him. Examine, but not touch, Prey'd been very clear on that. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Crimson had also finished removing his own bandages, but he couldn't look just yet.

Crimson had been visiting, same as he'd been doing every day and had been telling Prey more about flying and how calming it felt, when the doctor had walked in.

"Ah!" Humphrey had exclaimed, pleased, "Good, you're here too. Perfect. That means I can do the both of you at once. It's finally time to take those bandages off."

So that's what they'd done, and now Prey was impatiently waiting for the doctor to finish peering at his face.

"Hmm. Hmmmm. Hmm hmm..."

"Well?" Prey asked tersely, running out of patience. 'If you *dare* touch me...'

"Oh, it's healed just as expected, so that's good." Humphrey lied with a slightly strained smile.

"And?" Prey asked.

"It, ah, it looks fine. You can hardly even notice it. Really."

'-that's so ugly, and right on their faces too. I wouldn't be able to look in the mirror every morning like that-'

Prey was not a proud or vain person. Wearing his ribbon just to spite everyone was proof of that, plus, he was a runt anyways. Nevertheless, Prey knew appearances were very important. Importantly deceiving.

Looking harmless and weak had always been one of Prey's greatest defences.

And scars also went beyond something that simply damaged his disguise. They represented pain, suffering, and Prey hated having

them visible to everyone, who would then either judge or pity him. Exactly like those on his back, which were no one else's business but everyone was still fixating on when they thought he wasn't paying attention. And now he had more scars directly on his face for all to see.

"How bad is the scarring?" Prey demanded.

Humphrey quickly waved his hoof, "No no, really, it's fine. Really. Hardly noticeable."

'-if my colt had scars like those, why I'd, I'd... well, I'd do *something* about it-'

Prey scowled and turned aside from the useless doctor to someone who would not only give him a straight answer, but would also be able to provide a point of reference, "What do they look like Crimson?"

Crimson wing-shrugged, "With your white fur, not that noticeable. It does look like you've been crying though. Just a bit."

"Well, crying out the poison is more or less how I got them." Prey said with distaste. He strongly disliked the thought of anyone having any more of an excuse to call him 'crybaby'. He fought down the urge to touch at his cheeks, since they were still a bit raw.

"And me?" Crimson asked in interest, stepping closer and bending his head down.

Prey finally got a good view of the poison burns on Crimson's face, which almost certainly mirrored his own. Not that Prey was going to look in a mirror to check, no fear.

Prey raised his eyebrows at what he saw. Really, it wasn't as bad as the doctor's thoughts had led him to believe. From the way the pony had been carrying on, Prey had almost been expecting gnarled tracks of raised scar tissue.

It was nowhere near as dramatic as all that. Two to an eye, from each corner, and less than two inches in length a piece. Really, in the deep red fur of Crimson's face, you wouldn't even notice the

thinnish pink lines at first glance.

It was still unpleasant to look at. In stories scars are cool. In real life, they're ugly things. And these were definitely ugly.

Much like the shiny scar flesh left behind by a burn, that's what the lines down Crimson's cheeks looked like. Seeing them, Prey couldn't help but change his mind and lightly touch at his own face. He felt the slight, uneven divots in his checks. It was unpleasant, but judging by the feel of them, they were even smaller than Crimson's.

Prey remembered that back in the grotto as the poison gas flooded in, he'd been the one to cover his eyes first. He recalled that Gloom and Crimson had also used their wings to shield their own faces. Scenic had been the most badly affected, and Prey would bet the stallion's facial scars would be the most unpleasant.

Prey decided he was lucky to have gotten away the most untouched out of the four of them.

One of the benefits of living with fur was it tended to cover the edges of scars and blur their outline, and, if the scars were small enough or the fur thick enough, sometimes hide them completely. Doubly so with wool, such as the ones zig-zagging across his back.

'Okay, these aren't so bad then. I could hopefully probably carry out entire conversations with people without them noticing, unless they look closely.' Prey thought, nodding to himself.

"Yours aren't so bad yourself," Prey said to Crimson, "They blend in with your red fur colouring, and they're really thin."

Crimson made a noncommittal grunt and shrugged, "I am alive and I'm not blind."

"Although I do not recommend it so soon or without counselling, I can provide you a mirror if you wish to see for yourself. But I do recommend waiting first." Humphrey said.

Crimson dismissively flicked his wing at the doctor's concerns, "A mirror, yes please."

"I'm fine personally." Prey quickly said, as the doctor reluctantly pulled out a square of mirror from under a cloth. He'd had the mirror all along.

Prey hurriedly averted his eyes lest he catch sight of his own reflection as Humphrey hoofed it over to Crimson.

"Oh. Is that it?" Prey heard Crimson ask in a bored tone.

"Ha?" Humphrey made a noise.

"Yours are even less noticeable than mine Prey. Come and look for yourself." Crimson said.

Prey waved Crimson off without looking, "There's no need, because I don't care. Scars don't make me whom I am, nor will I pretend they do just because other people expect it. I'm still alive and that's all that matters."

Prey's noble words were really just an excuse to avoid looking in the mirror, but Crimson accepted them at face value.

'-wow, what impressive mental fortitude, especially in one so young-', Humphrey thought as he received the mirror back from Crimson, impressed.

While Prey and Crimson could have cared less about what the doctor thought, it would've required effort to do so. Humphrey had not been there, and despite tending to them here while in hospital, he really had been nothing more than an annoying pest most of the time. Crimson and Prey jointly gave the unicorn a pointed look, until Humphrey took the hint and left them alone.

With Humphrey gone, Crimson resumed telling Prey about flying, since Crimson didn't have a lot of other interests, and flying was what he was doing with most of his free time at the moment. Six to seven hours a day of flight, actually. As an obvious result, Crimson was looking even more lean and fit than usual.

"The weather in Equestria is so tame and listless. Even a foal could fly unattended without danger."

"Where's a hurricane to turn dirt into sandpaper when you need one, am I right?" Prey joked with perhaps an unnecessarily cruel smile, one that Crimson just took in his stride as being Prey.

When Crimson was done talking, it would be Prey's turn to tell Crimson something. To distract him, if Prey was being honest. They kept skirting around the things neither of them wanted to speak about yet, so talk of flying prevailed over the conversation instead.

Prey, having the disadvantage of being a sheep, of course had no first hoof knowledge to draw from, so all he could do was listen and ask questions as Crimson talked about different types of updrafts, cloud formations, and various types of winds. Headwinds, cross winds, soft wind, hard wind, bumpy, jagged, fractured, uneven, smooth, buffeting, and many others. Who knew there were so many different types of wind? Prey certainly hadn't.

But Prey *did* know flying was Crimson's method of coping with what had happened. Prey personally didn't really care what they talked about, just that he was talking with Crimson. The novelty of having a friend was still so fragile and new. Prey imagined Crimson secretly felt the same way, which was all Prey really wanted.

Still, Crimson's new face did prompt Prey to spare a thought for what Gloom and Scenic would now look like:

'Scenic suffered the worst poisoning. I wonder how bad his scars are?' Prey wondered as he got comfortable again on the bed.

The answer turned out to be; fairly bad.

The poison trails left down Scenic's cheeks were significantly more puckered and obvious than Prey and Crimson's. Still, Prey had seen facial scarring far more disfiguring before. Like that Resistance fighter who'd had their whole cheek torn off and somehow survived the following infection. Prey had seen all sorts of terrible wounds and scars in his life, and he was mostly numbed to it. Appearance didn't reflect on someone's ability.

But how well did Scenic take his new appearance?

'Let's take a wild guess,' Prey thought, 'Even putting aside him being a Guard, and not a self-image obsessed unicorn or mare, he's still a pony, and comes from the shining capital city of Canterlot. So I'm going to say 'poorly'.'

Prey was one hundred percent correct. But exactly how poorly did Scenic take it?

Well, when Prey and Crimson went to see Scenic for their daily visit, (Crimson's insistence), they found his giantess of a marefriend, Carton Juice, already there, and fussing over Scenic with a makeup brush to hide the scars. And Scenic was letting her work without any protest!

In fact, he was anxiously asking her how it was going. "How does it look? Can they be hidden? Is it working?"

"Don't worry, I know what I'm doing, my poor Spot. Now hush and hold still, I don't want to get any more in your eye." Carton fussed, her tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth and nose scrunched up as she worked. The hoof mirror and various other unidentifiable implements she'd removed from her hoofbag looked tiny in the mare's huge hooves.

She was working on the scarring under Scenic's eye with the piebald spot over it, which especially stood out because of the contrast in fur colour.

Prey and Crimson just stood unnoticed in the door, blinking at the scene.

"This is so embarrassing. I feel pathetic." Scenic mumbled, not able to meet his marefriend's eyes.

"You've been injured and hurt so badly Paint Spot. There's nothing to be ashamed about not wanting to be seen all scared."

"But, uh, I'm supposed to be a stallion, and ohh, I just can't help feeling guilty. Compared to what happened to Lilly-Uh..." Scenic broke off.

'-oops. I'm not supposed to talk about Lilly to non-Guards-'

Carton Juice managed a worried smile, "I love you no matter what you look like, but it's you I'm worried about."

"Thank you. I love you too Carton." Scenic said, finally meeting her eyes with a real smile on his lips. Then he saw Prey and Crimson standing in the open doorway.

"Urk!" Scenic choked and his face went red.

"You know, we could just get you a paper bag and cut out some eye holes if that'd be easier." Prey deadpanned.

Prey had stolen Scenic's unused wheelchair parked in the corner, and was using it as his seat.

"Sorry." Scenic muttered, starting at the floor tiles.

Crimson paused, "Sorry? For what?"

"Yes, there's no need for you to be sorry over anything." Carton Juice quickly chimed in to reassure her coltfriend. She'd hastily repacked her hoofbag, and was now sitting next to Scenic's bed, holding his unbroken leg's hoof between her own huge two hooves.

Scenic winced, face still red, "Sorry. Because of... And you guys are all scarred up too but I'm, uh..."

"Worried about your looks?" Prey suggested with a false smile.

"But their scars aren't as bad as yours though." Carton assured Scenic, then gasped and slapped a large hoof across her mouth, "I, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to imply-"

"It is fine," Crimson interrupted, "You are merely speaking the truth."

Which she was. Scenic's poison burns were much more visible than Crimson's, which meant they were extremely more visible than

Prey's. Crimson's words were just the blunt truth, but they made both Scenic and Carton's ears lower in shame and embarrassment respectively.

"But you guys are just so..." Scenic made a motion to encompass Prey and Crimson, "...So blasé and not worried. Whereas I'm all, uh, embarrassed. Like I'm ashamed of us."

"What us? They're your scars. Act as you wish with them." Crimson said blankly.

'-he's really cold and distant. Was he like this all the time as Scenic's squad mate or is it just because I'm here?-', Carton worried, wondering if she should leave but not wanting to.

"But, but it's so shallow!" Scenic exclaimed in frustration at himself:

"I mean like; compared to what could've happened I'm lucky! I'm still alive and healthy, uh, relatively healthy, but Lilly's all mangled and we basically turned her into a kindersn-A, uh, er..." Scenic hastily bit his lip before he could finish that.

"No, don't stop there. A 'what'?" Prey prodded.

"I didn't mean that." Scenic mumbled, looking away and hunching his shoulders. Carton Juice was looking back and forth between Scenic, Prey, and Crimson in confusion.

"What happened Spot? You told me there was a Lilly in your squad, dear. What happened? Is it bad?"

'-Paint Spot always stops before he tells me about what actually happened. I'm no clown, I know Paint Spot's just trying to protect me, but I just want to help-'

"That's not for any of us to say. Lilly's condition is private." Crimson said firmly, giving Scenic a flat look.

Carton Juice gulped at Crimson's tone. Prey thought this was all vaguely amusing in a twisted kind of way. Carton was afraid of Crimson, whereas her coltfriend was more unnerved by him, Prey's private discussion with Scenic the other day notwithstanding.

Usually Prey would be concerned with deceiving Scenic back into thinking he was a harmless little lamb, but really, what could Scenic do? Nighthawk was already putting Prey on a watch list, and despite his wishes, there were already too many people who knew about all the kindersnatches he'd killed with the bone rot mines so there was no hiding it.

And although Prey couldn't get back at Nighthawk, he could get back at Scenic Paint a bit instead.

Carton Juice gathered up her courage, squared her rather impressive shoulders, and addressed Crimson, "Mr. Crimson...Trace was it? Paint Spot hasn't told me much about your mission, but he mentioned you were part of his squad. I want to say thank you for bringing Paint Spot back to me safely. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Scenic and Carton did not know Crimson, nor were they pegasi, so they didn't spot the way his wings shuffled in embarrassment, "Keep your thanks. He almost didn't make it."

'Okay, improving at social interactions doesn't mean *good* at social interactions.' Prey thought, hiding a smirk at seeing Carton flinch.

Crimson saw her flinch too and took a step back, "I think perhaps we should leave, this isn't a conversation worth having. Prey and me, I mean."

"Wait!" Carton called, "Can't you tell me anything about what happened? Paint Spot's my special pony, I just want to know how to help."

Scenic flushed again and stuttered unintelligibly, but Carton Juice didn't let his or her own embarrassment hold her back, "Please, isn't there anything you can tell me about what your mission was?"

"Why do you think we could tell you anything if Scenic would not?" Crimson asked, his tone seeming to indicate offence, "You would go behind his back and try to force out details Scenic isn't willing to share? And regardless, it is restricted information. Scenic is still a Night Guard, so he is under orders not to tell you."

'-so cold and aggressive-', Carton thought, shrinking down despite her being almost twice Crimson's bulk. Scenic on the other hoof looked like he didn't know whether to be grateful or upset at Crimson's refusal.

Carton Juice spotted Prey though, trailing along behind Crimson, and the sight of the lamb stabbed her conscience, '-if this hurt my Paint Spot so much, what must it have done to a foal? I just want to help them all-'

"But what about Prey there?" Carton called out, "He's just a foal who's gotten caught up in all of this. That's not fair to him. Are the Night Guard making sure he's getting the help he needs?"

Carton Juice missed her coltfriend hastily trying to signal her to silence behind her. Instead, she tried to smile warmly at Prey while simultaneously giving Crimson a defiant look, (or trying to get up the courage for a defiant look anyway). Prey paused mid-step.

"Prey..." Crimson began warningly, but then shook his head, "Actually, you do what you want. You will anyway. Although maybe try to be kind about it?"

But it was just a suggestion, not an actual instruction to be kind. Crimson wasn't going to order Prey what to do any more than Prey would order Crimson to. They didn't know Carton Juice, she was overstepping, and what's more, she was only important to them because of Scenic, and not important to them personally, no matter how harsh that sounded.

Prey tilted his head and treated Carton to a lovely smile. Behind his bulky marefriend, Scenic's ears went flat as he saw that.

'Let's see,' Prey pondered, 'How to hurt you?'

Start by telling her just a little bit about what had happened across the Ridgeback? Alluding to the horrors of the scarecrow and reaper king should be a good start, then move onto the burning of Alfalfa Dale while they were helpless to do anything would no doubt shock her. Mention the dead animals in the gorge and how they'd died of poison, the same poison Scenic was now scarred for life from, and

finish off by saying; "And you know what? We're still all a hundred times luckier than the children of Mayflower. Wanna' hear about what happened to them?"

'Yes, that'll work. For a start.' Prey decided as he craned his neck back to meet the massive mare's compassionate gaze. In her thoughts was an earnest focus on wanting to help.

"Well, I suppose that depends Miss Juice," Prey said sweetly, "On what you're going to do about it."

"I, huh-what?"

"Well, I mean, I'm just testing the waters before I jump, you know? I'm just seeing what protection you can offer. Could you protect me from dark magic users who cut up ponies for fun? Will you throw yourself in the way of a charging reaper king for me? Or will you run away when the things in the night start to howl? Because oh, believe me, they do *howl*."

Prey casually rubbed a hoof against his wool and examined it, as confidently nonchalant as any child who had just announced there was no such thing as faeries. "If you're scared of those monsters, why would I want your help? Because no one needs help from someone who can't help. Duh."

Prey's words nailed the fears home in Carton Juice's chest, '-oh no, Scenic doesn't think I'm capable of helping. Why would he need me if I can't understand what he went through? Are my efforts not good enough? Is he just too kind to tell me he doesn't want me around anymore?-'

Carton looked back anxiously at Scenic, "I, you, you don't think I'm useless, do you Paint Spot? Is that why you won't, won't tell me?"

"No no, no that's not it." Scenic hurriedly said, but Carton was only half reassured.

'-what if he's just saying that because he thinks I can't handle the truth?-'

She licked her lips, "Is it, is it because you don't think I can

understand?"

Scenic looked down at the bed covers, "It's, it's not that I don't want to tell you Carton. Part of me does, but I just can't face it right now."

Prey bobbed his head and hummed to himself as Carton continued to dither and ring her hooves. He just needed to add the final touches.

"Mmhm hmm, Hmm mhm. Raven magpie fly away, scarecrow, keep at bay~" He hummed quietly.

"What?" Scenic squawked, head snapping around to Prey.

Prey blinked innocently in confusion, "Hmm?"

"That, w-what you said, about a scarecrow."

"Haven't you heard it? It's a village foal's nursery rhyme. Here, let me sing it for you-"

"No! Uh, that is to say, no thanks. No."

"What's he talking about Paint Spot?" Carton asked, with a slight look of hurt on her face. '-or is this something else he's hiding from me?-'

Scenic opened his mouth.

"Ah ah ah! That's restricted information too, you can't tell her that, Scenic." Prey cut him off, wagging his hoof reprovingly, "Captain Nighthawk's orders, remember? But there's nothing stopping you telling her about the other stuff. Why haven't you told her about that yet?"

"Other stuff?" Carton Juice asked at the same time as Scenic said; "What other stuff?"

Behind Prey, Crimson gave a small sigh, but made no move to rein the lamb in.

Prey was finding this boringly easy to play off their insecurities. Carton Juice was letting herself get worked up over his words by wearing her heart on her sleeve. Carton's issue was; she still thought he was a lamb, despite Scenic having warned her multiple times not to think of Prey as a child. So she was hearing what she believed to be a guileless child speak, and not believing that Prey could be so purposefully manipulating his words.

'Right, that's the groundwork of self-doubt sufficiently laid. Now to really start building.'

Prey opened his mouth to do just that, "So, Miss Carton Juice, you..." Then Prey saw the pleading look Scenic was giving him.

Again, Prey remembered being a little lamb, crying under a bush as a cruel zebra voodoo witch forced him to commit murder. Prey didn't owe Scenic, if anything the Earth pony owed him, but... But would it be so difficult to give Scenic something back? If nothing else, Prey respected Scenic's desire not to become a killer.

"...You really want to help, do you? That's what you've been saying each time we've met, right?"

"Of course I'm willing to help anypony who needs help, even if they aren't brave enough to ask for it." Carton leaned forwards eagerly at the chance Prey seemed to be giving her.

Prey smiled again, but perhaps only Crimson saw the bitter edge to it, "If you really want to help, you should get Scenic to take you to visit Lilly Blossom. Then perhaps you'll understand what kind of trauma you're up against. You won't be allowed in to see her if Scenic isn't with you, though. You both have to go. Second corridor on the left, last room on the end. Good luck. You'll need it."

Then he turned and hurried out the door as Carton and Scenic tried to call him back. Crimson waved goodbye with a wing and then used it to pull the door shut as he also exited, "I hope you recover soon, Scenic, Carton Juice."

"That was... rather more kind of you than I was expecting Prey. Kind to Carton Juice, I mean." Crimson said after a time as they made their way back through the hospital corridors.

"I wasn't feeling kind." Prey muttered.

"You could've started verbally pulling her life apart, I know you. But it's good that you didn't. She is not a criminal or a suspect. She's just..." Crimson paused thoughtfully.

"...Just a normal, sheltered pony who hasn't had to understand that survival isn't always pretty?" Prey suggested, being perfectly serious.

Crimson gave a slow nod, "Yes. That. She wouldn't have deserved it."

Privately, Prey mostly disagreed, but he did acknowledge that Carton hadn't actually done anything personal to him.

They walked on for half a corridor in thoughtful silence, stepping aside to let a unicorn nurse pass, towing a line of empty hospital beds in a telekinetic chain behind her. They were on the second floor, and outside the windows, Canterlot glittered in the midday sun.

"Oh. I don't think I told you," Crimson abruptly spoke up, cocking an ear like he'd just remembered something, "Do you recall the night before we were set to leave on the train? Out to Mayflower, I mean?"

Of course Prey remembered, he remembered everything. Or *nearly* everything, anyways. "Yes? What event in particular?"

"We were eating in the mess hall. We had to raid Cookie's cupboards again. That was our first meal with Lilly and Scenic too."

"Yeah, I remember."

"Those pegasi who interrupted us, the Wonder Clouds."

"The name is 'Wonderbolts'," Prey corrected, "They're supposedly a

military group. Supposedly."

"Wonderbolts, yes, that was them. I received a letter with a provisional offer to possibly join their unit." Crimson said blandly.

"How did they even get a letter to you? You don't have an address, and we haven't moved into our flats yet." Prey chose to focus on the less important logistical detail of how, rather than if Crimson could actually be considering the offer.

"They gave it to Lieutenant Starry Wing, who gave it to me."

"...And?" Prey eventually prompted.

"It said their commander was impressed with reports of my flying and would extend a place for tryouts. Said how big of a privilege and rare opportunity this was. She wrote about tradition and performance a lot." Crimson recalled.

"No, what I meant was, did you accept it?"

"What? No, of course not." Crimson flicked his wing in distaste, "I would never abandon my duty to Princess Luna. I just thought you would get a laugh out of it. I mean, that's the sort of thing you seem to find amusing, the shallowness of Canterlotiens and all."

"Knowing you, yes, I suppose it is funny that they'd think they even had a chance of swaying you with the paltry promises of fame and fortune." Prey agreed, the slight feeling of worry lifting from off his shoulders. It really had only been silly to be concerned.

They were almost back to Prey's room. They hadn't been taking the most direct route, rather walking around the hospital's perimeter so Prey could stretch his legs like the doctors had ordered. Muscle and body wise, Prey was feeling mostly back to normal. Aside from his eyesight. He could've been released already, but the hospital was reluctant to release a young child who'd suffered such appalling injuries as he had. Their words, not his. Plus, the doctors were still deeply concerned about where his whip scars had come from and wanted answers.

Well tough, they weren't getting any. They had tried gently

broaching the topic and asking tangential questions, but Prey had stone walled them every single time. And Crimson and Gloom weren't asking. They didn't seem to want to know the answer, not yet at least.

As the two of them walked, they occasionally passed other patients, sometimes hospital staff, in both cases Prey kept Crimson between him and them, but over all, the hospital wasn't very full. Prey estimated at least half the rooms weren't in use, with beds stripped of linen.

'How nice for them, to have such security in their overabundance.'

Crimson nodded in agreement when Prey said so out loud.

As they came up to Prey's hospital room door, for just the slightest fraction of a moment, Prey hesitated. But then he kept walking. Crimson had already taken a few quick paces ahead, so he could politely get the door for Prey, and just as he was about to hook his wing under the handle, it opened inwards.

Crimson took a quick step backwards, and the violet unicorn nurse almost ran muzzle first into Crimson. "Oh!" She exclaimed.

She blinked. Crimson blinked. They did that awkward little dance where they both tried to step to the same side to get out of the other's way. Pause.

"Please excuse me." And with that, the violet mare slipped past and trotted off down the hall.

It was just a nurse, one of many in the comings and goings of the hospital. Prey wandered into his room, but Crimson however frowned slightly, and looked out the door after the departing mare.

"Is something wrong?" Prey asked.

"She smelled of washed away blood." Crimson stated.

Prey came back out to look after her too, "Washed out blood? She was a nurse, might that have something to do with it?"

"Yes, no. Maybe. I don't know. I don't smell any *actual* blood." Crimson paused and considered, "She just smelled a lot like you. And me."

"Did she now?" Prey narrowed his eyes, and more carefully hid the rolled note from the disguised Lemon Pink under his wool, "I'll make sure to keep an eye open if I see her again."

"I will do so too. It's probably nothing, but a warrior must never let his guard down."

Prey made sure the door was firmly shut before he clambered back up into the bed and unrolled Lemon's note. Crimson had taken off, quite literally, to find something to eat, since he was no longer a patient here and so wouldn't be served lunch by the hospital staff. Bad luck for Crimson, since free food was always free food.

If Prey hadn't known that the nurse was actually Lemon Pink under an illusionary veil, he would've been a lot more concerned about a mimic laying a trap in his room.

As it was, there was a small runic array on the door frame which told Prey if anyone had entered while he was gone. Not who, how many, or when, but it still served its purpose.

Lemon Pink of course knew the array was there, and had reset it on her exit, just like Prey did every time he left the room. If someone else had been in the room before Lemon Pink, she would've loudly thought about it for Prey to pick up when she passed him in the corridor just now. She hadn't, so that was good.

Prey glanced at the bedside table, at the small statue of Celestia cast in a regal pose set there. Just like he'd asked Lemon to fetch.

Prey hated the sight of it, but needs must. It was important for his long term plans. With a sneer of distaste, he turned the little figurine around so it faced the wall, and went back to decoding the encrypted note.

Prey was pleased by what he read. The note was good news, mostly.

In it, Prey's biggest and most immediate concern had been addressed. The veropedes had been fed, and Lemon Pink had managed, through a light application of mind magic, to secure a meat supply from three different farmers who raised pigs as a side business. Lemon had worn a different illusionary disguise for each farmer, of course.

And, it seemed, she'd already found a possible solution to Prey's second need. A secret base.

Prey's suggestion about the sewers had led Lemon to stumbling upon an alternative that might, from first appearances, suit Prey's purposes even better.

Quite by accident Lemon had found a cave down inside of the mountain Canterlot was built onto. The cave was reachable either from Lower Canterlot, or by tracking through the undercity pipework. On further investigation, Lemon had discovered that the cave was part of an extensive cave network which delved deep into the earth beneath Mount Canter. Lemon had not ventured into the depths, but she confirmed there were no signs of any animal life or pony activity.

It might prove to be perfect. It should even be possible to get the veropedes up there.

The bad news was a little more abstract, or at least more distant. There were two pieces of it, kind of.

The first was about the Diamond Dogs. When Lemon had returned to the woods with a small herd of pigs with which to feed the hungry veropedes, her trip had taken her near the site from which she'd originally set out from with the splinter pack of Diamond Dog guides to cross the Ridgeback with.

Then she'd tricked, drugged, and sacrificed all the dogs to hatch her veropede. 'Murdered' was the correct word. On Prey's orders, even if only by her interpretation of them.

At the old meeting place, Lemon had found fresh signs of at least two Diamond Dogs searching the site, before the tracks set off in the

direction of the Ridgeback, retracing Lemon's steps. It was obvious these dogs were looking for the splinter pack, not knowing they were all dead. Perhaps they might even be family?

They'd find nothing, but Prey once again felt the weight of being Prey. Everything had a price, including survival.

The second piece of bad news wasn't even technically that. It wasn't anything Lemon Pink had included in her brief report. In fact, it was the *absence* that prickled the back of Prey's neck. There was the sense that there was something wrong, something which he couldn't rightly put his hoof on.

It was nothing Lemon Pink wrote, no change in the rhythm of words or gap in her explanation. Lemon Pink was completely loyal to him, so he wasn't worried about her trying to betray him or something. She was his tool.

But Prey was still getting the sense that something was amiss. Lemon Pink may not even be aware of it herself, which was actually a large part of Prey's concern. Lemon Pink had been created by Prey binding together his memories with the remnants of Night Watcher, a process that was neither stable nor safe. It wasn't a process which Prey had ever performed before, and he didn't know if there were long term side effects. Lemon Pink had always been flawed, but were there now more cracks developing?

This was the third time Prey had gotten this vague impression about Lemon Pink.

'Or is it just my own lingering paranoia over the mimics? A better question is, what am I going to do about it either way?'

Prey looked up sharply and crumpled the note into a tiny ball. There was a brisk knock on the door and then it opened before Prey could respond.

Lieutenant Starry Wing stood there. Behind him there were two other Night Guards, both carrying spears, and beside them, to Prey's surprise, was Crimson. What was he doing back here so soon? Prey got the feeling he was about to find out.

"Prey, if you could join us. There is a meeting you need to attend." Starry Wing ordered politely, but it was still an order. Did that mean Prey was resuming active Guard duty as of right now?

"Yes, sir." Prey said, climbing down from the bed.

"Ah, no, you're still on enforced leave, so it's not sir." Starry Wing shook his head.

'Yet you're still giving me orders.' Prey thought.

Starry Wing stepped aside to let Prey join them in the corridor. Prey sent a look to Crimson, but he just got a shake of the head in return, indicating he didn't know what this was about either.

Starry Wing saw the look, "Happily, we flew into Crimson on the way here. It's a bit of good luck really, as he's needed for this meeting." The Lieutenant seemed to be in a strange mood. Frustratingly, Starry Wing's thoughts weren't providing a convenient answer either this time.

Starry Wing set off at a brisk pace through the corridors, and Prey had to hurry to keep up with everyone else. The other two Night Guards, a mare, and a thin bony thestral stallion, didn't know why they'd been brought along either, just that they were ordered to come armed to act as a protection detail.

'-seems likely to be a secret meeting we'll be standing guard for-'

'-hardly any different from standing guard every night in the Palace then-'

"It's good to see that you're healing up nicely," Starry Wing said over his shoulder as he led the way, "Except for the scars, sorry about those. We were all worried when we heard about, well, you know. I'm just thankful to Luna you all made it back."

Luna. The dark alicorn's name echoed oddly in Starry Wing's head for some reason today.

"Here we are. After you two." Starry Wing said, abruptly coming to a halt beside a nondescript hospital door and pulling it open.

Crimson moved forwards to enter first, as the two Night Guards took up positions on either side of the plain door at a nod from the Lieutenant. Prey looked up and down the corridor, uneasy.

"After you Prey." Starry Wing repeated, still holding the door.

Without much choice, Prey followed Crimson in, hugging the other side of the door to keep out of Starry Wing's reach. Prey looked around. The room was decently sized. It looked like a conference room of some sort, with a long oval table in the middle with chairs drawn up around it, and a large blackboard against one wall. The hospital managers must use it for meetings. The room was a bit dim, the blinds half drawn.

Crimson moved to stand in the middle of the room by the oval table, looking the otherwise empty room over. He turned back around as Starry Wing came in, shutting the door behind him.

"My apologies for the bit of cloak and dagger, but this visit wasn't something the Night Guard could take lightly. It was last minute and unplanned." He said, striding around the table and towards the closed opposite door.

Starry Wing didn't give Prey or Crimson the chance to respond or ask questions. He rapped sharply three times on the closed door.

With a tint of pride in his eyes, Starry Wing pulled the door open and bowed, "Your Majesty. Both Prey and Crimson are here."

There was a shift of dark blue, and the sparkle of starlight. A cold breath of air washed through the room, like the chill air of a cloudless night. Crimson's eyes widened and he quickly dropped into a bow. Prey instinctively froze, his hooves rooted to the carpet.

With a glance that surveyed all and took command of everything she saw, Princess Luna swept into the room.

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Author's Notes:

Welp, that's finally an update on Lilly 🌷 and Lemon. 🍃

If you see any mistakes, please let me know as always so i can fix them. Thanks.

☆ Editor: Sweetolebob18

56.4 A Place to Lay my Head

"P-Pr-Princess Luna." Prey stuttered.

'What is Luna doing here? This is wrong. It's the middle of the day, the sun's still high outside, so she shouldn't be here!'

And why had she come to the hospital instead of just summoning them to the Palace? Why was this meeting being kept secret? This was bad, bad, *bad*.

Luna's piercing gaze settled on Prey, and the cold indigo eyes finally jolted him out of his frozen state and dropped him into a bow so fast he left his ears trailing behind in the air.

That sense of being examined by some feline predator Prey had come to associate with the night alicorn crawled over his wool. How did no one else ever seem to feel it? Did Luna only project it onto non-ponies? Was it actually some sort of passive spell? No, Luna had no need for an aura spell. This was all her sheer presence alone.

Prey didn't dare move or even breathe until Luna's freezing gaze shifted off him.

"Thou makest good time Lieutenant Starry Wing. Thou mayest all raise thine heads." Luna boomed.

"It was my pleasure, Princess." Starry Wing said deferentially.

Prey dared to glance up, and spotted for the first time that there was another pony accompanying Luna, standing in the doorway to the meeting room behind her. The briefest look was enough for Prey to know the stallion was a noble. the aura of self entitlement was unmistakable.

However, they were far less important right now than Luna was. The dark alicorn casually stalked around to the head of the oval table, starry mane flowing out behind her as if caught in a current

of water.

Luna did not take the seat at the head of the table, no, instead she flicked it aside into the corner with an indigo shimmer of her horn, and conjured up her own far more ornate seat. It was dark blue, imposing, glowing with magic, and decidedly regal. Only once Luna had a suitable throne did she deign to sit. All of this was done casually, as if Luna wasn't even making a point. Like it just came naturally to her.

"Rise." She ordered.

Crimson, Starry Wing, and Prey all did so.

Prey noticed that the noble had followed Luna into the room, and was now looking around almost as imperiously as Luna had. Starry Wing wasn't pleased by that.

'-he should've waited until Her Majesty called him into the room first-'

"There were no complications, Lieutenant?" Luna asked of him.

"None your Majesty."

"And none know of our royal presence here?"

"None that aren't supposed to, your Majesty."

"Well done. Take thy leave hence and attend outside the door. We will have need of thee once we art done here. We wouldst speak privily with the gathered members of our ISND and Lord Vanish alone."

Prey's eyes darted between Starry Wing and the now named Lord Vanish. The Lieutenant didn't know why the noble was here, only that whatever the reason was, the Lieutenant didn't approve. And it wasn't the usual detached dislike simply because Vanish was a noble, but rather because Starry Wing didn't think the Lord paid enough respect to Luna.

But Luna had spoken. "Yes Princess, I'll be just outside if you need

anything."

"Verily."

Prey wanted to know why some random Lord was even here? 'Why's Luna brought him? It's gonna' be something bad, isn't it? It's *always* something bad.'

Lord Vanish sniffed and straightened his cufflinks as Starry Wing left. The stallion had a severe cut to his mane and stance. Vanish was, of course, a unicorn too, but Prey had slightly bigger issues to worry about than him at the moment.

"Crimson and Prey, attend to our words." Luna called, immediately recapturing Prey's attention.

"This is Lord Vanish, Fifth of that name, of House Time. His lands lie to the East of Vanhoover. He hast petitioned us to hear him on his House's behalf, and we hath done so. 'Tis a matter which concerns thou, thus thou shalt hear it."

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Yes, your Majesty." Prey echoed Crimson hurriedly, still not having a clue why Vanish was here. The Lord had given Prey a look of mild surprise and contained disdain earlier, but now his attention was almost exclusively on Crimson. And it was not a happy look in his dark green eyes.

"Thank you, Princess Luna." Vanish said, speaking for the first time. His voice was smooth and clipped.

'-so, this is where it washed up-', Vanish thought. What? Where 'what' washed up?

"But first we need to speak briefly with them both. Thou wilt kindly wait a moment." Luna was not making it a question.

The corner of Vanish's mouth twitched downwards, "As your Majesty commands." He said with the barest dip of his head.

Prey cringed. Didn't the unicorn know he was playing with fire? It

was only because Luna seemed so coldly disconnected from social cues that she didn't care enough to get angry at him; "Crimson and Prey, step closer and heed our words."

With extreme reluctance, but not daring to delay, Prey hurried closer to Luna's magical throne. He should be worrying about Crimson too right now, but guiltily, all he could manage was to worry about was himself. Even seated, Luna towered over him.

"This shalt be a privy conversation." Luna announced, and Prey felt a sharp sting in his hooves as some type of privacy magic came into effect. Prey'd hardly even seen Luna's horn light up she'd cast so fast!

"Princess Luna?" Crimson asked in question.

"We will not bandy words," Luna said briskly, "We hast heard of thine exploits across the mountain range from our Captain. Now we shalt briefly hear thine own accounts for ourselves."

Crimson glanced quickly to Prey, an unsure question in his yellow eyes. Prey however couldn't speak. His mouth had suddenly gone dry.

It was Crimson who ended up answering for both of them, "What more do you want to know, Princess Luna? If Captain Nighthawk already told you about everything that went wrong, I don't know what I, I mean, what *we* can add."

Luna's gaze was as hard and unyielding as diamond as it bore into each of them, "We want each of thee to account for thine actions. Didst thou each do all that was in thy power to save the afflicted peasants? Didst thou fight with all thy strength? Can thou each swear thine failures were not through any fault of thine own?"

Next to him, Prey felt Crimson straighten and raise his head, even if he himself didn't dare turn his head even a fraction to check; "I was not good enough Princess. I tried, but I failed. I wasn't fast enough to stop the Mama'duke, I couldn't save the villagers, and I didn't beat the reaper king or the warlock in the end. But it wasn't because I didn't try Princess Luna. I just... wasn't good enough."

Luna's gaze softened just the tiniest amount, "Thou wast outclassed, even with thine timely acquisition of that artifact." Here Luna nodded at the jade necklace on Crimson's neck:

"'Tis not thine fault thou wast not strong enough to prevail. And thou didst still strive, which speaks well of thee."

Then her eyes locked onto Prey, "Canst thou say the same for thyself?" She demanded.

"I..." Prey trembled. Luna's thoughts were a blank void, intangible, yet he somehow knew Luna would not believe his answer if he said 'yes'. He was caught. "I, I t-tried....."

Prey couldn't finish. He couldn't lie, nor could Crimson help him here. He was alone before Luna.

"Answer us Prey. Didst thou do all that was in thy power?"

She knew he couldn't answer yes, she knew he would just be lying. Somehow, she just knew.

"....."

"Gloom hast spoken of thine allegations against the Border Guard. In light of the actions of somepony within the Border Guard spreading misinformation, 'twould be understandable. Yet we art told that was not thy reason for denouncing Corporal Shimmer, but thou didst so simply because he wast a unicorn. 'Twas merely racism on thy part. Canst thou claim it 'twas not so?"

Again, Prey had absolutely nothing he dared say in excuse.

Luna's eyes narrowed in displeasure, "Thou mistrusted and slandered somepony who gave his life for thee and thy fellows. A brave Guard who offered more honesty than *thou* didst. And now Corporal Shimmer is dead in part for thee. What sayest thou to that, hmm?"

'He was a filthy Border Guard, a liar and a murderer, a Mimic!' Prey screamed in his head, but not even a whisper of it passed his lips. He dare not even look away lest it make Luna even more angry.

"Well?" Luna barked, voice a loud whip crack, "Hast thou any excuse for thy unjust hatred of unicorns and the scholars of magic? Doest thou have any paltry reason for thy distrust of thy fellow pony?"

Prey had so many reasons for why the pampered, rich, privileged unicorns did not deserve the magic they wielded. The power it gave them over every other race, even their fellow pegasi and Earth pony brethren. He could give over a dozen examples in one breath, but say any of that to Luna?

He'd be killed.

"N-no." Prey mumbled.

Luna arched one imperious eyebrow, "No?"

"N-no, Princess Luna."

"We hast seen too much of this sorry affliction amongst ponies in the centuries, and it brings nothing but misery to all. The rendition of Hearths' Warming is one such tale, and in spirit it is accurate if nought else. Thou wilt learn from it. All ponies were created equal. Thou wilt put aside thy childish racism now. We trust that we wilt not have cause to tell thee again."

"No-I mean yes, Princess Luna."

Prey felt bitterness swirl in his chest. All ponies were created equal? *Ha.* Thus said the alicorn princess to the non-pony slave.

Crimson was still standing right next to him, but there wasn't anything he could do to assist Prey. And did he even want to? Crimson had also called Prey a racist back then too. Did Crimson actually *agree* with Luna here?

'No! I won't let Luna scare me into driving a wedge between us, not after everything.'

Luna however, much to Prey's horror, wasn't finished with him, "Look upon us Prey." She commanded.

Slowly, reluctantly, Prey raised his head, trying not to let his mask slip even an inch. Under his wool, he was shivering. He was scared.

Looking into Luna's face was like looking into a pool. It was as perfect and as smooth as glass, but Prey couldn't see what lay beneath its surface in the depths. "Next we would ask thee of the afflicted ponies thou slew in thy traps. Thou knows of what we speak."

The Bone Rot mines. Prey had thought he'd managed to convince Nighthawk to drop the topic. Apparently not.

"Yes, Princess Luna?" Prey squeaked.

"Thou shalt not make such weapons e'er again, unless thou art ordered to do so, and never within any pony city, town, or village. Such weapons are too dangerous to the common pony, enemy and ally alike. Thou didst nearly slay Crimson by accident in thy plans."

Prey couldn't help but flinch.

"Good. We see that thou hast already thought to regret thine actions. Wouldst that they were not needed in the first place, but it was at the command of Sargent Gloom, and thou all had little choice. Howbeit thy father came to know of such a weapon, we wilt never know, but thou art forbidden to teach anypony the method of their construction. I know not what such fell weaponry is exactly, but we canst but imagine such things constitute a war crime. 'Dost thou understand?" Luna asked gravely.

Prey nodded vigorously, scarcely able to believe he was being let off the hook so easily.

"'Tis well." Luna said.

She went silent for a long moment. Outside of their silence bubble, Vanishing was impatiently waiting, but he couldn't have been less important right then. Luna continued to look down at Prey, pursing her lips.

"'Tis well." She just ended up finally repeating.

Surely Luna, an alicorn, wasn't hesitating over something? No, that was ridiculous.

"Dost thy family know of what happened yet, that is to say, of thy scars Prey?"

Prey couldn't help it. His eyes flicked to Crimson, no matter that Luna would take offence at him ignoring her for even a fraction of a second. Crimson was looking back at Prey out of the corner of his eye, his lips pressed together apologetically even though it wasn't his fault, it was the doctors.

Prey forced his eyes back to the waiting alicorn. He felt sick at the lies that were coming. He swallowed, "No. My family doesn't know. It wasn't something that ever... No. I'd like to keep it that way. Please? The per-pony who whipped me isn't ever going to do it again. No wait! I didn't kill him! That came out wrong. He just died. I don't want to burden my family by bringing up bad memories again."

Luna's faint frown only grew at Prey's words, "We disagree with thy reasoning. Thou art afraid, but thy family shouldst know so that they mayest help thee. However, we will not press thee."

"You won't?" Prey asked in shock, "Your Majesty." He hastened to add.

"We wilt not. That wilt be the task of thy doctor to convince thee to see sense."

Prey's blank look must have said it all. "We wilt make this quick, as 'tis poor manners to keep the good Lord Vanish waiting. All of the Intelligence and Secrecy Night Guard Division wilt be attending a doctor's therapy sessions. According to Captain Shining Armour, 'tis a most successful undertaking for rehabilitating ponies injured in the line of duty." Luna announced grandly.

Now it wasn't just Prey who was taken off guard, but Crimson also, "Princess Luna-?"

"Thou wilt all attend thy therapy sessions punctually and without

complaint, that is our command. Now come, we hath made Lord Vanish patiently wait to lay claim to his heritage long enough. What 'tis sooner started 'tis sooner finished."

And with that, the stinging in Prey's hooves dissipated before either of them could question what she meant.

The short, but terrifying, conversation with Luna had barely taken five minutes. Now they were back in the hospital conference room, with this Lord Vanish pony who was here for whatever reason Luna had allowed him to come.

Seeing that they were finished, Vanish's muzzle wrinkled ever so slightly, but he was not crass enough to; '-speak ill of a Princess within her presence, even if she's committed a faux paux-'

Prey didn't like the way he kept looking at Crimson with anger in his eyes, either.

"We art finished. We thank thee for thy patience Lord Vanish."

"Oh course, your Majesty. You are too kind." Vanish said, his upper class accent once again masking whether he meant it or was secretly being sarcastic.

"Thou art welcome," Luna magnanimously decreed, "Thou mayest now proceed with thy task. Knowest however, that Private Crimson hath done much in our service, and hast done nought with malicious intent."

And with that not-at-all ominous statement out of the way, Luna leaned back in her throne and waved for them to get on with it. Crimson's questioning look was blithely ignored.

"Thank you your Majesty." Vanish said yet again. He gave a small bow to the seated alicorn, and then straightened up and looked down his nose coldly at Crimson, completely ignoring Prey:

"I am Lord Vanish of House Time," The unicorn began, confidence in every proud line of his body, "And I will be blunt and save everypony sometime. I am a busy pony. Return my property at once, and I will let this matter drop."

"Pardon?" Crimson asked blankly, obviously not having a clue what the stallion was going on about. Prey did, however he didn't manage to speak up before Vanish took offence at Crimson's confusion and snapped at him:

"I am being far more generous than you have any right to expect, even if you are only a thief by second hoof circumstance. Remember that. I am representing my House here in seeing that our heritage is safely recovered, and I have the responsibility and power to ensure that it happens."

"I am no thief." Crimson said stiffly. From her seat, Luna passively looked on at the exchange, astral mane drifting about her.

"Your arrogance to voice such a lie while you stand there with House Time's very heirloom around your neck is frankly shocking." Vanish said coldly.

"My necklace?" Crimson asked in surprise, hoof rising to the jade chain.

"Incorrect. *My* necklace. It belongs to House Time. Return it to me."

Crimson's feathers bristled, not that Vanish noticed, "How can it be yours? It was a gift bought by-bought from a street stall."

"That artifact which you're so casually wearing like some common trinket has been in House Time for over five centuries, created by Archduke Time Sand himself. Nopony has been able to activate it since, but that is irrelevant. We know it's ours, because we have our ways of tracking our property. When you so crassly unlocked the ring, did you really think it wouldn't send a signal to House Time of its location so we could reclaim it?"

Vanish's tone was an angry sneer, even if his face was a calm and detached facade.

"Are you accusing me of breaking into your home and stealing from you?" Crimson asked.

'-if you were just a common burglar I'd be having this conversation with you through the bars of a cell, but no, the Princess is here. I

must restrain myself-', Vanish made a show of taking a deep breath.

"No. The original theft was not yours. I do not know if you really bought it off a street vendor, nor do I care. It was stolen from us some twenty years ago by a braggart taking advantage of an overeager filly who should've known better. She had no right giving out House heirlooms for her foalish infatuation to a caddish Grapevine-"

Vanish broke off, grinding his teeth, "That Heirloom belongs to House Time and it was stolen. I have come to take it back."

Grapevine. Prey knew that name. It was one of the noble Houses which had been hit by Lemon Pink back when she was still a Nightmare Moon worshipping cultist. Which was also why the Solar Guard had pulled Prey from his cell in Dreverton to solve Captain Valour's problems for him.

Lemon's little circle of cultists had robbed House Grapevine's vaults, who'd taken it from House Time in turn, and the jade ring had obviously been pawned off by the cultists who thought it nothing more than just a decorative, if charmed, bulky green ring. And then Prey had spied it being sold on the underground market and bought it for Crimson.

In a way, it had all come full circle.

Crimson didn't look like he was moved in the slightest by the Lord's words, "You lost it. It's now mine. I paid the cost for it, and you couldn't use it even if you had it. It won't work for anyp-body but me."

"This isn't a debate. This is a reclamation of inheritance. There is nothing to negotiate. I am perfectly willing to take this to the courts if you aren't prepared to do the honest thing." Vanish responded bitingly.

Prey couldn't just sit back and let this happen. He might be scared, (not of the foolish Lord, but of Luna), but this was over the necklace which had saved all of their lives, that Crimson paid a deeply personal price to unlock, and which he himself had gifted to

Crimson. So despite the tremble in his legs, the high pitch in his voice, and the sweat on the back of his neck, Prey forced himself to jump into the hostile debate.

"Hang on, let's all just take a moment, okay? Why can't this be a negotiation? There isn't only two sides to this argument, you need to consider everything." Prey called, waving his hooves to get both Vanish and Crimson's attention.

Vanish's eyebrows shot up in surprise, and no small amount of annoyance, '-the sheep? Why's she even been allowed in this peer meeting? And where do these ponies get their repulsive face scars? Some vile local disease, no doubt. It better not be contagious-'

"You don't know what we're talking about. Please be quiet and let the adults talk, fillies should be seen and not heard." Vanish dismissed Prey, while raising an aristocratic eyebrow at Luna as if to say, 'Really?'

Luna however was making no move to take either person's side. She was just looking on at the argument, face cold and blank. Like this was all a form of drama and entertainment to her.

'-oh, so you're taking your little Nightmare Guard's side in this then Princess? But the law is on *my* side, so you can't do anything more than silently disapprove-', Vanish thought, turning away when he saw that Luna wouldn't respond.

Prey couldn't help but stare. This unicorn was completely crazy! He *actually* thought he had any sort of power over Luna? Vanish was completely misinterpreting the situation, Luna wasn't keeping quiet because she had no power to interfere, but because she didn't care what the outcome was.

"Prey-?" Crimson asked, searching for confirmation of what he was doing by jumping in.

Prey hurriedly tried to signal Crimson to be quiet and let him do the talking; "That necklace is a valuable Night Guard asset, capable of saving lives. It *has* saved lives. It's already proved invaluable in the field. And since the magic can only be wielded by Crimson, why

shouldn't Crimson keep it? It'll just be sitting gathering dust on a shelf if you take it back, whereas here it can actually do some good."

Vanish was taken aback by Prey's very grown up argument, but he wasn't about to let some jumped up precocious little lamb talk him out of his family's heritage. "Propriety is irrelevant, as ownership has already clearly been established. The artifact belongs to House Time, and I will be taking it back today."

Prey flipped from appealing and guilt tripping to accusations without missing a beat. "Crimson's done more with that necklace in the few weeks he's possessed it than your whole House has in, what, the last five centuries? And that's even if you're telling the truth about it belonging to your family. Rather convenient that Crimson activates it, and then you turn up on the doorstep immediately afterwards to claim it, don't you think?"

"That's irrelevant. What's been unlocked once can be unlocked again by another pony." Vanish snapped, starting to lose his cool.

"No, you won't be able to pay the cost. None of you will be, and besides, Crimson isn't going to tell you how he did it. If you're going to steal it from somebody your own heirloom deemed more worthy than all your past generations, just because of greed, you don't deserve to know how." Prey returned, playing the spite card.

"You are not involved in this, foal. It is between my House and Private Crimson. Kindly keep your misguided accusations to yourself!"

"But he's raised a number of good points that you haven't answered yet. Are they true?" Crimson challenged.

"I have no need to justify myself for what already belongs to my House, and certainly not to the pony who's withholding my own property." Vanish said tersely, clearly irritated by being outnumbered. His head snapped towards the calmly watching alicorn.

"Princess Luna, this Guard is under your command, isn't he? Surely

you've heard enough to mediate and declare me the rightful owner? Or must I take this matter to a judge to get justice? House Time has always been staunch supporters and law abiding citizens of Her Majesty, Princess Celestia." Vanish drew himself up, "Or do the diarchy each view the law differently?"

'-we aren't as foolish as those simpletons from the Gala, but you don't want us as your enemy Luna. You're without friends as the Nightmare. What's your choice?-'

Prey hastily backed up from the insane unicorn. 'He's trying to blackmail Luna. Why's he trying to commit suicide?'

Luna's dark mane stilled for a moment as it drifted about her throne. Her sculpted face of ice didn't change for even a moment, but just that little tick filled Prey with dread.

Slowly, Luna looked to Crimson and down at Prey. Her lips moved in a tiny sigh, "Thy loyalty to thy teammate pleases us Prey, however, 'tis not a matter that thou hast any say in. For thy own good, thou shouldst stay clear of the matter. 'Tis between Lord Vanish and Crimson."

She didn't say 'Private' Crimson, or 'Night Guard' Crimson, just 'Crimson'. She was indirectly saying this had nothing to do with the Night Guard and Crimson couldn't use his position in the Guard to back up his arguments. However Vanish still got to use his position as a Lord. That wasn't fair, it was just typical.

"But-" Prey should've known better. He *did* know better.

One word, that was all Prey said before he bit his tongue. Luna was an alicorn, and he was a slave. He had nothing to beg or sway her with. She was the Sun Wolf's sister, he knew what she was capable of. An alicorn always gets things her own way. But his loyalty to Crimson was enough to wring that one extra word out of Prey where he should've kept silent. Just one word. "But".

"Thou hast no say in this Prey. The matter is closed."

Prey blinked, his vision suddenly going grey as all the blood seemed

to drain out of his head. Why was he suddenly so tired? He couldn't feel his forelegs and grey fog was rapidly closing in on everything.

'Magic attack! Defend!' Prey screamed in his mind, but his body wasn't listening and tiredness was aggressively trying to drag him down. It was winning.

Prey soundlessly folded up into a little pile on the worn hospital carpet. His head lolled off his forelegs, squashing his own ear like a pillow. Through eyes drifting shut, Prey stared at the golden bands on his legs.

'Luna. She's doing this to me. Filthy alicorn magic!'

Prey tried to fight it. But the magic was so potent, and it was the alicorn of the night's work.

Prey's eyes closed and he plunged into the depths of sleep.

When Prey's eyes snapped open what felt like only a second later, he was greatly disorientated to find the conference room gone. Instead of the scratchy carpet he'd collapsed onto, he was back under the soft white sheets of a hospital bed.

From one second to the next, the world had changed. It felt like he'd been teleported. There was no inbetween.

'Wha-? That Lord was there to steal Crimson's-and then Luna! She did this to me!' Prey thought in outrage.

'She just used the tracer bands on me because she didn't feel like having me participate in the conversation. Just like that! I said one word, *one word*. She couldn't even be bothered to wait the ten seconds it would've taken to order me out of the room instead.'

Prey seethed in helpless fury. That stupid foal's mobile was still up there, hanging mockingly above his bed. Prey glared death up at it.

What had happened while he'd been unconscious? Had Vanish succeeded in stealing Crimson's necklace? And who had carried him

back to the bed anyway?

Prey kicked and struggled out from under the blanket which'd been tightly tucked under the mattress's edge. Free, he jumped down and made straight for the door. He wasn't a child, he wasn't just going to sit here and wait until an adult deigned to come and tell him what had happened. He was perfectly capable of finding answers for himself.

With only a very minor limp now marring his steps, Prey pushed open the door and went looking for someone who could provide him with answers.

Prey dodged nurses, doctors, and one whistling cleaner mopping up some spill outside the staff break room. None of them noticed him, even in the bright and wide open corridors of the hospital, mainly because he was making the effort to avoid attention. If he'd thought they'd known the answer, he would've asked them where Crimson was, but he didn't think they would.

Worry bubbled in the bottom of Prey's stomach. Why hadn't Crimson waited around for Prey to wake up? Had Luna given Crimson an order to leave? Or had he taken off after whatever had happened?

So Prey made for the room in the hospital with the greatest chance of holding Crimson, (if he were here at all), or possibly answers at the very least; Scenic Paint's room.

But Scenic wasn't there, he and his wheelchair were both gone and the was room empty, which was still an answer in and of itself. By process of elimination, only three people could've taken Scenic out for a walk. Scenic's marefriend, a member of hospital staff, or Crimson.

So Prey, with a frown, headed for the second most likely place to find Crimson; Lilly Blossom's room.

Voices came to Prey's sharp hearing before the room actually came

into sight. Familiar sounding voices, four of them, but only three of which he could identify as ones which should be here.

Scenic, Lilly, and Carton Juice. But no Crimson.

The fourth voice was quiet and gentle.

Prey trotted closer, for the moment distracted from his search for Crimson by what he was hearing coming from Lilly's room.

"Just go away. I don't want to see any of you, *especially* you!"

"I'm, uh, I'm just trying to see how you're doing Lilly. I'm very glad you woke up." That was Scenic.

"How do you think I'm doing?! I'm a house plant! Just go away, I don't want to see anypony. I'm a m-just go!" Lilly sounded just as distressed as the last time Prey had heard her.

"We will, but we just want to know how we can help first." And that pleading but resolute voice was Carton Juice. Looks like she'd taken his suggestion to try and help Lilly. Sounded like she was doing a very poor job of it. No doubt Carton was sufficiently horrified by Lilly's appearance, and was letting it affect her reasoning.

"You can't help this. Look at me. Look at *me*! I should be d-dead. You have no idea what this is like."

"I know, I know. It's not okay, but maybe if you let us try to help we can at least make it a bit better-" Carton Juice was cut off as Lilly went on another screaming rant.

"I don't want your bucking useless help! You're useless. All useless! You're hypocrites! You have no idea what this is like. You still have your whole lives ahead of you, you're all still p-ponies. And you, you're a bucking super model! I hate you. I don't want you here. J-just go away." Lilly was loudly panting by the end of her miserable rant.

"She's a model?" Prey heard Carton ask faintly in surprise.

"You're not useless Lilly, you're still just as much as a pony as me.

As us, I mean. And uh, I'm sure Miss Saffron just wants to help too." Scenic said, uncertainty entering his voice at the end.

Saffron? Saffron. Saffron Swirl. That was the magically crippled unicorn mare Prey had seen on the balcony who'd been planning to commit suicide. She was supposed to be a famous model or something if Prey remembered correctly. So what was she doing here?

'How strange.' Prey was right outside the closed door now, but he didn't make any move to enter and instead continued to eavesdrop.

"I know nopony here knows me, not really. I'm only a part time charity volunteer, but I'm here to help if I can." That was the Saffron Swirl mare speaking now, "I only bumped into Miss Juice in the hospital lobby where I was helping out by complete accident. I am simply-"

"You have no right to be here. I'm not some dumb P.R. stunt for your fans, so get lost!"

"Yes I'm a celebrity, but I'm not-"

"You have your whole life made! You know nothing."

"Please," Saffron tried patiently, "Your friends only asked me along because I suggested I could help-"

"Your whole life! *Made*! You're rich, beautiful, loved."

A soft sigh; "There used to be a time I thought the same. I know, I'm privileged and rich and spoilt, and I never did a single thing to earn any of it aside from being born pretty. I'm more lucky than I could ever believe. And even though I can never understand what you've gone through Lilly, perhaps I can help just a tiny amount." Saffron said in her smooth, musical voice.

All that got in response from Lilly was a forced bark of spiteful laughter; "Ha. Ha ha. *Ha*. You're a regular comedian. Ha! Horseapples to you, and you, and you too Scenic! Go cut off your leg and stick a weed in its place, and then we'll talk. I lost my magic. You two aren't unicorns, you two could never understand

what's been stolen from me. You're only *mud* ponies. Go sing to your crops or something."

"That's not very nice..." Scenic began weakly before Carton shushed him.

"Shh, let her say how she feels. This isn't about us." But Prey caught the tremble Carton tried to hide in her voice. As it should be. Prey would bet Carton Juice couldn't even look Lilly in the face, what with the meld wood growing out of it.

This drama scene didn't help Prey though. He needed to know what had happened to Crimson.

"This isn't something I share with many ponies," Saffron Swirl's calm voice came, "And not many know. But I can't use magic either. I have permanent thaumic disconnectivity. I'm a magical cripple."

"Oh you poor dear." Prey heard Carton Juice exclaim.

"...W-hat?" Lilly asked.

"Yes. I can't use magic. But you still have it a million times worse than me, Mrs Blossom, and you're also a million times stronger than me. I have it all made, just like you said, but I still gave into despair at one point. I thought nopony understood me. It's only through a lucky meeting that I got better and saw how fortunate I truly am. And how many ponies there are who are so much stronger than me. Lilly Blossom, you humble me."

'Damn it all to Tartarus.' Prey thought as he realised in disgust who that 'luck meeting' had been.

There was a moment of stunned speechlessness from inside the room at Saffron's selfless admission. She'd just bared her most private weakness to three complete strangers, on the slim hope it might help one of them. It was a gift of pure selflessness.

'How truly ponylike of you.' Prey thought. Prey swore he heard Carton Juice sniffing.

Saffron went on into the sudden silence, "I don't know you Lilly, or

your two friends here-"

"-don' know her." Lilly muttered.

"-But if you'd allow it, I'd be honoured if you would let me. I'm only a volunteer here when I can get free time away from my agent, and I know I'm not much, but if there is some way I can help, please, let me at least try."

None of this was helping Prey. It wasn't important, nor did it settle his worries about Crimson. He turned and walked away up the corridor, leaving whatever else was said in Lilly's room behind him. He had other more concerns than pony drama:

'What did Luna do? Did she really let Vanish get away with that? And what's happened to Crimson?'

It didn't seem like Crimson was in the hospital anymore. Where or who else could Prey go to obtain answers? Prey couldn't think of any. The only ones present for the meeting had been Crimson, him, Lord Vanish, and of course Luna.

A nurse pushing a washing trolley full of clean fluffy sheets spied Prey and almost cooed at the little ribbon wearing lamb, until she got a close up look at the glare Prey was giving her and the poison burn scars. Then she thought better of it and hurriedly pushed the trolley away.

His search for answers unsuccessful, Prey eventually was left with little other choice but to return to his hospital room to wait and worry. There was nothing else to do. Nothing but grind his axe.

There is a saying; "Hungry dogs are never loyal."

Canterlot practically glowed in the beautiful orange of Celestia's setting sun. It was a scene which had repeated itself a thousand times before, and would for a thousand more.

It was picturesque. The way the light glittered on the golden spires before the cozy glow of the nightlife began, with warmth still radiating off the sun bathed mountainside, and the fresh breath of pre-night air blowing up from the plains. It all wove together into the experience of what the city of Canterlot was. What it stood for. What it meant to its citizens.

Or at least, it did until those citizens turned in for the night. Then another, smaller selection of citizens would get up and start their night.

Soon, but not just yet. For now, the sunlight still shone on the horizon, wonderful and comforting.

Most businesses had already closed for the day, as the setting of their beloved Princess's sun signalled to the ponies everywhere it was time to wind down. Some places however, such as hospitals, understandably couldn't just shut for the night. Patients still needed aid, medicine still needed to be administered, and emergencies still occurred which required medical assistance.

Thus, the hospital was one of the few buildings in Canterlot that truly never slept, beautiful setting sun or no.

Inside the hospital, the foal's made mobile lay bent and broken in a corner of the room, the colourful coloured cutouts all angrily crumpled.

Prey looked up sharply as the door opened, and Gloom and Crimson walked in. Prey's eyes immediately zeroed in on Crimson's throat. There was no shimmering jade chain resting there.

Prey's eyes widened and swiftly tracked up to meet Crimson's gaze. The pegasus exile's look said it all, and the hardness there had nothing to do with the scar streaks.

Prey had thought... but no. Princess Luna really hadn't stopped Lord Vanish.

'He stole Crimson's property. Vanish stole it, and Luna let him get

away with it.'

This was the thanks for what the ISND had done? For suffering, crying, and bleeding to stop Hard Baked?

Crimson was part of the Night Guard, Luna's creation, one of the loyal thestrals who'd sacrificed their whole way of life to come running the moment she called. Crimson had sworn himself to Luna, but she'd chosen a noble's selfish claims over his own. Was this some spiteful test on her part to see how far she could push her Guards?

And what about all the other things rest of the ISND had done to prove themselves? They'd been outmatched so many times, the scarecrow, the reaper king, even by a hoof full of kindersnatches. But just when by happy chance Crimson unlocked a magical artifact that would level the field and give them a chance, immediately a greedy pony Lord came by to snatch it away again.

Nor could Prey go after Vanish to steal the necklace back. Luna, an *alicorn*, had let the unicorn steal it from Crimson. Thus, there would be no way Crimson could ever openly use the jade necklace again even if Prey *could* steal it back. And if something unpleasant happened to Vanish, Prey and Crimson would be at the top of the suspect list.

"I do not want to discuss it." Crimson preempted Prey, his flat tone making it final. That didn't mean Prey didn't catch the look of confusion and hurt over Luna's actions resting in the bottom of Crimson's yellow orbs. Evidently, he was asking himself exactly the same question; Why had Luna sided with Vanish, despite Crimson's continued loyalty?

Probably only Prey could've seen the struggle behind Crimson's mask, but Prey'd had a lot more practice at living with a mask on than Crimson did.

However Crimson had spoken and made it clear; "I don't want to discuss it." He'd said. Prey could only wordlessly nod in acceptance of Crimson's wishes, and let his eyes slide over to Gloom instead.

"What's the occasion for the visit this evening?" Prey asked, "Or is it night already?"

This was the first look Prey was getting at the uncovered poison burn scars on Gloom's face. Unsurprisingly, they were almost identical to the rest of theirs. They were about as bad as Crimson's were, meaning better than Scenic's but worse than Prey's. Gloom was taking the chance to review Prey's face for himself in turn.

"Looks like you got off the lightest Prey," Gloom observed, before grimacing and quickly correcting himself, "Wait, no, that came out wrong, sorry. I just meant your poison burns aren't as bad. None of us got off lightly."

'-least of all poor Lilly. Oh Luna, that's going to be so difficult and her parents are still pushing legal action-'

Prey lightly cleared his throat and again prompted, "And the occasion?"

Crimson answered, "You're leaving."

"Leaving? I take it you mean leaving the hospital?"

"The hospital has finally judged you well enough to be discharged is what Crimson meant," Gloom clarified, "And I know how much you hate it here, so I signed the release papers as your legal guardian and came to get you out."

Prey ignored the 'legal guardian' bit, it was just a bit of paperwork and wouldn't have stopped him if he'd really wanted to escape. He just hadn't had anywhere to go, not with these *filthy* rings of alicorn cursed gold still on him. Prey glared down at the tracer bands, remembering how Luna had so casually rendered him unconscious with them.

"So what happens next?" Prey asked.

Gloom paused in scratching at his scarred chest, "Now? Well, we go back to yours and Crimson's two flats. I went by and picked up the keys from the landlord earlier, plus made sure he hadn't reneged on the contract, so you can get in."

"No, Prey meant, 'what happens to us after this'?" Crimson broke in.

"Yes, what happens..." Prey's wave encompassed in the three of them, Crimson's lack of jade necklace, the rest of the hospital, the whole of Canterlot and the darkening night sky outside by extension, and their situation in general within the Night Guard, "...next?"

"Oh, *that* next." Gloom sucked in air over his fangs. He rubbed at his chest scar, hard.

'-I don't know, why does everypony keep asking me that? I feel like I'm adrift all the time-'

"I'm not really sure. But for now? Nothing, I guess. We're still on enforced leave until further notice. Just... sleep, read, eat, see the sights in Canterlot, do whatever really. Personally, I'm just waiting for Captain Nighthawk to call us back onto duty since I'm going to be staying on now." Gloom shrugged, eyes flicking away on the end of that sentence.

'I see. So we're just to stay out of the way and keep our heads low because of the royal inspectors, until Nighthawk has need of us again.'

Because even Nighthawk knew he'd eventually have a use for killers again. Prey didn't believe the Captain's words for one second about the ISND not being judged or punished. Perhaps not punished officially, but all who were privy to the information would remember it was the ISND who'd gone to Mayflower, and it was the ISND alone who'd walked out of the massacre.

Everyone was saying it wasn't the ISND's fault. Prey doubted anyone really believed that, not deep down in the privacy of their own hearts. Prey had seen death and unfairness too many times to believe it would be any different now.

But he couldn't do much about it, and so long as those people kept their blame and judgement private and left him alone, it'd be fine. Left him *and* Crimson alone actually.

"And Nighthawk is okay with letting me out?" Prey asked carefully, thinking about all those restrictions the thestral Captain had been talking about. Wouldn't Nighthawk want to trap Prey here where he could keep a constant eye on him?

"He okayed it, it's fine." Gloom hurriedly waved Prey's concerns down, "As long as we don't leave Canterlot, and don't let any of the inspectors ask us any questions, *especially* not any lawyers or legal ponies, it'll be fine."

But despite his assurance, Gloom couldn't meet Prey's eyes, '-why's Prey being punished for obeying my orders? I'm the one who said, 'whatever it takes'-'

Prey chose, for the sake of getting out of here sooner, to hold his tongue.

"Well, no point sticking around here wasting anymore time." Prey said, hoping down off the hospital bed and breaking the pained silence, "I'm ready to go whenever you are."

They left the hospital behind, but not any of its problems.

It was a long trot from the hospital through Canterlot's lamp lit streets to their apartment block. Well, long for Prey at least. But then again, most walks were long for the sheep runt.

The night sky was in full starry bloom by the time they arrived. The night air wasn't quite as warm as when Prey had first been brought to Canterlot in chains. It was still pleasant enough, but Fall was making its meandering way closer day by day.

The border lands across the Ridgeback had been colder.

The keys jangled in the front door as Gloom spun the key a full three times to actually get the door unlocked. On the way ascending up to the second floor, they'd passed by other apartment doors from under which warm light and homely sounds spilled, but down here at the end of the long landing where their joint flats sat, it was dark and quiet. Once again, neither Gloom nor Crimson seemed to even

notice that little fact.

Gloom finished wrestling with the finicky door and got the ring of keys back. He held the keys up looped over a wing claw, "So, uh, which one of you wants to hang onto these?"

"Why is there only one set? Should there not be a key ring for the both of us?" Crimson asked.

"Remember the landlord refused to rent to Prey, because he's underage? Both flats are in your name Crimson, so that's probably why he felt you only needed the one set." Gloom said, frowning at the key ring he still held.

"We will want a second set." Crimson stated.

"Then get the landlord to give you another one. I can't think of any reason he would refuse if you asked Crimson. Just say you want a spare set. He can't argue with that." Gloom shrugged.

"Can we just go in for now and deal with that in the morning?" Prey asked. He didn't like standing out here. He didn't think they'd been followed, but the person who knew about the mimics, and knew that *he* knew was still out there. And he didn't know what they were willing to do to keep that information quiet. While Gloom and Crimson had been talking, he'd taken the time to check the inside of the doorway and hallway for traps.

"You're right, it's not important right now." Crimson said, taking the proffered keys from off Gloom's wing claw, "It'll keep until morning."

The brief corridor behind the front door, which led down to the T split at the end, was exactly as short and cramped as Prey remembered it. At the T, Prey and Crimson's two doors each faced each other. For some reason, both Prey and Crimson each paused in front of their blank doors. This felt important. Or unimportant, but like someone else in their place would think it was important, standing here, returning from a long violent mission, finally getting to enter their rented homes.

'It's just a door.'

Prey pushed his unlocked door open. He frowned at the slight squeal it made, he'd have to fix that. Inside, the room was almost pitch black, the single window not having a clear view of the night sky, and so not letting in much light. Prey could feel the empty floorboards and space around him though. It was the feeling you get when stepping into a, well, a completely unfurnished and empty room. Like the space was larger and more empty than it really was.

'This is silly. An empty room is just an empty room.'

This wasn't home. This was just somewhere he'd been forced to rent. It was a stranger's room, even if it was technically his. He didn't have to like this flat. He scuffed a hoof over the varnished floorboards. Sure, it was twice as big as Gossamer's family's cottage had been back on the farm, but still. That didn't mean anything, it was just a flat.

It really was very empty and quiet, though.

Over there, set in the corner of what was supposed to be the bedroom was the shadow of the disassembled bed frame Gloom had taken them shopping, (dragged really), to buy. The mattress was leaning up against the wall, exactly where they'd left it.

Prey sniffed. The air was still and sterile.

'What a horrible place.' Prey decided. Even the bunkroom back at the Palace was better than this. This was a flat, in Canterlot city, the pony capital. Prey hated it. But now it was his, or at least it was his until further notice.

"Hm." Prey looked back to see Crimson standing at the door's threshold, critically looking over the dark empty space. He'd evidently finished checking his own similarly empty room, and had now come over to check Prey's. And unlike the lamb, he could actually see it even in the dark.

"Did you want to come in?" Prey offered, stepping aside.

"No it's fine. This is your flat now. I was just checking." Crimson

said.

Checking for what? "Well, if it's my flat now, then you're always welcome any time." Prey told him.

"Okay." Crimson shrugged, but still didn't come in. Gloom peered over the pegasus's shoulder from out in the hallway.

"Well, this is it I guess. We're here." Gloom commented rather lamely.

"I guess." Prey agreed, looking around again. There was a silence in the empty room. Gloom coughed:

"I'm going back to my own flat. I'll come by sometime tomorrow and show you where it is. Or not. You're technically on vacation, you can just... Do whatever you want."

"Yes. I know. About being on leave, I mean. I go flying a lot." Crimson said. He *had* been out of the hospital for a week already after all.

"Oh right. Good. Well, tomorrow then. Night watch over you." Gloom said vaguely, and with a wave goodbye, he left.

Prey caught the thestral's parting thoughts, '-don't need me hanging around, they're not foals, not even Prey. Not anymore. They're more than capable of looking after themselves-'

Prey heard a light scuffing out on the landing's balcony, then the leathery *thwap* of wings as Gloom took off. Prey shifted on his hooves. Crimson continued to just stand in the doorway.

Making a light hearted joke about how it was too late because he'd already invited Crimson in and hadn't brought any garlic would probably help relive the strange, strained atmosphere, but Prey didn't feel like making a joke.

"There's change coming." He said instead.

Crimson pondered on his words for a minute. "I think it's already happening."

"There's more of it coming. I can feel it." Prey insisted. He looked at Crimson's bare neck where the jade chain used to hang, "You need a new mane tie."

"...I'll improvise something."

"Sorry."

"It wasn't your fault." Crimson said philosophically.

Prey understood Crimson didn't want to say anything further on the matter. He rubbed at one ear, then his ribbon, then at the scars down his cheeks.

Finally he said, "Keep an eye open, and watch your back, especially when you're alone."

Crimson's yellow eyes sharpened in the dark, "You believe that the noble Vanish will still not be satisfied?"

"Nnnno, not him per-*say*," Prey dragged the word out, "But I still sense something is coming. Be on your guard."

"I will be." Crimson nodded gravely, taking Prey's warnings dead seriously by now.

The mystery person out there hunting Prey for knowing about mimics was dangerous. Prey wanted to tell Crimson, but it was too late now. The moment had passed, and besides, sharing the information with Crimson might just make him into a target too.

So Prey bit his tongue, feeling guilty, "So, uh..."

"Until tomorrow. Night watch over you Prey. And keep your eyes open too."

"I will." Prey promised.

Crimson lingered a moment further, then left, quietly closing the door.

Prey looked around his empty flat again, or as much of it as he was

able to see in the dark. The flat did have a light crystal, but he hadn't turned it on, there hadn't really been a need. Gloom and Crimson probably hadn't even noticed anyway. The flat felt very empty. Prey trotted across the empty floorboards up to where the mattress leaned up against the wall.

Prey stepped to the side and gave it a little push.

**Swiiish*-Thump*

Prey wasn't interested in assembling the bed frame tonight. That could wait until tomorrow. There was no blanket or sheets, but what did that matter to Prey? A soft mattress still counted as the height of luxury in his book.

"Prey, what was that?" Crimson's muffled voice came through the door.

"Nothing, just dropping the mattress down." Prey called back, wincing at having already carelessly given Crimson a false alarm after only just warning him to be careful.

"Alright." Crimson's faint hoof steps disappeared again.

Prey gave the splayed mattress a cautious kick. Anyone could've potentially snuck into the flat while he was gone and laced the mattress with poisoned needles or the like. His new enemy in the shadows would no doubt be all too eager to help Prey into an early, (so to speak), grave.

Just because that rather useful rune he'd placed on the door frame when they'd last been here, (some three weeks ago), hadn't been triggered, didn't mean the flat hadn't been infiltrated. Teleporting in would get around the rune for a start. This flat was very empty, and worse, undefended. It was unpleasantly dark too, but it was nothing like the blackness which had pervaded 'that' night in Mayflower.

Prey gave the mattress one last suspicious, but also disappointed look. He wasn't going to be getting much, if any, sleep tonight. This room just wasn't safe. He wasn't prepared to close his eyes without at least a rudimentary runic array for defence.

More defences. *More* safeguards. *More* enemies. *More* traps to kill people. Prey was so tired of it, had been since before Dreverton really, but it wasn't ever going to stop until after the day he died. You couldn't just decide to stop swimming, no matter how exhausted you were.

'You can rest when you're dead.'

Prey sighed and rubbed at his ear, then got to it and began the long process of drawing out runes in the empty flat.

Wood was an easy material to work with, and took runes well, but there was a limit to what runes dead plant fibre could hold. As he worked late into the night, Prey wished the flat held more metal in its structure. He would have to see about changing that. Lemon Pink could help with that.

Change was coming. Prey could feel it. True, change was *always* coming in one form or another, but it was unequivocally coming now. Be it good or bad, large or small, Prey couldn't yet tell. But experience told him; "If it's not bad, then it'll be worse."

But he could remember, and he remembered all the times he could've died, both on the mission to Mayflower, and back over the years.

Some people would tell him he was safe and didn't have to fight anymore. That Hard Baked had been stopped, and the mission was over. But Prey knew better. There was no such thing as safe, there was no hallowed ground or ceasefire. The war never ends, the battlefield just changes.

Hard Baked and all his dark magic constructs had just been one in a long line of people and things trying to kill Prey. Hard Baked had failed, but there would always be another threat, another disaster, another monster. Sooner or later, larger or smaller.

Prey had survived this time. The people from Mayflower and Alfalfa Dale hadn't. Hard Baked and his kindersnatches had gotten them.

And those the warlock hadn't, Prey himself sacrificed to hatch the veropede, he couldn't forget about that.

'I sacrificed them for *my* monster, Hard Baked sacrificed them for *his* monster, and Lemon Pink sacrificed them for *her* monster. It's all just one big cycle. None of us are any better than the other.' Prey thought, feeling bitter and guiltily empty. Even Hard Baked had placed wreaths at the old stone circle for the villagers he murdered.

'As if that could ever make up for what he did, or undo his evil.'

It'd just been the warlock's way of salving his own conscience, 'I hold no such delusions about what I did, and what I would do again.'

Prey stopped working and looked at the door to the flat, *his* flat. He went over to it. Reluctantly, and with no purpose, he began lightly scraping words into the wood. The lines were only shallow, and roughly scratched, but that wasn't the point.

Although what the point was, even Prey couldn't have said. To remember? To not forget? As if. He *couldn't* forget. There was literally no point to what he was doing. It wasn't a memorial, he wasn't trying to cheapen those villagers deaths or what he'd murdered them for.

He'd sacrificed them to stop the person who *would* have murdered them. They would've died either way, but it was still him who'd done the deed in the end.

'Damned if I did, damned if I didn't. I've done worse things before, and I'll do worse things again to survive.' Prey thought hollowly.

But those justifications had never once made any of Prey's many murders right, and he couldn't keep doing things like he had been doing. He couldn't keep doing this. Something needed to change. Prey had a friend now in Crimson, and more than that, he had the pegasus's trust too. Prey had to be more careful, he couldn't risk losing that.

Prey finished the last letter and let his hoof drop. There, faintly

carved into the wood and invisible in the dark, was the harvest rhyme. Prey couldn't see it, but he could've unerringly traced every line again if he'd had to:

"~Raven magpie, fly away, Scarecrow, keep at bay..."

Prey hummed the rhyme through to the end. He thought of Crimson's defeat of the scarecrow, and his own of the reaper king. But mainly he remembered all the kindersnatches and the tortured ponies they'd contained.

"...Summer passes at its height, Reaper king, laughs delight."

'The ones in the pit weren't the only ones I sacrificed,' Prey thought wearily as he finished, 'There were those I left outside the firelight to satisfy whatever came out of the Wolfing Woods.'

Prey recalled cowering around the fire, the night so black the darkness hummed.

He shivered, "It wasn't real. It wasn't there." Prey recited.

"Close your eyes and count to three, and if you let it pass it'll let you be~"

---<-<-<O>->->---

Prey felt the stitch lines in the mattress fabric pressing against his cheek as he woke up.

He'd finally had to stop creating runes and collapsed onto the mattress about four hours before morning came. *After* he'd checked the mattress for contact poison or needles, of course.

Now morning was here, and its annoying morning light shining through the curtainless window and onto his closed eyelids. The presence of the sun banished any lingering shadows from last night.

He was also hearing something in one ear too, which was strange since it was the ear he'd foolishly fallen asleep resting his head on top of.

'Darn. That's going to hurt in a minute when it wakes up. But what is that noise?'

It took Prey a full half second to realise that those faint shuffling sounds and vibrations were actually coming from the flat below him, transmitted through the floorboards, the mattress, and to his ear.

It was a new experience. He'd never lived in a flat or woken up in one before.

So... now what?

He was awake, but there was nobody ordering him to get up. No shrill and hated alarm clock, no Night Guard duty, no T-Day training, no pony doctor or nurse coming in to do their morning check up, nothing.

'I could even go back to sleep.'

But that would be a waste of time. Time was invaluable. Prey could go back to sleep, since four-and-a-half hours rest, (while usual for him), was still not what one could call 'substantial'. Unfortunately, his runes and plans weren't going to complete themselves if he rolled over and went back to sleep. But he *could*.

'If I wanted to. There's nothing stopping me-owowOW.'

And that was his squashed ear, finally waking up with an indignant protest about pins and needles.

Prey sat up on the bare mattress, absentmindedly massaging his ear to speed along the blood flow and recovery process while he looked around the flat with fresh eyes. It was still as empty and sparse as it had been the night before, it was just that now early sunbeams laid the room bare in all its barren glory.

The untouched sink, the empty cupboards, blank white washed walls, bare floorboards. A pony's flat would've normally been furnished with carpets, curtains, a table and chairs, floor cushions on which to sit, a door mat, paintings for the walls, ornaments, pot plants, possibly a pet, a fruit bowl, a coat rack, a hat stand, and all

the other trappings.

But what use would Prey have for such things? He didn't even need the basic amenities available right here. He'd survived in the Deeper Green with nothing before. He had his ribbon and the wool on his back. Literally everything else Prey needed for survival he carried in his head.

'Still, I could get a table. Or make one. I could definitely make a small table with some wood and a saw. Don't even need a hammer if you were to make it right.' Prey thought. Hmm. Make a table. *Make* a table. Yes, he could do that. He could make a table.

Prey nodded decisively to absolutely no one but himself, 'Yes. I should make a table. One that's *my* height too for once. See how everyone else hates it.'

Tap Tap Tap

Prey did not bang on the door, banging wasn't needed. Crimson was a pegasus warrior. A simple tapping would get his attention just as well.

"Crimson, I would ask if you're awake in there, but if you're hearing this it's a redundant question. I'm hungry. Do you want to go get breakfast?" Prey called.

Prey patiently waited in the dim light outside Crimson's door. The short hallway leading from the front door down to both of their flats doors had no lighting fixture, hence the dimness. It took maybe a minute, but Crimson opened his door.

"Breakfast? Where?" Crimson frowned, lanky black mane haphazardly dangling in his face.

"I don't know. Where have you been getting your meals these last few days?"

"The mess hall in the Palace. But Captain Nighthawk was still letting me sleep in the bunkroom back then. Now that we're out

here..." Crimson glanced back into his empty flat.

"I plan to make a table today. You could make one for your flat too." Prey said, nodding past Crimson.

"I, what?"

"Make a table," Prey repeated, "They're simple enough. Just need some wood and a few tools."

Crimson blinked slowly at Prey, absently reaching up to drag his too long mane back. Then he just shrugged in acceptance, "Okay. A table."

"It can't be hard to find the tools somewhere here in Canterlot. But first, food. I'm hungry." Prey said, returning to his original goal.

"Okay." Crimson shrugged again, rubbed at one scarred eye, paused, and frowned; "Food from where though? Go all the way back to the Palace mess hall?"

"No, it would be simpler to just buy something to eat. And also get something to stock the cupboards with too, since, you know, we're supposed to be living in these flats now."

"Neither of us has any bits. Buying things requires money." Crimson pointed out. He paused. "And any tables will too. Probably." He added after a moment's thought.

"We have money at that bank place." Prey said. He still had trouble believing they, two conscripted prisoners, were really getting paid, and that it wasn't just a clerical mistake. There had certainly been enough of those recently for him to believe it might be one. Last he'd heard, Nighthawk was angling to court martial that clerk who'd thought commandeering a train to send reinforcements to Mayflower would be a wasted expense. Prey hoped the selfish bean counter got sent before the Sun Wolf.

"Oh, right. The bank. But I don't have my bank book. It's in my locker in the bunkroom. I think. Or maybe I threw it away." Crimson mused, frowning.

"You don't need it. I read their rules. You can make a withdrawal in person if you have your account number, code, and password." Prey assured him.

"That still doesn't help. I seem to have forgotten mine." Crimson admitted, wing twitching with annoyance.

Prey waved his concern off, "That's no problem. I know mine, and I memorised yours too."

"Alright." Crimson just accepted that without any issue or concern.

"Great. So we can go right away. If you're ready, of course." Prey hastily added.

"Now is good," Crimson just walked out the door as he was. He looked down sideways at the lamb, "You're very cheerful this morning. Overly so."

"I'm making an effort to try."

"It doesn't suit you."

Prey let his expression flatten back into normal, "I suppose it doesn't." He admitted plainly.

And that was that. Prey loved that about his new, first, and only friend. He didn't have to explain or question anything if he didn't want to. They were both weird, and if neither always fully understood the other's weirdness, so what?

"You're not going to lock the door?" Prey asked as they exited the out onto the apartment blocks landing.

Crimson stopped, "Oh yes. That. I forgot the keys. There was no need to lock anything back in the clans. We didn't even have doors to lock in my clan-I mean, in clan Myrrdon."

"No doors? What did you have?" Prey was quick to smoothly ask so Crimson didn't have to dwell on his slip.

"Curtains. Thick ones, I mean. They were good at keeping the heat

inside the caves." Crimson turned back to the door, "I should go get the keys."

"Why bother? You got anything worth stealing in your flat? I only have a bed in mine." Prey asked. A lock wouldn't stop Prey's enemy in the shadows until he got his runic defences up and running, so why bother?

"Mine neither. My armour was returned for repair. Quartermaster Carrot was not happy to see me. Nor what was left of my armour." Crimson recalled.

"He's never happy to see anyone, and he *certainly* doesn't believe in following those six virtues of Harmony or whatever. Alright, if you've got nothing worth stealing in your flat either, then we don't need to bother this time," Prey said, already heading for the stairs as he called back, "I'll meet you outside at the bottom Crimson."

Why at the bottom? Because Crimson could fly. When they'd accepted these flats, it hadn't just been because there was virtually nothing else available. The second floor landing had an open balcony to the sky, and Crimson could fly. Prey was ridiculously proud of his past self for thinking of Crimson, but also guilty that he felt he had any right to feel proud over something so measly.

Since it was still early, by Canterlot standards, Prey didn't hear any signs of life coming from the other flats he passed on his way down. And once he met up with Crimson outside, they didn't encounter much in the way of Canterlot citizens on the street on their way to the bank either.

The sun was up. The sky was blue. Canterlot's streets gleamed. It was the start to another perfect day.

But Prey wasn't one to forget his own warning, and neither was Crimson. They may have been in Canterlot, in a city of ponies, on a main street, in broad daylight, but you should never let your guard down. Thus, Prey tried to stay fully aware of his surroundings at all times, and Crimson did the same.

So while they hardly spun around at every sound, or eyed every shadow, or kept their backs pressed to a wall, (Which would've been both ridiculous and just plain impractical), they both still stayed alert. It wasn't anything drastic or difficult. Staying aware was as simple as keeping yourself alert for changes, checking behind oneself regularly, being mindful of who else was around and in your blindspots, and not forgetting to look up. After all, one third of the population could fly, much to Prey's secret and deeply hidden jealousy.

They arrived at The Royal Canterlot Bank just after it opened, and spoke to a cashier about withdrawing some money without too much issue. Of course, since the cashier was a pony, once he got a second look at Crimson's face and realised those streaks indeed really were scars, he couldn't help but openly stare.

"Uh, here you, uh, go Mister Trace. Your bits." The stallion stuttered, tips of his ears trembling slightly.

'-keep your ears straight, keep your ears straight, don't let him know you're staring-'

Crimson wordlessly took the packet of withdrawn bits, Prey already having taken his own. Prey had reminded Crimson of his password and code on the way here, since Prey doubted the bank would let him, a lamb, withdraw money on someone else's behalf. They still let him withdraw from his own account though, once they were finished treating him like a little child of course:

"Oh hello there little filly. You come to withdraw bits from your account for the first time? My, aren't you a big filly. Do you need any help? Now, do you have your password? Do we need to ask your parents-Er, guardian, Mister Trace?"

That attitude had lasted all the way up until the annoying cashier had gotten his second look at Prey's face too. Prey wasn't happy about the scars, but it had done wonders in making the pony almost swallow his tongue.

Now with their money successfully extracted, there was no point in sticking around in the marble halled bank. So they took their leave without delay or thank you.

The two of them had set out with some very simple goals in mind. Find food, buy food, eat food, and then, if possible, buy some tools and planks to build a couple of tables with. Unfortunately, Prey's very simple plan turned out to be needlessly complicated, tiresome, and filled with frustration.

Getting some breakfast was the easy, and decidedly enjoyable experience, spent in an early morning breakfast cafe. But the rest of the plan? Not so much.

The first issue came when they went to pay for their eggs, hay, and potato wedge breakfast. It was the situation with the bank cashier all over again. When the cafe staff saw Crimson's facial scars, combined with the pegasus usual emotionless expression, resulted in scaring all the staff and being asked politely by the cafe manager to stay away from the other customers. While in the future, some more of the fur on Crimson's face would no doubt grow back and help minimise the visible scarring, it hadn't happened yet.

The second issue was the fact that they were apparently expected to 'tip', a concept Prey had never heard of before and didn't like once he had heard of it, and third, Prey got annoyed at their waiter's aversion to Crimson and started tormenting her with innocent sounding questions but which nevertheless messed with her head.

Petty, certainly, but satisfying. But next came a logistical problem which Prey really *really* should've foreseen when they left to buy more food to stock their flats with, and also the materials to build a table with.

And that issue was; Transport. How were they supposed to get it back to their respective flats? They had no saddle bags, backpacks, or cart to carry everything in. Plus, on Prey's suggestion, they were headed into Lower Canterlot where things were bound to be cheaper, (or cheaper by Canterlot's standards anyway), making it

even further to transport everything back.

The last, and biggest problem was price.

Prey had assumed that, by all logical conclusions, that simply buying the wood and nails to build a table and doing it yourself was cheaper than buying a ready made table.

He'd assumed wrong.

It was expensive, *twice* as expensive, to do it yourself as to buy the table outright.

"How does that even work? How does this make any economic sense?" Prey had grumbled to Crimson.

Crimson didn't know. He said as much quite plainly; "I don't know."

Prey was used to doing something yourself if you wanted something made. Back in the village, if you needed a new table, you went out, chopped down a tree, split it into planks, planed them down, measured them to size, and made it yourself. Or if you wanted a good table, you dried the wood first to prevent warping, but a table didn't have to be a work of art, it just had to be functional. Nobody had time for art on the border. You had bigger concerns.

Like the harvest, a heavy storm, ponies, or other wandering monsters.

"Whatever," Prey said, turning away in disgust from the rows of tables in the furniture store, "Who really needs a table anyway?"

So they settled for simply stocking up their respective flats instead.

Before Dreverton, Prey had spent a lifetime worrying about where his next meal was going to come from. This experience naturally led Prey to only buying preservable foods, focusing on quantity over quality, and sticking with simple, easy to prepare things. He wasn't interested in cooking. Time was valuable and could be better spent creating more runic arrays to defend himself with. As long as he

had food, who cared how good it was?

Besides, simple food was also easier to detect poisons in.

Flour, potatoes, hay, oats, and when Prey found it, dried pasta and rice. That was the extent of what he bought. Although those last two food stuffs he'd only recently learnt about since coming to Canterlot. They hadn't had pasta or rice over the mountains, but Prey was impressed. Just add water and boil. Simple, cheap, filling, straight forward, and best of all, non-perishable.

Crimson had a similar approach, although he bought fruits and vegetables too, the types which could be preserved for a reasonable length of time in cool dry places, such as apples, onions, and carrots.

Crimson was very kindly carrying most of their purchases on his back in thick paper bags, while Prey himself was carrying a smaller number, since that was all that fitted on his back. Flying was obviously impossible for Crimson what with all the bags he was balancing, so that only left walking back to their flats. The two of them spoke little, but only because that's as much as they felt like saying. The streets were quite a bit busier by this time in the morning, and it was a bit too noisy for a conversation anyways. That, and Prey strongly disliked crowds, *especially* pony crowds.

Crowds put him on edge, their thoughts were so rudely loud, and it was much harder to keep track of everyone for potential threats.

It was just about then that they went past a vendor with ice cabbages out on display.

'I used to make even our ice cabbagez' taste good, in hare stew, yez?' The remnant of Garrow whispered unexpectedly in the back of Prey's head. A ghostly desire to buy the nostalgic, if tasteless, cabbages faintly tickled Prey.

Prey angrily squashed the irrational feeling and ignored the vendor's stall. 'That's not me, and never was. Just a dead griffin's childhood memories.'

Ascending the apartment block's stairs and arriving back outside their two flats, Crimson and Prey found Gloom pacing outside.

"There you two are. Where'd you go?" Gloom asked the moment he saw them.

Prey pointedly looked at the food they were carrying, "To find food."

"Ah, sorry." Gloom winced, "I forget all about you two not having anything in your flats. I should've picked you up for breakfast. How did you buy any of this?"

"The bank." Crimson grunted, giving the door a push.

'-the door was open?-', "You should lock that." Gloom said, following them inside.

"There was nothing worth stealing. We will lock it from now on, though." Crimson said, politely opening Prey's door and going in to drop off his food first. Prey didn't care about them barging into the flat, since even although it was his, it was just a flat, and plus it was just Crimson.

'When I get the runic defences up and running though, I'll have to be more careful.' Prey thought, putting the flour and potatoes away in the otherwise empty cupboard. "How about getting that spare set of keys from the landlord now?" He asked out loud.

"We can certainly do that yes," Gloom answered, looking around the bare flat, "We'll also need to see about getting you some more stuff Prey. And you too Crimson."

What was this '*we*' all of a sudden? Prey hadn't forgotten how Gloom had been prepared to leave them behind in the ISND. Sure, Gloom'd changed his mind and was now staying, and Crimson wasn't holding a grudge over it so Prey shouldn't either, but it wasn't even about that. It was just a flat, it wasn't a home, but even though Prey hated the flat, it was supposed to be *his* flat. It was none of Gloom's business what he put in it or didn't put in it.

"Why's it matter to you?" Prey asked.

"Because you need some basic kit?" Gloom responded, raising one eyebrow, "How else are you going to cook that stuff? You've no pots, bowls, spoons, nothing. These flats are completely bare."

"I hadn't forgotten, no." Prey answered.

"We were going to go out again to buy those things next." Crimson put in.

"Good, then I'll come with you. I had to outfit my own flat with a few things when I moved to Canterlot from my clan. I had to do quite a bit of searching for the cheaper places, so I can show you where some good shops are."

"That would be helpful, thank you." Crimson said.

"Good idea." Prey said, hiding his mild displeasure at Gloom's accompaniment. He gave Gloom's still thestral appearance and jagged chest scar a once over. No Dusk Pony amulet, nor even a scarf to hide the scar tissue.

'I suppose when you're flying, there's little need for masking your appearance that high above the ground with not even other fliers seeing you up close.' Prey thought. If Gloom was coming with them though, he was going to have to walk because of Prey, and then any ponies they encountered were going to freak.

'Actually, that's an excellent reason to bring him along.' Prey smiled.

Crimson packed away his food, and then they left. This time, Crimson remembered to bring along the only set of keys and locked the front door.

Gloom looked at the line up of Prey's intended purchases. Up the front of the shop by the till, the pale looking owner was staring with wide eyes whenever he thought they weren't looking, but they were ignoring his un-subtle attempts.

"You know you can buy more than one right, Prey?"

"What do I need more than one for?"

"You have one pot, one pan, one bowl, one plate, one spoon, one knife, and one fork."

"So? That's plenty." Prey answered.

Gloom sighed, "Okay, so I understand sticking to the bare necessities. But maybe more than one plate?"

"Why? I'm already only getting a plate because you said so, even if I think it's unnecessary. A bowl can do the job just as well. And I only need the one. I can just wash it up after each use."

"Because," Gloom waved his hoof, "You know... You might have guests or something."

Gloom was actually right, what if Crimson ate with him at some point? "Alright, another knife, fork, spoon, bowl, and plate."

Gloom sighed again, "How about more than two? They come in sets of four, so if you're buying more than one you may as well buy four."

"What I would like to know..." Crimson began slowly, looking at Prey's basket, "Is the reason that you have so many knives in there?"

"What? It's only six kitchen knives. You can never have too many knives."

Time waits for no one. It was midday by the time they got back to the flats to drop off Prey and Crimson's newly acquired kitchenware. And then what? They were all supposed to be on medical leave, but no one had any obligation to stay with the others if they didn't want to. They could in theory split up and go their own ways.

Change was here. It was the start of a new chapter in Prey's life. But how long and how uncertain this chapter would be, Prey didn't yet know.

Time marches on, but some things unfortunately stay the same. The scars still remained, on all of the ISND.

For example, Gloom was still traumatised by what'd happened in Mayflower. In fact, the real reason the thestral was here right now and not lying despondently in his bed was because keeping active was better than staying still and thinking. Crimson was still an exile from his clan, his father was still dead, the jade necklace had been stolen from him, and he sought refuge in flight and physical exertion. Prey himself was simultaneously as free as he had been in fifty-seven years, and bound more tightly than ever. He was out in Canterlot, but he was not free to do what he wanted.

Time marches on and things change, but it's never the things you want. So the three of them stood on the apartment landing, each looking back at the other two, and each stuck in an uncertain moment of awkwardness.

Finally, Gloom broke the moment by suggesting they return to the hospital to visit Scenic and Lilly, mainly to attempt supporting and encouraging the latter.

Crimson agreed to go. Prey didn't. They weren't on duty, and Prey knew Gloom wasn't about to force him to attend. Prey would've tagged along to go with Crimson despite that, but he could see how much the pegasus really wanted to fly to the hospital instead of walking again. And he couldn't fly if Prey accompanied them, so Prey refused.

Gloom was upset that Prey didn't want to go, but Prey dismissed his worries and said he'd go by and visit Lilly and Scenic later. ‘Right after they open a health spa in Tartarus.’

"I'll go by in my own time, don't worry. I haven't forgotten our squad mates. But you two can get there and back a lot faster without me, so go on, shoo. You know you'd much rather fly."

Mollified, Gloom and Crimson said goodbye and launched off from the apartment block's balcony, squinting against the sunlight, but still swiftly gaining height.

Prey waited until they faded from view, then hurried back into his flat and locked the door with his newly acquired set of keys. With an unknown enemy on the loose, staying alone out in the open when there weren't any witnesses was a foolish idea.

He wasn't safe, and Prey could never let himself forget that.

One hour turned into two, three into four, and Prey turned them all into more runes, which was still only enough to secure the flat with the mere basics of defences. Even while inside the nearly empty flat and out of direct line of sight from his single curtainless window, Prey still felt like he was being watched. The back of his wool kept prickling, even though he knew no one was there. It was exhausting.

'I can relax when I'm safe. Or as safe as it's possible to get for someone like me.'

Safety came from backups, safeguards, and contingency plans. Peace of mind came from information, defences, and sustainability. And more to the immediate point, it came from runes.

But runes, as always, took time. It would take about a full one-hundred hours work before there were enough arrays set up in here for Prey to feel reasonably safe, and if he wanted to make the flat properly secure, another hundred after that. And if he wanted it to be really *really* well protected, well, any additional time spent after that could only improve the defences.

So far, Prey had only done about ten hours of it.

For example, Prey wanted defences against teleportation, telekinesis targeting him, along with mind magic not his own, anti-fire wards, and silent intruder alarms. Also planned were defences against scrying and magical spying, (no matter how unreliable and unknown those magics were), scanning spells, illusions, attempts to circumvent these defences, and of course arrays to reinforce everything against forced entry in case anybody decided just to kick the door down.

Oh, and some more lethal defences Prey could trigger himself. Like

the rune flare trap. It was one of his go-to favourites, despite how fire scared him, since it was one of the most efficient rune traps for the amount of time and energy required, while still managing to be fast acting and potent. Of course he'd need to add in fire proofing for the wooden flat too then.

It was all very complicated, for example, there was the issue of making sure the arrays were layered properly. If done incorrectly, certain types of arrays would fight each other or stop working altogether. Some runes also invalidated others, so Prey would have to work out replacement runes and make sure those *new* ones didn't block the *other* runes either. For what he had planned, Prey was also going to have to create a number of higher runes, which always came at a cost and with their own risks.

Plus, spare space also needed to be planned in advance and accounted for so later improvements could be added, and everything had to be carefully done in the correct sequence too.

And, to top it off, every one of these arrays had to be discreet and hidden against any scanning spells of even the most magically sensitive unicorns, as well as being just visually hidden.

Prey however had mapped out everything in his head long ago. He'd had nothing but time to think about theoretical runic combinations, applications, and uses while in Dreverton. Fifty-seven years did wonders for perfecting your theory crafting.

'And I'll have to replicate all of this again for the secret cave Lemon found down in Canterlot Mountain.' Prey thought.

Although to be fair, the lair would also be containing the veropedes, so the active defences there were already mostly taken care of, Prey supposed.

Prey didn't stop to cook, he just ate some of the recently bought hay and kept on working without pause. He didn't recall if he even tasted it. Time was precious.

He needed to be ready for whatever the crisis life brought.

Prey finally had to stop when Gloom and Crimson returned. He was mentally exhausted, and felt like a piece of wire drawn too thin. But Prey was used to the hollow, drained feeling and hid it well when he opened the door to welcome Crimson back. And welcome Gloom too, as he supposed he must.

"Did anything of interest happen at the hospital?"

"Scenic is... doing reasonably well, I think." Crimson said.

"And Lilly?" Prey asked, already knowing the answer.

'-I hate what we did to her. And I wish she hated us more than she currently hates herself-', Gloom thought as he coughed into his hoof:

"Not... not so good I'm afraid. Scenic and some friends are apparently trying to help her, which is great, but I don't know if it'll make it any better. I'm afraid they'll end up making it worse instead." Gloom admitted. It sounded almost like a guilty confession.

"So she shows no change." Prey summed up. Carton Juice and her impromptu friend/supermodel Saffron Swirl were welcome to try their best, though. It was no wool off Prey's back.

"She is still refusing to see her parents." Crimson added without inflection, however the knowing look in his yellow eyes said it all to Prey. He gave a single nod back to Crimson in understanding.

Lilly Blossom was refusing because of Nighthawk's deal, or ultimatum, or possibly just challenge. He'd promised Lilly that if she still wanted to commit suicide *after* facing up to her parents, he'd stop the hospital from interfering and hold the knife for her himself.

Lilly was afraid. Afraid to take Nighthawk's challenge, afraid not to, afraid of facing her parents, afraid they would change her mind, and afraid that they wouldn't. She was afraid and confused, not knowing what outcome she really wanted. So she was not taking any of them and hiding instead.

It was a sad, twisted, and broken position Lilly found herself in. Either she would survive it, or she would not. But then, as Prey well knew, being able to survive never meant it was okay.

It may have seemed strange, but that was more or less how the day ended for Prey. There was still plenty of daylight left, but interpersonal interaction wise, that was basically it. Gloom eventually left, Crimson excused himself to go spend three or four more hours flying and training, and Prey was back to being left alone in the flat.

'This. This is weird.'

The ISND were on enforced medical leave. There was no active case to solve, no warlock to stop, no need to work tirelessly round the clock. Nothing. In fact, the amount of nothing they had to do was disquieting. Prey was all too used to it. It made him feel like he was back in Dreverton.

The hours were empty and the day was free.

'This is *really* weird.'

After Gloom and Crimson left, Prey just stood in the open front door, watching the wide, bright blue Canterlot skyline past above the balcony railings. A pleasant breeze periodically blew in, and the occasional bright colour of some pegasus or another would drift across in the distance.

No push, no drive, no schedule but his own.

"Huh. Weird." Prey muttered thoughtfully. He was still drained from all the runes he'd created, but he'd recovered a little. Enough to have no further excuse for not continuing to work, at any rate.

Sigh "No rest for the wicked."

Prey didn't stop working again until Crimson returned, right before

it got dark, and by then, Prey was well and truly exhausted.

He even had trouble standing and answering the door when Crimson knocked, but again, he knew how to hide the hollow, weak feeling which came from over exertion in runic creation. Like he hadn't eaten in a week, and all the life had drained from his limbs. Even if it was Crimson, the pegasus still couldn't be allowed to have any clue as to Prey's runes. For his own safety, if nothing else.

Prey smiled, making it a real one, and not just one to hide the mental exhaustion. He made a note to figure out some way to secretly give Crimson a runic key so the defences would recognise Crimson too:

"Good evening Crimson. You were flying all this time?"

"Yes, and training."

Crimson had sweat streaking his face, and his lean muscles stood out from recent use. The pegasus stretched out one wing out to its full limit, then the other with a contented groan, "I'm very glad my flat has a shower."

That's right, Prey's flat had a shower too didn't it? He hadn't used it yet, but showers were a wonderful invention. He didn't have a towel or anything resembling one, but eh, so what? He'd never had a towel in the Deeper Green. Give yourself a good shake and then drip dry was good enough.

'I wonder, perhaps I should go buy a towel from Luxury Linen? I wonder what face Leaflet Spring would make if I walked back into their store?' Prey snorted out a giggle at the thought.

Crimson gave him a blank look.

"Just thinking how neither of us have bought any towels. I thought how amusing it would be to buy one from Luxury Linen." Prey explained.

"Ah," Crimson nodded, "There would be a certain entertainment value to it. But I prefer not to swim in the sea."

Prey titled his head, "Swim in the sea?"

"Salt water, drugs in the towels, I mean. It was a joke."

"Oh, I get it. The sea is salt water, although I've never seen the ocean myself. Have you?" Prey asked in interest.

"Not me personally, no. But my father has seen... had seen the sea."

It went quiet. It was always the little causes of grief that caught you off guard when you least expected them. Over sixty years later, it was still happening to Prey to this very day. It could be as simple as a strange sound, an old scent, a familiar colour. You were prepared against the big things, but never the little things.

Prey didn't offer Crimson any empty comfort or say; 'I'm sorry'. He simply waited a moment to let Crimson recenter himself, and then said, "I doubt you've eaten yet. I have much the same in my kitchen as yours. Want to eat dinner off my non-existent table?"

Prey wasn't being callous, he was just offering Crimson a chance to change the conversation without having to confront or admit anything. The attempt to switch the topic to food caused Crimson's wings to lock up for a moment on his back, however.

"No. Actually, I would like to... speak. I mean, I would like to retell the tale my father told me of his encounter with the sea." Crimson said, clearing his throat.

"Okay." Prey agreed easily, folding his legs under himself and lying down on the one end of his mattress, waving for Crimson to take the other.

Crimson blinked at the mattress still sprawled on the floorboards, "You have still not set up your bed frame yet?" He inquired as he took the other end. He did not sit prone down like Prey, but on his hind quarters, hooves together, and back perfectly straight.

"Eh, I'll do it later tonight. There's plenty of time," Prey dismissed, "Now, your father's journey?"

Crimson gave his head a small shake, putting aside the distraction

and returning to the poignant topic he himself had raised, "Yes... My father. Yes. He did have to fly to the ocean once. This was before he met my mother. He said it had been a year of bad storms in the mountains..."

Prey listened to Crimson's stumbling, awkward, and halting retelling with riveted focus. Crimson wasn't retelling this for Prey's benefit. He was recounting it for himself. Prey was just required to be there to listen as the moon rose outside.

That night, Prey went to sleep on a bed constructed with Crimson's assistance. He slept with his ribbon on, though.

A pink and bright green mare chatted non-stop to her coltfriend as the two of them strolled down the street, a panting dog happily straining against the leash in the stallion's aura. This was a popular street in Lower Canterlot to walk your dog, possessing pleasant grass drives on either side of the road, and a water fountain at the far end where you could let your dogs drink.

None of the couples walking their pets noticed the runt lamb watching from a side alleyway. This plain alleyway was never used, as it only led down some stairs to below street level, turned back under itself, and then to an emergency access hatch to the water mains. That was where the fountain's water was coming up from.

This access point was so unused, that the entrance way had a straggly curtain of green ivy trailing down over it, growing out of the stonework.

Prey had been hiding in the shadows at the top of the alleyway here for the last fifteen minutes, making certain he wasn't being followed.

Only when Prey was absolutely certain, did he venture down the disused steps, having to take them one at a time with his short legs, cautiously pushing aside the dangling ivy to gain access.

The sun was cut off behind him as he ducked through the vines, but it was only a few paces before the alcove ended anyways. A locked, plain faced steel door, with cobwebs in the doorway's corners. There was a picture of a tap and a water droplet indented into the drab metal surface, but that's not what Prey was looking for. He was looking for something which couldn't actually be seen.

'Hmm... Ah! There it is.' Prey reached up and tapped the invisible rune placed just below the door lock. There was a dull metal click, and then at a light push from his hoof, the door swung near noiselessly open without resistance on recently greased hinges.

Inside was a small, dusty stone and concrete room, the far wall taken up by a number of large metal pipes, stop valves, cobwebs, and another squat steel door. This second door was open, and led into dusty darkness. The whole room was cool, and a strong smell of mildew permeated the old air.

Prey didn't care about any of the pipes however, only the far door. Set down beside it on the floor was a lantern, and a flint and steel.

The candle flame flickered in the damp air as Prey lit it on his third strike with the flint. Pausing only to close the little lantern's hatch, Prey balanced the lantern on his back and ventured in.

Where did this next doorway lead? Wherever you found an emergency water access mains, what would you also find close by?

An overflow pipe, in case of unprecedented flooding in Canterlot, (How that could happen when pegasi teams closely controlled the weather, Prey didn't know), and never far away from an overflow pipe, the sewers too.

Prey went down some more concrete stairs, leaving natural light behind. The air was chill and the roof low. He climbed down an open access cover and down some ladder rungs, lantern grasped in his teeth, and dropped down into the empty overflow pipe. The curved concrete tunnel was bone dry. The tunnel's ceiling was over five times his height again, or more simply, merely twice the height of an average pony. Prey's hoof steps echoed faintly, and the candle's flame cast long shadows on the smooth, featureless grey

walls as he spat out the handle and returned the lantern to his back.

This setting could be something out of a ghost story, what with the blackness, the oppressive silence, the empty tunnel, and the echoing darkness, but Prey wasn't overly afraid. He knew where he was going, and that there was nothing down here to hurt him. He'd taken precautions to ensure as much.

Prey trotted down the concrete tunnel, following its long, slow curvature. This particular overflow pipe ran through a full quarter of the South district of Lower Canterlot, so it was a fair trot. The tunnel stretched and elongated, each yard revealed in the lantern light the exact same as the one which came before it. His soft hoof steps faintly echoed. One-hundred..... two-hundred..... four-hundred..... four-hundred and fifty... And then suddenly in the tunnel's roof was a jagged opening of broken stone.

The hole was fresh, like a small cave in, but all the rubble had been removed. Looking up and into the jagged hole, there was a rough stone tunnel above, the rocky innards of Mount Canter a splash of darkness against the grey of the tunnel's concrete roof.

And there was a ladder, like a root growing down out of the hole, right here in the middle of the tunnel.

Gripping the lantern handle in his teeth again, Prey ascended the splintery wooden rungs. As his head broke the level of the pipe, Prey felt the rune set on the opening trigger as it sent a silent signal down the link of runes and off into the dark.

Prey sat himself down on the cold stone lip of the rough hole to wait, candle flickering in the oppressive darkness.

Somewhere far above all this rock, up in the openness of the sky and so different from where he was currently waiting, Prey knew Crimson was flying. Today had begun much like yesterday really. Prey had awoken to the strangeness of his own flat, a building he'd had the chance to get much more familiar with, on account of how he had and would yet be spending so much time pouring over every inch of the walls and floor placing runes. Nevertheless, it was still strange and always would be. It wasn't a home. He'd hopped off his

bare mattress and gotten right back to work. Time was too precious to waste on relaxing.

Actually, that bare mattress was one of the things he and Crimson had fixed earlier after breakfast, once his pegasus friend, ('friend', still such a novel word), had also arisen.

They'd gone out to eat again at a new cafe, Prey had insisted on a new cafe, not an old one, lest they form a pattern and become predictable. Crimson had not offered any resistance to Prey's paranoia. He understood Prey's distrust, even if he didn't feel the same level of danger and uncertainty as the lamb always did.

Anyway, instead of returning back to their flats after breakfast, they'd instead then continued on to go shopping to obtain a few more basics for their flats. Namely, two bed sheets, two pillows, and one blanket. Only one blanket, because Prey still intended to get back his old runic inscribed blanket from the bunkroom, which Lemon Pink had removed for safe keeping prior to Alfalfa Dale and Mayflower.

Prey could pick it up before he went back today actually. He glanced up from idly peering down into the dark overflow tunnel and turned his head. There was a much brighter lantern glow than his own coming from almost right on top of him. "That was a reasonably fast response time. Good."

"Yes, Prey. But I feel the result's time is skewed. I was expecting you." Lemon Pink said tonelessly, lowering the lantern suspended in her silver aura. Unlike Prey's, her lantern was a full magical crystal glow one.

Prey opened his own smaller candle lantern and blew it out, not needing it anymore, "Point. Well I'm here now, so you can show me around the new lair yourself."

From the opening in the roof of the overflow pipe, this new section of rough tunnel barely lasted ten hooves length before it joined into a much smoother, and obviously older cave system. Prey brushed a

hoof along the cold stone walls as Lemon led the way, and judged the cave to be many centuries old. They'd no doubt been here long before Canterlot.

The stone passage twisted and turned, contracting to almost claustrophobic dimensions in some places, expanding in others, and then without warning it opened into a wide cavern.

This was to be his secret lair.

There were three more crystal glow lanterns set around the domed cavern, but while they helped light up the area, they only lit about half of it, with the corners of the cavern still suspended in deep shadow. In the middle of the cavern was a crystal clear pool of water, disappearing down into plunging depths. Stalactites at the domes peak slowly dripped water into the pool one droplet at a time. Prey eyed the sink hole warily, but the most eye catching features in the cavern were the crystals.

Crystals. Enormous, milky white angular crystal structures jutted out randomly all over the place. From the floor, the walls, the ceiling. Some were smaller than Prey's hoof, some were the size of his whole body, and the most impressive and largest specimens were the length of whole carts. While the crystal formations didn't quite refract the lantern light like some rainbow prism, the light still lent them a gleaming sheen.

Prey's eyes swept the cavern, noting sizes, space, angles, and most importantly, the joining exit tunnels out of the cavern. Or entrances in. Then a corner in the dark part of the cavern twisted, unwound, and turned into a glistening maw of teeth.

And there were the two veropedes, both curled up into balls of armoured exoskeleton in the shadows and looking like something out of a nightmare. The one which had just awoken was Prey's, or the one he'd personally hatched at any rate. Not that he could tell the visual difference between one giant spiked monstrosity from the other, but the control runes just 'felt' like his when he reached out with his mind to give it a command.

'Come.'

The nightmarish monster unwound with terrifying silence and speed, and bore down on Prey. He held firm as the thing's circular toothy maw came to a halt less than a hoof's breadth from his face, and many hooves closer than was comfortable.

"Feeding them both enough is no longer an issue?" Prey asked Lemon without looking away from his leashed weapon. He felt a shiver, indicating the feathery light touch of the veropede's antenna as they brushed over his face and body.

"No, Prey. I fed them each three grown pigs two days ago. From my observations, it'll be another three days before they start to grow hungry again, and another two days after that until they grow restless."

"That's still roughly twenty-two and a half pigs a month. But perhaps the food requirement can be cut down when I have time to begin carving more runes into them." Prey mused as the giant insect continued to examine the runt lamb in front of it.

'Enough.' Prey mentally commanded, sending the impulse for the veropede to lose interest.

The veropede hesitated, antenna pausing for a moment. 'Enough.' Prey repeated, and this time sent the impulse to go rest too.

That did the trick. The veropede finally turned on its segmented length, and skittered back over the crystal strewn cavern floor, returning to the comfortable shadows in the corner to sleep.

Prey watched it go, and was pleased. The veropedes were not dogs however. They were not, and never would be, pets. They were not even war hounds, like those used in the old stories about minotaur warriors. These were monsters of instinct, plain and simple. They did not need stimulation or interest in their lives, such things didn't matter. They were pure creatures of nature. Hunger, thirst, the desire to breed, and rest, that was all that drove the veropedes.

If nothing changed in the next forty years, as long as pigs kept getting brought in and the pool remained full, it was doubtful if the veropedes would ever leave this cavern, merely eating and sleeping

away the months and years. Of course, things would never be that simple, but for now, it was good enough for Prey. As long as he could ignore the lives the veropedes existences had been purchased with.

Prey nodded in satisfaction as the veropede curled back up around itself and went still. Things would never be that simple, but when were they ever? For now, it was enough.

"Let's continue the tour." He said, turning back to Lemon Pink.

"Yes, Prey."

After Lemon Pink had finished conducting the little impromptu tour, which wasn't long since she'd only found this cave and moved the veropedes in here a few days back, Prey looked at the pool again.

"Watch out for the pool, especially when you're down here alone. It's always night down here, and I'm distrustful of deep water. It has a way of calling."

"Yes, P-Deep water. Deep water. I...remember." Lemon came to a stumbling halt. Prey looked up at her sharply.

Lemon's violet eyes had gone glassy, and there was an unconscious tremble in her lip, "I was made. When you made me from, from what was left. Eaten. In the deep ocean, hunger."

Lemon's eyes refocused again. She looked around the cavern, "Forgive me. I, I am unsure what just happened. I have not had that reaction before when thinking about my creation."

"What else do you remember?" Prey asked, staring at her intently.

"I don't remember further. What happened that night, Prey?" Lemon asked.

Prey's soft expression was belied by the coldness in his blue eyes, "When you were made, I gave you all my memories, but not all the

memories of your, or rather Night Watcher's, last moments. If you think for a moment, I'm sure you can figure out why that is."

Lemon did just that, and thought. An expression of understanding passed over her face, and the faint trembling in her shoulders ceased, "Ah. I understand why now, Prey. A piece of reality held in memory. What you dug from that hole. Hunger. I was not physically present at the time, I only have your memories, so it won't work for me."

"At least, I don't *think* it'll work," Prey allowed, "And I'm not going to risk it. I built the same cage inside your mind, but yours stands empty. That's all I'll say out loud, and you know better than to push, don't you? Yes or no?" Prey demanded. He would only accept the one answer.

Lemon Pink knew the danger she was in, but she was his creation. If Prey said to jump, she would jump. Her life was his. "Yes, Prey."

"Good." Prey let out his breath as the sudden scare passed, "Be wary of the pool. Now, back to this cave, how many ways to get in are there?"

"Two from the surface, Prey."

"I can count four tunnels out of the cavern." Prey pointed out.

"Pardon me, Prey, I misunderstood. Two down from the surface, and the other two lead deeper into the mountain."

"How deep?" Prey asked.

"I don't know, Prey. It's a labyrinth down there. I have not had time to safely venture in far enough to map it yet. Should I make that a priority?"

Prey looked at the two dark tunnels. Where could they lead to? Or rather, what might be down there under the mountain? These crystal caves were beautiful, but like all things in nature, beauty was just a concept. The quartz crystals would still stand just as tall and as proud when spattered with blood as not. Quarry eels could be the least of what he had to worry about.

"For now, no." Prey said, and concentrated.

The two dark coils of armoured veropede in the shadows unwound, their instincts telling them to move and rest outside the two tunnels leading deeper. In the veropedes minds, they were now guarding the entrance to their nest. The two burrowing monsters were basically built for underground tunnels like these.

"Both those tunnels will need to be blocked off at some point, but for now..." Prey gave the blackness of the two tunnels one last look, before returning his attention to the rest of the cavern.

Looking over the huge empty space of rock, Prey couldn't help but sigh. Here was another area he had to spend hundreds of hours preparing runic defences for. What's more, this wasn't something Lemon Pink would be much help with. While she *could* create runes, it seemed to take her three times as long as it took Prey. Therefore, it wasn't efficient for her to do so.

"So much work that needs doing." Prey lamented.

"Yes, Prey." Lemon Pink agreed solemnly.

Well there was no getting around it, and the sooner started, the sooner finished. And to be honest, Prey was pleased with his new 'lair'. Very pleased. The cavern was almost perfect. It was well hidden, undisturbed, defendable, and all the rock and especially the crystals in the way, it would wreak havoc with any scanning spells from the surface. The lair may be empty and lacking supplies now, although the plentiful supply of water simplified it somewhat, and the rest of the missing supplies could be gathered.

Prey cleared his throat, and before he got down to the grunt work of creating runes, began voicing a list of instructions for Lemon Pink:

"I have taken up permanent residence in the flat now, and the sooner you can find a flat nearby, the better. I will be requiring the return of my runed blanket and the pot plants you were storing for me. There has been no overt assault by my new enemy in the shadows, but I'm sure it's just a matter of time. That electrite, I need

it a lot sooner than I had anticipated. The Night Guard are going to be restricting me even further. Our objectives from The List remain on hold for now, but after this lair is secure, numbers 5B and all of 8 will be open for us to pursue again. Continuing as follows..."

Perhaps to both Prey and the pegasus's surprise, Crimson took Prey's offer to eat at Prey's flat for what passed for dinner that night.

It felt very weird, just like everything else that had been happening recently.

'I have a house, in Canterlot, the most desired city in all of Equestria, and I'm inviting people over for dinner, and actually have enough food to share. Huh.' This is what rich and famous people did all the time, wasn't it? Invite other high class people around for tea parties and the like?

Well, Prey wasn't any of those things, and he didn't have a fancy table, (or any table for that matter), but he *was* having Crimson around for dinner.

'Huh.' Summed up Prey's thoughts for a second time.

Prey and Crimson sat upright on the floorboards, each with a bowl of oats and rice cradled in the crook of one leg, and a spoon in the other. Prey had one of those spoons like unicorns used, since he could grip it between his cleft hoof, whereas Crimson had the more normal spoon with the hoof loop. Prey had heard there were also fancy enchanted cutlery out there which stuck to your hoof naturally with magic, but understandably, he didn't have any of those.

No serving utensils, place mats, napkins, table, chairs, or floor cushions, just bare floorboards. It was very similar to what each of them had grown up with, one in a cramped wooden cabin, and the other in a stone cave.

No, what *was* surprising to Crimson as he chewed, was; "This is fairly good."

"Surprised?" Prey asked, raising his spoon.

"Yes," Crimson answered with blunt honesty, "I was expecting something more like Cookie's cooking. I mean, you have never seemed to care about taste before."

"Food is food. Hunger is the best spice, or so they say." Prey said.

"Yes. That is true." Crimson agreed, and Prey knew he was agreeing from experience, same as him. A quiet moment passed.

"When? For you?" Crimson asked seriously.

Prey didn't need to ask for clarification, neither did he withhold the answer from Crimson:

"On the farm in my village. Twice, we had a bad harvest. And some other times too, there just wasn't enough to go around for anybody, and foraging the surrounding land was dangerous and the pickings ran thin when everybody was having to do the same." Prey answered, darkly thinking about his time spent trying to survive in the Deeper Green, "You?"

"Six years ago. There isn't much you can grow in the mountains, although Clan Chillara manages it well or so I've heard. Anyway, it was an early and hard winter, and a blizzard buried what few crops we did have. Then half of the clan's stores were lost to rot and a mite infestation. My father and I were at the bottom of the ration list." Crimson stopped there.

Those weren't happy memories for either of them, that much was obvious. Prey looked at where the jade necklace used to rest on Crimson's neck. As Crimson had asked, Prey had not brought it up since, but he wondered now how much Crimson had been planning on relying on the magic artifact to help him get his revenge against Clan Myrrdon when the time came. But now a greedy lord had stolen it away, and now Crimson was back to square one.

"So how?" Crimson asked.

Prey paused in scooping about another spoonful of oats and rice, "How...?"

"How did you make this taste not awful? I mean, good?"

"Oh, right, that." Prey nodded towards his reclaimed selection of potted plants and herbs by the window sill, "Some seasoning goes a long way."

If only it wasn't Garrow's remnant who'd prompted Prey on how to do so, Prey would've been a lot prouder of the result. Garrow had been a chef in the Low Kingdom's Royal Kitchens at one point in his life, despite how ridiculous the idea was.

Crimson blankly observed Prey's little makeshift window garden, "That is a good idea. I should get some herbs of my own. And pick up my Blood Fern from the barracks too."

"If you want some potted herbs, I'm happy to get some for you." Prey offered.

"What herbs do you have here?" Crimson asked, wing flicking at Prey's plant collection.

Prey started naming them and listing their properties, uses, and applications. Most had uses outside of mere taste enhancement in cooking, which meant most just had a mild additional medical property. Swelling reduction, an antiseptic, fever relief, a blood thinner, a muscle relaxant, and the like. For a few of the plants however, Prey had to pretend there was nothing additional to them.

Because he couldn't tell Crimson that if prepared correctly, or mixed in a certain way, those plants would create deadly poisons.

But alternatively, if applied in food with a different quantity and mix, it made for a decent rice and oat dinner.

"Impressive." Crimson said simply when Prey was done listing out the pot plants, "It's like your own little medical station."

"Thanks."

"Was this also taught to you by those travelling zebras?" Crimson asked.

Prey kept chewing his food to hide his moment of hesitation. Crimson had been asking quite a few questions tonight. But it was Crimson asking, and Prey knew he could just tell Crimson he didn't want to answer and the pegasus would never bring it up again. He should just say that. Did he want to though?

Prey swallowed. He played with his spoon for a minute. "Not precisely. It wasn't those zebras. It was... someone else. A different zebra."

Something in the way Prey said that must've alerted Crimson. He lowered his bowl, "A different zebra. Someone else who came later."

"Yes."

"Someone bad."

"...Yes." Prey admitted. 'Bad' didn't even begin to do Snake justice.

Crimson looked around the room, then focused back on Prey's face. The scars under his yellow eyes really did make his gaze piercing, and now it seemed to see right through Prey.

"Was this zebra the one who...?" Crimson cautiously gestured at Prey's back with a wing, wincing at his own bluntness.

Now that was going a bit too far for Prey's liking. He raised his bowl higher and cleared his throat, "No, he had nothing to do with whipping me. He was worse. And that's enough of this topic."

Prey's answer was final. Crimson accepted it and dipped his head. They both returned to silently finishing off their food, and soon that silence turned back into merely the companionable type of silence.

"It will be my turn tomorrow. For making food, I mean." Crimson said as Prey put the bowls in the sink. (A sink with running water you didn't have to draw by hoof, and *hot* water at that! Ponies didn't know how good they had it.)

"I'll look forward to it then."

"I will wish you a good night. Night watch over you Prey."

"Thanks. See you tomorrow."

Morning came creeping up on Prey. He unconsciously started to scowl as sunlight gently impacted his closed eyelids. His nose twitched in distaste, before he promptly rolled onto his back and pulled the blanket over his head. There the ball of blankets and wool settled for a few more wonderfully comfortable and peaceful minutes. Then Prey woke up.

Immediately he sat up and got going like there was no time to waste.

He might still be tired from staying up late last night creating more runes, but once again, he knew all too well the value of time. He'd lost fifty-seven years of it. And anyway, at a push, Prey could function on four hours sleep. Not consistently, but still. However that did mean he was always tired underneath it all, but comfort was secondary to safety. Hence why he didn't linger in bed.

Prey couldn't afford to start developing bad habits now, no matter how tempting. Although he refused to even consider getting an alarm clock. He hated those things, and anything which made loud, unnecessary noise.

'So most ponies, then.'

He'd eaten a quick breakfast, and then it was back to drawing runes. Prey wanted to get in as much time as he could working on the flat's defences. Who knew when or if the attack would come, and he didn't have a lot of time this morning. The reason being?

Gloom had come by yesterday in the evening, (mainly to go flying with Crimson since the sun was no longer so bright at that time of day), but also to drop off a letter. A doctor's letter, two of them, one each. Gloom had already read his own letter.

The letters were from an approved therapist, containing appointment times, just like Luna had said. The letter was politely asking them to attend an emergency session the next day. That was

yesterday. For all its politeness, the letter wasn't really offering him the choice. Attendance was compulsory. Luna had made that clear.

'A *therapist*.' Prey stopped creating the 'Yhe'vva' rune, waiting until the spike of anger faded before trying again.

Luna and Nighthawk were forcing him to go see a therapist. A *pony* therapist, one who hadn't a clue what they were doing and thought hugs all around were the way to go, and were going to treat him like one of their foal patients.

'It doesn't matter,' Prey reminded himself, 'Bow, beg, scrape. Do whatever you must to placate Luna and stay alive. Nothing's changed. Pride is the privilege of the strong.'

At least he had a few hours where he could actually get something productive done before then.

'And who knows?' Prey told himself, 'Maybe it won't be so bad. Instead of being 'murder worthy' awful, maybe it'll only be 'maim worthy' levels of awful.'

'Or I could kill him instead.' Prey thought.

The therapist was a unicorn, a stallion with a pale coat, slim shoulders, and a kind smile. Apparently him being a stallion was important, because it was supposed to help Prey connect with someone of the same gender. There'd been a moment before the therapist, named Clear Mind, had momentarily panicked until he'd surreptitiously checked his report and confirmed that yes, Prey really was a boy.

So far they'd been sitting here in silence in Clear Mind's office for the last ten minutes. The office was bright and open, with lots of splashes of muted colours, which Prey hated on sight. Clear Mind had a desk, but he wasn't sitting behind it.

Rather, he'd asked Prey to sit wherever he wanted and then waited to see what the lamb did. Prey had taken the furthest bean bag in the corner. Clear Mind had smiled, and taken one of the matching

bean bags in the very middle of the room, meaning Prey would be the same distance from him no matter where he sat.

The session had barely begun, and already Prey was sick of all this mental analysis the unicorn thought he was interpreting from Prey's every action. Worse, Prey knew he was going to have to play along with the narative until he was 'cured' to satisfy Luna and the Night Guard command.

Aside from saying hello to introduce himself and asking Prey to take any seat, that was all Clear Mind had said so far. If Clear Mind was trying to play some therapist game and out wait Prey, he was going to be disappointed. Prey had well learnt the life saving value of patience in the Deeper Green, whereas this doctor wasn't even a rank amature.

'-good, Prey seems to be starting to relax. Be friendly, let him know he can speak anytime, but let him speak first-'

Relax? Around a unicorn? Ha! Prey was ready to kill this pony if he turned hostile, that was how relaxed Prey was. On the other hoof, if Clear Mind was planning on waiting until Prey spoke first...

Fifteen minutes later...

Clear Mind's serene smile and open expression hadn't slipped, but inside Prey could hear that the unicorn was a lot less confident than he had been at the start of this session.

'A session is only forty-five minutes long anyway. So only another twenty minutes to endure.' Prey thought. He wondered how Crimson was doing.

'-okay, so not going as good as I thought. Could this be an indication of a fear of sound or conversation? Prey hasn't broken and spoken, any standard foal should've by now. What does this indicate?-'

While Clear Mind worried about what kind of trauma could've caused this, it finally occurred to Prey that Clear Mind might not have a clue what he was doing. The doctor might just be a complete quack.

'-Prey needs to open up and learn to trust me if I am to help him. The file said he was forced to bear unwilling witness to a traumatic death, so it's imperative he opens up as soon as possible. No, I can't force anything. His file said don't use touch, so hugs are out. But I need some way of introducing positive reinforcement-', Clear Mind silently fretted.

'Does he think life actually works like this? What am I, a dog looking for a pat on the head?' Prey thought in disbelief. Even from a pony, this was just plain insulting.

'Is this really what they teach pony doctors? Perhaps it works on pony foals, just give them lots of hugs, but really? Really? That's your best strategy?'

Two minutes before the session ended, (Prey was counting), Clear Mind finally spoke.

"Well Prey, I'm very glad you could come and attend this session with me today. I think even with this one session, we've made good progress, and I know you'll rapidly improve." Clear Mind lied, a bead of sweat on his brow.

Okay, Prey just had to ask; "Good progress? On what basis?"

Clear Mind beamed at him, "You've been very well mannered and polite. Trust me, compared to some of the foals who tear up my whole office, you were positively a little angel." He chuckled.

'-yes! I finally got him to speak to me, progress!-'

"Oh? You really think I'm really doing that well?" Prey asked, soft blue eyes going big.

Clear Mind completely missed the hidden mockery, "Yes I do, and together I just know we'll make blinding progress Prey. You can trust me on that, I'm here to help."

'-so he's not afraid to speak, that invalidates my previous hypothesis. Wonderful! This is very very good, he's able to identify with normal foal behavior. It's just a shame it took me this long to engage him in conversation. Seem's he really was just shy, and it's not trauma-', Clear Mind's thoughts raced away, providing him with baseless speculations and hypotheses.

Prey's mask didn't budge even one inch, despite the mental drivel he was listening in on, "Thanks Mister Clear Mind. So, do you think because I'm doing so good, maybe I don't need to come back?"

Clear Mind chuckled ruefully, apologetically shaking his head, "Not quite yet. But don't worry, I'm sure we won't need to work together long. You're a wonderful little f-lamb, and you're wonderfully strong. Don't let anypony ever tell you otherwise. You can do anything you set your mind to. But it's okay to ask for help too, okay?"

"Okay?" Clear Mind gently prompted again after a moment, "Can you do that for me?"

'I can write your name on the back of The List, that's what I can do.' Prey thought very calmly. But he let his eyes drop, "I uh, uh... Thanks. It was nice to see you mister Clear Mind."

Prey exited the therapist's office and wordlessly rejoined Gloom in the waiting area. Crimson had only just started his session, replacing Gloom's spot with the second therapist, so they'd have to wait. Gloom and Prey's eyes met across the waiting room.

Prey looked at Gloom. Gloom looked at Prey. Wordlessly, Prey took a seat across from him. For forty-four long minutes, they sat in slightly stunned silence.

On the forty-fifth minute, just before Crimson was due to finish, Gloom spoke, a thoughtful look on his face as he stared up at the panel ceiling. "Well that was... something you don't experience every night. Or every day. Thank Luna for small mercies."

"Are all of them... Trainee therapists or something do you think?" Prey asked.

"Maybe?" Gloom offered without much confidence.

"Or maybe they're just plain incompetent." Prey muttered.

"I'm sure it works for normal Canterlot ponies." Gloom said.

"So give them a hug, sing a song, eat a cake, and it's all better?"

"Well, I wouldn't mind giving the cake part a try." The joke was flat, without any real feeling behind it. It sounded like Gloom was just going through the motions.

'-I actually feel worse than I did when I came-'

The only point Prey would give in their favour was that Clear Mind and his colleagues hadn't visibly flinched at any of the ISND's facial scars, or Gloom's thestral heritage. Which, considering Gloom had the worst scarring out of the three of them *and* was the thestral, was reasonably impressive. For pampered Canterlot pony quacks, that is.

After a long moment, Gloom spoke again, "On the other hoof, this is all on Princess Luna's instructions. And they're ponies honestly trying to help. As dumb as I think it is, I'm still prepared to give their methods a go if it means-"

The second therapist's door opened, and Crimson trotted out, with that same, slightly cautious gait as if he wasn't quite sure whether this really was reality. He looked blankly at Gloom and Prey, while behind him the second therapist beamed:

"Thank you all so much for coming. I look forward to seeing you and Gloom again. Have a lovely day."

The cheerful therapist's words seemed to galvanise Crimson, because he made straight for the front door, "Let's get out of here." He muttered to Gloom and Prey as he went past.

Gloom and Crimson didn't stick around once they'd left/escaped the hospital again. Lilly had refused to see them, although she was

apparently willing to see Carton Juice and Saffron Swirl at least.

"Who's Saffron Swirl?" Gloom had muttered.

Prey would've probably answered if Crimson had asked the question, but felt little need to enlighten Gloom.

Scenic was in a session with the orthopaedist, so they'd given visiting the Earth pony a miss too. Gloom made the resolution to, '-go by later and try visiting again-'

Crimson had left to do what he did all day, which was fly and train, and Gloom had flown off to his own apartment for lunch and then to try and get some more sleep after: '-the nightmares last night. Thank Luna for Princess Luna-'

Wings really were useful for getting everywhere, and fast too, but Prey wasn't offended by Crimson wanting to spend time by himself, Prey wanted to do the same, after all. Still, if he'd been born a pegasus instead of a runt lamb and could fly too...

'And if wishes were oat cakes, no one would ever go hungry.' Prey thought. So he waved Crimson goodbye until the evening, and watched him rapidly power up into the sky until Prey had to look away because of the brightness of the sun.

Then he went back to the flat and got on with creating more runes instead.

It was while Prey was thus working on building an outer runic array to help differentiate between any passive magic and hostile magic used within the flat, (much more complicated than it sounded), that disaster came knocking.

The first Prey knew of it was a banging on the front door, the one out on the landing leading down to his own and Crimson's flat doors. Prey paused. That wasn't Crimson, since the pegasus had a key, and it didn't sound like Gloom either. It didn't seem likely from the banging to be a Night Guard either. It was the middle of the day, and thestrals were a lot more restrained.

Well, since Prey didn't know who it was at the door, there was a very simple solution. Ignore them. Prey wasn't interested in answering the door to someone he didn't know.

Then came the muffled shout, making its way through two closed doors and down one hallway. "Crimson Trace! Open up. This is the Civil Law and Criminal Prosecution Agency. We have the Royal Guard with us. We have a written warrant for search and detainment!"

Prey whipped around and raced for the door.

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Author's Notes:

Well here's the next chapter, and wow it really dragged on when writing. And no wonder, 20K words. But I had lots of time to write these last two weeks! So, that's a positive I guess.

Anyway, lots more words means lots more potential to have missed mistakes. If you see any, please let me know. Thanks.

Thank you to the editor for helping: Sweetolebob18

Also, another little Picture by GreatSpaceBeaver, relating back in the story. Thanks be to him.

57.4 A Clear Sky, A Clear Day, and a Clear Mind

"Crimson Trace! Open up. This is the Civil Law and Prosecution Agency. We have the Royal Guard with us. We have a written warrant for search and detainment!"

Prey yanked the front door open so suddenly that the stallion who'd just about to pound on it again stumbled forwards.

Beyond the open doorway, four ponies blinked down at Prey in surprise. Prey assessed them in an instant: 'Two Royal Guards, both rank private, and two unknowns. Official looking. None are openly armed. Two unicorns, dangerous, one pegasus, and an earth pony. Surprised, not expecting to see me here. Why are they here for Crimson?'

Prey got a wash of thoughts from the four unwelcome visitors at the same time he was thinking all this.

Official number one, a unicorn mare; '-well that's certainly not the pegasus in question-'

Official number two, the earth pony stallion, '-huh? Strange Happenstance didn't say nothing about a filly-'

Unicorn Royal Guard, '-wait, what? That silly lamb from the Night Guard lives here?-'

Pegasus Royal Guard, '-does this mean that freaky bat lover really did adopt a foal?-'

Almost all of that was uninformed drivel, but Prey's mind immediately latched onto one name that stood out, 'Strange Happenstance. Him *again*. What's he playing at this time?'

The moment of slightly stunned surprise passed, and the unicorn

mare cleared her throat importantly, "Is Crimson Trace in? We have a warrant to search his property."

'-sugar. A foal complicates things. We can't use an excuse to bring Crimson Trace in for questioning if it means leaving an underage foal alone and unattended-'

Prey gave a wide eyed blink, "Why do you want to see Crimson?" He asked instead of answering.

"I'm afraid that's between us and him," The earth pony official said with a not unkind attempt at a smile, "Crimson Trace *does* live here right? He's looking after you, I take it?"

Prey considered for only a moment, "Yes, that's right."

"That's great. Please take us to him. We need to ask him some questions." Behind the two official ponies with their ridiculous tailored jackets, the Royal Guards were exchanging uncertain looks and thinking:

'-this all seems a bit iffy for a warrant-'

'-but what a great chance to put those lying Night Guard investigators in their place!-'

Prey smiled cheerily up at the two officials, as if he didn't comprehend the real reason they were here, "Sure I can, follow me."

"Crimson Trace is here right now, isn't he?" The mare double checked.

"Yeah, right here in our flat." Prey said, and turned left into his own flat. None of the trailing ponies noticed the slight tremble in his voice or the quickness in his step.

The four of them entered Prey's empty flat and looked around at the bare walls in dismay.

'-this place is a dump-'
'-how can they let ponies live here?-'
'-the room's tiny, but I don't see this Crimson pony-'

'-hang on, there's only one bed-'

But it was too late by then. The moment they'd stepped into Prey's domain, they were already in Prey's power. Runes may have availed Prey nothing against the reaper king, the scarecrow, the baloth, the kindersnatches, or Hard Baked, but that's only because setting up a runic array took hours.

But if Prey'd had all the time he needed to prepare the area before the conflict? None of those dangers or monsters would've stood a chance. He may not have been close to finishing all the defences, shields, and safe guards he wanted to construct on the flat, but he had enough to deal with these Tools Of Oppression.

Prey didn't turn to face the four ponies. He didn't smile, hesitate, toss off a one liner, or give any kind of warning. He simply activated the rune beneath his hoof.

There was a surge in the air, and for the briefest flash of a second it felt like Prey's wool was standing on end with heat. Everyone touching the floor, with the designated exception of Prey, collapsed like puppets with their strings cut. Or in other words, unconsciously with no regard for cushioning their fall.

*Thump-**Dump**-Crump-*Bump**

Prey turned around, and let out a breath of relief. The four unwanted guests were sprawled on the floor where they fell, unmoving. One of the Royal Guard's helmets had rolled off, the fool obviously hadn't been wearing it properly. Well, their unconscious state would only last for about seven minutes, possibly as little as four for the unicorns whose magic naturally gifted them the extra advantage of resisting foreign magical influences. And this *had* been a magical stunning, so Prey would need to work fast.

Nervous energy was racing in Prey's veins. He felt jittery. The first thing he did was go back out into the hallway to shut and lock the front door, then he returned and did the same with his own flat's door.

Coming back in, he hurried over to the pile of fallen ponies and,

with a shudder of disgust, placed the tip of his hoof against the first one's head. Unconscious, the pony's instinctive mental defences were basically non-existent. It took Prey less than thirty seconds to ruthlessly pull their subconscious defences to pieces and establish his own rudimentary control. He *could've* broken their minds with a mere touch, but that wasn't his goal. If nothing else, they'd certainly be missed, and he caught as a result.

Prey went around and did all four of the ponies, starting with the unicorns and ending with the earth pony legal official. Counting from when he'd activated the runic array until now, it had all taken three minutes.

When Prey was done, there were four ponies standing lined up against the wall and away from the window in case a Pegasus flew by. Their eyes were glassy and unseeing, and apart from breathing and supporting their own weight, they didn't even twitch. They looked like incredibly realistic mannequins, like the ones you saw in the windows of all the Canterlot clothing stores.

"Right, let's start with you." Prey muttered, rolling his shoulders to try and ease his muscle tension, and heading for the unicorn mare who'd thought the name 'Strange Happenstance'.

By the time Prey was done trawling through the four ponies heads, he was grinding his teeth over the name of Strange Happenstance, feeling frustrated, mildly reassured, and worried all at the same time.

What had culminated in these four ponies coming here to trespass today with their warrant for Crimson was a number of events.

First, it wasn't a warrant for arrest, or anything like it. In fact, it was only a warrant for entry into the premises and questioning of the named individual on the warrant, and then, if reasonable concerns were raised as a result, to search the premises. Nothing about arrest, detainment, or the like. They'd merely been bluffing to gain entry, since by their own rules if Crimson simply hadn't opened the door, they weren't permitted to force entry.

As for who these Civil Law and Prosecution Agency officials were, and where they'd gotten this warrant from?

They were a legal department of the government, and had been contacted by, of all ponies, Lilly Blossom's distraught parents. The warrant had to have come from the Royal Guard however, as they were the only ones with the authority to issue a nonjudicial warrant within Canterlot, but the warrant still had nothing to do with the legal proceedings of suing the ISND and the Night Guard like Lilly's angry parents wanted.

The warrant was for questioning in relation to the suspicion of theft, and receiving stolen property. Now where did that charge come from?

Well, the warrant physically came from a Royal Guard Lieutenant, Twining Ivy. Prey had witnessed how it had come to pass from the Royal Guard pegasus's very own perspective:

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The Lieutenant had summoned him and his Guard partner to his office. Inside, Lieutenant Twining Ivy sat behind his neatly tidied desk, and there stood the Civil Law and Prosecution Agency mare on the other side.

"Ah, good," Twining Ivy had said, the rich red of the brushed plume on the Lieutenant's helmet dipping as he nodded at the mare official:

"This is Jenny Barley, from the Civil Law and Prosecution Agency. On the grounds of evidence she's presented and some...'other' concerns, the Royal Guard is granting her agency a warrant."

Prey 'remembered' his own mouth asking in a voice not his own; "Sir?"

"A warrant for Crimson Trace. A Night Guard. An ISND Night Guard." Twining Ivy said with a significant look.

"Oh. Ohhh. Yes sir." He and his Royal Guard partner both saluted smartly in understanding.

The Night Guard deserved this. They'd taken the Royal Guards place of honour at the Grand Galloping Gala, and then they'd made a mess of it!

'I was supposed to be one of the ones on shift at the Gala, I missed the chance of a lifetime to see it because of some arrogant Bat Guard jerks. We wouldn't have botched it.'

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So that was where the warrant had come from, a slighted Royal Guard Lieutenant bearing a grudge. How boring and uncreative. Prey could clearly see that Twining Ivy had only granted a warrant to create trouble for the ISND. He obviously didn't expect anything to come of it, but he *hoped* something would. And, hey, if nothing else, it would still waste the ISND's time as some petty revenge.

However Twining Ivy obviously wasn't dumb enough to give out warrants without reasonable grounds. That could get him into big trouble. He needed an excuse. And where had the excuse come from? From Lord Vanish of House Time.

The infuriating noble hadn't been satisfied with stealing Crimson's jade necklace. He'd had to make additional trouble for them too by filing an official complaint of attempted theft against Crimson.

This memory came from the unicorn mare official. It was of the accompanying letter written by Lord Vanish that came with the official complaint:

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The letter in her hooves was on the rich creamy paper of the wealthy, written in smooth flowing cursive script by a fine quill. She levitated the coffee mug off her neat desk to under her nose, and took a sniff of the tempting aroma before sipping. Prey experienced the memory of a taste of bitter milk sweetened richness.

She re-read the letter. It was short, and she hadn't forgotten what it said, but you had to be sure about these things in legal prosecution.

'I, in full faith of my words, attach this letter to the formal accusation levied against one Crimson Trace. The aforementioned stole a historical family heirloom from my House, although he claims ignorance. I have reason to doubt his claims of innocence, and his stubborn resistance in all but refusing to return the stolen heirloom when directly confronted leads me to find his excuse highly suspect.

I urge all actions and precautions to be taken against this brazen thief, and I only hope that my credentials will go some way in exposing this criminal for who he really is.

Signed, Lord Vanish, Marquess of House Time.'

The short length of the letter wasn't the important bit. What *was* important was the signature which had been committed to the letter. A Lord of a House. A noble citizen of Canterlot and a gentlecolt.

Indignation against this Crimson Trace pony rose in her chest, 'This is the third time I've heard his name in less than three days. He's obviously a deviant and a rogue guard, and I'll prove it.'

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Three times the self important mare had heard of Crimson. The first from Lilly's angry parents. The second from a petty Lord, and the third? From the private detective and business acquaintance of the Civil Law and Prosecution office, Strange Happenstance himself.

That annoying, secretive, private detective had been the driving force behind this the whole time from in the background.

From looking at the earth pony official's memories, Prey had seen how Strange Happenstance, in his long coat and wide brimmed hat, had invited the two Civil Law and Prosecution Agency officials out for coffee, and then subtly prompted them to go after the ISND.

It had gone like this:

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This really was a good coffee shop, with low friendly chatter, pretty waitresses, and a nice ambience. 'Mmm, I'll have to remember to come back here again.'

His own russet orange fore hoof with its coffee mug looped over it rose up into his view, and he blew away the steam. Across from the two of them, Strange hadn't removed his omnipresent hat or trench coat. The stallion really had the mysterious edge going for him. Prey felt the earth pony's admiration for that, and the wish that he himself could be more like Strange Happenstance. The private detective always had this knowing look in his eyes that seemed to say he knew what was what.

'So why'd he call us here then? It must be important.'

Next to him at the circular table, Jenny Barley, his work college and senior, decided to politely start things off, "So, Detective Strange-"

"How many times do I have to tell you lot, just Strange is fine." Strange broke in with a good natured smirk, "You'll make me feel old."

"Strange Happenstance then-"

Was Jenny flustered? No way, she never got flustered.

"-You've always been a great help to us at the CLPA. Perhaps it's our day to return the favour. Is there something we can help you with?" Jenny asked, leaning forwards over the coffee table.

"Can't I just invite some fellow professionals out for a coffee at lunch?" Strange said with a knowing lift of his eyebrows.

"Well, of course, I'm not saying-"

"It's fine. I know what they say about me behind my back in the office."

"It's all very complimentary, I assure you-"

"I'm sure it's all in good fun," Strange waved it off, chuckling, "But really, it was mostly just a want for some company over coffee. It's

been a long week of work. See, I've run into some suspicious characters, working in the Night Guard if you can believe it."

"Is this, er, alright for ya' to be telling this?" The earth pony Prey was sharing perspectives with couldn't help but ask.

"Relax, everything I'm saying is unrestricted. Enjoy your coffee, I just want somepony to rant to. Now, it's a division called the ISND, it's got a pegasus in it by the name of Crimson, Trace I believe his second name is, and a thestral..."

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And that's what had happened. One thing had led to another and here Prey was with four mind blanked captives in his flat. Prey didn't believe for a second that Strange Happenstance hadn't been angling to incite suspicion and an investigation all along. The unicorn detective was an opportunist, he'd been adding fuel to the fire going under the ISND since the beginning. A typical unicorn.

During Strange Happenstance's little 'talk' at the coffee shop, he'd cryptically mentioned something about; "A pony getting horribly maimed working up in the Palace, and the Night Guard covering it up."

In context, the only person Strange Happenstance could've been referring to was Lilly Blossom. Meaning the Civil Law and Prosecution Agency weren't the only people Lilly's parents were reaching out to in their desire to legally hurt the Night Guard.

Strange Happenstance had simply helped coax the pieces together and got Jenny to go to the Royal Guard, who in turn had passed it up the chain of command until it got to the grudge carrying Lieutenant Twining Ivy. Prey wouldn't even be surprised if Twining Ivy was somehow an acquaintance of Strange Happenstance. The detective was insidious, and seemed to get everywhere. Like a cockroach.

Jenny had promised to tell Strange about what they found out from Crimson once they'd questioned him. That'd no doubt been the detective's goal all along. The unicorn was using others to do his

dirty work and dig up information for him.

Prey was angry. This was the second time someone had targeted his friend Crimson on false pretences. *His* friend Crimson! The first time, Prey had been powerless to help prevent anything because it'd all been done under Luna's indifferent approval and oversight. But this time, Prey had caught on to what was happening first.

Prey glared at the four ponies standing listlessly in front of him.

Prey wanted to go to work and implant a hidden compulsion in the two officials to go back and kill Strange Happenstance the next time they saw him. But that was crude, obvious, and beyond attention grabbing. Those sort of mental changes would leave behind very obvious signs of mind magic if he gave anyone a reason to check, which they certainly would if these four suddenly became murderers. The Guard would be all over it, and there was a good chance it would be traced first back to the ISND, and then second either to Crimson or Prey.

And if Strange really was working for whomever knew about the mimics, despite the chances of that now being less than twenty percent, they would know and definitely retaliate. But even if none of that were true and Strange really was just a typical jumped up, arrogant, overconfident unicorn detective who thought he was Harmony's Embodiment Of Justice, if Prey had him killed so obviously, there would still be massive fallout.

'No, I don't know enough to make a rash decision.' Prey angrily rubbed at one ear, smoothing down the fur to help calm himself.

'They came here to cause harm to Crimson, and it's not just them either. It goes further than that. Lilly's parents, Vanish, Strange Happenstance, they're all going to keep causing Crimson and me problems.'

Well, maybe not Vanish, he seemed the type to leave it be now that he felt he'd made his point and proved he held the power. Lieutenant Twining Ivy was neither here nor there, he'd merely been annoying for the sake of petty revenge, but the others were definitely going to keep on coming.

'Well, there's one thing I can do.' Prey thought, settling on the safest and most discreet course of action:

'I can at least ensure these four pains in the flank give up and never come back again.'

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It was delicate work, and couldn't be rushed, but when the four ponies left Prey's flat almost two hours later, once again completely in control of their senses once again, they didn't realise anything was wrong.

They had no memory of getting stunned, or of Prey picking through their minds. They'd all probably have a splitting headache, but since Prey hadn't delved too deeply and since his memory tampering all pertained to their most recent memories, it should be fine. It was the least they deserved.

What they *did* all have memories of was being shown into Crimson's flat while the red pegasus was present, showing him the warrant, whereupon Crimson had invited them all to search his flat. That had been an easy memory to create, since there was so little in the flat anyways.

Needless to say, their memories confirmed that they'd found absolutely nothing, whereupon they asked Crimson their questions, received some disappointing answers, and left. Prey heavily reinforced the notion that nothing had been amiss, that they couldn't find any evidence of wrongdoing, a total waste of time, and that coming back again would be a further waste of time.

They'd go report back to Strange Happenstance, Lieutenant Twining Ivy, and even Lilly Blossom's parents if they were asked about how it was a dead end. The Crimson in their memories had done nothing they could pin on him, so they wouldn't even try.

Prey had been thorough. Even if Strange asked Jenny Barley to repeat the make believe conversation she'd 'had' with Crimson, she would be able to do so word for word. Or rather, word for word what Prey wanted her to tell the private detective:

"The ISND followed orders. The orders came from Princess Luna. There was a monster attack that crippled a mare over the mountains. A necklace was bought from a pawn shop that was later demanded back by Lord Vanish. The necklace was promptly returned to Lord Vanish with Princess Luna as the witness."

'There. Let's see the detective try making accusations against Luna and find out how long he survives.' Prey thought, tiredly dropping back onto his hooves after shutting and locking the front door.

He felt more drained than even a full day of rune crafting would leave him. He'd had to be oh-so-careful with the four ponies fragile minds. Prey knew his mental touch was equivalent to a barbed razor blade drawn across the brain, so he'd had to make the effort to be extra gentle. He didn't want all four of them having a complete break down a few months from now.

Prey took a moment to sit down and rest. He'd been lucky to be here when Crimson was out, but next time he might not be so fortunate. He hoped Strange Happenstance would give up, but somehow he doubted he would be so lucky. But it'd worked out for Prey this time.

'Why haven't I been doing this more to solve my problems? While mind control isn't always feasible, when it is, it's so much more efficient and easy.' Prey asked himself.

Prey looked down at his hooves. The golden bands sat where they'd always been, still there and still silently mocking him. Looking down also caused the blue end of the ribbon to swing into his view. Prey reached up and untied it from behind his ear.

'It would be so much easier to mind control people. I read their thoughts all the time anyway, so why refrain from going a step further when it would benefit me?' Prey thought, running the ribbon between his cleft hooves as he considered. The silk felt as cool as water.

'Perhaps I should. Perhaps I shouldn't. No, I *know* I shouldn't, I already know it's wrong. I'm a mind leech, I understand the sanctuary I'm violating. But will that stop me?'

It hadn't ever before.

This wasn't the first time, and it wouldn't be the last Prey broke into someone's head. He'd held this internal debate with himself many a time, both before and during Dreverton. But despite all his internalising arguments, Prey knew he would never stop. Perhaps he would sometimes refrain, but he would never hesitate if it meant protecting his own life.

'Survival isn't pretty, and it always comes at a price. Even if I'm not the one paying.'

Prey felt bad that he didn't feel worse, but after so long of doing this, that was all. He was used to it.

Rata-tat-tat

"Crimson!"

Prey froze at the muffled call from out at the front door. Crimson looked up. The red pegasus had been the one to offer to make dinner for them both this time, since Prey had been the one to invite Crimson over last night.

Again came the sharp rap, *Rata-tat*

"Crimson, Prey. Yoohoo! Anypony home?"

"That sounds familiar..." Prey began unhappily.

"Is that Taffy?" Crimson asked unsurely.

"Com'n guys, open up. I came all the way here to bring you a fudge cake!"

Prey looked at Crimson. The pegasus gave a helpless shrug with his wings.

"We should ignore her. She'll go away." Prey said.

"No, she came all the way here. That would be rude." Crimson shook his head and headed out the flat for the front door. Prey thought of returning to his own flat and locking himself inside, but then he heard the front door being opened down the hallway and knew it was too late.

"Oh hi Crimson, great! I was worried I got the wrong address."

"Good evening Taffy Hopes-"

"Wow, you look awful. I mean you look great! Aside from, you know, those burn scars of course. Hey, is Prey here too? Gloom said this was where both your flats were, or something. Personally, I think he was just trying to throw you two under the wagon to get away from doing his paperwork."

"Yes, Prey is here. And Gloom is on leave. Pardon, but why are you here, Taffy?"

"I brought you a 'get well soon fudge cake', duh. I came by on my way home from the Palace."

There was the sound of Taffy breezing past Crimson and approaching down the hall. Prey braced himself; 'I'll get you for this Gloom.'

Taffy Hopes strode in through the open door. She still had her uniform on, but not the cap, meaning her frizzy orange mane bounced free. She had on a pair of saddle bags, and levitating above her to show off its sugar crystallised surface was a glazed fudge cake.

"Hmm," Taffy critically scanned the empty flat and bare boards, then shrugged, "Meh. I lived in smaller digs when I was studying in Fillydelphia."

Crimson appeared from behind her, belatedly walking back into his own flat.

"Please do come in Taffy. I was just making-"

"-But we are so totally getting you guys some proper furniture! And

curtains. Curtains are important to a good flat." Taffy declared, thinking:

'-if there's no table, then where am I supposed to cut this fudge cake?-'

"Who's 'we'?" Prey asked suspiciously.

"Oh hey there Prey. Sorry about, well... What happened." Taffy grimaced, "I really do mean that. Sorry. I don't know what happened, just that it was bad and all of you ended up in the hospital."

"Don't mention it. Really. And who's we again?" Prey repeated, not exactly uneasy but definitely still on guard around the unicorn mare.

'-if they don't want to talk about it, I must respect that-', Taffy thought, widening the cheery smile which for a moment had wobbled.

"Oh, me, some mare friends, you, all curtain shopping. It'll be fun. Remember when we bumped into each other at the market and you two were bed hunting? I was there with Future Spark. I should bring him curtain shopping with us too."

"I am sure Future Spark would... appreciate that." Crimson said with a blank face.

"Liar," Taffy laughed, "But it'll be good for him. It's a good chance for him to get out of his lab once in a while. I've got some eligible friends, it's about time some of them started looking for a sweet stallion."

Prey and Crimson had literally zero experience to make any kind of comment on that. Or the desire to even try.

Awkward silences didn't seem to phase Taffy Hopes though. She was still levitating the fudge cake she'd brought, and now she looked around again, "Hey, I'll just put this on the side there. You guys can eat it later. There's plenty there, so don't be shy about sharing with others. Perhaps your neighbours would like some?

Making friends with your flat neighbours is really important, trust me on that."

'-still remember that one deaf drum player I got as a neighbour in college-'

"Thank you Taffy. For the cake, I mean." Crimson said.

"You guys deserve it. I don't know what's happened to Gloom, but he looks like he desperately needs some cheering up." Taffy's smile started to slip again a bit, "But hey, I'm just the liaison officer. I don't go out and work in the field. I've got my nice cushy desk job, so what do I really know? You've all got these new scars under your eyes, and..."

"Thank you for the cake Taffy. It's a nice thought. And I'm sure it'll taste nice too." Crimson said.

Prey didn't understand why Taffy seemed to care. Sure, Taffy had never been bigoted towards thestrals or scared of them like so many normal ponies were, but she was still born and raised a Canterlot unicorn. She didn't even realise all the privileges she took for granted. And it wasn't like the ISND were special. Taffy dealt with paperwork and saw squads from all over the Guard, both Royal and Night. The ISND should just be one of many to her.

Taffy took a breath and recomposed herself. Her bright, slightly eccentric smile returned, "Well I certainly hope so Crimson! I baked it myself, so it better be good. Listen, I'd love to stay and chat, but I can see you're busy and I have to get back and feed Mabel. It's great to see you both, and it's kinda' sweet you're letting Prey stay with you Crimson."

"Pardon?" Crimson paused.

"You'll make a good father some day. Mares approve of a stallion who can manage foals, take it from me!"

"No, I have my own flat-" Prey tried.

"Ta Ta for now," Taffy was already breezing back out the door she'd breezed in through, "Catch you back at work. Paperwork waits for

nopony."

Crimson looked at his half cooked pot of pasta and broccoli, and then to the gleaming iced surface of the fudge cake Taffy had on the side. Prey could practically taste the head and stomach ache inducing level of sugar just looking at the thing. If it wasn't poisoned, (and Prey *would* be checking that), Prey would take the trade.

"So. We have a cake." Crimson said blankly.

"Against all common sense, yes, it appears to be that way." Prey agreed.

Crimson flicked his too long mane out of his eyes, looked at the cake, then looked around at his flat. "Are all those things really necessary?"

"You mean all the furniture Taffy so flippantly mentioned?" Prey checked.

"Yes. Tables, chairs, desks. Curtains. A doormat."

"I'm not getting a welcome mat for my flat. I'm not a liar." Prey sniffed.

"Should we eat this cake now?" Crimson asked, eyeing the thing.

Prey glanced at the pot still coming to a slow boil, "Waste not, want not. But if you want to eat the cake please go ahead, you can eat what you want." Prey quickly added.

"No, the cake'll keep until morning." Crimson agreed.

"It certainly will. It looks like it's got enough sugar in it to preserve it for at least a decade. But, cake for breakfast though?"

Crimson blinked blankly, "Why not?"

"I think cake is supposed to be bad for you?" Prey hesitantly offered. Wasn't it supposed to rot your teeth or something? Prey wasn't sure how true that claim was, since where he'd come from they'd never

had access to much sugar.

"Oh. Are you sure?" Crimson asked, looking back at the fudge cake.

"No?"

"Well, waste not, want not."

"Quite. Cake for breakfast it is then."

The morning sun glinted at Prey's window. Inside, Prey scooped up the first spoonful of fudge cake from his bowl.

He gave it a cautious sniff, but smelled nothing but the mild scent of baked flour, heated sugar, and yeast. No obviously identifiable poisons. No lumps, trace flecks, or unidentifiable dustings either. The consistency was about what he expected to be normal too. There were a fair number of poisons which wouldn't work on Prey anyway, on account of the cursed Jaw of Heart's stuck in his chest. It would force his heart to keep beating no matter what, but that was no reason to get careless. Fatal or not, getting poisoned still hurt.

'Only one test left. Taste.'

Prey returned the spoonful to the bowl and scraped up a tiny portion of the thick fudge to taste check.

Knock-knock-knock

'Why are mine and Crimson's flats suddenly so popular? How do people even know where we live?' Prey thought in exasperation, dropping the spoon back into the bowl.

Prey yanked open his flat door at the exact same time Crimson opened his. They were left facing each other across the thin hallway for a moment, until the knocking came again.

Knock-knock-knock

Prey'd originally only been going to sneak close enough to the front door to be able to perceive the thoughts of the knocker outside, not actually open the door. Crimson however, was much politer or perhaps just less paranoid than Prey. After the moment of blinking silently at each other, Crimson tipped his head to indicate he was going to answer the front door.

Prey hid a grimace and stepped back to let the pegasus go ahead.

Crimson unlocked and opened the front door, "Hello? How may I help you?"

At the open door stood an annoying chestnut coloured pegasus. Prey didn't know anything about the pegasus yet, but because he'd knocked on the door, he was immediately annoying.

"I'm looking for a Mr. Crimson Trace. Is this his residence?"

Crimson considered his opposite, "Yes, that would be me."

The pegasus was wearing a smart uniform trimmed in gold, and had flight saddlebags on his flanks, 'So he's here on some kind of business. Double annoying.'

Prey also noticed the stallion had the close cropped mane and tail favoured by pegasi who liked flying fast.

The stallion tipped his uniform's hat to Crimson, "Pleasure. I've got a message delivery for you."

So saying, the pegasus, who hadn't introduced himself, flipped open his flight saddlebags and removed a scroll, not an envelope, but a full on scroll, sealed with a stamped gold and blue seal.

Crimson examined it for a long moment, a bit too long really, before he took the scroll. "Thank you."

Crimson made to shut the door but the pegasus coughed. Prey scowled from down the corridor, 'If he's waiting for a tip...'

"Yes?" Crimson asked blankly.

"The return message?" The pegasus prompted, "I'm happy to wait, but I need a reply to take back before I leave."

Crimson blinked, "I have not heard of this from the postal service before."

The pegasus looked affronted, "The Royal Equestrian Mail? No no, I'm not a postal worker, I'm a courier, see?" He said, proudly displaying his uniform's badge.

The badge and company name meant nothing to Prey, so it certainly meant nothing to Crimson either. Nevertheless, Prey got the hint. The annoying pegasus's job was to wait for Crimson to read the letter and then bring back Crimson's reply to whomever the sender was. It was also a good way to have the courier act as a witness. Prey was immediately suspicious.

'Is this another threat of some kind from that Lord Vanish? Or something from Lilly's parents? Strange Happenstance again?' Prey worried.

Using his wings to help grip the scroll, Crimson broke the seal and unfurled it. Prey wouldn't do something so crass as to try to read over Crimson's shoulder, or rather from *under* at his height, although he wished he could. Besides which, the lettering was *just* slightly too blurry at this distance for his damaged eyesight to make out comfortably. So he just had to wait while Crimson finished.

Crimson made an annoyed flick with his wing as he read, "I already made it clear I did not have any interest in their offer."

Prey easily drew the connection with just those few words and it worked out, "Those showboating stunt Wonderbolt flyers again?"

"Yes, them." Crimson said, not turning or surprised that Prey was listening in. The other pegasus however jumped, not having spotted Prey standing behind Crimson. His eyebrows shot up, but it wasn't just startled shock on seeing a runt lamb in Canterlot, but at what Prey had said.

"Do you even know who the Wonderbolt's are? They're the most

skilled, high performance flyers in the whole world!"

'Didn't know, didn't care, and still don't.' Prey thought.

In joint sync, Prey and Crimson both raised a sceptical eyebrow at the courier. The pegasus snorted, professionalism forgotten as he was presented with two people he clearly regarded as "heathens".

"I will require an answer to the scroll either way. I will be going back to the Wonderbolt's offices directly." The still nameless courier added that last part like they should be worried about what he might say.

'How annoying, yet amusingly petty.'

As Crimson just continued to stare him down, the courier's misguided bravado drained away. The scars did wonders for tipping Crimson's normal blank stare over the edge into intimidating. Prey kind of wished he could manage the same, but all he could pull off was looking like an angry bunny rabbit.

"I'll, I'll just wait here, shall I?" The other pegasus's eyes shifted about, "I can take a verbal reply, but if you should choose to write one, I'm obligated to wait until-"

"You can politely tell them thank you, but no thank you. I won't be attending this..." Crimson referenced the scroll he held, "...Young Flyers Competition as an amateur guest judge."

"You're saying 'no' to a personal guest invite? But that might've come from Spitfire or Soarin themselves!" The courier exclaimed in shock.

"Let me change that no to, 'No thank you'. Have a nice day."

"Wait wait, I don't suppose that invite was transferable-"

Crimson shut the door in his face.

Prey looked at Crimson, and just got a disgusted flick of the wing. "Pushy pon-people who don't know that 'no' means 'no', not 'nag me'."

Prey nodded firmly in complete agreement, and went back to the flat and ate a non-poisoned, eye wateringly sweet sugar packed fudge cake for breakfast. The second bowl full was almost worth the sugar induced headache it gave him afterwards.

Prey expected that to be that regarding the Wonderbolt's. Just some over eager pushy ponies who didn't seem able to take the hint. But Crimson's reply had been very clear this time around. Anyone with any sense would've taken the hint.

"Did you see it Prey?" Scenic exclaimed.

"See what?" Prey asked grumpily. Everyone today had asked him the same question. Every, single, damned, person.

"The giant rainbow light show earlier, of course!"

"Oh, *that* giant rainbow light show. I thought you meant the *other* giant rainbow light show." Prey rolled his eyes.

"Well, did you? Did you?"

"No. I was inside at the time." Prey said.

It was true. He'd been underground checking on the veropedes and making more runic defences for his secret lair. There's was never any rest of for the wicked.

Lemon Pink had wandered in halfway through and asked; "Prey. There was a huge rainbow explosion in the sky from the direction of Cloudsdale seventeen and a half minutes ago. Do we need to take any action?"

Prey had stopped working and turned to face her.

"What?"

Now he was visiting Scenic and Lilly in the hospital, (at Crimson's continued insistence), and getting told about it all over again.

"That's too bad Prey, because it was great. I saw it from my window. The nurses said it apparently came from a pony at the Young Flyers Competition."

'A doubly good thing Crimson didn't go then.'

"Oh?" Prey said out loud, feigning interest as if he hadn't heard all this a dozen times already today. Granted, he'd been eavesdropping then, but it still counted.

Crimson had been out flying at the time of the rainbow explosion, (not anywhere near Cloudsdale itself, but apparently that wasn't necessary because the light display was so large), and had told Prey about it when he'd arrived back at the flat before they came here to the hospital. The conversation had gone something like this:

"Hello Prey."

"Hello Crimson."

"Hm. Did you happen to see a rainbow today?"

"No, I was inside at the time."

"Huh. Well, there was a big one."

Carton Juice all but burst into the room, "Hi honey, I'm- Oh, hello there Prey, and uh, Crimson."

Prey waved a hoof vaguely in her direction. Crimson gave her a serious nod and equally grave, "Hello Carton Juice."

"Hey Carton, you look great, did you see the rainbow explosion thing?" Scenic Paint enthused.

"Did I ever! I was just about to go back in from tending my bee hives, and guess what? Rainbow! Everywhere! Across the whole sky!"

Prey hid his sigh as Carton went on. All anyone seemed to know was there was an enormous rainbow explosion of light, coming out from Cloudsdale at the same time as the Young Flyers Competition, which then travelled across the whole sky. Its actual cause and purpose were not yet known. Apparently though, there'd been a similar light display but on an even grander scale some eleven years ago.

Prey had missed the first one, due to the small matter of being locked away in Dreverton, and also the second such event it now seemed.

'Does this have something to do with why the Wonderbolt's were so keen on Crimson attending? Was there some plan?' Prey thought suspiciously, mind already coming up with conspiracy theories.

Finally however, Crimson put a stop to Carton's gushing over the pretty rainbow display by bluntly asking; "You're trying to help Lilly Blossom along with that volunteer. Is it working?"

That sobered Scenic and Carton up real quick, and stopped their chatter about pretty but ultimately irrelevant light shows.

"How did you hear about us working with a volunteer?" Carton asked, somewhat guiltily.

'-Saffron Swirl was very nice. She asked us to not go spreading her working here around in case the newspapers heard-'

"Prey told me." Crimson shrugged.

"Prey?" Carton Juice started in surprise, looking at the lamb, "But, how did, uh...?"

"Why are you surprised? Were you trying to keep it secret or something?" Prey asked innocently.

"No no, nothing like-Well alright, maybe-"

"You must be aware the hospital and Night Guard are both keeping a close eye on Lilly Blossom. Both your and Saffron Swirl's efforts are definitely being monitored." Prey dismissed with a wave.

"You even know which pony we're working with?" Carton gasped.

"Yes. So? You haven't answered Crimson's question yet." Prey prodded impatiently.

Next to his marefriend in the hospital bed, Scenic wasn't surprised. He just accepted it, '-of course Prey knows. He always somehow knows-'

"Lilly Blossom, I, uh, I think she's scared to accept help. And her parents aren't helping. I mean, I'm sure they're only doing what they believe is right," Scenic hastily clarified, "But, well, it's not helping Lilly. You know how she told us she doesn't have a good relationship with her mom and dad, right?"

"Neither do you, if I recall. Your disagreement was quite loud." Crimson pointed out.

"Yes, well..." Scenic hunched his shoulders and Carton Juice gave him a quick nuzzle, avoiding his scarred cheek. She tried to conjure up a smile to meet Crimson's yellow eyes as she took a breath:

"I don't have the pleasure of really knowing Saffron Swirl, we only just met, but she seems to be a wonderful and compassionate mare. We're all just trying to help Lilly Blossom the best we can, in fact, we managed to get Lilly to agree to play chess with us. Or one of us. It's the helplessly sitting around and thinking that's getting to Lilly the most, I think." Carton said sadly.

Saffron Swirl and Carton Juice were both outsiders, and Prey still wasn't quite sure how circumstance had led both of them to both somehow getting involved with all of this. Or why they were so dead set on volunteering and helping Lilly.

"Chess?" Crimson asked.

"Yeah, chess. I suggested cards, but she can't really hold cards in her magic anymore." Scenic winced.

"No, I mean, what is chess?"

"Uhhh... You know, chess?"

'If they had chess out in the clans, would Crimson be asking what it is?' Prey thought in exasperation at Scenic's stupidity. He answered in the slow earth pony's place; "It's a type of two player board game Crimson. It's a turn based strategy game based around capturing the opposing pieces."

"Ah. I see."

"Do you know how to play chess Prey?" Scenic asked in sudden interest, leaning forwards, "I love board games, especially strategy ones. Here, Carton brought in my chess board earlier. Do you want to play?"

"Maybe some other time." Prey said, translation meaning; 'never'.

Scenic Paint deflated a bit, "Oh. Right right, of course, any time."

Carton's face nearly lit up as an idea occurred to her, although she tried to downplay it, '-get everypony together to play board games! That'll help everypony feel better-'

"Crimson and Prey, how would you like to come to a games night, or something? I bet you'd both be really good at it." Carton slyly tried to offer. She was about as subtle as an albino crow. An albino crow perching in a black room. Prey and Crimson both just gave her this look.

"And I'm sure Lilly would greatly appreciate having the company too." Carton Juice hastily amended.

"How will a board game help Lilly?" Crimson asked.

"Well, it just, might? Help her feel better, that is?" Carton Juice winced.

'-oh sugar, this was a bad idea. Why would a soldier want to play games?-'

"We'll think about it." Crimson decided.

"Oh? Oh. No pressure, just let me or Paint Spot know." Carton smiled, much relieved, before switching the topic, "I hope you don't mind me asking, but you're a pegasus, right?"

"Yes." Crimson began guardedly, obviously expecting a question about how he came from a clan full of thestrals.

"Well, you know how the rainbow explosion came from Cloudsdale? Do you think it could've been caused by a weather team? Was it some kind of pegasus stunt? Could that be possible?"

Prey sighed, 'Back to the pretty rainbows again. It only took her, what, five minutes?'

Really, with how easily ponies were distracted by bright lights and colours, he wouldn't be surprised if someday they started gathering around street lamps at dusk like their fellow annoyances; moths.

Prey was experimenting with the novelty known as 'free time'. Quite literally experimenting.

The metallic scent of blood hung in the back of Prey's sinuses. It lingered, and would not leave, but that was okay, Prey was very used to this smell. Besides, it was just pigs' blood. Watching the veropedes eat said pigs had been... an experience.

Prey was currently inside his secret underground base, inside the quartz crystal cave hidden in Canterlot Mountain. Lemon Pink hadn't been here when he'd arrived, off in disguise fetching the two pigs, but she'd turned up a while ago, the two pigs alive but stunned, being dragged in a small cart behind her.

Prey had stopped what he was working on to watch, which was an outer runic ring for a defensive array specifically aimed to interfere with the formless telekinesis almost all unicorns used. Or that was the goal anyway. He'd still have to test it, and then build in an exception key for Lemon Pink, and then find a way to somehow tie the key to her. All very complicated stuff.

Anyway, he'd stopped when Lemon arrived and mentally called the two sleeping veropedes over. Seeing the two segmented lengths of glimmering armoured exoskeleton unfold so smoothly always brought a spark of smug pride to Prey's chest. And buried guilt.

Pride, because these were his weapons, and he'd figured out how to hatch them, and guilt, well, because of *how* they were fed after they hatched.

Prey'd actually been examining the two of them earlier before Lemon had arrived. The veropedes' terrifying appearances hadn't dissuaded him in the slightest. He'd examined his veropede's circular mouthful of teeth from only a few inches away, learning how her teeth actually possessed tiny backwards facing serrations to help sheer through meat and grip struggling prey, and her mandibles may as well have been gleaming scythe blades.

The deep red of her throat wasn't flesh either, but something much harder, like armour on the inside, and he'd been mildly surprised to learn veropedes did not possess even a rudimentary tongue.

'Probably why they didn't spit out the reaper king.' Prey had joked to himself.

He'd also felt along and measured their cool carapaces by hoof, testing how it was joined to the flesh underneath. He'd used his mental control to compel one to let him lightly feel the razor sharp barbs on an antenna, and felt the coiled strength of the wiry, whip-like appendage under his hoof.

He'd gone on and tested the sharpness of the blood red spines dotting their backs, the shudder inducing velcro like sticky effect of the bristling hairs running underneath the veropede's belly which kept off dirt particles, and he'd seen how the veropede's legs each actually had a small hooked spur near the end for either better grip or to help prevent the monster sinking into mud. Each leg was also individually strong enough to chip stone.

Prey didn't care for art, but the veropedes were masterpieces in his eyes.

The two veropedes scuttled over, their whip-like antenna groping ahead to grab the pigs. It was very swift.

The barbed antenna snatched the unconscious pigs from the cart in a blur and coiled back in towards the cavernous ring of teeth that passed for a mouth. There was no chewing, just tearing.

The veropedes did not waste. By instinct, each insect fed the pig down its throat to minimise the amount of wasted blood spilled on the ground. Then each veropede set to fastidiously cleaning its antenna and mandibles.

The whole thing took roughly ten seconds, if that.

Prey could easily imagine a person in place of the pig. All too easily.

'But their beautiful savagery won't do much against a unicorn with a powerful enough spell. Or even just a very specific spell, one intended especially for monsters like veropedes. One specialised spell, and they'd be dead. Gone, just like that.'

That would be a huge loss. An unacceptable loss. However if it came down to a fight, Prey couldn't afford to give it anything less than his all and commit everything. When your life was on the line, you couldn't afford to give it anything less than your all. He had learnt that in the Deeper Green.

Weapons were made in the hope of never being used, but were still created in dreadful anticipation.

Lemon Pink stood to the side of Prey as he considered his two giant weapons. She spoke, "This feeding schedule is unsustainable in the long run, Prey."

"I know." Prey agreed. Meat was very expensive in Equestria. Fish was a cheaper alternative, but unlike live pigs, fish did not keep. While it wasn't a problem now, the constant drain on Prey's stolen gold would add up. Plus, there was always the slim but real risk of some nosy pig farmer asking the wrong questions and uncovering something. Thus, despite Prey's wishes, this was an unsustainable

set up.

Prey had considered the problem already, but he was reluctant to set in motion the alternative he'd settled on. However there wasn't much choice. The veropedes had to be fed. They were his.

'So now my only earthly possessions are a bed, some cutlery, a number of pot plants, a ribbon, and two giant centipede monsters designed to kill everything in their way.' Prey thought, lips twitching in morbid humour.

"I've decided it's time to go with your previous desire." Prey said out loud.

"Yes, Prey?" Lemon blankly tilted her head.

"Your expressed desire to invest a portion of the gold in a business." Prey clarified.

"Specifically, a business in the meat industry. None of the farms from your memory raise anywhere near enough pigs to feed both veropedes for an entire year. So we're instead going to go to the intermediary buyers, who buy pigs from the farms and then arrange the transportation and sale to Griffonia. I have already looked into it. There are two such businesses. Equestrian Eggs, and Smiley Supplies."

The business names were a bit misleading, but ponies despised the whole idea of meat eaters, even if it was necessary for some species' survival. So the two companies kept their work occupations close to their chests to avoid the social stigma and their workers did the same. Besides, it wasn't like they *just* exported pigs to Griffonia. Equestrian Eggs did make half it's business from marketing eggs, which ponies had no such hang ups about eating.

Prey continued; "Ideally, I would suggest investing in and subtly taking over Smiley Supplies. However, this is to be your project Lemon Pink. The idea was yours, so the execution and investment management of it I leave in your hooves."

"Yes, Prey. Thank you." Lemon said blankly, but Prey was used to

getting 'blank' from Crimson, and Lemon actually sounded like this was something she'd been wanting to do. Earn money, make investments, and sniff out gold making opportunities. Not that Lemon Pink would ever *truly* think of doing so on her own initiative, all her actions aimed to further Prey's success in some form or fashion. She was a tool that lived to serve Prey.

There were few differences between Lemon and Prey, but the few which did exist were important. Not good or bad, just important. In retrospect, this was probably what he'd been noticing 'off' about Lemon Pink.

So why did Prey still have the nagging paranoid suspicion in the back of his head that there was a little extra detail about Lemon Pink he was overlooking? Or was it just his own attitude? He didn't know, and he worried it would be the former, not the latter.

When Prey left to return to the surface, he was in a conflicted mood. Not about Lemon Pink, about something else. It was merely that one secret worry had naturally led to another and, well, now he was worrying.

Prey was not Hard Baked, and he never would be. That's what Prey told himself.

Yet here he was, in a secret lair devoted to dark research, much like the warlock's own lair. Hard Baked had made his scarecrow and reaper king, while Prey had his veropedes. Only a blind person would've missed the similarities.

Prey hated the parallels he was drawing between himself and Hard Baked, and there were so many of them if he but looked. The remnants of Garrow and Snake didn't help either.

Prey wanted to be a better person, he really did. But it wasn't going to happen. Survival kept getting in the way.

Prey's secret crystal lair may not have been filled with murdered villagers, but the things Prey was planning to be researching,

creating, down there were arguably just as bad. Or possibly even worse.

But neither had Prey forgotten how helpless he'd been against Hard Baked. Prey's goals hadn't changed, he still had to find some way to get free of Luna's shackles.

'It may be quiet now, but it's just the calm before the coming storm. I don't know when and I don't know what, but the wolf only needs enough luck to find you once in the dark. I have to be ready.'

Wherever Prey seemed to turn, people kept going on about the flipping rainbow explosion. As Crimson and Prey sat in the early morning cafe for breakfast, (it was fast becoming a habit), the few early birds already up and about were still gossiping about yesterday's event.

Prey had to sourly listen to them blathering on about it from three tables over. However, he did learn, (much to his reluctance), a bit more about the event. The rainbow was apparently something called a rainboom, a historically famous stunt performed in the distant past by some equally famous pegasus. And now, some new pegasus mare from the Young Flyers Competition had recreated the visually offensive stunt.

Wonderful.

Most Canterlotien ponies were satisfied to leave it there however, and Crimson himself had little interest in this rainboom, but Prey wasn't them, despite how much he might secretly wish he'd been born one of them and not a runt. No, Prey looked a little deeper into the issue.

How? By finally being allowed to do something he'd been eager, no, *desperate* to do for years.

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The sun was rising over Canterlot, another beautiful day being started for the pony citizens by their benevolent alicorn ruler.

Quietly, and mostly forgotten, the younger sister brought the night to an end at the same time. The citizens could hardly be blamed for their disregard, though. Celestia had tended to both the day and night for a thousand years. Why should they be grateful that Luna was now doing half the job Celestia had been doing for their whole lives?

But the common view of Princess Luna was not important to this day's events.

The birds were singing and the bees were buzzing. In the middle of a city secured onto the side of a mountain. These chirping birds had forsaken their natural environment for the city life. Well, there were plenty of parks and decorative trees for any bird to choose from, and an abundance of colourful little bird houses put out by nature loving ponies. Or rather, ponies who loved their tamed, safe, and controlled version of nature. The bees too really, emerging from artificial basket hives, managed by ponies who'd somehow magically been granted a special bee tending talent by means not even scholars fully understood.

However the birds and bees weren't important to this day's events either.

But back to Prey's deeper investigation. Prey had never had a birthday present before, or a Hearth's Warming gift. They hadn't had the money for any special occasions back on the farm. Your toys were what you could make or find as a child. Weirdly shaped sticks, a shiny stone, an unusual feather tied to a length of frayed twine, stuff like that.

The point being, Prey had never had a birthday present, and the Hearth's Warming they celebrated out on the border was a little different to what ponies understood as 'Hearth's Warming'.

But to Prey, on this particular day, it felt like he'd been given the best birthday and Hearth's Warming present ever.

Because it was today that Prey was finally, *finally*. Allowed. Into. The. Royal. Canterlot. Library!

Sure it meant returning back to the Palace he hated the sight of so much, trekking through the golden front gates, having to wait in the line because he wasn't a Night Guard at the moment, enduring all the looks, and having to present the written permission he'd gotten from Gloom, (Gloom's First Sargent rank still counted for something thankfully), but he got in!

Prey had to stop for a moment at the double door entrance to the cathedral-like inner structure of the library, and just *look*. He hardly noticed the other morning library visitors as they trotted around him and inside. He craned his head back to take in the shelves and shelves and *shelves* of books.

Once again Prey couldn't help but think that this library was as close to a holy place as he'd ever seen in any pony construction. The morning light streaming in through the high arched windows lent the dark oak shelves a hallowed glow, the hushed quiet was reverent, and along with the buildings complete devotion to the pursuit of knowledge was breathtaking.

But it wasn't any of that which caused Prey to have to swallow the lump in his throat. Appearances were just that, appearances. The library was beautiful, but it was only a building, an object, a thing.

But memories were something entirely different, and Prey was remembering a time when Fleece used to jokingly tell his little brother Gossamer that, one day, he'd get into the most prestigious unicorn university and, "Show all those ponies up!" Back then, Gossamer had longed to visit the famous Canterlot library to read all of their books. He had been told that there were more books than he could read in a lifetime!

And now here he was, fulfilling that childish dream. All it had cost him was everything but his life.

'But I can't change the past. The future is still out there, and all that knowledge in here is just ripe for the taking. I can't be picky.' Prey squared his shoulders and took his first step into the carpeted library.

If only Fleece and Gossamer had still been alive to enjoy this in

Prey's stead.

'Yeah. And if wishes were barley cakes no one would go hungry.'

Prey got over his poignant, bitter mood. Actually, he didn't, but he was used to the gnawing feeling, so he ignored it. It was easy to do with the banquet of knowledge laid out before him.

The runic arrays weren't getting built back at the flat, or in his secret base. The veropedes weren't being studied, his list wasn't getting completed, but so what? Prey was *finally* in the Royal Library.

'It's a worthy sacrifice of time. Yes. This is completely worth the time investment. Pity about the restricted sections, but I still need to learn the basic library layout for myself. Lemon won't do as a proxy, not for this. Yes. The runes will have to wait.'

Thus successfully self justifying his indulgence in childish glee, Prey took a deep breath, scenting old paper and dust, and launched into it.

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And that was how Prey was able to discover more about the recent rainboom event. It wasn't hard to discover where to look among the many shelves, thank goodness, because the sheer quantity of available books would've made that decidedly difficult. But quite a few ponies were also interested in the same topic for obvious reasons, so all Prey had to do was listen in on their thoughts and follow them to the right shelves with the relevant books.

Prey read the relevant chapters, being very gentle with the pages, but all the extracts were more or less the same. A brief history of old Pegasopilis and the rainboom's origins. There wasn't much on it, but Prey was able to look deeper and infer more than the rest of the curious ponies had been able to pick out.

Prey frowned as he closed the latest book and carefully slotted it back onto the correct shelf with the others. From what he'd just

read and combined with his not inconsiderable knowledge, a rainboom should've been completely impossible for any pegasus to perform.

The books were very insistent that breaking the sound barrier was the key feature, and such speeds would quite literally strip a pegasus's wings bare, damage their internal organs, crack their bones, shred muscles, peel skin, and generally just kill the pegasus. The only way around this was magic. Without either a unicorn with the skill level of at least a junior magi casting a number of spells on the pegasus, or without the aid of a magical artifact, such a stunt would be completely impossible for a pegasus to achieve on their own merits alone.

Prey supposed it could be done if the pegasus in question had won the Harmony lottery and been granted an especially powerful cutie mark, but even then, Prey's gut told him there would be more to it.

'It still wouldn't be enough. Magic would still be needed to explain the excess. A strong magical saturation, with what would normally be a lethally high level of ambient magic present in a pegasus at least.'

Which would be illogical. So either this stunt pegasus had a powerful and talented unicorn willing to help them out, or an equally powerful magical artifact keeping them alive, or an impossibly high innate magic.

Prey thought it likely Crimson would've been able to perform a rainboom with the jade necklace. That's how high Prey's opinion was of Crimson's capabilities and the power the jade artifact possessed. Not that Crimson would have a use for such a flashy and pointless stunt that did little else besides making a lot of light and noise.

But now it was an impossibility either way, because of the selfish pride of one Lord.

Really though, this postulation was merely a distraction. Ponies had always been Harmony's chosen, with magic and special talents given to them for free. This rainboom thing? It wasn't even

surprising, just one more in a long list of ponykind's unexplained feats.

'Forget it. It's not important.' Prey thought. He cast his eyes about him, and saw bookshelves in every direction. Prey smiled, a real smile, one where he could forget his worries for a little while.

'But there's so much more here that could be important. And I get to discover it.'

Prey went to the closest shelf, and began eagerly perusing the titles.

Thus satisfied that it didn't affect him, Prey didn't even bother obtaining one of the Cloudsdale newspapers, which actually had a report of the rainboom event, names, and the Young Fliers Competition. Perhaps he should've, but he didn't want to waste the time it would've taken.

Prey read fast. He made the most out of every moment, skipped irrelevant passages and introduction chapters, and remembered everything he saw. He tried to only focus on book titles which might be relevant to his interests, but despite all his time saving tactics, the hours slipped away like minutes.

Prey spent the entire day at the library, not even noticing lunch pass by. Who cared about food? There were books here to read. He'd sacrificed far more for far less knowledge before.

Prey loved every frantic minute of his day at the library, but it wasn't enough. Despite only having access to the public section, Prey didn't get even one thirtieth of the way through his desired topic list list, even after remorselessly pruning down the topics of his interest. Being slowed down by librarians trying to direct him to the foal’s section didn’t help

For example; unicorn telekinesis for foals and beginners. Despite such a common magic being second nature to all unicorns, not even requiring structured magic to cast, there were still five whole

shelves packed with studies, books, instructions, and thesis's on the topic.

And they were *tall* shelves too, ones that you needed a ladder to reach the top shelves for. Or to be a unicorn.

Prey barely got to scratch the surface of the available material. The library was closing up and all the visitors were quietly being asked to leave for the day before Prey guiltily realised he'd spent the whole day there. Guilty, because he hadn't spent any time with Crimson, and wasn't he supposed to be Crimson's friend?

Prey hurried back down the streets of Canterlot, for once sticking to the main roads rather than taking the back alleys he'd memorised from maps. He'd spent all day in the library, plenty long enough for anyone who might've wanted to find him to track him down. If Prey's watcher in the shadows had assembled an ambush to catch Prey alone, then he'd stick to the main streets where there were plenty of witnesses. He kept one eye on the sky the whole way.

The evening sun splashed over the cobblestones, turning the sidewalks a pleasant orange as Prey was turning into the apartment block.

Prey reached the second floor landing and unlocked the front door. Closing it behind him, Prey made straight for Crimson's flat and knocked.

There was a delay, then the door half opened.

"Sorry." Prey said the moment a distracted looking Crimson was revealed.

Crimson blinked, refocusing on Prey, "What?"

"I, er, I didn't say hello this morning. Or goodbye. Or anything to you. Sorry." Prey apologised, finding Crimson's gaze suddenly very hard to meet. 'What am I, a five year old getting scolded?'

"You were gone for the day-? Oh. I suppose you were. It's fine Prey." Crimson dismissed his apology.

Crimson... hadn't even noticed?

Prey quickly banished the ridiculous sinking feeling. He was being stupid. Crimson had his own priorities, and if Prey could lose a whole day in the library, why couldn't Crimson also be capable of getting distracted by his own activities?

'Yep, five year old, that's me, feeling jilted that my friend didn't want to play with me.' Prey mocked himself.

"Well, did you have a good day anyway?" He asked.

Crimson thought on the question for a minute, "Well enough." He eventually answered.

"I went to the Royal Library. Did anything happen I should know about back here?"

"N...Hm, no. I bought a few more items for my flat. A chair and a cool box." Crimson said.

Prey tilted his head, "Cool box?"

"It is a refrigerated container to store food in. In my, in *the* clans, we used to use cut ice stored in a dark cave to preserve food. The ice would have to be cut during winter and flown up the cliffs. In Canterlot, apparently they use a cool box. It's enchanted."

"Ah. Right." Prey could see how such an item would be useful. It was like a much better version of a cold pantry. He hadn't thought of doing it until now, but Prey could easily create his own 'cool box' with runes. It just hadn't occurred to him.

"Would you like to eat? I could make us both something?" Prey offered.

Crimson shifted, still standing in the doorway "No. I mean, no thank you Prey. I have already eaten."

"Oh." Prey said, feeling vaguely foolish for some reason, "Next time?"

"Alright, next time thank you."

"Good."

"Good."

"Okay."

"Yes. Well..."

"Yeah. Uh, I'll see you later."

"See you later Prey. Yes."

Prey retreated into his flat and Crimson retreated into his own.

The awkward, and slightly self deprecatingly humorous moment over, Prey turned in for the evening. Which for him, meant staying up for many more hours laying runes late into the night.

Doctor Clear Mind smiled warmly at Prey. The therapist had been smiling warmly ever since Prey had stepped into his office and they'd begun his next therapy session.

"Feel free to take a seat Prey, anywhere you want to is fine again. Or if you'd like to try standing, then that's fine too." Clear Mind said.

'-last time he sat in the corner. Will he stick to a formed habit, or move into something new if he's uncomfortable?-', The doctor thought to himself, already over analysing Prey's every move.

'Oh, *joy*. Barely a minute in, and already I'm considering mind breaking this idiot.' Prey thought.

He didn't want to be here. Prey was no stranger to being mocked and insulted, in the Resistance he'd been the lowest of the low, but this here was definitely a more *personal* type of insult. Ponies thought they could judge him, that they were somehow better than him, and that he needed to be fixed to meet their 'ideal' of

Harmony.

But Prey needed to be here. It was an order from Luna. So he'd just have to grit his teeth and bear it until he'd fulfilled the quota of therapy sessions and was judged 'fixed'.

With that in mind, Prey purposefully chose a plush bean bag seat, near but not totally in the corner of the room.

Clear Mind beamed. Prey felt like vomiting at the delighted expression on the vapid unicorn's face.

"May I say, I'm very glad to see you again Prey. Today, I'd like you to please remember I'm only here to help. I'm also very glad you've trusted me enough to come back, and we made such promising progress last time, believe me."

'I wouldn't believe you if you told me the sky was blue.' Prey thought. He made a subdued noise in answer to Clear Mind's words which could've been interpreted as acceptance.

'-last time he just sat in silence almost all session. I think it's for the best if I gently push him out of his comfort zone for his own good-', Clear Mind decided to himself.

"It hasn't been so long since our last little chat Prey. Could you please tell me a bit about what's been happening in your life since then? Just a little bit? I'd love to hear."

Prey briefly entertained the idea of telling the therapist; 'I practised old runic magic, built a secret lair right under your hooves, fed live pigs to two monsters out of your worst nightmares, and mind controlled four unfortunate victims who dared to pose a threat to my friend.'

Somehow, Prey didn't think Clear Mind would 'love to hear' about that.

"Nothing happened. It was nice. I went out for some walks. I think getting a spider as a pet would be cool. Perhaps two big ones. That way they could have more baby spiders."

"Uh, um..." Clear Mind coughed, fighting down a shiver at the mention of spiders. Seems it was one of the Doctor's secret fears, imagine that?

"...That sounds like a nice idea. It's good to be proactive, to find a hobby. A constructive outlet is important. Why, I myself like to draw, although I'm not very good. Ha, if I showed you some of my drawings, you'd laugh."

Clear Mind suddenly tapped his hoof and smiled, "Aha! That's it. Hey, how would you feel about trying to draw? I have some drawing pads here actually, we can do it together." He suggested, as if the idea was spontaneous and hadn't been planned all along.

Prey wasn't fooled or amused, but since he had to be here for the length of a session anyway, he may as well get it over with. "Alright."

"Wonderful." Clear Mind beamed again, and levitated out two thick sketching pads along with a selection of colouring pencils from behind his desk, where the unicorn had stashed them just for this outcome.

'-now, what colours will Prey choose and what will he draw? This could provide valuable insight-'

Prey didn't take the proffered pad and pencils. He silently waited until Clear Mind placed them down on the ground near him before he picked them up himself.

Clear Mind purposefully didn't look at him as he quickly began to sketch on his own pad, while commenting; "I'm not very good at drawing but I like it. It's relaxing. I tell you what, I'll try drawing you. If you don't mind that is?"

Prey knew what the conceited unicorn was doing, but whatever.

"I don't mind." Prey lied, randomly selecting a green colouring pencil and starting to make some squiggles on the paper pad. He was a lamb, he wouldn't be expected to make an impressive drawing. A spider was simple enough to draw though. This

aggravating session couldn't end soon enough for Prey.

After a few minutes of quiet drawing, Clear Mind spoke; "You're a very kind foal Prey, I can see that you care very much about other ponies. You can see that in yourself, yes?"

"Why thank you very much." Prey insincerely thanked him.

"You're very kind to everypony, and I'm sure many others want to be kind to you. If you'll let them." Clear Mind held his breath to see how Prey would respond.

"Why thank you very much." Prey repeated.

That shut Clear Mind down, and for a while Prey had some peace and quiet while the doctor formulated his next approach. The peace couldn't last for long.

"I'm finished. If you're not done, feel free to continue on at your own pace. But here, see?" Clear Mind said, flipping his sketch pad around.

The Doctor had clearly been underselling himself. He was more than just a 'decent' artist. It wasn't amazing, but it was very good for only five minutes. It was an impression sketch of Prey, with details focused on the face. Clear Mind had noticeably not included the ribbon, and drawn on a much bigger and warmer smile than Prey had ever shown the therapist.

"It's not exactly in depth, but this is what I see when I look at you, Prey. You look kind." Clear Mind waited for a beat, "Can you see what I see in yourself?"

'How droll.' Prey internally sighed.

"You missed a spot," Prey commented, tilting his head to the side, "You forgot my ribbon."

"Oh of course, silly me. Here, let me fix that." Clear Mind said, and with a few skilful strokes added the impression of a ribbon outline. "It's a bold fashion choice, not that I know much about fashion, just like my wife always tells me."

'-a ribbon isn't really appropriate for a colt. Is it a deeper indicator of a gender dissociation problem?-'

Prey twirled the ribbon around the end of his hoof and just smiled at Clear Mind. It hadn't been a question, so Prey didn't offer an answer, but it pleased him to know Clear Mind disapproved. The gleam in Prey's eye was not kind.

"How about you, what did you draw Prey?" Clear Mind asked, slightly uncomfortable.

Prey carelessly spun his own sketch pad around. On it wasn't some depiction of a monster or blood, but just some green holly leaves, grass, a spider, and some scribbles. Much more realistic for a child, and besides, Prey didn't really have a talent for drawing. Clear Mind of course dutifully complimented Prey on his efforts and praised him for his non-existent art, "Can I keep this Prey? I tell you what, I'll trade you for mine? Please, I insist. No really, I do."

The whole therapy session was a complete waste of time, with Clear Mind continuing to futilely try to get Prey to; "open up", and; "express himself". When the forty-five minutes were finally up and Prey could leave, he made sure to toss Clear Mind's sketch straight into the nearest waste trash can.

Gloom was waiting in the waiting room, same as last time while Crimson had only just begun his compulsory therapy session. The thestral gave Prey a strained smile when the lamb sat down opposite, but still out of reach, of him.

"I'm sorry Prey." Gloom abruptly blurted.

'Huh?'

At Prey's look he lowered his voice and continued, "I... realise you might feel like I was going to abandon you and Crimson to the ISND. Lilly and Scenic too actually. So I'm sorry I was being selfish."

"Buuut?"

"But what?" Gloom asked.

"I'm waiting for an excuse or reason. This is usually the point where someone would defend their actions."

"No, there's no but. I'm saying sorry. I'm asking for forgiveness. And I forgive you for anything you feel you might've done wrong to me too."

Prey folded his hooves under himself on the seat and examined Gloom, "The therapist told you to do this, didn't he?"

"Yes." Gloom admitted. The thestral sucked in a slow breath and explained, "He told me to say sorry for anything I might've done wrong and ask for forgiveness. Even if I didn't feel like I'd done anything wrong, he advised me to say sorry, and to also forgive. It's supposed to help me find peace."

Prey's face was a picture of scepticism, "And this works, does it?"

"I don't know. I don't feel any better." Gloom admitted uncomfortably. He scratched at his chest scar, looking tired, "But I told him I'd give his suggestion an honest try. So I'm trying."

'-it's stupid, so stupid, but it's my duty to Princess Luna to do this, so I must-'

"Riiiight." Prey drawled, and that one word said it all.

"I am sorry Prey. Really I am. I'm sorry about everything that happened to us over the Ridgeback. I'm sorry I led us all into that mess."

"Hm." Prey thought it best to hold his peace. This was one of those times where if you had nothing nice to say, it was better to say nothing at all.

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Author's Notes:

Yikes, after the last long chapter, the two week mark really creapt up on me. Nevertheless! Here's

the next chapter! (Also, 700K+ words and going now)

🍎 Kind editor once again 🍎 Sweetolebob18

EDIT: Hilarious picture Here by GreatSpaceBeaver 🎨

58.4 Due Process of Law? What's that?

"Hey guys! Great news, guess what?" Scenic exclaimed when the three of them walked into his hospital room.

"You're getting released?" Prey boredly suggested.

"No, I'm getting release-How did you know?"

"Magic." Prey answered, too lazy to explain.

"You, uh, can't do magic." Scenic said, not sounding completely sure.

"Prey's pulling your tail. The nurse at reception told us when we signed in." Gloom said.

"The magic of the mundane." Prey deadpanned. Visiting Scenic was still restricted to either the Night Guard or approved individuals. The brass didn't want a repeat of the Strange Happenstance incident.

Crimson went over to Scenic's bed and leaned in closer to examine the earth pony's two legs in their casts, silently drawing in a deep breath through his nose. "You certainly seem to be healing well. When will you be released exactly?"

"Tomorrow!" Scenic crowed in victory, "I can't wait to get back to my own house. Carton is coming by in the morning to pick me up."

Prey briefly considered if Scenic meant that literally, because he was fairly sure the giantess of an earth pony could carry her coltfriend all the way back just fine.

"You're lucky to have a friend so willing to help you out at every turn. I hope you appreciate that." Gloom said as he took a seat.

"Oh I do. I have no idea how I got a marefriend like her. She's so

kind, and brave and strong. Uh, not just physically, I mean. Although that too. Did you know Carton can buck down trees all by herself? Just one good kick." Scenic boasted, then looked contrite:

"Not that she'd ever hurt a fly. Uh, don't tell her I told you guys about that farm trip, please?"

They all gave their assurance easily enough.

'Well it's good to have confirmation that if Carton Juice kills me, it'll be by accident.' Prey thought.

As Scenic went on talking about how much he was looking forward to getting out, Prey only listened with half an ear as he thought over other things.

With Scenic getting out of the hospital, it would just be Lilly Blossom left here. How long would Nighthawk wait before ordering them back to active duty when it became obvious Lilly was never recovering? She was not going to be physically fit for duty ever again, and all the moral support Scenic, Carton, and the random addition of Saffron Swirl were giving her was doing nothing towards fixing her mental disabilities either.

'I know Nighthawk plans to keep her in the Guard if she wants to stay, but he can't mean *in* the ISND, surely. After everything that's happened, he'd have to be insane to think that's a good idea.'

But who could tell with Nighthawk? The Captain seemed to be so solid and practical most of the time, (not that Prey didn't hate him), but then out of the blue, he'd pull a stunt like dumping Scenic and Lilly on the ISND. Prey wouldn't put it past the opaque Captain to do something similar again.

'Scratch that, what might *Luna* pull next?'

Prey's stomach fell when he remembered his own unfavourable position with Luna at the moment. Last time he'd been in the presence of the dark alicorn, she'd sternly reprimanded him, and then stunned him into unconsciousness with magic. Suffice to say, Prey didn't think he was in her good books at the moment. And

while that might sound like a blasé statement, it really did make Prey afraid. He doubted any of Luna's books had a happy ending.

There was a sharp bang outside the door, and a muffled curse of; "Butterscotch!" As the orderly who'd crashed his laundry trolley into a wall regretted his moment of inattention.

It was nothing, just an accident which was no doubt repeated everywhere in all walks of life.

Prey breathed out and lowered himself back into his seat. An ordinary accident or not, his response had been automatic.

But it was nothing, just a clumsy orderly. There hadn't been any threat or danger.

So why did Prey not feel safe?

Prey knew the answer to that question; because he *wasn't* safe.

Prey was at war. It didn't feel like it, and it certainly didn't look like it either, but Prey knew his enemy was out there. They could strike at any second of the day. Prey wasn't safe anywhere but the flat or his secret lair. Or in less danger, at least. It was not a nice feeling, but there was no alternative. It was called living.

Prey sat and brooded until it was time to leave the hospital.

Unpleasantness begets unpleasantness. Fear begets fear. Anger begets anger. And paperwork begets more paperwork.

The pony from the legal side of the Guard had regrettably, but inexorably, arrived, smartly dressed in his beige dress uniform, and bearing Prey's restriction papers. It more or less read as follows:

"By receiving this document, the named individual, 'Prey', shall hereby come under effect of the conditions listed below as punishment for misconduct and risk to pony life, by Her Royal Majesty's authority, Princess Luna. Failure to comply is a criminal offence, and for the good of ponykind will be enforced by legal

action if so required.

1. The pony placed under these restrictions shall not leave Canterlot without prior written warning given to a designated officer (See 9D)

2. The pony placed under these restrictions shall not engage in any rally, protest, or public festival within the confines of Canterlot taking place after the hours of 8:00 pm, with the exceptions listed in 9E.

3. The pony placed under these restrictions shall not be out past 10:00 pm without either prior written warning, excepting in an emergency, or unless their working hours so demand them to. If so, see 10A.

4. The pony placed under these restrictions shall not....."

The 'shall not' commands went on and on for another three double-sided pages, listing exceptions and laws that Prey was expected to now obey because he'd proven he knew something dangerous.

Prey coldly read through the document page by page, completely stone walling the legal officer who was impatiently asking again and again for Prey to sign saying he understood and agreed.

'So this is the thanks I get for saving our lives? Fear, derision and punishment.' Prey thought.

It didn't matter. He wasn't going to be obeying any of these pathetic laws instituted by cowardly bureaucrats who'd never so much as had to defend themselves against a rabid sparrow before. So long as he wasn't caught, none of this even mattered.

"Sign on the dotted line please! Whether you agree or not makes no difference, you are still under the same obligations and laws either way, so just sign the paper."

Crimson, who had insisted on being in the room for this, had had enough. "Quiet."

It was just one word. Crimson did not shout, or even snarl it. But it was his body language and cold glare which lent the word the

power to immediately silence the clerk. The scar tracks under Crimson's eyes also really helped make the glare into a proper death glare. Prey wished not for the first time that he could've pulled off that same glare. Unfortunately, it would probably just look like he was trying not to cry or something.

Uninterrupted, Prey finished reading and memorising the entire document in grim silence. Then he neatly shuffled the papers into a pile and placed them on the desk. Prey tried to think up some act of suitable defiance he could pull, tearing up the pages or spitting on them, but no, that wouldn't prove anything.

He should just leave it, but the vindictive side of Prey was loudly shouting in the back of his head for him to retaliate. He looked at the clerk. A nobody to him, just the messenger.

A nobody who Prey could definitely inflict some petty vengeance upon.

Prey stared at the bureau clerk. With rapidly building apprehension, the clerk stared back at the unnaturally still and focused lamb.

'No. Don't make anymore enemies. Just walk away.'

The clerk didn't dare say anything in challenge as Prey got down off the stool and simply left without signing. Crimson stalked out after him, slamming the door behind them.

Outside, the Guard Compound greeted them. The order for Prey to come in had been dropped off in the mail this morning, and Prey had judged there was little point delaying the unpleasantness. Scenic was probably out of the hospital by now Prey thought as he took a moment to banish the lingering anger and re-check his surroundings.

The Guard Compound was exactly the same as when he'd entered, aside from the three squads of Royal Guards now drilling in marching formation out front. At least he hadn't had to go all the way up into the Palace for this pointless waste of his time, although he wouldn't have minded making the trip if he'd been going to the Royal Library instead.

Beside him, Crimson was fuming, although probably only Prey could tell. The pegasus made a severe flick with his wing, signalling strong disgust. "That was a complete farce. Is this how they treat heroes?"

"What heroes? Do you feel very heroic for anything that we did?" Prey returned.

"No, of course not," Crimson backtracked, "But you know what I mean. We did our duty, no, we did *more* than our duty, but now they just, I mean, it's wrong."

It pleased Prey that Crimson was on his side. It shouldn't matter, since he'd known from the very beginning he wouldn't be treated fairly, but still, it was nice to hear Crimson's opinion.

"Come on Prey, follow me." Crimson said abruptly, turning away and stalking off towards the compound's exit.

Prey started, and then hurried after him. He wouldn't have risked following anyone else whose mind he couldn't read, and therefore, couldn't first vet, "Why? Where are we going?"

"Somewhere nice I found, you'll like it. To eat, I mean. I have a bad taste in my mouth."

Crimson was right. Prey did like it.

The cafe Crimson spoke of was actually a contained, raised garden of sorts, with potted rose bushes set on an open elevated plank platform. Obviously, the cafe was targeted almost exclusively towards pegasi clientele, evidenced by the open elevation. The cafe building itself was set beneath the shanty style platform, and you had to place your order before climbing the stairs. Or simply flying up if you'd been blessed with wings.

Prey liked it because of the unobstructed view it offered in all directions from atop the open dining area. It let you watch all approaches, and also made it obvious if anyone was watching you from the street level because they'd have to be looking up. Oh, and

the rose boxes were probably a nice, if ultimately pointless, aesthetic touch Prey supposed.

"I found this place flying over. I wondered what it was and came down and asked. I have not tried the food, but it looked like a good place." Crimson said, seated opposite Prey.

"This really isn't necessary." Prey protested again, even though they were already seated.

"Well I wanted to. It wasn't fair to you, Prey."

"But it doesn't matter. It's just words written by petty ponies on a piece of paper. It doesn't actually change anything." Prey said, placing his fore hooves on the table. The gold tracer bands were prominently displayed.

Crimson's eyes flickered down to Prey's hooves, then back up to his face. Wordlessly, Crimson set his own fore hooves on the table, matching golden band for golden band. Prey nodded, and Crimson nodded slowly back in understanding. It changed nothing, just like Prey had said.

"Still..." Crimson murmured, "Their behaviour angers me."

"Because it reminds you of your own treatment by your clan?" Prey guessed.

Crimson's feathers bristled for a moment, before smoothing back down, "Yes, precisely that reason. They made up laws and restrictions just for me and my father and forced us to live by them. And after all my father did for them-!"

Crimson bit down on whatever he'd been about to say and looked away. There was quiet for a few minutes, aside from the passing chatter of citizens in the street below and the buzzing of bees in the rose boxes.

"If you want to talk, I'm willing to listen..." Prey cautiously offered, "But only if you want-"

"Yes." Crimson interrupted, then he repeated it, more quietly, "Yes.

Clan Myrrdon hated me. And my father, I mean. Me because I wasn't born a thestral, and my father because he supported me."

Prey knew there was a complicated story here, but he didn't ask for any of the clan's deeper reasoning, although it was obvious that whatever it had been, it probably hadn't been nearly so simple as plain racism. He patiently waited while Crimson thought over what he wanted to say and how to say it.

"My mother died in childbirth," Crimson finally began without any sentimentality. Obviously, since he'd never known his mother, he didn't miss her, "Maybe it was because I was a pegasus born to thestral parents. A throwback. It's only been recorded three times before in the clan's history, but it does happen. Each time, it didn't end well. There were tales about what those previous throwback pegasi did... But that doesn't matter. Their issue was, my father refused to give up his position."

Prey blinked, showing he wasn't following.

"I mean," Crimson amended, "My father was on the council, but he refused to give up his position when he took on the task of caring for a foal. He did both instead. I think that was the start of it all. It was just a small crack, but by the end years later, it was a gaping chasm between the elders and my father."

That was a rather more poetic description than Crimson was normally given to, but Prey supposed he'd had a long time to think and brood on this.

"Because of what happened with the last pegasi born into Childara, it was against clan law to train any such pony to be a warrior. My father did not care, and I began my training when I was six winters old."

Prey could hear the warm pride there, even in Crimson's blank tones.

"Most of the elders protested, but my father used his position as both an elder and my father to decide how he wanted to raise me. There were lots of little things, most of them I didn't even notice

until I looked back. Clan life is... *was* hard. Monsters, low food, it's always a constant struggle on the border. But you already know that."

Prey nodded. He did know, he'd lived there, and he knew how close to the edge you lived at all times.

"You have to be united, or the whole clan will fail. Duty before all else." Crimson's jaw momentarily clenched, "Some fools started saying my father wasn't doing his duty. That he wasn't putting the clan first."

"Just because he was training you?" Prey asked.

"No. I mean, not just that. My father turned down a proposal for marriage to a widowed mare. Misty Crag her name was. Then she died a week later. It was an accident, just awful luck. A rock slide while she was flying underneath. It could've happened to anyone, but it happened to her while she was flying up to our cave. She was one of the only ponies who tolerated me. She'd grown up alongside my father. She was my mother's half sister. She didn't deserve that death."

Crimson didn't have to explain any further there. Misty Crag had died while going to see Crimson's father, a stallion who'd just rejected her marriage offer. Suspicions would be raised, rumours started, and the already existing distrust would grow.

There was a pause as Crimson thought about the past, or considered what he wanted to say and what he still wanted to keep secret. His yellow eyes were distant and yet terribly focused at the same time.

"My father argued with the elders a lot. About clan policy, I mean. About foraging and that we should start looking further afield. That we should find new caves. A cockatrice infestation. A hard winter. A cave-in. Spoiled rations during the winter. Newborn foals going hungry and increasing family sizes."

Crimson listed out each issue heavily, like it was personal, and to Crimson, Prey supposed it had been. He'd lived in that clan, their sufferings and their victories had been his too at the time.

"My father helped, and I helped with everything too. Rebuilding, foraging, scouting, monster elimination especially, me and my father worked the hardest. The hardest! But they never thanked us, not once. The elders just kept arguing with my father more and more. By then, no one in the whole clan would even speak to me because of the elders and their superstition. Eveypony, I mean everybody, makes mistakes, but when my father made even one wrong call, they leapt on it and tried to make him step down again and again. But they never said thank you when we did something right."

Prey had wanted to know what happened with Crimson's clan and father, and now he was finally getting the answers. He'd more or less guessed all of this before, but it was one thing to guess and another to have Crimson frankly confirm it all to him.

"How did it end?" Prey asked quietly.

"With Princess Luna."

Crimson spoke in a brisk, clipped tone, wanting to get his explanation over with; "On Princess Luna's return, she extended a hoof to all three clans to return. My father voted for taking her offer. All the other Myrrdon elders called her Nightmare Moon and refused. My father challenged them. A duel was set. The elders lied. They said a duel, but they turned it into a gauntlet. My father won the duel, but then the elders kept coming one after another. They didn't give him any choice, they just attacked. He, he lost after the fifth one. He surrendered, I heard him yield. But, but Nexus still..."

Crimson didn't need to finish. Prey knew exactly what had happened next.

"Afterwards," Crimson swallowed drily and slowly resumed speaking, "They lied again. Nexus claimed he hadn't heard my father yield in time. Liar. Everyone heard and saw, the whole clan was there. But just like that, the elders got away with murder."

'But they didn't, did they?' Prey thought, 'Because you were still alive. I know you killed them, or some of them, for murdering your father. This Nexus at the very least. It sounded like you challenged

them to duels one after another, not just cut their throats in the middle of the night, but it just proved all their suspicions about you, didn't it? I wonder how many elders you killed in duels before they realised you meant to take revenge on them all and they exiled you before you could? Two, maybe three elders?'

Another silence fell between them. The bright sun and Canterlot sparkle didn't seem so bright or sparkly, and the scent of red roses faded into something less pleasant but much more familiar for a second.

Crimson didn't keep talking, so Prey didn't ask. He had wanted to know, and now he did.

The waiter, a young pegasus, presently appeared with their food. He actually flew up to them from the kitchen below, expertly balancing two trays. He smiled brightly at the both of them.

"One cabbage omelette with beetroot salad, and one squash n' peas cheese mash. Enjoy." The young waiter chirped.

"Thank you." Crimson said seriously, accepting his omelette.

"You're welcome. Do you want any drinks to go along with your food?" The waiter asked with a smile, while thinking; '-gosh it's weird seeing a sheep in Canterlot instead of out in the country-'

"Oh. Yes, drinks. I suppose that's normal to order too." Crimson said.

The waiter looked politely confused.

"Just get us some water." Prey said, "Please."

"A jug of water and ice, no problemo', little miss." The waiter chirped happily. Prey couldn't be bothered to correct him that he wasn't a ewe, and, seeing Prey not caring, Crimson did the same.

"Oh, do you think you might be wanting dessert after? I'm just asking, because if you want cake or flapjack, we can cook them up fresh and have them done by the time you're finished eating the main course. Would you like to see the dessert menu too?" The waiter asked, pausing with his wings half spread.

That was the problem with all the eateries and cafes Prey had been to. The waiters and cooks were always pushing you to try their dishes and hovering on your tail constantly checking if your meal was okay, or perhaps if you just wanted to chat.

Crimson's tufted ear gave a flick of annoyance, swivelling towards the waiter, "No. Thank you, but we don't want any dessert. The water is all."

"No problemo', I'll-ugh!" The stallion almost swallowed his own tongue, and his eyes and wings opened wide. '-oh my goodness, look at those scars! They're hideous-'

This pegasus must be blind to have missed Crimson's scars this long. Or rather, perhaps just average. 'Just an average pony citizen living an average day.'

It was... disappointing, even if Prey knew it was, and would forever be, rare to find ponies who weren't immediately freaked out.

"I, uh, I, I just, I'll just go a-and get that water right now." The waiter stuttered, and beat a hasty escape.

Prey distastefully watched him fly over the rose planters and drop below the platform's edge as quickly as possible. "He's not coming back with the water." Prey stated.

Crimson grunted and turned his attention to his food instead.

Prey hesitated, weighing if he should ask or not before going on ahead, "You're still going to go after them again, aren't you? One day?"

Crimson stopped cutting into his omelette, but didn't look up from the plate. He knew exactly who 'they' Prey referred to were. The elders of Clan Myrrdon. Prey hadn't forgotten what Crimson had said out at Mayflower, even if he'd been delirious and barely conscious at the time. Prey never forgot.

"Princess Luna ordered me to put aside my vengeance." Crimson eventually said.

Prey nodded neutrally, "That she did."

Crimson lifted his eyes. There was no judgement in Prey's face. Any excuse Crimson might've been going to voice died. Prey wasn't like the others, Prey understood. He could see the answer as plain as day on Crimson's face, and the pegasus would not lie and try to hide the truth, not from Prey.

And the truth was that the answer was; no. Crimson had not forgiven, nor forgotten his clan. He might be bound here to Luna's service, but if he ever saw any of them again...

"I see. Well, if that time ever comes, let me know if you need help hiding the bodies." Prey said. The veropedes were always hungry.

Crimson jerked, "I, you, no. No Prey. Even if I were to-but no. It isn't your fight. I won't risk you getting dragged down with me. And, hiding a b-no. Just no." Crimson shuddered.

"Yes, it's not my fight," Prey agreed, "But I've already told you. There are only two things I won't do for you. You didn't forget that, right?"

"No, but I... Have you hidden a... one of those before?" Crimson asked in a whisper, breathing shallowly. He looked sickened by the possibility. And also deeply disturbed that he couldn't dismiss it.

Prey poked at his cheesy squash and pea mash, hesitating. "Does it matter? You and me, in this we're both the same. ‘War to the knife, and that to the hilt’ as the zebras say. So do you really want to know the answer?"

"...No, I don't think I do."

"Okay. But I'll help you hide one if it ever comes down to it."

Prey didn't think Crimson would ever take him up on the offer, even if the pegasus did have a body to dispose of. But Prey had made the offer, and he'd meant it. And Crimson could tell he was serious.

"That's... no Prey. My answer is no. I don't want you getting hurt in my fight. I know I shouldn't go after them, it's wrong, and I'm trying

not to, but if I see any of them... I don't want you getting caught or killed alongside me Prey."

"Then don't get caught or killed."

Crimson groaned, and then barked a laugh, "It's not that simple."

"No, nothing ever is." Prey agreed.

"You can say that again Prey." Crimson picked up his forked again and finally got to taste his omelette.

Prey winced, tugging at his ear, "Hey, don't you ever, ah, check for poison first?" He asked.

"Pardon?"

"In your food."

Crimson deliberately put down the fork again, "Prey... Are you trying to tell me this is poisoned?"

"No no, not this food. I just meant your meals in general. Do you check for poison? I haven't seen you doing so, but maybe you do and I've just been missing it?"

Crimson shook his head, "No I don't. I wouldn't even know how to. Is that what you do before you eat anything? I hadn't noticed."

"That's why I just thought I might've just been missing you checking too with your own method. And yes, I always check my food for poison."

Crimson looked at Prey, "Every time?"

"Yes, always. You can never be too careful."

"Ah. I see." Crimson said gravely, and Prey thought it likely he really did see.

Prey never felt safe. He was always in danger, and you never knew when and where the next attack would come from. Bitter

experience and fear drove Prey to check his meals for poison every time, even from people he knew. (Cookie, for instance). Someone who had never been in Prey's position would scoff at him for being paranoid, but that didn't matter. It was a habit, one that'd saved his life before, and one which Prey couldn't and wouldn't stop.

And to be fair, Prey didn't *physically* check his food every time for poison. If he could read the thoughts of the person who'd made the food, and he didn't hear anything suspicious in their mind, that was usually good enough for Prey.

"So just to clarify, this food isn't poisoned, and I can eat it right?" Crimson double checked.

"No and yes, in that order. Although I suppose it still could be, but by a poison with characteristics I can't detect."

Crimson looked down at his gently steaming omelette and fresh beetroot salad, "I was perfectly happy to eat this before you said that." He commented.

"Er, sorry." Prey chuckled awkwardly.

"Are there many poisons you can recognise Prey?" Crimson asked. And just like that they were back to the heavy, dark questions.

Prey answered honestly, "Yes. But there are always more poisons out there, and that's not even touching on venoms."

Crimson seemed to be considering that answer, "Has someone... poisoned you before?"

Prey remembered Snake, and how the voodoo witch had used him as a test subject. Prey had even poisoned himself on a number of occasions, like the time he needed to avoid attending Wheat Plow's trial. Prey glanced away. "Yes. None were lethal poisons, or at least no lethal doses, obviously, since I'm still here. But yes."

"I see why you always check your food then." Crimson said, back to eyeing his own plate.

"Actually, I've been naturally poisoned far more times by plants and

animals than I have by people." Prey admitted.

"Oh, that's a relief? I think? Not that you were poisoned, I mean. That's bad either way."

"It's certainly no fun either way, I'll tell you that much." Prey said with a wry grin.

"Would you teach me Prey? How to avoid poison, I mean." Crimson asked.

"Of course I would. I'd love to help you stay alive Crimson." Prey perked up. His smile didn't last long however, "Although it's probably not going to be much use. There's too many poisons and combinations to reasonably memorise, and unfortunately most of what I know is from experience. The long and the short of it is; if someone wants to poison you, and they're determined or ingenious enough, they'll find a way to get you in the end."

"Really?" Crimson sounded a bit sceptical.

"Really," Prey said seriously, "Not all poisons are ones you eat or drink, those are just the easiest to identify. There are contact poisons and airborne poisons. Think about every object you touch in a day. Your armour, the door, your bed, the chair, dish cloth, tap handle, your keys, everything. The chances are low, but where anything could be poisoned, can you see why it's impossible not to slip up eventually?"

"I understand." Crimson said, not sounding too happy about the possibility.

"And that's to say nothing about magical poisons," Prey sighed, "And there's nothing I can say about those, because I don't know."

"So if someone wants to poison you, there's nothing you can do about it? Is that what you're saying?"

"No no, I'm just saying don't believe you *can't* or *won't* get poisoned just because of what I teach you. And really, all I can do is teach you the signs to look out for."

"Okay. What must I watch out for?"

"Right, here's what to look for. The first thing is the most obvious. Sight. Look for unexplained lumps, granules, powders, bits, dark patches, anything you find suspicious. If it looks suspicious, it is."

"How do you ever eat anything Cookie serves us, then?" Crimson deadpanned.

Prey flashed a quick smile, "Very carefully. Next is texture, although it doesn't really tell you much. All you can really look out for with texture is if it doesn't feel like what you think it should be. Then smell. With your talent this'll probably be the easiest for you Crimson. A lot of natural poisons smell like almonds or citrus. Additionally, anything smelling sharp or sweet can be a sign of poison. Next..."

Crimson listened, and Prey lectured, trying to teach him the basics of avoiding poison. It made Prey anxious, because it just enforced how easily someone might get Crimson. Theoretical knowledge could only go so far, and there were plenty of almost undetectable poisons that could be slipped past even Prey. But he imparted his knowledge to Crimson as best he could, and hoped his friend would never need it.

As predicted, the waiter didn't bring their requested water in the end. Prey didn't leave a tip.

Prey was seriously tempted to slam the door shut in their faces.

"Alright, let's hear it. How did you two get this address anyway?" Prey asked the nervously grinning Scenic and Carton Juice. Scenic's rear leg was still in a cast, but his front one was just in a sling, and he had a crutch. From how closely Carton was standing alongside her coltfriend, she'd been offering a strong shoulder to lean on the whole way here too.

"Er, Sargent Gloom told me when I asked." Scenic shrugged.

"I hope you don't mind." Carton Juice added sweetly.

"We, uh, thought we'd do that chess match. Like a mini round robin tournament or something." Scenic added.

Prey had returned earlier after his lunch, or whatever that was with Crimson at the open diner. He'd been looking forwards to getting down to some more serious rune work and defence making done, but then these three had barged in here. Uninvited.

"That explains you two. But why is she here?" Prey asked, looking to the third pony.

"Heya' Prey." Taffy beamed, leaning out from behind the bulk of Carton Juice, "Well, I was just coming by to pick up my cake tray, but then I met Scenic and the wonderful Miss Carton Juice on the way here, and I thought, 'Hey, it'd be great fun to join them'. So here I am."

'Yes, here you are. As welcome as the headache you bring.'

Prey looked at Taffy, then flicked his eyes to the midday sun out beyond the landing balcony, "I take it that it's your day off, and that's why you're not at the Palace making paperwork?"

"Yep. Wait, I do *not* make paperwork. Paperwork makes itself, I'm merely an avid collector."

"Uhh." Scenic seemed confused. Walking here like that couldn't have been painless, but here the earth pony stood, (with some help), scars, crutch and all.

"So, can we, uh, like come in and stuff?" Scenic prompted, still nervously grinning but with a definite strained edge to it now.

"Not into my flat." Prey denied immediately.

Carton blinked while Taffy 'Awww'd', "Why not?"

"Because I don't want you to." Prey said bluntly. It was not a polite answer, but it was the truth.

'-that's not polite-', Carton thought, '-no, he's a foal who's been through more than I can imagine. It's a wonder he's not worse than

he is-'

Prey decided to ignore her irrelevant opinion. Really, they should be thankful he was keeping them out of his flat. The runic arrays had not finished being refined yet, and were not 'friendly' at the moment to put it bluntly.

Taffy however, wasn't perturbed in the least by Prey's rudeness, "Hey, that's fine. We'll just use Crimson's flat instead!"

"Yeah, let's ask Crimson."

"You don't think we'll be imposing, do you, Paint Spot?"

Prey refrained from giving them all the dirty look he felt they rightly deserved. However it wasn't his place to speak in Crimson's stead. Crimson might *actually want* to see them, although False Gods only knew why.

"You can ask him yourselves. You're in luck, usually he'd be out flying at this time." Prey grudgingly admitted them, stepping out of the doorway.

Not wanting to get stuck in the corridor with three much larger people crowding in on him, he hurried to Crimson's door and knocked. The pegasus had been out doing something in Canterlot, and only returned about twenty minutes ago.

"Crimson? You in there? Scenic, Carton, and Taffy have turned up at the front door for some reason."

Prey heard a muffled exclamation of "What?" from inside the other flat.

"I said, Scenic, Carton, and Taffy have turned up!" Prey called again, louder.

Crimson opened the door far enough to look out. He looked down at Prey, then up to the three visitors. "Hello?" He offered.

Taffy answered for them all in her boisterous way, "Yoohoo Crimson. I was just coming by to pick up my cake tray and I

bumped into these two on the stairs and now we're all here to play chess in your flat."

Through the gap, Prey saw Crimson's wings momentary go into a panic. Crimson looked over his shoulder, then back out at Prey, then to the three hopeful ponies, and then back into his flat again. Crimson calmed his wings and opened the door wider with an unvoiced sigh, "Alright. I suppose you may come in."

"Great!" Taffy pushed in without any embarrassment. Prey jerked away and hurried in past Crimson before the mare got too close to him.

Crimson's flat looked the same as the last time Prey had seen it, with one exception.

"Oh you got a table. Great, this'll make playing chess so much easier." Taffy grinned as she spied the new addition.

'-still need to see about getting him and Prey some proper stuff. Like chairs, carpets, and curtains. Especially curtains! No home is complete without curtains-'

Scenic and Carton, like all who first saw the flat, (and that number was far too high in Prey's opinion), were shocked by how bare it was, whereas to Prey and Crimson, it was perfectly fine. Carton was looking around in dismay, her ears wilting:

'-this is how the Guards who defend us live?-'

'-I didn't know Crimson and Prey were so hard up. I feel bad. I should have guessed-', Scenic thought in guilt as he hobbled himself inside.

"Your cake tray is beside the sink." Crimson said to Taffy. "Thank you by the way. It was very sweet. And full of fudge. And sugar. And fudge stuffed with sugar. And more sugar."

"You're welcome," Taffy beamed proudly, "I'll grab it later. But I hear we're supposed to be playing chess, am I right? Scenic said he brought two checkerboards so we can all play. Well, one of us can sit out and take turns, but it'll be fun. I love chess."

Scenic jerked up from staring at the one lone decoration in the flat, Crimson's Blood Fern, and looked in interest at Taffy, "You regularly play chess? You must be, uh, quite good then. Could I have a game?"

Carton Juice gently bumped Scenic with her hip, although the huge earth pony mare still almost overdid it. At least he didn't bounce off the wall. "What, beating me over and over isn't fun anymore?" She gently teased.

"I do not win over and over. You're very good, you win like, er, half our games." Scenic defended bashfully.

"Aw, don't be modest." Carton said.

"I do not know how to play chess." Crimson said.

"Don't worry, we'll teach you. I'm a great teacher." Taffy waved him off, "Hey, what about you Prey? Do you know how to play the king of board games?"

"King?" Prey asked.

"Chess is like, the original board game of all board games. It's centuries old, Princess Celestia used to play it back in her day. It's the fairest and most balanced strategy game there is. There's no trickery or luck, just all skill."

Scenic looked taken aback by Taffy's sudden passion, then excited at finding a fellow enthusiast, "I know right? Everything is fair because both players have the exact same pieces and can see the whole board at all times. It's the ultimate strategy game."

'-seems my Paint Spot's found a playmate. Good for him, he could do with a proper challenge-', Carton Juice thought, the huge earth pony smiling fondly down at her coltfriend.

Prey was just wondering whether he could successfully sneak out of the flat and get back to work without being noticed, when Taffy clapped her hooves together, "We're getting ahead of ourselves, we came here to teach Prey and Crimson to play chess. We can't all play if we don't know how, right? So let's get down to business!"

'*Damn* it.' There went Prey's plan.

Crimson looked sceptical, "I'm unsure if I want-"

"Don't be such a grump. Come on, it'll be fun, you'll see." Taffy interrupted, not giving Crimson a chance to finish.

'-wow. She's brave, or insane. I don't think I could just interrupt Crimson like that-', Scenic thought, impressed.

Prey rolled his eyes to himself, 'Well obviously that's because you've seen Crimson slicing kindersnatches to pieces, whereas Taffy sits behind a desk all day. She just doesn't know any better.'

"You too, Prey. Come and learn the king of board games." Taffy called.

"No thanks, I'm fine."

"No buts Prey, it'll be good for your brain."

"Really, no thank you."

"Come and give it a go at least. You can't say you don't like it if you've never tried it. Join us please."

"I'd rather sit out, I don't like board games. But don't let me stop you." Prey said, purposefully sitting himself down and out of the way.

Giving up, ('-but only for now-'), Taffy made a mock pouting face, then quickly wiped it off in favour of her usual smile as she spun back around to the other three:

"Alright, who wants to play first?"

Chess, Prey decided, was an awful game.

First off, when did he ever have time to play games? Well, right now if you wanted to be technical, but after watching from the

sidelines as Taffy and Scenic avidly explained the rules of chess, Prey decided it was a stupid game. Scenic however seemed to think of chess as some great strategy game, some time honoured tradition almost. Taffy described chess as having come from "noble origins", having been mastered by the "greatest strategists in the world".

Complete hogweed.

Taffy had talked Crimson into playing a practice game with her so she could better show him how the rules worked. Despite her chatting away and pointing out both good and bad moves on both their sides of the board, she was quite clearly winning. Crimson's blank face didn't really show whether he was enjoying the game or not, but Prey thought he was probably just humouring the huge mare.

Not that Prey was any sort of chess master himself, Hell, he'd never even played one game and he didn't intend to, but he thought Crimson should just move his bishop up and leave it there threatening the whole rest of the board, before focusing on the mess of pawns and knights going on in the middle.

Prey refused all offers to play a match extended to him, all cajoling, coaxing, and blatant attempts to try and provoke him going ignored. Prey held no interest in playing at all.

The three of them had turned up unannounced and uninvited, interrupting his work, and expected him to play a game with them? Ha, fat chance. Plots don't hatch themselves, Prey had *important* things to do.

'-this would be great if we had Sargent Gloom here too-', Scenic thought fondly, '-let's make sure to bring him next time, so we can all join in-'

But then he remembered Lilly Blossom, and the moment of fun faded and died in Scenic's chest. Prey folded his hooves, 'And now he finally gets it. Chess is pointless. It's not survival, it's not training, and it's not research. What good can a board game do

against a kindersnatch, or another warlock?'

"You know, with some music, cushions, a lick of paint and some other stuff, your flat could be a great place Crimson." Taffy announced out of the blue, unknowingly interrupting Scenic's spiral into depressed musings.

"Stuff?" Crimson asked.

"Yes, stuff," The frizzy maned mare confirmed seriously, "What say you we get together with Gloomy this weekend and I can show you guys some good places to go shopping? How about it?"

"Gloomy?"

"Yes, Gloomy."

Crimson lingered on that disrespect for a moment, before just letting it go with a slight shake of the head, unintentionally causing his overly long mane to slip into his face. Crimson puffed it back out of his eyes and said, "While I thank you for the offer Taffy, I see little reason to do so."

"What? Uh, why ever not? It's like totally bare in here." Scenic exclaimed.

So what? It held all the necessities for life, food and water, and the flat itself was the completion of the third and last necessity; shelter. Alright, there was a difference between a shack and a mansion, still if both contained all you needed to survive, Prey saw little practical difference and Crimson was certainly the same. The thestral clans' ancestral homes were literally caves after all.

"It's fine isn't it?" Crimson answered Scenic's question blankly.

"Uh, no? You guys have got nothing. I mean, you can't be comfortable like this right?" Scenic asked incredulously.

"Yes?" Crimson responded just as blankly, "I don't need anymore. I already have more amenities here than my cave ever did."

That blunt statement startled the three Equestrian ponies, and

sympathy, compassion, and respect quickly followed from Taffy, Carton, and Scenic in that order.

"Besides," Crimson inadvertently cut them off before they could start expression their condolences:

"All those things cost bits. Neither Prey or I have a store of money yet. Shopping will have to wait." Crimson finished without any sense of embarrassment. And why would he be ashamed of being monetarily poor? They didn't have money in the clans, so the concept didn't yet hold much value to him, and Prey himself had never cared much for gold. You couldn't eat it when you were starving or burn it when you were cold.

'-I, I didn't think about that, but they're new to Equestria, of course they wouldn't have any funds yet-', Taffy thought, wincing and looking down.

'-but Paint Spot said they were like heroes, yet Crimson is so poor? Are all thestrals actually poor? And that poor little sheep, made to live like this-', Carton Juice was thinking about things she'd always just taken for granted and assumed until now, ears drooping. Scenic's own thoughts were not much different to his giant marefriend's.

Prey rolled his eyes heavenward in frustration. Could they just *not* please? Just this once?

"So this piece, what was it called again? Castle? It goes diagonally right?" Crimson asked, interrupting the brewing atmosphere.

"Huh?" Carton Juice blinked, refocusing on the chessboard, "Ah, no, that's what the bishop does. Yes that one, but only on the colour square it starts on."

---oOo---

Some say that those who've survived near death experiences develop a sixth sense about such dangers. A way for the subconscious to warn the waking mind.

This was a saying Prey could and did completely believe. It was

called 'experience' by the sensible, and 'paranoia' by ponies. But he didn't believe it was an actual sixth sense. Although, magic had done weirder things before, especially if you took into account pony cutie marks.

But some other people said close family could develop the same sixth sense about their loved ones instead. A study was actually made by some rather noteworthy scholars of their time making arguments for both sides of the dispute, although nothing conclusive was ever actually proven. But that study wasn't important. Everyone had their own personal experiences, and each believed their own opinion.

Such as a wife who woke up in the middle of the night to find out the next day her husband had been hit by a wagon at the exact same hour. Or breaking the homemade mug from aunt Remedy on the same day she had a stroke.

Now *that* Prey firmly believed was just wishful thinking and lucky coincidence.

But some people say it's real. If so, it'd never happened to Prey. Where was the warning when Breaker was in danger? Why didn't it tell him when his brother was killed?

No, all such signs and warnings were pure coincidence.

---oOo---

Prey himself was given no such pre-warning.

A banging came at the front door, jarringly loud.

Only *then* did Prey get a bad feeling.

The feeling was that of a loose stitch which hadn't existed suddenly being tugged on the back of Prey's neck. The tug wasn't one Prey had felt before, but it was directly linked as if by a thread straight down to his gut. And *that* instinctual gut warning he *did* recognise.

What was it which put Prey on edge? Perhaps it was the loudness of the knocking, or the attitude behind it. Or was it paranoia that

made Prey remember the leafy rotting stench of Deeper Green air tickling the back of his neck?

Or maybe it was much more basic than all that. The very recent attempted intrusion by the two Guards and two lawyers Prey had dealt with was still in the forefront of his mind.

"Huh, were you expecting somepony else? Ooh, do you think that's Gloomy come to join us?" Taffy chirped, looking up from check-mating Crimson.

"I don't think so," Crimson gave the four visitors a look, "You didn't invite anyone else to my flat, did you?"

Scenic and his huge marefriend looked at each other over their chess board and exchanged a nonplussed shrug. '-why's he speaking funny and not saying 'anypony'?-'

Prey was on his hooves, a worried frown on his brow and an unpleasant squirming in his stomach. Crimson was heading for the door. "Crimson, wait-"

Crimson stopped as Prey hurried up next to him, "Prey?"

"I, I don't know. Be on your guard." Prey hissed in a low voice.

Crimson's eyes flicked back to his wings, but his father's wing blades that he was so proud of were still locked away in the Palace. For safekeeping of course, but he didn't have them right now. And with the jade necklace gone, Crimson was weaponless.

The pounding came at the door again.

Crimson looked out into the hall. He rolled his shoulders and stepped out of the flat.

"Crimson-"

"They won't wait forever, Prey." He said simply to Prey's hiss of worry, "Whoever they are, it is better to face them. It's probably nothing anyway. Another courier who didn't get the message."

That would've made the most sense, if it was just another mailpony. But Prey felt sure it wasn't.

The front door opened as Crimson pulled down the latch. It was deja vu. The scene waiting on the landing was so shockingly similar as to be the same. It wasn't, not really, but it also was. However it wasn't a disembodied feeling of disconnection, because Prey recognised what he saw. It was as if Crimson had opened the door and Prey found his cell from Dreverton on the other side.

It was like finding he'd come full circle when his back was turned. Remembering Dreverton was appropriate for the moment too.

Celestia's afternoon sun was on this side of the building, and its rays came in through the balcony and refracted off gold armour. Prey had to squint against it before he could make out the four figures spread out in front of Crimson.

Four Guards. A two and two split. A pegasus and an earth pony in the standard plating of the Royal Guard. And two unicorns in the more extensive, golden and alabaster armour of the Solar Guard.

For a moment, Prey locked up. Two unicorn Solar Guards. And he recognised one of them, the tallest one on the right. He'd been there when Captain Valour had dragged Prey from Dreverton; Sunshine.

In that moment, all Prey could think as he stared wide eyed at Sunshine was; 'He's come to take me back to Dreverton!'

You can run, but the past will always catch up. There is always a price.

It was the other Solar Guard who spoke though, not Sunshine, "Crimson Trace of the Night Guard?"

The unicorn's voice was brisk, impatient, and full of no-nonsense confidence. His question threw Prey off kilter. Weren't they here for him?

Crimson coolly evaluated the stallion and the other three Guards. "Yes, I am Crimson Trace."

'-ha, I thought so, couldn't be sure it was him out of the armour though-', The earth pony Royal Guard thought.

'-not so scary now are you? Just a pony like me-', The pegasus one was thinking.

It was a thrill of fear that Prey finally regained enough control to realise he couldn't hear Sunshine nor the second Solar Guard's mind. They were not guarded behind mental walls like Crimson's were, or simply missing like with mimics, but rather clouded. Obscured. Just a muffled fog to Prey's perception.

'Magic. The same enchanted gems on their helmets they had last time. A mind lock they called it. That must be it.'

Before him stood two powerful unicorns who, for all their hang ups about violence, were dangerously competent soldiers. They might be here to kill him and Prey wouldn't have any warning. Standing here and caught off guard, he was as vulnerable as any other person would be before them.

The pegasus Royal Guard puffed out his chest, "Crimson Trace, by the power invested in me by Her Royal Majesty I hereby place you under arrest for suspicious activity."

Crimson blinked slowly, once.

"Pardon?"

The Solar Guard who'd been speaking before the pegasus butted in rolled his eyes, "You're under arrest on suspicion of theft."

Crimson's wings stiffened, "What?"

"I suggest you comply and come quietly. We have a warrant. If this is a mistake, you'll be released with a full apology."

This was not a mistake. They wouldn't have sent four Guards, two of them Solar Guards, unless they were sure, and the stances of all four Guards said they knew that.

'No, nonono. What is this? I dealt with those fools last time. I made

sure of it, I wiped their memories! It was just a warrant to search the flat, just written permission to be annoying, not arrest him! What's changed? Why is Crimson being arrested?!' Prey thought frantically, but he couldn't come up with any explanation that made sense.

"Theft of what?" Crimson demanded.

"That can be discussed with you at the station when you give your account-"

"And I'm demanding to know now. I have a right." Crimson cut him off.

A tense look went around the four Guards. Sunshine sent a sidelong look at his companion and tilted his ears. The other Solar Guard snorted in response. Sunshine gave an aggrieved tail flick at having to be the one, and answered Crimson's question; "You are accused of breaking and entering, and the theft of a magical heirloom belonging to Lord Vanish of House Time."

"I stole from-? He stole from me!"

Prey was just as shocked and outraged as Crimson. What was Vanish doing falsely accusing Crimson like this? Sending a threatening message through those lawyers was one thing, (a message which Prey thought he'd dealt with), but this was an active attack. Was Vanish stupid? Crimson hadn't stolen anything. How did the noble intend to explain his false accusations when it was revealed Crimson didn't have the jade necklace, and he, Vanish, still had it in his possession the whole time?

Unless... Unless it wasn't a false accusation.

Prey'd mind raced to make the connections. What if the necklace really had been stolen? Not by Crimson, obviously, but by someone else? Naturally, their first suspect would be Crimson.

Vanish was a greedy, self serving, arrogant, lying, entitled, blackmailing, rich unicorn snob. In short, a typical noble. But he had never appeared to be stupid. False accusations which could so

easily be disproved and would blacken his House's reputation wouldn't be something a noble like Vanish would do.

Thus, someone else must've really broken in and made off with House Time's priceless family heirloom.

'But why're the Solar Guard here? What could possibly be serious enough to involve them? Who sent them? Why're they here *plus* the Royal Guard? Did Shining Armour do this? Has Celestia herself taken an interest?!'

Prey's breath was coming fast. He was approaching the edge of panic. What should he do? Should they fight?

The Royal Guard pegasus took another step forwards, almost getting in Crimson's face.

"You stand accused and are under arrest. I'll ask again, do you want to do this the easy way, or the hard way?" The pegasus dared, shoving a set of hoof cuffs under Crimson's nose.

'-go on scar face, make my day. I'll show you how a real pegasus does his duty, you bat lover-'

Muscles along Crimson's wings and under his fur subtly tensed. Prey's breath caught in panic. Crimson was unarmed and unarmoured, still trapped in the doorway without room to manoeuvre, and there were two unicorn Solar Guards, both subtly ready to spring into action. This wasn't a fight Crimson could win head on.

But then Crimson relaxed, and the moment passed. He glanced back at Prey, still standing behind him, blue eyes wide and, yes, scared. And Prey saw the Guards finally spot him standing behind Crimson. Sunshine's eyebrows snapped together-

'He knows, he remembers! The memory runes didn't work.'

"Who's this? There was no foal registered living with you at this address. We can't leave a minor unattended because of an arrest." Sunshine said.

Prey breathed again. Sunshine hadn't recognised him, and had also let slip a loophole. He could work with this! They couldn't just arrest Crimson if they thought he was looking after Prey-

"We'll just have to bring her with us and put her into temporary care." The second Solar Guard answered, looking put out at the inconvenience.

"Hey, no, the sheep's a Night Guard too. She's in them ISND's group too sir." The earth pony Royal Guard spoke up.

"She? Prey isn't a-No, Prey's *not* coming with me." Crimson emphasised.

"It's not up to you. Protocol dictates not leaving foals unattended at arrests. Enough stalling." Sunshine ordered.

Prey opened his mouth, "I-"

Crimson's wing shot out in front of Prey, silencing him.

"No. He can stay here with Scenic Paint and Carton Juice. They're friends. They're back in my-in the flat right now." Crimson said firmly, then hissed to Prey; "Don't get involved. Go and tell Gloom what's happened. Let Captain Nighthawk know. They'll sort this out."

"Sir!" The pegasus Royal Guard protested to Sunshine, "Are we really just going to take his word for that? What if there's nopony even in there? He could be lying. And shouldn't we search the flat for the stolen heirloom too?"

All of Crimson's primary flight feathers bristled at the Guard's accusation. "I am *not* lying, and I have stolen nothing. I'm complying with this arrest because of the law, not because I'm guilty."

"That's got nothing to do with us. We're neither the prosecution or a judge," The second Solar Guard said dismissively, "And this is a problem solved easily enough."

The stallion raised his voice, "This is the Guard. Are there any

ponies within this flat?" He called, apparently not realising the corridor actually led to two flats.

"Is this a joke Crimson?" Taffy's voice came back, muffled.

Scenic and Carton said something too. It sounded like, "Who's that?" And, "Huh?"

The Solar Guard nodded, "There you go, there's other ponies who can look after the foal. Private, if you would?" He gestured the pegasus with the hoof cuff's forwards again.

The Royal Guard hesitated, thinking; '-what about searching the flat though?-'

The Royal Guard and Solar Guard were technically completely different Guard units. Neither answered to the other's commander, and had different assignments and roles. However, in practice, the Royal Guard deferred to the Solar Guard when both were on the scene.

Historically, usually half or more of all Solar Guards were former Royal Guards who'd proven themselves through exceptional dedication or skill. Usually both. It was a mark of high recognition to receive a transfer offer to join the prestigious ranks of the Solar Guard, and there was also no returning once a pony joined the Solar Guard. They were the modern day equivalent of knights in shining armour, crusaders sworn to Celestia. They were superior and everypony knew it.

As such, the pegasus Royal Guard was hesitant to be disrespectful enough to further question whether they should search the flat, even though procedure insisted that they should.

Regardless, Sunshine seemed to guess his thoughts anyway, because he spoke; "We're arresting Crimson Trace on the grounds of reasonable suspicion. There's no proof he did steal anything yet, and even if he is the thief, he wouldn't be dumb enough to hide it in his very own home which has other ponies in it."

"Oh. Of course sir, I see now." The pegasus straightened.

"Hey, what's going on out there?" Came Taffy's impatient call from down the corridor.

"Nothing. It's nothing. Back in a second." Prey called back quickly to placate her, trying to keep the squeak out of his voice. Taffy would just create a huge scene without achieving anything if she came out here right now.

Crimson did not move while the pegasus finished up fastening the hoof cuffs around his forelegs. They sat just below the gold tracer bands from Luna. The sight of the joint metal restraints circling Crimson's legs made Prey furious.

Sunshine politely smiled down at Prey, not having a clue about the hate those soft blue eyes hid as Prey cautiously backed up, "Please, there's no need to be afraid little miss. I hope this is all a big misunderstanding and your, ah, big brother? Guardian? Crimson Trace will be back to you soon, ah... What was your name?"

The sheep looked the Solar Guard up and down. He remembered the last time he'd seen the unicorn. "My name is Prey."

'But unlike you, I have not forgotten your name, Sunshine. It's still on The List.'

Sunshine's smile faltered for a second and his eyes flickered, "Prey? Prey. Why does that sound... Hmm, I could've sworn... No. It's nothing. But don't worry Prey, you'll be looked after no matter the outcome. Her Majesty cares for all her ponies."

He didn't seem to notice how Prey's face went even whiter. "Come Sunshine. We're leaving." The second Solar Guard called.

Prey blinked, then whipped his head towards Crimson. It was as the Solar Guard had said, they were leaving, with Crimson hobbled and shackled between them. He wordlessly looked back at Prey. He had to blow a lanky strand of mane out of his amber eyes to do it, but he looked at Prey squarely and nodded. Crimson still hadn't gone about getting a replacement mane tie like Prey had told him to. For some reason, that seemed ridiculously unfair.

"Come on. Move out."

"Yes sir."
"Yes sir!"

Prey's jaw hurt from grinding his teeth. He stood and watched as Crimson was led off towards the apartment block's staircase, because life isn't fair. The weak suffer under the strong.

'No, I can fix this. I don't think this is an attack by my enemy in the shadows, it's just Crimson getting caught up in the mess. I can get Gloom to go to Nighthawk, that'll at least help.'

But the Solar Guard held much more authority than Nighthawk did, and Luna had already made it plain she didn't care for their struggles. She was an indifferent ruler who only acted on her own whims. Prey hated being so helpless.

'Out of everybody, why did it have to be the Solar Guard?' Prey thought angrily. Prey hadn't forgotten Valour. Even now, the Solar Guard Captain was making problems for Prey despite having no memories of the runt lamb.

'I'll get you yet Valour. And you too Vanish, you've just moved your ranking up on The List.'

"Hey, anypony out there? Yoohoo, Prey, Crimson? What's going on?" Taffy stuck her head out of the flat. She blinked when she only saw Prey standing by himself in the open doorway.

"Hey, where's Crimson wandered off to?"

It was the same pathetic story the world over. The misunderstood underdog trying to stand up for themselves under the unjust oppression of the powers that be.

Through no achievement of personal strength, these people in power had been given it by 'convention', and 'laws'. These people could steal all your belongings, your home, your land, even enslave you and take away your very life, and as long as they ticked all the

right boxes, society would let them get away with it.

Just because it's a law doesn't mean it's right.

Although this was all from the underdogs perspective. To the majority of wider society, it was all proper and correct. There was a due process of law for a reason, and ninety-nine times out of a hundred, it worked just as intended and protected the innocent.

Mistakes are made, it's inevitable. But that's just life, and no system is perfect. Well meaning people try their best, but misunderstandings will still happen. It's no one's fault. It’s The System, and The System works.

Yeah, Prey didn't care about any of that. Who cared about the ninety-nine when you were the one?

"No." Nighthawk said without hesitation, "You aren't getting involved with this mess."

"But sir, Crimson's under my command. It's my duty to him to help." Gloom protested.

"I appreciate that Gloom, but that's where you're wrong. You are on extended sick leave, not on duty. You have no authority to get involved. That goes for you too Prey." Nighthawk added, turning his sharp slitted eyes on the lamb.

Both Gloom and Prey were standing in Nighthawk's office. Prey had gone straight to Gloom's apartment to tell him what had happened. The thestral had been surprised to find Prey on his doorstep, since he didn't recall actually ever telling Prey his address, but he quickly forgot all about that when Prey hastily informed him of what had happened.

The both of them had come straight here to the Palace, and demanded to speak with Captain Nighthawk.

Demanding to speak to a high ranking Guard officer wasn't something you could usually do, off-duty Guard or not, but this was

the Night Guard and the ISND were also Night Guards. They were fortunate that the Captain was even still awake at this hour of the day, but Nighthawk had admitted them both without delay, whereupon Prey and Gloom had filled him in on Crimson's arrest.

But now Nighthawk was telling them to keep out of it. Prey glared at Nighthawk while Gloom protested; "Please sir, we can help. Prey was there when this Lord Vanish took the necklace off Crimson the first time. It wasn't Crimson, it's just these Royal inspectors throwing their weight around. Tartaraus, it's probably that Strange Happenstance detective again. Please put us back on active duty and assign us to this case."

"No." Nighthawk repeated, unmoved. "This is for your own good. Scenic Paint and Lilly Blossom are not ready to resume active duty, and you are all too close to see things clearly. Any investigation you conduct would be compromised."

'-this is for their own good, and I smell danger. Why else would the Solar Guard get off their high cloud to get involved while purposefully keeping us out of the loop?-', Nighthawk was thinking.

Gloom's jaw worked as he tried to find grounds to protest on. But Nighthawk was the Captain for a reason, and being easily swayed was not it.

However, Prey had not given it a go yet, it had been Gloom doing the talking so far. He despised the thought of playing by pony rules, but if it helped Crimson, then he would do so without hesitation.

"Nighthawk, sir, I disagree. It is *because* we're close to Crimson that we'll be the best to prove his innocence. Haven't the ISND proven we can manage any task? Without being arrogant, for our small size, we're your best investigation squad, sir. Even if Scenic and Lilly aren't recovered, Gloom and I can manage by ourselves. Won't you give us a chance? What have you got to lose?" Prey reasoned.

For a moment, just a fleeting moment, Nighthawk looked pained. But then it was gone, replaced by the normal, unmoving, stern visage of the Night Guard Captain.

"No. Neither of you are mentally fit to return to active duty yet, and it's not as simple as that. The Royal Guard have made this arrest, and the Solar Guard have also gotten involved. This is far more serious than you realise. You must leave it with me. I do not forget my Night Guards, and I will be doing everything I can for Crimson. Or do you not trust my word?" Nighthawk challenged.

"Of course sir, but... Yes sir." Gloom gave in, bowing his head.

Prey didn't trust Nighthawk. He didn't trust anyone without reservation, no not even Crimson. But he too made a show of jerking his head away and reluctantly admitting, "Yes, sir."

Prey wasn't angry, he was calm, very calm. His mind was clear and he could think without getting distracted by emotions. He'd been getting far too compromised when it came to Crimson lately, no matter how wonderful it felt. But right now, Prey would be calm and do what he needed to.

"I need your word, Prey." Nighthawk said gruffly.

Prey raised his head with a questioning look on his face.

"Your word you will not try to investigate this anyway. You are not a Night Guard at this moment. You cannot get involved, not with your... restrictions. If you are caught, there is nothing I can do. Leave this to the Night Guard, I will not fail. You have my word, so I want yours."

Prey didn't immediately agree. Nighthawk would be suspicious if he gave in too easily. So he grimaced, scars standing out as he narrowed his eyes. "Yessss." He finally let the reluctant word out.

"Good. Don't worry, I will deal with it." Nighthawk repeated, standing up from behind his desk and ushering them ahead of him towards the door, already formulating a plan as he went:

'-first find Starry Wing. Send him to Shining Armour and find out who's doing this is. I need to go make the protest formal and demand visiting rights. I'll send Screech to talk with Crimson. If this drags on, we'll have to smuggle in some blood to keep Crimson

healthy too-'

"Thank you for seeing us at least, sir." Gloom sighed.

Nighthawk paused on his way to the door and briefly rested a wing claw on the scarred thestral's shoulder, "You do not have to worry Gloom. Crimson has done nothing wrong."

Outside the office, Nighthawk spoke a few words to the Night Guard standing sentry and sent her hurrying off to find Starry Wing. With that taken care of, he gave a sharp nod to Prey and Gloom, and marched off towards the Royal Guard section of the Palace without a backwards glance.

Prey watched him go.

"Well, we've told the Captain. He'll figure out a way to get this nonsense sorted out." Gloom said, trying to sound more upbeat and confident than he really felt.

"That's it? You're happy to just leave it like this?" Prey asked.

"No, of course I'm not. I've failed at my duty so many times already. But it was an order, Prey." Gloom said tiredly.

'-and Nighthawk's right. At this point, trying to step in will only make things more difficult for Crimson-'

"Crimson's not in any physical danger Prey, nor is he hurt or starving. If I believed for a second he was in any real danger-", Gloom broke off and shook his head. "But this is now all a legal battle. It could take a while, but Nighthawk will sort it all out, I'm sure of it."

Prey supposed that as far as it went, that was true. Crimson wasn't currently in any physical danger. Currently. But Prey had enemies, and what if they went after Crimson in an attempt to lure him into a trap? There were still the mimics, Strange Happenstance, whomever had really re-stolen the jade necklace from Vanish, not to mention the angry and humiliated Lord himself.

No, while Crimson shouldn't be in any physical danger, especially

while under guard, Prey didn't trust anyone.

But Prey was calm as he watched Nighthawk disappear around the corner and didn't say anything. He knew what he needed to do. If he couldn't trust anyone, he'd just have to get Lemon Pink and do it himself.

"Lemon Pink, where are you?" Prey shouted in high pitched frustration, no longer calm. His voice bounced around the shadowy crystal lit cave and returned unanswered. The larger veropede, the one Prey had hatched, curiously tasted the air around Prey as it felt the vibrations.

Prey ignored the huge monster. Where was Lemon Pink?

On leaving the Palace, Prey had immediately split from Gloom claiming he needed to; "Take a walk to clear my head. Alone."

Gloom had still tried to accompany him, but Prey had emphasised "*Alone.*" again, and Gloom had backed off.

From there, he'd hurried through Canterlot, dodging into side streets and backtracking to confuse anyone who might've been following him. Right when a cart had been passing, Prey had slipped down into the waterway access point, and crawled down into the unused overflow pipe.

Lemon Pink was scheduled to be feeding the two veropedes this evening, so Prey had been sure he'd find her here. But she wasn't here, the cold stone cavern was empty.

Obviously, she'd been delayed. Normally, that wouldn't be a problem, but normally, Crimson wasn't in jail. It was unavoidable however, so Prey had carved some runes and tried to patiently wait. He'd waited, and carved. And waited.

That was over three hours ago. Now Prey was worried Lemon Pink might somehow have been identified as belonging to him and killed. She was not on a specific schedule, but should definitely have been here by now. She could be dead or captured for all Prey

knew.

Lemon Pink's veropede uncurled its armoured length and scuttled into the light cast by the lanterns. Its segments gleamed as one by one they came into the low light. Prey paused to see that it was just taking a drink from the plunging sinkhole, before he returning to trying to focus on rune work, and when he couldn't focus, resorted to pacing.

Should he go and retrieve a couple of pigs from the hired pen for the veropedes while he waited-? No, he might end up missing her. Besides, that was unimportant right now. A veropede could go weeks between meals. Months if it hibernated. Although when next it ate, it would have to be a *large* meal.

Besides, Prey had much bigger problems.

'If Lemon does not return by tonight, I'll have no choice but to proceed as if she's been either captured or killed.' Prey thought. If it came to that, perhaps Prey should make sure and trigger the suicide rune he'd placed on Lemon Pink's neck just in case of this very situation? Then she wouldn't be able to tell her captors anything.

Prey didn't have to be near Lemon to activate it. He could also trigger it from long distance by using a different runic array to boost the range.

He could do it right now actually. The array was set up and ready to go.

Should he? Or should he wait? In theory, Prey knew he shouldn't take the chance. Lemon Pink had been acting odd lately. But she had come across the Ridgeback to save him, even if she'd only been following her orders. She was useful, and could not be easily or safely replaced, but if she was captured and traced back to him…

Prey stared down unseeingly into the invisible depths of the sinkhole as the veropede finished its drink and the ripples stilled. He tugged at the end of his ribbon while the giant insect settled down to clean its razor barbed antenna less than ten hooves away.

'I warned Crimson change was coming. Well, now it's here and it's hostile. What should I do?'

The cold depths of the sinkhole provided no answer. What unknowns could these waters hold? The depths of the pool probably hadn't stirred in hundreds of years.

Prey looked around for a stone to throw into the depths, then stopped as his ear caught something. He cocked his head to the side, tense. He reached out with his mind and gently brushed against the runes embedded into the two veropedes, just to assure himself they were still there and ready.

If he'd been discovered, things were shortly about to get bloody. Prey concentrated.

The light trundling of wooden cart wheels over stone slowly grew louder, and the glow of a lantern approached up the tunnel.

"Lemon Pink, where have you been?" Prey snapped.

Lemon paused in her pulling of the cart, two unconscious pigs in the back. The lantern she was levitating lowered a fraction in her silvery aura, "Ah? Prey. I was detained by-"

"Never mind," Prey cut her off, "The reason can wait until later. Someone has made a move against me. Against us. I don't know if it's the mimics, someone else, or even targeted specifically against me at all. But Crimson has been arrested by the Solar Guard."

A brief spasm of ugly anger danced across Lemon's normally placidly beautiful face. She'd had cause to hate the Solar Guard back when she was Night Watcher, and her becoming Lemon Pink had only enhanced that hate, since her experiences came from a combination of Prey's own.

"Is it another left over consequence of Night Watcher's poorly managed raids against the nobles, perhaps?" Lemon asked, referring to her past self as someone completely different and contemptible.

"Don't know. Chances are one in three that it does bear a lingering influence, but making any prediction right now is premature."

"Yes, Prey. I see. What action will we be taking?" Lemon asked. She was a tool, as patient and indifferent as a hammer as to how Prey best chose to utilise her skills.

Lemon Pink's safe return, (if late), had cooled much of Prey's rising anxiety. If she had been attacked, then Prey would've known he was their next target. But she hadn't been, which meant Crimson's arrest probably wasn't the first step in an assault specifically against Prey, whether it be by the Solar Guard or someone else.

Which meant Prey could be a lot bolder in his approach without placing himself at risk.

Except that wasn't true, because there is always a risk and always a price. The war never ends, the battlefield just changes. His enemy in the shadows was still out there, still hungry. Just because you were running from a hydra with only three heads instead of four didn't make it any better.

Prey certainly didn't feel safe. He never did. One wrong move and that was it. The wolf only needs enough luck to find you once.

Prey huffed out a deep breath of the chilly crystal cavern air. He looked around his secret lair. It was almost completely bare of tools. Runes weren't something you could see or move, but there were his two veropedes, still set guarding the dark opening plunging into the mountain's depths.

"First feed the veropedes. Then get ready to travel. We're going out." Prey ordered.

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Author's Notes:

Hello to all. [image] Here's the chapter, a couple days late but I'm back now. You see any mistakes, please let me know thanks.

As before, helper and kind editor here: 🍎 **Sweetolebob18** 🍎

Also! To those of you who check these, another small Pic. by GreatSpaceBeaver over Here

59.4 Sunshine through the Jail Bars

The sun had set, but that made no difference to the train's progress as it chuffed along the tracks leading towards Vanhoover.

It was a small but fast overnight express train. On board, it carried urgent parcels which were nevertheless not urgent enough to pay the exorbitant fee for the use of a unicorn teleportation delivery. Also, in the strongly enchanted and enclosed carriage pulled behind the engine were monetary deposits to the Vanhoover banks. And as an add on, a number of sleepy passengers in the single, half-size passenger carriage at the back.

The express train would take three hours to reach Vanhoover, almost half again as fast as the normal train, but as a trade off, it was a bit less than comfortable.

On his stall stool, the tired conductor yawned yet again and vigorously rubbed at his eyes as the train ceaselessly rocked. Perhaps in an effort to keep himself awake, he looked around at the passengers again. Almost all were unsuccessfully trying to catch some shut eye, cushioning their heads with travel coats or bags against hard windows or aisle seats.

Almost all. The conductor blinked, having almost missed the pair sitting closest to the exit. His tired eyes seemed to slide right off them.

The conductor yawned and rubbed at his face again, and promptly put the pair from his mind. They weren't important, just two more cloaked passengers. Utterly forgettable. And being cloaked was perfectly ordinary for a travelling pony after all.

If pressed, the conductor could've probably grumpily confirmed the tall one was a mare. Probably yellow? She might've been wearing a hat too. The other was... The mare's foal? Probably. A little white filly, also wearing a hat.

Just a family in a hurry to get back home to Vanhoover for one reason or another, like almost everypony else who'd been willing to board this car this late at night, it wasn't anything to comment on.

The train chuffed onward into the starry night, on its speedy way towards Vanhoover.

The Guard station of Vanhoover was actually bigger than the Guard Compound of Canterlot, but part of that was because the Royal Palace in Canterlot also held the main Guard offices. And while the Vanhoover Guard also lacked a dedicated night time Guard force like Canterlot had, they still had enough Guards to run the station throughout the dreary hours of the night.

The Guard station received an unexpected visitor that night. But not a new one. The station had unknowingly played host to this very same visitor in the past. It was just that none of the City Guard had known about it the first time. All they knew was that three months ago, the Solar Guard had requisitioned use of one of their buildings, (something they'd almost tripped over themselves to provide), and outfitted one of the rooms to hold a special prisoner.

The City Guard of Vanhoover were a lot less distinguished than their Royal guard counterparts in the capital, who had a much more grand and illustrious history dating back to before the rise of Nightmare Moon. Also, Royal Guard authority extended beyond the boundaries of the capital city and covered all of Equestria. But while less famous and admired by pretty young mares than their gold clad brethren, the City Guard were still proud of their role. They took their job seriously and always tried their best.

So when the two City Guards working the night shift on the reception desk saw the tall and rather good looking yellow mare limp through the door, with blood trickling from her lip and a swollen face, they both gasped in horror and leapt up to help.

"Oh Celestia, quick, tell us what happened!"

"Who did this ma'am? Are they following you?"

The mare wobbled, her smooth mane drooping as her head hung, "N-no, there's not...he's not..."

The mare's horn was unusually curved and sharp, a negative connotation among unicorns. However neither City Guard cared about that right now with the obvious distress she was in.

"Easy ma'am, easy. Here, just come take a seat."

"It'll all be fine. That's right, this way. Easy, it's okay-"

When the mare's legs almost gave out, it was perfectly natural for both Guards to try to catch her in their concern. What kind of Guard ponies would they be if they didn't help another pony in need?

They never suspected a thing.

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Lemon Pink straightened up, sharp horn now held high and shining with silver magic. Her yellow illusionary disguise fell away. Standing on either side of her, both stallions were frozen.

"Get them back behind the desk." Prey ordered, stepping in from hiding around the corner outside, not wasting time on praising Lemon for her acting.

"Yes, Prey." Lemon acknowledged, removing her fore hooves from the two City Guards' chest plates.

But both her horseshoes stayed firmly stuck to the Guards as if magnetised. They faintly glimmered with the same silver aura Lemon Pink wielded. Basically, the shoes were extended mind links. Or puppet strings, if one wanted to look at it that way. Essentially, they were a little boost to Lemon Pink's own mind magic which worked through direct or near-direct contact.

Complicated? Yes. Rather at risk of something going wrong too, like if Lemon lost focus on the spell, or if a horseshoe got forcibly

knocked off. But this was still a far subtler touch than breaking the mind and then controlling it. Mind control shouldn't be confused with memory and mind reading, they were two very different things.

The latter was something you could do after you'd gotten past a person's mental defences, (or knocked them unconscious), and leave nothing behind but a headache if you were careful. But full on mind control, and not merely implanted compulsions and suggestions, involved completely breaking the victim's mental hold over their own body. That wasn't something a victim easily, if *ever,* recovered from. Not just because of the shock and horror, but because the process did actual damage to the mind. Usually.

But in this instance, despite Lemon Pink now having rough control of the two Guards bodies, once Prey was done here, neither would be left any the wiser or crippled. They wouldn't even have the telltale headache so indicative of the after effects of mind magic. Or at worst only a very small one.

Also, long as the horseshoes were fed a trickle of power from Lemon Pink, the non-destructive mental control could be maintained. Again, just one of the many advantages of being born a unicorn and having magic, and then being boosted with runes.

"Which room and who am I looking for?" Prey asked out loud.

There was a five second pause as Lemon concentrated on the minds of two City Guards she had ensnared, "Staff Sargent Collins. A medium blue unicorn stallion. In the Second Lieutenant's office."

"This shouldn't take longer than ten minutes." Prey said.

"Yes, Prey." Lemon said, retrieving her hat and adjusting it on her head to hide the glowing of her horn, before taking a seat in the waiting area. Both Guards jerkily turned around and walked back to their desk, creating the facade that nothing was amiss.

Prey left Lemon Pink to it, and walked confidently into the building, knowing where he was going and the layout from his last unwanted trip here. Lemon Pink would stay at the desk, attending

to the two City Guards, and acting as his lookout.

This, this plan, all of this... Lemon and Prey were being far too bold.

To any outsider who might've known about this, which was no one, this would probably have looked like overconfidence and arrogance. However it was a falsehood, a mask. All it would take was one tiny slip, one unforeseen incident. The saying, 'He who dares wins' was a lie. He who dared was often the first to die.

And while Prey was fairly confident of his success here tonight, he still hated this aggressive approach. Brute forcing his way in like this was far too daring, too risky, and nowhere near as secret and therefore safe as he would've liked. Butterflies were even now squirming and proliferating in his stomach.

But this approach was the fastest one, and he was working on a tight schedule.

Prey knocked as loudly as he could on the Second Lieutenant's door, which admittedly wasn't all that loud.

"It's open." Someone, hopefully Staff Sargent Collins, called from inside.

Prey didn't answer and just knocked confidently again.

"It's open, come in."

Prey waited a beat, then knocked a third time.

"I said come in!"

Knock knock knock.

"Oh for Celestia's sake," The person exclaimed, hooves clopping closer. The door was pulled open by a stocky blue unicorn in uniform; '-are they deaf or something?-'

"I said, it's open-"

A thrown silk ribbon lazily flopped over the stallion's face, and looped around his horn.

The Staff Sargent went rigid. He tried to scream, no he *was* screaming. It was a soundless wail as all his limbs locked up.

'-make it let go, let go! It burns it's so cold, please let go let me go let go it's going to eat me! Freeze my horn, chew my bones-'

Fear. Pain. Hunger. The unicorn was not Prey, and the ribbon did not belong to him. He didn't know how to withstand it. Sargent Collins was completely locked up, not even able to register the outside world anymore as Prey squeezed past the stocky unicorn and pulled the door shut.

Prey gave the office a quick once over to check for possible dangers and to make sure he really was alone. They were. This type of office was one he'd already seen many of before, both in various Royal and Night Guard offices. That of a shared work space used by multiple ponies, to whom paperwork did not come naturally, and was treated as something to be put off for as long as possible.

Satisfied of his immediate safety, Prey returned to the frozen Sargent Collins. The unicorn had progressed from simply locking up, to shivering violently. His teeth chattered, and his thoughts were spiralling worryingly.

'-g-get it off, g-get it away. Hungry, cold, it's hungry, no no, go away-'

Prey's eyes flicked from the stallion's face up to the clinging ribbon. It had a thin blurry edge to it, like you might see out of the corner of your eye. Prey looked closer, and the blur wasn't there.

Instinctively, Prey's hoof twitched towards his ear where the ribbon normally happily sat, but of course it wasn't there. He knew that, he could see it right in front of him binding the stallion. Prey gave his head a brisk shake, and licked dry lips. He was here because of Crimson and, Prey reminded himself, he was on a tight schedule.

And right now, he had the unicorn Sargent right where he wanted

him. As helpless as a newborn, and unable to cast magic or defend himself, whether that be physically or mentally.

Unlike those four ponies who'd come to try and arrest Crimson the first time, Collins hadn't done anything to make Prey his enemy. He was simply unfortunate enough to have been standing in Prey's path.

Collins hadn't done anything, but Prey was still hurting him.

Prey didn't offer a pointless apology that he didn't mean, he just reached out and rested his small hoof over the Staff Sargent's own.

The unicorn's mindscape appeared before Prey's consciousness in a swirl. It was not a pleasant sight to behold. Prey didn't know what form the unicorn's mindscape normally took, but he knew what he saw before him now was not it, and he also knew the cause. Him.

Collins whole mindscape was quivering alarmingly, formless grey suggestions of fear danced all over the place as the stallion's thoughts looped around and around in terror. Collins wasn't scared of anything real, it was all in his head, but then again, he was hardly in a state to be thinking rationally. It made him utterly defenceless as Prey descended upon him. He tried to keep his touch light. It was all too easy to irreparably break a mind, and the stallion's mindscape was already unstable enough at the moment even without him poking it.

But a gentle mental touch was not one of Prey's skills. Lemon Pink's mental feelers felt cold, detached and blunt, like a hoof made of ice. Prey's could charitably be described as the sensation of rusty thorns being dragged across flesh.

'I'll make this quick.'

Prey swiftly began rooting around in Collins most recent memories, ignoring the Sargent's older ones. He didn't need to go deeper, and to do so could do more damage. What Prey was looking for was a recent event, namely, Lord Vanish of House Time reporting a break in and a theft, followed by an accusation against one Crimson Trace.

'There it is.'

Prey's rummaging tendril of barbed thought hooked the relevant memory, and reeled in.

Prey quickly examined it. Much as he'd suspected, when a noble house like House Time reported a crime, all of the City Guard command structure got involved and knew the details.

Plus, after the previous string of similar break ins and mind tampering which'd occurred to many nobles in Vanhoover only three months ago, the City Guard were understandably very keen on ensuring the same didn't happen again. Thus, it'd been all hooves on deck.

Half of the City Guard were scrambled to get out to the estate of House Time to secure it and the surrounding area. Guard checks were posted at each of the city's gates, trains were delayed to be searched, and the weather teams were questioned about any suspicious flight activity they might've seen.

Prey speedily began dissecting Collins relevant memories, looking for things that might've been overlooked or if the City Guard had any leads about who really had made off with the jade necklace.

But there was nothing. Prey saw in the Staff Sargent's memories that the Time mansion had been searched, including the grounds inside the property's wall, and the family vault had been examined.

While there was no sign of forced entry into the mansion itself, the vault had definitely been accessed. There were no traces left of whom it could've been, or how they'd been able to trick or force the magical lock, since it was still intact. The money and jewels inside hadn't been touched either, only the jade necklace had been removed.

'This was a skilled thief, and not one motivated by simple greed. They knew where they were going, what they were taking, and how to get in and out undetected.'

Prey was not ruling out House Time trying for an insurance scam

just yet, although the chances were low. From his understanding of Equestrian law, rarely could unique magical items be insured.

From Collins memory, Prey learnt how the City Guard had called in some specialised unicorns with scanning and tracking spells, who would be arriving tomorrow. But otherwise they were at a complete loss. For now, they'd cordoned off the whole mansion and left a squad there overnight to patrol the grounds. The City Guard Captain was hoping that tomorrow would turn something up, because right now they were stumped.

'Hope. What an unreliable plan. So far, they have nothing.' Prey judged. He continued searching through Collins memories of the filed reports and emergency action meetings. He was looking for two things in particular.

'How are the Solar Guard involved? And is Captain Valour part of this investigation?'

Prey quickly found the relevant memory. In it, Collins and eleven other City Guard officers were all standing at parade ground attention, heads held high and chests puffed out as the Solar Guard landed in sky chariots which looked very familiar to Prey. The pegasi snorted and folded powerful wings, and the unicorn's golden armour shone as they disembarked.

It was as if Prey was there, seeing and feeling it all vicariously, and he could feel the awe and pride in Collins memories as the Staff Sargent saw the Solar Guards.

The Solar Guard unicorn in charge, a First Lieutenant, strode up to the City Guard Captain at their head, "City Guard, it's an honour."

"No sir, the honour is all ours."

The First Lieutenant smiled, "Don't be modest. The City Guard does sterling work."

Then the unicorn's smile faded, "It's unfortunate that we must meet again so soon. Barely three months, and the lowlife scum has already struck again, back to their old tricks. But this time by

Celestia, we're going to make sure to catch every last one of them. These attacks against our historic founders cannot be allowed to continue."

"Yes sir. Of course sir." The City Guard Captain exclaimed, caught up in the First Lieutenant's fervour. Collin felt the same fervour himself, he'd been there himself three months ago and felt the helpless indignation of the City Guard being run rings around.

"The Solar Guard is here to work alongside the City Guard to solve this case, if you'll allow us."

"It'll be my honour sir!"

The brief, but informative memory came to an end. It'd been enough. Prey had his answers.

First, Captain Valour was not part of the investigation, which was good, since Prey didn't want to see the unicorn again until he was ready to kill him. Secondly, as Prey had already guessed, the Solar Guard were here because of the similar nature of this theft to the previous crimes that had rocked the rich noble Houses of Vanhoover less than half a year ago. With how the last crime spree had ended, with the brain damaged victims still in a psychiatric ward, of course the Solar Guards were going to take a proactive approach in combating this one.

'But even so, they, just like the City Guard, don't know how or why this has happened. Same as me really.' Prey thought. He continued to try to shift through Collins mind as quickly and delicately as possible.

Prey stopped looking as he found something interesting. The City Guard hadn't finished taking statements from all the servants and members of House Time. There was a tick-list, one which they intended to complete it tomorrow. Collins memory wasn't eidetic, so seeing every servant on that list wasn't something Prey could get from viewing the memory alone. But Prey could do the next best thing. Something that Collins *did* remember.

'Now where is this list?- Ah, in the second filing cabinet on the left,

I see.'

Prey disengaged his mindscape from the slowly haemorrhaging Staff Sargent's. The stallion's mind was locked in a stupor of unnamed fear, hunger, and cold. Prey winced and blinked dry eyes as his consciousness returned to the office.

"Second filing cabinet on the left." Prey muttered. He hurriedly pushed a chair over to the correct cabinet so he could reach, and stood on it. The drawer slid out with a squeal, and Prey flicked through the folders until he came to the right place.

Snatching up the correct folder between a hoof cleft once he came to it, Prey began to skim the list. Names, genders, ages, addresses, and occupations within House Time's estate.

Prey's eyes darted down the list until he came to the bottom, where there were only three names without ticks applied against them, showing they hadn't been interviewed yet.

'Olive Branch, Earth pony, gardener. Ideal, aside from being an Earth pony. They'll need to be a unicorn for this.'

That narrowed it down to two, a middle aged unicorn mare named Warm Hearth, who worked as a housekeeper, and a young stallion who worked as a part time chef called Planetary Shift. Odd name, not that it mattered to Prey. No, all he cared about was their addresses, and which of the two was closer.

Prey found his answer, nodded to himself, and snapped the file shut.

As Prey and Lemon headed back out into the night, they left behind two City Guards none the wiser to having lost ten minutes of their lives, plus one Staff Sargent. Collins would be fine. Probably. Almost certainly. The reaction had been much stronger than Prey had expected. It really shouldn't have been that severe. It was supposed to be a simple mind blanking and magic inhibiting. But the ribbon had done a bit more to the unicorn than Prey had

expected.

Collins had been left sitting slumped behind his desk, staring blankly, with a tiny trickle of blood coming out of his nose. His fur was cold to the touch. He'd awaken at the first sign of outside stimulation, and not know anything was amiss, just that he'd gotten a sudden nose bleed. But he wasn't Prey's concern anymore.

Prey'd done far worse to less deserving people before. The veropedes existences proved that, and there was very little he wouldn't do if it meant achieving his goals. It wasn't something Prey was proud of though.

The Vanhoover river gurgled distantly in the night, carrying over the open countryside and even reaching all the way out to House Time's estate.

Much like Lord Vanish had boasted to Prey and Crimson, the noble House had existed for over five centuries. And going even further back, House Time could trace its roots back to being related to a member of the first conclave of magi, who would later become unicorn nobles of New Unicornia as they gained Celestia's favour, and were granted lands and titles in return for their service and allegiance.

That had been centuries ago. While a few such noble houses had dwindled and collapsed under poor management, most had prospered and grown even more wealthy over the years proportional to the size of Celestia's first grant.

House Time was one of the second types of noble Houses, albeit one of the less well known ones, unlike some of the more famous examples, such as the loudly sociable House Blood, or the obscenely wealthy House Fell.

But nevertheless, House Time had done well for itself over the years. It may have been approaching midnight, but the darkness didn't hide the quality or the expansiveness of the Time estates.

House Time's lands were large enough to have idyllic holiday cottages to rent out, a private bakery, mill, boating lake, and a parish hall all before Lemon Pink and Prey, trotting along through the night, even came upon the Time mansion.

The mansion itself had a gate house, walls, rows of pruned and sculpted trees running alongside the private road, and well tended flowerbeds. Through the iron bar gates, you could see and hear a fountain set before the mansion's steps, with cosily lantern light illuminating the front door. Basically, even at night, the whole place screamed 'money'.

'I'd love to fill this place with fire runes strong enough to melt even stone and set the whole thing ablaze.' Prey thought as he and Lemon Pink stood outside the iron gates, hanging back in the cover of the shadows.

Collins memories had said there was a City Guard unit posted here who were patrolling inside the mansion's grounds throughout the night, along with another unit posted within the mansion itself.

That was okay though, Prey had no intention of going into the mansion or its gardens.

So if he wasn't going in, why bother coming here in the first place? If he didn't intend to enter the mansion to search for clues as to the real thief, why even risk the possibility that this was a Solar Guard ambush? Prey had no doubt that the Solar Guard had laid one or more alarm spells around the mansion just waiting to catch intruders. So why risk it?

The simple answer was; Prey wasn't going to. He wasn't here to break in, or find Vanish, or look for clues.

Prey hadn't seen anything that indicated they'd triggered some magical tripwire or been spotted, and they'd been standing here for thirty minutes. Satisfied, Prey turned and jerked his head to Lemon, 'Let's go.'

Wordlessly, the two of them turned away from the gate and began traversing alongside the property's outer wall, as silent and patient

as two shadows. Even if someone with a night vision spell had been looking out of the mansion in their exact direction, they would've seen nothing. Doubling down on illusions was useful like that.

They'd almost circled the full way around behind the mansion when Prey held up his hoof. Prey studied the night sky, the placement of a tallish tree near the wall, and then a small copse of graceful willow trees growing a ways off next to a creek. The willows looked like giant, bowed heads in the night. The creek emptied into a stream, which trickled and flowed until it eventually joined the vast Vanhoover river itself, at a point somewhere before the river entered the glowing lights of the city.

Prey gave a slight nod. This spot would do. He pointed a hoof towards the distant creek, which was all the signal Lemon Pink needed.

From her saddle bag, Lemon removed a set of slip-on horseshoes and put them on. It couldn't be seen in the dark, but the horseshoes were quite destinctive; old, scuffed, and loose fitting. Prey took up a hiding place in a bush, while Lemon started sneaking off towards the creek.

The lamb settled down to wait. Lemon would be coming back, and she'd leave a faint trail behind her, no matter how careful she was. A bent blade of grass, a nudged pebble, a broken flower stem. And around the creek itself, it would be even harder to avoid leaving tracks. The soft mud of the river bank, the water reeds, all would hold signs of Lemon's passing. A trail of tracks that lead there and back.

That was fine, it was part of the plan. He just had to make sure it wasn't *too* obvious.

Prey kept watch on the dark sky, the mansion, and his surroundings while he waited for Lemon Pink to return.

Who had really stolen the jade necklace, and why? Had they done so purposefully to bring the Solar Guard back into Vanhoover? Prey

was fairly confident by this point that this wasn't a targeted attack striking specifically at him through Crimson, but just an unlucky coincidence. However that didn't provide any answers to who and why, since they'd obviously been after the jade necklace, and not just money, which had apparently been left untouched in the safe.

'I don't know who they are, how many, how dangerous, or what resources they have at their disposal.'

But whomever they were, they were now Prey's enemy. Or that was how the old Prey back before Hard Baked would've thought. The Prey of now wasn't so sure it even mattered. They'd still stolen the necklace, and made problems for him and Crimson. They were going to pay for that.

Unfortunately, Prey greatly suspected he'd never learn who was really behind this theft. A good thief was one who never got caught, and this had all the hallmarks of a good thief. There were probably even greater thieves out there, one who'd stolen things no one even realised they'd taken.

'They don't know me, and I don't know them. I have no clue about their real motivation. They didn't even have anything against Crimson personally, it was just his bad luck and that arrogant bastard Vanish jumping to conclusions.' Prey thought sourly.

The thought that he was once again indirectly suffering because of someone else's, (almost certainly a unicorn), uncaring greed made Prey angry. It also made him feel like hypocritical filth, because it's exactly what he'd done in the past too.

If his enemies were selfish, arrogant bastards, then what did that make Prey?

Prey was still fruitlessly pondering ideas to catch the real thief, and weighing up if he should even try, when Lemon Pink returned from her little jaunt to the creek and back.

Prey stood up. 'Done?' His look asked.

Lemon nodded, removing the horseshoes again. In the darkness, her

normally pale silver magic appeared far brighter than normal. Well then, it was a good thing they were under an illusionary veil. Lemon levitated one shoe up to the top of the wall and scraped it on the stone, then at Prey's direction, made a few chips into the bark of the tree near to the wall. Not much, just enough to rouse suspicions if someone looked very closely.

Prey wasn't the tracker Snake had been, even with most of the evil zebra's memories, but Prey believed his woodcraft skills were good enough to lay a believable false trail without overdoing it.

Satisfied, Prey signalled their retreat. The false trail was set and it was time to leave. They just had one more stop to make in Vanhoover on their way back to the train station.

The first soft rays of morning light were just starting to hit the spires of Upper Canterlot when Prey closed the flat door and crawled under his blanket.

His hoof wrapped itself in his ribbon as he drifted off, and his last thoughts were of how Crimson must be waking up right now in a cell, and then about the weight all those he'd sacrificed and murdered in the desperate pursuit of his ultimate goal; To stay alive.

And then, just *after* he'd drifted off, a horrible thought occurred to Prey's sleeping mind.

What if this wasn't all bad luck, and really had been an attempt to frame Crimson?

'If I was trying to frame Crimson, and I knew the Guard had arrested him, and that Crimson's flat was now empty... Maybe it wasn't incompetence that those Guards didn't search Crimson's flat when he was arrested.'

The blanket flew off as Prey leapt up. It hadn't fully settled back onto the bare mattress by the time Prey was already out the door. A moment later he was back and grabbing his keys, which also

included a key for Crimson's flat, and then he was back out the door again.

Yesterday, Sunshine, (the filthy lying unicorn hypocrite), had said they wouldn't be searching Crimson's flat because there was no way a thief smart enough to successfully steal from a noble's house would've kept what they stole in their own flat. But what if the Solar Guard decided to be sensible and cover all bases, and search the flat later anyway?

Prey rushed into Crimson's flat. It looked the exact same as when he'd locked it up yesterday. But was it really?

In a frantic whirl, Prey searched every hiding place he could think of, which despite the flat being almost completely bare, were still many.

He looked under the table, the bed, in the mattress seams, checked all the floorboards in case any had been loosened, the sink, the pipes and plumbing, the toilet, in the soil of Crimson's Blood Fern, the cupboards, behind the hinges, the skirting boards, inside the crystal glow light, and finally in the new refrigerator box Crimson had bought just the other day.

No planted jade necklace. Prey stood in front of the open cool box, or refrigerator as its proper name was, cold air playing across his face as he stared in and thought.

No planted jade necklace. But that didn't mean the Guard wouldn't still end up searching Crimson's flat. Slowly, Prey let the refrigerator's door swing shut on the nearly empty shelves, cutting off the flow of cold, sterile air.

Prey sat down on the floorboards and thought about what this meant, where it fit with what he already knew, and where it disagreed.

'The Guard can't be allowed to find anything wrong in here. I won't give them any reason to lock Crimson away, no matter who they are. Captain Valour, Shining Armour, Vanish, Sunshine, or even Luna. No one. Crimson is my friend, and friends look out for each

other. I owe Crimson.'

Just yesterday, Prey had jokingly told Crimson he'd help the pegasus hide a body if he ever needed the help, but Prey had meant every word of it. Well, while this wasn't *quite* helping Crimson silence a witness or dispose of the murder weapon, Prey was still going to help.

'A few hours intense rune work should do it.' Prey considered, still staring at the white cool box in front of him unseeingly, '...And perhaps a few extra just to be safe.'

"We've got to do something!" Scenic exclaimed for the fifth time, "We're just, just sitting here uselessly."

Prey was rapidly running out of patience with the earth pony, although he didn't show it:

"Nighthawk has ordered us to leave him to get Crimson out. There's nothing we can do." Prey repeated for the fifth time, not looking up from the newspaper.

"But it's not right. Crimson hasn't done anything, and he's a Guard! They should be giving him a medal, he took down the scarecrow all by himself. This isn't right!"

Prey couldn't be bothered to even say anything about the world not being fair. He turned the page and smoothed it down while Scenic continued to posture. Newspapers might be filled with uninformed drivel, but they still had their uses and the odd nugget of information.

"We should make like, like, uh, a defence. Or a case! We could prove it wasn't him, yeah, didn't you and Sargent Gloom catch Wheat Plow and do that creep's trial? You should easily be able to prove it wasn't Crimson. Or, or we could go to Princess Luna, or, uh, catch the real thief ourselves." Scenic tried. If it wasn't for one of Scenic's legs still being in a cast, Prey was sure he would've been pacing restlessly.

While it was rather gratifying to see Scenic's loyalty to Crimson, the stupidity of his suggestions grated on Prey. So he continued to skim over the worthless news article about cloud house princes as he asked; "What part of the phrase, 'Nighthawk has ordered us to not get involved' do you not understand?"

"I understand, but, but, we need to do *something*. Isn't Crimson supposed to be your best friend Prey?" Scenic exclaimed.

Prey looked up sharply, and Scenic almost swallowed his tongue. He cringed, ears going back, "I-sorry, I didn't mean it like that."

"Crimson is my friend. But what do you suggest I do exactly? Break into jail and bust him out? With me and what army? I already know Crimson is innocent, and will end up getting released before too long. At the absolute most, they can hold him for a week without a charge. The Night Guard has lawyers, they're working on this. Do you think Crimson would thank me for doing something rash in the meantime?" Prey asked coldly.

Scenic's ears went back even further at Prey's frigid tone, "I, uh, no, I guess not."

"Crimson is innocent and will be released. This Lord Vanish is just throwing a temper tantrum and accusing anyone he can think of." Prey said firmly, looking back down at his newspaper. The double broadsheets were as big as he was when folded open like this.

"But, but what if something goes wrong? What if Crimson gets falsely charged? I've read about that happening in stories. It *could* happen." Scenic anxiously fretted.

'-how can he be so calm about this? If it was *me* trapped in Crimson's position...-'

Prey looked up again and put on a big innocent smile so sarcastic that even Scenic couldn't miss it:

"Surely you're not suggesting that there could be a miscarriage of justice, are you? This is the famous Solar Guard, the most righteous and honourable of all ponies. Everyone's equal before the law, so

I'm *sure* it has nothing to do with just the word of one Lord. You're not thinking that somehow, ponies could *possibly* be wrong about something, are you Scenic? Right?"

"Alright alright, there's no need to make fun of me. I'm being silly, I get it." Scenic mumbled, looking down at the floor.

Secretly though, his worry hadn't abated in the slightest, '-Prey's just trying to scare me. None of that can even be remotely true, *surely*. But what if it is?-'

Prey snorted softly to himself and went back to reading the newspaper. Hopefully, Scenic would take the hint he wasn't wanted here and leave so Prey could get back to work. Gloom had been by earlier in the day, and Prey knew the thestral intended to petition Nighthawk again.

The Solar Guard were not allowing any civilian visitors in to see Crimson, something Prey was not happy about, since the ISND were not on duty, so they counted as civilians at the moment. Prey tried not to let himself get too worked up. He was angry and worried, but it would work out, and by the Guards' own rules too, not him breaking into the jail. De-escalation, not escalation was the way to go here. Probably.

After all he'd already said it. Crimson was innocent, and would be released. Prey would insure it.

Prey watched, fascinated, as his veropede, on his command, chewed through the bent bar of steel without apparent effort.

He'd seen the bent bar on a scrap heap in a back alley in Lower Canterlot on his way down here, waiting to be collected, and had decided to take it to test.

The veropede didn't eat metal, but that didn't stop its circular maw of teeth grinding down the bar like it was no more than a candy cane. Sure, Prey had known his two veropedes were capable of this, they'd ripped the reaper king to shreds and could burrow through

stone after all. But still, to have the chance to see the steel bar reduced to a metal pulp up close was an experience in and of itself.

He'd already spent many hours studying his two armoured monsters, and he could happily spend many hours more. His goal was eventually to apply more runes onto the veropedes, and turn them into true weapons.

It would hurt the veropedes, but it had to be done. They were his tools. Prey felt guilty about the coming pain he was going to inflict on his two obedient monsters, non-sentience notwithstanding. The veropedes were beasts, they didn't understand concepts of the future, they'd just know it was pain. And the *severity* of the pain...

Prey remembered how much it'd hurt when he carved the runes into his own fore hooves. He remembered how much he had screamed, all alone in the Deeper Green. It had *hurt*.

Prey hated pain. He hated witnessing pain, and despite how hypocritical it sounded, Prey even hated causing pain. It seldom stopped him, but he hated it.

But Prey put it from his mind for now, as it was a problem for the future. He wasn't ready to begin working on the veropedes, he still had a lot of planning and rune combinations to test out before he started working on them. And that would only come *after* he was done making this underground base as impenetrable and secret as possible.

The veropedes were only tools, two leashed monsters, not some kind of twisted pet. They were creatures of nature, neither good nor evil. No conscience, no morals or false concepts of fairness. No pride or arrogance or selfishness. No anger or fear, no corruption or innocence. Just an apex predator, the perfect representation of nature, not the tamed version ponies seemed to think was natural. They just *were*. Prey knew that, just as surely as he knew the only thing stopping them devouring him right now were the implanted runes and blood magic from when they were tiny, (relatively speaking), eggs.

Prey also knew he was perverting that very nature he both so

respected and feared, but that was what he was. A conniving, honourless, lying, walking contradiction. But he was also still alive, and meant to stay alive, so that's what counted in the end.

Prey reached up and patted the cool chitin plate to the side of the veropedes head, even though the monster wouldn't even be able to feel such a light touch through the two inch thick plate, and wouldn't have understood it even if it could.

"In the future though. Not yet. I've got a lot of work to do before then." Prey sighed to himself.

Enough standing around philosophising, it was about time he got back to work. The runic arrays weren't going to build themselves, and staying busy helped keep him from dwelling too heavily on Crimson's imprisonment.

And, as terrible as it sounded, Prey really did have bigger worries than Crimson's predicament. Crimson wasn't in any danger, and no matter how much Prey wanted to bust him out of jail as soon as possible, sitting tight and doing nothing would better solve the problem in the end. Probably. It didn't mean he had to like it, but there were other ongoing issues Prey couldn't afford to forget about.

His enemy in the shadows was ever weighing on Prey's mind, along with the mimics, the possibility of the Sun Wolf or Luna uncovering something about him, The List, Nighthawk's obvious suspicions that there was more to his story than met the eye, and Lemon Pink.

He'd already seen to the solution of Crimson's problem. Even if it went against his heart, he just had to wait. Crimson was innocent and would be released soon. Probably.

Gloom and Prey tried returning to the Palace that evening asking for visiting rights to see Crimson. Nighthawk wasn't there, he'd already left for Vanhoover to try and get this mess sorted out as swiftly as possible. Lieutenant Starry Wing had been there and had spoken with them instead.

"I'm sorry Gloom, but the Royal Guard are not allowing us any access. It's their case, well, theirs and the Solar Guard, and they've point blank refused us." Starry Wing said shaking his head.

"They can't do that," Prey protested, "They've insisted on arresting Crimson as a civilian, so we have a right to visit him as civilians. The reverse is also true if they arrested Crimson in his Night Guard capacity."

"That would be true if you were family or a legal guardian," Starry Wing sighed apologetically, "But as you well know, there's nopony in the whole of Canterlot who can claim that."

Prey could hear Gloom grinding his fangs, '-this is the Royal Guard trying to get back at us for investigating them, isn't it? Nothing personal my tail-'

Gloom was definitely right. Prey had seen how smugly the couple of Royal Guard officers looked at them on their way here. They hadn't even tried to mask it.

"So that's it? They're blocking us over a petty grudge, so we're not allowed to do anything and we just have to sit back and take it?" Gloom asked. His words should've been heated, but they just sounded more resigned and tired, like he already knew the answer.

"So that's it, yes." Starry Wing agreed with simple thestral fatalism:

'-Captain Nighthawk will sort it. For now we just have to let the Royal Guard posture until they grow tired of it, or the holding time is up-'

Gloom was just as much a thestral as the Lieutenant. He'd gotten the message. Continuing to prevail on a senior thestral to produce the impossible was both insane and very rude. Gloom formally dipped his head to Starry Wing, Prey copying him even if his own bow was fake. If Prey hadn't learned to convincingly fake sincerity, he'd have died in the Resistance.

"Thank you for your time, sir. Sorry for being a pain and bothering you when there is nothing you can do." Gloom said.

"You're not back on duty just yet, Gloom," Starry Wing reminded him, "I'm just Starry Wing at the moment, dealing with an important civilian concern. That's hardly a waste of my time."

"Thank you, but really, we know you're very busy." Gloom shook his head.

"I am busy," Starry Wing admitted honesty, "But that's hardly new. I'm also taking this opportunity to assess how your recovery is going and how soon I think you'll be able to return to active duty."

"You think we're finally ready to come back?" Gloom asked, raising his head in surprise.

Starry Wing had no trouble looking Gloom in the eye, unaffected by the scars even as he disappointed the off-duty Sargent; "Sorry, but no Gloom. I can see that both you and Prey have made excellent progress, but until you've both been cleared by the therapist at the very least, I'm afraid it's out of the question. For everypony's good, you need to be fully recovered before you begin working again. Scenic Paint’s leg isn’t healed, and Lilly... Well, and Lilly."

Gloom could only dip his head again in acknowledgement of the Lieutenant's judgement. Prey was fine with not returning to active duty and risking his own life, thank-you-very-much. He had enough of his own concerns to be getting on with, thank-you-very-much.

"You'll get there soon though, I'm sure." Starry Wing said encouragingly, giving Gloom a wing pat on the shoulder. Somehow, it wasn't even a condescending gesture, but a sincere one.

Then he coughed; "Now let’s talk about the delicate matter of, ah, Private Lilly Blossom needing to get well again too."

"Lilly Blossom." Gloom repeated quietly, joining Starry Wing in sparing a moment to dwell on the mare's plight.

"How does her parents' lawsuit against the Night Guard go?" Prey asked, breaking into their chain of thoughts.

"It *should* be going nowhere. As regrettable as it is, Lilly was injured in the line of duty. The Night Guard does not abandon its own, and

Lilly Blossom will be cared for no matter what. Her parents however..." Here Starry Wing paused to find the right way to put it, "Are rich, angry, looking for somepony to blame, and a chance to get richer."

'-moon blight take them both-'

"I'm sure they're just trying to do what they believe best for their daughter." Gloom offered.

"Certainly. But they're going about it in a selfish way." Starry Wing said with another sigh, thinking:

'-if only Lilly would consent to seeing her parents, it would invalidate a lot of their lawyer's legal arguments. However it's Lilly's choice, and the Night Guard supports its own-'

Prey nodded to himself, "So it isn't going well. Have the Royal inspectors joined together with her parents lawyers yet? That's the sort of two pronged sneaky thing they'd do."

"Oh. *Oh*. No, not yet, thank Luna for small mercies." Starry Wing exclaimed, stunned by the horrible idea.

'Not yet, but I bet it's only a matter of time,' Prey thought. 'Strange Happenstance has been too quiet for too long. He brashly swore he would get to the bottom of this, after all. Surely he hasn't given up? What's that slippery private detective up to?'

In theory it wasn't his problem, but Prey knew it would still somehow inevitably become his.

But it wasn't his problem yet. Eventually yes, but right now, Crimson's incarceration was his current problem. Prey had done everything he reasonably could to ensure Crimson would be found innocent and speedily released. And some unreasonable things too.

There was nothing further Starry Wing could do for them however, so Gloom and Prey eventually left. The few thestrals still awake and on duty at this hour of the day nodded solemnly in respect to Gloom as they passed. And to Prey's mild surprise, at him too, although there was a certain amount of pity mixed into their yellow

slitted eyes which Prey didn't like. Well he could hopefully exploit that in the future, but he still didn't like it.

Gloom breathed deeply as they emerged from the Palace's Guard entrance, and out into the sun. He squinted briefly up at the bright sky, then down the path towards the Guard Compound and the exit.

"Hang on Prey," Gloom called as Prey was about to go, "Let's not go just yet. Let's go for a walk."

Prey stopped, "A walk." He repeated flatly.

"Yes, around the public Palace Gardens."

"And if I don't want to?"

Gloom blew out a breath, "Then you don't have to. It's not an order Prey, I'm just asking if you want to."

No, Prey did not want to waste time on something as mundane as a walk. However he was not a mind leech for nothing.

'-there's been a rift between me and Prey ever since the hospital. Does Prey secretly blame me for everything that happened but just won't say so?-', Gloom worried.

Prey turned back around, "Is there a special reason for a walk you're not telling me?"

Gloom considered dodging the question, but only briefly. "Yes actually."

"And that reason is...?"

Gloom gestured off towards the direction of the public section of the Palace Gardens, "Come find out."

"What's wrong with talking right here?" Prey responded. If Gloom wanted to talk, he'd rather get it over and done with.

Gloom sighed, "Just come Prey, please. My cutie mark is telling me I should go for a walk in the Gardens, so that's where I'm going."

Well that changed things slightly. Prey gave in, since you couldn't always get what you wanted, and sometimes you had to do the giving rather than the taking.

"Alright. Lead on."

A young pony couple, obviously freshly infatuated with each other, were leaning against one another under a rose arch, blushing smiles on their faces as they admired the spectacular flower beds but mainly just each other.

Prey gave them a once over to ensure they weren't a threat, before returning to watching where they were going as Gloom led them at a leisurely pace between rows of sculpted hedges. Neither they, nor the obnoxious pony couple, were the only visitors to the Palace Gardens. The constant bird song mixed with the just as constant low chatter of pony conversation, as small groups wandered around the gardens, enjoying the scenery during the opening hours. Two groups of twittering annoyances.

The uniformly cut grass was a rich, nearly supernatural vibrant green, and looked incredibly soft. Too bad there were signs telling all members of the general public to keep off.

There was a private section of the Palace Gardens too, but as the name implied, it was private and guarded, reserved for royalty or special events, such as the Gala which'd only recently passed. There were still laborers about fixing the last of the damage, as it happened. Prey had heard that to get an invite to attend the Royal Gardens was considered a special mark of Celestia's approval, reserved only for nobility or magi of renown.

'An invite to attend a private garden tea party with the Sun Wolf. What a horrifying prospect.'

"You found what your special talent wants to show you yet?" Prey spoke.

"No. Maybe? It's always hard to tell. It could just be taking me to

see something, or to physically find something. Or perhaps just to stop me taking a different wrong path. Or I could even be misinterpreting the whole thing." Gloom admitted, thoughts confirming he really wasn't sure.

"Well, since you've no idea, how about we use this time productively? What did you want to say to me that you've been hesitating over?" Prey asked bluntly as they took a turn towards the statue garden.

Gloom's wings hunched up slightly all by themselves, '-right. I didn't really want to talk. But now I've got to follow through. I bet this is what my talent was really leading me to-'

Gloom automatically glanced around with a slight squint, checking there was no one within earshot.

"I don't hear anyone close by." Prey assured Gloom without being prompted.

"Anypony," Gloom corrected without thought, "I, well, I did want to speak, yes."

Prey waited for Gloom to continue. The thestral was taking his time though. An iridescent purple butterfly flitted across their path. Prey's eyes followed it. He didn't recognise it from Snake's pillaged memories, so it probably wasn't one of the poisonous varieties.

Gloom grimaced, facial scars crinkling up, then squared his shoulders and got on with it; "Things aren't the same as before. You've grown close to Crimson after what happened in Mayflower, which is great of course, but, I don't think it's the same with us anymore. I don't feel there's any mutual respect, and I get that. I know I said sorry, but sometimes sorry isn't enough. Be honest with me Prey, how much do you hate me now?"

Prey looked away from tracking the butterfly's flight. He met Gloom's scarred eyes squarely, the thestral deserved that much at least, although his mouth still curled into a bright, friendly, and *fake* smile. Gloom couldn't help but wince when he saw that. He knew it meant Prey didn't see him as an ally right now.

"You didn't listen to me." Prey stated.

"About?" Gloom ventured to ask.

"I said don't go into the wolfing woods. You didn't listen. Then later on, you said, 'whatever it takes', remember? But when I did what it took, I just got punished for it when we got back, and now I'm on a watch list and wasting my time seeing a therapist. But more than that, you were going to abandon us. Crimson and me, I mean. You were going to quit the Night Guard and leave us to fend for ourselves."

Gloom could only lower his head, "Yes. I said sorry then, and I'll say it again. I'm sorry Prey. I did what I thought was right at the time, but at the end of the night..."

Gloom shrugged helplessly, "...Here we are."

"And here we are." Prey agreed. The pleasant smile stayed in place.

Gloom's tufted ears lowered further, "And here we are indeed. When everything's been said, they're just words. What's done is done and I can't take it back. All I can say is sorry again."

'-we're still a team who has to work together, but if Prey does not want to work with me anymore, what can I do to fix my mistakes?-'

"Crimson's already forgiven you." Prey told him.

"I know he has. We had a frank talk and he accepted my apology."

They'd spoken? Well, Prey must've missed it while off building death traps, no doubt. "But his forgiveness isn't enough? You want mine too, is that it?" Prey challenged.

"I don't want false forgiveness, no," Gloom shook his head, "And even if you don't forgive me, we will still have to work together *when* Crimson is released."

Gloom heavily emphasised the term 'when'.

"Then my forgiveness isn't really important, since nothing will

change with or without it." Prey said.

"It's important to me." Gloom said quietly.

'-Luna's starry mane, I sound pathetic saying it like that-', Gloom thought, but he didn't try to take it back.

Prey let Gloom stew for a while as they wandered around the statue garden, some new, mostly old stone depictions of famous ponies or historic events. Gloom was a thestral though. He'd asked, and now he would wait patiently without pushing until Prey gave him the answer.

'How stoic and noble. How *thestral*.' Prey thought derisively. Well, let Gloom be patient and noble for a bit longer then. It served Prey's purposes to make Gloom wait. It would make what he said next all the more impactful. Even now, despite the sincerity of Gloom's apology and all they'd been through together side by side, Prey was still the manipulative selfish little lamb he'd always been.

But, didn't Gloom deserve better after all he'd done for Prey? Even though Gloom had made mistakes, bad mistakes, he'd still fought to keep all of the ISND alive. No one was perfect, and Prey had betrayed, backstabbed, and let down more people than Gloom ever could.

'Yes, Gloom does deserve better. But instead he's got me.'

They were approaching the middle of the statue garden, and Prey was surprised to see there were a few statues which weren't solely devoted to famous ponies performing heroic deeds. Still, he'd yet to spot any statues of any of the other sentient races, like griffins, minotaurs, diamond dogs, or even cows or donkeys. Just a few stone beasts and animals artistically rendered in poses, like a sleeping tiger or a majestic lion. And some large kind of chimera serpent, set on its own pedestal. Prey hadn't ever seen an animal or creature like the one depicted. He looked up at it as he finally broke the silence to answer Gloom:

"Actions speak louder than words."

It took Gloom a minute to connect the dots, "Are you saying you want me to buy your forgiveness?" Gloom asked, stunned.

"That's *exactly* what I'm saying."

"Seriously? But that's just..."

"I want a promise." Prey said, twirling the free end of the ribbon in his off hoof.

"Oh, you meant a promise." Gloom straightened his shoulders as he prepared himself.

The silken end of the ribbon swung in slow circles. Gloom couldn't help but watch it, "I think a promise is the least you can do for me, considering."

"Yes." Gloom agreed, '-a promise is only fair-'

"I want a promise that you won't think about trying to abandon me or Crimson again. When or if we stand accused of breaking some silly law made by sillier people who have no idea what survival really takes, I don't want you to just sit back and let it happen. I want you to stand up for us."

Gloom couldn't help a guilty wince. He hadn't been there when Vanish had taken the jade necklace from Crimson, to say nothing of where Crimson currently was; sitting in a cell. Regardless of whether it'd been Princess Luna's decision or not, Gloom hadn't been there, and that's what mattered. Nor was he there when the ruling was delivered on Prey being deemed a danger to society, or when subsequent penalties and restrictions were placed upon him. Again, sure, Nighthawk hadn't wanted to do it, but that didn't matter because Gloom still hadn't been there again.

'-and both Prey and Crimson still wear the gold tracer bands. How much does that have to do with what Prey is asking me now?-', Gloom wondered. '-after all they've done for Canterlot, we still get treated like outcasts-'

"Yes, I can promise that Prey." Gloom said, and he wholeheartedly meant it. Every word was the truth, he would back Prey and

Crimson even if it meant coming into opposition with the law.

'-because they're my team, *my* ISND-'

The swinging ribbon came to a stop, "Good. Thank you." Prey said. He felt like the lowest swindler, but he'd do it again in a heartbeat. Gloom had promised, and if it came down to it, Prey now knew Gloom would follow through on his promise. No matter what.

Prey hadn't secured Gloom's promise for himself, or at least, only partly for himself. If Prey was caught, he doubted there would be any getting out of it, regardless of anything Gloom could say or do. But perhaps there would be a chance for Crimson if that ever happened.

And then Crimson got released from custody.

Prey almost smiled as he first saw Crimson standing there free, his coat and mane a bit scruffy but without the insult of hoof cuffs marring his figure. And indeed Prey *would've* smiled and dashed up to talk to the red pegasus if it weren't for who else was present in the office. As it was, Prey restrained himself, and settled for simply saying; "Crimson, it's good to see you."

"Thank you Prey." Crimson returned formally. He too was very aware of who else they were in the presence of, and stayed standing stiffly at attention where he'd been placed in the room.

Captain Nighthawk, Lieutenant Screech, along with Captain Shining Armour and a couple more of his Royal Guards were gathered here, plus Sunshine representing the Solar Guard.

Next to him, Prey could hear Gloom's thoughts of strong relief on seeing Crimson too; '-finally! It took long enough, but finally!-'

They were all standing in one of the spare offices within the Guard Compound which happened to be free, the room having been hastily cleared without issue when both Nighthawk and Shining

Armour had marched in with their entourages. The Night Guards had ended up in a sort of face off against the Royal Guards once they'd all filed inside, split down the middle of the room. Silver armour and grey fur on one side, and gold and white on the other.

Although right now, all the officers along with Sunshine were just talking. It was a conversation bordering on an argument, but Nighthawk and Shining Armour were being professional enough to limit it to that.

"The Night Guard told you so from the beginning." Nighthawk gruffly rasped, as blunt as a brick.

Shining Armour didn't look phased, "And happily, you were right. Everypony did their duty, and as a result, we got this all sorted out quickly."

Shining Armour didn't say the; 'this time' out loud, or ‘and without any collateral damage’, but it was clearly there.

When he'd arrived in the Guard Compound, the Captain of the Royal Guard hadn't been pleased to see his opposites in the Night Guards already there and waiting for the Solar Guards' return, doubly so when he spied Gloom and Prey in attendance too.

'-why've you got to try and fight me like this Nighthawk? It wasn't anything personal. Everypony's on the same side here-', Shining Armour had thought, the flash of his steely blue eyes giving a hint to the unicorn's inner frustrations. '-and how'd he learn the release meeting was this morning anyway?-'

Prey had kept close behind Gloom as the unicorn Captain had marched passed into the Compound office building with barely so much as a second glance at them, and so Shining Armour hadn't caught the darkly considering look from Prey which trailed inside after him.

'If we're all on the same side, why are those Royal inspectors still trying to dig up any dirt they can find on the Night Guard, hmm?' Prey thought, although that wasn't why he was angry at Shining Armour, since Prey only counted himself as an unwilling part of the

Night Guard, and thus didn't care about the organisation as a whole.

Prey hated Shining Armour for a much simpler reason. As the Royal Guard Captain, and a powerful unicorn to hoof, he was one of Celestia's personal favourites. Thus, by definition, he was the ponification of Evil Incarnate.

Technically, Prey and Gloom shouldn't have actually been here since they were still on medical leave, but when Prey had overheard Shining Armour asking why the ISND were present for this meeting, Nighthawk had bluntly told the other Captain; "Because I invited them, and it's their right to be here."

Well, technically it'd actually been Screech who'd sent a thestral messenger to Gloom and Prey. However, Nighthawk certainly wasn't going to second guess his trusted Lieutenant, and especially not in front of Shining Armour.

Screech caught Gloom's eye and gave him a nod. Gloom nodded back gratefully, '-got to remember to say thank you to Screech properly later-'

But then the door had opened again, and the accompanying Solar Guard, (Sunshine again. Why'd it have to be that unicorn out of all the Solar Guard?) had come in with Crimson, lanky black mane hanging messily, just like Prey remembered it being when Crimson was arrested two days ago.

And now the various Guard officers were all arguing. No, sorry, not arguing, *vigorously debating*.

Why couldn't it be as simple as a hoof over and release? By their own rules, Crimson had been cleared of any charges and was free to go wherever he wanted. He could've flown straight back to his flat from Vanhoover, or off into the sunset if he'd wanted and legally they wouldn't have been able to stop him. Yet Crimson had been brought back with a Guard escort.

Prey didn't know why they were doing this, or rather he *did* know why they were going through the motions: Guard politics. The

words made Prey's lip curl.

This whole thing had been about politics and the various Guard units infringing upon the grey areas between each others' jurisdictions from the very beginning.

Just look who was present; the Captain of the Night Guard and his Lieutenant, their opposites from the Royal Guard, plus Sunshine, who was here as a representative of the Solar Guard, all who held some stake in this affair.

'What's the point of Nighthawk purposely delaying us returning to active duty if we're still getting dragged into this cesspool?' Prey thought. The Night Guard and Royal Guard could fight each other to their heart's content as far as Prey cared. So long as they left him and Crimson out of it, they could do whatever they fancied to each other and good riddance.

Being a mind leech, Prey could've related word for word just what Nighthawk thought about having to go through these motions. And those words would've been:

'-worthless, useless, pointless. You're as bad as a noble, pandering to your sycophantic officers like this, Armour-'

'Ouch. Now that's harsh. Accurate, but harsh.' Prey thought, slightly amused but still far more impatient. He wanted this pointless fiasco to come to an end so he, Gloom, and Crimson could get out of here. He had other things he could be doing.

But there was no leaving until Nighthawk and Shining Armour were finished. It wouldn't do for the conversation topic, meaning Crimson, to walk out the door now would it?

Prey recalled that it'd been like this, the back and forth between the Royal and Night Guards, ever since the ISND had caught the riot instigator, Wheat Plow, and it had only been escalating from there. All the big cases, like with the royal inspectors the Royal Guard had brought in, along with the Gala, and most recently Crimson's arrest on the mere word of a noble, were only the most obvious points of contention. Beneath the surface there was much more.

Every day, there were at least a dozen more minor, unnamed clashes between the rest of the Royal and Night Guards. Cruel names called in the mess hall, jostling when patrols passed each other, deliberately mislaying the other side's paperwork, looks of disdain exchanged, and much more such snide sniping.

Most of those incidents weren't reported, or weren't the sort to have evidence, but this case here with Crimson? It was a solid, definite case both sides could clearly draw a line with. Prey just wished it hadn't ended up involving Crimson.

"It was a reasonable accusation made by a reputable Lord of a noble House. The law is clear." One of the Royal Guard officers protested. Shining Armour's tail gave a twitch, but he backed his officer up.

"The Solar Guard raised a red alert based on Lord Vanish's report and reached out to us, along with the City Guard of Vanhoover. Taking precautions was only sensible. I don't think anypony here would disagree that it's better to be safe than sorry, and ponies' lives could've been at risk. Has Sunshine told you what happened the last time?" Shining Armour asked grimly.

Sunshine took that as his cue to speak up, "Only a few months ago, there was a band of cultist thieves targeting wealthy ponies in Vanhoover with dark magic. With *mind* magic."

Sunshine's face was just as grim as Shining Armour's. All around the rest of the room, the ponies' reactions to the term 'mind magic', ranged from disgust to fear. And with good reason as it turned out, because Sunshine continued:

"I won't share confidential information, but over a score of ponies had their minds irreparably damaged. They're now a danger to themselves and their loved ones, liable to lash out if triggered. Even one of our own was ambushed, mind controlled, and used to attack his fellow guards."

'Oh come on, no one died and even those afflicted nobles are fine so long as you don't mention the robbery.' Prey thought.

"Now do you understand *why* we had to do what we did?" Sunshine

asked Nighthawk.

"Caution and concern was correct," Nighthawk gruffly replied, "Merely acting on the word of one Lord with no proof was not however."

"Private Crimson was hardly the only pony the joint City, Royal, and Solar Guard task force arrested," Shining Armour pointed out, "And I'd do it again in a heartbeat if it meant preventing a threat of this severity."

'Sun Wolf suck up.' Prey thought.

Screech tapped his hoof, signalling to Nighthawk he wanted to speak. The Captain jerked his chin to indicate Screech to go ahead. "Pardon, but what do you mean by that, sir?"

'-there's more to this than they're saying, I can feel it in my wings-'

Here at Screech's enquiry, Shining Armour looked over at Sunshine. The Solar Guard unicorn spoke solemnly, "It's because the cultist leader was never actually captured. It was assumed he drowned in an escape attempt jumping off a roof into the Vanhoover river, but the stallion's body was never actually found. And the theft from House Time fits all the patterns he used to use."

'They thought Crimson could've been a mind leech?' Prey thought in surprise, 'How utterly ridiculous. The thestral clans weren't even in Equestria back then when the robberies were occurring, plus he's a pegasus, not a unicorn, so how could it have been him? Mind magic has nothing to do with the secrets he wants to keep hidden.'

Screech was sharp. Not much got by him, "*Used* to use? Does that mean...?"

Shining Armour nodded briskly, "The real culprit has been apprehended and arrested, yes. Obviously, we've released all the other suspects with a formal apology. The real culprit is in jail in Vanhoover under heavy guard. Their name will be withheld until they are formally prosecuted, as per the law, but I can assure you that you'll have the details a few days from now, Captain

Nighthawk. The Solar Guard have thankfully confirmed the culprit is not a mind mage however, and has nothing to do with the deceased cult leader."

Captain Nighthawk's yellow gaze didn't budge as he stared at his opposite and bluntly turned the discussion, (no, definitely *not* an argument), back to his problem; "That's nice. But if a Night Guard is a suspect in the future, it's still up to me or the most senior Night Guard on duty to take them into custody. Not the Royal Guard."

And on and on it went, forcing Prey, Gloom and Crimson to act as bystanders to the Guard politicking. Prey had no interest in listening to either side of the argument, both what was said and what was only thought in the not-so-private privacy of their minds. All except Sunshine, who's mind was still muffled under the mind-lock enchantment on his helmet.

It was stupid, all so stupid. It was like bickering children, but children with much more complicated chips on their shoulders and the full might of their respective Guard forces behind their actions. Typical pony nonsense, and typical of ponies not to care who they inconvenienced with their foolishness.

'This seems like just a squabble, but a couple months down the line, when they look back at this, what will they think then? Is this a sign of what is to come?' Prey wondered. He really should be more concerned, since he was essentially a prisoner of the Night Guard, but Prey had trouble dredging up concern when the lot of them were getting so worked up over an incident where no one died or was even injured.

Prey was much more worried about who had really stolen the jade necklace. Along with his constant concern about the mimics, Luna, and his shadow enemy, of course.

Prey shifted on his hooves, subtlety stretching his legs as the three of them were forced to wait. He really wanted to ask Crimson what had happened while he was being held in a cell, not just stand around woolgathering. No pun intended.

Still being forced to wait next to the hated Solar Guard, Crimson

seemed to feel Prey's gaze on him, and turned his own eyes to meet the lamb's without shifting his posture. He raised one bored eyebrow under his current mess of a mane.

Prey twitched his lip, flicking his eyes up to Crimson's too long mane as it trailed into his eyes.

Crimson raised his other brow as if to say, 'I've been sitting in a jail cell, what do you expect?'

Prey tilted his head in mock thoughtfulness, then raised his hoof, 'Oh, I don't know, how about getting a mane cut?' He silently suggested, scissoring his cleft hoof together.

'I'm a thestral warrior. I don't do mane cuts.' Crimson seemed to return with a slight raise of his chin and straightening of his wings. Prey couldn't help but notice that despite his scruffy mane, tail, and coat, Crimson's feathers were all still pristine.

Prey gave a barely perceptible shrug, then brushed briefly at his ribbon, a slightly mocking lilt to his smile, 'Well, you could always get a nice ribbon like mine. Or...'

Here Prey covertly drew in the air, indicating something small, round, and ring shaped, '...You could get a mane tie instead.'

'That's what got me into this mess in the first place.' Crimson's snort said. Then he gave Prey a flat look, 'And you're the one who got me that jade ring too.'

Prey dropped his eyes and looked away; 'Sorry.' He'd just been trying to cheer Crimson up.

'No, it's okay.' Crimson's look seemed to reassure Prey, or at least he hoped that's what Crimson meant it to mean. He'd been stupid doing that, Crimson had just gotten out of jail after all, so of course he didn't want some dumb attempt at cheering up. Besides, Crimson had already told Prey once before that he didn't want to talk about Lord Vanish stealing the necklace from him.

Prey kept his hooves to himself and his eyes lowered for the rest of the tediously long non-argument between Nighthawk and Shining

Armour, being patient until Shining Armour had finally had enough and closed the meeting down so they could all leave.

Prey, Gloom, and Crimson made a beeline for the Guard Compound gate the moment they were dismissed and after they'd said their thank yous to Screech and Nighthawk for all their efforts.

"You're okay?" Gloom asked Crimson, checking him over.

"Nothing happened while they were holding you, did it?" Prey joined in as he hurried, (as always), to keep up.

"Yes. Nothing happened, and it's fine Prey." Crimson assured them, "They didn't put me in general population, and none of the Guards tried anything. I am just glad to be out to stretch my wings again."

"Do you need to get a drink?" Gloom asked, not talking about water or liquor.

'-do you need any blood?-', Is what Gloom really meant.

"It was only two days. I mean, I'm fine for now, but thank you." Crimson answered.

"I don't suppose they let slip who the real thief was when they released you?" Gloom asked curiously.

"Most definitely not. During my stay, I got the impression these Solar Guards hold their rules very close to their shiny golden hearts." Crimson said, wing giving a distasteful flick to indicate exactly how he felt about their attachment to their blind laws rather than thinking for themselves.

"We're not that bad."

Prey jerked around to see Sunshine striding towards them. The stallion offered an apologetic, but friendly smile when the three ISND members all stopped to warily regard him.

The Solar Guard's armour was radiant in the direct morning light,

and in the background, Prey saw passing Royal Guards stopping in interest to stare at the elite Guard.

'What's he here for now? To apologise, or to give us a threatening warning on behalf of the Solar Guard?' Prey thought suspiciously, remembering the argument which'd just taken place inside. Seeing Sunshine standing blithely before him, proud and confident, without a clue about how much Prey hated him and everything he stood for. It grated on Prey's teeth, like chewing on gravel. The harder you chewed, the more you hurt yourself.

Gloom looked the Solar Guard up and down, who'd come to a stop just out of hoof's reach "Alright, what did you want to tell us that you didn't want anypony back in there to hear?"

Gloom wasn't the only wary one, Crimson had just that slightest tension in his stance that could indicate he was prepared to move, as he coldly examined his former jailer. Sunshine raised a hoof in a placating manner:

"Nothing like that, I just wanted to remind you it wasn't anything personal, Crimson Trace. You were hardly a model prisoner yourself, you know. But there's no hard feelings on my side."

"Why would there be? You are just one Solar Guard of many. We do not know each other." Crimson asked blankly.

"That's right. The Solar Guard were just doing what we had to, but I do realise we inconvenienced you, so I wanted to personally say sorry for that." Sunshine answered.

'*You're* apologising, but the Solar Guard *isn't* apologising for taking the word of one pompous Lord as damning evidence.' Prey interpreted, keeping his temper in check.

"Alright." Crimson said neutrally, not actually accepting the apology.

"Was there something further? If it's related to our job, I'm going to have to refer you back to Captain Nighthawk until we've returned to active duty." Gloom told Sunshine. It was obvious a half apology

wasn't all the Solar Guard had stopped them for.

'-this had better not be *more* Guard politics-', Gloom was thinking.

Sunshine's thoughts were still locked away from Prey, so he couldn't tell why the unicorn was really here, but whatever the reason was, Prey knew he didn't like it. Especially when he noticed Sunshine was actually studying him specifically. It wasn't obvious, but every now and then the unicorn's eyes would shift from whoever was talking to Prey:

"I've got to leave to get back to Vanhoover soon, but before I went, I wanted to speak to the ISND. I didn't even know the Night Guard had such a unit until the Royal Guard told us just now."

Prey was getting the distinct impression Sunshine meant him when he said that, and Prey really wasn't liking it.

"That is merely a statement. Not a question." Crimson said.

"Be polite," Gloom reminded Crimson, "Sunshine was just following orders. Even if they were bad orders."

That was rather more passive aggressive from Gloom than normal. But right now Gloom wasn't on duty and he was tired, so he didn't have to be a good representative of the Night Guard, and the Solar Guards' arrest of Crimson had really had him worried. So his barbed remark was understandable.

Sunshine tilted his head back, spiral horn tall, and Prey was reminded again how Sunshine could either quick cast, or perhaps do auraless magic. His heart began to speed up as the Solar Guard stopped merely glancing and focused directly on him.

"The Royal Guard Lieutenant Twining Ivy told me something concerning. I was told that Prey is actually a Night Guard. Is that true?"

Gloom blinked, ears going up in surprise. He was so used to Prey being, well, *Prey*, that despite the lamb's height, build, apparent age, and voice, he sometimes forgot Prey was supposedly still a child, and how that looked to other people. '-ah. So that's the issue-'

Crimson shifted to cover Prey a bit more, "Prey is a full member of the Night Guard, by order of Princess Luna."

"Princess Luna gave an order to that effect?" Sunshine asked in surprise. He didn't look happy about that. "Does Princess Celestia also know?"

'By all that is unholy and terrible, I pray not.' Prey thought, his heart really pounding now within its spiked cage. The very idea made him cold, despite standing in the middle of the Guard Compound under the sun.

"I wouldn't know," Gloom said calmly, "I don't know what their Majesties discuss together. Being a Solar Guard, you'd be more likely to be able to tell me."

"Hmm," Sunshine mused, narrowing his eyes down at Prey from under his golden helm, "I will not question Her Majesty. As a champion of Harmony, her will is just and true."

He kept looking at Prey though.

"Is there something further we can help you with?" Gloom eventually asked, a tad testily.

"I just can't help the feeling I've met you before." Sunshine said to Prey.

Prey's smile was as insincere as an angler fish's lure, but as real looking as a rainbow. He blinked in a display of honest confusion, "I think I would remember meeting a Solar Guard like you."

Sunshine raised his eyebrows, "And I think I would remember meeting a foal like you." But his eyes continued to study Prey. Prey's confused look did not waver.

"How did you get those scars? You've all got them, and they look quite nasty." Sunshine asked.

"A run in with a warlock." Gloom said shortly.

"Your unit fought and beat a full on warlock?" Sunshine exclaimed.

"Yes." Gloom was vaguely vindicated by the Solar Guard's surprise. '-that'll show him the ISND isn't a joke and Princess Luna knows what she's doing-'

"How did you manage to capture the warlock? I thought you didn't have any unicorns in your number?"

"Who told-? No, we do, Private Lilly Blossom, but that's not-No. We didn't capture him, but unicorns had nothing to do with it." Gloom frowned.

"The warlock is still at large?" Sunshine asked in alarm, "Why hasn't the Solar Guard been informed about this? One of our duties is specifically to apprehend and imprison warlocks."

"That is not an issue." Crimson stated.

"Because he's dead." Gloom finished.

Sunshine stepped back, but not out of any kind of surprised fear. No, it was disgust and he clearly displayed it for all to see, "Are you admitting you killed him?" He demanded.

Gloom's yellow slit eyes narrowed, "Nopony killed him, except himself. We still don't know exactly what happened, but when cornered, he took his own life."

'-but not before murdering a whole pit full of innocents for no reason, but you don't need to know that. Arrogant Solar Guard-', Gloom added in his head.

Sunshine straightened back up, both relieved and even more disgusted at the same, "I will never understand why some ponies feel that suicide is the answer." He said, sadly shaking his head.

"He was a coward. On that we can agree, if nothing else." Gloom said, "Now I'm sorry, but we really shouldn't even have said that, so we're going to have to leave you now. Good day."

'*Finally*.' Prey thought, eager to put this horn head he'd so narrowly escaped the first time behind him.

"You won't stay for a minute?" Sunshine asked.

The three of them were already turning to go, but Gloom and Crimson stopped to look back at Sunshine. Prey didn't.

Crimson eyed the Solar Guard who'd arrested him flatly, "Why would we stay?"

"We're off duty, and there's a nice cafe I was thinking of taking us three to to celebrate Crimson's acquittal." Gloom said, completely in sync with Crimson in giving Sunshine the cold shoulder.

Sunshine finally seemed to get the hint. He sighed but accepted that, stepping back and waving a hoof that they could go, "Once again, no hard feelings and have a nice day. May Celestia smile upon you."

Sunshine's horn suddenly glowed, and in the exact same instant, something orange and glowing flashed into existence in front of the Solar Guard.

Prey, who had been turning away, eager to leave, let out a very undignified squeak of fear. Flight or fight slammed down onto his mind like an iron door, but Sunshine wasn't even looking at the ISND, but at the magical construct he'd just instant cast in front of him.

It was a clock. An orange clock face made out of magic, complete with Romane numerals, hovering in the air. That was what Sunshine had cast. A spell to check the time. Just a clock. Satisfied, Sunshine nodded to himself before trotting briskly away back up towards the Palace.

Prey's heart continued to pound in his throat and make breathing difficult. If not for the Jaw of Heart's, he might've had a heart attack. Sunshine had just used magic, something so incredibly powerful and complex, for something so mundane as checking the time. He was skilled enough that he had a spell just to check the time, and could cast it just like that! Like it was nothing!

It had been so fast, faster than the extra second it would've taken

Sunshine to simply remove a pocket watch from his armour. Sunshine probably didn't even think about it. To him, it was just common sense to reach for his magic since it was faster. It spoke of his power, skill,and control.

'He could've cast an attack spell before I could've reacted. I can't read his thoughts with that mind lock enchantment still on his helmet. I wouldn't have had any warning.' Prey realised.

It hadn't been an attack, or anything of the sort. Sunshine had just been checking the time. But to Prey, it was just a reminder of why he feared unicorns and especially the Solar Guard.

"Prey, Prey?" Gloom repeated, "Something wrong?"

"I, no, nothing important. Just remembering why I really don't like the Solar Guard."

Prey couldn't help one last surreptitious look back out of the corner of his eye after the departing Solar Guard. And to Prey's mind, it looked like Sunshine was doing the exact same thing to him.

'I *really* don't like them.'

"So you're telling me nothing happened? Nothing at all?" Gloom asked, signalling for the waitress to bring their bill. Prey saw the mare gulp at the thestral's signal, and very reluctantly, drag her hooves over to the till to ring up their total.

True to his word, Gloom had taken them to a cafe he'd found as a little celebration for Crimson's successful acquittal. It was a milkshake pallor, something Prey didn't even know was a thing.

"Really, nothing." Crimson shrugged uncomfortably, "They kept me isolated. I just sat in a cell for two days. I had meals, a bed, the Solar and Royal Guard each tried to interview me twice, but of course I had nothing to tell them. They all gave up within five minutes each time. It was a waste of time. Their time, I mean."

"They didn't try and make you sign anything did they?" Gloom

checked.

"Or attempt to intimidate or frame you?" Prey chimed in. The strawberry ice-cream milkshake had been delicious, but he couldn't appreciate it properly, his stomach was still twisting over Sunshine.

"No. And no. It was just boring. Very boring. Even more boring than last time I was in a cell."

"You were in a cell before?" Gloom asked in surprise.

Prey lifted his forelegs above the table top and gave them a wiggle to showcase the gold bands, "Remember where Luna pulled us both from?"

"It's *Princess* Luna," Gloom reminded Prey sharply, but he couldn't argue Prey's point. '-and I've made that promise to Prey. If something like that happens again, I'm going to stand with them-'

Out of the corner of his eye, Prey saw the waitress had gotten the bill, but was trying to delay coming over to Gloom by chatting with the cashier, "And they gave no indication as to who the real culprit was?" He asked next.

"None at all. I mean, why would they even tell me something like that anyways? I was a suspect." Crimson shook his head in the negative. He looked at Prey with just the faintest trace of suspicion, like he wouldn't put it past Prey to have done something.

"We tried to get visitor rights, but the Royal Guard refused us." Prey quickly said.

"That's fine. It was only two days." Crimson said with a shrug of his wings.

"Speaking of visiting, I think we need to try and visit Lilly Blossom again." Gloom said, shifting the topic, and it was a heavy shift. Lilly Blossom's state was never far from Gloom's thoughts.

'-Scenic's got his marefriend and is making progress. Soon he'll be starting his own therapy. But Lilly... Her getting bitten by that oversized cuttlefish is starting to feature in my nightmares while

little rats scurry everywhere-'

"Right now?" Crimson suggested, pulling Gloom from his dark memories.

Gloom nodded, and then again more firmly and stood as the waitress finally arrived, "Yes. There's no time like the present after all."

As far as Prey was concerned, there were plenty of times like the present. “Never”, for instance.

The strong take, and the weak suffer.

For Gloom and Crimson, the question had been put aside since neither had the answer. And to be honest, the answer didn't really matter to them either, just so long as this debacle was over and Crimson was free to go. But the question still remained. *Who* had the Solar Guard caught? Who was the *real* thief of House Time's heirloom?

And were those two people the same person?

Prey knew the answer, and the answer was no. He didn't know who'd really stolen the jade necklace, but he did know who the Vanhoover City Guard had sitting in their cells. And because of his own involvement, Prey knew with one hundred percent certainty those two people were not one and the same.

'As if they could even catch a cold without my help.'

Someone had been caught. But that was all that had happened. Someone had been *caught*. Justice, injustice, fair, unfair, did it matter now that the Guard had their culprit? Just a pony who was now a criminal, one to be judged, sentenced, punished, and forgotten. Gloom, Crimson, Nighthawk, Shining Armour, all of the Guard forces had been satisfied. Because they'd caught their culprit, and that was that.

Truly, the strong take and the weak suffer.

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The report detailing the thief who'd stolen from House Time was only shared with Nighthawk the night after next. And even then, Nighthawk had to lean quite heavily on the Royal Guard to get the report that soon. Because of some excuse about 'ongoing case proceedings' and 'suspect protection', they'd been reluctant to share.

Once again it was just more Guard politics. Strictly speaking, the Royal Guard were just following the rules in not letting a separate law force influence their work. But also strictly speaking, both Guard forces were supposed to have the same authority, and both ultimately answered to the same two ponies. The Princesses.

But arguing that grey area of rules was of no interest to any of the ISND, including Lilly Blossom, who just didn't care about anything right now full stop.

What *was* of interest was when Screech let the ISND read the report for themselves, since as far as he was concerned, after Crimson's false arrest, the ISND were as much involved in the case proceedings as the rest of the Night Guard. Therefore, the Lieutenant was happy to let them read a copy.

Tearing Scenic away from Carton Juice had been a struggle. The earth pony stallion had been having a relapse day, caused by him panicking last night when his night light had gone out, leaving him in darkness. It was kind of sad, and pathetic, and Scenic had been deeply ashamed when forced to confess the reason he was scared to even leave his house when they came by, but none of them had judged him, not even Prey. Anyway, Gloom had persevered in his persuasion, and gotten Scenic to come along in the end.

Thus, the four of them had gathered around and read the report.

Skipping through most of the details about confirmed dates, times, referenced evidence appendages, and cross signatures, the meat of the report could've been cut down to just the summary at the end:

"As a result of the suspicions raised by Private Iron Bar, C.W., about inconsistencies during the interview of Warm Hearth, a second interview was undertaken with Corporal Letter Heading present. Warm Hearth was not able to provide an alibi for the night of the 5th, during the time the break in to House Time occurred.

After attempting to flee, Warm Hearth was taken into custody and her home searched, revealing a large amount of bits hidden under her floor. Evidence shows the hiding place was created very recently.

Subsequently, Warm Hearth confessed to both breaking and entering, and theft of the specified magical artifact from House Time. The search of her house revealed horseshoes, (Refer back to evidence Item No. 2), in the bottom of her trash bin matching the hoof prints along Warm Hearth's confessed route of approach. Trace dirt samples on the horseshoes match mud from the stream bank where Warm Hearth confessed to arriving and leaving by a small water craft in an attempt to avoid leaving a trail.

The stolen water craft was found abandoned in some reeds adjoining Vanhoover river. (Refer back to evidence item No. 3)

Attempts to identify the pony Warm Hearth confessed to selling House Time's artifact to have been unsuccessful. Warm Hearth swears she never saw the buyer without a cloak on, who only identified themselves as Average Accountant. The individual approached Warm Hearth and threatened her into carrying out the theft, promising payment if she was successful and to, quote; "Burn down your home if you fail me."

Searches are still ongoing for this Average Accountant. No leads so far. Unknown if the individual Average Accountant is associated with the previous incidents in Vanhoover, but it is judged unlikely. Possible link to a theft of precious magic metals in Canterlot, where a calling card left as evidence at the scene was marked with the initials; "A.A."

Warm Hearth stands to be charged with, (Refer to page No. 4), breaking and entering, resisting arrest, theft, attempt to destroy evidence, lying to a City Guard, and destruction of private property,

but under the provision of being under duress and pleading guilty."

Signed, Second Lt. Daisy Chain, City Guard of Vanhoover.

So there it was, Prey's interference, all laid out in the report. And no one else but the real thief, or thieves, would ever know the truth of what Prey had done.

Not even Warm Hearth would know. She herself believed she'd done the deed, sneaking in through the window, heart pounding, and used an unknown green crystal holding some kind magical enchantment which 'Average Accountant' had provided to bypass the locks on House Time's family vault. Warm Hearth knew she'd done it, she had the memories. It *had* to have been her.

But she was innocent. She'd done nothing wrong. Prey had framed her, all to make sure Crimson was released.

Prey didn't even regret it. Warm Hearth had been a complete stranger to him when he'd selected her from the list taken from the City Guards offices. He hadn't done it in malice, vengeance, or even spite. She was merely the most convenient replacement for Crimson. It was just her bad luck and the uncaring hoof of fate.

The world isn't fair. The strong take and the weak suffer, and this time, it had been Prey doing the taking, because there was something he selfishly wanted; Crimson's freedom.

It takes a certain kind of person to be willing to hurt a complete stranger, someone who had never done anything to you. Prey was one of them. He had always known it, from the first moment Snake had made him create his first runes. He'd known it again when he'd thrown the veropede egg into the pit filled with drugged prisoners.

So framing Warm Hearth? Prey hadn't enjoyed it, but he'd gladly do it again to get what he wanted.

Prey did not know it at the time, but ignoring the identity of the real thief would prove to be a hugely costly mistake.

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Author's Notes:

- Editor: Sweetolebob18

60.4 Try to make it Count

When disaster came, it came all in one rush, like the rising tide, and Prey was left kicking to keep his head above water.

"Uh huh." Gloom answered Carton Juice, only half listening. He was finding the chessboard in front of him more interesting than the chatter of Scenic's marefriend. Which wasn't saying much, really. Prey wasn't even sure which famous so-and-so pony Carton was nattering on about now.

Gloom, sitting across from Scenic, was of much the same opinion, '-why does everypony fixate on events happening outside their own lives which they have nothing to do with? Hmm, should I move the knight or the bishop?-'

However Scenic was still being a good conversational partner to his marefriend, meaning he was nodding and saying "Yes" at all the right intervals, while still managing to beat Gloom quite easily on the board. Scenic was off the crutch now, and could hobble along by himself.

'-go on, take the pawn, take the pawn, you know you want to-', Scenic thought. "Yes dear. I wonder how all that even happened?"

Carton Juice shrugged her broad shoulders, happy just to be talking and socialising and not at all bothered by the notion that everyone may only be half listening; "There's all sorts of extraordinary ponies out there, living extraordinary lives. It's exciting to hear about what some ponies who can live their dreams do."

Off to the side, Prey rolled his eyes. 'Fame, newspapers, ponies, yadda yadda. For every success story sensational enough to grab your jaded nation's attention, there are a hundred, no, probably a thousand more which aren't, but that are much more important. A foal taken by timber wolves, a prairie fire which decimated a community's crops, or a pirate ship ravaging the coasts.'

Prey was a cynic at heart. For him, every castle-in-the-sky not only had a mortgage but a dungeon as well.

"Yes, I see." Scenic nodded to Carton Juice as Gloom finally moved his bishop up to take the pawn. Scenic's rook immediately swooped down to take Gloom's now unprotected queen.

"Check." Scenic added, trying not to be too smug.

Like Prey, Crimson was not a fan of chess and was sitting off to the side on a floor cushion. He seemed to be studying a painting hanging from the wall, or perhaps he was just blindly starting at the garish mish-mash of colours wishing he were elsewhere.

They were all in Scenic Paint's apartment. It was the first time anyone here, (aside from the sappy Earth pony couple), had been to Scenic's abode.

It was a lot nicer than Prey or Crimson's apartments, hence why they were here instead of there.

To be more specific, this was a semi-detached apartment, built in the middle class district of Canterlot, with its own small garden outside. Inside, it was outfitted with all the trappings of Canterlot life. Bookshelves, pictures, curtains, a welcome mat, sofa, floor cushions, wardrobe, a dining table, etcetera.

Scenic may not get on with his parents, but apparently that didn't extend to their money, since Prey had doubts about whether Scenic could've afforded this place on his Guard wage alone.

Prey had not wanted to come along on this visit when invited, and was uncomfortable here, but Gloom had asked Crimson to come, and Crimson had asked Prey to come, so here Prey was.

Prey had refused the refreshments offered to him, saying he wasn't hungry, ("No, I'm not thirsty either thank you"), and had just as resolutely refused any offers to play chess. Carton was particularly persistent in her kind entreaties, but Prey hadn't budged.

The bulky mare was spending all of her free time with Scenic outside of her beekeeping job, helping to facilitate his recovery.

And trying to help Lilly too. Carton Juice had taken it as a personal challenge to help the hospitalised unicorn, (or ex-unicorn since she couldn't use magic anymore), to recover. Carton, Scenic, and their new friend Saffron had formed an impromptu support group, and were dedicating themselves to trying to lift Lilly Blossom out of her depression.

Prey didn't rate their chances highly, but they probably saw far more of Lilly than the original ISND members did. On Prey's behalf, this was because he was avoiding Lilly, and for Gloom and Crimson, because Lilly refused to see them whenever they tried to visit.

'Finally a problem that doesn't default to being mine.' Was Prey's take on the situation.

If Scenic, Carton, and their new friend Saffron could help Lilly, then fine. Good for them. If they couldn't, well, then it was no wool off Prey's back.

They were supposed to be celebrating Crimson's acquittal. For a second time. Scenic was sorry he'd missed the first one, so he'd declared a little party here at his house and invited them. Prey however could tell that it'd actually been Carton Juice's idea.

'-they need to smile more. All of them do, my dear Paint Spot included-'

Carton Juice really didn't know Prey for who or what he was. Even after Scenic's warning words, she still only saw Prey as 'the little lamb'. Prey had refused the slice of hot fruit cake she'd offered him, no matter how tantalising it'd smelled.

Of course, on the flip side, Carton Juice was still a bit apprehensive around Gloom and Crimson, the visually intimidating ones, which manifested itself in just the slightest things. Like not looking them in the eye when she welcomed them at the door, or that trace of reservation in her chuckle, her hesitation when telling a joke, and subconsciously sticking close to Scenic for reassurance, (despite her being the uninjured one and far bigger and stronger than her colt friend).

"Check."

"Check."

"Check again."

"And that's checkmate." Scenic declared, placing his white bishop down with the satisfaction of victory.

Gloom studied the board, not really bothered, "Checkmate. Hmm."

"Thanks for the game." Scenic beamed.

"How about a change of game now?" Carton suggested brightly, "Something that everypony can play together. How about UNO? Or perhaps Banana Town, or Butterfly Catcher?"

Crimson blinked and looked away from the painting, "Pardon? What?"

Carton Juice repeated the options, along with a few more boardgames that Prey didn't care about, since he'd never even heard of them, and had no interest in playing anything the mare suggested anyway. He understood that it was just a pastime, as acceptable as going for a walk, playing a sport, or just chatting with friends, but damn if they weren't all boring to him. Not that Scenic could've done the physical activities on that list with his still healing legs, though.

Prey wouldn't have minded reading a book instead, but his idea of reading wasn't one of the Daring Doo novels Scenic had on his shelves here, Prey's idea of reading was more what others would have called "boring study". It took a certain type of person to find a scroll on unstable crystal forms 'interesting'.

'What am I even doing wasting my time here?' Prey asked himself yet again. First, he didn't like being around people, doubly so with ponies, second, he didn't feel safe here, and third, he had far more important concerns he could be working on. Why he could be doing-

Prey suddenly felt sick, a pain in his stomach, and a headache

behind his eyes. He gasped, hastily steadying himself on the wall.

The headache vanished as swiftly as it had arrived, but the unpleasant twisting in his stomach remained.

The sudden bout of sickness had nothing to do with Scenic's house.

Prey jolted to his hooves. Something had happened down in his lair! Danger, magic, death. Which, Prey didn't know, but something had happened.

'Who? Why? Is it the Mimics or the person who wants to keep them secret? The real thief? Who?' Prey's mind raced, his stomach a cold knot of worms. His lair had been found, infiltrated, compromised! His runic arrays weren't finished, he wasn't properly prepared to defend against intruders yet.

'Zoma'Grika. Why'd it have to be now?!'

He didn't know what had happened down there, or what was *still* happening. A cold sweat was prickling his skin.

"Prey? Is something wrong?"

Prey jerked, returning to his surroundings. Crimson was looking at him.

"I... It's nothing that can't wait." Prey said, and sat back down, forcing his features back into boredom.

He had to wait, he couldn't go rushing off. It would be too suspicious. And he could be running straight into a trap, but at the same time, what if they were taking his inaction as a chance to set up a trap instead?

'No, stay. I can't run off. Don't let them know I know in case they're watching Scenic's house right now. This could be a test. But how on Equis did they even find the cave? Did they follow Lemon Pink?'

If whoever they were could find Prey's secret lair, was there any reason they couldn't also find Prey too? It was possible they were on their way to attack Scenic's flat right now. But if he broke cover

and ran away, what about Crimson and the others?

Prey's stomach continued to work itself up into an ever increasingly painful knot. But he had to wait. He had to stay.

He sat there through the entirety of Carton's suggested game of Butterfly Catcher. He didn't protest at Scenic's follow up game of Rummy Cub. He sat there in his corner, unmoving on the outside but mind churning on the inside.

He waited with agonising patience all the while internally worrying, trying to figure out what could've happened, and what he was going to do about it. His lair had been invaded. The veropedes were there, but what if the invader or invaders had escaped and taken back the news? He hadn't finished the memory suppressing runic defences yet. What if it was actually just some incredibly unfortunate geologists exploring the caves who'd go running straight to the Guard? Then what?

But Prey sat on his cushion and waited. He smiled at Crimson, coolly ignored Carton Juice's continued entreaties for him to join them in a game, answered Gloom's odd question, and wore his mask.

He couldn't let them know anything was wrong. He couldn't.

So Prey sat and waited.

It was approaching dusk. Not too long now, and the crystal street lamps would light up.

"Is something the matter Prey?" It was the second time Crimson had asked. They were almost back to their flats, and it was just the two of them, Gloom having said goodbye and flown off. The red pegasus had chosen to walk, and was looking at Prey out of the corner of his eye.

Prey knew Crimson hated lies, but this was Prey's problem. Crimson

would be safer off staying out of it. Prey shook his head, keeping his eyes straight ahead:

"No, I'm just worried. Nothing major, and not the sort of thing you need to be concerned about anyway."

Nothing further was said on the return to their flats. Prey didn't know if Crimson had believed him or not.

Two hours, and twenty-one minutes.

That is how long it took Prey and Lemon Pink to progress down the dry overflow pipe, stopping after every step to search for traps, to listen for an ambush, and scan for magic.

Two hours, twenty-one minutes of gruelling, mind grinding tension in the dark. Lemon Pink went first, and levitated a cloak over a wire frame shaped like a pony ten hooves in front of them as a decoy.

Lemon wore a thin metal clasper around her throat. If there had been any light in the tunnel, it would've looked like dull silver. It wasn't, not on the inside. The outer shell was silver leaf. Inside, it was electrite. The clasper was a weapon, bearing runes. Not enough runes. The necklace wasn't actually finished. It was meant to be Lemon Pink's weapon, but there hadn't been enough time to complete it.

Two hours and twenty-one minutes at their crawling pace to pass down the pipe. But Prey did not want to dwell on that. They weren't ambushed, nor did they uncover any traps or tracks along the path, meaning this was almost certainly not the route the intruders had taken to reach his lair.

That was all that was important, and let that be enough said about the two hours and twenty-one minutes of nerve humming tension.

It was always the smell that reached you first. A sour acidic scent wafted out of the darkness as they crept up the tunnel. Then, when

they got closer, another sickly cloying stench oozed from underneath the first. Burnt fur and flesh.

Prey stopped just outside the gaping black mouth of the cavern entrance. He focused, feeling out into the dark lair, runes inside the crystal cavern responding to his command. He felt no intruders. Whoever had attacked, they were long gone.

"Light." Prey ordered. The sharp acrid stench was stronger than ever.

Lemon's horn glowed silver, and a ball of white light lifted off from the end of her sharp horn and floated up. It grew in brightness as it ascended towards the cavern's peak, getting captured and refracted inside crystal formations hundreds of times. Prey squinted against the sudden illumination and looked around.

There was surprisingly little damage. The runic defences Prey had created might not have been complete, but they were still defences. Runes were not merely physical things, and while the cavern was rock and crystal, such things did not break easily. The invaders had come up through one of the two unmapped tunnels leading down into the winding depths of Canterlot Mountain. There, however, they'd encountered the veropedes and the runic defences he'd completed.

Prey's breath stuck in his throat, but it had nothing to do with the scorch marks, tufts of burnt fur and flesh, or the blackened outlines situated around the two tunnels. The cause of those was a large scale flare trap, with a secondary bone shattering pulse on contact, but the remains weren't what had Prey's wide eye'd attention.

"No!"

The veropede, *Prey's* veropede, lay in a slaughtered heap. It's armoured carapace had been carved through like bread, huge cross sections of dense muscle exposed to the air, glistened in a pool of spikes, jointed legs, and dark blood.

Prey dashed forwards. The acidic stench was coming from the gallons of spilled veropede blood. He saw lightning scar cracks

riddling the carapace, the giant monster having not died easily. The invaders had tried to use normal weapons at first, Prey saw broken off spear heads uselessly embedded in the armour of the veropede's head, a saber crumpled like paper on the ground.

Prey skidded to a stop at the edge of the viscous blood pool. The sharp stench was almost overpowering.

His weapon was dead. Its enormous carcass lay before him like a mocking taunt. There was fur and shreds of flesh caught in the veropedes open maw, but its savagery hadn't been enough to save it in the end.

This close, Prey could see that the huge slices which'd bisected his veropede weren't done by any blade, but by magic. How many had the veropede killed before it had been brought down? It didn't matter, because whatever the number, it hadn't been enough to win.

His weapon was gone, dead, utterly destroyed, but where was the second veropede? Where had it gone?

Prey reached out with his mind. Where was it? 'Come! Here. Come.'

A patch of stone and darkness uncoiled jerkily from behind a large cluster of milky quartz, and the second, smaller veropede emerged. All four of its antennae were gone, severed at different lengths, and deep gouges and cracks were dug into the carapace around its head. A whole section of legs down one side were gone, burnt to charcoal, and its mandibles and many teeth were broken, as if it'd tried to bite through something truly unbreakable.

'Stop. Rest. Stay there.' Prey ordered in relief. One of his weapons was still alive. Prey galloped towards the surviving veropede as it curled up and collapsed. He saw the smeared trail of blood left behind it.

"Search the place." Prey cried to Lemon as he ran up.

He ignored the oozing blood and sharp stink, quickly beginning to assess the giant insect's state. After all the veropedes had cost him,

he didn't want to lose another one. They were *his* tools. They *belonged* to him. *No one* stole from him.

'I should've placed runes on them. I should've warded them against magic sooner!' Prey berated himself. But he hadn't finished the runic defences on the lair, he'd wanted to do those first, and then plan out the best runic combinations to inscribe on the veropedes.

'There wasn't enough time. But there's just. Never. Any. *Time*!'

Up close, the frightening force that must've been necessary to cleave into the veropede's armour became clearer. The carapace was stronger than steel, able to deflect a hydra's teeth. An enchanted edge with huge force behind it must've been required to cleave through. Prey's mind whirled, piecing together what must've taken place here:

'The wounds and damage are different on each veropede. Two different sets of enemies engaged each veropede. Powerful magic was used in each fight, but the first group wielded the magic better suited to slay my first veropede. They only had the power to nearly kill my second.'

But what about the invaders the veropedes had managed to kill? It was obvious the invaders had eventually been forced to retreat, but who had they been? How did they find his lair? They'd obviously come prepared for a fight.

'That information doesn't matter right now, it can wait.'

Prey was frantically searching over the veropede by this point, acrid gore coating his hooves, his mind as calm as a stone even while his body was pumping with adrenaline. The damage he found was great. The veropede was a monster among monsters, an apex predator, but even it had its limits past which it would die. He got down to work immediately.

"Prey, the tracks lead back into the mountain."

"It can wait. This comes first." Prey snapped, attention riveted on preserving his last veropede's life.

"I do not know when or if they will return. It is feasible they are returning with a larger attack force right now." Lemon warned.

"I don't know either, but there's nothing we can do about it. So we do what can be done first."

"Yes, Prey."

Someone had broken into Prey's sanctuary. Someone had openly declared themselves his bitter enemy with no chance of reconciliation. And the worst of it? Whomever they were, they were powerful, with enough magical might behind them to get away with it too.

The veropedes had destroyed the reaper king, but even they fell prey to magic.

Somewhere above the ceiling of dark stone, the moon was setting, but that didn't matter to Prey. He worked on.

Crimson would probably wonder where Prey was come morning. He should've left a note, but what could a note say? 'Gone to secret lair to fight intruders. Don't worry. Back soon'?

Prey knew he was breaking the probation rules placed on him by not having informed anyone about where he was, but he could only hope neither Gloom nor Crimson would report him. If they were worried about him, they just might. He hoped they were circumspect enough to trust him to get on with it, because he couldn't go anywhere right now.

If he left, then the veropede would die. It was already dying. Soon it would be dead, but Prey worked frantically on.

The morning sun above the rock seemed a million miles away from the atmosphere down here.

The cavern was cold and dark, despite the two still mostly

functioning crystal lanterns Lemon had recovered. They only served to add depth to the shadows. Prey burned through the jars and boxes of materials and plants Lemon Pink had been gathering to stock the lair with.

There wasn't much, just the beginnings of a properly stocked lair. Herbs, some poisons, some magically stable powdered compounds, like copper and nickel. He broke into the precious, tiny store of stolen electrite, but by itself the magical superconductor wouldn't do anything. Bundles of poison oak branches, grasses, and cloth. Things Snake had used in his foul concoctions. Needle and thread Prey had in abundance, for a lair always had need of those, but it wasn't enough to save the veropede.

Prey sent Lemon out into Canterlot to gather for him; "Get me two, no, three of the pigs. Alive."

Greater runes, that was what Prey needed to bind the veropede to life, but there were only so many greater runes Prey could make in time, and only so many times he could pay the required price. There were also only so many the veropede could carry and survive. But it was dying anyway, so he had nothing to lose by trying.

He ruthlessly pillaged from the slain veropede, its dead flesh and organs providing grisly fuel. It felt like salvaging shards of broken hopes and shattered plans.

And finally, when he was ready, Prey braced himself and bent his mind to drawing out the greater 'The'thos' rune on the dying insect's head.

The strength drained out of Prey like water poured onto dry earth, and sharp frost formed, misting the air. His teeth chattered and his vision swam. The bucket of blood from his dead veropede he'd hauled over curdled and bubbled, then all at once turned into a solid lump. Prey lost consciousness for a few seconds as the higher rune finished forming, but it did finish without failing.

He lay on the cold stone of the cavern floor and weakly panted for a few minutes, but finally some strength returned to his limbs. It was his internal strength that was slower in recovering. He felt cold and

empty, like a frayed bow string which might snap any moment under the strain. It was a sure sign of pushing himself too far.

Slowly, the frozen beads of sweat on his wool unfroze.

He'd overdone it, but he'd always been over-expending himself, because the only safe level of creation from the old runic alphabet was none at all. Shakily forcing himself to stand up, Prey got back to work.

Prey poured his anger, his fear, and his frustration into his work, and at the end he was left hollow. The runes hungrily took his emotions and kept grasping for more.

Prey worked through the buzz of mental exhaustion, fighting back the grey fog gathering in the corners of his vision. The acrid stench of veropede blood began to turn rotten. It stained his wool and hooves, and at one point a smear even got in his mouth and burned his tongue as he tried to spit it out.

'The mimics. Strange Happenstance. The Solar Guard. Luna. The real thief. The Sun Wolf.' In the back of Prey's head, the list kept repeating itself over and over. All his enemies, all people who just couldn't leave him in peace. He should've been more upset, but it all rang hollow. The emotions weren't where they should've been. He was empty.

'The mimics. Strange Happenstance. The Solar Guard. Luna. The real thief. The Sun Wolf.'

Who had done this? Who had invaded his lair? Who had stolen from him?

Lemon Pink returned with most of the materials he'd sent her out to get. Prey immediately had the veropede eat one of the three pigs she'd returned with, and got to work using the others she'd brought back in conjunction with his runes to patch up the veropede's dire injuries.

"Now go back. Go to my flat. Use illusion magic. Pretend to be me.

Reassure Gloom and Crimson I haven't run away." Prey ordered, throat raspy.

"Yes, Prey. What shall I tell them if they ask?"

"I don't care. Make something up."

"Yes, Prey." Lemon Pink agreed and hurried away.

Later, he sacrificed the remaining two pigs in a crude blood magic ritual.

There were no two ways about it. What Prey was doing down here was dark.

Dark magic. Black magic. Voodoo magic. Blood magic. Call it what you will. Bits and pieces all tied together. Things taken from the experience of Snake's memories. He should've been more worried about what he was doing. He wasn't.

Prey created a second greater rune, pushing through the resistance and forcing it into existence. Then a third, and finally, after a long teetering battle of back and forth, a fourth greater rune.

Through the gathering black fog, his list enemies kept going around in the back of his head, fading in and out. Except it had changed when he wasn't paying attention:

'The mimics. Strange Happenstance. The Solar Guard. Luna. The real thief. The Sun Wolf. Big Fields. Garrow. Hard Baked. Night Watcher. Valour. Snake, Razor,
Stinger,Torment,Ruin*FireStrikeYarn*... Prey.'

Prey woke up. He was on his belly on the stone floor. A quartz node was digging mercilessly into his ribs. His head felt woolly, both on the inside and out, and his legs felt as sturdy as a fresh grass frond.

He'd been aware of himself slipping into unconsciousness after creating the final greater rune, but he didn't remember if he'd succeeded in laying down first or if he'd just fallen.

His bruised ear where it was squashed under his sore jaw indicated it had been the latter.

Prey blinked. Where was his ribbon-? Ah yes, now he recalled. It was draped over one of the motionless veropede's broken mandibles.

But he'd done it. His weapon was stable. For now. There was still lots he would have to do, but for now he'd done all he could. He'd succeeded. The veropede was still his tool, but now just in a different way. A sword and a spear are both still weapons, but each is wielded differently.

With great effort, Prey stiffly rolled onto his side and off the jabbing quartz node, but that was as far as he got. He tried to get his legs under himself, but the attempt ended in abject failure and his jaw meeting the floor again.

Prey lay there, for the moment rendered helpless as he struggled to breathe. He couldn't get up. He was empty.

"Damn," Prey announced with startling clarity to the empty cavern, "I should have told Lemon to hurry back."

Prey woke on the ground to a raging headache, thirst, hunger, but

worst of all, cramp.

He'd known it was going to happen, taking a nap on the hard stone of the cold cavern floor, but he hadn't possessed the strength to move.

So Prey lost an uncertain number of minutes to writhing on the rock as the back cramp ran its course. Prey hated pain, it cut through the empty hollowness like a red hot knife. The whip scar cramp was every bit as terrible as it always was in Prey's memory. Worse. The same as always, really.

'I hate you Stinger, I hate you Stinger, I hate you Stinger!'

When the damaged muscles of his back had finally stopped quivering and Prey lay sweating and gasping in the blessed relief of the aftermath, he found the copper taste of blood in his mouth. He'd bitten his cheek.

Prey groaned and weakly levered his hooves under himself to stand up. He'd recovered enough strength for at least that. His ribbon was back in place behind his ear somehow. He didn't remember retrieving it. Prey turned his head and briefly scrubbed his face in the wool of his shoulder. 'I hate you Stinger.'

Prey knew he hated Stinger, but with the horrible pain gone, he was having trouble holding onto that hate. The empty apathy was already creeping back in. He felt almost physically brittle.

From the feel of it, Prey estimated he'd been asleep for a little over two hours. He still felt hollow and drained, but he was standing, so that was something.

Now to do something about his hunger and thirst. Prey looked around the cavern. There was dried food and water stored in here of course, but he hadn't had time to check if it'd been destroyed by the intruders or not yet. And he didn't want to drink from the sinkhole pool.

'Ah, good. Still here.' Prey shuffled weakly over to the crate, set against one of the largest crystal formations emerging from the

floor, and with what felt like great effort in his weakened state, pushed off the lid.

Prey pulled out some of the unappetising but filling oat cakes along with a water canteen, and sat himself down uncomfortably to sate his complaining stomach and parched throat. After checking for poison, of course. It didn't matter if this was his own lair, intruders had breached his defences looking to kill him. Prey was ruling nothing out.

The two recovered crystal lanterns were still the only sources of illumination in the cavern, Lemon's light globe spell having left long ago when she did. The walls were steeped in shadow. Prey blankly studied his lair again as he chewed. Lemon had not returned yet. If she'd been here earlier while he was unconscious, the runes would've still recorded her presence, plus, she would've left a message. She hadn't been attacked, had she?

He should be more concerned about that.

In the dimness at the edge of the circle of light the lanterns cast, the gory remains of Prey's first veropede lay utterly still. This was a recent battlefield Prey was sitting on. Desperate violence and death had happened here. His living weapon had been taken from him. Gone, dead, stolen away by intruders.

'No one steals from me.'

Prey had one veropede left to him, but it was only still alive because of his frantic salvaging and rune work. The intruders had been driven off, but Prey wasn't counting it as evenclose to a draw. This was a complete loss. He had only two veropedes, now one, while the invaders had who knew how many warriors left?

His weapon was dead. He had one left, but it had already been defeated once by powerful magic.

'My first veropede was scarred by lightning magic, but was ultimately slain by some kind of ridiculously powerful severing magic. The magical power output needed to cast a spell like that freeform over and over again would have to be...'

Prey estimated, and even though it felt like this was all happening to someone else, shuddered at the answer he came to:

'Assuming it was the same unicorn casting the spell each time, they must be tier eight. Maybe even nine. A magus, one who can fight and isn't just a scholar. A battle mage, a real one. That's, no, that can't be right.'

Prey frowned. Surely that couldn't be right. If there was a magus with that kind of power, why hadn't they been able to kill his second veropede in the same manner too?

'No, it couldn't have been the same attack spell getting cast over and over.' Prey realised. Prey wasn't a unicorn, but he still knew it took more mana to cast a spell multiple times than it took to just maintain the same spell, within certain bounds and exceptions. However if it wasn't a unicorn of that tier with magic reserves to match, then they wouldn't have had the power to sustain a magical edge strong enough to cut apart a veropede for long enough. While unicorns could pool their magic into a group spell, it wasn't the sort of thing they could've done in the midst of a battle, so that ruled a group casting out.

But if it hadn't been one ridiculously powerful unicorn, then it certainly couldn't have been a lesser one either. It hadn't taken only one or two blows to fell his first veropede, it had taken a multitude. Prey felt a sliver of pride before that too faded. The veropede's vitality had been beyond even other monsters.

So if it wasn't a battle mage or a group casting, then the next logical explanation wasn't just a spell, but a physical edge amplified with magic instead. Like an enchanted blade, or something like how the jade necklace had laced energy up and down Crimson's wingblades. Or, perhaps multiple mages armed with enchanced blades?

Prey also knew that one of the rules of magic is that it's easier to empower a physical object than it is for the magic to take the place of that object in the spell. As a prevalent and simplified example, it was easier for a unicorn to simply levitate a knife and fork than to use their magic itself to cut up their food.

Prey started to draw up a list in his head, 'So there was a powerful unicorn armed with either a magical blade, an artifact, or both. Plus whomever was casting the lightning, making it at least two unicorns.'

Add in whomever had been fighting and holding off the second veropede at the time made three, but probably more like five or six. There were of course those intruders who had been slain, but they were a non-factor to Prey now, being dead and all. It was the survivors Prey was worried about. They'd retreated back into the mountain, taking the with them remains of those who'd died to his runes, so he couldn't even get any information off the carbonised corpses. Proof that at least half of the attackers had gotten away, an utterly depressing relisation.

'So that tunnel leads to the outside.' Prey thought grimly, looking at one of the two pitch black tunnel mouths, the one where the scuffed tracks led in and out from.

The mountain's innards were a twisting maze down there, all darkness and pressing rock, but the intruders had managed to make it. They could do it again. They'd survived the first time, they'd learn, improve, and come back. Damn it, he had to abandon his lair, *right now*! But would his remaining veropede survive being moved so soon?

Prey's eyes flicked back to the source of his desperate labour these last dozen hours. The veropede's form was obscured under a tarpaulin and shadow, making a canvas hill of dips and contours. Every so often, the mass would twitch. His second monster was alive, for a given definition of alive.

Whereas the first veropede had faced lightning and severing magic, the second had faced a different set of spell casters entirely.

As Prey had frantically worked on the veropede, he'd felt the cracked and outright smashed carapace in places. Its mandibles and teeth had been broken, spent in trying to bite through something invulnerable.

'Invincibility, or a type of completely impervious shielding spell.' The kind of magic once again needed to pull off something of that power and magnitude...

'Zoma'Grika,' Prey realised numbly, cursing because he knew he normally would curse, but unable to feel the necessary emotion behind it at the moment, 'All of these ponies must've been armed with magical artifacts.'

And the jade necklace had been stolen from House Time following Vanish stealing it from Crimson. What were the chances this was all some big coincidence?

High, very high actually. Prey estimated it was about eighty percent actually. But he didn't believe it for a second.

Prey knew, just as he'd known that Garrow was really hiding in the lumber yard and that fire was the only way to survive the night in the ruins of Mayflower, that this was all connected.

'The invader's leaders all had artifacts. Not those who died to my traps or the veropedes, obviously, since if they'd had artifacts they wouldn't have died. They were just common soldiers armed with normal weapons.'

Prey had pulled a broken spear and some arrowheads out of the veropede's carapace. Just common iron or steel. Those soldiers hadn't stood a chance.

No. Once again, there was something not adding up there. Arrows meant bows, and bows meant people capable of drawing them. The broken shafts had come from normal arrows, not the much shorter and thicker bolts of crossbows. That ruled out Earth ponies, and a pegasus usually needed to be flying to be able to draw a normal bow. No, bows were best suited as a unicorn weapon, but if you were a unicorn then you already had magic, so why use a bow?

While it could've been pegasi, Prey didn't feel there was enough room to take off down that end of the cavern, and the invaders hadn't gotten in any father.

'So in that case it still means... what?'

Prey put down the nearly empty water canteen and stood up slowly, back muscles still painfully stiff. He walked a ring around the pool, towards the open tunnel mouth. He stopped and bent down by the first deeply scorched patch of stone. The thick soot was made from carbonised fur and flesh. Prey could still smell the cloying scent. He knew it well.

Someone had died here, never knowing what had killed them. That *he'd* killed them.

They had invaded his place of safety. This was the price for their aggression. But it was still his fault they were dead. Brushing back his ears so they didn't drag, Prey bent even further down, bringing his face right up close to the scorched remains.

'As I thought.' Prey thought, mouth set. Why use a bow if you were a unicorn? Because you weren't a unicorn. Or a pegasus, or an Earth pony. There were many other races out there, plenty of which could use a bow just fine and regularly did. Minotaurs, griffins, and...

'Diamond dogs.'

When you looked closely, the scorched outline around where a hoof had been placed wasn't a hoof but a paw. You could make out the pads where in that instant the flare had blasted up between the dogs toes. Prey had just been too busy to come over and look until now. Diamond dogs were people. Skin, fur, fat, muscle, blood. They burned just the same as ponies.

They may be a simpler and more tribal people, but all people have one thing in common. They scream.

Lemon Pink had coerced a splinter pack of diamond dogs to act as her guides across the Ridgeback mountain range. Later, she'd drugged and then sacrificed the diamond dogs to act as her veropede's awakening meal.

Prey had made his own sacrifice of the townspeople of Alfalfa Dale, which Hard Baked had captured. 'They were going to die anyway. If

I hadn't, Hard Baked would've merely sacrificed them himself.'

That did not make it any better.

And then, what were the chances, but Lemon Pink had reported finding fresh tracks where she'd left with her diamond dog guides. The rest of the original pack the diamond dogs had splintered from. Their family.

'So that's how they made it up here through the maze of Canterlot mountain.' Prey thought. He felt very tired and empty, and it wasn't just the headache and exhaustion from over reaching. He stiffly sat down on the hard stone, looking at the blackened scorch marks.

It was all like a template, or a story, one he could see now.

These diamond dogs had back tracked along Lemon Pink's original path. They'd followed the cold trail, how Prey didn't know, but they must've managed it, and found the remains of their brothers and sisters. They'd then somehow tracked Lemon Pink back here next, and come for revenge. Somehow they'd managed to either hire or convince some powerful unicorns equipped with magical artifacts to help.

Or maybe it was the ponies who'd done the convincing? They were the unknowns in this disaster after all. It didn't really matter though, the outcome had been the same.

An attack on his secret base, a trap, a fight, perhaps most of the dogs' deaths, and the unicorns had eventually retreated.

Prey sat in the half light, thinking of what had happened in the past and what might happen in the future.

The law of the harvest. 'You reap what you sow.'

Good for good. Evil for evil.

Lemon Pink finally returned, climbing back up the ladder from the breached overflow pipe. Mechanically, Prey filled her in on what he'd discovered, about the invaders and their origins tracing back to that pack of diamond dogs who'd been driven out from the lands near Ponyville by the Royal Guard. There was a dark joke in there somewhere. In the end, both the original pack and the splinter pack of dogs had run afoul of him and Lemon.

Prey didn't know how their story had begun, but through one method or the other, he'd been the cause of most of their ends.

Lemon slowly blinked her deep violet eyes, face empty as she received the news. She didn't feel anything. That was the way Prey had made her. When she was done thinking over the implications, she just asked, "What are your orders now, Prey?"

Prey got up, limbs stiff and cold. The headache was still there, still dully pressing away behind his eyes, but he'd recovered enough strength to begin creating some of the minor, lesser runes again.

Prey didn't answer her right away. Instead he asked after Gloom and Crimson first; "Was there a problem covering for me up above?"

"No, Prey."

"What did you tell them?"

"Disguised as you, that I was out in Lower Canterlot looking for a table to buy, and got distracted browsing book stores. Both seemed willing to accept that answer."

"Good."

Prey hadn't looked away from the deep dark of the tunnel once while speaking with Lemon. Now he jerked his head, and Lemon Pink stepped up alongside him. Her much larger profile cast a shadow over Prey.

Prey raised one gold ringed leg and pointed with finality at the tunnel mouth, "There. That is how they got in, and how they got out. And how they could yet return to attack again. If even one diamond dog survived, they should be able to guide the magic

artifact wielders back up here again. My lair is no longer safe. The runic defences aren't finished. If they were..."

If they were, they wouldn't be having this conversation. Not only would not even one of the raiders have survived, but even if they had, Prey had planned to have runic arrays to wipe this place from the memories of any who visited without being keyed into the lairs defences. But he hadn't finished, and now...

"It's biggest strength was secrecy, and now it's been compromised. We can't stay here." Prey finished. The headache beat away in his skull.

"Will they go to Celestia?" Lemon asked, lip twitching and curling for a moment.

"We'd already be dead if they had." Prey said flatly, "But they are criminals themselves, so they won't. However, they might just give an anonymous tip off to the Guard instead."

Lemon nodded, understanding. "We cannot stay here. Where shall we go, Prey?"

Prey did not want to abandon his lair. It was perfectly located, and he'd poured so much time and effort into the runes and defences. But the intruders knew of his base's location now, and they still had their memories. To stay here was to invite another attack. That was not the way Prey fought, it was not the way of the Resistance.

If a camp was compromised, you moved, you abandoned it, but you left behind a nasty surprise or two.

"First we trap the inside of the tunnel," Prey began, "Deeper in. They'll be expecting more flare traps, so it'll need to be something special. Then we fall back to the sewers. It's the only place the veropede will fit that's still hidden. I have a back up plan, although it isn't much. But beggars can't be choosers."

If Prey had time, he could build a runic trap array that would shred the invaders into itty-bitty pieces, no matter their shielding spells. But that would take at least thirty hours minimum, even if he was

in peak condition, which he wasn't, and then another fifty hours to finish the defences on top of that. That was five days. If the raiders were going to return, it would be far sooner than that. Twelve hours had already gone into saving his veropede, and he didn't have any more time to spare.

"Fetch the three bone rot mines I've made, the ones with the null magic runes on them. You'll have to carry them on your back. Then get me the lockbox with the kinder sapling."

You reap what you sow.

As a city filled with herbivores, the sewers of Canterlot did not reek. They certainly stank, but it was within tolerable levels. In the past, Prey had waded through the remains of a battlefield, crying, gagging, and struggling to breathe rotten air filled with death. In comparison with the swamps of the Deeper Green, the sewers might as well have been fresh hay.

Lemon was walking in front with the crystal lantern. Prey came behind, the solid lock box containing the wickerwatch sapling he'd created carried on his back. Their hooves clopped and echoed loudly up and down the passageway at every tired step.

It was better than what they'd been plodding through two tunnels back, where their hoof steps *hadn't* echoed. The fur of Prey's fetlocks were matted with unmentionable filth, but, again, Prey had waded up to his chin through worse in some of the mires in the Deeper Green.

Somehow though, the two golden tracer bands were still completely pristine. The grime just seemed to slip off like oil.

Clop-clop, Clop Clop, clop-clop

Their pace was slow, too slow for Prey's anxious tastes, but it was because of him they were having to set this pace. He just didn't have the strength to go any faster right now.

The lantern threw long shadows ahead of them down the circular tunnel. Just behind them however, was a wall of following blackness, plugging the tunnel. It was the veropede, squashed into the passageway, its many backwards facing spines squashed flat against its carapace by the walls and ceiling.

Prey turned to look back at it. The monster's head was less than a hoof's length from his tail, but the normal sight of its horrifying circular maw of teeth and mandibles did not greet him. Prey would have preferred seeing that. Instead, he just saw the hood of coarse sacking cloth he'd used to bind over the damage.

His weapon was alive and able to move, but it would never be the same again. Not least because of the runes he'd placed on it. If the veropede had been a person, the pain of carving those runes down into the beast's essence would've driven her insane.

Prey focused his attention forwards again, following Lemon Pink's black, yellow and silver tail, which was tied in a bun to avoid trailing in the sewage. He still had one of his weapons, that was as good as he was going to get. Life wasn't fair, so you had to take what the damned ponies left behind. The tightly shut lockbox was uncomfortable and heavy on his back. 'Shortly to be two weapons.'

"Take the fork on the left." Prey spoke thickly, throat dry from trying to only breathe through his mouth.

Just as he'd said, there was a fork in the tunnel coming up. They took it. The splashing sound of falling water came from somewhere ahead in the dark, winding, underground network. Everything down here was artificial, having been built at some point in Canterlot's past. Somewhere beneath them, below all the cement, tunnels, brick, and finally the massive city supports, there was nothing but empty sky and a mile long fall to the base of Canterlot Mountain.

All of what Prey was guiding them through had been built, and therefore mapped in the past. Maps of the sewer and waterworks he'd memorised, having taken them from the relevant, unsuspecting public maintenance departments.

It was horribly cliche, in keeping with all the trashy pony adventure novels where the villain had their secret lair hidden in the sewers. It was a stereotype which subconsciously just 'clicked' in a pony's head. It was right from their point of view that villains should lurk somewhere so disgusting, drawing a nice parallel between the villain's own evil scumminess. In all those inaccurate and unrealistic novels, the sewers also made for a good dramatic setting, with the hero having to brave the dark tunnels, and survive the jump scares on their path to inevitably defeating the villain inside their secret lair.

But it was for that very reason a pony would scoff at there really actually being a secret lair down in Canterlot's sewers. Because when it came down to it, who'd actually want to live in the sewers? What's more, who was going to double check?

In the stories, the hero got lost in a maze of pipes, but this was reality. And while on the ancient blueprints, Canterlot's underground sewer works might look like a giant spider web, in actuality, there were only a hoof full of tunnels large enough for someone to move in, and even fewer that could accommodate a veropede. But there were enough of them, and Prey had read and memorised the blueprints.

At points along their journey, the architecture of the pipes changed, new sections appearing in the lantern light and fading back into darkness as they passed. The changes ranged from the colour, size, and type of bricks, to the depth and thickness of the mortar. Sometimes it was the tunnel shape itself which changed, from square to round to oval, to even an upside down semi-circle at one point. Decades or possibly even centuries old water lines marked where the sewers had once flowed in the past, before an addition to the architecture over the thousand years of Canterlot's history had diverted it. Yet somehow, the stench had never faded.

Canterlot was old, and where you found a city which did not fall to plague, there you would also find sewers.

And in a thousand years, a lot can change, be added, and rebuilt. Or simply forgotten.

Prey guided them into the oldest part of the sewers, the tunnels which had first been created along when Canterlot, the New Unicornia, was built. And much like that old name, this part of the original sewer system had been forgotten. The bricks of the tunnel walls here were real stone, worn slippery and smooth in patterns, while the roof where the water had not ever reached was pitted and rough.

"This is it." Prey said, halting Lemon Pink. His words weren't really necessary. As Lemon levitated the lantern higher to better reveal the area, you would've had to have been deaf, dumb, and blind not to sense that this was their destination.

They had stepped down out of the long dried tunnel and into a circular sunken room, of sorts. It was not large, not by any definition of space above ground, but compared to the tunnels they'd been walking or wading through, the circular room was large, cold, dry, and empty. Above the circular basin of the sunken stone floor, shadowy pipe mouths fed into the room, leading off in every direction.

Now this really was a room worthy of all those badly written villain's lairs. It was chilly down here, very dark, and even more silent. The dark, empty tunnels leading off from this room were like the long shrivelled capillaries of a dead heart.

That was what Prey was going to call this area. The Sewer's Heart.

Prey took this chance to remove the heavy lock box from his back and set it down. It wasn't really heavy, it only contained one thing, but for a tired runt lamb, it was heavy.

'Come here. Come. Lay down.' Prey mentally commanded.

From out of the pipe they'd just exited, the veropede crawled. Most of its remaining legs still worked like normal. Some were missing entirely, and some others had been repaired by Prey. The veropede encircled the circumference of the room almost entirely, with only about a four hoof gap between its rear end and head, leaving Prey

and Lemon in a shrunken spiky circle in the room's center.

Prey was tired. He sat down on the flat stone, ignoring the filth on his legs. There'd be clean water for a wash soon enough. He tipped his head back, ears flopping, and squinted tiredly up.

The ceiling was solid, no convenient shaft and ladder leading straight down here from the city above, which was why Prey had selected this place. There was no easy way in, no direct, easy access invaders could exploit. To get in here, or out of here, you had to follow the twists and turns of the tunnels.

Still staring up at the ceiling, Prey stuck one grimy hoof out sideways to Lemon Pink. "Here's the map."

Without needing any prompting, Lemon brought her own filthy hoof over, but let Prey close the last inch and initiate the contact. Their mindscapes connected in the familiar vertigo-inducing rush of grey ash. Prey prepared a bundle of memories from the maps he'd read and pieces he'd put together, and pushed them across the connection to his servant.

Prey remembered the lessons of the past however, and remained completely focused and unwavering until he was absolutely certain Lemon Pink had the memory package, and then a bit longer just to be safe. It was hard. He couldn't seem to care about the outcome even if the transfer went wrong, but he knew intellectually that he did, because a mistake in the mind could be dire, even fatal.

'See here?' Prey instructed, bringing the correct sections of map memory to the forefront of his own mind, Lemon Pink quickly finding the matching sections in her own newly acquired memories, 'There are three paths to get down here to the Sewer's Heart.'

Prey's mind flashed through the three different routes, junctions, and side tunnels to take.

'Getting the veropede here through tunnels wide enough was the hard bit. Our own movements up and down should be comparatively faster. And harder to track back here.'

'Yes, Prey.'

'The veropede does not need so much food anymore. You will not need to bring pigs every three days. I've changed it. Perhaps it might even be best not to consider it a veropede anymore.'

The invaders had taken one weapon from him already, and almost taken the other. Nobody stole from him.

They might even yet find him here, since all his hard made runic defences were left behind in the crystal cave. His stomach twisted at the thought of what he'd been forced to abandon, but to stay still and in one place was to be trapped, no matter how good your defences were. And the point was, his defenses *weren't* finished.

That the invaders had been able to find his lair at all despite all the runes and preparations against magical tracking was because of how the diamond dogs had led them. Prey had seen the remains, or rather the remains of the remains, and knew not many of the diamond dogs could be left alive by now. Prey hoped their path through the sewers would counteract the last few surviving dogs' sense of smell.

They might be able to track him and Lemon *to* the sewers, but not *inside* the sewers. Prey's opponents would have to comb the tunnels one by one, either through magic or mundane means. Either way, it would still take them time. Days at the least, even if they were incautious and rushed in looking for revenge.

Would that be enough time? He'd have to make it enough.

'I don't know what's going to happen next,' Prey mentally confessed to Lemon, still connected across the link, 'But to be prepared, first we need water. Follow this route. There should be an old sluice gate according to the plans. If there isn't, come back. If there is, half open it. The water will flow down to here. But not too much, we don’t need anyone looking for a leak.'

'Yes, Prey.'

Lemon Pink removed the second unlit crystal lantern from her back

and coaxed it into life. Then, levitating the second lantern out ahead of her, she clambered up over the veropede's carapace using the unbroken spines as hoof holds. Then, regaining her balance, Lemon ducked down the tunnel Prey had pointed out. Her firefly of light was gone ten seconds later as she climbed upwards, only her hoofbeats echoing back. A minute later, those were gone too.

An old crank handle beneath Canterlot began to move, turned by a silvery aura. Gears which hadn't moved in over three centuries screamed in protest. A steel gate began to slowly rise into the ceiling. An inch later, rust hopelessly locked up the gears and jammed the mechanism, but it was enough.

Water began to gush from under the thin gap. It was the merest trickle compared to the quantity rushing past on the other side of the sluice gate, and the diverted amount would never be noticed, but an inch was still over ten gallons a second as it gushed down the old disused pipe.

A rim of dust was washed ahead of the spreading tide as it sloshed down the dark tunnels, following the path of least resistance until it emerged into lantern light and spilled into the basin of The Sewer's Heart.

The lamb inside of the sunken basin took a step back from the pipe mouth now flowing with water. It ran in rivulets over the veropede's carapace in gleaming contours, and some soaked into sack clothing, but it all ended up splashing down into the basin in the end.

The old basin began to fill up. The water was cold and not exactly clean, but was still far cleaner than the sewage Prey had waded through to get down here. The water soaked into his fur and gradually washed the disgusting remnants of his trip away. He waited. The veropede shifted, sending a cascade of water spilling in a new direction, but did not move to get out of the rising water level. A veropede could swim without issue. The water rose up Prey's ankles, then his legs, and before long the chill water was lapping at his belly. He shivered, but stayed put.

The water stopped rising there, not because it ceased to flow, but because the level had risen high enough to start flowing out down the multitude of other pipes branching off from the Sewer's Heart. Prey felt the plucking drag on his wool as the water flowed past, gurgling noisily off down the new pipes.

Prey listened to the gurgling, tested the water depth in the basin with his hoof and judged it to be enough.

Sloshing, Prey waded over to the middle of the basin. Obscured beneath the slightly murky surface, the heavy lockbox lay submerged.

'Up. Raise higher.' Prey commanded, sending a clear mental image for the veropede's instincts to follow.

In response, the veropede lifted the crystal lantern higher, spreading the light over the flowing water surface better. It wasn't an antenna that lifted the lantern anymore, all four of those had been severed by the attackers, but they'd been replaced by something leathery and black instead, covered in barbed metal hooks.

Without any effort, the veropede held the lantern there, positioned directly in the center of the ceiling. It was a magic glow crystal, not a flame. Even if it were to be dropped into the water, it wouldn't be a problem.

Prey felt about along the lock box's side under the chill water, locating the metal twist lock by the glint in the swinging lantern light. It was hard to turn it, but it did turn and Prey felt the vibration click of it unlocking.

The lid was dragged open and a big bubble of displaced air burst in front of Prey's face. He blinked the splash droplets from his eyes and looked in.

Inside the now open lock box, unclear under the water, something brown and wavy started to flow out of the box like river weed, but it didn't just follow the water flow if you looked closely enough. Those twitches didn't always align with the current.

Laboriously, Prey waded back, carefully grabbing hold of one of the lower, unbroken spines along the veropede's side, and used one of its legs as a step. He didn't currently have the strength to pull himself up, but he could still instruct/guide the veropede to raise its leg and give him a boost.

From there, he could clamber up and then over back into the tunnel. The lantern floated behind him on the hooked appendage, the lantern illuminating his path as he started wading back up the tunnel through about four inches of water.

Behind him, the veropede heaved its armoured bulk out of the basin and fed its length into the tunnel after Prey on rows of insectile legs. It filled the tunnel, blocking off the Sewer Heart.

Left behind in the dark, the wickerwatch sapling slowly spread out from the discarded lock box.

Prey blinked rapidly as he emerged from the sewers. He'd been working underground for an entire night and half a day. The sun had set and returned while he'd desperately been working down in the caves and tunnels.

It was only evening, but after the darkness of the underground, the evening sun was too bright for his damaged eyes. He felt like he was Gloom, always wincing and squinting in the sun, wishing for some shade. It was at times like these that the damage caused by the reaper king's poison became the clearest. Prey's regrown fur did a good job of covering up the scars under his eyes by now, but there was no helping the real damage.

'I hate you Hard Baked.'

And Prey hated that he himself had inflicted worse on others before. Well, he knew he hated it, but just not right now. He was too horribly hollow and distracted to summon up any feeling of proper hate.

Lemon Pink had her orders. She was to maintain a low profile and

remain on guard against *any* sign or whisper of a threat. Also in her possession were some of the more lethal plants they'd bought all the way back in the underground market, and she would be extracting and refining some of their poisons in addition to preparing some of her own runic defences. Her runic work speed was pitifully slow compared to Prey's, but Prey could not be everywhere and they needed every little advantage they could get.

Their enemies were powerful unicorns, with equally powerful magical artifacts at their disposal.

Prey was as tense as a bow string as he hobbled down the streets of Lower Canterlot, sticking close to the crowds, regardless of the headache the noisy din of their thoughts gave him. Prey was weak and drained, and he didn't think that even if he was being followed right now he would be able to tell, but if he was, then he was. There was nothing he could do about it.

Paranoia, fear, emptiness, weakness, and cold. None of it rests lightly on the shoulders.

That yellow pegasus who suddenly appeared over the buildings and looked like he was going to swoop down. That roast chestnut vendor who seemed to be looking in Prey's direction for too long. Those two unicorns walking down the pavement towards him whose horns were glowing with an unidentified spell to name a few.

Each one of those situations left Prey breathing hard with the blood pounding in his ears.

It was an unwelcome reminder and wake up call to his precarious position here on Luna's mercy. 'I hate alicorns. I hate this whole place.'

He hated how he couldn't properly even feel that hatred. He felt hollow, he wanted his hate back. Any feeling was better than the cold numbness from over draining himself. From experience Prey knew it would pass, he really did, but right now when he couldn't even feel-

A startlingly loud caw of raucous laughter from some unicorn teen and his friends made Prey flinch and stumble. The group of teenagers shoved and joked with each other, oblivious in their own bubble of existence that anything in Equestria could possibly be wrong. 'I hate Canterlot. I hate unicorns. I hate ponies.'

'I hate being afraid.'

Overdoing it earlier when creating those greater runes had consequences. Prey's energy drained out of him faster than expected, leaving him all in one rush almost before he could notice.

Suddenly he was leaning against a wooden fence, gasping for air as his legs shook. People kept passing by, unawares as Prey struggled to stay standing. Some excited dog ran up on the other side of the fence and began yapping aggressively at him, but he couldn't move. It was all he could do not to fall to the pavement as he lent there and gasped. It was scary how fast his strength had fled.

The stupid dog's barking attracted some attention, though.

"Filly, are you okay there? Have you lost your parents?"

There was a concerned older stallion leaning down, an utterly stupid hat atop his head.

Prey forced a smile, "I'm fine."

"Do you need help finding your parents? What're their names?"

Prey shakily reached up and managed to grasp at the end of his ribbon, "I'm fine. Please go away."

"Oh." The stallion blinked hazily a couple of times, then simply resumed trotting down the street.

Twice more Prey had to stop and rest, head swimming and legs as weak as water.

He took the apartment block's stairs slowly and one at a time, up to the second floor. He didn't know what he was going to say to Gloom or Crimson if they asked questions. Lemon Pink's performance as him had better have been good, or he might be in trouble.

"Prey, there you are." Came a surprised voice ahead of him.

Prey raised his head. Ahead of him at the top of the stairs, Gloom stood, his long black scarf looped loosely around his neck and over his chest scar. Gloom beat Prey to speaking first; "Where were you Prey?"

Prey sucked in his breath sharply. Gloom *had* noticed something. If he was here, that must mean he'd just been searching for Prey. Was it Gloom's special talent? And when had he noticed Prey was missing? What excuse should Prey use?

"I was-", Prey made himself stop and listen before he blurted out the first excuse that came to mind.

'-better late than never. Looks like we won't be late after all-'

Gloom's thoughts did not show any panic or suspicion. Prey breathed out and finished his sentence, "...Just out in Canterlot, obviously. I was going to go to see what this park is supposed to be like but stepped in dog crap which some selfish person-"

"-Pony."

"-Person didn't clean up. Had to wash it off in the fountain." Prey finished.

"Unlucky." Gloom said, taking a sniff and lightly wrinkling his nose, "Ugh."

"Quite," Prey said flatly, starting up the stairs again, "So excuse me, but I'm going for a proper shower. Whatever you were looking for me for will have to wait."

Gloom halted him with a wing in his path, but without actually trying to physically touch him. Prey raised a single questioning eyebrow up at Gloom, "What?"

'-I'm getting a feeling... what are you trying to tell me about this path, talent?-'

Gloom briefly chewed on his lip with a fang, "Has something gone wrong, Prey?"

"Yes. I've stepped in dung and I need a shower." Prey repeated.

"No, not that. Has something serious gone wrong?" Gloom pressed.

Prey's body language screamed tired annoyance, "Why all the sudden questions? Is there some reason I should be wary? Are the Solar Guard out to arrest all of us too or something?"

'-he's hiding something, I know Prey by now-', Gloom thought. "One question then; you're not trying to get some kind of revenge on Lord Vanish are you Prey?"

"No."

"Wait, it's not the Solar Guard either then is it?"

"*No*. And that was two questions." Prey saw the ugly pink scar tracks under Gloom's yellow eyes crinkle in concern.

"I'm just worried, Prey. Worried about you getting caught breaking the terms of your restrictions." Gloom clarified.

Prey silently regarded Gloom.

"Don't give me that look Prey," Gloom sighed, "You know I don't agree with those parole restrictions. I already promised I'd stand by you and Crimson, not the rules, remember?"

Prey *had* been going to subtly remind the thestral of his promise, but it obviously wasn't needed. Prey was tired and drained, but he still had enough focus for his mind to raise a red warning flag. *Why* had Gloom felt there was a legitimate reason to worry he might've broken his parole restrictions?

Prey purposefully paused before answering, dragging out Gloom's full concerns.

'-Crimson said you weren't answering your door this morning so he went in. You weren't there, so where were you really Prey?-'

'Zoma'Grika.' Prey cursed himself for being sloppy. He was just making one stupid mistake after another. Apparently Crimson had been worried when he didn't answer the door. A sensible worry, what with all that'd happened and Prey's own dire warnings, so Crimson had used his set of keys to unlock Prey's flat and check.

It was a very good thing the runic defences on the flat were currently unfinished, so were set not to trigger when anyone came in through the doorway by the normal methods. Meaning, with a key.

'Quick! Make something up, Gloom's still waiting for an answer.'

Despite his budding internal panic, Prey didn't let his mask slip, "Those restrictions are arbitrary, stringent, and just plain insulting. If I have something I need to do and it hurts nobody, why shouldn't I just go do it?"

'-it was just a simple act of rebellion? Well, okay, he *is* still young-', Gloom wondered in surprise. But it was also reassuring since that was all it was. "I'll say it again, I just don't want you to get in trouble. Nighthawk's hooves are tied in this if you get caught, Prey."

"*If*. All I'm hearing is, 'don't get caught'." Prey grumbled.

Gloom winced, "I, sort of? No, I mean, don't break the restrictions, but even more so don't get caught. Actually, what's there even to do past your curfew out there? I thought you didn't even like Canterlot."

"That's not right. I don't *dislike* Canterlot." Prey corrected.

'I actually *hate* Canterlot.'

"But no, it's not the place. It's mainly the people I can't stand."

"Ponies." Gloom absentmindedly corrected, thinking:

'-so the glass is half full at least. Can't say I think any differently

either, at least for some of the ponies here. How Her Majesty stands it I don't know-'

Ehem, Prey pointedly cleared his throat, nodding at the leathery bat wing still blocking his path, "If you wouldn't mind. I have an appointment with my nice hot shower, with heated running water."

"Oh." Gloom quickly refolded his wing, withdrawing the taut sheet of membrane from Prey's path.

And that should've been an excellent place to leave it. Gloom was placated, Prey needed to get back inside to the safety of his flat to rest, and also continue trying to work on the runic defences he so desperately needed.

It *shouldn't* have been any more difficult than that, just finish walking up the last of the concrete stairs. But of course it was.

A wave of weakness made Prey's vision go blurry and he missed the next stair, and Snake's remnant just had to step in sideways to fill the lapse in that moment.

The cold sibilant words were echoes of ones Snake had once spoken in life; 'All enemies are to be killed. Nature is never weak. A predator does not hesitate. If you are weak, I will dispose of you and fulfil the cycle of nature.'

"Woah, what's the matter." Gloom reached out as Prey nearly fell, then quickly snapped his hoof back when Prey flinched away.

"Nothing," Prey said, "Just tired."

'-then why've you gone so white I can't even see those scars anymore against your face?-', Gloom thought, not believing Prey.

"I don't think you should go back to your flat alone. Come along with me Prey." Gloom said.

"No." Prey immediately refused.

"*Yes*," Gloom pressed, "Come with me."

"*No,* I'm going for a shower and to eat some dinner."

"Forget the shower, it's not that bad. Really, you can hardly smell anything and they won't notice. Come on, you don't look well, and there'll be food, Mr. I-endlessly-Hunger." Gloom tried to joke.

"Who's 'they'?"

"Well, since I found you, we're going to Scenic marefriend's house for dinner. She formally invited us. They want to hold a chess night again." Gloom answered.

"No. I don't want to go, I don't know her house, I don't like chess, and I don't want her food."

"This is the first time I have been invited over by anypony in Canterlot. And she invited all of us as guests." Gloom repeated, stressing the term 'guests'. It was bigger than Gloom was saying.

Despite all hopes and efforts to the contrary, thestral acceptance back in pony society was in a spiral of decline. The Princess's intent had been for their integration to happen through familiarity and patience, and mainly by just being present. During the first month, it had been working, but only in official events and meetings. None of the general populace outside of the Guard and government wanted anything to do with the night ponies.

And after the Gala, Wheat Plow, the lumber yard, the royal inspectors, the dragon, and everything else, even that process of osmosis wasn't working anymore. Hostility towards thestrals and by extension, the Night Guard, was only increasing.

Thus, Carton Juice's invitation to them was one that Gloom, as a conscientious member of Clan Chilldara, couldn't let pass.

But again, it was more than Gloom merely taking an opportunity, this was personal. Carton was Scenic's marefriend, and she was trying to extend a friendly hoof to them. It was an invitation of trust into a private bit of their lives.

"Then you can go. I don't want to." Prey repeated.

But Gloom insisted, "We've all been invited as guests. Me, you, Crimson, and Carton Juice even took an invite to Lilly despite her still being in hospital. Come on Prey. It'll do you good."

"So what?" Prey wasn't persuaded. He didn't care if it would do him good. He needed to get to the flat.

"So come on," Gloom sighed, "This is more than just getting some free dinner. Scenic is a member of our squad deserving of our respect, and, there's also something we need to discuss."

'I don't have the time or energy to be wasting on this.' Prey thought. Interacting with people was the last thing he should be doing right now. He was still far too drained of emotion and energy, he was struggling to even hold this abrasive conversation with Gloom.

"Can't you just leave me and go by yourself?"

"Oh come *on* Prey. Seriously, think about somepony else for a change. Just come to the dinner. It's less than ten minutes away."

That was not a good enough reason for Prey, but he was just too tired. He was just so empty from all the energy he'd poured into the runes that he just didn't have it in him to argue the point. Prey sagged.

Gloom was mistaken. It might've been less than ten minutes as the crow flies, but Prey didn't have wings like Gloom did. He had to walk. It did *not* engender any more good feelings from Prey about this trip in any way.

He had far larger concerns he could be attending to rather than this dinner, so what was he even doing? But he was so empty of energy, now that he'd given in, it was a struggle to care anymore about the very real level of danger he intellectually knew he was in, and the time he was wasting.

Carton Juice's house wasn't as big as Prey would've expected for someone of her size, what with her being the largest living Earth pony Prey had ever seen. Her home was just normal sized, so it

must've been quite snug to her.

Out back in her small garden, but still bursting with a multitude of flowers, Prey could hear the near insentient dull buzz of Carton's personal bee hives. She'd told them there were a lot more hives she also tended to, but those were with a dozen other beekeepers also, the business providing for nearly half of Canterlot's everyday market. Richer, snobbier ponies still went upscale for the special blends of honey which graced their breakfast tables, but whatever.

None of that Prey needed to know. None of that Prey cared about. Carton Juice told him anyway, jabbering away cheerfully as she welcomed him and Gloom inside, seeming to think that he, as a child, simply must be interested in bees and her special talent.

'-all foals are interested in getting their cutie mark at that age-'

Carton completely missed the obvious point that Prey wasn't a pony. It was a bit strange that someone so big would have a special talent working with animals so small. But, that was ponies for you. If it was too stupid to be believed, nine times out of ten they would do it.

Scenic was already seated in Carton's living room on a floor cushion, supposed to be resting his still healing legs, but he still rose as they came in; "Good evening sir-I mean, Gloom. Thank you for coming."

"Thank you for inviting us." Gloom responded, looking around the brightly decorated living room with some interest. There were bee and honey themes everywhere. Wax candles, little painted bees, yellow hexagon patterned curtains. Gloom was sensing a theme. Carton Juice was definitely a mare who lived by her cutie mark.

"Where's Crimson?" Prey asked sourly, not seeing the red pegasus in here.

Even the thought of venturing into an unknown, unsecured, and undefended building was enough to get Prey's skin crawling, and here he was actually standing in one. Again. When there was the very real danger of someone hunting Prey right now. Again. But

here he was, being forced into it. *Again*.

"Oh, Crimson just went to the toilet I think." Scenic said, sinking back onto his belly atop the floor cushion.

"He arrived before you two, he even offered to help me in the kitchen if I needed any assistance. A real gentlecolt. It really is too bad we couldn't get Saffron here too, but she said her agent had booked her in for a show she couldn't avoid." Carton said as she bustled around, plumping up additional floor cushions for the rest of them.

Prey immediately dragged his cushion off to the side of the room and out of the line of sight from the window. Manners be damned, he wasn't going to get shot at through a window.

"Thank you for inviting us into your house." Gloom repeated again, very aware of formalities.

'-we've been invited into her home in goodwill. Don't mess it up-'

"Oh it's nothing. Oh, please take any seat you want." Carton replied smiling, but her eyes skittered around rather than looking Gloom in the face as she spoke.

"Thank you. We'll just-"

Crimson came back into the room, interrupting; "Gloom, Prey. Hello."

Prey's automatic health check of Crimson showed his wings were in pristine condition, and he'd even bundled up and braided his mane into a thick knot in an effort to appear more presentable. The braid looked mightily weird to Prey as a non-thestral, and Scenic and Carton couldn't help but think so too, but were much too polite and unsure to even hint at how out of place it looked on a stallion.

Carton Juice was determined to be a good hostess. '-c'mon Carton, step up. You invited them here to make better bonds of friendship, so step up girl. They've done so much for Scenic and all been through so much too-'

She still couldn't help but gulp though; '-but Celestia I just hope I don't put my hoof in my mouth and do something offensive to their culture-'

"Would anypony like some mango as an appetiser? I heard it's supposed to be a favourite for, erm, thestrals?" Carton Juice offered a bit hesitantly.

Crimson blinked slowly, "Ah. I believe that is a stereotype."

Carton flinched, "I-"

"You are most kind. Yes please."

Rather than eat around Carton's table, instead the meal was served and eaten off trays as they sat on the floor cushions. It was a bit of an unexpected arrangement, but it wasn't bad. Gloom definitely thought it a novel way to eat, to dine and talk informally while still in a formal setting.

'-wouldn't mind doing it again actually-'

Honey roasted carrots, parsnips, and sweet potatoes. A hearty, filling meal, to be expected of an Earth pony host, especially one of Carton's enormous stature. Prey checked it for poison just the same as with everything else. When Crimson noticed, he sent Prey a look, but didn't try and get him to stop.

Carton was making a very obvious effort to try and keep a lively conversation going, chatting, laughing, and forcing herself to think up lots of questions to ask throughout the meal.

"The weather's been lovely hasn't it?", "That's a lovely scarf Gloom.", "Have you heard of the new magic show on Manestreet?"

She was a pony. In her mind, if no one was talking, it was because they weren't comfortable.

It was the exact opposite of the thestral viewpoint, to whom silence was perfectly fine. Prey, despite not having the excuse of coming

from the clans, was emulating Gloom and Crimson. He had zero interest in making small talk, no matter how many times Carton Juice tried to engage him in conversation. Scenic tried to do his part too, but he was mainly trying with the other two, guiltily avoiding Prey's eyes.

That was the dinner. Informality of formality to two of the company, and overly formal informality to the other pair. And Prey on the sidelines, who just didn't care either way.

But apparently being polite enough to sit through dinner wasn't enough to satisfy Carton and Scenic. Oh no, they wanted their guests to get involved after the meal too. How? By playing chess.

'Stupid ponies.'

Carton Juice had scarcely taken their empty plates away before Scenic was breaking out the chess boards to set up over on the table. He tried to smile and not sweat as they looked askance at his over keenness, "So who wants to be white?"

Carton Juice mentally sighed in relief despite the breach of social etiquette, '-sweet Celestia thank you Paint Spot. I don't know how much longer I could've kept that up-'

Chess was a game where it was acceptable to be silent as you played, supposedly so you could think deeply about your strategy.

'What strategy? It's just a stupid boardgame.' Prey thought. He had a growing headache now to go along with everything else.

"Sure. I don't mind starting white." Gloom said, shrugging and getting up to move to the table, but not before exchanging a glance with Crimson.

'-if this is what you're supposed to do when invited to dinner, then sure. Seems a little weird though, but I guess Scenic and Carton just really like chess-'

Scenic, Carton, Gloom, and Crimson played a few rounds of chess

like this, rotating through opponents to try and keep things interesting between themselves, Scenic winning all three of his games. Prey refused once again to play, just laying dispondantly on one of the floor cushions, worrying and trying not to fall unconscious.

'How much do the invaders know? What if they track me down? Will my runes be enough? How can they be, when I never get to finish them?' He was worrying over the same things, and still not having any of the answers.

"Go on, do it. Be nice." Carton whispered gently to Scenic, probably not realising the others had excellent hearing.

"Okay okay, but he won't want to." Scenic whispered back. He cleared his throat loudly, "Prey, uh, how about playing a game? It'll be fun."

"No. Thank you."

"You haven't played even once. Why not give it a go?" Scenic tried.

"I have no interest in playing." Prey told him, and then, because Gloom was giving him a look, added; "But thank you for asking."

"It's fun," Carton tried joining in, "Don't worry if you lose, it's just a game. We don't take it seriously, I promise."

As if Prey cared about losing a boardgame. "I'm fine."

"Try it just once at least Prey, please." Scenic tried.

"We're just trying to keep everypony included." Carton added.

"One game. You know you want to~"

"C'mon Prey. I'll let you be white."

Prey usually wouldn't have given in to such pathetic peer pressure, but he was tired and empty, with a headache to top it all off. He had far more serious concerns but here he was, being forced to waste time on this dinner invite because Gloom had made him

come.

"Fine. *Fine*. One game, but that's it. And we play down here."

"Yay." Carton gave a little cheer and beamed at Prey, "I'm happy you're getting involved."

Prey ignored her and sat up on his floor cushion as Scenic brought the chess board from the table and set it between them, pushing it closer so Prey could reach with his shorter legs. Gloom and Crimson, who were playing their own chess game with a rather listless back and forth, looked up.

The board was already set up. "You can go first." Scenic said, smiling.

Caught up in the enjoyment of his board favourite game, Scenic Paint's wariness and uncertainty was gone. He wasn't the self conscious, slowly healing stallion who was scared of the scars under his own eyes. He was more confident, more outgoing, and happier. The only time Prey remembered seeing the Earth pony like this before was when he was talking about his passion for art.

"Just one game, right?" Prey repeated.

"Sure, if you don't like it then that's totally okay-"

Prey reached out and flicked over his white king, "I surrender. You win."

"Oh come *on*."

"You said one game."

"That's not what I meant and you know it. I meant a *proper* game."

"Why? You're now four for four. The reigning champion. Congratulations."

"Hey, no. Play a real game Prey. That's not a victory if I didn't do anything."

"It's the best kind. That was one game-"

"That doesn't count and you know it," Scenic interrupted, "If you want to lose just to get your one game over with, then fine. But we're at least going to play it properly."

Scenic really was like a different person, or pony. In a moment of annoyance, he'd quite overlooked his normal cautious view of Prey. Prey looked at him emptily.

"Fine." Without another word, Prey nudged a white pawn forwards, not caring which one he'd picked.

"Ah. King's opening, tried and true." Scenic said, leaning over his own side of the board, eager now that a proper game had begun. He moved one of his own pieces, and without bothering to think, Prey pushed another pawn forwards to block it head on.

The game progressed like that, Scenic naming moves and commenting on pieces, while Prey ignored the game almost entirely, only pretending to think about his moves before he made them.

Prey didn't care. It was just a boardgame. Soon he was down ten pieces to Scenic's three, and a while later, Prey was down to two pawns, one bishop and his king.

"Check." Scenic said with a frown, sliding his rook up the board.

Prey nudged his king to the right.

"That's also check."

Prey nudged it to the left instead.

Scenic narrowed his eyes, and moved his queen all the way up from the back of the board, "That's checkmate."

'Finally. That took way too long.' Prey thought, taking the opportunity to knock his white king over for the second time.

"You weren't even trying." Scenic accused, angry.

"You got your win. Take it or leave it." Prey said. He'd have enough of this. It wasn't his problem Scenic had let himself get carried away and actually gotten upset over the results of a game.

"You could be good at chess if you just *tried* Prey, you're just the sort to thrive on strategy games. Chess is a good game, why won't you even try?" Scenic snapped.

"Paint Spot..." Carton said uncertainly, putting one huge hoof on Scenic's withers.

"What strategy? It's just a game. It doesn't mean anything." Prey said.

"No it's not. It makes you consider and plan, it improves your forward thinking. All the greatest chess masters in the past were geniuses. My grandpa was the smartest pony I know and he was the best chess player in my family." Scenic argued back.

'-and if we were better at strategy, Lilly wouldn't be crippled and all those ponies wouldn't have died-'

'Ponies?' Prey thought, a flash of anger sparking in the empty apathy caused by the rune overuse, 'What about all the other villagers? The goats, cows, donkeys, and sheep?'

Scenic hadn't meant it like that, Prey knew, but the unintended cheapening of those deaths and thinking that maybe if they'd been better at chess it would've somehow helped... That grated on Prey.

"You think that chess is oh so wonderful? That it can teach you anything about real life? It's just a worthless game. What good would chess have done against the kindersnatches, hmm? It's a *board* game, with little wooden pieces. In real life, there are no turns or balanced playing fields, you don't know your opponent, and you don't have all the time you need to think. When the stakes are live or die, what use is chess?" Prey waved his hoof in disgust at the checkered board.

By that point in his impatient rant Carton had already withdrawn, rubbing her huge hooves together, eyes big and worried. Crimson

and Gloom had also stopped their own unenthusiastic chess game. They were holding their peace because it was Prey and Scenic's business, but they were definitely agreeing in the silent thestral way:

'-it is not even a form of training. This can only be counted as a form of relaxation-'

"Fine. Set up the board again," Prey snorted, "Apparently it didn't get through to you the first time, but this is just a game. A pastime. A hobby."

"Fine. As you wish." Scenic returned. His happy glow from playing had rapidly faded. Scenic subconsciously realised he'd made a big deal out of the game to someone who obviously thought it was meritless, but despite that, Scenic's competitiveness for his favourite game wouldn't let him just give up. So what if Prey had a point? Scenic also had a point. They both did.

'-I'm in the right just as much as him. I'm not going to go easy on Prey just because of that-'

"Umm..." Carton Juice went completely ignored as Scenic swiftly reset the board.

"You're white. Your move." Scenic said, a challenge in his tone.

Prey moved forwards the exact same pawn he had last time.

Scenic's brows snapped together, '-if he's just going to replay last game after all that fuss...-'

Scenic decided he wasn't going to take that. He instead went for a bolder start, skipping his pawns entirely and moving out his knight. '-there. Now's he's got to actually think-'

Prey just moved another pawn. Scenic matched it, opening up the way for his bishop. Prey barely glanced at the board as he moved a third pawn.

'-is he even trying?-', Scenic thought, moving out the bishop he'd cleared the way for the turn before and taking Prey's pawn.

'-there, and that'll also open the way for either threatening his queen or taking first his pawn, then his knight when I move my own knight forwards again next turn-'

Prey moved his first pawn forwards one space. Now, it was blocking the bishop's path of attack. Scenic could take it, but if he did, Prey's white queen could take it in return.

'-never mind then. I'll just wait and move my own pawn out of the way-', Scenic thought, already planning on how to bring his rook into the game in two turns' time.

Too bad Prey immediately jumped his knight out to put in position to take Scenic's rook if he did.

Scenic paused, '-was that luck or did he actually know?-'

"It's your move." Prey reminded him flatly.

Scenic decided to leave the rook plan for now, and instead go with setting a trap with a pawn and his second bishop. Prey completely ignored the bait and instead moved his knight up again, threatening the first bishop. Scenic quickly retreated, but Prey took the pawn it'd been beside anyway as a consolation prize.

Again, Scenic paused, and looked more closely at the board.

'-okay, what should I do now? Trade my knight for a rook maybe? Yes, then I can use my queen to take over afterwards-', Scenic offered the trade. Prey ignored it and instead made space for his rook to take Scenic's queen if he did decide to bring it out.

For the third time, Scenic paused. '-...now what do I do?-'

The game went on from there. It was not a clean game by any means. It was a mess, Prey's approach changing every time Scenic changed his strategy to match. Pieces fell from both sides, but it was clear right from the get go that each trade favoured Prey.

Two black pawns lost for one white.

A pawn and a bishop for one knight.

A white rook for the black queen.

At the end of it, Scenic's king was backed into the corner of the board, his few remaining pieces also locked down into helplessness. Scenic stared down at the board in dismay. He'd been utterly picked apart. It'd been a losing game right from the get go and Scenic knew it.

Roughly, and without any flourish or finesse, Prey slapped down his queen onto the last square, "Checkmate."

Prey was not any sort of chessmaster. How could he be, when he'd barely played? It wasn't any kind of genius strategic planning coming to the forefront either. Chess wasn't some higher indicator of a master or a prodigy. It was just a game.
Prey wasn't any of those things, but he was a mind leech and he knew how to cheat.

"How'd you do that?" Scenic demanded.

Prey ignored the question, asking his own instead; "Now you've had your one game, what does it prove? I won, does that somehow make me better than you? Does being able to play a game make me not a runt? Am I suddenly a master general? Can I change the past? Will it undo the events of Mayflower? Does it help me in *any* way whatsoever?"

Prey reached over and slapped over his white king, "No. Because it's just a game."

Scenic seemed to have gotten the message. He wouldn't look up, and his shoulders were hunched. Instead, he played with a board with the edge of his hoof. Reality had reasserted itself, and Scenic had remembered his position within it.

'-just like mom and dad were always shouting. Were they right about me?-'

Carton Juice didn't quite understand what was going on, but she didn't like it, however she also wasn't brave enough to intervene despite this being her own home and her being the biggest person

in the room.

"I think he gets your point, Prey." Gloom blandly observed, still reclining on his honeycomb patterned floor cushion. He and Crimson had completely abandoned their own game to watch Prey's. Crimson just shrugged his wings in agreement, as if to say; 'That's right. It was just a game'.

The silence dragged out.

'Zoma'Grika, I'm so done with this.' Prey thought.

He stood up, only swaying for a moment as his drained body protested, "I'm going back to the flat. I don't feel well."

"Unwell? Should I come with you?" Crimson immediately asked.

"Only if you want to. But if you don't, please stay. I'll be fine."

Crimson considered, "If you're sure you'll be okay, then I'll stay." He decided.

"Prey." Gloom tried not to hiss. '-he can't just walk out. That's rude to our host-'

"No no, that's okay. If you're feeling sick, you should be lying down. You didn't have to come if you were feeling sick Prey." Carton quickly waved down Gloom's concerns, her protective mare instincts pushing aside her previous timidness.

"If you need to go Prey, that's fine I promise, so don't worry about it. But you really should go with him too, Crimson. A foal shouldn't be out this late by themselves, and what if he needs you to carry him?" Carton Juice fretted to Crimson.

Crimson blinked slowly at her, "Carry Prey? If I'm carrying Prey something has truly gone wrong. Like an invading flight of wyverns."

Crimson had touched Prey twice in all the time they'd worked together. Once to prevent him from falling to his death in the lumber yard, and once to carry him from out of the abandoned

Mayflower, unconscious and injured. Thinking back, even though it'd been to save his life, and even though it'd only been Crimson, a shudder of revulsion still went up Prey's spine.

"But what if Prey needs-"

"Carton dear, it'll be fine. Prey can look after himself. Trust me." Scenic spoke up to calm his marefriend, still looking fixedly down at the chess board.

Prey hastily summoned up a smile to show Carton before anyone else could think to delay him further; "Thank you for having me around for dinner. Have a good night." And then he was trotting for the front door.

Prey wasn't prepared to wait around while Scenic and Carton sorted out their sensibilities or worried about being good pony hosts. He didn't care and wasn't willing to try either. He just wanted to make it back to the flat and collapse into bed. And that meant sneaking back through Canterlot, while avoiding any notice in case he was being followed. A heavy groan slipped out from Prey without him even meaning to.

There was just so much hanging over his head like an axe.

Prey heard Carton Juice and Gloom coming along to see him off as he reached the door. He reached up and pulled down on the handle, ignoring the jangle of wooden beads from the homemade dream catcher as he swung the door open.

Out on the porch, Prey found the crystal street lamps were just beginning to light up as the sun dipped below the orange tinted rooftops. Carton Juice had a seashell wind chime outside her door, and it clinked faintly as a breeze stirred it.

Prey cautiously looked both ways up and down the street, then up at the roofs and deepening sky. There was a white mare in a raincoat coming this way down the street, and a father and his colt just crossing the road further up, but Prey saw no one who was obviously watching this house-

Prey's eyes snapped back to the coated mare as she stopped in front of the low front gate. There was the tip of a horn poking up from beneath the hood. Prey took a step back, reaching up for his ribbon. The unicorn's head was lowered and hidden. There was movement, they were reaching for something under the rain coat. Prey's heart leapt into his throat.

The mare pulled out a slip of paper, dropped it into her hoof, and checked it. Then she looked up. Thick bunches of golden ringlets were packed under her rain hood as she checked the house's address.

Prey recognised her. It was Saffron Swirl, the magicless unicorn. And she recognised Prey in return.

"Oh." She exclaimed in surprise, rose pink eyes going wide.

"Who is-? Saffron you came!?" Carton Juice exclaimed, coming up from behind Prey in the doorway. Behind her, Gloom peered past Carton's muscled bulk, looking out.

"Oh Carton Juice, wonderful. I'm so glad I found the right house." Saffron said, a relieved smile softening her heart shaped face.

"Come in, come in. But I thought you said you had a show to attend?" Carton asked happily, trotting out and waving at Saffron to open the gate.

"Thank you. I managed to get out early after the show, dodging the reporters." Saffron said, but her eyes had gone back in interest to Prey.

Gloom noticed her beauty. He wasn't blind, '-Scenic said she was a Canterlot model of some kind. I can easily see that-'

Saffron was being ushered in by Carton, the much larger Earth pony dwarfing the other mare despite the slender model being taller than an average unicorn. Her head kept turning to follow Prey though as she was led up the short path.

Her thoughts were also filled with surprise, '-wait, so the sheep Lilly and Scenic were talking about is the same foal I met all along?-'

Carton was meaning to usher Saffron inside like a good host, but Saffron halted as they were passing Prey.

Saffron leaned down and smiled at Prey, "Hello there Prey. I don't know if you remember me, but we met before up in the Royal Palace."

Gloom's ears went straight up in surprise, but aside from leaning in closer to listen, he didn't interrupt.

"I remember, yes. You were sitting on the stone bench." Prey said woodenly, 'Sitting and trying to decide on how best to commit suicide. And somehow instead of encouraging you, I dissuaded you. Damn my luck.'

Saffron Swirl's smile grew, and her pink eyes glimmered, "I was sincerely hoping I would get to meet you again Prey, to say thank you. What you said that day deeply touched my heart."

"It did?" Prey blinked. What was she talking about?

Gloom's eyebrows had also shot up to match his ears, '-wait, Prey said something *nice* to somepony? How did *that* happen?-'

"Yes it did," Saffron assured him, "I really needed somepony to talk to, and you came along right then and touched my heart. If I hadn't talked to somepony just then, I'd, I'd have... Oh that's not important now. What is important is that you helped me."

Prey was bewildered. He hadn't helped at all. In fact, he distinctly recalled doing the opposite, getting Saffron to mentally torment herself by digging at her insecurities.

"You're... welcome." Prey said suspiciously. Saffron Swirl's thoughts were showing she was being completely sincere too, which made it all the more confusing. This was all just making his headache worse.

Saffron beamed at him as beside her, Carton Juice 'd'awwed'. She sniffed delicately, and the corners of her eyes were swimming, "Thank you for what you said. You were wonderful."

"Don't touch me." Prey darted away from her hoof as she reached out to try and pick him up in a hug.

'-aaaaand there's the Prey I know-', Gloom thought to himself in dry amusement.

Saffron looked surprised, but then she was back to smiling angelically, the smile which had no doubt captured the hearts of many an audience, but it was a real smile, brimming with positive emotion. "Aww, that's okay. I'm just glad I could meet you again to say thank you. Are your parents here at Carton Juice's?" She asked, looking to the open door.

Carton's ears fell, and Gloom swiftly stepped in, "No, that's, ah, no, Prey's mother is not here in Canterlot at the moment."

"Oh, you must be Dusky Gloom. I apologise if I have you at a disadvantage, but Scenic Paint and Lilly Blossom have told me lots about you." Saffron curtsied prettily, despite her only wearing a raincoat and not a dress, "You must work with Prey's father in the Night Guard then. Thank you for the job you do defending everypony."

Gloom stalled, confused about how she'd come to that conclusion, "Uh, no. That is to say-"

Gloom shot a furtive glance to Prey, and winced, "Not... as such. Listen, perhaps you should come inside. Ah, it's Carton Juice's house, I shouldn't be speaking for her, but-"

"No no, that's fine. Please, do come in Saffron." Carton agreed, chuckling nervously.

'-oh gosh this is awful, Paint Spot told me about how Prey's dad tragically died earlier this year-'

"Please, after you Saffron. No no, really. I insist."

"Ah? Were you just leaving Mr. Gloom-?"

"Me? Ah, no, just Prey. He's not feeling well."

"Should somepony not accompany-?"

Gloom's eyes kept darting to Prey as Carton shuffled Saffron inside, "Don't worry about it." He said.

Prey's empty headache was pressing behind his eyes, and every time someone opened their mouths they made it worse

'That's it. I've had enough of this. I'm done.' Prey thought. Without a backwards glance or parting comment, he stomped off.

He completely ignored everything behind him; Saffron's innocent questions, Gloom's awkward answers, the annoying wind chimes clinking, he ignored all of it. He was just so *done* with today.

It was empty in Prey's mindscape that night. Up above, in his outer mindscape, Snake whispered unintelligible words over and over, the last remnants of a dead zebra not even knowing he was only a memory.

Down in the depths of his inner mindscape, the ocean was grey and cold, but above all, empty. Prey hung there, a ball of nothing in a horizonless sea of nothing. In the vast, depthless emptiness, Prey drifted in uneasy sleep.

---oOo---

"Prey!"

A jolt of fear shot through his system. That was Crimson. Something was wrong.

For a moment of stillness, the realisation was delayed in Prey's brain as his mind processed itself, and worked out it was still asleep and lying down.

'Asleep. Lying down.'

Prey shot up in a fail of waving hooves and flying blanket, as his mind finally reconnected itself to his body. Then he let out a choked

scream and fell over.

"GaKhaa-!" Prey writhed in an undignified heap on the apartment floor, spine bent back like a bow, hooves desperately trying to reach around to relieve the burning scar cramp.

Unfortunately, Crimson had heard his cut-off shriek of pain. "Prey?!"

Even though Prey only half heard Crimson over the blood pounding in his head, he still tried to shout; "It's fine, stay out!"

That's what Prey *meant* to shout. What actually came out was more along the lines of a high pitched squeak, sounding a bit like, "Ay hiinee! Hee' hoot!"

If Prey hadn't been in crippling pain, it would've been almost funny. But he was, and it wasn't funny. Crimson apparently didn't think so either.

The door shook as Crimson tried to kick it open, but it was reinforced with runes. It could withstand a charging rhino. The cramp was rippling higher and higher up Prey's spine, radiating out in burning waves from each ridge of scar tissue. '*IhateyouIhateyouIhateyouStinger*!'

Giving up on kicking down the door, Prey heard the scrape of a key in the lock from Crimson. The runic arrays on the door weren't yet set up to differentiate between when to open for a key in normal circumstances, or hostile circumstances.

'No!' Prey didn't want Crimson to come in and see him. Prey managed to get to his hooves for a second, but then a violent muscle spasm drove him back to his knees.

The door slammed open and Crimson came through in a red blur of feathers, wings spread low, ready to sweep and strike.

He saw Prey on the floor, and all Prey could feel was hot shame. Crimson drew up, finding no enemy, just Prey, straining to stand back up from his knees on the floor.

Crimson's eyes darted around the flat, "Are we under attack?"

"No," Prey managed to grit out. He wanted to tell Crimson to go away, but all he could get out was another squeaking hiss. The cramp really was going the whole hog this time.
'*Hateyouhateyouhate youStinger*!'

"Is it poison? Magic? What should I do?" Crimson demanded in alarm. Instinctively he reached out to try and steady Prey, but Prey jerked away from the touch, just as he always did.

Helplessly, Crimson withdrew his hoof. Prey was starting to pant, " 'M fine, Ghaa! Don't nee-eeek! Go away."

The cramp was peaking, Prey could feel it in the way his muscles were straining to what felt like their breaking point. Just a few more moments and it'd finally stop. Why couldn't Crimson just have waited outside?!

Prey didn't want anyone to see him like this, not even Crimson. It meant that Stinger had won once again.

"Prey, what should-?"

"Nothin-hinG! J-just. Stay. There!"

'*HateHateHateHATEStinger*!'

A few long moments were drawn out as long as possible by pain, with Prey panting and Crimson standing helplessly by, feathers bristling for a fight. And then, as Prey had known it would, the cramp finally ended.

Prey slumped with a moan of relief as his back muscles finally went slack. He could feel clinging sweat as he rested his head against the wood of the floorboards. He felt sore and bruised, even muscles which should in no way be connected to his back now ached. But at least the hated cramp had ended.

"Prey?" Crimson quietly asked.

Prey opened one bleary eye to look up at Crimson. The red pegasus

was leaning over him, but keeping just out of reach to respect Prey's wishes. His amber eyes shone with concern. And from his body language, he was upset.

Prey looked away in embarrassed shame as he forced himself to sit up. He turned his back. He hated being a runt and so much smaller than Crimson. He surreptitiously wiped his watering eyes. 'Never show weakness. This isn't Crimson's problem to deal with, it's mine.'

After a long silence, Crimson asked, "What happened?"

"Whip scars acting up. Happens sometimes."

"Oh. I see. I won't say sorry."

Prey turned back around in stark surprise, tilting his head up, "Huh?"

"I'm not saying sorry because you don't want my apologies. I mean, I know I wouldn't in your place. Whenever I tell you about my past, it's not because I want pity. It's so you can understand where I come from." Crimson spread one wing and held it up, glossy red pinions the length of Prey's leg splayed out.

Prey understood what Crimson meant. He'd grown up an outcast within his own clan, the initial reason all stemming back to him having been born with feathers instead of membranes. He didn't want Prey's pity for being who he was.

Crimson peered down his open wing's length, "I'm only sorry I will never get to meet the person who whip-who did that to you."

"Oh, er, erhm." Prey coughed, "Thank you."

In his head, Prey was repeating over and over, 'Please don't let this become a big deal, please don't let this become a big deal.'

They both went to speak at the same time:

"Yes well-"
"-It's alright."
"-Er, you go first."

"-No, you go on."

They both stopped talking and looked at one another.

Crimson cleared his throat and spoke first, "I, uh, might've damaged your door Prey. Sorry about that."

Prey seized upon the offer to change the subject like it was a life raft, "Oh, well if it's still standing, I don't think you need to worry about it."

‘And if the landlord *dares* to complain….'

It would take a lot more force than Crimson just bucking his rune reinforced door to break it down. If he'd still had the jade necklace though... Prey dismissed the thought, since it was now impossible and did no good to dwell on. Except it wasn't so impossible, because the thieving invaders had the jade necklace themselves now. And likely many more powerful artifacts to hoof. *They* could theoretically break down his door.

"What made you so worried just now, Crimson? You were trying to find me for something, weren't you?"

Crimson shuffled his wings, "That. It's not, I mean, it doesn't seem nearly so serious after all. I shouldn't have barged in, I know you were... I mean, I was looking for you because I had a bad feeling."

"A bad feeling?"

"Yes. I didn't think to check that you had made it home last night. And then, when I went to go flying, I saw a newspaper stand with it in the headlines."

"What headlines?" Prey asked.

"'Attack on Vanhoover Guard Station'. There was a break in, and one of the prisoners was broken out. It didn't say who, but I know it was the thief, the one who really stole my-I mean, stole the jade necklace from Vanish." Crimson said.

"What do you mean?" Prey asked, very carefully.

"The newspaper said the City Guard had already re-captured the escapee back at their home. But no one else. Just the escapee."

"Just the esc-? Hang on, that makes no sense." Prey exclaimed, "There's obviously more than one. Someone must've broken them out for a start. And why'd they just abandon the prisoner after going to all the effort to free them? And why would they go back to their own house, anyway? That's the first place any City Guard would look. There's no way-"

Prey broke off. This wasn't making any damned sense! Prey knew Warm Hearth wasn't really the thief, he'd been the one to frame her to take Crimson's place, after all. But the real thieves would also obviously have known that too, so why'd they rescued her? And then just let her go? Prey couldn't understand their reasoning.

Maybe they were just trying to work out if they'd somehow left loose ends behind? But if that was the case, why let Warm Hearth walk free afterwards? Why not silence her, since she might be able to identify her would-be rescuers later?

'What's happening? What are they trying to achieve here?!'

"Wait, when did you say this happened?" Prey hurriedly asked.

"The night before last." Crimson answered.

'The night before last. That puts the break in at-'

At right after they'd made their assault on Prey's lair. Setting aside the time it would've taken for travel, they must've gone straight to Vanhoover. Prey's mind raced. How did they know the framed Warm Hearth was linked to his lair? *Did* they know? No, there was no way. There was no evidence which could've clued them in.

No, that wasn't quite right, there was no evidence Prey *knew* of.

But no matter how carefully you planned, there was always an angle you couldn't foresee, witnesses you couldn't account for, dumb luck you couldn't predict.

A chill settled in Prey's stomach, liked he'd drunk a gallon of ice

slush.

They knew. Somehow, the thieves knew the person behind the lair was the same one who'd framed Warm Hearth.

How? That was a silly question. The answer was, of course, 'magic'.

'Zoma'Grika. They also now know I have mind magic too.' Now Prey's stomach was twisting into frozen knots.

They would know because they would've interrogated Warm Hearth, and Prey, in his cleverness, had implanted false memories in the mare's head which convinced her she really had been the thief. Except the real thieves knew she wasn't, because they'd been the ones to carry out the theft, not her. They knew she'd been tricked. It shouldn't have mattered, if only the thieves hadn't somehow met up with the remnants of the diamond dogs, then-

But they had, and now they knew.

Prey was running through a long, detailed string of curses in his head. If only it weren't for those diamond dogs!

...If only Lemon Pink hadn't murdered their brothers and sisters.

Actions have consequences. There is always a price to pay.

But there was another, much more immediate worry and question in Prey's world.

"Why'd you come straight to check up on me Crimson? Even before... the cramp attack, you were ready for a fight." Prey asked.

Crimson's wings hunched on his back, "I wish now that I'd never received the jade necklace. It was your gift, and it was mine, I paid the price for it, and I want it back. But now all holding on is doing is bringing harm. Vanish, and all the rest of it, I mean. Not just to me anymore, but all of us."

"You're not making any sense." Prey said, now even more worried if that were possible.

"The necklace. Vanish took it-"

"Stole. He *stole* it from you."

"Princess Luna made the final decision, Prey." Crimson corrected, or perhaps just to convince himself.

Prey closed his mouth.

"Vanish took it," Crimson went on. He didn't add the lord's title, "But when his maid was blackmailed into stealing it on behalf of someone else, he also lost the necklace. But now a fourth person obviously wants the artifact too, and wants it badly."

"But, I'm still not following. Why then were you worried about me? Shouldn't you be more worried about yourself?" Prey asked nervously. Did Crimson know something about Prey's illicit activities and this was his way of warning Prey?

Crimson shook his head, "Don't you see Prey? This fourth group attacked the Vanhoover City Guard to get to the last pon-I mean, the last person who had the necklace and might be able to tell them something about who now has it. It must be even more powerful or important than Vanish let on. And the last person who had the necklace before Warm Hearth was me. If they were prepared to attack the City Guard to get to that witness, then they could easily come after me too."

He lowered his eyes to the ground between Prey's hooves, "I don't know what they're after, but to get to me, they might try to use you as leverage, Prey. And I didn't think to check if you'd made it back last night, so..."

"So you came rushing to check I hadn't been kidnapped." Prey finished. He felt numb. Crimson thought he himself was the one to blame for this.

He wasn't. It was Prey's fault. This was all his fault.

"I, we..." Prey searched for words, for some way to solve all of this. But there wasn't any, and Prey knew it. He'd known that the moment he'd seen the devastation wrought in his lair, and how the

invaders had still walked away despite all his defences.

"Vanish should've been the end of it. Getting arrested by the Solar Guard should've been the end of it too. And when they caught Warm Hearth too. And after what we just survived in Mayflower-!"

Crimson drove his hoof sharply into the floor. Prey jumped.

"Sorry," Crimson hastily apologised, "We just, I mean, we're under attack yet again!"

Crimson was so right and he didn't even know the full extent of it. The danger these opponents posed and the threat they represented was greater than Crimson realised. Crimson was only seeing what was on the surface. Prey hadn't meant for anyone else to get involved, least of all Crimson. This was all his fault. Yet Crimson thought the fault was his.

And all this had been started a long time ago by Prey when he'd first bought a stolen heirloom to give to Crimson.

But here Crimson was, taking the blame, and worst of all, he was right in worrying about being a potential target, although not for the reason Crimson thought. If the invaders found out Prey's identity, Crimson could be next on their list.

Had the invaders gone back to Prey's crystal lair to have another crack at it? It was possible. Prey had no way of knowing. He'd abandoned the lair because the location was compromised, but what if he'd overlooked and left something behind?

He'd hidden his surviving veropede deep in the sewers, but now it didn't look like that would be enough. It seemed he'd been laying traps and protection in the wrong places, because Crimson was the one in danger now.

"You need to go to Gloom," Prey exclaimed, the words slipping out almost before he'd worked out what he meant by them, "You need to tell him you're going to be targeted. He'll tell Nighthawk. The Night Guard will have to do something, set a watch, witness protection, protective custody, something!"

"These people have already attacked the City Guard. They could just as easily attack the Night Guard here." Crimson protested.

"No that's not the same. That was Vanhoover. This is Canterlot. This is the Sun-I mean, Celestia's capital, the New Unicornia. It's not the same, they can't get away with such blatant actions here."

"Prey-"

"There's no hard evidence we can show Nighthawk, but it's obvious you'll be a target. If you explain it, then he'll understand too." Prey's voice was rising higher and higher in pitch.

Crimson was going to be targeted, but not because of anything he'd done. It was far worse than Crimson realised. They were going to come after Crimson for information, but armed for a fight against Prey.

'They're going to come after Crimson!'

"Prey you need to calm down. Listen to me." Crimson all but shouted.

Prey finally stopped and looked back up at Crimson. He was breathing too fast. Crimson settled back down, "Calm down, Prey. Be calm, and listen to me."

Prey tried to do what Crimson said, he really did, but it was hard. Crimson didn't realise the danger he was in.

"Listen to me Prey. I will tell Gloom and Nighthawk, because they deserve to know what is happening. Scenic and Lilly too, don't worry about that. But I will deal with this. It's me the thieves are really after, so as long as you are careful, you'll be fine."

"It's not me I'm worried about." Prey snapped.

Crimson just looked at him.

"Okay, a little bit, but it's you who's in real danger here!"

"I know," Crimson said calmly, "What of it? I mean, this is nothing

new. We're always in one danger or another. It's part of the job. You yourself warned me danger was coming. So it's here now, what of it? There is nothing I can do but face it."

"But-"

"But what, Prey? What else can I do?" Crimson challenged, but not harshly. More like he was resigned.

"But what if it's not enough this time? What if-?"

'-What if they kill you? You're my first friend, what if you die and leave me alone?' Prey couldn't finish. He felt ridiculous, and he knew he was panicking. This wasn't how you solved a problem.

"It's me they want," Crimson told him again, "I will deal with them Prey. You'll be safe."

Prey couldn't meet Crimson's eyes. The warrior pegasus had no idea he was sitting beside the real cause of all his problems. It was Prey's fault, yet Crimson was trying to shoulder the burden. Prey felt ashamed.

'This isn't what a real friend does to his friends.'

"But I don't want you going into danger." Prey whined.

That was a pointless statement. Life wasn't fair or safe. Prey knew that. Crimson knew that. Whining wouldn't change a damned thing.

Crimson could only shake his head, then push his lanky mane back out of his eyes, "And I don't want you in danger either, Prey."

And that was that, wasn't it? If wishes were oatcakes and words could change anything, neither of them would be here in Canterlot.

Prey scuffed at the floorboards, "So... what, what do you want to do?"

"There is nothing *to* do. Except wait. I had the necklace last, this is my responsibility to deal with."

"I was the one who gave you that necklace." Prey mumbled.

"But it was me who unlocked it. If it'd just stayed as a ring, no one would be any the wiser." Crimson said.

They were talking in circles, but Prey couldn't think of what else to say.

"What's that on the back of the door?" Crimson unexpectedly asked, blindsiding Prey.

"Huh?"

Crimson pointed at the flat door, "There. If you tilt your head like this, and the light hits it like that, you can just about faintly see some words."

"You can see those?" Prey blinked.

"Yes. You wrote them? What's it say?" Crimson asked, trying to step closer to see, but when he did he lost the angle and the faint writing disappeared.

"I, yes. It's, well, it's the reaper king rhyme." Prey admitted.

Crimson stopped trying to get the right angle to catch the words again. "Oh."

Prey began to recite, "Raven magpie, fly away, Scarecrow, keep at bay~"

"I remember it." Crimson interrupted, but quietly. A shiver went up the feathers of his wings, "You put it there on purpose?"

"Um, yes?"

"I do not know if I could sleep soundly at night with that written on the inside of my door." Crimson said.

"You sleep soundly at night?" Prey asked.

Crimson shrugged. It was a very Crimson response, "Rarely. You

know how it is."

Despite everything, Prey had to half smile. It didn't have any humour, "Yeah, we both know how it is."

He wanted to add something more profound or meaningful, but he couldn't think of anything. In the end though, it wasn't needed. They both sat there quietly for a minute, looking at the door and remembering the warlock and his dark creations. But they were still here. They'd survived, despite Hard Baked and the forest's best efforts.

"I should go and inform Gloom and Captain Nighthawk of the situation, like you said. The Captain might've thought of all this already." Crimson said, standing up.

Crimson was right. Sitting here doing nothing wouldn't solve anything. If he wanted to survive the coming storm, as always Prey would have to save himself. The real thieves were slowly closing in, learning more information every hour. There was no chance of hiding anymore, because they now knew about Crimson. They had a name and someone to follow.

"Crimson," Prey said suddenly, "Can I, er..."

"Yes?"

Prey took a deep breath, "Can I please have one of your primary feathers?"

"W-?"

"I mean when one falls out! Not just pull one out, obviously. Can I please have the leftover feather then?" Prey hastily corrected, wincing.

Crimson was visibly confused, one ear straight up, "I... suppose? I mean, it's a pinion feather, but once it falls out I don't need it anymore. What do you need it for though?" He asked, but there was an edge of caution in his tone.

"The feather itself? Nothing. I just wanted the measurements. A

feather from any pegasi would do, but since you're the only one I really know..." Prey trailed off with an apologetic shrug.

"I don't see a problem, but... I won't come to regret this in some way, will I Prey?" Crimson asked seriously.

"No. Why? What do you think I could do with a feather?" Prey asked, not mentioning all the things you could do in voodoo magic with a feather willingly given.

"I don't know, that's why I'm asking. Not that I don't trust you." Crimson quickly added.

"What do you mean?"

Crimson hesitated for a moment, then just shrugged and bluntly stated it, "Apparently here, in Equestria I mean, pegasi give a feather to those they are courting and receive one in return."

"Oh. I see."

Crimson shrugged again, a mixture of uncomfortable and perplexed, "I have no idea why. It seems a stupid custom to me. I mean, we didn't do it in the clans."

"Well, exchanging a piece of wing membrane is probably more creepy than romantic I would imagine." Prey tried to joke. It wasn't funny, not after Crimson's revelation about the thieves, but it was better than panicking again.

"Ah. Right." Crimson blinked slowly, "Of course. How silly of me. That would be a rather disturbing custom alright. Not to mention painful."

"Nighthawk and Gloom," Prey reminded Crimson, "They need to be told all this right away. *You* need to go tell them. The sooner the better." He urged.

"You're right." Crimson said briskly, straightening, "I had to come check you first, but you're safe. I overreacted. But the others must be informed."

"You should fly there. Stay above open populated areas. You're fast, it'll be the safest." Prey said. Hitting a flying target above you with a crossbow was much harder than anyone thought.

"I was planning to."

"Of course, I didn't mean-of course you are. You've got the wings, not me." Prey knocked his hoof against the side of his head. Worry was making him a moronic fool. But this was all his fault.

"I know what you meant Prey. You're just worried, like I was. About you, I mean. But about me, I mean. I mean, er, thank you." Crimson awkwardly stated.

"Don't thank me, really. There's no need. Really."

"Right. Well..." Crimson dithered for only a moment more, then he decisively pulled the door open after a quick glance at the near invisible rhyme scratchings, "It'll be fine Prey. You helped with everything else, so I'll deal with it this time. Stay safe."

Prey followed Crimson out into the hall to watch him launch off over the balcony. Crimson's wings snapped open with a wuff of air, his powerful wings swiftly lifting him up into the sky, legs tucked in close and head driving forwards for the best aerodynamic posture. Within seconds, he was already a fading red bird sized shape in the sky. Prey so wished he had been gifted with wings and Crimson's skill.

But he hadn't, he wasn't a pony, he was just a triple cursed runt lamb. And he was in danger. Prey started, hastily glanced around, then slammed the front door and rushed back to his flat.

Runes weren't going to create themselves, and now, more than ever, he needed those defences. Not just for himself anymore, but for Crimson too. What if the thieves were bold enough to come and raid Crimson's flat directly? It was the middle of the day, but would that stop them? What if they found something in there to make them think Crimson really was their one target?

This was Prey's fault. It was all his fault.

Crimson came back about mid afternoon, a worried Gloom accompanying him, along with a pair of Night Guards flying in behind them, and all of the thestrals squinting badly in the midday sun.

"Prey? Ah, good. Crimson's already filled you in, yes?" Gloom asked, worried and distracted.

The pair of Night Guards, both of whom looked very tired and who must've been two of the only few available at this hour, were talking to Crimson about security in his flat:

"Only you and the landlord have a key, right?"

"Not having a key won't stop any determined pony."

Prey nodded in answer to Gloom's worried question, still half listening to what the on duty Night Guards were discussing with Crimson.

"Prey has a key too? I guess that's fine."

"How about other entrances? Only one window, you say?"

Prey noted Crimson had his wing blades attached once again. They were supposed to be locked up safely under Nighthawk's care, the only place Crimson could be persuaded to leave them. Nighthawk must've changed his mind after hearing Crimson's bad news.

The laws were clear about non-Guards, including off duty Guards, carrying any type of weapon within Canterlot. It was worrying how Nighthawk had obviously felt it prudent to waive this law.

'But there's no such law restricting unicorns who all walk around with a lethally dangerous weapon sticking out of their foreheads.' Prey thought sourly, but it was in the back of his mind. He was much more focused on the problems of here and now.

"What's Nighthawk decided? What's being done to protect Crimson?" Prey asked.

Gloom pursed his lips, "There isn't much that can be done." He admitted.

"Why not?" Prey immediately demanded.

Gloom looked at him askance, "You must know why."

Prey could work it out, but he'd asked anyway in the hopes of changing it. They couldn't prove an attack was actually coming after Crimson, and if one did come, it was unlikely having a couple of Guards protecting Crimson would make much of a difference. The thieves hadn't balked at taking on a full Guard Station in Vanhoover, after all.

'-on top of which, the Night Guard just doesn't have the ponies to spare on twenty-four/seven witness protection-', Gloom thought, unhappily thinking of the thestral minority in Canterlot.

"But those two were still assigned here, that's got to mean something right?" Prey asked, jerking his head towards the Night Guards who'd accompanied Gloom and Crimson back.

"Short term. Until something better can be worked out, or the threat has passed." Gloom said.

"How are you supposed to know when it's passed? What if the thieves simply wait until the Guards leave and *then* attack the moment they're gone?" Prey said.

"If you've got a solution, I'm sure they'll be happy to hear it, by all means." Gloom said in exasperation, waving his wing towards the two Guards whom Crimson was taking inside, after only a brief hesitation, to check his flat for security risks.

Gloom's exasperation was caused by worry though, not real annoyance. If Prey had a good idea, Gloom genuinely wanted to hear it. Prey's ideas usually had merit, even if they were almost all equally unfailingly unpleasant. Gloom didn't want any harm to come to Crimson, or any member of his squad.

'-I don't want to fail them again-'

Prey was glad he'd added a few runes to Crimson's flat. But there were only enough in there for a distraction, not actual defence. It would be safer if Crimson was to stay in Prey's own flat instead, but there was no way he could explain why that was the case to Gloom and Crimson. Prey tugged at the end of his ribbon, trying to think up some way to sell the idea anyway.

Well, he could pretend to be scared and ask Crimson to stay with him. But unless he revealed all his runework, he wouldn't have any explanation they would accept about why that was any safer than Crimson staying in his own flat. They *literally* lived opposite each other, afterall.

'So maybe it would be better if Crimson stayed somewhere else altogether.'

Canterlot was a big place. As much as Prey hated the Palace and all it represented, it was still well guarded, plus Prey knew it sported its own magical protections. They weren't active or specialised defences like Prey's own, but the Palace still had a lot of passive anti-fire enchantments, anti-teleportation, dark magic detection alarms, and the like.

Prey was also certain beyond a shadow of a doubt there were some other enchantments even the Guard weren't told about. It was the Sun Wolf's home, after all.

'Actually, why *hasn't* Nighthawk moved Crimson back to the Palace?' Prey frowned. He turned to face Gloom.

"Surely it would be safer back in the barracks room in the Palace? You know, where we first started?" Prey asked.

Gloom grimaced, face sour, "I had the same idea, unfortunately there's one problem. The royal inspectors." He almost spat.

"You mean to tell me they're *still* here?" Prey asked in disbelief. It was over two weeks past the date by which the inspectors investigating the Night Guard were supposed to be finished.

"They *should've* left long ago, yes," Gloom agreed, "But they haven't.

They're still hanging around."

"Why? Shouldn't Nighthawk have all the evidence he needs by now to prove they're just lingering to manufacturer evidence, and force Shining Armour to withdraw them?" Prey asked. This was completely ridiculous, even by the standards of the petty Canterlot politicking which seemed to be accepted as normal around here.

But the Night Guard command structure was *not* from around here, and Prey could *not* see them accepting it as normal.

While these royal inspectors had been set on the Night Guard as an indirect retaliation to the ISND's own investigation for salt dealers and other corruption within the Royal Guard, Prey had never considered it personal. He'd never met or even seen one of the inspectors, (unless Strange Happenstance was actually one in disguise), but now their actions were putting Crimson at risk. And that *was* personal.

"This is just beyond ridiculous by now." Prey exclaimed.

"I completely agree. It's ridiculous." Gloom said, turning to glower in the direction of the distant Palace, then immediately regretting it as he got an eyeful of sunlight. He hissed and rubbed at the scars around his eyes, "Luna that stings. But yes, they should've been kicked out weeks ago."

"So why're they still here? Something's obviously changed to allow them to stay, but what?"

"I don't know the exact details," Gloom said, blinking rapidly and scowling, "But Captain Nighthawk said the details were restricted. Just that it's to do with the after effects of the Grand Gala, and that it involves some of the nobility."

'-those sycophantic leeches. Oh, and the other nobles too I guess-'

"Ah, I see why now." Prey said, keeping the anger from his tone. And it was the truth, he could clearly see Nighthawk's reasoning now.

The nobles Nighthawk had referenced were those who'd made a

move to try and blackmail Luna at the Gala. The job title was '*Royal*' inspectors, meaning they worked for the government. And that meant they worked almost directly for both alicorn princesses too.

The inspectors were still here because they weren't just reviewing the Night Guard anymore, but also those nobles who'd made themselves Luna's political enemies. And the thestral officers of the Night Guard took the attempted blackmail of their princess very personally indeed.

'What kind of suicidal idiot do you have to be to try and blackmail an alicorn, anyway?'

But Nighthawk was holding a snake close to his chest. The inspectors were still here to investigate the Night Guard after all, and they were especially after the ISND. If it weren't for them all being on an extended leave of indefinite medical absence, no doubt the investigators would've come after the ISND already by now.

The Captain had weighed the scales, and as a result of his choice, the ISND were now stuck here outside of the protection of the Palace when they needed it most.

Nighthawk had chosen his Princess over them, just as any thestral would've, but Prey knew Luna would never even think to thank them for it. Because she simply didn't care, did she? She'd already proved her indifference very clearly to Prey, on a whim choosing to let Vanish take the jade necklace from Crimson.

'So we're on our own again, is it? Throw us to the wolves why don't you Nighthawk?'

No doubt Nighthawk didn't see it like that. There was no real way for them to get rid of the royal inspectors now, and he'd probably estimated any potential threat to Crimson was low at best, but that was only because they didn't know the full extent of the threat. They didn't know about the other powerful artifacts these people had. But Prey did know. They'd breached his lair, slain one veropede, nearly killed the other, and the non-diamond dog portion of them had gotten away.

It was remotely possible that even Scenic or Gloom might be targeted, although Lilly Blossom, crippled and disabled in the hospital, would probably remain untouched.

It wasn't her Prey cared about though, or Scenic. They weren't direct targets, and even if they were, they could look after themselves. Only Crimson was important.

A pair of Guards following Crimson around for a couple of days wasn't going to be enough if something did happen. Instead, the ISND were unknowingly being left to fend for themselves. Again.

There would be no help coming from the Night Guard. Again.

'So much for gratitude.'

Deep beneath the finely paved streets of Equestria's capital city, the sewers and waterworks of Canterlot ran, a network of pipes keeping the citizenry of Canterlot, rich and poor alike, well watered.

That wasn't all though, far from it. Also supplied were the numerous fantastical water features, public drinking fountains, swimming pools, and decorative water features, such as Canterlot Park's five different ponds, home to many a happy duck, and the occasional waterway which flowed through Canterlot and under small bridges.

These waterways were kept clean through routine trawling by maintenance ponies, the same ones who managed the park and all those decorative trees in little metal cages running alongside the main roads.

Theirs wasn't the most glamorous or respected job within the gleaming city of Canterlot, but it was a stable sort of job and decently paid for all it was unskilled labour. It was a job filled almost exclusively by earth ponies, since Celestia knows there were only so many posts within Canterlot which called for an earth pony's natural talents.

But that wasn't really important, unless perhaps you were one of

those employed earth ponies, keeping the park and waterways clear. But what if, say, you weren't one of those ponies, and were instead, say, a minnow from the park pond.

If one happened to be such a minnow, one might just swim down to the pond bed, and there, one might find a pipe, pumping in freshwater.

And if such an inquisitive minnow existed, it might just swim through the grate and up the current. If there existed a minnow with enough strength to swim against the current all the way up the pipe, it might find itself passing through a valve.

And if, say, this theoretical minnow existed, and it passed through the valve, it would find itself inside the fast flowing underground waterworks of Canterlot.

And if this minnow wasn't swept away as it was battered first this way, and then the next in the rushing water pressure, it might, just *might*, find its way into another pipe if the valve happened to be open.

If a minnow could do all this once, then it would be reasonable to assume it could repeat the performance a second time, and get into another pipe, and then another, and another. If all this aligned, and the minnow kept swimming deeper, it would find itself travelling through older and older pipe networks.

Not that a fish could know such things as age and architecture, since it was a fish. But if it *could*, and it kept heading into the older networks and pipes, it might, by luck or grand design, find its way all the way down to the Sewer's Heart.

And there the minnow might stop, finding itself in a still patch of water, caused by a submerged basin beneath a turbulent surface where water was pulled in a dozen different directions by a dozen different open tunnels. Each pipe was only filled by half a dozen inches of fast flowing water, but to a minnow, that would be plenty.

And in this still patch of water, just underneath the currents tug, this little fish might find something.

Something which appeared like brown pond frond, or perhaps seaweed would be a better description. But if so, it stretched far longer than any piece of common seaweed. It was like a mat of thick netting, or maybe rope. The multitude of ends trailed up from the bottom of the sheltered basin, up into the turbulent surface water, whereupon the stands were taken off in every direction down every pipe.

The slimy fronds didn't extend far down these pipes, at least not yet. It was still growing. This strange plant like thing had only been down here for two days, but already, the longest strands were over eleven yards in length.

There were no leaves or root hairs, just limp brown rubbery tendrils, however if someone had been there to try, they would've found it nearly impossible to pull a piece of the slippery plant thing off. Perhaps cut, yes, but break? No.

But there was no one down there in the sewers' heart, no one who could catch the wickerwatch sapling in time to try, and the minnow didn't exist.

But if it had existed, it might've been drawn to the glow of lantern light in the darkness. It would have regretted it.

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Author's Notes:

Another chapter, and here we go in answering some of those questions and speculations you were all posing.

If you see any mistakes, please point them out so I can fix them. Thanks.

🍎Thank you to the Editor for lots of help once again: **Sweetolebob18**

61.4 Sewers make for poor Scenery

Prey withdrew from peering down into the Sewer's Heart, turning himself around in the flow of water to begin heading back topside. His hooves and lower legs were slightly numb by now from the cold water, and slimy brown tendrils brushed disturbingly against his legs as he waded.

He'd come down here to observe the wickerwatch's growth, and to make sure there were no problems other than those he'd left for intruders.

Prey... was not satisfied. The artificial plant form was growing, but not nearly fast enough. He needed it fully grown and he needed it fully grown now. Not in a week's time, but *now*. The wickerwatch didn't need sunlight to grow, just water, ambient magic, and trace nutrients.

'Is there not enough ambient magic down here?' Prey worried, 'Or did I make a mistake in creating it? Lemon stole the memories from Hard Baked on kindersnatches, but I deviated when trying to improve. It's possible I could've made a mistake.'

This was just supposed to have been the prototype, but there'd been no time to try and create a new one. Prey was never going to recreate the kindersnatches, but the theory of the dark magic involved, no matter how vile and reprehensible, had seemed both useful and sound in principle.

Prey stumbled on a suddenly slippery bit of tunnel. Momentarily on three legs, he lost his balance and almost fell. After briefly flailing and splashing himself more than he would've liked, Prey did manage to get himself stable, and without dislodging the lantern balancing on his back. Small mercies, but he was now a fair bit wetter, filthier, and grumpier than he'd been only ten seconds ago.

'I need to find a better light source for travelling here. And for use

down in the cave tunnels too.' Prey thought. But such a concern was far less pressing than the need to stay alive and survive the inevitable coming confrontation.

Prey and Lemon had gotten a ping earlier, signalling that the lair had been visited again by the invaders, but nothing indicating they'd actually gone back inside, or if the special bone rot mines he'd left in the tunnel had worked as intended or not. He didn't know, and he couldn't risk going back to check himself or sending Lemon Pink.

Tunnel warfare was the stuff of nightmares. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, only one path, single file, traps around every corner, bad air, darkness, and with the constant threat of being buried alive at any second.

It was like trying to fight inside a coffin.

Prey took a turn at a tunnel split, following the map in his head. Shadows danced on the walls, but the gurgling water remained matt and dull, no matter how the lantern light hit it.

Another twist, a second left, squeezing under a low grill, following a line of yellowish pennynick bricks in the wall instead of the normal brownish burnt clay ones, and then he turned a corner and his lantern light was abruptly swallowed.

A huge shadow on the sewer tunnel's wall moved, black on black. The lantern's sphere of light shrank in on itself as the looming bulk pressed in, cutting off the surroundings and any retreat. The tunnel walls, the way back or forwards, it was all blocked off.

Prey hadn't been satisfied with the wickerwatch. But he was very impressed with the veropede's ambush. Except it wasn't an ambush, because the veropede wasn't trying to attack him, this was just how it moved in the tunnels, encircling everything to get a closer look.

The sack cloth swaddled head came out of the gloom to Prey's right, hanging above him. Prey still felt a bitter shock of anger every time he saw the damage done to his veropede.

'No one steals from me.'

Three black barbed and hooked tendrils, mockeries of the near perfect antenna the veropede used to have, quested towards Prey and he had to swiftly reach out mentally, 'Stop. Slow, gentle.'

He had to be careful around his weapon now. The veropede wasn't whole anymore. Those antennas weren't natural and didn't have tactile feedback. One clumsy slip could tear Prey open like a feather pillow.

'They stole one perfect weapon from me, and ruined the other. No one steals from me.'

But the raiders *had* stolen from him, and had mostly gotten away with it too. And now they were coming back for a second round, looking to finish what they'd started. Prey brooded on that as he looked over the veropede, checking the injuries he'd previously fixed or closed, and examining again the permanent damage under the sacking to see how it was being handled by his rune work.

The huge veropede remained quiet and still throughout his examination. Water swirled beneath its bulk, through the fence like rows of its spiky legs. It was like a statue under Prey as he clambered over it and held the lantern close.

A missing chunk of smashed carapace needed his attention, the missing hole of muscle underneath having broken open again. Prey took the time to tend to it, before letting himself slide down the veropede's side rear hooves first, splashing back down.

Prey took a moment to look up and down the length of his veropede again. He could feel from its mental state that the veropede was interested in hunting, as it was getting a bit hungry again. Not ravenous, just what you might call 'peckish', if such a soft term could be applied to the unholy maw of centipede and teeth.

It'd been very impressive just now, to witness how it seemed to appear out of the shadows like that. It was deceptive how much space the large veropede took up if you weren't aware it was there.

His observations helped lessen the sting of losing his other veropede somewhat, to know he still had this one to prowl and guard the Sewer's Heart. Even if it was damaged and twisted.

'But beggars can't be choosers.'

Prey met Lemon Pink under a dank and slimy pipe archway, the pipe narrowing here into a thicker joint. At some point in the distant past, there must've been plans to add another pipe here, but it'd never happened.

Now it served as a recognisable way point.

The glow from the crystal lantern showed the dark circles under Lemon Pink's eyes as they exchanged nods of greeting. Prey didn't bother hiding his own tiredness either. They were both up late into the night for every hour they could get away with. There just wasn't enough time to do everything they needed to.

Time. Never enough time. He was always lacking in time time time *time Time*!

"It'll need feeding by the day after tomorrow." Prey said without prelude, referring to the veropede.

"Yes, Prey." Lemon nodded tiredly. She shifted, and a couple stray drops of cloudy water slid off the short rain cloak she was wearing over her withers.

"How many pigs are left?" Prey asked.

"Eleven. Sunny n' Smiles will hold and feed our bought stock of pigs." Lemon answered. She'd never gotten the chance to buy out the Sunny n' Smiles business like they'd originally intended.

"Eleven pigs. About two months worth. Should be plenty. I don't think whatever is going to happen is going to drag on longer than that." Prey muttered, thinking about how if he still had two veropedes, both uninjured and unaltered, that would only be enough for about two and a half weeks. He wished he was still

dealing with that problem instead of this one.

Prey wiped an annoying droplet trickling down his foreleg, but at least it was just water and not sewage. He was remembering, of all things, Fallen Leaf and the deer holt. The deer had fled the reaper king and Hard Baked's presence, but no one knew if they'd lived or died. The Guard had found no bodies, but there were plenty of dangers in the forest just as bad as the monstrosities the warlock had created.

'Whatever came out of the Wolfing Wood was roaming around that same night...'

Prey hurriedly shook himself free from the grip of those thoughts. Down here was definitely not a safe place to have those memories. He shivered, the sodden fur of his legs cold and unpleasant.

'This isn't helping me right now.'

Prey looked at Lemon, seeing the disguised electrite choker hung around her neck, representing nearly two-fifths of all the electrite he'd stolen. It never left her throat now, not even when she slept. Who knew when an attack might come? And although far from finished, the few runic arrays on the choker were better than nothing. It went without saying Prey never removed his ribbon, either.

"I take it you haven't had the time to monitor the underground market lately?" He asked.

"No, Prey." Lemon said with a shake of her head.

Prey hadn't had any expectations otherwise, but he'd just been checking. He knew the thieves used powerful artifacts, and while it was highly unlikely anything of note would cross the underground market, you never knew. And indeed, he wouldn't know, because he didn't have time to check.

'Decades in Dreverton with nothing *but* time and now never enough damned time!'

There'd be no miraculously pulling something like another jade

necklace off the underground market again. There'd be nothing with which to somehow solve all his problems.

"How's the wickerwatch growing?" Lemon asked, reclaiming Prey's attention.

"Slowly. If this whole stalemate does end up dragging into longer than two weeks, then it might be some real help. Every hour we can stall is an hour we can better prepare with."

"So can they." Lemon calmly pointed out.

"Yes." Prey had to acknowledge, and wasn't that what it all came down to in the end?

Who could catch the other group out first, and who could use the time better to prepare?

'The odds are not in my favour. There's only two of us, and at minimum at least four of them, not even counting the surviving diamond dogs. That's at least double the hooves, eyes, work load, and available time that Lemon and I have.'

How many out of the dog pack could realistically be left? After the heavy toll Prey and Lemon had reaped, how many bitter survivors bent on revenge could there be?

'At least one. One more than I want.'

One was more than enough to kill you.

This worrying and brooding wasn't revealing anything Prey didn't already know. Worse, he was wasting precious time.

"Walk and talk." Prey ordered, starting to retrace his steps so he could get back to the pipe junction. From there, they could begin the trip back up to the surface. Lemon sped up to get past him so she could lead the way, the directed light cast by her horn superior to his lantern as they fell into single file, hoof steps mutely echoing.

Their destination was the closest entrance into and also out of the sewers. A rarely used maintenance door, set into the face of one of

the rising levels of Canterlot. The exit was overhung by a stone promenade and bridge, which made the site shadowed and hidden. It was a gloomy and cold spot because of all that stone overhanging it, and not even rebellious fillies and colts visited the boring spot.

An excellent place to emerge unseen, and from which to slip unnoticed back into the rest of Canterlot.

As they went, Prey continued asking Lemon about the latest news, both about the highly unimportant goings on of Equestria, but which nevertheless were still important to keep abreast of, and the much more dire information about how their preparations and back up plans were coming along.

They reached and climbed up a steel ladder, Lemon levitating the lantern up for Prey so he didn't have to carry it by the handle in his teeth.

At the top, Prey scraped off some dirt which'd stuck to his still damp wool, and accepted the lantern back with a nod, "There is also the matter of Lord Vanish and the maid I framed, Warm Hearth. It's not a problem we can do anything about right now, but if we get through this, it looks like it could turn into a huge headache in the future."

Prey would've swapped immediately for that headache compared to this current one.

"Yes, Prey. And Strange Happenstance?" Lemon both agreed and asked.

"*Him*. I don't know what he's up to or what he might be doing. Last I knew, he was working with Lilly's parents to try and get a case filed against the Night Guard. But that case isn't going anywhere. I doubt that stallion will be content to just wait and see." Prey gnawed at his cheek.

"It is not an issue for now, but if I ever encounter him, should I dispose of him?" Lemon asked, coldly indifferent to the possibility of killing a person.

Prey considered it just as coldly. "Maybe. I'm eighty percent sure he's just a self righteous pony, and not secretly a mimic, but until I'm certain and while this current problem persists-"

Prey almost got a pink rear leg in his face as Lemon jerked backwards.

A hooded pony had just appeared out of the steel door she'd been reaching for. Appeared, not entered, just appeared. They stared. The hooded pony stared back. Both sides were completely caught off guard at seeing anyone else inside the maintenance room.

Prey heaved the crystal lantern around and flung it at the unidentified intruder's face.

The flying lantern was only half way there when Lemon attacked with a lunge of her own, no time to cast, just looking to gore the pony in their hooded face with her sharp horn.

The intruder flinched, instinct making them jerk back but it wasn't enough, the hurled lantern was just about to clobber them in the head and Lemon stab them in the face.

They should've hit. They *did* hit. They hit and went right through the flinching pony as if he wasn't there. The lantern crashed against the back of the steel door with a ringing clang. Lemon's strike swiped through the pony's hidden face, hood and all, without any resistance. She jerked away as the intruder's hoof shot up to their own chest.

Prey's first thought was, 'An illusion!'

Desperately he flung his perception out, hoping the illusion's caster was within range so he could pinpoint them. It sort of worked. Prey felt a mind. He didn't have time to hear anything, just confirm the direction of the foreign mind which was-

-Right in front of them.

Prey meant to shout, 'It's not an illusion!' to warn Lemon. He didn't get any further than sucking in his breath, "-!"

The thing around the pony's neck was actually a gilded chestplate under the cloak. There was a glittering blue stone set in the middle. The pony hurled themselves backwards.

Their rear hit the closed door, and they slipped straight through it like it was made of water and they vanished. Prey and Lemon were left behind in the maintenance room, with the light from the fallen lantern now casting shadows up from floor level.

"Not an illusion!" Prey squeaked, "That's one of the real thieves. He has an artifact!"

Prey was going to shout more, but he didn't get the chance to finish. The mind which had just exited his perception range by running out through a solid door, had re-entered his perception range.

Coming from beneath the floor.

Prey spun around and pointed to a dusty spot in a dark corner of the room, "There!"

A moment later, the hooded head cautiously poked up from out of the floor.

Lemon Pink's red spell laced through the figures head before they could even flinch, but all the spell did was bounce off the floor and then **crack** the wall in a flash of red light.

The head promptly vanished back into the floor.

Prey belatedly realised he couldn't hear the pony' thoughts. He could feel the pony's mind, but not hear their thoughts while they were immaterial or whatever the strange magical state they'd entered was. The mind was clouded, just a buzz, but he could still *feel* it, and he felt it move sideways from under the floor and up towards outside, before it left his bubble of perception again.

How? How could they do that? What kind of powerful magic was this, and how could it be cast so swiftly?

"Where?" Lemon called, scanning the empty floor.

"They're back outside. I don't know exactly where." Prey was backing up towards the sewer's entrance while simultaneously trying to provide as much information as possible, "They're impervious to harm while immaterial like that, but they obviously can't physically see through stone."

What about breathing, could they breathe while phased like that? Prey didn't know.

'How do they even move when they're not touching the physical world?!'

Only now did the details lost in those first few blurred seconds of action and reaction start to properly align in Prey's head, facts filling themselves in. Prey had seen light armour on that pony under the short cloak, not including the obviously magical gilded chestplate. They were a unicorn too, Prey had seen a horn but not their face, damn the luck. And they were a stallion by their body type, not that it made any difference.

And then it clicked with awful clarity. The invader had seen both Prey and Lemon's faces. He could identify them.

Prey's mouth worked as he tried to find words to give orders he didn't have. They'd been seen. What should he do?

'Flee? Try and catch him?'

"Orders?" Lemon Pink asked.

"We can't run-He's coming back!" Prey cut off, twisting to face the door.

For a brief moment on the other side of the door, Prey caught a snapshot of coherent thoughts; '-go in again-'

Then the mind slipped away into a buzz, as the pony's orange muzzle phased through the door, then the head, then their whole body as they stepped through. They weren't trying to hide like last time, they came straight through the only door. That they could do so without the requirement of opening the door only added to the intimidation factor.

The cloaked stallion lifted their head and seemed to look down at Lemon, as if daring her to try attacking him again. Lemon's horn was glowing red and she was warily crouched, and Prey knew the silver electrite choker was helping focus her magic to the razor's edge. However she didn't try shooting recklessly again. Prey couldn't see the stallion's eyes in the depths of his unnaturally darkened hood, but he could feel them weighing him up.

The large blue stone set in the stallion's strange gilt breastplate still shone. The stallion's head turned away from Prey, dismissing but not forgetting about him, and focused on Lemon Pink instead.

And suddenly Prey could hear the ponies mind again as he faded back into being, '-must be her. She's here, she attacked, that's damning proof enough-'

The stallion spoke, "You-"

Prey's hoof twitched and Lemon fired on his signal.

It was nearly point blank, but Prey hadn't been fast enough in signalling. In the nick of time the stallion returned themselves to intangibility and the blast hit the metal door and dissipated into the steel.

'-how'd she?-'

Prey's hoof jabbed again and Lemon Pink fired, her casting speed boosted by the runes on the electrite choker. But once again, it was just a fraction of a second too slow as the stallion ducked to the side and the red spike lanced harmlessly through where his shoulder should've been.

The stallion dropped into a crouch, not returning to solidity, trying to bait out another shot from Lemon but she held on for Prey's signal.

Prey was holding his breath, heart racing. Stalemate. The moment dragged out agonisingly as they were baited, until-

'-there's no way she can tell when-'

Lemon didn't fire, instead she magically grabbed up the fallen lantern from behind the stallion and went to smash it on the back of his head.

Despite being so tense, the invader didn't see it coming. *Th-*dunk**

The stallion staggered, but Prey instinctively knew it hadn't worked. The sound had been wrong, not the crack of a skull he knew.

'He has more protections too!'

Lemon's follow up spell streaked through the staggering stallion's head, but it was already too late. His thoughts had turned into a buzz once again and the red spike of light did nothing.

He must've been wearing some kind of helmet under the hood, or equipped with some enchantment against physical force. Lemon had almost gotten him, but almost never won any prizes.

This time, when the stallion straightened back up, he took no chances. When the thief's thoughts next flashed back into existence, he went straight for the attack.

'-she *can* tell! Too dangerous-'

His horn glowed yellow, and a platinum ring Prey hadn't seen resting around the horn's base lit up with power. Another artifact! How many of the damned things could he *have* and not combust? A crack of sparks rushed to the tip of his horn as he aimed for Lemon-

-And had to go intangible as Lemon's follow up spell blasted through his chest, aimed right at the blue stone in the breastplate. With the runic array on the choker helping shave off previous half moments, Lemon was faster. Only just. But that's all that mattered.

When the enemy unicorn phased out, his spell was cut off, discharging with a loud *crack* into the air.

'He has to be solid to be able to cast! He can't shape magic while intangible!' Prey realised with a thrill of hope.

'-I must be faster-'

The stallion phased in again and went straight for attack. He didn't even bother to duck for cover, trusting in his ability to not be there to keep him safe, simply trying to race Lemon to cast first.

The platinum ring lit up brilliant yellow, cracking lightning jumping to his horn tip.

The light stung Prey's eyes. His hoof flew to grab for the ribbon. Lemon raced to fire her own spell again.

For a second afterwards, Prey didn't know who had won. He was deafened and blinded by the *__crack__* and a surge of light. He staggered, hooves burning with phantom pins and needles, trying to blink his stinging eyes clear.

What had happened? He couldn't hear the thief's mind!

Prey saw the shapes and outlines. There was Lemon Pink, she *had* managed to fire first, but the enemy unicorn had also managed to finish his spell. The two spells impacted perhaps inches out from the stallion's face and exploded.

The stallion was on the ground, leg thrown over his hooded face. Something of the spells must've still hit him before he could phase out. A hit!

And the hit didn't matter. He was right there in front of them, dazed and momentarily stunned on the floor, but Prey couldn't take advantage of his weakness. All he would need to do was reach out, touch the stallion, and Prey would break his mind like glass. His enemy, one of those responsible for stealing his veropede from him was less than two paces away, down and on the ground... But he was beyond Prey's reach.

The pony was *right there*, but Prey was helpless to stop him, because he wasn't really there.

The thief had all the time in the world to recover, as he groggily shook his incorporeal head and slowly sat back up.

Only now did Prey realise that Lemon had not gotten away unscathed either. Her fur was gently smoking, and she staggered

drunkenly to the left, then to the right, trying to keep her wavering horn centered on the recovering thief.

Prey was frozen. The ribbon dangled in his grip, hoof drawn back ready to toss, but he was rendered helpless to use it.

Lemon bumped into the wall and fired by mistake, her spell a noisy and unclean mess. It wasn't even on target and did absolutely nothing. Nothing, aside from getting the stallion to snap out of his daze.

The thief cast around on the floor wildly, looking panicked. His hooded head locked onto Lemon Pink. He could've attacked right then. He could've tried to phase back in and hit Lemon while she was weak. Maybe Prey would've been able to dash forwards and touch him in time, or throw the ribbon.

Maybe. Maybe not. Prey would never know because he didn't risk trying.

The cloaked pony rolled himself sideways, as if just rolling out of bed, and dropped down into the floor vanishing. Prey stared wide eyed at the spot. The mind beneath the concrete sped towards the outside again, moving through stone and matter like smoke. Why was the unicorn always returning back outside? Was there a time limit to how long he could remain intangible?

'How am I even seeing him like that if he can't interact with the physical world? How can I even sense his mind? It shouldn't be there if he's completely intangible.' Prey's thoughts raced, but any answer he came up with wasn't going to help him right now.

He dashed over to Lemon's side. He smacked at her face, shook her, "Hey, hey! Wake up. You need to get up."

"You... I do not..."

"Breathe. Your muscles aren't working properly. Concentrate on your magic, you can still use that. Breathe." Prey's voice was squeaky in panic. Lemon was the unicorn here, not him. She *needed* to be able to defend them.

Lemon groaned, tried to get her hooves under herself, and almost managed to sit up.

"Don't try and get up, you might faint. Just get your magic ready. He could be back any moment-"

As if on cue, Prey felt the buzz of the mind come into his perception range again. From above in the roof.

Prey made a snap decision.

"Lie down, pretend to be unconscious. But prepare your magic. Fire on my command." He hissed, then jerked away and turned to face the shadowy room.

Out of the corner of his eye, Prey saw the enemy unicorn's hooded head phase in through the ceiling, dipping down as if the stallion were lowering his face into a pool to see what was underneath. Why did the hooded unicorn always keep the same orientation while intangible? Surely it shouldn't matter if he stuck his head out upside down or out sideways through the wall? Or did gravity still apply in some way? Or was it to stop him from losing track of direction?

Prey didn't turn, not letting on to the stallion that he knew the pony was up there.

Prey's heart was hammering. If it weren't for the runes engraved on the jaw of hearts, that should've been causing him agony right now. He swallowed, still forcing himself not to turn around despite the eyes drilling into the back of his neck. His hooves were trembling, just like they always did when it came time to fight or die.

"What do you want?" Prey called out to the room. His voice quavered all by itself without even needing to fake it.

Could he succeed in baiting the unicorn out? Prey couldn't let the thief go, they'd seen his and Lemon's faces. The hooded head watching from out of the ceiling stayed up there, not moving.

"What do you want?" Prey cried out again, trying to create a distraction, "Why did you attack my mother? What did I ever do to

you?"

Prey was lying, trying to evoke a reaction from the pony up above. If the unicorn wanted to respond, he'd have to phase out of the ceiling and become tangible again to do so.

Out of the corner of his eye, Prey saw the head jerk, before pulling back up into the roof. The feel of the mind zipped above Prey and emerged back outside the room. Prey sensed the pony drop back down to ground level and phase back in.

'-buck, North Star would be better at dealing with this. Should I go back in or not?-'

That all but proved it, there was some kind of restriction on the magic of the artifact, one which forced the user to return to full solidity regularly. The stallion had retreated to safety outside the room to do so first for a reason. But what was the cause? What could it be?

And then Prey lost connection with the thief's mind as the pony came towards him. The hooded stallion stepped through the wall like a ghost, blue jewel set in his gilded chestplate shimmering.

Prey jumped, spinning around to face them as if he hadn't known of their approach. The stallion regarded Prey, but he hadn't returned to solidity just yet, perhaps sensing a trap.

Prey crouched, affecting wide eyed fear. It was no great acting feat. His legs were still trembling. The hooded head turned to regard Lemon Pink, who was still playing the part of being down and out. The hood must've had some obscuring enchantment on it, because there was no way shadows naturally collected that thickly. Prey couldn't see their face, but he could read anger in the unicorn's body language plenty clearly enough.

The stallion took three incorporeal steps sideways, putting Prey between himself and Lemon Pink. Prey's heart sank. Lemon couldn't fire now. Only then did the stallion drop back into the real world.

Prey was immediately hit with their angry thoughts; '-unrepentant

greedy thief! Throwing her own adopted daughter under the cart to beg for her-'

"What do you want?" Prey demanded again, hoping he could get the stallion to start monologuing now that he thought he'd won. Prey still gripped the blue ribbon, tightly wrapped around his cloven hoof.

"Murderer," The stallion stated. His accent was clipped and precise, like a teacher's, "*Murderer*. Thief. Bandit. Traitor. That is what your mother is, little filly." He spat.

"What? We've never even done anything to you!" Prey lied, further baiting him.

"A liar on top of all else as well then. How much of what she told you was even the truth, if any? Do you even know what your adoptive mother has hidden under Canterlot mountain? Do you know about the diamond dogs she's murdered?"

'-Celestia this is disgusting. I hate warlocks like these-'

"No, no she wouldn't do anything like that," Prey protested, "You're lying! *You* invaded. It's *your* fault."

The unicorn stepped aggressively forwards, bristling, "Ignorant filly! You have no idea what we've been forced to do to protect the peace because of ponies just like-"

Prey dropped flat right in the middle of the unicorn's outraged rant. This was why you never attempted pointless talk. It distracted you from the reality of the kill or be killed situation you were in. Prey barely saw a flash of red light streak over his head as he hit the floor.

And for once, Prey heard it hit. A shout of pain, the clatter of the unicorn falling over, unable to phase in time. But he wasn't dead if he could shout.

That red flash was supposed to be lethal if aimed right. A concentrated spike of force, simple and uncomplicated, meant to just pierce a hole. It didn't have much stopping power, more like a

red needle of magic than anything else. It took far more control than it took power to cast, making it ideal for the magically depleted Lemon Pink.

But it still hadn't killed the thief. Prey raised his head to find the unicorn clutching at his face under the hood. Lemon had aimed to kill him in one go, wagering on managing to score a headshot.

The force spike should've gone straight through his unarmoured head, but it hadn't. Whatever unknown protection enchantments the pony had on him must extend to magical attacks too.

'Zoma'Grika.'

Prey scrambled to his hooves and flung himself at the downed unicorn, going against all his screaming instincts to get away from the much larger and stronger enemy.

The ribbon snaked out from his hoof mid air, almost like it had a foul life of its own, eager to latch onto the unicorn like a snake.

It all happened so fast, and he was too slow. Prey thought the ribbon touched, but it didn't. The stallion had phased. Prey's ill advised lunge carried him skidding *through* the pony. For a moment he lost sight of the room as it all went dark until he emerged on the other side. Prey cursed, scrambling to turn around to face the unicorn.

The prone stallion returned to solid just long enough to lash out with a rear leg right into Prey's chest.

Prey instinctively tried to grab for the leg as he was booted away, but caught nothing. Whether he missed or just slipped straight through again he didn't know. Prey flipped over and smacked into the floor, *hard*. He hacked, doubled over. His ribs! His screaming rib!

Red flash, red flash, red flash!

Through watering eyes, Prey saw Lemon was casting again and again in succession as quickly as she could manage, not trying to connect, just trying to keep the thief intangible so he couldn't

attack.

Prey managed to get to his knees, but no further. His chest hurt too much. He gasped out, "Air. Needs air."

Lemon abruptly stopped casting, although her horn still shimmered red. When Prey looked, eyes blurry, he saw the cloaked stallion had vanished again, sinking into the floor and retreating back out of the room.

"Where?" Lemon asked, back to her hooves finally, although still markedly unsteady.

Prey could only point to outside, the direction the mind had gone, "Air." He gasped again.

Prey didn't get time to explain further. He jerked his head to the left wall, eyes wide, "Incoming-!"

The thief barrelled through the wall in a dead charge, no subtle peeking through first this time. As his tail left the wall, the stallion's hooves struck the stone as he phased back in.

Lightning raced up the length of his horn as he continued his headlong charge at Lemon.

Her red force spike went through his center mass before he could finish. Instead of puncturing a lung, all it did was send stone slivers flying off the far wall.

The thief had to drop his spell with a crack of discharged lightning, but didn't slow his spectral gallop.

"Wh-" Lemon tensed, and he ran right through her and went on to vanish into the opposite wall.

Prey wheezed, "He'll be back-"

The stallion reappeared, charging back out of the wall coming from the opposite direction now. Once again Lemon's spell went off in the nick of time and the intangible pony ended up harmlessly galloping through the far wall again.

Prey tried to get out of the middle of the floor. His head jerked to the side, "There-"

Again, the galloping form of the stallion appeared from the wall, coming from a different angle. This time however, he didn't even try to cast. The red flash lit up the room again as Lemon was forced to fire anyway when he was almost on top of her, just to stop him from phasing back in and ramming her.

Again, he sailed soundlessly though her, and again, vanished into the far wall.

He was going to keep coming, keep charging through like this while invulnerable, waiting for Lemon to either tire herself out or make a mistake. Lemon wasn't a magi, she couldn't keep casting near forever. A crude, simple, but effective tactic.

From the left this time, the cloaked figure burst forth. Lemon fired, and the thief vanished again, but five seconds later he was back, coming in at another angle. He was smart and patient, wearing them down first.

A third, a fourth, a fifth time, Lemon casting her red magic at the last second, and Prey frantically signalling where the stallion was going to attack from just before he appeared. The hooded unicorn had rapidly taken control of the fight and the scales were becoming more and more unbalanced every second. He had them completely trapped in here.

They couldn't keep this up. Prey forced himself up from his knees, a groaning hiss escaping through clenched teeth. It was difficult to breathe, his lungs felt trapped in his too tight rib cage, 'Got to get to Lemon! Gotta' get to Lemon!'

Lemon had what he needed. He'd figured out what the restriction was. The thief needed air. That's why he kept reappearing outside between each charge, to grab another breath of air.

The magic of his strange chestplate may let the wearer fade in and out of existence on some level, but that level also excluded air. He could only take what he had in his lungs when he phased out.

Prey ducked, a red flash winged past too close to his head, trying to get closer to Lemon Pink, who was sweating with the strain. The stallion's attacks were coming from every direction now, jumping out from the floor and walls, and dropping out of the ceiling.

Prey finally managed to stumble up to Lemon's side, eyes watering with every step, but he had no time for pain. He bumped into her, grabbing at the inner lining of her cloak. She had it here somewhere, Prey knew she did. Where? Where?!

Fear made Prey's shaking hooves fly. He yanked out a square drawstring pouch and staggered away from her, getting clear.

"Fail on the next cast." He wheezed out the order.

There was a moment's hesitation, a flicker in Lemon's eyes where she obviously disagreed with Prey. The thief came bursting through the wall again and Lemon hastily whipped up her horn around. The spell flashed red-and promptly fizzled out as if she'd lost control of it.

The thief was almost on top of her, literally less than a hoof away. He was too close to reappear to cast a spell in time. So he phased back in and rammed her instead.

The thief was a stallion, larger than Lemon Pink, in light armour, not to mention whatever protective enchantments he had on him, and was travelling at speed.

The charging stallion hit Lemon in her chest with his armoured shoulder. Lemon Pink made a sound like a hiccup crossed with a kicked dog. Her hooves left the ground as she went airborne for a second. She landed ungracefully on her back in a tangle of cloak and legs.

The hooded stallion had barely been slowed by his impact with Lemon, and if he tried to stop now, he'd hit the wall horn first. So he didn't stop, vanishing through the wall, but he'd be back any second now before Lemon could recover. Prey reared back, drawstring clenched in his teeth to throw. He teetered there, ribs screaming, unable to breathe as he frantically tried to sense which

direction the thief was coming from.

'There!' Prey whipped his head in an arc, letting go of the pouch, then fell over clutching his ribs.

Through the wall the hooded unicorn came in a phantasmal charge. Horseshoes rang on the floor as the stallion phased in, horn levelled at the downed Lemon Pink.

Then the fine orange powder drifting in the air from the thrown pouch got under his hood, and he completely forgot all about casting.

The stallion screamed, shockingly loud in the maintenance room. And what went hoof in hoof with screaming was breathing in to scream. He sucked in a lungful of the burning kerash root powder.

He howled like a wounded animal, staggering blindly into the wall, clutching at his face. He choked, gagged, and screamed, breaking off into a wracking coughing fit.

"Shoot! Get him!" Prey shrieked.

Lemon Pink wobbly aimed her horn at the screaming thief's back, clenched teeth bared as she forced her front hooves under herself.

The thief's choking howls of pain abruptly cut off. Prey looked. The unicorn was dragging himself through the wall, fumbling for something at his side, an amber gemstone.

A few moments later as Prey stared at the wall, the muffled hacking and coughing resumed from outside. Then there was a large wash of magic which stung Prey's hooves like fire-ants, and the unmistakable *clap!* of displaced air which came from classic unicorn teleportation.

Lemon Pink's magic faded from her horn. Prey stared, one hoof still clutching his ribs, "He... escaped?"

The thief had just gotten away. He'd just escaped, as simple as that. It had all happened so fast.

The hooded stallion had seen Lemon and Prey's faces. He could identify them. And he'd just escaped, and/or gone to get reinforcements.

The artifact wielding thief had waltzed into Prey's lair, killed one veropede, crippled the other, waltzed out, then stumbled across him and Lemon in blind luck, fought them both off despite Prey's tricks, and had still gotten away in the end.

Fury boiled up inside Prey, hot and thick. It dulled the pain of his ribs and almost made him forget how scared he was. Almost.

"No one steals from me!" Prey spat, striking the ground ineffectually with a hoof, "No one."

But they had. And Prey was scared.

It took a few minutes for the last particles of the burning orange powder cloud to all drift to the floor, and allow Prey and Lemon respectively to limp through it to reach the door. They did so, very careful not to kick up any puffs of the flour-fine orange granules.

Normally, Lemon would've cast an air bubble and swept up all of the powder back up to leave no evidence. But normally, blinding powders weren't mixed with ground up marinated kerash root. Standard unicorn magic had a hard time getting any sort of grip on kerash root, it being a naturally occurring dark magic saturated plant.

Normally, this still wouldn't have stopped Lemon from using a simple water cantrip spell to condense a half cup's worth of water from the air to sprinkle over the powder, dampening it into clumps. But normally, Lemon wasn't magically drained and exhausted.

And normally, Prey didn't have to worry about a diamond dog getting his scent. But the burning powder strewn across the floor removed any chance of that.

When they exited the maintenance room, there was no sign of the incapacitated thief, or anyone else beneath the grey concrete

overhang for that matter.

They didn't linger, and hurried away as fast as they could manage. They didn't know where the thief had teleported to, but even if he retreated straight to his allies, it would be a while before the incapacitated pony was able to stop coughing and crying long enough to tell them about Prey and Lemon. They had to get out of the area before that happened.

Prey was betting that amber crystal he'd seen for an instant was actually a predetermined teleport destination. All it would've required was the raw mana from the user to activate. How else could the unicorn have been able to teleport whilst in his agonised and blind state?

Plus, if the destination had been anywhere outside of Canterlot, the unicorn would've definitely needed a boost to get there. Teleporting was a high end and very complicated spell, and four out of five unicorns who mastered it still couldn't get further than about a mile. Plus, there were also all kinds of teleport blocking enchantments around certain places in Canterlot, like the Royal Bank, hospitals, the Guard jail cells, and the Palace.

Prey hated unicorns. He hated their magic. He hated them and how easy they naturally had everything. And he especially hated having to fight them.

The open streets of Canterlot, with their groups of happily oblivious ponies passing by, didn't feel safe. They felt like a sham, a falsehood, a pretty lie to the violent danger Lemon and Prey had just escaped.

There were ponies laughing. Why were they laughing? They shouldn't be laughing. It felt eerily wrong.

There shouldn't be anyone chasing after them yet, but what if? What if one of these chatting ponies was secretly trailing him and Lemon, just waiting for the perfect moment to strike? His enemies were unicorns, they could hide in plain sight in a city of ponies.

Every horn he saw passing by spurred him to fresh fear, so recently

renewed.

This all felt so, so... Prey didn't have the right word. The fight had been so abrupt, so sudden, as violence often was.

For all he'd been expecting the danger and known it was inevitable, he still hadn't been *expecting* it. His stomach still lurched at every painful step, just waiting for the violence to pounce again out of nowhere.

"They now know about the sewer." Prey said to Lemon as he limped along, only taking small, short steps. He'd been hoping the pain in his ribs would settle. It hadn't. Every step hurt his chest.

"But they do not know where in the sewers." Lemon Pink said. She was also limping, favouring her front left leg. She was too magically drained to cast an illusionary disguise over herself, so her normal pink coat and tri-coloured mane were on full display to everyone who looked.

"But they do know it's somewhere in the sewers. They may have some magic to scan the tunnels and find our second makeshift lair." Prey returned.

"Yes, Prey. That is certainly possible. What shall we do?"

Prey was quiet for a while, thinking as haltingly limped/trotted along. They crossed the street between a gap in the carts, and under Silver Shoal's arch, a purely decorative engraved structure that held no functional purpose whatsoever.

Prey was scared, but he couldn't let fear rule his actions. He had to be objective and take the most logical course of action. He didn't know what to do, but doing nothing was definitely the worst possible choice. Sometimes there are no good options, and you just have to pick one.

Prey came to a decision.

"We can't move from the sewers. Trying to smuggle the veropede out now is bound to get us caught. And despite everything, the sewers are the best place to hide from the diamond dog trackers

they have. You can't leave tracks in water, and the smell itself will hide any scent down there. Hopefully." He added with a groan.

"There is no chance of any dog obtaining our scent from back there either." Lemon observed, breathing shallowly, and referring to the burning blinding powder still scattered about the maintenance room.

And right now, they were walking down main streets, frequented by thousands of ponies every day, scents and paths all criss crossing each other.

Perhaps things weren't as bad as they seemed, Prey dared to hope. Then he remembered the strange but powerful magic artifact the hooded thief had wielded.

No, things were certainly even worse than they appeared, because Prey didn't know what was coming next, and his enemy now knew his face. And how many sheep were there in Canterlot? As far as he knew, just the one. He couldn't flee Luna's generous 'employment' either.

"We do the same we've been doing all along," Prey said, "Make runes. Prepare. Look for an opportunity to strike back."

Patience is what separates good hunters from dead hunters. But reaction speed is what divided live prey from dead prey.

It was late evening, just before twilight started to deepen, when Prey returned to the flat, carrying a small box and drained to the edge of apathy. He'd created yet more runes upon runes. The demand for arrays and runic defences was never ending, and the need had never been more pressing than now.

Of course, Prey did not go to bed without first knocking on Crimson's flat to check he was okay. The door was pulled swiftly open, and on the other side Prey found one of the two Night Guards assigned to Crimson staring down at him.

'-Luna damn it. I would've won that bet if I'd taken it-'

Prey offered the thestral mare a slow nod, "Good evening. Is Crimson around?" He asked politely. He didn't care what bet the mare was thinking about, he was only here to see his friend.

The mare's ear stud showed her to be clan Fellieon, and for some odd reason, she'd tied off her long warrior braid with a number of pink elastic bands. It wasn't any of Prey's concern.

"How many armour stands are there in the left alcove of the ISND's office?" The mare asked.

Prey raised one eyebrow, but it was obviously a security question to make sure he wasn't an impostor, because there were obviously hordes of imposter lambs roaming Canterlot, "Trick question. None."

"Just checking. And yes, Crimson's here." The mare nodded, stepping aside. Her griffin claw boots clanked softly on the floorboards.

'-really though, there's like, only one sheep foal in the whole of Canterlot, so who else could it be?-'

'If they only knew about the Mimics.' Prey thought, forcing himself not to limp as he walked in. Although the poultice he'd applied earlier and the herbs he'd eaten had helped, his ribs still hurt, but it wasn't as bad as he'd earlier feared. None of his ribs were cracked, and Prey was very good at medicine and healing, courtesy of Snake.

Out of the two of them, Lemon Pink had required more medical attention in the end.

Walking into the bare flat, Prey immediately looked for Crimson.

He didn't have to look hard, the red pegasus was in the middle of the flat, his wing blades out, and running through the movements of his training kata. With slow, but smooth precision, Crimson brought one wing high, rising up onto three legs, then transitioned into a kick of some kind, then a slow motion strike.

Prey watched Crimson for a moment, then dropped the box and sat to help relieve his ribs, glancing at the second Night Guard temporarily assigned to Crimson, who was standing guard by the

window. Prey supposed that Taffy's obsession with curtains wasn't *entirely* without merit. If he'd had curtains, Crimson could've closed them instead of being backlit in front of an open viewport into his flat. Behind Prey, the Guard mare had shut the door and was standing at ease.

Prey waited a beat, then coughed to get Crimson's attention, although the pegasus definitely already knew Prey was there.

"Yes Prey?" Crimson asked, not halting his exercise.

"I thought I'd just check in before I went to bed. That, you know, you hadn't been attacked or anything." Prey said.

"Not today, no." Crimson answered, sweeping a low kick at the legs of an imaginary opponent.

Not today. That really summed up Crimson's feelings of nervous frustration. It hadn't happened today, but that just meant it would happen some other time. Crimson could only wait and try to be ready when it did.

"It may not happen at all." The thestral stallion by the window spoke up, keeping one eye on the falling night through the glass.

That was true. Maybe nothing would happen, but...

"Better safe than sorry." The thestral mare summed up nicely.

Prey tilted his head towards the two Night Guards, ear flopping, "I take it they're both getting relieved at some point tonight, right?"

These same two Night Guards had been here since this morning. That felt like such a long time ago. Between then and now, Prey had almost died. Inside, he was feeling a lot less composed about that whole affair than he was letting outwardly show. It was all a mask.

"Unless you're not actually sleeping here Crimson, but safe somewhere else...?" Prey trailed off, trying not to sound too hopeful. Safe inside the walls of the Palace would be ideal.

"Nah, we're going to be replaced in about an hour's time." The window Guard answered before Crimson could. He glanced at the first stars appearing outside, "Maybe a bit less actually."

"That. What Kitesail said." Crimson agreed, doing some kind of rising lunge that Prey knew he could never have emulated even if he wasn't just a runt lamb.

"And did anything of importance happen today?" Prey checked, gingerly rubbing at his ribs.

"No. I mean, not really? I don't think the thing with the magpie and the paint counts as important." Crimson shot a glance at the thestral mare.

Prey could almost feel the smug amusement coming off Kitesail, the Night Guard standing by the window, as he laughed in his own thoughts, while behind him, Prey picked out a mix of embarrassed and resigned sounding thoughts.

'-oh come on, nopony could've seen that magpie coming-'

No doubt it had something to do with the pink elastic bands in the mare's braid.

There was probably a funny story in there. It could've been the greatest comedy act of the decade, and Prey wouldn't have found it funny right now. The forming bruise under his wool across his ribs made it impossible to forget an attack could come at any time.

But Prey kept his polite mask on, projecting polite disinterest, "Ah, okay."

Prey just *so* didn't care. He didn't care didn't care *didn't care!* He wanted to converse uninterrupted with Crimson, and these two Night Guards were getting in his way, and if they didn't get their useless hides out of the room right now-!

Prey smiled apologetically, tugging at one drooping ear in a distracted manner, "Sorry to interrupt your practice Crimson, but could I possibly talk with you for a minute? If it's not too much trouble."

Crimson paused in his kata, "What do you mean? We are talking right now-Oh, you meant alone."

Kitesail shifted at the window unhappily, "We'd be remiss in our duty if we were to leave you unguarded."

Crimson folded his wings, wingblades sliding away, "It's Prey. If Prey wants to speak with me alone, then it's in my best interests to speak with him. Alone. Trust me on this."

"That came out wrong. What I meant was, it would be the perfect time for anypony watching the flat to strike if we were to leave." Kitesail amended.

'-as if that's what I was worried about. Thestral warrior versus undersized lamb, ha! Actually, no, that wouldn't even be funny-'

Crimson remained as unphased as ever. "I would like to speak with Prey alone please."

The two Night Guards exchanged looks, communicating silently. He frowned. She shrugged.

'-well, Crimson Trace is probably a better warrior than me in any case-'

'-and it's not likely anything will really happen in only a minute when we're right outside-'

"Okay, we'll be just outside. Not that I think anything will happen, but it's our duty." Kitesail said, but he was still reluctant. It was his duty to voice that protest, and as everyone knew by now, thestrals took duty very seriously.

The door couldn't close on the two thestrals soon enough to suit Prey, leaving Prey and Crimson alone in the nearly completely bare flat.

"I-"

"Are you hurt Prey?" Crimson asked, head swinging towards him.

Prey fumbled, on the back hoof for a moment, "I-what? Why'd you ask that?"

Crimson took a deep breath, tilting his head back, "It's not that I can smell any blood, but, you smell a bit like hurt." Crimson awkwardly explained.

"Hurt has a smell? What's it like?" Prey asked, for a moment curious.

"It's not... How to describe...? I think, it's a bit like heated metal, or faintly unpleasant mushrooms."

"Really?"

"No," Crimson admitted, "I'm mainly just guessing. But you look..."

His amber gaze roamed over Prey from hoof to tail, eyes which hated lies and would rather see an unpleasant truth instead. He was a better person than Prey like that.

"Tired. Very tired. You're always tired Prey. Everyday, you come back from somewhere which you won't tell me tired and... empty like."

Crimson, quiet contained Crimson, always did see more than Prey would have wanted.

"I..." Prey couldn't lie, "I'm tired yes. Very tired. Sick and tired of all this..."

Prey vaguely waved his hoof, indicating nothing and everything at the same time, "...All this stuff. Constantly being under threat. Never being safe. I hate this place. I hate being here, I hate Canterlot, I hate magic, I hate being a runt, I hate being forced to risk my life, and I just want to go back-"

Prey quickly stopped himself. It wasn't that Crimson wouldn't understand, but Prey was skirting on the edge of saying too much.

Crimson's wings were twitching, but he hadn't anything to say to that. Words were cheap, and any he might voice would just ring

hollow.

Prey coughed awkwardly, then regretted it as it made his ribs twinge, "Anyway, I didn't come to waste your time with pointless complaints. I wanted..." He stopped, shuffling his hooves, before squaring his shoulders and sitting up straight.

"Crimson, I've got a gift for you." Prey declared.

There was a beat of silence.

"A gift?"

"Yes."

"A gift."

"That's what I said."

"For me."

"Yes."

"A gift. Another gift. For me."

"That's right."

"From you."

"Yes."

"Another gift, for me, from you."

"Yes?"

"And... What is this gift?"

Prey pushed the small makeshift box over to Crimson.

There was a brief rustle of newspaper wrappings.

"This is another ring."

"Yes."

"Another mane ring."

"Technically it's an actual mane band this time, but yes I suppose so. It seemed fitting I should provide a replacement."

"And... This ring isn't going to be anything like the last one, is it?"

"No-"

"Not that I'm not grateful Prey, because I am! Very grateful. It saved all our lives. It's just, I mean... Look what's still happening because of last time."

"No no, it's nothing like that." Prey hastened to assure him, "I swear it's not magical to the best of my knowledge. It's just carved iron wood as far as I can tell."

Crimson's ears tilted apologetically, "Sorry Prey. I mean, it's just, you know..."

"It's just plain wood. Nothing like the jade necklace."

"I was just checking."

"Oh, and here's your second gift."

"...Pardon?"

Prey reached a forehoof into his wool scruff, and drew out a long metallic feather. The metal tines were impossibly fine, like a real feather, yet despite that, the hair thin metal didn't break. But for all that, it glittered and shone in the light like it was made of silver water.

It represented the entirety of the remains of Prey's stolen electrite. Or to put it into a gold value, tens of thousands gold worth of bits. Crimson stared at the brilliant feather, the exact length of one of his own pinions. "I, how did you even carry that in your-? No, forget that, what is this Prey?"

"Half my body mass is just wool. Runt here, remember? It's easy to line anything long and thin into my wool. I just have to keep it flat against my skin, for example a pencil-"

"*Prey*."

"Okay," Prey winced, "It's an artificial magical feather. And yes. It's probably exactly what you think it is."

Crimson stared at Prey's face, then at the feather held outstretched in the cleft of the lamb's hoof. "Who did you take this from?"

"No one."

"Prey, it's a magical artifact. Are you going to tell me you picked it up from a yard sale again?" Prey could hear the strains of genuine worry and fear in Crimson's tone.

"I didn't steal it, and no one is going to come looking for this feather like Lord Vanish did, I can assure you."

Prey paused, "Let me rephrase that, because it sounded way more sinister than I meant. No one is going to come looking for this because it was made *specifically* for you."

Crimson's gaze was sceptical, "How? Something like this must cost... I have no idea, but lots. How did you get it?"

Prey hesitated, "I know someone."

"You know someone." Crimson repeated.

"Yes, and I asked them to make it."

Crimson looked at the glimmering metal, "This is why you wanted one of my old feathers." He sighed.

"Yes."

"Prey, this is too much. I can't take it."

"But it's for you! I went to a lot of effort to get this made."

"A lot of effort," Crimson looked sharply into Prey's face, "What did you do? What did you promise? Prey, what did you promise them?"

"Nothing. There's no cost you need to worry about. No debt collectors are going to come to kick in my door in the middle of the night, I promise you." Prey assured him, trying to get Crimson to take the feather.

He didn't. "Prey, I...I don't know what you did to get this. But I didn't, I mean, I *don't* want you doing something dangerous or immoral for me."

"Please Crimson, I got this for you. And it's fine, it wasn't dangerous." Prey assured him, skipping over how the electrite was actually all stolen, "Take it. Please."

Crimson's gaze was wary as he scrutinised the feather, "What does it do, exactly?"

"Things," Prey answered evasively, "Stuff."

"Prey..."

Prey shrugged uncomfortably, "Alright alright. It doesn't do anything active. It's got lots of passive enchantments on it though."

Runes actually, but for Crimson's understanding, enchantments were functionally the same.

"It's supposed to help guard you against magic, it varies to what extent between different types. It also has some notice-me-not magic on it, and it's not going to fall out or get blown out by itself-"

"Fall out?" Crimson interrupted.

"Yes. It acts like one of your normal feathers. Just put it in your wing and it'll blend in."

"You don't just put feathers in, that's not how-"

"Just slip it between your pinions. It'll work, you'll see. Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, it is also supposed to help you fly faster."

"What? Fly faster? Wh-How?" Crimson demanded.

The answer was a complicated one, involving passively channelling ambient magic in safe quantities into Crimson's pegasus circuits, thereby enhancing his instinctive weather and air mastery, all without requiring any conscious input. And that was only the surface, the feather also helped funnel air, create a better aerodynamic flow, lessen the strain on Crimson's muscles, better circulate blood through the wings during flight, and a host of other smaller effects.

Prey actually felt a bit jealous. But he couldn't make one of these for himself, because they worked off the passive magic inherent in the host's body. Ponies, even non-unicorns, were full of the stuff. Sheep? Not so much.

"It's complicated. The short answer is magic, and I really don't understand it all. But it works." Prey had wanted to give Crimson wing blades capable of slicing through steel and deflecting magic, but he couldn't. Anything big like last time would get noticed.

Crimson looked at the feather for a long minute. Prey saw worry there, leaking through the impassive mask. The jade necklace had exacted a heavy price from Crimson, and in the end it had been stolen from him. Once burnt, twice careful. But it *had* also saved them against the scarecrow and the kindersnatches while it was still in his possession.

"You don't want me to tell anyone else about this, do you." Crimson said. It wasn't a question.

"I would prefer it if you didn't. One of the conditions was I didn't tell anybody about who I got it from. Plus, it's my gift for you. It has nothing to do with anyone else. They don't understand."

"Don't understand what?"

"Understand what it's like to be hunted. To fight for your life, to be afraid and so desperate for a weapon that you'll use anything." Prey said grimly, not a trace of levity in his voice.

"Ah." Crimson turned to look at his wing blades, folded away but still attached, "I can understand that."

"So, could you please...?" Prey waggled the feather at Crimson, trying to hide how nervous he was. The two Night Guards waiting outside would be getting antsy. This should've been simple, but Crimson was being far more cautious about receiving a new magical artifact than Prey had predicted. He probably shouldn't have been surprised. The only reason Crimson was even entertaining the idea of using a strange, unknown artifact was because it was coming from Prey, and Prey's last gift had saved all their lives.

"Prey, be honest. Should I take this or not?"

"Yes." Prey answered with all the sincerity he could muster.

"Alright then." Crimson reached out, and Prey dropped the metal feather onto his waiting hoof.

Crimson looked at the feather as it shimmered in his hoof. It was very light, not like metal at all. "Alright. I've got it. Yes. Well. Okay. So now what?"

"Khe-he." The giggle escaped unbidden from Prey as he smiled, then winced and touched a hoof to his ribs, "It's quite simple. Here, hold out your wing."

"Does it matter which?"

"No, either should do. It doesn't work by strengthening only one wing, but rather your natural internal magic. So it doesn't matter which one."

Crimson spread out his right wing, the feathers played wide.

"Alright, so just sort of slip it between two pinions."

"Won't it just fall out?" Crimson asked, nevertheless doing as Prey had said.

"It'll be fine, see?"

And Crimson did see. The metal feather slipped in between two pinions, and then seemed to twist and slide over the organic feathers all by itself, fitting seamlessly into place. It shivered, and abruptly it wasn't shimmering silver anymore, but deep red, just like Crimson's normal feathers, perfectly blending in. It had a simple notice-me-not effect on it too, just in case anyone did somehow have time to count and notice the uneven number of pinions.

Crimson blinked, flexed his wing, folding and unfolding it. The feather moved completely naturally, just one of a dozen more. It really was completely indistinguishable in Crimson's wing. He tried flapping, and it didn't fall or shift.

"It doesn't even feel any different. I'm not even unbalanced." Crimson murmured, bending his wing to bring the pinion's up close for his scrutiny.

"Excellent." Prey beamed with delight.

"I... thank you Prey. I think. I hope we both won't regret this."

"You won't," Prey promised, "Mostly you won't even know it's there. It's more of a 'just-in-case' kind of insurance."

The feather certainly had a few hidden 'insurance' like effects. Hopefully, they would never be needed. But standing here, all the hours he and Lemon Pink had invested into the feather's creation were worth it. He'd been working on it since before the thieves had raided his lair, but the discovery Crimson might be a target had pushed Prey to rush its completion.

Prey looked at Crimson's wing, and couldn't see the metal feather even though he knew it was there. It was a miniature masterpiece. Prey's smile slipped away as his eyes caught the glint of unassuming gold on Crimson's forelegs, and felt a corresponding weight on his own.

'I can create such things, but I still can't discover anything more about how these filthy alicorn bands work.'

At times, Prey even forgot the two gold bands were there, at this point just like another unwanted piece of his runt body. But every time he woke up in the morning and stretched, or looked down, or reached for a page, or climbed the stairs, he saw the tracer bands and was reminded.

"Right. Well, I've kept you from practice long enough. Your two guards are probably just about ready to burst in to make sure I haven't kidnapped you or something." Prey said, getting up and enduring the pressure on his ribs the movement caused; "And thank you for listening to my request."

"Any time," Crimson cast around the empty flat, "I won't tell, I mean, I will keep this between us. And, sleep well Prey. Luna watch over you."

"Thanks. You too."

The last thing Prey wanted was the night alicorn watching over him. He feared it *would* be the last thing.

---I---

Author's Notes:

Here's the next chapter in the course of the story. [image]

Editor: **Sweetolebob18**

TO READERS: As per the comments in the last chapter, I am now asking officially what people want to happen with Lemon Pink. (I haven't missed or forgotten what people wrote last time, I'm just asking for anyone who might've missed it and wanted to speak)

People have had many different ideas and theories. Not saying if I'll definitely use a suggestion, but I'm asking for inspiration anyways.

62.4 There's a Time and a Place for Nothing

This morning, the Canterlot weather teams had decided on scheduling a light, predawn mist, the kind which quickly burnt away under the sun. Until that occurred however, the city was tinted a nice buttercup yellow.

The air was fresh, crisp, but with that special warm hum which promised another beautiful day to come.

Just the weather team's little artistic reminder to Canterlot's citizens that fall was on its way, something the teams did every year, although it would take a pegasus to truly appreciate the work they'd put in. Or those who arose early enough to see.

There was one such group awake right now, but they were not admiring the picture postcard worthy view.

The group was small, only four individuals, and all cloaked. They were seated under the awning of a still closed shop. One of the figures was tall and hunched, not equine at all in shape. There was nothing to indicate that this group had been there half the night, carefully watching the unassuming maintenance door situated across the street, past the fence, and under the bridge overhang.

To be able to see anything during the past night, they would've needed either a light, some kind of night vision, or magic. They'd lit no light during the hours of darkness, narrowing the options down to two.

Occasionally, one of the cloaked figures would turn and murmur something to another. The three equine shaped figures anyway. The fidgeting hunched bipedal figure was rarely included.

The group had been patient and cautious. There'd been magic of some kind used earlier, both to set up some form of monitoring on the lone steel door across the street, and over their own position.

But that'd been hours ago, when the four figures had first arrived during the night time. It was only now, at first light, that the hooded group finally made a move.

Words were exchanged, last warnings, orders, or perhaps reassurances. Two of the three ponies stood up. The hunched figure started, moved to follow, and was stopped by the third hooded equine. This fourth figure hunched lower and slumped back down under their cloak. The pony staying behind gave them a quick pat on the back, but their attention was fixed on the other two.

One of them was large and bulky, probably an earth pony although there was no guarantee of that, and the other was proved to be a unicorn when their horn started to glow a bright white yellow beneath the hood. Between the folds of cloth, on their chest, there was a glint of a glittering blue stone.

The one who was probably an earth pony wrapped a hoof around the unicorn's shoulders as they continued to gather shining magic, building up the spell matrix for about seven seconds, before the pair flashed and vanished.

The mist stifled the **crack**

The pair reappeared next to the door under the gloomy overhang in a matching flash.

Both ponies immediately went back to back, braced for some kind of explosion. They didn't move for a full thirty seconds, even after nothing happened. If you looked real closely, there was a faint white glimmer over the larger pony's whole form which wasn't the mist.

Back across on the street, past the fence and under the awning, the remaining pony shaped figure stopped restlessly tapping their hoof in relief. It could be noted that they were wearing some kind of odd hoof guard.

The freshly teleported pair exchanged nods, and then the unicorn walked through the door. As in, right through it, without resistance or effort, like the steel was merely an illusion.

The one remaining with the non-equine figure started tapping their hoof again as the seconds ticked past. The hoof guard had a strange black metal along its rim.

One minute and twenty-two seconds later, if you were counting, the cloaked pony re-emerged, appearing out of the wall like a ghost. They visibly sucked in a deep breath of air, before shaking their head to something their waiting companion asked. If there'd been someone there to see into the deep shadows under the overhang, they would've seen the bigger pony cautiously place their armoured hoof over the door's lock, then give it a push. They leaned out of the way as the door slowly swung open.

Nothing happened. Across the street, the pony's hoof stopped tapping again.

More gestures were exchanged. The two ventured into the darkness of the open door.

The hoof tapping anxiously started up yet again.

The sun continued to turn the slowly evaporating mist a beautiful pale yellow.

Prey blinked rapidly and rubbed his aching eye. It hurt from peering through the compact, collapsible spyglass for so long, despite him regularly switching eyes.

The view it showed him was just that little bit more blurred and persistent than could be ascribed to the spyglasses' fault. It was the permanent lingering aftereffects of the reaper king's poison. Prey really hated that.

The bricks he was lying on had long since grown warm from his body heat over the course of the night, as Lemon Pink and he lay and watched the group watching the overhang.

It was them. The thieves who'd invaded his lair, or part of their number at least. They had indeed come back to the site of their confrontation to look for clues, as he'd predicted likely.

'No one steals from me.'

The blanket over him and Lemon Pink was itchy, but neither of them had moved since lying down. They were over two hundred yards away from the awning, but Lemon Pink had still kept up a low level illusion projected over the blanket the whole time. Having just the one mono coloured and mostly flat surface to project onto helped her, but Lemon was still nearing her limit, and couldn't focus on anything else except her casting. That left Prey as the one using the spyglass.

That non-equine figure under the awning, Prey was sure he or she was a diamond dog. If the shape didn't give it away, the dynamic between the ponies and the dog had. It'd been obvious who was in charge. The body language of the dog screamed "uncomfortable at being in Canterlot", and was plainly visible even from under the cloak.

That phasing unicorn with the strange enchanted chestplate was not the same one who Prey'd confronted the other day. The previous one had orange fur. Prey had seen this one's fetlocks beneath the cloak, and despite the similar height, weight, race, and build, their fur was obviously maroon, not orange.

The blinding powder Prey had hit that unicorn with wasn't the type you could just walk off. Unless they'd gotten medical attention, they were likely now permanently blind or half blind. Even if they'd gotten help, (and unfortunately that seemed all too likely), they would still be incapacitated for a while yet, and in miserable pain for up to roughly thirty hours after getting hit.

Anger lurked in Prey's heart as he looked back through the spyglass, but it was a cold sort of anger. These people had attacked him, his lair, his veropedes, Lemon, and Crimson.

'You killed my veropede. You threatened me and made me afraid. You've destroyed so much of my precious work. You invaded like it was your right, forced your way into my home, attacked my lair, and endangered both Crimson and me. And you still keep on coming, you won't quit while you're ahead.'

And there they'd sat, hooded and obscured, but still right there within his sight throughout the night. But while he certainly could've enacted some plan against them, he hadn't.

The power of Prey's runes lay in defence, in traps and pre-prepared ground. And Prey had gotten the distinct feeling there was another person hidden here somewhere, but neither he nor Lemon had caught a hint of where. It's what he would've done if he were in the thieves place, what the Resistance had taught him. And even if he was wrong, a battle here in the middle of a city street would definitely attract the Guard.

Right now, the thieves were probably only here to scout out the maintenance room and begin venturing into Canterlot's sewers, a much better place for murder. That was why only those two had gone in, the phasing thief and the bulky pony. Prey had a very good guess about what artifact or artifacts the probable earth pony carried.

He remembered the crushing damage done to his lone surviving veropede. After thorough examination, he'd worked out it had been mainly self inflicted, like the veropede had been throwing itself against an indestructible, immovable object which reflected all force. In short, the veropede hadn't been able to touch the pony last time. After all, how did one beat invincibility?

Why else would that pony be confident enough to venture in alongside his fellow intangible unicorn friend to face any possible traps?

Prey didn't know what artifacts the third thief who'd remained outside possessed, but obviously he had one or more of some sort. They wouldn't be able to find his last surviving veropede down there, would they? No, they couldn't be venturing in that deeply today, and the veropede was hidden deep. This was just a preliminary scouting mission. *Surely*.

Prey silently waited and watched the scene as the morning mist dissipated. The sunrise was behind Lemon and him, so the spyglass wouldn't catch the light and give them away as he continued to use it.

Those cloak hoods were enchanted, Prey couldn't see anything of the faces underneath to tell who it was. 'They'll not get caught by something like the blinding powder again either. They must have measures in place now. A mask, or air filtering spell perhaps.'

If only Prey'd been born a unicorn and had access to that kind of magic on demand, then he could-

No, it didn't matter what he could've done, since he hadn't been born one. Just a girly runt sheep instead. Dammit, he so desperately needed time to set up more runes.

Soon the early birds of Canterlot would start to emerge. It would still take a while longer before they started filtering into the less frequented areas such as down here, but they would still be coming even if only to pass through on their way to somewhere else.

The hooded diamond dog looked to be growing more and more uncomfortable with every passing minute. He or she argued about something with the pony, before subsiding and hunching back down.

If they stayed, the dog was going to draw unwanted attention from racist and/or curious ponies. Surely the thieves couldn't be planning to stay here much longer? The mist was almost gone, and Celestia had raised the sun clear of the horizon by now.

Prey rested his aching eye and switched to the other at the spyglass again. The pony under the awning was doing something, looking at something they'd pulled out. Prey couldn't see what, because they were facing away from his vantage point.

What was happening? Or what *had* happened?

The pony shoved whatever it was away again, and pulled out a familiar looking amber gem.

It came as no surprise when they went over to the diamond dog, and one huge mitt emerged to grasp the pony's hoof. Then they were gone in a bright flash and sparkle. A second later, the **crack** of the displaced air reached Prey's ears, muted by the distance.

Prey sighed and lowered the collapsible spyglass, taking the opportunity to rub at the scar tissue underneath his aching eyes. He didn't know what, if anything, the thieves had found or why they'd decided to call it a day, but he couldn't make assumptions. Those other two could still be down there searching for all he knew.

"At least two of them have left." Prey muttered lowly to Lemon Pink, who still had her eyes closed in concentration, maintaining her illusion spell. She nodded in acknowledgement, slightly curved and sharp horn dipping with the motion, but she didn't open her eyes or stop.

Prey tried to settle himself more comfortably on the bricks. They were going to be here for a while longer yet. The hidden, unknown thief was probably still lingering in the area, hoping to catch anyone breaking cover and leaving. Prey and Lemon would have to wait until the traffic was good and flowing through the area before they made their own exit.

'This is just the start.' Prey thought, brushing his ears aside and setting his chin down, 'They know my face. They have the advantage. They're not going to give up. Somehow they tracked me back to the sewers, and now they're homing in.'

Prey had experience being the smaller, weaker, less equipped and hunted party from being in the Resistance. He knew how it went. He knew how to fight viciously and give no quarter with hit and run tactics.

But he also knew that it'd been the smaller, weaker, and less well equipped Resistance who'd been destroyed in the end.

Everyone roots for the underdog, but no one bets on him.

Prey felt like he was stuck in a trap. The whole of Canterlot itself was the trap, and it was none too slowly closing in.

Tick-tock, tick-tock.

Minutes were like gold bits. Each one was something precious to be spent for as much as it could buy.

A minute could be turned into a lesser rune. A dozen such lesser runes into a basic array. A score of basic arrays into a defence against lightning magic.

Then an array to ground the lightning. Then another to help prevent the first array from overloading. Then one to prevent tampering. Another to hide them all. More to harmonise with the other arrays. Another array was required to encompass a greater range of lightning, for there was more than one type of spell for casting it. And then an automatic control array to join all of these arrays together. And finally a fail safe so if it all collapsed, it would do so harmlessly.

All that to build one defence array against lightning magic. Too many arrays, too little time.

Tick-tick, tock-tock.

But what if Prey was attacked by a fire wielding unicorn, and not one with lightning? Or what if it wasn't flames, but just heat? Conducted through the air directly at Prey, or perhaps through some other medium? And what about differentiating normal fire from a magically fuelled one?

Some defences had to be broad enough to stop all dangerous levels of heat, but it couldn't catch everything, so you had to add in narrow, specified runic arrays to catch everything that might slip through the first.

Tock-tick, tock-tick.

The traps and the failsafe slowly spread out over the rough greenstone walls and tunnel floor. Slowly, because the defences weren't finished. Time was running out, and Prey wasn't permitted to see the hourglass to know how much sand he had left. But he had a feeling in his bones that it was already too little, and running out.

Tock-tock, tick-tick.

Prey never took the same path back to the flat twice if he could help it, mixing it up with side streets and seemingly nonsensical detours, while checking if he was being followed. He was dead on his hooves by the time he finally arrived back at the apartment block, and it was only late lunch time.

But he'd been up half the night lying on a brick roof, and since then, he'd been draining his strength into creating runes and climbing first down, and then back up, long sloping stone tunnels. The mid-afternoon sun was too bright and the happy sounds of Canterlot life grated on his every nerve like each was personally made to spite him.

Prey plodded up the stairs to the second story, then in through door 31. He stopped to check if Crimson was here, (he wasn't, and neither was there any kind of guard left on the pegasus's flat), before going inside to his own appartment. It wasn't *his* flat though, it wasn't a home. Just a flat. But one with lots of runic defences in it.

Prey took out a cold baked potato and listlessly ate it, not even bothering with a plate as he held it between his forehooves, mind occupied elsewhere. He'd baked a whole load of potatoes two nights ago. They were easy and lasted a while. It was a cold, tasteless mush on his tongue. He didn't have time to waste on anything more satisfying. He was only eating to keep his strength up.

'Where is the fish? Plants are no meal for a Stormcrow, yez'?' Garrow's remnant whispered out of nowhere. It wasn't a question to Prey, but a memory of a question the murderous griffin had once asked in life.

Prey almost dropped the half eaten potato. Angrily he focused inwards, hardening his mind, 'I am in control. You are already dead. Begone.'

But the remnant didn't disappear as he'd wanted. 'Fishez'. Sardine, cod, salmon, my favourite. Cooked over my camp fire with Father. It is alwayz' tastier when eaten outside, yez'?'

The thought of eating fish made Prey loose what little appetite he had. But the memory of the delicious taste of ember baked salmon which flaked off in your beak was still there. Pegasi sometimes on rare occasions ate fish, but Prey was a sheep and entirely a herbivore. He didn't want fish, but in his memories he did.

Prey clenched his jaw, focused harder, crushing Garrow's remnant like a wheat stalk over an anvil, 'I am Prey. You are nothing but dead. I am in control.'

Under his intense focus, the remnant finally broke apart and vanished. Prey kept his mind bound with iron control for another moment, before breathing out and letting go. He shouldn't have had to do that twice, once should've been enough. Hell, he shouldn't have to do it even once.

'You are weak. Nature abhors weakness.' Snake hissed in his other ear.

The potato hit the floor. It didn't go splat, the baked vegetable was too dry for that, but the half-eaten insides spilled out of the skin in white chunks.

Prey looked down at it. He slowly lowered his forehooves back to the floor. The reflective sheen on the golden surface of the tracer bands trembled slightly. His leg was gently shaking. The feeling of the silk ribbon behind his ear was little comfort. Snake had been tormenting him long before he'd had even his first ratty ribbon.

Prey got up, and went and got a wet rag to clean up the spilled potato. Then he went and methodically thumped his head against the wall for a few minutes. It didn't really help.

---oOo---

"You were nearly caught yesterday?"

"Yes, Prey. Twice almost."

"Show me."

"Yes, Prey."

---oOo---

Yesterday. Lemon Pink opened the door to Prey's flat. Outside stood Gloom, dusk pony amulet on and appearing as a normal grey pegasus.

"Good morning Prey." Gloom said.

"Morning to you too. Whether it's good or not remains to be seen." Lemon Pink answered. In her own ears, her voice wasn't her own. It was childish and light, Prey's voice. The words were exactly something Prey would've said too.

Lemon was taking Prey's place, while the lamb worked hard on preparing the runes they so desperately needed down in the tunnels. Prey was far faster at runic creation. It was only logical Lemon should therefore be the one to placate Gloom when he came to visit.

"I think it will be good." Gloom said blandly, looking at Lemon's legs, or the height where Prey's eye level normally was. That's where the illusion's eyes were too. Lemon kept herself from moving, the thrumming feeling of magic circulating through her horn taking most of her focus.

"Oh? Why's that?" Lemon heard the childish voice of Prey again asking her question.

'For what reason could it be good? What positive events were scheduled to occur that Gloom would think Prey might judge good? Unknown. Prey did not mention any scheduled in.'

"Did you forget?" Gloom asked, raising an eyebrow, "Lilly Blossom, remember? It's her hospital review. She might get released, so we're going to support her."

"That does not constitute good."

Gloom frowned down at the illusion of Prey, "Excuse me?"

"I mean," Lemon corrected, "That is not a happy event. She might not pass. And why should it be good, where 'good' would've been

not getting injured in the first place?"

'Downplay, explain, and deflect.'

"I didn't mean it like that Prey. Of course it's not good, but being there to support her, emotionally, is important. And it'll be doubly important for us to be there if she fails. We're her squad." Gloom said, voice and tone heavy.

'Negative. I cannot attend any such meeting.'

Lemon twitched the magic, making the illusion of Prey take a step back into the flat, shaking its head, and carefully modulated the voice to express appropriate emotion, "I'm sorry, I can't attend today. I am not feeling well."

Gloom's frown came back. Lemon saw it held suspicion, not just disapproval.

"Are you lying to me, Prey? Why? This is Lilly we're talking about."

'Annoyance. His special talent is manifesting suspicion. Downplay, explain, and deflect.' If this didn't work, this might become a confrontation. She was prepared to stun and forcibly alter the thestral's memories if need be.

Lemon spoke through the illusion again, "I really am feeling unwell, but putting that aside, I really think it's best we don't go. You and I both know Lilly Blossom lays at least a portion of the blame for her condition on you, Crimson, and me. She has refused to see any of us three. Fail or succeed in her hospital assessment today, won't the last people she wants to see be us?"

"We're her squadmates whether she likes it or not. Even if she currently hates us, we still owe it to her to try. Both for her sake and our own, we need to try, just like Doctor Clear Mind says, even if it doesn't work." Gloom insisted.

'Continue to deflect.'

"We will only make it worse if we do," Lemon warned through Prey's voice, "The only people she's allowed in to see her are Scenic,

his marefriend, and Saffron Swirl. If she could, she would deny even Nighthawk and the doctors. Think about that. Not even her family. Her *actual* family. If we go against her wishes, we'll do more harm than good. I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to sit this one out."

Gloom's eyes narrowed at Prey's illusion, but he didn't speak for a moment.

'Oversight. Something has gone amiss. He still suspects.'

"You know..." Gloom began slowly, "I've been in Lilly's situation before, injured and slowly recovering. I was extremely grateful for all the support I got, even though I didn't think I would be. It meant more to me than I realised after I got clawed by the wyvern."

'False. This is a trap. A test. He suspects something.'

"You didn't get clawed. You said you got hit by the spines on its tail." Lemon said, trying to correctly express confusion in Prey's fake voice.

Gloom's posture relaxed slightly, but he was still frowning at Prey, "Yes, I did get tail swiped, not clawed. I misspoke."

Lemon didn't say anything, just changing the flow of magic to have the illusionary lamb blink at Gloom.

Behind the illusion though, Lemon was slowly tensing her legs up, ignoring the sharp twinging in her left foreleg. She would only have a moment of surprise when she dropped the illusion.

Abruptly, Gloom turned and began striding away, but not before calling back, "Fine. If you really do believe it's a bad idea to try and help Lilly, we're off duty, I won't force you. However, I think we both know you could still try, you're just afraid to. I can't judge you for that, but I want you to think about it too. If Lilly won't even see us, then you've lost nothing by trying."

---oOo---

"Gloom's special talent, I presume."

"Yes, Prey. I agree that was most likely it."

"Regardless, that doesn't constitute nearly getting caught. You over estimated the severity. Gloom merely had a suspicion because of the current security risk threatening Crimson, and asked a question to double check."

"I see, Prey. In that case, I was nearly caught once not twice today."

"Let's see the other memory then."

---oOo---

The pleasant clip-clopping echoed up and down the cobbled street, mixing with the sound of passing carts and loudly talking ponies. The scent of freshly baked ice-cream waffle cones brushed her nose as she passed the stall. Lemon glanced from under the brim of the floppy sun hat, and saw the ice-cream vendor serving a pair of young, rambunctious colts as he joked with their father.

'Did I used to like ice cream before...?' Lemon cut off the thought, 'Unnecessary.'

She turned off the street, onto a quieter , less travelled one, taking the first turn by the lamppost. There was no time to do the bi-weekly check of the underground market. Unfortunate. The project of preparing a safehouse would have to go on semi permanent hold too.

Lemon's thoughts shifted back to the unicorn she'd fought in the maintenance room, once again critically re-evaluating their fight.

'Unfinished.' There was distant anger within the memory, but it was muted, like it had all happened long ago, rather than just yesterday. In Lemon's head the anger felt more like a checkbox to be archived than anything deeply personal. It was with the same detachment she'd drugged and then sacrificed the splinter pack of diamond dogs.

'Uncoordinated. An inefficient performance on all sides of the fight. My magic consumption, Prey's planning, the thief's use of his artifact, all of it. That's what happens in the heat of the moment.'

Lemon changed her pace as the cobbles changed to concrete paving slabs beneath her hooves. She'd exited the housing district, and now she was into a business street full of offices. And when she turned off that, passing by a small time solicitor's firm, a collection of warehouses and storage buildings lay below her at the bottom of the slope.

'The old airship gondola construction bay. Behind the toilet block on Bay 2. Disused access hatch into the sewers. Convenient.'

While there were plenty of access points down into Canterlot's sewers, the number which were unattended like this one, out of sight of passers by, and also large enough to admit a pony were far more limited. There were less than twenty such access points scattered throughout Canterlot. Official ones anyway, assuming you weren't prepared to tunnel your way in. The veropedes definitely could've done so before, but this wasn't before.

Lemon ducked under the lone red and white barrier pole, and headed off around the side of the empty warehouse bay.

This skyship construction bay had been shut down for eight years, with a fair amount of accumulated dust inside, but there was no structural deterioration showing yet. She found the small, squat red brick waterworks shed situated at the back, and with some concentration, a touch of magic and a spell, unlocked the door.

'Dusty.'

Silvery light from her horn showed a couple of pipes and stopcocks, but otherwise an empty shed. And a square, dark metal hatch in the corner.

The hatch was heavier than it looked, and Lemon had to let go on her first attempt at heaving it up, staggering. She breathed sharply, injured leg curled in as she waited for the pain to pass. Then she tried again, this time using her uninjured leg and better prepared for the weight.

The hatch made a heavy *__clunk__* as the lid came to rest upright against the wall. She lent over, and the dark way down was

revealed. Through dancing dust motes in her horn's silvery light, a short drop was revealed, along with a rather rickety ladder set into the red brickwork. At the bottom, there was another identical hatch.

The ladder really was wobbly, and Lemon lost a wisp of her mane that got sharply snagged. With another heave, and a vague wish that she was stronger or didn't have to hoard her magic so much, she got the second hatch open despite the cramped shaft.

The unmistakable smell of the sewers immediately greeted her nostrils.

'Old. It's not fresh sewage. This pipe won't join any active waterways. I'll have to take the back way down to the Heart.'

Lemon turned herself around and started descending, rear hooves first, testing each rung with her full weight first.

'Third rung loose. Skip that one in the future.'

The air was dank, and the smell was fast intensifying in the dark. She fed more magic into her horn, the ethereal thrumming feeling running up her horn increasing as the light correspondingly brightened.

She froze. '...What was that?'

She almost hadn't caught it, but that thrum of magic just now hadn't all come from within. Something external had brushed ever so lightly against her own magical field, the one which all unicorns had, extending a couple of millimeters past their own bodies.

If it weren't for the enhancing effects of the electrite or the choker, or if she'd been even momentarily distracted by something else... But she hadn't been distracted, and Lemon knew she hadn't imagined it.

'Danger. A magical trip wire.'

Lemon launched herself back up the second ladder into the cramped shaft. She grabbed the second hatch in her magic, no time to be

conservative now, and slammed it shut. Brick dust billowed into her face as the *__Clang__!* reverberated.

Her hooves found the first ladder and she raced up it, the rungs jerking and squeaking. Equines were not made to climb ladders.

'Faster. A magical alert will have been sent. Must be fresh. Alarm spells don't last, only enchantments. How quickly can they respond?'

Darkness sprang up behind her as she let the light spell wink out and grabbed the first hatch. It slammed just as loudly in the narrow confines of the waterworks shed. How close could they be? Had they left a teleport beacon around here?

'Run. No time to re-lock the door. No point, they already know. Just run.'

Her leg hurt, but Lemon ran, out of the shed and out of the deserted skyship construction bay. She reached the barrier pole, ducked under it, sun hat pressed firmly to her head with magic, eyes and ears swivelling for the attack. No one was about.

'Cover. Get under cover. They could have fliers.'

She made it to the closest fire escape door into someone's office. It was locked. Her magic grabbed the panic bolt from the inside and pushed it down. She yanked the door open and darted inside. She caught the door just before it shut and held it, peering out the crack, breathing hard.

From this angle, she had a half view of the skyship bay. She counted the seconds as her heart continued to hammer.

'...eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourte-'

Her ears twitched at a dull *_crack_* of displaced air. A teleport spell, sounded like less than a hundred yards away. Lemon didn't move, staying perfectly still at her position at the door crack peeking out, ignoring the interior of the office building she'd broken into.

'...twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-'

There. Two ponies, hooded and cloaked despite the bright sun, were striding towards the barrier. And...

She frowned, concentrating on the two figures as they ducked under the pole. There were two of them, but there had been just for the briefest instant at least three sets of hoof steps. Anyone else would've doubted themselves. Lemon didn't.

'Invisibility. Actual number of enemies unknown. At least one extra though.'

There could be one conducting a sweep of the area right now, coming in this very direction, and she wouldn't know.

Lemon let the door drift very slowly shut, then keeping her head low, she made her way through the office and out the front entrance, ignoring the surprised receptionist who started and squawked. She would soon forget Lemon's passing, thanks to the sun hat's notice-me-not array. Lemon had to report this.

---oOo---

Prey withdrew from the memory, disentangling the grey courtyard of Lemon Pink's mindscape from his own burnt ashen forest. The familiar, unpleasant heavy feeling of being back in his own flesh reasserted itself as he blinked. He didn't ask Lemon if she'd checked there wasn't some kind of tracking magic on her. If she wasn't sure, she wouldn't have risked coming to meet him.

Prey worked his tongue around his dry mouth, "Almost got caught indeed." He commented blandly to Lemon.

"Yes, Prey. It is most likely they have access to the same architectural sewer records as we, and thus have marked all such ideal entrances."

"That much is now obvious," Prey nodded slowly, thinking, "You left strands of your mane behind. That was a mistake. You should've retrieved that tuft."

Lemon grimaced, bowing her head at his criticism, "Yes, Prey."

That had been a dangerously amateurish mistake on her part. Sure, she'd been in something of a hurry getting out, but not when she'd been going in. It would've only taken a moment to snag the loose strands of mane caught on the ladder. It was too late now though, and there was no going back to check if the thieves had noticed or not.

"They probably don't know any voodoo magic to use it with." Prey offered, but it wasn't much comfort. 'Probably' didn't mean 'certainty'.

The kind of magic which used hair and/or body parts was, as a whole, dark and/or banned. The thieves were hardly paragons of virtue though. Wasn't that exactly the sort of magic they might know?

"They probably don't." Prey repeated. He was still thinking over what Lemon had seen, even as he considered this side problem, "But better safe than sorry. Make and wear a warding charm just to be sure."

Voodoo magic was a largely ritualistic style of spellcasting, relying heavily upon ritual components, exactly like a strand of mane. Largely unknown to ponies, voodoo magic wasn't powerful, not straight up like unicorn magic was at least, narrower in scope too, but it could be just as deadly and far more insidious. Snake had known voodoo magic, but as such, the zebra had also known how to guard against it.

It was rather simple if you knew how. A charm made from a little roll of bark, containing a drop of Lemon's blood and something dead, (a beetle would do but a plant wouldn't), and tied up with strands of your own hair or fur.

"Yes, Prey. I will make a charm straight away." Lemon nodded, starting to magically comb through her yellow, white and black mane looking for a loose strand.

"But back to your close call though; there was someone invisible there, possibly even more than one."

"Yes, Prey. I am certain."

"Invisibility. I don't have anything to base my assumption on, but I'm betting it's the true sort of invisibility too, not just a veil. With all the other powerful artifacts and magic they've been throwing around, it's all but certain." Prey muttered, curling the ribbon around his hoof in thought.

True invisibility. Perhaps one of the most classic and iconic of all spells, the sort all unicorn foals said they'd learn when they grew up so they could raid the cookie jar unseen. Of course, growing up, such goals were quickly forgotten as impractical.

Real invisibility wasn't an illusion spell which fooled the senses, but one which, (to Prey's understanding), physically refracted light. It was of course vastly more complicated than that, but that was the general basis.

'Well, I know how to get around invisibility easy enough. A bone rot mine kills everyone just the same, visible or invisible.'

Prey said that, but what if a bone rot mine didn't actually solve the problem? What if they had another defensive artifact too, or caught Prey anywhere he hadn't had time to prepare the field ahead of time, like, say, most of Canterlot, or avoided the explosion, or spotted the bone rot mine first, or simply just approached from a non-trapped direction? Like from up in the sky for pegasi? Or from under the ground, like with diamond dogs?

You might know how to fight a lion in theory, but was that much comfort when you were actually getting clawed by a lion? No, not really.

Prey bit his cheek, shutting his eyes to better think. It didn't help much. None of the scenarios he could envision ended positively. He was drained and tired all the time now, and worry was his constant companion, eating away at his gut. His mind *hurt* from all the runes he'd been creating.

'Think. What have I learned? They have the sewer entrances under surveillance. But those alarm spells must need to be refreshed semi-

regularly. So every eight or nine days? Somewhere around that time limit.' Prey thought about what that meant for a bit.

Now every time he ventured into his backup lair down in the Sewer's Heart posed a risk. But also maybe an opportunity. Perhaps he was thinking about this wrong. He should take a step back. Why did he actually *need* to go down into the sewers? What was stopping him from just avoiding the tunnels entirely?

Well, it was both where his sole surviving veropede was hidden, which would also need feeding, and where Lemon and he had moved all his supplies and experiments from out of the crystal cave lair.

Except he'd had to put all of those experiments on hold. Sure, he'd worked hard and finished the electrite feather for Crimson still, but otherwise? All the rune work he did now was just for defences and traps.

'But they've seen my face. They'll track me down eventually, either inside or outside of the Sewer's Heart, it'll happen. The only reason they haven't found me yet already is because they're looking in the wrong place. If they look towards the Palace or the Guard however...'

The thieves were currently looking in the wrong place. For that reason, Prey needed to keep them focused on tracking down his lair within the sewers, because if they took a step back and started searching in more mundane places, Prey was done for. The thieves already had all the leads they needed with Crimson, they just didn't know it. If they were watching Crimson, it was highly likely they'd eventually see Prey too. They shared the same front door, for Tartarus sake.

Probably the only reason the thieves hadn't discovered the connection already was because they'd put Crimson on hold while they tried to track down Prey, who appeared to be a much larger and more imminent threat. If only they knew the answer was right under their stupid pony noses.

'I'm locked into this course. If I stop and hide, they'll start searching

in other places and go after Crimson again. If I keep going, we'll inevitably cross paths and fight again anyways. And my time is running out. Every hour, they scout more of the sewer network and work their way closer to me.'

It was hopeless, there was no escape. Eventually, one way or the other, it would happen and they'd track him down.

If he could flee from Canterlot, if he could just get *far* enough away... but no. There was no fleeing Luna's reach.

The back of Prey's throat felt tight, or like he'd swallowed a live worm. He pressed his forehooves together to eliminate that traitorous trembling he hated so much.

'I hate this. I hate all of it. And I hate hate *hate* the hunt.'

But there was no way back. The only way out of this was to make it to the other end of the tunnel; battered, limping, teeth gritted, and with a bloody knife in hoof.

"I have to do something. I can't just keep waiting. If nothing else, the veropede will eventually have to be fed at some point. Do we have any copper sheets left?"

"No, Prey. I used the last five to transport the array for reinforcing the heat sink dump."

"Fine, get me some metal of whatever we have left then, I'll make it work. They're not the only ones who can rig a silent alarm."

Except the unicorns could do it with a flick of their horn. For Prey, it was hours of work to create just one such alarm for a single entrance.

"What kind, Prey?"

"I said any kind, whatever metal we've got left."

"No, Prey. I meant, what kind of alarm?"

"The tracking kind."

Lilly Blossom passed her medical review and suicide checks. She would be released from the hospital tomorrow. Unfortunately, (for Lilly), her parents were also informed of her impending release.

Prey was there. He hadn't gotten out of attending in the end. They were gathered inside the hospital, in the waiting room of the restricted ward. He stood off to the side, behind Crimson, Scenic, Gloom, Carton, and Saffron, the glamour model who came wearing a plain, nondescript dress, sunglasses, a hat, and a scarf as a pseudo-disguise.

Prey was too distracted to care one way or another about the emotionally charged atmosphere as they tensely waited for Lilly to be brought out.

He was blanking out the screaming mare on the other side of the double doors, who was shouting all kinds of insults about the Night Guard, the hospital, and the staff while a loud stallion, her husband, backed her up and demanded to be let in:

"Sir, madam, please listen to me-"

"That's my daughter! My own flesh and blood. I have a right to see her!"

"You, your hospital, all of you! You've been nothing but a disgrace to ponykind since we've begun this whole affair. How can you call yourself a doctor?" Lilly's father shouted.

"Sir, I'm not a doc-"

"So you admit it!"

"Let us in. Please! Let me see our daughter. Just one of us, just let one of us in at least." The mare begged, but without any hope. Both of their voices contained the worn, tired edge of someone who'd done this a hundred times already this week, and had no hope that anything today would be any different.

There were two orderlies staffing this side of the double doors, ensuring the upset family didn't try and force their way through. Both orderlies were staring straight ahead, ears lowered, and making sure not to meet any of the room's occupant's eyes.

Lilly's older brother and sister were also out there, it wasn't just their parents who'd come today. Desperation, resignation, defiance, fading hope. Those were the sounds the room had been hearing coming from the other side of the doors for the last ten minutes.

No one had said a word, but their thoughts were pained. Shouldn't Lilly's family be the ones in here right now, and not them? But Lilly had refused to see her parents.

The mood was as brittle as glass.

Carton Juice was squeezing Scenic to her side, although whether to comfort primarily Scenic or herself wasn't clear. The earth pony stallion himself was staring at the floor, reminded all to clearly of his own poor relationship with his own parents:

'-this isn't right. But my situation isn't like Lilly's, my parents only want a perfect son, they don't see me as my own pony-'

Next to the pair, Saffron Swirl was miserably hunching her shoulders into her scarf, also remembering how her own parents had disinherited her, and feeling guilty compassion for the family outside.

'-I've gotten to see Lilly and they haven't. But it was only to help her get better, I wasn't trying to steal Lilly from them, I'll swear before Celestia-'

Gloom and Crimson were stoically unmoving in the face of all this. The two Night Guards who'd accompanied the red pegasus had remained out the back. Here in the middle of the hospital, there was little chance of an attack against Crimson. But that was only on the outside. On the inside however, Crimson and Gloom were just as affected by the ongoing plight of Lilly's family happening next door.

'-why couldn't Lilly just see her parents? Why does she have to do this to her own family?-', Gloom was thinking.

It was enough to even get an unguarded thought from behind Crimson's mental walls; '-this isn't right. She has a duty to her family. So why?-'

Lilly wouldn't let her family see what'd become of her, but she was willing to have the rest of them here on her release? That made zero sense.

Prey didn't get it, he really didn't. 'It's not like her family doesn't know where her flat is. Honestly, does Lilly think they can't just come around after her once she's released today?'

What did it accomplish? What did *any* of this accomplish? Prey knew for a fact he could be accomplishing a lot more if he wasn't here. He stared blankly at the potted tree against the far white wall. It was a miniaturised topiary tree.

What was taking the hospital staff so long in bringing out Lilly? They weren't some sort of actors working at a theatre, with dramatic reveals and delays. This was a hospital.

Had Lilly changed her mind and was refusing to come out? It wasn't a hard scenario for him to envision. The last time Prey'd seen her, she'd been a distraught, self-destructive, suicidal, and crippled wreck.

It was almost suspicious, the number of people here who were estranged from their parents or the like. Prey and Crimson's parents were dead, Saffron's had disowned her for being magicless, Scenic wanted nothing to do with his own, Gloom still had his father, but he was separated all the way back in Clan Chilldara. Really, of those gathered here it was only Carton Juice who had normal, or just *living*, parents as far as he knew. Or cared.

Prey's ear twitched. He looked towards the hall. It took a few moments, but what he'd heard was coming around the corner, or rather *who* he'd heard. Lilly Blossom, a nurse close at her side in case she fell, with the *tap tap* difference in hoof fall every time

she brought her peg leg down.

If everyone was silent before, then they were now mimicking the silence of the grave as they too spotted Lilly.

Through the double doors in the background, muffled but still clearly audible, the shouting continued:

"How many times do I have to say this? Why won't anypony listen? Am I not her mother?"

"This is hopeless, dear. These ponies are useless, you'd do better to try explaining harmony to some other turd."

"Sir, that kind of language is not-"

Lilly slowly entered the frozen room proper, and raised her head. She was wearing an ill-fitting loose shirt, obviously a few sizes too big, but it covered her leg and halfway up her neck. The left sleeve hung slack, draped over the stiff stick limb within. All it did was hide the fake limb from view, it could not hide that it was fake.

But it did nothing for what was visible above the collar. The sprouting twigs which ran up the left side of her neck, pushing out of the peach fur, were still disturbingly visible. Of course, Lilly's face was the worst. Everyone here had seen it before, some more often than others, but it still took you aback each time.

You could say 'I only look on the inside, not the outside', or, 'beauty is only skin deep', but even the most empathetic being still had to see the outside appearance first. Unless they were blind, of course. The thick root twining up from under Lilly's jaw, nearly over one eye, and then curled itself greedily around her horn was just as bulging and worm-like as when Prey had first watched it sprout.

It was always the eyes though that told you the truest story. Lilly's nearly perpetual fiery anger from before was now nothing but gutted ashes in the tired, sunken orbs. They were so expressive, so unguarded. The Lilly before them was a completely different pony, now a hunched, downtrodden, disillusioned, and uncertain wreck of a mare.

It was Lilly who broke the silence. She cleared her throat drily, "Um, hey everypony? I, I guess I'm getting out. Tada."

That was all it took to break Carton Juice from her frozen state clasping Scenic. The huge Earth pony let go of her coltfriend and rushed over to Lilly.

"Oh Lilly, I'm so sorry it took this long, but I'm so happy to see you've made it this far." Carton cried, bending and hugging the much smaller mare carefully from her uninjured side. There were real tears in her eyes. The nurse stepped back, letting Lilly hesitantly lean into the sideways hug.

"Thank-thankyou for, for coming to visit me."

Unknowingly bigoted, privileged, soft, and easily misguided Carton Juice might be, but uncaring she was not. Since the beginning, when Scenic had brought her in to see his injured squad mate, Carton had committed herself to selflessly helping her fellow pony.

'A heart of butter and a head to match.'

Carton's hug seemed to have been the signal to break ranks, because Scenic and Saffron went over too, although they didn't give hugs, Since Carton had still yet to let go, there wasn't room.

Scenic awkwardly patted Lilly on the back where he could reach, "I, uh, wow, I don't know what you're supposed to say right now, but congratulations. Really, congratulations. The hardest part is over now."

'Liar. It's only just begun.'

Saffron leaned in, unheeding of the bulging root growing out of the left side of Lilly's face, and made air kisses on each cheek in an elegant manner, "Thank you for trusting me enough to let me be here. I know I'm nopony special, but thank you for letting me help just a little bit."

"Nopony special, says the supermodel." Lily muttered. It was hurt, bitter, and resentful all at once, and Lilly looked like she immediately regretted saying it. But she'd also meant it, just hadn't

meant it specifically for Saffron.

Saffron smiled gently, her beautiful face framed by enormous golden ringlets, "Oh, it's fine, Lilly. You can say whatever you need to say, I know how unfairly lucky I've been in life."

Lilly's face worked, angry, apologetic, grateful, "I..." She looked away, and saw the last remaining three members of the ISND.

Up until now, Gloom and Crimson had refrained from approaching, remembering Lilly Blossom's previous refusal to even see them. Yet for some reason, they'd been allowed to come today. Gloom squared his shoulders and stepped forwards, Crimson right beside him.

"Lilly Blossom," Gloom cleared his throat and looked Lilly over unflinchingly. He himself had worn neither dusk amulet or scarf today, and his thestral heritage and puckered chest scar were clear for anyone to see, and the scars under his eyes were always visible.

"You look much improved," Gloom said, "And I'm not just saying that. You really do look improved, within yourself."

He held Lilly's gaze when she gritted her teeth and scowled, pressing on, "You really are, Lilly. I'm not making it up. You *have* improved. I didn't say 'better' or 'healed', I'm not trying to insult you."

"You no longer want to die for a start." Crimson spoke up beside Gloom in his blank way.

Everyone else froze or winced at Crimson's words, the nurse and two orderlies on the doors included, Saffron cringing the most. Crimson blinked around, "Oh. I shouldn't have said it like that. I'm sorry."

'Tactful, as always.' Prey couldn't help but think.

Lilly mumbled something and looked away. Carton tightening her hug, but Crimson wasn't done. He stepped closer, making Lilly look back in alarm, meldwood root standing out across her face.

Crimson bowed, all the way to the ground in front of everyone. He

spread his wings, laying them out flat too, "I'm sorry Lilly. You wouldn't let us see you before now, so I couldn't apologise properly. But I'm sorry. I'm sorry I wasn't fast enough, I'm sorry I didn't kill the Mama'duke first, I'm sorry I failed you as a teammate. And there's nothing my useless regrets can do to help you."

Gloom joined Crimson, bowing himself down to the floor and laying out his wings, in a display of full supplication while everyone stared.

They both stayed down there, heads bowed, until Lilly finally found her voice, "I, t-that's, please don't do that. Get up."

Gloom and Crimson stayed bowed. "C'mon, get up guys. Please. I don't, I don't..."

Lilly took a deep breath and shut her eyes. With an obvious effort, each word strained, she spoke, "I don't blame you. Or not anymore. It's nopony's fault, not even mine, the doctors made me see that. So I d-don't want your sorrys."

Behind Lilly, the nurse was beaming with pride at her patient. Lilly breathed deeply and opened her eyes again as Crimson and Gloom finally rose. Carton whispered into Lilly's ear, "That was very brave and grown up of you."

Gloom nodded to the disfigured mare, "I understand. But we're here to help you now, in any way we can. Nighthawk and the Night Guard too. So how can we help?"

Lilly glanced uncertainly around at everyone, all who'd gathered to be here for her release, "I just want to go back home for now. After... I don't know yet."

"Mentioning that, are you going back to your own house?" Gloom asked.

"Yes. I mean, no, not my old house. Lieutenant Starry Wing helped me sell it and get a new one. One which..." Lilly gritted her teeth, and forced herself to say the words, "One which is better suited to, to my needs."

"That's right, and it's only just down the street from me." Carton chimed in, "I can come see you every day. Or you can drop by for tea at any time, you're always welcome."

Carton Juice hadn't known Lilly before a month ago. Carton owed Lilly no obligation, but she'd thrown herself into helping and had accepted Lilly as a possible lifelong responsibility without hesitation.

Saffron deftly reached out and kindly tugged the collar of Lilly's oversized shirt straighter where it'd slipped down, and was exposing the sprouting meldwood twigs, "If you'll have me, I'd be honoured to visit and help too. I'm just a welfare volunteer here at the hospital, but I'd love to take you, as a fellow mare, clothes shopping."

"Clothes shopping?" Lilly parroted, stunned.

"I can't claim to know much, but I do know a bit about playing dress up. But only if you want to." Saffron offered.

"Dress up? But, you're a model, and I'm, I'm..."

"A pony. A strong, brave pony. One who just needs a fashion consultant." Saffron said confidently. She reached up and unwound the scarf from her own neck, "Here. I can help with... some covering clothes, but only if that's what you want."

"Thank you." Lilly said in a small voice, "And yes please very much."

"Of course." Saffron smiled gently, and with assistance from Carton, carefully wrapped the scarf around Lilly's neck up to her chin, keeping it loose where it rested over the protruding twigs.

"Thank you." Lilly's lip trembled, but she blinked fiercely and glared straight ahead, the remnants of her old pride refusing to let her cry.

"You look fine." Carton assured her.

"Yeah, what my much smarter half said." Scenic echoed helpfully, although this really was a mares only moment.

Gloom stood by and tried to smile encouragingly, (close lipped, no fangs), but couldn't seem to find anything further to say. After all that fuss and dedication trying to visit Lilly over and over when she kept refusing them, he didn't rightly know what to say. He was a thestal, to whom words didn't come naturally and actions spoke far louder. But when the time came, Gloom was more than ready to follow with actions, and so was Crimson.

Prey stood off to the side. He alone hadn't said anything yet. A twist of bitterness tugged at his insides as he watched it all.

All of this was a wilful, self-delusional sham. They were deceiving themselves. Lilly was still crippled, hurt, and disfigured. None of that had changed or been fixed.

Where was the anger against the unfairness of life? He wouldn't have sat back and taken this, he wouldn't just have accepted it as the way life now was. Where was the bitterness of youth learning they were not immortal?

"No, sir, madam, for the last time you can't-stop them!"

"No, no more of this! No more of your lies!"

Prey got the answer to his question when the muffled shouting and arguing which'd been going on in the background all this time finally spilled over. The two orderlies on the door, distracted watching the sickeningly bittersweet moment happening in front of them, failed to bar the doors in time, especially when blue and plum magical auras threw them wide open.

Both orderlies were knocked off their hooves, the unluckiest one catching the swinging door right in the muzzle. In through the open doors rushed Lilly Blossom's parents, and closely behind them, her brother and sister for good measure.

For a moment everything hung in the air, like a tablecloth whipped out from under the cutlery where for a heartbeat, it all still remained intact.

Then it all came smashing down.

Lilly's family were all unicorns. They'd rushed into the room not knowing what they'd face. What, if anything they'd been expecting, it was almost certainly not what they found. They hadn't known about the two orderlies. They hadn't known about the gathered ISND. And they hadn't known Lilly was already right there in the room.

The father, a blue unicorn, jerked up short as Gloom and Crimson whirled around, ready to attack. "Who-?"

The peach mare, Lilly's almost hysterical mother, saw her daughter standing frozen between Carton and Saffron. For a moment, the mare's eyes didn't show any recognition. Then the terrible realisation broke across her face.

Prey's hooves barely made it up to his ears before she screamed, shrill, shocked, horrified.

The older brother and sister, fending off the two orderlies as they tried to grab the intruding family members, finally recognised their younger sister. They gaped like fish, recoiling, the father shouted in disgust at the meldwood, and over it all, the rising scream of their mother.

"*My* daughter!"

From there, things went every bit as badly as Prey had expected them to.

Scream, shouting, accusations, threats, entreaties.

Gloom, Crimson, and the two orderlies blocked the unicorn's family's way. Nurses, more orderlies, and doctors were quickly converging on the scene, but it was far too little, far too late.

Carton seemed just as frozen as the paralysed Lilly she was hugging. It was probably only the oversized Earth pony's strength which kept Lilly upright as she began to shake.

Lilly's mother was shouting, demanding to know what the hospital

had done to her daughter, threatening the Night Guard, the hospital, the staff, Celestia, and everyone present by turns.

Saffron had her head bowed, not adding to the raised voices, but she stayed beside Lilly. Scenic was less than useless, his ineffective attempts at defusing a situation which was already so far beyond his control by saying; "It's okay, it's okay" just made it worse.

More shouting and screaming. It was the sound of broken hearts and vengeful tempers. The older brother and sister weren't even able to look at Lilly. The father's eyes were bulging. He looked green.

It barely took anything to get foul language starting to fly next; "You butchers! You *butchers*! Vampires! Flankholes! Bastards! Thieves, Nightmare cultists, criminals, scum, liars!"

Petty sounding insults, but screamed with all the raw feelings of a devastated parent.

But what did Prey not hear amidst the mess of crushed hope, not even once? One of them trying to speak to Lilly. To ask her if she was okay, if she needed help, what had happened to her, or if she was in pain. Not even once. They were treating her like she was already dead, or mentally disabled, not at all like she was standing there and starting to blubber and cry.

Lilly was hideous, injured, unable to ever use magic again. But her family were more interested in avenging her than actually helping her. There was nothing practical they could've done, but they didn't even try.

And not once did any of the four of them say; "We want you back Lilly."

A tragedy. A fragile daughter waiting desperately for a single sentence, even just one word, that would never come. An irreparable rift ripped wide between a horrified family.

Where had all the blind paternal love gone? All that sorrow from before, all those weeks of desperately trying to get in to see their

daughter, even their unflinching commitment from next door less than five minutes ago, where had it all gone?

How quick they were to forget all of it once they'd seen Lilly, and they were now only able to see a broken mare. They saw her as broken, unfixable, and their sadness turned to anger. It was understandable. They'd been there when Lilly was just a cooing foal. They'd been there when she'd grown up. They knew what Lilly Blossom was supposed to be. And Lilly Blossom was not supposed to be a crippled, thin, magicless, hollow eyed, three legged mare with squirming roots bursting out of her face.

It was tragic how it took complete strangers like Carton and Saffron who hadn't ever known Lilly before to see that she was still a person, still there and still alive.

In the end, Prey got to see his wish come true. More orderlies arrived and pulled the family out. Bitterness and rage against the world. He also got to see a devastated Lilly Blossom quietly led away by a shocked and stunned Carton Juice to slip out a back exit to the hospital. Wordlessly, the rest of them followed.

Out on the street, the pair of Night Guards still assigned to Crimson until further notice hung a good way back out of respect, and didn't try to hurry them as they guided a slowly limping Lilly Blossom to her new apartment.

Lilly was crying and sniffing too hard to see most of the trip, and when they got to the door, it was only then Lilly realised she'd left the new key and all her other personal effects back at the hospital.

Without a word spoken, Scenic and Carton turned Lilly around and led her back to Carton's place instead. "You're staying with me tonight."

Gloom spread his wings, "I'll fly back to the hospital and get her stuff." He muttered quietly.

"She's staying with me." Carton repeated firmly.

Gloom shook his head, "I wasn't suggesting anything to the contrary. However Lilly will still need her stuff, I'm just going back to get it for her. I'll be back in thirty minutes."

Even the short walk back up the street took ten of those thirty odd minutes.

They were now all gathered, sitting quietly squashed into Carton Juice's bee themed living room. There were only just enough chairs and floor cushions to go around, even putting aside how Crimson's two trailing Guards had refused a seat when offered a chance to sit, and were still standing.

Carton had put Lilly to bed in her spare bedroom, and the emotionally battered and physically drained mare had succumbed to sleep almost immediately.

Now the rest of them were gathered awkwardly in Carton's living room, not sure what to do or say as Carton poured everyone raspberry tea.

Prey, having immediately claimed the honeycomb patterned cushion in the farthest corner, pushed his saucer to the side and didn't touch it. Prey was acutely aware he was wasting precious time here, trapped by social expectations. He was seriously considering just getting up and walking out of the house anyway, fallout be damned.

He could live through social disapproval. He couldn't live through getting attacked before he was ready.

Prey checked Crimson. The pegasus was tilting his tea cup about and examining the steaming liquid inside sceptically. He lifted it up, sniffed the slightly sour smelling tea, took a cautious sip, and quickly put it back down on the table with a grimace of distaste.

Everyone else seemed captivated by their own tea, staring into their steaming cups. Even Crimson's two thestral witness protection detail had accepted a cup and saucer each. The only sound was the ticking

of a clock with little bees for hands, and the unconscious fidgeting of Carton and Scenic. Saffron Swirl seemed to have had perfect etiquette ingrained into her, (likely essential for a model), and sat with perfect posture, delicately sipping her tea. Her eyes were distant though.

The silent minutes continued to lengthen.

"My dad knocked me out of a tree once."

Everyone looked up at Scenic. The earth pony seemed to be deep in thought, because he went on without any self consciousness, "Yeah, it was when I was a foal. My dad took me to the park for a picnic, mainly to give Mom a break I think, and I climbed all the way up this tree. Of course I got stuck right at the top and started bawling my eyes out."

Scenic grinned, scratching at the back of his mane, "Heh, he was so embarrassed. He'd told Mom to stop worrying. But then he dozed off on the picnic blanket, and ten seconds later, I was up the tree."

Gloom raised his brow, "And he knocked you out of this tree because...?"

Scenic blinked, refocusing on the room. He hesitated, "He, uh, well see, he told me to jump and he'd catch me, because it wasn't actually that high. Of course I refused, screaming about how he was going to let me fall and I'd go splat-splat. Dad was so embarrassed and annoyed about the scene I was making, he bucked me right out of the tree."

"You never told me this story, Paint Spot. Your dad caught you though, right?" Carton asked, leaning in.

"Oh, no. No he missed me completely and I landed on my flank in a bush. He bribed me with a triple scoop, double dip ice-cream sundae not to tell mom. And then I threw it all up the literal, and I mean *literal* moment she opened the door and got busted anyway. Boy, was she cross." Scenic chuckled in embarrassment.

"Were there no pegasi about your father could've asked to simply

fetch you? Or a unicorn?" Crimson enquired archedly.

"Hey, I never thought of that. Why didn't he? What a rotten old stallion." Scenic exclaimed, ears shooting up in outrage.

The thestrals and pseudo-thestral in the room gave Scenic looks of mild reproach, "I'm sure he just didn't think of that in a moment of panic." Gloom told him.

"No way, I know my dad. He was just too embarrassed to ask." Scenic said, scowling into his tea cup.

"If you feel it is truly a bone of contention between you two, perhaps you should speak to your father." One of the two thestral guards put in.

"No thanks. He'll just turn it into a lecture about me failing to continue the family tradition and become a painter. He and Mom both hate that I'm in the Night Guard. No, I'm better off keeping my distance and not giving them the chance, thanks."

"Forgive me, but I thought you wanted to be a painter, Scenic? You've been kind enough to show me a few of your paintings, and I was most impressed." Saffron deftly inserted herself into the conversation, gently moving to smooth things over.

"I, uh, thanks. But really, those weren't anything special. Anypony could do those." Scenic mumbled.

"No way, your paintings are really good." Carton Juice gave him a shoulder bump, "Would Mr. Willmore have offered to buy some if they weren't any good? I don't think so."

"Yeah, well, I don't want to be a painter for a job. Not like my parents want me to be, anyways. As a hobby, I love painting. But I've always wanted to be a Guard and help ponies." Scenic admitted.

'How disgustingly sweet. The cloying aftertaste of self-righteousness really is nearly overpowering.' Prey thought cynically, but without much feeling. Half of him was as ever worrying and panicking over his situation with the invaders, but the other half of his mind couldn't help but dwell on the scene with Lilly's parents in the

hospital.

Her parents hadn't moved to help or comfort her. Grief did strange and horrible things to people. This time, it'd made Lilly appear as a monster to her own family, a freak, a half-pony.

'If Gossamer hadn't died, and if I were still him, and they were still alive... Is that how Mom and Fleece would see me?'

Prey already knew the answer deep down. After all he'd done, was still doing, and was going to do, how could they not? Gossamer's mother had hated violence of every kind. She was so disappointed whenever Gossamer and Fleece used to scrap as children. Disappointed and hurt, like she'd personally failed to teach them better.

He hadn't known the term back then, but she'd been a pacifist in all but title. And she'd died for her beliefs, going back into the burning village to try and help.

'All it takes is one or two breaths of smoke-'

Prey slammed the lid shut on those thoughts, locking the box and shoving it deep back down. Internally he sneered at himself, disgusted; 'Look at you, getting all mopey and depressed. Get a grip. The thieves aren't going to halt just because you're feeling tearful and tender at the moment.'

Saffron *clinked* her teaspoon as she put it down on the side of her saucer, "May I please have some more tea? It really is delightful. Oh, thank you, but there's no need, I can pour."

Saffron's words were more than just a polite request for a refill though, they were carefully chosen. Saffron was politely, and without being any sort of rude about it, gathering everyone's attention.

'-so nervous, but, but perhaps sharing something would do me good-', Saffron sat back, everyone unconsciously pausing to see if she would say anything. Her gentle face didn't express any of the nervousness she was holding inside.

'-go on, you can do it you coward. Just say it Saffron-'

Saffron took a sip of her tea and smiled appreciatively at Carton, "This really is nice. I must ask for the brand before I go. It reminds me a bit of sitting with my own mother's tea party guests when I was small, trying to act all prim and proper."

Saffron lowered her voice conspiratorially, "Just between the eight of us, I think my mother despised tea."

"Huh?" Scenic echoed.

"Oh, she loved tea parties, it was a proper lady's activity, and as she always used to tell me; a lady never shirks her duties. She loved the party and to gossip with her friends, but she just hated tea." Saffron smiled with the recollection, and it would've taken someone in the know, like Prey, to spot the bitter under the sweet.

She gently cleared her throat and continued; "Of course, she never told me that. It's only now, thinking back that I've picked up on it. And even then, I would never have guessed if I hadn't seen our butler always getting confused over how the teapot never seemed to be as empty as it should've been. Every time my mother lifted the tea cup in her aura to drink, she was actually secretly magicing it back into the teapot."

'-if I wasn't a magical cripple, was Mom going to teach me that spell one day?-'

"You had a butler?" Gloom asked, "Were your parents nobles?"

"*Are* still nobles, yes." Saffron admitted, "Just a lesser house though. We only actually had a butler, a maid, and a cook, nothing like the big noble houses, like Fell or Blueblood you're imagining I'm sure."

‘I’m astounded you managed to bear up and didn’t all die from the hardship.' Prey thought, still eyeing the door.

"But oh, pardon me, that sounded incredibly stuck up and condescending. I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking. I've still been lucky enough to be born into wealth when so many aren't." Saffron bowed her head.

"Oh no don't worry, you're nothing like those other stuck up nobles." Carton Juice hurried to laugh, despite Prey doubting if she'd ever met another noble before to compare Saffron against.

Everyone except Prey chimed in, agreeing, "Yeah, you're wonderful. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

"You're too kind." Saffron murmured, but she really meant it. '-I really didn't deserve any of the privilege I was born with-'

Prey could thoroughly agree.

Scenic paused, cocking his ear as a thought occurred to him, "Wait, if you're from a noble house, and your name is Swirl, then your House must be called Swirl. Swirl as in, Star Swirl the Bearded!?" He exclaimed.

"Yes-"

"What, really? Wow!"

"-But only distantly. A second wife of a great great great great great grandson who remarried."

"But that's like, uh, still amazing. Starswirl's got to have been the greatest unicorn who ever lived. He's in all the history books at school." Scenic enthused.

"The Father of Modern Magic," Carton Juice quoted, just as excited as her coltfriend, "He invented a hundred spells in a hundred days. He's supposed to have even studied magic with Princess Celestia! Not that I've ever been, obviously, but there's a massive gold statue of him over the entrance to Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, and, er..."

Carton trailed off awkwardly as she finally recalled; '-and Saffron can't ever use magic. What must that feel like to be born as a descendant of Star Swirl himself and not be able to use magic?-'

"I had no idea you were a noble, Saffron Swirl. You gave no indication." Crimson commented.

"I'm not." Saffron said quietly.

"Pardon?" Scenic leaned forwards.

"I'm not a noble." Saffron said more loudly, raising her eyes from her teacup.

She put on a smile and gently shook her head, golden ringlets bouncing, "I'm not a noble *anymore*. I haven't been one for sixteen years now, since I was nine. I have a claim to the name Swirl, but that is it."

"Your parents disinherited you?" Scenic spluttered.

"Yes," Saffron said simply, still smiling gently, "That is the way of things."

"That's terrible. How could they do that?" Carton exclaimed, holding a hoof to her mouth.

"Because you've got no magic." Gloom said, putting two and two together, "Ah, sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. It isn't my place."

"No, you're right. It was because I have no magic of my own." Saffron nodded.

"I was told nobles took succession and inheritance very seriously. But I didn't expect things like this actually happened." The second thestral guard spoke up, deep disapproval in the set of her brows and wings.

"They didn't throw me out onto the streets or anything like that. And up until I fell into my career as a model, completely by accident mind you, although that's a story for another time, they were still giving me a generous allowance." Saffron felt she had to defend her parents. But it was a poor defence for their actions.

'-I didn't want their money. I just wanted them to love me again-', Saffron thought, regretting but also not regretting sharing her past.

"Your parents disinherited you at age nine. What happened at nine? They had another foal, didn't they?" Crimson asked.

Saffron hesitated, but then nodded. She'd as much as admitted it, after all. "Yes, my baby brother, Vermilion Swirl. A healthy unicorn foal. After his first infant surge of magic, they petitioned the Stable of Lords to have the title pass to him. He'll be turning sixteen later this year."

Disowned over a favoured younger brother. It was like something out of a bad story, but it'd really happened to Saffron Swirl. Was this really the day and age they were living in?

Apparently it was. It was Carton who summed up what the rest of them were thinking. "That's horrible."

A family who'd mistreated their daughter. It couldn't help but remind them all of the reason they were in here in the first place.

The more lighthearted mood which'd slowly been returning vanished like a stone into a well. It wasn't that anyone had forgotten about Lilly, but for a moment, they'd been able to laugh about other things and put aside the sad situation. How could they laugh while at the same time Lilly was suffering? But, shouldn't they also try to be upbeat instead of sad? But now they'd all guiltily been reminded.

"I'm sorry for sharing all of that," Saffron apologised regretfully, "You didn't need to hear it and now I've gone and made the mood even worse."

Depressed thoughts flitted around the group.

'-why is everything ending in tragedy all the time?-'
'-nothing we do ever seems to work out-'
'-how could a pony treat their own flesh and blood like that?-'

And then, after Prey was sure the mood was sufficiently dead and everyone would soon quietly leave, Carton Juice abruptly stood up. In her haste, she accidentally bumped the table, and blushed, "Oops. Excuse me, I'm just going to put the kettle back on for a refill. Everypony's tea's gone cold. And after that, I think we could all do with playing a nice board game together."

'Oh no, not this *again*.' Prey groaned in aggravation.

"A board game?" Crimson repeated flatly, Gloom's expression echoing Crimson's disbelief. Everyone else seemed just as taken off guard.

"Yes. I think it's for the best." Carton Juice raised her chin and looked around her living room. She couldn't maintain eye contact with any of the thestrals, but her smile was still optimistic:

"I think it's exactly the thing we should be doing. Today's been a real roller coaster, but we shouldn't focus solely on the downs. I'm sure Lilly doesn't want our pity, in fact I'm certain she doesn't. We can't be sad, we've got to help instead. And I think that starts by helping ourselves and not being all gloomy. Er, no pun or offence intended."

"None taken." Gloom said. '-well, that was rather more optimistic than I was expecting-'

Around the cramped table, people exchanged looks as Carton picked up the teapot with another bright smile. It wasn't the worst suggestion, and it certainly sounded better than sitting here brooding over the depressing unfairness of the world.

Gloom scratched at the ragged edge of his chest scar, thought about it, then shrugged his wings, "Okay, I guess I'm game."
Saffron Swirl also perked up, smiling, '-when was the last time I thought to play a board game?-'

"Well, I do have some time before my manager's double booked me for a magazine interview and a dress fitting, so why not?"

Crimson just shrugged and nodded, seeing as how everyone else was staying, and Scenic gave a small whoop of approval.

'No. No. No.' Prey buried his face in his hooves in sheer frustration. Would anything short of murder get him out of here?

Scenic was already breaking out and setting up Montrotoly, "Who wants to be the banker?"

"I wanna' be the lucky horseshoe." Carton called from the kitchen.

Deep in the sewers, down the winding pipes, through the dark twists and turns, the Sewer's Heart continued to swirl with diverted water. In the pitch blackness, the basin was no longer quite as empty as it once had been.

The ever moving surface of the flow now rippled with something other than the current, many long and slippery somethings, stretching off down every tunnel in the current.

The wickerwatch was steadily growing longer and more tangled every hour of every day. Before, its longest rubbery tendril had reached maybe ten paces. Now, the slippery fronds were stretching over five times that.

A rat scampered by in one of the dry sections of pipe, its little twitchy nose wiffling. It was young and nimble, and scurried between rows of what were pillars to it.

A whip of hooked barbs smacked it into the brickwork with a pathetic little squeak and splat. The morsel of dripping meat on the end of the repaired antenna was reeled in, and deposited somewhere beneath the hemp sacking covering the veropede's head.

There was a sewer hatch. It had a keyhole slot for a lever, and through this tiny hole, a thin shaft of sunlight streamed. In the tiny splotch of light, a few straggly strands of grass grew. It was only here, by happy luck, that the required light, water, and trace amounts of dirt had gathered to allow this tiny plant to eke out an existence. Life always found a way.

With no sort of warning, prelude, or sound, a hooded head popped out of the wall. It was just there. One second it wasn't, and the next it was. This utterly out of place head surveyed the tunnel, finding it clear.

A moment later, a full pony stood in the tunnel, hooded and cloaked, a gilt chestplate with a gleaming blue gem stealing the single thin beam of sunlight.

It wasn't the only source of sunlight for long. There was a loud scraping of metal, a clunk, and the hatch was hauled up in a scattering of old dirt.

There was no built in ladder, but it wasn't needed. Through this new bright skylight, a bulky upright figure dropped, landing on all fours. Brown, oversized forepaws with huge, albeit stubby and worn claws, pushed the diamond dog upright. They quickly looked about, before loping out of the way and letting a second, then a third and fourth dog drop inside. They were all of different sizes and heritages, one a dalmatian beneath the cloak and another similar to a shaggy bulldog.

"Stinks." One of them growled.

"It's a sewer. What did you expect?" The pony asked snappishly, eyeing the dark tunnel.

"Stinks." The dog repeated again simply.

The largest diamond dog, the one who'd dropped through first shook his impressively sized head. One of his ears was missing a bite chunk. "Baliff's right. Stinks. No scent to find."

The pony made an unhappy but unsurprised sound, "Well, it was a long shot anyways. But Celestia willing, you might still be able to find what us ponies have missed so far."

"Yes," The diamond dog leader's chest vibrated with a deep, base growl, "I will find her. Must find her. Must take our vengeance. Will finally lay their spirits to rest."

"Be careful," The hooded unicorn warned, deadly serious, "There could be more of that burning powder that got Centurious, or any number of those magical traps anywhere down here."

One of the diamond dogs unconsciously whimpered and touched a swathe of pink burn scar across their paw. Like they'd tried to grab

someone burning and pull them free. The leader's shoulders hunched in memory. "Forget? Never. Never forget, never forgive. Find her. Make her pay."

The four diamond dogs, plus their replacement phasing unicorn companion quietly gathered themselves, and then cautiously ventured down into the dark of the sewers. There would be no backing down.

The tuft of grass, bleached almost white by lack of light, lay uprooted and flattened behind by an uncaring paw or hoof.

---I---

[[[*Bonus picture for Halloween* - Innocent? Ha!]]]

[image]

Author's Notes:

Happy Halloween! 🎃🎃🎃 I made a picture.

Anyway, hope you liked, but the climax will actually be in the *next* chapter, (Probably), even though this chapter is on Halloween.

EDIT: I massively underestimated how much of this ARC there is left to write. Sooo... it's not going to be in the next chapter, but probably the one after that. Or the next...

⭐Editor⭐: Sweetolebob18

63.4 Proper Prior Planning Precipitates Prime Performance

It seemed absurd that under such mounting pressure and with his ever dwindling time frame, Prey would still be expected to attend his therapy sessions with Doctor Clear Mind.

'Soft, weak, disgustingly self-righteous ponies.'

But it *was* expected, and Prey *was* forced to attend. He couldn't not go, it was an order from the alicorn ruler of the night. No one knew the tightrope Prey was being forced to walk, no one knew he went to bed exhausted every night from runic creation and woke up even more tired after only a few hours of fitful rest. No one knew.

'Time's running out. It's going to happen soon. It's *got* to.'

But why would anyone else appreciate the pressure he was under? As far as everyone else knew, Prey spent every day either wandering around Canterlot, visiting the library, or whiling away the hours lounging in his flat. They didn't know.

Crimson was far more everyone's concern at the moment, as they waited to see if the thieves who'd raided Vanhoover would go after him next. Neither Guard force had gotten any more leads. To the best of their knowledge, the thieves had gone to ground.

No one knew. No one knew anything about the secret war Prey was fighting.

Thus, he had no excuse he could offer to get out of having to waste precious time satisfying Clear Mind that he was a recovering patient, time Prey so desperately needed to spend elsewhere.

'Why can't they all just leave me alone?'

Prey sat on the beanbag chair in the Doctor's muted coloured room. Next door somewhere, Crimson was enduring his own therapy session.

Prey was barely paying attention to what Clear Mind was blathering on about. The unicorn was going on about positive thinking, coping mechanisms, and making sure everypony Prey regularly interacted with was made aware. Yeah, right. As if Prey would ever tell anyone. Prey had learned many bitter lessons in many hard schools of life.

"I know it can be hard, but before you go to bed each night, try to think of five things you're thankful for that happened during the day." Clear Mind was trying to encourage Prey.

"Okay." Prey agreed, not listening. 'Lemon said it looks like the tracking tag worked. I need to get to the array as soon as possible to perform the check.'

Clear Mind smiled at Prey's easy acceptance, "It may not seem like such a small thing can make such a big difference, but I can promise you from personal experience that if you try Prey, it really will."

'-first extend the commitment, then promise the reward, and finally personally affirm its worth-'

Prey hummed something which sounded affirmative, meanwhile thinking about how, if he survived this coming fight, he'd have to deal with the bodies. Because there weren't going to be any prisoners. Both sides knew it was a fight to the death.

'Runic incineration would be the easiest. Or bone rot. Feed them to the veropede? Maybe. I do hate the smell of charred flesh. It gets stuck in your wool.'

"A constructive hobby also really helps keep you grounded. Have you tried drawing again? Or perhaps a sport? Hoofball is all the rage for foals your age I'm told. Does your caretaker take you out often?" Clear Mind suggested, leaning forwards on his own bean bag chair.

'I have a hobby. Staying alive.' Prey thought. He made a show of hesitantly thinking it over; "I like making things with my hooves. Maybe knitting or needlework?"

'Or runic deathtraps.'

Perhaps Clear Mind picked up on the hidden insincerity of Prey's words. He was someone who made a living out of picking through people's words, after all. The unicorn frowned lightly at Prey, "Now now Prey, there's no need to lie. If you don't want to do something, then just say so. You've got to be honest and open about your feelings. I know it can sound scary, but if you don't tell anypony, how are they supposed to know to stop? The key is clear communication."

Prey slowly blinked. He'd been looking at Clear Mind, although avoiding eye contact, but now he was really looking at him.

'Clear communication? Alright, how about; I hope you get eaten by a quarry eel and die. In that order. How's *that* for clear communication?'

What he really said was; "I'll give it a try."

Clear Mind sighed patiently, "You just did it again, Prey. If you don't want to, just say so. Tell me what you really feel. Keeping it all bottled up isn't healthy for anypony."

'Not a pony. Never a pony. Just a second rate runt citizen.' Clear Mind was really working to get under his wool today. Prey was in a race for his life, and here he was, being forced to waste time in this insufferable doctor's presence. It was infuriating.

"Prey," Clear Mind said in that same patient, understanding tone, "Prey, could you look at me please?"

Suppressing his temper, Prey meekly met the unicorn's green eyes. He couldn't help but also flick a glance up at the blunt spiral of Clear Mind's horn.

'-aw, don't give me that look, this is for your own good. It's emotionally unhealthy to compartmentalise at the best of times, but

especially for a foal recovering from this type of trauma-'

Clear Mind affixed his best, most sincere and kind smile. He tucked his hooves together and leaned all the way down to Prey's own eye level so he was not looking down at Prey as he spoke:

"I know that you've been hurt, and you suffered things you didn't deserve and I can't imagine what that's like. But I know you can be better, I'm sure of it. You don't have to let the past define you Prey. You're my friend, and I know you can do better if you just try."

Friend? *Friend*?

When had Clear Mind *ever* come under the delusion he was Prey's friend? How *dare* he. How dare he act like he had *any* idea. To demand Prey change to meet his expectations, as if he had any *right*.

Ponies were like this, they were *always* like this! They all acted like they were so much better than you. It wasn't even that they consciously thought it, because they just knew it. With all their wealth and their magic and free special talents and extra long life spans and their sun goddess to shelter them from the rest of the world, they were just better. And then they looked down at you with your hooves in the dirt, and judged you for not having been born on a pedestal like them. They truly believed it was a sign of moral weakness not to be born a pony, and unicorns were the worst of them.

'You tell me to share, and act like you care, but all you want is the pride and praise of solving a complicated puzzle. Another tick box in completing your job.'

Clear Mind said he wouldn't judge, but the moment Prey actually told him any of what'd really happened, he'd call Prey despicable. Clear Mind only *thought* he was empathetic. Prey knew how it really went, he knew how that earnest smile would wither and the offer of aid would die on his lips.

What did Clear Mind know of being whipped? What did he know of despair and murder? Only what, if anything, he'd read in a textbook.

Prey clenched his teeth together. He could hear the rushing of blood in his ears. No, he'd keep it in. He wouldn't say anything. He'd kept control of his temper in more stressful situations before, he could and *would* do the same again.

"It'll be okay Prey. You can say what you really feel," Clear Mind coaxed, "It's just the two of us here. Nopony, not your parents, not even Her Royal Majesty needs to know."

Clear Mind was... putting Luna above Gossamer's mother? Saying that Luna was... more important?

Prey looked around the doctor's office. It was just the two of them in here. Prey leaned over the side of his beanbag and picked up a stuffed dog plush toy, one of a number meant for Clear Mind's younger patients. It was nearly a third of Prey's size.

Prey fiddled with it for a moment, then turned the toy dog the right way up and held it out, "Here."

Clear Mind was surprised, but took the soft toy anyways with a smile and carefully held it, '-strange. He's never shown any interest in any of the toys before, not even the toy castle all the foals love, so why now?-'

Prey settled himself comfortably on the beanbag, and smiled at Clear Mind. His eyes and demeanour were soft, just like the rest of Prey's runty lamb appearance.

"Gloom and Crimson, they already told you what happened in Mayflower and Alfalfa Dale, right?"

"I can't discuss other patients' treatment I'm afraid, but Captain Nighthawk of the Night Guard made sure I was appraised of what happened to you." Clear Mind answered.

"So you know about the kindersnatches then. The kidnapped, drugged, and tortured villagers who were forced into becoming unwilling hosts for parasitic dark magic seedlings. And you know how they were driven mad with pain, screaming, unable to die?" Prey asked pleasantly.

Clear Mind gaped at Prey, open mouthed at the complete attitude reversal.

"Did you know how we killed them? They were hostages, and we killed them. I created acidic explosive traps, and melted them alive. The rest were either killed by some horrible and nameless thing in the night, or were eaten alive by a veropede. I suppose there might be a couple of kindersnatches left, wandering around in the forest if something else hasn't gotten them by now. Lost, mad souls."

"I, I, w-what?" Clear Mind spluttered. Prey went right on talking.

"But that was before I sacrificed a pit full of captured and helpless townspeople from Alfalfa Dale. I threw the same veropede into their midst to hatch and feed. Innocent, helpless victims. It was like fish in a barrel. I'm skipping a bit here, but then I confronted the warlock responsible, captured, had my servant essentially mind rape him, before she killed him on my orders."

Clear Mind shuddered. His mouth was dry and his eyes were wide. '-wrong. This is wrong. Wrong wrong wrong-'

The therapist's mind was whirling. Why was there a chill in the air? Why did Prey's words seem so real? There was a bite, an undercurrent to them which got under Clear Mind's skin. And why did it seem like he could feel an echo of those events?

Words weren't supposed to make you *feel* them. Clear Mind had heard many tragedies over the course of his job, but only second hoof as they were retold to him. No matter how sad or terrible, those things had never happened to him and he could go home safe in the knowledge they wouldn't happen either.

They were just words. Words couldn't hurt you.

If someone came up and told you they'd seen a dead body, that wasn't terrifying. It might be disturbing, especially if they went into detail, but no matter how good their description, you hadn't personally seen the body. It wasn't *real* to you. You didn't have to deal with the nightmares, because it hadn't happened to you.

Words were just words.

'-but I can feel it. Something's wrong, what's happening?-', Clear Mind was frozen on his beanbag. He tried to move.

"Ah-ah *ah*," Prey waggled his hoof reprovingly at the stallion, "You wanted me to open up. You wanted me to talk, so now you get your wish. You get to hear about the rotten blood, the stomach curdling gore, the constant gnawing fear so bad you can't sleep, only fall unconscious. What's wrong? Oh, I get it. You didn't realise this was all *real*, did you?"

"No no, t-that's not what I thought at all-"

"Good! Because I've barely even skimmed the surface. Next, I want to tell you all about a zebra named Snake."

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Clear Mind was trying to hide his shivering. The stuffed dog toy was clutched between his hooves, as if he were the foal seeking comfort. Prey still lay on his beanbag, coldly observing the therapist. He wasn't smiling anymore.

It was only through fear Clear Mind kept the disgust from his face. Fear of Prey. He was just a runt lamb, but Clear Mind was a pony who'd never raised a hoof against anyone in his whole life. He was staring at Prey like one might a deadly venomous snake, one which might strike at any moment strike without provocation.

'-despicable, horrible, foul evil! This isn't a foal, it's not a person, it's evil incarnate!-'

It was the exact reaction Prey had known he would get. 'Why'd I even try telling him all that, then? I already knew, so why'd I even try?'

Prey didn't feel vindicated or proven right. He only felt hollow and bitter.

Everyone was always telling him if he opened up and actually told his story, it would get better, that it would help. He hadn't believed

it, but everyone kept telling him that. Perhaps part of him had just wanted to give it a try.

"You think I'm a monster. That I'm evil. Utterly unforgivable." Prey stated flatly.

Clear Mind swallowed and wet his lips, but when he spoke, it still came out a croak, "No no, not at all. I'm the one who wanted to know. It's, it's my job to hear this."

Prey eyed him, not fooled for a second. "You think I need to be banished to the moon, imprisoned under an inactive volcano and the key thrown away. You want me to disappear and cease to exist. Or better yet, to have never existed at all."

"Not at all, I assure you. Everyp-everyone deserves a second chance." The unicorn was shivering, sweating now as he desperately lied through his teeth.

Prey let out a bark of fake laughter, "Ha! As if. The moment you escape from this room, you're going to gallop as fast as your legs can carry you to the nearest Guard you can find, and tell them everything."

"No no! I won't, I won't!" Clear Mind cried, wide eyed and terrified. '-buck buck buck how does he know?-'

"How do I know? I can read your thoughts. I never got around to that bit of the story, but it was before..." Prey trailed off, "Why am I even telling you this? It's not like it matters. You aren't going to tell anyone."

"No! I swear I won't, I promise, I swear on my life I won't tell anypony! You don't have to do this. Don't kill me!"

Clear Mind tried to leap up, tried to run. But his limbs wouldn't move. '-what'd he do to me? What'd he do?!-'

Clear Mind reached for his magic, thinking of blasting Prey away despite him not knowing any actual attack spells. He tried to grab Prey with his telekinesis, hit him, push him, crush him, anything to keep him away. But none of the unicorn's magic responded to him.

Clear Mind started crying he was so scared, a grown stallion, great hiccuping sobs. "W-why? Why can't I? W-Wt's?"

He was shivering with cold. Cold and scared. Cold and scared and *hungry*.

Clear Mind could only jerkily lower his head to look down at the stuffed toy he still clutched. The blue ribbon, the one he'd always previously seen behind the lamb's ear was now tied around the dog plushie. He hadn't seen it there before. He hadn't noticed Prey tie it on. But now he couldn't let go of it. He couldn't let go!

Clear Mind's teeth began to chatter. His face was turning a pallid grey. '-it's cold. Cold cold, what's happening to me? I'm hungry, cold, cold, please let go let go letgo*letgo*-'

Prey got off his beanbag and walked over. He stared into the unicorn's glazed eyes. Even with Clear Mind prone on the beanbag, and Prey standing, the doctor was still just above Prey's eye level.

'Why did I try this?' Prey asked himself again. Why did he bother trying to talk? He'd always known how it would end. He'd just wanted to hurt Clear Mind.

'I could keep on hurting him too.' Prey thought.

He was going to erase Clear Mind's memory. Right from the beginning, the unicorn had never, ever been going to tell anyone about this, which was the only reason Prey had told him his story in the first place. Some of his story anyway. The soft coward had buckled before Prey even got halfway through the retelling.

'But I could hurt him a bit more first.' Prey thought.

It was all too tempting. Hurt Clear Mind. Hurt him. Hurt him, and make the world fairer.

'No.'

No, this was dumb. This was all a stupid risk. He shouldn't have done this. He shouldn't have risked telling anyone. What if someone were to barge into the room right now?

'What am I doing?' Prey thought in shock, taking a step back, 'What am I doing?! This is so stupid, so unnecessarily risky.'

He stared at the silk ribbon. Why had he hoofed it over? That was *his*. He would have snatched it back, if that wouldn't have freed Clear Mind.

With an angry hiss, Prey reached out and grabbed hold of the disgusting unicorn's leg, "Don't resist."

The world faded into ashen grey and Prey's mental mindscape, superimposed over Clear Mind's mental landscape. The doctor's mindscape looked a lot like a blobby, undefined version of the very office they were in. Except there was something wrong with it. It was shaking and trembling, slowly breaking down. But as per Prey's order, he couldn't resist.

'Good.'

Prey reached out with his mind, his grey mindscape unravelling long tendrils which stabbed down into the unicorn's mindscape below.

'Not so clear minded *now*, are you?'

Prey took everything of the last half an hour, every bit of memory, and destroyed it. Not suppressed it, but utterly destroyed it. He wasn't leaving a job half finished to somehow be undone in the future.

In the newly hollowed out space, Prey left behind a false memory showing him just sitting unresponsive on the beanbag for the whole of their therapy session, refusing to answer any of Clear Mind's questions.

Prey could've crafted a memory showing a conversation instead, him making progress to satisfy Clear Mind, but he didn't. He was in a hurry. He just wanted this erased.

Plus, Clear Mind being in contact with the ribbon really wasn't good for the stallion's health.

Nevertheless, it wasn't out of any concern for Clear Mind that Prey hurried.

Right now, Clear Mind was at serious risk of permanent damage. And if that occurred, concerned people would start looking into *how* the damage had happened. They wouldn't find any physical cause, so next they'd check magically, and they just might find evidence of mind tampering. That would prove disastrous for Prey.

'Another reason this was such a stupid risk to take.' Prey berated himself.

He finished up as fast as he could, and snatched his ribbon back. The silk was cold, almost bitingly cold as he retied it hurriedly behind his ear. Clear Mind sat there like a statue, unresponsive, only breathing.

Prey sent him a last glower, 'Serves you right for asking what you had no right to know and no ability to handle. Utterly pathetic.'

The phantom crawling sensation started up in the back of Prey's mind as the ribbon settled back into place, back where it belonged. But it was fine, it was his ribbon, and he was used to it.

Prey gave Clear Mind's beanbag a light kick. Clear Mind jerked, blinking around rapidly. "Wh-Oh, pardon me. I seem to have dozed off for a second."

'-how did I do that? I wasn't even tired. Although I am very hungry-'

"Don't worry about it." Prey muttered, rubbing tiredly at the faint scarring under his eyes. Thank goodness the session was almost over. Just a few more minutes, and he could get out.

Clear Mind rubbed at his forehead, finding he had a headache and his horn hurt. And he was still ravenously hungry. "Well, I, err, hope I didn't miss too much, Prey. Where were we? I just, err..."

'-I don't feel so good. I think I'll sign off sick after Prey's session. Gosh, I hope I haven't picked up something nasty-'

"Well, I think we're about done for today. We've made more

excellent progress, and I'm very happy with what you've achieved Prey. Just remember to keep up the good work." Clear Mind declared, deciding to cut the session short since they were almost done anyway.

Clear Mind followed Prey out back into the reception area, shutting his office door. The softly coloured reception area, with its magazine table and padded chairs, was nearly empty apart from a seated stallion obscured behind a newspaper, and the receptionist.

"Hey Sally," Clear Mind called as he headed for said receptionist's desk, "Sorry about this, but I think I'm going to have to go home. I've suddenly come down with something."

Prey barely listened to the receptionist's sympathetic response. His attention had been snatched by the seated and obscured stallion. The stallion's coat and messily cropped tail were a muddy shade of unflattering green. Unfamiliar. Not a colour he knew.

But Prey couldn't hear the stallion's thoughts.

Slowly, the stallion lowered the newspaper. He was an earth pony, wearing a thick waistcoat and a wide brimmed hat. Prey recognised the face, but the fur colouring was all wrong. However he still immediately knew who it was.

Strange Happenstance.

Prey almost choked. How had the private detective gotten in here? Why was he the wrong colour? How'd he found out Prey would even be here at this time?

'Did he hear? Was he listening in at the door? Zoma'Grika. Oh Zoma'Grika und hez'crash und krecaw!' Prey started to mentally curse in zebrican, 'Did he hear what I told Clear Mind?!'

Why had he said anything? Why hadn't he just kept his damned mouth shut and stonewalled the stupid doctor!?

Strange Happenstance's face gave nothing away as he held Prey's eye. Slowly, the stallion lifted an open, scuffed brass stopwatch. Prey caught a glimpse of the watch's face, a second hand rapidly

counting down backwards, then the detective flicked the watch shut with a little snap. The drab green colouring of his fur and tail rapidly faded back to the mud brown Prey recognised.

Clear Mind was still talking to Sally at the desk, neither of them noticing the standoff happening behind them.

Prey felt like he was fighting to keep his head above water. It was just one event after another in a never ending barrage. 'But merely kicking isn't swimming.'

"Sargent Gloom is going to be out here in only a few minutes. He'll arrest you if you're still here." Prey said flatly, going straight on the attack.

Unphased, Strange Happenstance calmly tucked the battered stopwatch into a pocket, "Nice try. But you know what I keep hearing up at the Guard Compound? 'Dusky Gloom is on indefinite leave.' Your Sargent's got no authority over me while he's off duty."

Prey couldn't discern anything from the stallion's carefully measured tone about what he might've gleaned or what he might even now be hiding. Prey's hoof itched to reach up to touch the comforting silk of his ribbon, "This is harassment and stalking. You've already been ordered to cease and desist by the Captain of the Night Guard. That's an offence by itself."

"Nope. I'm just here for a private appointment with my therapist. Anypony can pay for an appointment, it's a public business after all. How was I to know you also used this place? It's all just pure coincidence." Strange said, lazily tilting his hat back.

A blatant lie.

“That’s *your* opinion. Think Captain Nighthawk will share it?”

Prey's head was humming. What could the private detective hope to learn here? Steal or coerce information out of the doctors about the ISND's sessions? But why then reveal himself to Prey at all?

'He's threatening me,' Prey realised, 'He's deliberately doing this to intimidate me.'

What was the stallion's real goal? What was he planning for Prey? Was he really even a stallion at all, or a mimic? Or what if he was with the thieves, or the thieves were using him? That had been a disguise artifact Strange had so blatantly displayed just now. Was that the unspoken threat?

No, no. The thieves already knew his face. If they could find him like this, they would've already tried to kill him. They and the diamond dogs were here for blood, and weren't going to stop until they got it.

Once again Strange Happenstance had blindsided Prey and left him scrambling, re-evaluating all over again whether the pony actually really was a mimic or something else.

'Damn it. Damn it. Damn it all.'

Prey wanted to kill Strange Happenstance. He wanted to kill him right here, right now. Everyone was threatening and pushing Prey from every side, and now the private detective arrogantly thought he could get in on the action. It made Prey want to snap and kill him for being right.

But he couldn't. Prey knew he'd never get away with it. But he seriously considered it.

Strange Happenstance was still coolly looking Prey over. Barely five seconds had passed, and none of this answered the question: Had Strange overheard what Prey said back in the office? Or was this all a bluff?

"Say..." Strange Happenstance began thoughtfully, "You being here at the therapists wouldn't have anything to do with Private Lilly Blossom's condition, would it?"

Of *course!* That's right, Strange had been contacted by Lilly's parents.

"I cannot confirm or deny any speculations." Prey immediately responded.

"So it *does* have something to do with it."

Prey hated that arrogant satisfaction in Strange's face. But it was what Prey wanted the stallion to think, he'd answered like that on purpose. 'Let Strange think he's discovered something. It was nothing but an open secret anyway.'

"Speaking of Private Lilly Blossom of the Night Guard, she's not at her registered address. Neither has she returned to the hospital." Strange gave Prey a meaningful look.

"So what?"

"So I don't suppose you know where her concerned parents might be able to get in contact with her?"

Had Lilly's parents had a change of heart and realised their mistake? No, this was just another ploy to distract Prey.

"No idea." Prey lied, straight faced.

Strange's level look said he didn't believe Prey in the slightest. "After today, I have a hard time believing that, my little woolly friend."

If it'd been physically possible, Prey's spiked heart would've skipped a beat. After today? What was that supposed to mean? So did the unicorn actually know something? Had he heard some of what Prey had so foolishly told Clear Mind, or was he just trying to frighten Prey into letting something slip?

Prey didn't know, and that smirk which worked its way onto Strange Happenstance's lips made Prey doubt himself. Had he inadvertently let something slip, or was the smirk part of a further bluff? If *only* Prey could hear his thoughts.

Strange Happenstance's smirk widened, seeming to say; 'I know something you don't know.'

Prey clamped his mouth shut, refusing to give any response of any kind.

"Oh. So that's how it is." Strange remarked thoughtfully, raising a hoof to tug at the brim of his hat. He discarded the newspaper and

stood up. He looked down at Prey.

"I can see my time here will be wasted. I can better spend it elsewhere. Besides, I already got what I came for."

Prey's hoof twitched. He was ninety-five percent sure this was just another bluff, a jab to get him to slip up before Gloom and Crimson finished their own sessions and came out. But that still left a five percent chance...

"And Prey," Strange Happenstance looked back as he turned to go, "I *will* find out *everything* that happened over the mountains."

And what did that mean? You as in 'you Prey', or you as in 'you the Night Guard'? The only thing Prey moved was his head as he tracked Strange Happenstance.

The private detective paused at the receptionist's desk, "Sorry to interrupt but I'm afraid something urgent's happened. I'll have to reschedule my appointment some other time. Sorry again."

"Oh, that's no problem. When would you like me to book you-Mr. Grey, wait. Mr. Grey!"

But Strange Happenstance was already out the door. The receptionist sat back, "I guess he was in a real hurry."

"Don't worry. I'm sure he'll be back." Clear Mind assured her.

'Mr. Grey' the receptionist had said. Strange Happenstance obviously had no plans of returning here. He hadn't given his real name. Actually, the name 'Strange Happenstance' could be a cleverly crafted lie too for all Prey knew.

Prey stood there, furious and scared. He'd allowed Strange Happenstance to just waltz out of here with whatever he might know. Probably nothing, but what if he actually *did* know something? And Prey wasn't able to do anything, not here in broad daylight with all these witnesses.

The door behind Prey opened and Gloom emerged, thanking his own therapist, "Yes, see you next week. Thank you, and I hope you

and your wife have a good time at the Hoofball match too."

Gloom shut the door and paused, spotting Prey standing there. He frowned, quickly looking around the reception area, "Is something the matter, Prey?"

Prey looked back. Should he tell Gloom about Strange Happenstance? He probably should. "...It's nothing."

Mimic, thief, private detective, or something else, Prey knew it was inevitably going to come down to him to have to deal with Strange Happenstance eventually. The last thing Prey needed were pony witnesses slowing him down.

After splitting from Gloom, Prey was accompanied back to his flat by Crimson, and Crimson's two Guards. Those three could've flown ahead, but Crimson had declined to leave Prey behind, and chosen to walk back with him through Canterlot's streets, ignoring all the looks they garnered.

Crimson didn't want to take even that small risk of splitting up, what with the unknown thieves still potentially about. Crimson's caution was well founded, although not for the same reasons the pegasus thought. Prey knew he should've declined the escort for Crimson's sake. But he was selfish. He wanted Crimson and his two trailing Guards as protection to dissuade Strange Happenstance, just in case the unicorn really was up to something at the moment.

Prey knew Crimson was carrying the electrite feather on his person, he could feel the passive aura coming off the runes like a source of heat next to him.

Not much was said. Prey was almost sure Crimson suspected something was the matter, but if so, he didn't try and press Prey for details.

On that note, the two thestral Guards serving witness protection duty wouldn't be around much longer. It just wasn't practical to keep up witness protection 24/7. The Night Guard so desperately

needed them elsewhere that it was a minor miracle Nighthawk had managed to spare them for as long as he had already.

Prey wished he could make all of this up to Crimson somehow. He already owed Crimson so much. The thieves' presence here in Canterlot here was his fault, and it was him who'd gotten the jade necklace for Crimson in the first place, and it was also him who'd gotten Lemon Pink involved.

And then, what should Prey find when they got back to Flat 39, but a notice addressed to him from his probation officer?

Prey hadn't known he even *had* a probation officer.

Or at least, he hadn't known his public restrictions came under the purview of a probationary officer. No one had mentioned or thought about one while in his presence, so he'd just assumed a negative.

Prey stared up at the notice, stuck to the front door at what would be normal head height for an adult pony. It was addressed in bold red to him. He actually had to ask Crimson to take it down and pass it to him.

Stonily, Prey unfolded and read it, Crimson reading over his shoulder which Prey made no move to stop. The two thestral Guards stood politely back, looking in the other direction.

"A complaint has been filed against you, Prey (Second name unknown), for committing an infraction of your probationary restrictions 2.4B: 'Curfew and Accountability', of the law: Public Safety and Dangerous Individuals. You were out past your curfew of 9:00pm without reporting it to your probation officer, Hazard Safety, in advance."

Prey moved further down the page; "By further failing to report yourself after the infraction within the 24 hours grace period after the incident and failing to provide an explanation, you are hereby charged for being in breach of your agreement. For a first time infraction, a fine of 200 bits is hereby issued, payable within one week from the date of this notice. This is a serious matter, and I

trust this fine will serve to impress upon you the severity of your infraction and that it will not happen again. Be warned, repeat offences will incur much harsher penalties. Signed, Hazard Safety, Civil Probation Officer."

Prey's lip curled in utter contempt for what he was reading. 'Calls that 'civil', does he? What would he call 'rude' then?'

Prey just couldn't catch a break, could he? It was almost even funny.

"What is this?" Crimson asked from over Prey's shoulder, in the same tone of voice he might've used if he'd stepped in something brown, sticky, and foul.

"A fine for two hundred bits." Prey said flatly. He was tempted to rip the notice up.

"And they just... dare? Dare to give it to you? Do they think they can just do that?"

"Apparently the answer is, yes, they do think so." Prey said. They knew nothing of Prey's troubles, his situation, or who he was, and they certainly wouldn't have cared even if they did. There was just some jumped up, self important pony behind a desk who saw a wrong doer daring to trespass upon their oh-so important rules that Prey had never agreed to in the first place.

Crimson's wing gave a curt flick, indicating disgust, "You won't pay this pathetic note. Right? You won't, right?"

Prey thought about agreeing and saying "no". He let the thought tempt him. A huge loophole he had spotted in the original paperwork, (which he hadn't actually *signed*, not that it made a difference), was that all the terminology in it referred to him as a 'pony'. He could maybe therefore claim that it was invalid and get away with it. Although he had doubts that would fly, they'd probably say his claim was ridiculous, since "pony" was the correct form of address for anyone no matter their actual species. Because why wouldn't you want to be a pony? After all, every *decent* 'person' was.

On top of which, it might be better to save that card for later, because if that loophole did actually work, he doubted he could get away with it more than once.

But it would feel good to ignore this fine in an act of defiance. However doing so wouldn't solve anything, just get him into even more trouble. These were the kind of indignant people who'd gleefully leap on every excuse to punish you all the more for standing up and questioning their rules. And he desperately couldn't afford to garner any more attention at the moment. Dreverton had been full of them, he could spot them on sight.

Nighthawk or the Night Guard wouldn't be any help either. It'd been Nighthawk who'd delivered the ruling after all, albeit reluctantly.

"Unfortunately yes, I'm going to have to pay it. It isn't giving me a choice." Prey grudgingly said.

"No," Crimson snapped, "This is ridiculous. You don't have to pay anything. They have no right."

"No, it's me who has no rights." Prey interjected. He wasn't angry at Crimson, how could he be? He owed Crimson, but the red pegasus didn't seem to be getting this. Prey waved the offensive notice:

"This isn't optional, I'm afraid. This is Canterlot. The New Unicornia, Capital of Equestria, the Grand City of Invention, and all that. We live here, but we aren't citizens. Tartarus, I'm not even a pony. The people who make the rules control our very lives, Crimson."

"It's not like that Prey. You are free."

Prey half raised one hoof, and showed the gold band on it. He lowered his voice until even he could scarcely hear it, meaning the other two thestral Guards definitely couldn't:

"Crimson, we're not free. C'mon, you already know this. Me and you, we're still both prisoners as long as we wear these tracer bands. Prisoners on a long leash, yes, but prisoners nonetheless. We're here only so long as we can keep serving Luna."

"It's Princess Luna. You're making her sound like a tyrant saying it like that Prey, and she isn't like that. She does care about us, about all her subjects."

Prey held back on what he really wanted to say about Luna, knowing well how all the clans revered and almost worshipped her. Instead he whispered, "So why'd she let that House Time noble steal your jade necklace?"

Crimson's brows snapped together in anger, "Prey..." He warned.

"What I'm trying to say is; we're not important to her, Crimson." Prey amended. It made his stomach twist to think how deferential Crimson still was towards Luna.

He quietly shook his head, ears swaying, "Face it Crimson. She has her own plans, agendas, and goals. She's an immortal goddess. We're nothing to her. A century down the line, we'll be nothing but dust. She won't even remember the two dumb sods she pulled from prison-"

"Enough." Crimson interrupted, "I don't want to hear any more of this Prey."

Prey flinched, like Crimson had just shouted at him, rather than the level tone he'd actually spoken in. Prey quickly looked away.

Crimson shifted on his hooves, considering what he wanted to say before he next spoke, "Prey I... You already know I don't agree with that view, and I think you're wrong about everything you've just said. Princess Luna does care about us for the very same reason she pulled us from prison. But I think, I mean, *we* think she just has trouble showing it in a way we can understand. I mean, after Nightmare Moon and being banished, is it any wonder Her Majesty seems disconnected?"

'So in other words, you think she's still mad from being on the moon.' Prey interpreted in his head. "Wait, who's 'we'?"

"The Night Guard. We're sworn to her service. We will serve her for however long it takes Her Majesty to recover. Maybe she won't.

Maybe she will in a hundred years. The when isn't important. The clans will still serve her."

"But why?" Prey asked, "I don't get it. Why? Just, just why?"

"Because of what happened a thousand years ago. We, the clans I mean, failed Princess Luna. She failed us too in the end, but only after our ancestors had already failed her."

Crimson took a slow breath, and haltingly explained, "We have records Prey. Princess Luna did not suddenly fall to Nightmare Moon. It was gradual. It was our fault for not noticing. When she was silently crying out for help, we didn't notice. The whole world almost fell to eternal night back then Prey. Do you understand what that means? It is all our duty, our penance, to ensure something like that can never happen again."

"Oh." Was all Prey could say.

The way Crimson recited all of that made him feel sick. That was not a good enough reason for Crimson to be so devoted to Luna, just because it was 'tradition' and 'duty'. That had been a thousand years ago. Luna didn't deserve Crimson's loyalty.

But even runty sheep knew how seriously thestrals took duty. They'd undertaken the responsibility to sacrifice their lives in the service of an alicorn, just to make sure she didn't fly off the handle and again try to doom the whole world.

Hate. Loathing. That was what Prey felt for the Princess of the Night. She was so incredibly powerful, and she'd used that power to almost kill everyone. And what did she get for her slip up now that she'd returned from the moon? The unwavering loyalty of entire thestral clans, joint rulership of Equestria, a Palace, riches, wealth, luxury, privilege, and power.

The scales of justice were totally different when weighed for an alicorn.

What did Prey get for being deemed a threat, one which was nowhere near the level of Luna? He was censored, watched, and

now insulted and fined. Of course, that wasn't even counting the fifty-seven years he'd spent rotting in Dreverton.

'So why didn't Crimson's own clan come back? I guess somewhere along the line they realised the traditions they were hoofing down to their children were a load of horseapples.'

Prey of course hated Clan Myrrdon wholeheartedly because they were Crimson's enemies, but perhaps they'd had a point in not wanting to return just so they could live out their lives under the night alicorn's rule. And that was saying nothing of her sister, the Sun Wolf.

But this wasn't about the clans. This was about Prey and Crimson. They were friends, more than friends even. They understood one another. But not on this. On this, they'd suddenly been forced to confront that they each had a radically different view. Now what were they supposed to do? Each looked sideways at the other. Prey's heart was twisting, and his stomach was twisting itself along in a sympathetic knot.

How important was this difference between them? Very. But was it more important than their friendship?

"I yield." Prey said.

"I, pardon?"

"I yield. I give up. I take back what I said. You win. Whatever you want Crimson, that's how we'll do it. This isn't something I'm willing to fight over. The thestrals have a duty to her, and are doing the right thing by committing to her."

Crimson drew a hoof across his face, tear scar tracks really making him look haggard, "That's not, I mean, you're allowed to have your own opinions, Prey. I don't want... I don't want that to be our friendship. Just agreeing all the time. But Princess Luna is a good person."

Good. A good person. Yes, and Tartarus was a vacation resort. Perhaps once upon a time, that might've even been true. But the

pathway to Tartarus was paved with the intentions of good people.

'But nothing I can say will change anything.' Prey looked at the floor. It was better to concede rather than risk alienating Crimson in any way. That was what really mattered here and now, not a truth Prey couldn't prove and which Crimson wouldn't accept..

"I understand. I get it. And for what it's worth, I think what you and the clans are doing is noble."

"Don't say that Prey."

"Say what?"

"Noble. It's not noble. It's just what we should've done from the start a thousand years ago. And besides, I don't believe in noble and neither do you. Do you?"

"No, not really." Prey admitted. He and Crimson both knew that being 'noble' and 'righteous' was above them. They'd both done things they weren't proud of, things which they could never take back or make right. Survival isn't pretty.

Prey hunched his shoulders, waiting and looking away.

Crimson's wings were fidgeting. He touched one of the golden bands on his leg, then glanced almost guiltily around before lowering his head down to Prey's level to whisper, "I just, I mean, is that really the way you see it Prey? As just being a prisoner here?"

"I want to go home. I just want to go home so badly. But I can't." Prey admitted.

Now it was Crimson's turn to blanch, "Oh." He hesitated, mental walls twisting:

"You will go home someday, Prey. I swear it. Serving here in Canterlot won't last forever, you will get to see your family again, even if I have to fly you the whole way there myself."

Crimson had misinterpreted Prey's words when he said '*I can't go back*', but then, Crimson wasn't to know. Prey couldn't let anyone

find out his home village of Rushweed didn't exist anymore.

'I'm an idiot. I'm such an idiot. What am I doing, dropping incriminating hints like this? Do I *want* to get caught?'

Hadn't he learnt his lesson with Clear Mind? He couldn't tell anyone. He'd just had this lesson hammered home, but yet here he was, on the verge of breaking it not two hours later. Honestly, what *was* he doing here, telling secrets in the middle of a corridor, with two Night Guards barely out of ear shot?

'But it's Crimson...' Half of Prey's mind protested, but the other half was too afraid to risk anything. It was Crimson, and if Crimson *hated* him-

'But he's like me. He knows what it's like to regret everything you've done. He didn't judge me then, so why would he now?'

But what if...? Prey was too scared to risk it. Maybe the day would come, but if it did, it wouldn't be because Prey had told him, but because Crimson had finally figured it out.

'What. Am. I. Doing? Just pay the stupid fine.'

Prey mustered up a smile, "Thanks for the offer Crimson. Let's just... go in and forget about this for now, okay? It's just some bits. Who cares about some gold?"

Crimson took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled, also letting the matter go with it. Prey was right. It wasn't right, but it wasn't worth it either.

Twenty minutes later, Prey slipped out unnoticed from his flat, having gobbled down a bag of dried oats as fast as he could, and waited until Crimson himself had left. Gone out flying and training again, Prey knew, and to get used to the passive boost from Prey's gift, the electrite feather. By tonight, the two Night Guards accompanying him would need to leave, and Crimson would be on his own again.

Maybe they'd done their job and deterred an opportunistic attack by the thieves just by being there. Maybe, maybe not. There was no way to ever tell.

Prey didn't want Crimson left unguarded, but it did selfishly please him that no one else would be hanging around Crimson all the time. It was a small consolation.

Prey looked both ways up and down the landing corridor, then instead of taking the stairs down, went up towards the roof instead. He dodged a couple of residents, then opened a janitor's closet and went to the back, where there was an emergency exit, opening out onto the fire escape.

This was the path out of the building Prey took, just in case anyone was watching the front entrance. Hot sun, blue sky, and a stiff breeze blowing through the metal rungs of the staircase accompanied him as he *clank'ed* down the side of the building.

Back on the ground, Prey glared briefly up at the sun, 'Hate you. Hate you and your damned sister both.'

Then he put his head down and hurried off, shoulders hunched.

The runic arrays along the length of the green stone tunnel were coming along. Not easily, or fast, but they were coming along. Slowly. All too slowly.

Prey drank greedily from his waterskin, sitting against the hard stone wall, damp with water. He leaned his buzzing head back against the cold stone. He was completely drained of energy. Again.

Five hours had come and gone since Prey had left the apartment building. It was precious little time to create anything of true worth in rune work, but it was what he had.

Prey let out a long breath and restoppered the waterskin. He was tired. The damp green stone wasn't comfortable, but Prey let his eyes drift shut to doze for just a moment...

The remnant of Snake bent down and whispered in his ear; 'Ego brings everyone to their knees. I find your efforts... disappointing.'

Prey's eyes flew open. A hiss of furious rage escaped him, "Oh just buck off!" He punched the stone, and then yelp-squeaked in pain and curled over his hoof. The flash of sudden pain just made him even angrier.

"You Zoma'grika,half-baked, indolent, bucking corpse! You're already dead, stay dead you useless cadaver. You're dead, you're dead! I killed you. Just stay *dead* for once!"

Prey finished screaming at the empty stone tunnel and gasped for breath. He was so angry at everything, and there was nothing he could do about it, about anything! Everything about this hated city was out to get him. Prey growl-whined in helpless anger, getting to his hooves three-legged.

He'd dozed off for ten seconds, and Snake's remnant just had to sneak in the last word. Ten seconds! "I'll, I'll, you, I'll....ghaa!"

But Snake was just a remnant inside Prey's own head. There was nothing he could do to the already dead voodoo witch. There was no threat he could make, no bargain, or promise which would make the remnant stop.

Prey stood there in the dim tunnel, panting, and more angry than ever. And there was absolutely nothing he could do about it or any of the real reasons he was angry.

"I'll kill you," Prey swore to no one, "I'll kill *all* of you."

Prey fumed and muttered and silently cursed all the way back through the cave tunnels to where they breached back into the sewers, but even in the midst of his black anger, his eyes stayed peeled. This area was supposed to be safe, but that didn't mean it actually was.

And then just as he reached the join back into the sewer network, Prey thought he sensed something behind him in the darkness. Perhaps it was a sound, perhaps a movement, maybe just the weight of eyes on the back of his neck, but Prey felt it.

Prey did exactly what you weren't supposed to do. He looked back.

He saw nothing but darkness and stone behind him, the odd crystal fragment embedded in the rock catching his lantern's light at odd intervals and making it hard to judge distances.

Wait, for a second there, those two uneven crystals right at the edge of his blurred vision, had those been a pair of eyes? Big pupiless cyan eyes?

Hurriedly, Prey retreated into the sewers breach, relying on the runic traps around the choke point he'd prepared to protect him... Nothing moved to follow him. Prey hid around the corner and waited, heedless of the smell.

But still nothing tried to follow him into the sewers. Prey didn't know what it was, but he was certain.

There was something else inside the mountain. He hadn't felt threatened, but he had felt like he was being stalked and watched just now. Some cave dwelling monster, not hungry just curious instead?

Well, Prey wasn't going to give it the chance to grow bold enough to try finding out what the new 'prey' tasted like. He'd avoid taking this path again. He had other, safer paths he could take in the future. To get onto those particular paths, anyone or anything would have to pass across certain choke points.

The choke points looked like harmless rock. They weren't.

There was something in the underground crystal labyrinth. If it knew what was good for it, it would stay there.

'Just another problem to deal with later. Or never.'

Lemon Pink was in the Sewer's Heart, up to her knees in cold, brackish water. Although there wasn't really all that much water left in the basin. Now, the basin was more a dark, submerged mass of slowly wriggling tendrils. It looked disturbingly like Lemon was standing in a slick, black mass of entrails. The rubbery tendrils passively slid up against Lemon's wet fur, sometimes faintly twitching in a disgustingly slimy way.

But that was just an aesthetic concern. It was perfectly safe. Well, safe for her and Prey at least. Not that the wickerwatch had been created to fight. It was mainly just a plant, both in form and function. That is to say, passive, and unresponsive. Mainly. Most of the time anyway.

However, much like anything Prey created, it could still be dangerous to the unwary.

Lemon wasn't focusing on that though. A crystal lamp hung from a freshly hammered spike overhead, its light mixing with the silvery glow coming off the mare's horn. In ages past, a curved or sharp horn had been a mark of shame, associated with the warping characteristics of dark magic. A baseless stereotype, but still secretly at least half believed by many unicorns today.

In Lemon Pink however, those groundless fears would've been proven right. She had her eyes closed in concentration, magic slowly pulsing through her horn in time to the beat of her heart. But with each pulse, a swell of black sparks would buzz and then fade.

Prey might be far superior with rune magic, but Lemon was the one with the horn and far superior options. In most areas, (assuming she had the skill and magical reserves), Lemon could pick and choose spells to learn from a long list tested and perfected by generations of unicorn scholars.

However dark magic was not one of those areas.

Unsurprisingly, any such research on the topic was illegal, not to mention hazardous, and thus had only been carried out in secret by either desperate or deranged individuals in the past. Unfortunately,

this also made their research, (if they even recorded it), suspect and unstable to study at best. And that was assuming you could even get a hold of their work without getting caught.

But Hard Baked had managed it, obtaining an old, exceptionally foul grimoire from a half crazed dark, black, and blood magic practitioner, who'd faded into history some centuries past. That was how he'd made his gnarled effigy, and then the scarecrow and reaper King from that.

And Lemon Pink had raided Hard Baked's mind before his death. While Hard Baked might've only been an earth pony, and was thus limited in what he could use from the grimoire, he'd still managed to decipher a fair bit of the book's other text and seen some unicorn spells.

A variant of which Lemon Pink was using right now.

Perspiration beaded her forehead despite the cold air, and her straight, waterfall mane was damp with it. The black sparks pulsed and faded as Lemon Pink continued to feed the spell magic in a steady trickle. Raw power was not the key here, since Lemon didn't have that kind of magical reserve, but rather careful control instead.

What was being created here, in the hidden catacombs underneath Canterlot? A hex, or a curse.

Modern magicians claimed curses didn't exist, but they were wrong, plain and simple. Curses might not be big and bold like a fireball or a forcefield, or documented and recognised like Star Swirl's work, but they were very real. Just as real as the one Lemon Pink was weaving over the area right now.

This was a hex of fear, of darkness, and of paranoia. Hexes weren't spells in the traditional sense of spellcasting. No two were ever cast the same, and were non-replicable. Unlike common spells, where a unicorn could just feed magic into a spell matrix they'd memorised in school without having a clue about the why and how, a curse was all about emotion and intent.

A normal unicorn didn't need to understand the forces and

mathematical intricacies to use a spell. They just used it and went on with their day. They didn't even need to *want* the outcome so strongly that the magic eventually bent to their will. There were no matrixes or formula for curses, all that mattered was your willpower to create an effect.

Fear, paranoia, and darkness.

That was the hex Lemon was casting. Things that grew and multiplied in the presence of each other. Not tangible things. Nothing you could detect with magic either. Only things you could dismiss in the back of your head as not being real. Or that you hoped weren't real.

A stout heart, and you'd be safe. But in this narrow, dank, enclosed environment of the sewers, even your smallest doubt would start to multiply.

Where the wickerwatch's submerged tendrils spread, the tunnels seemed lower, the shadows thicker, the air colder, and the water darker.

Was that movement in the corner of your vision? A flicker? Were you just imagining things? Had you taken the second left, or was it the third right? Was that splash in the dark actually a muffled hoofstep?

Your so called friends weren't pulling their weight, they should be keeping a proper eye out. You always had to do everything yourself if you wanted it done right. They were so useless. You'd have to watch your own back down here, no telling what might be lurking around the next corner in the shadows.

The longer and deeper you went, the stronger the crawling paranoia became. The wickerwatch spread it through the sewers.

It was everything that made you jump in fright. When you call "Who's there?" A cobweb across your face. The shadow under the door. Snatched glimpses of gleam of eyes in the dark. A rattling of the closet handle. A moan of wind in the moonless night. Tree branches scratching at the window.

And the wickerwatch would only grow larger and reach further with each passing day. Already, it was sending back the presence of the thieves scouting party like a plucked stand in a spider's web.

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Two levels above, round a bend, down two tunnels, a second left, across an intersection of flowing sewerage, and under a narrow shaft crammed with hot water pipes, a hoof slipped and splashed into the cold water.

Or perhaps it was a paw, not a hoof. It didn't matter, because either way, the appendage's owner splashed against a frond of something slimy and long under the water's surface.

The foot or hoof was yanked back in disgust, and the scouting group kept on moving. They were on the hunt, searching for a dangerous quarry. A pink unicorn mare with a curved horn, white, black and yellow mane, and a penchant for lethal dark magic. And also a little sheep filly, of all foolish things.

The hunting group moved on, never ceasing to scan the tunnels with both light and magic, and thought nothing more of the slip and splash. They knew what might happen if they got distracted.

As yet, they felt no effects from the curse. It'd only just come into existence after all, its creator having laboured for many hours to set up the right conditions. Plus, this hunting party wasn't close to any mass of wickerwatch tendrils. But that would come later, in time perhaps. Both wickerwatch and curse would spread.

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Was there any point in going back up, Prey asked himself?

He needed all the time he could get working on his runes. A soft bed to rest his drained mind and body in would be good, but to get there, he'd have to take the time to travel back through Canterlot. If he stayed down here, he could immediately resume work when he woke up.

In the end though, he still went back to the flat. What decided him

was the worry of getting into further trouble for breaking curfew again. The pathetic threats of the probation officer, Safety Hazard, didn't phase Prey. Rather it was the worry about the attention he might draw. If he did, Nighthawk or another Night Guard might come to find out why. Prey didn't have the time or energy to waste pacifying them.

Prey had reason to be glad he'd returned to his flat before the morning came.

It was dark. Late. Someone banged heavily on his door. Prey jerked upright on his mattress.

The knocking came again from outside the door, methodical, tired. Prey rolled upright, instinctively grabbing for his ribbon. He found that it was still tied on. That's right, he'd never removed it, he remembered now.

He didn't call out asking who it was. He knew who it would be; his old friend Trouble. Instead, Prey just tightened his ribbon's bow, and silently padded over to the door.

He was safe here inside his flat, this was where his runic defences could protect him. He wasn't going to open the door into his fortress in the middle of the night just because some fool knocked. Prey placed his hoof on a patch of wall, and concentrated as the tired, heavy sounding knocking came yet again.

His runes came to life, and let Prey feel who or what was on the other side of the wall.

Prey dropped his hoof and yanked the door open. The shape of Crimson stood in the near darkness of the corridor outside.

"Crimson, what-?" But already Prey was taking in the problem.

"Sorry about this Prey. Can you lend me a hoof?" Crimson asked thickly. He was hurt. He was standing, but in such a way that Prey immediately knew there was pain.

"What happened? Get inside quick. How bad is it?" Prey asked all at once, any sleepiness gone. He hit the light switch as he hurried Crimson inside, the crystal in the ceiling brightening to life.

Prey blinked in the brightness, and took in Crimson's state.

First, and this was the most important point, Crimson was still standing. The Reaper King had done worse. But that didn't mean Crimson still hadn't been messed up.

Crimson's coat and the feathers of his normally oh-so pristine wings were battered. Prey saw swollen bruises all over the left side of Crimson's barrel, and a shallow but nastily long slice down a foreleg. There were at least eight different matted patches of fur from cuts or punctures, (Prey didn't know which yet), and grazes galore. There was a hitch to each of Crimson's inhales that indicated pain in his chest too.

The worst though, aside from the long slice, was a seeping hole in Crimson's rear right leg muscle. It looked like something had 'hooked' in and twisted as it was yanked out.

Obviously, Crimson had been attacked.

The thieves? They'd waited until the very night Crimson's two Guards had left, and then attacked. How had Crimson gotten away? Anger clenched Prey's teeth together. They'd attacked *Crimson*.

'No one steals from me.'

"Did you see their faces?" Prey growled, although from him it was more of a vaguely threatening warble.

Crimson paused in painfully lowering himself to the floor, "What? Yes, of course."

"You did?" Prey jerked his head up from peering at a torn flap of skin on Crimson's shin in surprise. He'd expected the thieves to be wearing cloaks and hoods like last time.

"How many were there? Tell me what you remember. Cutie marks, defining characteristics, fur colour, numbers. True they could've all

been in disguise, but we can still go tell Nighthawk-"

"No Prey. No. It wasn't the thieves who broke into the Vanhoover station." Crimson winced and gingerly brushed at a swollen and raw bruise forming under his jaw, breathing shallowly. His fetlock came away with specks of blood.

Wait, it wasn't the thieves? But then...what was all this? Who else could've attacked Crimson? "But... who then?"

"Not them." Crimson averted his eyes, "It's not an issue you need to worry about."

Prey caught his breath. He'd used that very phrase before himself. "You killed them? When? Where? Do I need to-?"

"No! No no no, that's not what I meant at all. No one's dead."

"What? But then who-?"

"It's not important. Can we just leave it Prey? It was... mostly my own fault. All this, I mean." Crimson nodded painfully down at his battered body.

"Not important?" Prey repeated incredulously, gesticulating at Crimson lying on the floorboards, "How is this 'not important'? Someone *dared* to hurt you."

"It's not whatever you think it is, Prey. I knew what I was getting myself into. I don't want to talk about it because I know you won't approve."

"Of course I don't approve of whatever this is! You're *hurt*." Prey hadn't a clue what Crimson could be thinking.

"It's... Look, are you prepared to help me or do I need to go to the hospital and I can't go there? They'll ask questions and file reports." Crimson looked up from the floor to tiredly meet Prey's eyes. Prey knew if he said no, Crimson would apologise for waking him up, and then hobble out the door to the hospital.

Prey scowled, that question was truly offensive. "Of course I'll help.

I'll always help you Crimson. I keep telling you, there are only two things I won't do for you. Anything else, and I mean *anything*, you only have but to ask."

Crimson's ears fell, "Of course, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to insult you. That was unworthy of me. I knew, I mean I know you wouldn't, wouldn't..." His words trailed off.

"Have you got a concussion?" Prey asked in concern, hurrying around to Crimson's front, "Here, try and look me in the eyes."

"No, I didn't get hit hard enough for that. Not in the head anyways. I just need you to patch me up, like you did for Gloom in Mayflower. Can you do that please?"

The only reason Prey hadn't already immediately started doing exactly that the moment he'd gotten Crimson inside was because he knew Crimson wasn't critical. If Crimson had managed to fly back here and then limp inside unassisted, he wasn't about to keel over. Finding out what had happened and if Crimson was being followed was more important. Except Crimson wasn't telling him.

Prey gave Crimson a look just to let him know how unhappy he was with this, then rushed to grab his emergency kit from the cupboard. It was a large and extensive kit. Prey always tried to be prepared for the worst.

Crimson blinked at the kit's contents as Prey unzipped it. Rolls and rolls of tightly wound bandages, pressed bundles of dried leaves, roots, flowers, seeds, small jars of thick pastes or liquids, a knife, scissors, scalpels, and enough needles of all sizes to look like some demented sowing kit.

"What is all of that?"

"Medical stuff." Prey answered shortly.

"Why do you have so much? What were you preparing for?"

"Nothing. Just the inevitable."

"Ah. All gathered in the hopes it would never need to be used, I

take it."

"Be quiet." Prey snapped. He was still very unhappy about all of this. He pulled out a roll of bandage and began unwinding it. The long slice down Crimson's leg was bleeding the most, although it was not Crimson's most serious injury. That was the puncture hole. The bandage was just to keep the slice closed until he could get around to properly disinfecting, then stitching it shut.

Prey shifted to reach around Crimson's upper foreleg, then hesitated, bandage spread between his hooves.

"Do you want me to raise my leg like this-?"

"No!" Prey recoiled, Crimson freezing in turn. Prey stopped himself and took a breath. 'It's okay.' He told himself. No one was touching him, it was the other way around. He was still in control. Prey despised still being so afraid of just a simple touch, but there it was.

"I'm going to be... I'm going to be working here, but don't touch me. Don't move, okay?"

"I-"

"I said don't move. And be quiet. Just let me work and don't distract me."

Crimson bit his lip and went still. He didn't nod or say yes, because that would've violated exactly what Prey just told him not to do. Prey steeled himself.

"Don't move." He repeated again, then leaned in and quickly reached around to wrap Crimson's leg. The leg felt hard with lean muscle under the fur, and almost too warm. Prey kept going round and round until the wide but shallow slice was firmly wrapped.

Prey stepped back and let out the breath he'd been holding. Next was the hook hole. Prey winced just looking at it. He didn't have a clue how Crimson wasn't whimpering right now. Probably just too tough for that. The pegasus's self discipline really was formidable.

"Hold on one second." Prey scurried over to his windowsill, laden

down with his pot plants. He stretched up on his rear hooves, and began plucking leaves from five different plants. Crimson's eyes followed him, but he didn't move or speak, exactly as Prey had ordered.

Prey hurried back over three-legged, the leaves clutched to his chest. He dumped them onto the floor and pushed three of the leaf types towards Crimson. "Here. Eat these. Don't leave any, eat them all."

Crimson didn't ask what they were, or what they were for. The leaves could've been poison for all he knew, (in specific combinations, they were poison), but he still scooped them all up with the feathers on his least injured wing. He grimaced at the horrible sour taste as he chewed, but he persevered and didn't stop until he'd eaten every leaf.

Meanwhile, Prey was mashing the other two remaining types of leaves together into a green soapy paste.

"This is going to sting." Prey warned, then daubed the mix around the puncture wound.

Prey's warning was useless. Crimson's entire body went rigid even under Prey's light touch, and a long hiss of air escaped from between his clenched teeth. Evidently, Crimson had only been remaining strong until this point.

"Sorry, but I need to disinfect it. Don't worry, those leaves you just ate will start to work in a few minutes and help with the pain."

He worked quickly, applying the mashed leaves until he was satisfied the wound was thoroughly disinfected, before lightly scraping the excess away.

Prey wiped his hooves off, then pulled out one of the needles and reel of stitching thread from the box. The needle was curved to the side, made specifically for sewing with flesh, not cloth. Prey sadly knew how much of a difference that made when working. Cleft hooves really did help with holding and threading the needle's eye, something he made sure to do outside of Crimson's line of sight. No

one liked to see the needle. Annoyed or not, he still warned Crimson before he began.

"How are those leaves coming? Have they helped with the pain?"

"Yes. A bit."

"Good. Try not to tense up now. It'll only make this hurt twice as much." Prey ordered rather waspishly, still upset about all of this, then pressed the raised flesh of the puncture shut and slipped the needle under Crimson's hide. Crimson still tensed up, everyone did sadly for the first stitch. The only question was, did they manage to untense their muscles for the rest of the stitches?

Prey worked as fast as he could without slipping up, wanting to get it over and done with. He stitched in silence, just Crimson's hitched breath catching every time the needle went back in to break the loud quiet.

By the time he was finishing up the last stitch, (stitch number seven), Prey knew how Crimson had gotten this puncture wound. He saw how the muscle had been jerked as the hook was pulled out. The hook had been pointed, but not with a sharpened edge like a knife would've had. More like a blunted practice weapon. Specifically, it looked a lot like what Prey imagined a wound inflicted by a sparring griffin claw boot would look.

Crimson wasn't saying how he'd gotten hurt, but Prey could add two and two just the as well as the next person, and also *far* better than most ponies he'd met.

Prey's mouth turned down. But he didn't say a word as he cleaned off his needle and began the process of seeing to the rest of Crimson's injuries.

He unbound the slice wound and washed it out with a mix of water and crumbled mustard root, not even looking up as Crimson wheezed in pain, merely murmuring wordless assurances as he got on with it.

The slice wasn't deep, however it was too wide in the middle and

the skin too thin to hold more stitches. Prey settled for putting butterfly stitches on both ends and tightly packing a dressing including yarrow over the middle. He paused to wash the sticky film of red from his hooves and fetlocks, and moved on.

Other small cuts and gashes got the same treatment, cleaned and bandaged where they were small enough, and a couple of stitches where they weren't.

The friction grazes Prey couldn't do much about besides smearing a balm on them and wrapping them too. They weren't serious but Prey knew how much they had to hurt.

Bruises he simply slapped small poultices over and told Crimson to keep the poultice on for as long as possible.

Gently Prey felt along Crimson's ribs, using just the tips of his cloven hooves to probe the bone, feeling for cracks. To Crimson's credit, he didn't flinch even once, which was a good thing because if he *had,* Prey would've probably flinched in return, and that really wouldn't have been good for Crimson's ribs.

Prey listened to Crimson's breathing, lifted up an ear and pressed it against the pegasus's side after psyching himself up for it. Prey told him to breathe in deeply and hold it a few times, before concluding that none of Crimson's ribs were broken. The practice armour chestplate Prey was certain Crimson had been wearing had done its job.

"Bruised chest, and possibly two bruised ribs on the right side too. Probably. I'm not a hundred percent certain yet. You'll know in a few days for certain, though." Prey concluded.

Crimson cocked a questioning ear, still not daring to speak since Prey hadn't asked him a direct question.

Prey gave him a mirthless smile, "Feel that pain? If it's just your chest muscles, it'll feel the exact same. But if it's the ribs that are bruised, it'll be worse by then."

That done, Prey looked over Crimson's wings last of all, ignoring his

patient's discomfort. The feathers weren't important, those would grow back in time, but since Crimson'd had his wings folded since he came in, Prey hadn't gotten a chance to examine the wing muscles themselves.

Crimson complied, and let Prey stretch out his wing, because heavens knew Prey didn't have the strength to forcibly extend it. A pegasus's flight muscles were usually the strongest muscles in their whole body.

Prey felt the tingle from the disguised electrite feather when he passed over it, even if it looked exactly the same as the rest of Crimson's admittedly impressive pinions. There was no missing it. How could Prey not know the buzz of runic power tingling his hooves when he'd been the one who created the feather? Prey wondered how much worse Crimson's injuries would've been if it weren't for the passive boost from his gift?

Either way, Crimson's wings were fine, and Prey let Crimson refold them as he let go.

Prey sighed in aggravation and walked around to plop himself down in front of Crimson. He gave the Pegasus a long, hard stare. Normally, you couldn't outstare a thestral, or even a pseudo-thestral, but Crimson obviously knew he was in the wrong here.

Rather than meet his accusing eyes, Crimson had his gaze fixed on Prey's ribbon. Prey waited. Every so often, Crimson would gingerly shift to alleviate one of his pains. The leaves he'd eaten could only do so much after all. His breathing was still shallow too. Or perhaps he just didn't like the smell of his own blood staining Prey's hooves. Few did.

Finally, Prey broke the silence of his flat, "Are there going to be more of these illicit 'training sessions' that I'm going to have to patch you up from?"

"You knew-? I mean, I'm not surprised, of course you could work it out." Crimson said tiredly.

Prey kept up his glare, "Training implies restraint and practice. I've

just treated you, so I know there was none of that involved."

"Sorry. It really was my fault. I pushed for all of them to attack me at once. I thought I could take them. I'm sorry you had to deal with my folly." Crimson apologised stoically.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you did come to me. And if you're ever hurt, of course I'll help. But I don't..." Prey waved a hoof, encompassing Crimson's injured state, "...I don't want to have to help in the first place. I don't want you to get hurt. I don't want to see this."

"Sorry. But if you don't push your limits, you don't improve. But sorry." Crimson apologised again.

"So... Is this going to be a regular occurrence or not?" Prey pressed after a minute of Crimson not elaborating.

"I, no? Maybe?" Crimson looked over himself, "I want to train, I *need* this kind of training if I'm going to get good enough. But I don't think I will do it to this level again. I took on too much. I can't even say I won, it was a draw."

Pain was a great teacher. It taught you to never again do what had caused it. Pain had a way of really making your priorities clear. Crimson's unflattering review of himself and his capabilities was a result of that. Right now, although he was sitting and conversing quite lucidly, Prey knew Crimson was struggling with keeping the pain under control.

"What brought on this sudden need to improve so much?" Prey asked after a time.

Crimson looked up and studied the ceiling, "I went to visit Lilly Blossom in her new house." He said simply.

"Ah."

And didn't that say it all? Prey and Crimson were so similar, but it was only Crimson who saw Lilly's pitiful condition as his fault. Crimson was a better person than Prey like that. Back then he'd had the jade necklace to aid him, but now he didn't even have that. He

was even weaker than he had been in Mayflower, so how was he supposed to protect anyone now?

The guilt had gotten to Crimson and driven him into finding a number of Night Guards and demanding they brutally attack him all at once. It was a ridiculously extreme training method, with little return and a high cost. The very same night he'd gotten out from under the careful watch of his two escorts, he'd snuck off and engaged in this.

But Prey could see it in his mind's eye; The thestral Guards shaking their heads, Crimson stubbornly insisting, and the Night Guards eventually giving in and agreeing to meet him after hours.

Those Guards hadn't held back despite their reluctance though, that wasn't the clan's way. They would've done exactly as Crimson asked and attacked with blows fully capable of crippling or killing if taken head on.

'Oh Crimson, you idiot do-gooder and your bleeding heart.' Prey sighed internally. Crimson really didn't deserve any of this mess with the thieves, all started by that unbending selfish Lord Vanish.

"I'll say it again, I don't want to have to tend to you like this," Prey stated, "And I don't approve of your training method either. But you already know there's only two things I won't do for you. Just... if you feel you have to do this kind of training, well, maybe just check I'm in that night before hoof? Just to give me a heads up?"

Crimson knew as well as Prey his probation forbade him being outside after dark. However Prey was confirming he didn't care and went out at least semi-regularly anyways. It was an unspoken admission of guilt that he was also doing things Crimson wouldn't approve of.

It was a trade, but not one of the selfish sort. Not a; 'I'll-look-the-other-way-if-you-do-the-same' sort. They were both friends and far beyond such points. Prey was telling Crimson because it was only fair he should know. A trade of reaffirmed trust.

Crimson might be bad at words, but he understood the silent,

deeper interactions where what you *didn't* say was more important than what you did say.

Crimson smiled sincerely at Prey, the band aid the lamb had stuck over the cut on his cheek creasing and scar tracks really standing out, "I understand. I will warn you when, *if*, I do this again. And thank you Prey. For being my friend, I mean. Oh, and fixing me up, that too."

"You really need to work on your smile. You'll scare children with that, not to mention make their parents panic." Prey sighed, but he still smiled back.

A smile can't fix anything, but between two individuals who understand, a smile, no matter how tired, worn, wry, bitter, hollow, or outright twisted, is another one of those silent deeper interactions that said more than words.

Prey still wasn't happy about any of this, nor about Crimson's frankly reckless training methods, or seeing his pain and now having dried blood on his hooves, but hey. Smile. It was just a moment in the enclosed safety of Prey's flat, and come the morning all the other problems and consequences would come back, but right here and now, they were both still alive, and for now that was enough.

Prey breathed out and sat up, turning aside his face into the crook of his shoulder, rubbing away the sandy feeling under his eyes to help stay awake, "Well, not that this wasn't fun and educational, but it's way past late, and we should really both be getting some rest. You especially."

"Healer's orders, is it?"

"Yes. You are to go to bed and rest. No leaving your flat at all tomorrow. Rest. We'll see how you're doing after that. And I don't think I need to say don't interact with anyone either. Stay out of sight unless you want to explain why you look like a tenderised raw piece of fishz, sorry, fish." Prey ordered, eyeing Crimson's state meaningfully.

"Yes, I know. I'll leave you to sleep."

"Do you need any other help?"

"I made it back here while injured," Crimson pointed out as he slowly stood up, "I think I can make it across the hall."

"Well if you're sure. I'll come by tomorrow. And don't forget to drink plenty of water."

"I will make sure. And thank you again Prey."

Crimson's assurances aside, Prey still followed Crimson into his darkened flat to make sure the pegasus actually made it to his bed. Crimson didn't begrudge him that. Prey checked the flat over before he left, glanced at the ice box with the blood fern set on top, and shut the door.

Lemon Pink came by at five o'clock that morning in the darkness before the dawn. She came under a heavy illusionary veil and notice-me-not charm, eyes red from lack of sleep, and delivered her emergency report. Their old 'friend' Trouble was back.

---I---

Author's Notes:

Hello to all. So, my mistake in the last Author's Notes. I said this would be the last Chapter in the ARC. Obviously, I underestimated how much I had left to write in this ARC. So the climax isn't *juuuust* yet. 😬

Hope you enjoy and like the chapter anyways.

☆ Editor: **Sweetolebob18**

64.4 Digging for Diamonds

Lemon Pink came by at five o'clock that morning in the darkness before the dawn. She came under a heavy illusionary veil and a notice-me-not charm, eyes red from lack of sleep, and delivered her emergency report.

Prey sat slumped on the edge of his mattress, head hanging, ears drooping, a woolly bundle of listlessness. Twining around his front hooves, the ribbon lay. But Prey didn't see it, even as he stared straight down at it. He didn't see the length of silk, his hooves, the floorboards, or even the dull gold gleam of the hated tracer bands.

From the outside, Prey looked utterly despondent. But he wasn't.

He might've seemed stunned. He wasn't that either.

Nor was he lost, poleaxed, frozen, or defeated.

Prey was thinking. He was thinking as deeply as he'd ever done.

Look beneath the outside appearance and see the mental rather than the physical. To put it more exactly, Prey was pushing his mind to the limit. His body may have been slouching, but his brain was racing with frantic, desperate activity, travelling as fast as the fastest pegasus flier. Split in two, his mind was running in parallel in an attempt to double his planning abilities. He couldn't pay any attention to anything outside of himself, everything else was mundane.

Lemon's report. It was a disaster, a failure, a threat. He needed an answering solution and he needed it now.

Oh, Prey already knew what his answer was going to be, the end result was never in question. Only the method of its execution was.

Lemon Pink's awful report had finally reminded him of who he was.

He was Prey. He might be staying within the richest capital in Equestria, with enchanted walls, Mage Towers, and others defences, and he might be enrolled in the Night Guard, surrounded on every side by soft ponies who were adverse to violence, but underneath all that he was still Prey. You never really left the jungle.

Fifty-seven years in Dreverton had been a lifetime. But he was still the same Prey who'd first been dragged kicking and screaming into his cell. A lifetime ago.

Things had changed since then. Nothing had changed since then.

He was still himself, still Prey, no matter what he might wish. Still just 'Prey'.

Deep down he was the same lamb from the war, the last survivor of the Resistance.

Somehow, inconceivably, the ISND, Luna, Nighthawk, Screech, Scenic, Gloom, and yes, even Crimson had led him into the temptation of forgetting.

'How could I forget?'

Prey was not defeated as he sat there. He was thinking. And he was furious.

He was so so *so* incredibly furious. Anger sat heavy in his belly and burned like curling embers in his chest. He could taste the bitter heat in his throat with every breath. The whip scars prickled over his back. He was so angry he'd been shaking earlier. Now he'd come right out the other side. Now, he was ready to kill.

'No one steals from me.'

Prey was plotting redredred*red*. Why didn't any of them get it? Why did they insist on pushing him? Why? Didn't they realise the only outcome lay bathed in red, one way or another, win or lose?

'They want to do this? They want to push me? Fine. We'll do it their way. And my way. They said it themselves; 'this means war'.'

With the most perfect cosmic timing, fate chose this exact moment to stick its big nose of destiny into Prey's business, and decide; 'Yes. My time is now.'

The hollow thump of someone knocking on the front door drifted down the corridor.

Jerkily, Prey raised his head. Now? Some fool had to come calling right *now*? Did they WANT to die? If so, all they needed to do was ask, and they would receive.

Almost without conscious input, Prey's legs got up and walked him over to his door. The ribbon was carried wrapped around his hoof, like a coiled adder. Who was at the front door? Which blithe, unaware, foolish idiot was asking to die?

Another courier? The post mare? That meddling pest Strange Happenstance? Another unwanted messenger from Nighthawk? Or that weakling Scenic and his empathetic marefriend? If it was Saffron Swirl coming to try and befriend him like some lost puppy, Prey was going to quite probably kill her and feed her corpse to his last remaining veropede.

Prey went out into the hallway to answer the front door even as he was internally seething, fit to overflow like a boiling pot; 'GoAwayGoAwayGoAwayGoAway.'

It didn't occur to Prey to just ignore the door. If he did that, they'd just keep knocking and then Crimson would eventually come to answer the door because he was a polite stallion like that.

Crimson was injured. He needed to rest like Prey had instructed. Not get up. He should stay in bed. Not answer the door. This suicidal visitor didn't deserve to see Crimson. Prey would have to deal with them instead. So who was it?

Prey got close enough to hear the thoughts of the mystery person waiting on the other side of the door and had to stop for a few seconds to let the burst of fury pass.

'Wait. Wait a moment.' Prey had to let it pass. Had to get it under

control. Prey was furious, and it was affecting his judgement. He knew that, but he still couldn't halt it.

He should. He should stop. But he was just so furiously angry. The thieves had dared to steal from him yet again.

'I need to calm down. I need to calm down right now.'

This wasn't funny. Rage felt empowering but it was merely hollow overconfidence. Anger didn't make you stronger, it made you careless.

Prey breathed deeply, and only when the red in his head faded did he rear up to the door latch and open it.

Taffy Hopes, wearing a bright yellow cardigan and even brighter smile, beamed down at him, "Hi'ya Prey, and a good morning to you too!"

Prey didn't need this right now. In his head, he was thinking of how easy it would be to mind kill the liaison's officer right here, right now. All he had to do was reach out. So simple, a touch was all it would take.

Just a touch.

But not a flicker passed across the polite mask of Prey's face. "What are you doing here, Taffy?"

Too bad for Prey that fear and anger still turned his voice into a humiliatingly high pitched squeak.

Taffy's eyebrows shot up under her fuzzy orange fringe and she grinned, "Why, did I just hear a voice break? My my, somepony's growing up fast."

Prey swallowed down the burning taste of hot bile. 'It's not intentional, she's not doing it on purpose. She's just a typical pony. Arrogant, intrusive, nosey, and overly cheerful.' He repeated in his head.

Prey made himself breathe evenly and enunciate each word clearly,

"Not that I'm not thrilled to see you here Taffy, but seriously, why are you on the doorstep?"

"Oh, I'm just popping by everypony to drop off invitations for an out of work party on Nightmare night. See? Here's one for you guys."

Taffy's horn glowed, and her telekinesis pulled open her hoofbag, before shoving a cardboard rectangle into Prey's face.

It took every bit of what was left of Prey's rapidly degrading self control not to react violently to the sudden use of magic right over his face. If he *couldn't* read Taffy's thoughts, and *hadn't* known it wasn't an attack...

Prey refused to take the blue, glitter suffused invite from out of Taffy's aura. He silently held out his hoof and waited for Taffy to drop it. Only once she obliged did Prey read the invite, which was a lot politer than simply doing the smart thing and ripping the damned thing up.

Prey read it; 'To: Crimson Trace and Prey (Something-or-Other). Ready for some spooky fun? Great! You are hereby invited to a Nightmare Night costume party on Friday 31th October. Venue on Elm Street. Bring a friend!'

Taffy grinned, mistaking Prey's stare for interest, "I know it's a bit early, but me and the girls thought it best to start planning early. We even got together and booked a hall. We're going to decorate it, have a mini-haunted house, apple bobbing, a themed food contest and everything! Between us, we think we can probably get about two hundred ponies attending."

Prey took a breath, 'Just a single touch. It would be easy. She's so unguarded and open...'

But she would be missed.

"Thank you Taffy. The thought is... appreciated. I'll make sure to show Crimson the invite when he wakes up."

Taffy beamed, "Wonderful! I'm'a drop by Paint Spot and Carton next to give them their invites. By the by, I hope to see you all back at

work soon. I've been saving a special corner in my office for all of Gloom's paperwork. I can't wait to see his face."

Taffy's smile turned a bit sad, before she caught herself and quickly hid it by smoothing out the front of her hideously bright yellow cardigan.

'-don't go ruining the mood now, Taffy girl-'

Prey just nodded neutrally.

"Welp, cheerio till then Prey! Ta' Ta for now~"

Prey shut the door, he didn't slam it, he *shut* it. He then only barely managed to stop himself from ramming his hoof into the floor. He would only hurt himself. He barely cared right now. Maybe the pain would help the flaring redredred anger. But no. The sound would almost certainly draw Crimson's attention.

So instead, he had to settle for throwing the glittery invite on the floor with an inarticulate suppressed hiss of fury, and stomping (quietly), back to his flat.

He'd almost killed Taffy just now. He'd really truly honestly considered it, and had a plan to carry it out and everything. Trick her back into the flat. Burn the body to ash with runes. He wouldn't even have regretted it.

It's not like she wouldn't have been deserving of it. Getting in his way, and being so unbearably happy and blind and rich undeservingly privileged just made Prey' blood boil.

Her only offence today was picking a particularly bad time. But that would've been crime enough in the Resistance for Torment to claw out her guts. Or for Snake to coldly cut her throat. Or for Garrow to tear off her face. Taffy didn't know how lucky she was to have walked away today. Fifty-seven years Prey had rotted away in Dreverton, and today he'd just been reminded today of what he'd been fighting against all those years ago.

Selfish ponies. Greedy landowners. Blindly ignorant Guards. The helplessness. Fire Strike and his Border Guards. Oppression and fear

closing in from all sides. Being forced to participate on pain of death. The threat of agonies inflicted. Unicorns and their overpowering magical advantage.

All of those reasons and more.

And what was Taffy? She was the living personification of one of those very reasons.

Prey threw himself back onto his bed. Horrible ideas swam through the back of his head, like shadowy ripples spreading beneath dark water.

'A plan. A plan comes first to punish those who stole from me. Taffy is nothing. Forget her. Because no one steals from me.'

There would be revenge. Not balance, or justice, or satisfaction, or the righting of wrong. There would be none of that. Just anger, hate, and revenge.

Prey went over the packet of Lemon Pink's memories again. He remembered the events clearly, after all, they were part of his own memories now, but he still studied them again.

---///-Five Hours Ago-\\\---

Lemon Pink had been in the Sewer's Heart, connected to the wickerwatchs web, and channeling the raw feedback through a runic processing array. It was the only way for a sane, sentient mind to make sense of the overwhelmingly huge web of twitching nerve fronds that was the wickerwatch.

She'd been down there monitoring the wickerwatch when it'd happened. And thus she was there and saw, heard, and felt the disaster as it happened.

The cause of the disaster was obvious. It was the same one which had started all of Prey's problems: The thieves.

A tremor shivered through the wickerwatch, passing up dark pipes

and down twisting tunnels before arriving, after being translated, into Lemon's consciousness. The wickerwatch was just a plant, it didn't think or feel, so it was Lemon Pink alone who experienced the surge of alarm.

More tremors from out of the dark, more feedback, all of it spelling out danger as Lemon pieced sensations together into a picture.

Bodies were moving swiftly down one of the main sewer tunnels. Magic was being used, no doubt light and scanning spells. Too many of them. The thieves hadn't pushed into the sewers with this many people before, nor this fast and this aggressively. What had caused this sudden change in tactic? Merely a reliance on strength in numbers? Or did they think they'd found something and we're going all in?

'Aggressive. But what is their goal?' Lemon considered, 'The veropede? Another attempt to take the crystal cave lair? Or...'

Or perhaps they were aiming for the Sewer's Heart where she now stood alone, up to her knees in cold water, ropes of slippery wickerwatch. and less pleasent things.

Lemon Pink could feel the body heat they gave off through the wickerwatch, taste the vibrations they made in the water, and the currents of displaced air.

The group was large, Lemon could detect roughly fifteen individuals, the wickerwatch didn't allow for any more accuracy than that. As for the split between diamond dogs and ponies, she didn't know that either, just that the hoof and paw steps relayed that there were both races present.

Pushing into the sewers like this was bringing them towards her position, but again, there was no way to know which tunnels these invaders were planning to take. Perhaps they were going to turn. Perhaps they weren't. There was no way to tell. But they were advancing faster than she'd ever observed before, not carefully scanning for traps at every step like their artifact wielding scouts used to do.

Realisation; 'These tunnels are all paths they've scouted out before. Ones they knew were safe at the time.'

Reckless. Or perhaps they'd just deduced that Lemon and Prey just hadn't had the time to re-trap the sewers along every path the thieves had already taken. Especially since as before, those scouts had never traversed the same sewer tunnels twice in their search.

'It was all part of a gambit to control our response and prepare ahead for when they went all in like right now.' Lemon deduced. It was such a detached observation on her part, a sneaky deception she herself might've used, but that didn't mean Lemon wasn't afraid. Through the memory, Prey felt her heart thumping as if it were his own.

Down one tunnel, then the next the thieves pressed.

Lemon could only pick up through the feedback from the wickerwatch and plot their route once they'd already taken it. She was powerless to do anything more. The party was still descending deeper and closer.

'Worrying. But where are they ultimately aiming?' There was still no way for Lemon to tell.

The crystal cave? The veropede? Right here in the Sewer's Heart? Or a fourth, unknown objective? A one in four chance of her discovery, followed by her violent death. But Lemon couldn't do anything to stop their approach. Nor could she get the veropede moved in time, either to here or to further away. The beast might be perfectly suited to life in the dark beneath the city, but because of its size, the paths it could take were limited, and the and the paths it could take unnoticed even more so.

And if she mentally sent the veropede a command to move right now, it was almost certain to encounter the rapidly advancing thieves. Move it anyway? Have it stay put?

She didn't know. She was trapped in here as the thieves closed in.

But 'trapped' wasn't the same as helpless. She was not without

defences here in the Sewer's Heart, a few key runic arrays built by Prey were set up in here, nor were the tunnels completely trap free, perhaps those would at least slow the thieves down, especially as they would be unexpected.

And of course, there was the pervading hex spread throughout the sewers wherever the wickerwatch's tendrils extended. Where it grew, so did fear, darkness, and paranoia.

Lemon couldn't do anything more. Now it all depended on the invaders' route.

---oOo---

Floating balls of artificial arcane light glowed. These orbs revealed dark, winding tunnels like the insides of intestines. But the magical glow was never strong enough to banish the dark all the way to the tunnels' ends. Sometimes it was a corner, a sharp bend, an overhang of shadow, but no true end was ever revealed to the raid group of fifteen people.

Water dripped. Claustrophobically tight pipes appeared at random, like portholes in a ship's side, jutting off from the main tunnels to branch into as yet unmapped paths.

The group was moving fast, not stopping for any breaks. They were on guard, tense, wary. Two unicorns were leading the group, cloaked and their faces hidden. Their light spells strained against the perpetual darkness. A gilded chestplate briefly gleamed from the gap in one of their cloaks. A blue gemstone glittered. The other unicorn just wore a full suit of plate under their cloak.

Behind them, the rest of the raid group followed in close proximity. Thirteen more of them. All people trusting in the lead two to guide them on safe paths down here in the depths of the crushing earth.

Diamond dogs snorted at the constant foul smell. Some panted. Water splashed in their haste. Careless hooves made warped echoes down the cramped tunnels. The ears and heads of both species were on a constant swivel.

The dark pressed in close to hungrily watch their hurried progress.

One of the dogs jumped and spun with a snarl at the gaping maw of a pipe, set into the ceiling.

"What?" The lead dog demanded, claws out.

"Nothing," The other dog rumbled, "Heard wrong. Is nothing."

A cloaked unicorn, one who seemed to blur out of your line of sight even while you were looking straight at them, sent their white light floating globe up into the dark, revealing there was indeed nothing, a slimy grate covering the empty pipe.

"Keep moving. Stay together. Remember, if you lose your assigned partner for even just a second, call out at once."

The air was dead in the tunnels, unmoving as they pushed through it, almost like it had its own weight. The shadows were thick enough in places to cut, and flowed back in to claim the area as soon as the lights moved on.

It was a maze down here, even having a map and knowing exactly where they were on it.

Another tunnel came, another junction went.

"Hey, stop! That's the wrong turn. It's *this* intersection." Someone hissed.

"No it's not, you clod."

"Yes it is. In case you've forgotten, I've been down here before."

"And you're still wrong. Check the Nightmare damned map if you don't believe me."

"Enough." A third pony interrupted. "You're bickering like foals! What are you doing?"

"We are not-!...I, I, You're right. I was just-forget it."

"Just check the map. This place is getting to us all."

"What is hold up?" One of the dogs growled, futilely trying to hurry them up.

"*Patience*. If we take a wrong turn, it could be our last."

The dog subsided, but they were all feeling it. The watchful dark. The shadows. And everyone here remembered the two centipede monsters from before. What else might be down here?

Many of their members had died horrible, screaming deaths to those terrible beasts in the first ill-fated attack. They'd been so confident of success and revenge back then. So *careless*.

Now? Now it was dark, cramped, and tense. Every now and again, something seemed to move in the dark, oily waters. It was probably dung. Hopefully it was just dung.

"Have a bad feeling in my tail. Very bad. Like when Jonas was crushed in cave in." A greying dog muttered.

"No. No turning tail now. We so close. So close to revenge."

"Yes, revenge."

"Yes. No go back."

"Grrr."

"Finish this today."

They all meant it. Everyone here was committed. Neither half of their alliance was going back, not now. The diamond dog had said it, they were so close. Their target was *so* close!

But the fear was there too.

"Celestia's will be done, let's get this over with." One of the unicorns murmured, encouraging his fellows.

Onwards they pressed into the tunnels again, avoiding the stagnant,

foul water running through the bottom of the pipe.

It was too bad that somehow, inexplicably, and despite having only just argued over checking the map, the lead pony somehow still took them down the wrong turn. And even worse, not one person noticed.

In the slowly encroaching dark and growing unease, one shadowy tunnel mouth unfortunately looked a lot like another.

All the sounds, vibrations, and movement fed into the wickerwatch. It 'heard' without understanding, 'saw' without seeing, as the fifteen warm blooded people travelling near it drew up short.

"Stop. This isn't right."

"What isn't right?"

"It's not familiar, none of it. It's all wrong."

"Why stop again?" A dog whispered.

"We've taken a wrong turn."

"How? Weren't you paying attention?"

"Wasn't I-? Weren't *you* paying attention either?"

Diamond dogs were growling in anger. They'd just been led astray by the ponies' incompetence. It was dark, it stank, and constantly it felt like the tunnels were closing in whenever they weren't looking.

One of the unicorns shoved the other, the pushed one's hoof slipping into the foul water. They yanked it back with a curse.

"You dare-? You want to go a round?"

"Stop!" The alpha dog barked sharply, making the tunnels ring.

All other noise ceased, "Stop, stop, stop. You fighting does not help. Stop it. Bad ponies. You mess up, we all die. Stop it."

There was a silence. Water dripped. The dark kept creeping closer.

"Something's wrong here." One of the hooded ponies declared, "I'm certain there's some effect tampering with our heads."

"Impossible. You've still got the anti-mind magic defence going haven't you? And besides, we're all wearing mind lock amulets too."

"The spell is still up yes, but you know as well as I there's no way to be sure against the dark, insidious nature of mind magic. We thought these traitors only had direct mind altering magic, but now it looks like we were mistaken." The same pony answered, voice disgusted.

"Oh yeah? And how are you so sure?" The other one challenged stubbornly.

"I can be sure because you just asked that very question, Crescendo. Think. Look at us Crescendo. We've crusaded alongside one another for years protecting these lands. We're all brothers. I trust you with my life, and you trust me with yours. You know I would never lie to you. So what's making you want to not believe me?"

There was a stunned silence. Some swallowed loudly.

"Y-you're right. By Celestia, how didn't I realise? I'm sorry Quarterstaff, I didn't mean any of that."

"It's fine. It's this *infernal* mind magic that's to blame. It, and the traitors to Equestria who sink so low as to use it." The unicorn spat.

"Something messing with our heads?" A dog growled.

"Yes, and we can't stop it. It's trying to make us turn on each other, but we can't let it win."

"Don't give in, the mind magic is lying to you. Remember why we're here. Remind yourselves if you've forgotten, and focus on that. Remember those whom this warlock has murdered. We've got to

trust one another, or all is lost." Another unicorn joined in.

People shifted, looking at each other, no doubt trying to rekindle the trust they hadn't even been aware of dying between them.

"So. What we do now then?" The alpha diamond dog rumbled, "Go forward? Go back?"

There was another pause of hesitation. Through the wickerwatch, Lemon Pink never got to find out what the answer would've been. One of the lead diamond dogs, shifting uneasily, took a step too far and strayed closer to the mouth of a tunnel intersection.

The invulnerable scout and the phasing scout had mapped out the safe tunnels, the artifact wielding duo rarely encountering any of the traps Prey'd scattered through the sewers. Such traps had been placed more as a hopeful deterrent, rather than a real defence. There was simply too much ground for him and Lemon to cover in the limited time they'd had, even not counting all the tunnels which were too narrow for a person to traverse.

Most of the traps hadn't even been of the magical variety, since runes were just too costly of a time sink for trapping anything but key choke points, and even then, Prey hadn't had the time for more than a few arrays on the most strategically important of those, like the one joining the sewers to the cave network under the mountain.

Instead, there were spike swing traps, a couple of collapsing tunnels, a spring spear launcher, snap traps, poisoned spikes, and the like. Nothing that could hurt the phasing or invincible scout unless Prey got really lucky and caught them off guard.

It had made the thieves grow overly bold, empowered by their confidence in their artifacts. It had made them forget.

Just because the scouts had encountered so few traps, and none which posed a threat to them with their magical protections, didn't mean those same traps weren't still lethally dangerous. Or that they'd all been discovered and disarmed.

And one such trap just happened to be here.

click

Such a small, inconsequential sound.

Stuck to the roof of the tunnel like a limpet, the bone rot mine ruptured into a wave of bubbling green liquid.

There was only a moment to see the expanding sheet of caustic acid before it fell. There was a howl of absolute agony, barely begun, before it was cut off. The diamond dog... dissolved, down the head, neck, shoulders, chest, arms, waist, hips, thighs, upper legs, all of it! It disappeared like the bone rot was a magicians' vanishing cloak thrown over a volunteer.

A few pitted lower leg bones, still sloughing off the remnants of stringy muscle, were all that remained. It perversely remained standing for an entire stunned second, and then fell.

Splash

Fourteen stunned, horrified intakes of breath.

But that was not the end. The bone rot wasn't quite spent yet, it'd splattered hissing into the water at the bottom of the tunnel, floating on the surface like oil, and now the falling dog's remains drove this still active layer sloshing forwards.

"Get out of the w-!"

"Auuuroww!"

A diamond dog, a pitiable second too close and too slow in retrieving her paw, screamed. Gone. Her hindpaw was gone. Slews of skin and muscle dripped off the brittle twig of corroded bone that was all that was left.

The tunnel lit with a sudden rush of magic. A sphere of light blew over the water, flashing past the spill of bone rot and shooting back up the tunnel. Behind where the spinning orb passed, the water was dragged by magic, flowing back on itself like it was being sucked up a drain. A magical shield sprang into existence where the water had flowed, locking off the tunnel wall to wall behind a transparent

barrier of shimmering blue energy.

But it was too late. The damage had been done.

The wounded dog fell to the tunnels floor, heedless of the chunks of filth left behind by the receding water, yowling in pain.

"Back, back!"

"Ahh ahh AhhH! Hurts!"

"Help her! Help Niler!"

"Shields! Light the area up! Get the medical kit out."

Screaming, more flashing magic in all colours, frantic activity. But it was still much too late for two of the diamond dogs. Or one and a half diamond dogs, depending how you looked at it. A little while later, the banished water came trickling back to lap gently against the shield, but there it was held back by the shield dam, slowly rising as the shimmering magical blockage halted its progress. However the bone rot had well and truly diluted into harmlessness by now.

Not that any of the fourteen surviving thought to test it.

Unnoticed, lodged under the blue shield, a couple of black, rubbery weed like tendrils lay squashed. In the pressing dark and strobing magical lights, it was easy to dismiss them as nothing more than exposed sewage.

Lemon Pink wasn't there, but she heard, and interpreted, and understood.

Lemon had Prey's memories, she'd come into existence from out of them. And so she could understand what the thieves were experiencing right now. How often had Prey seen the same in the Deeper Green?

Thus, she knew what the surviving members of the raiding party were thinking and feeling.

Whether on an innocuous game trail in the humid jungle which suddenly turned into a yawning pit filled with poisoned spikes, or contained within the dark tunnels of a sewer, the stunned shock of the survivors was all the same.

They bunched up defensively together, froze, held their breath, waited for the other horseshoe to drop.

Prey's weapon of both choice and necessity had been fear. That'd been how he'd combated the Border Guard. Fear. To the victim, it was over quickly if they were lucky. But to the survivors, who'd just witnessed one of their number cruelly snatched away, the fear the incident installed would last forever.

Fear. A horrible tool. Just like traps. They got inside your head. Made you hesitate, flinch at every step, insecure, afraid, second and third guess yourself.

Traps weren't an enemy you could take the fight to. They were things, not people. You couldn't get revenge on a trap, and the person who'd set it was long gone.

You couldn't fight traps, only avoid them in time.

Or not. Like the most recently deceased diamond dog.

'Adequately acceptable. That has bloodied their nose.' Lemon thought, 'They will slow down now, or possibly even pull out of the sewers entirely-'

"I've had it. I'm sick of these road apples. We're going in and finishing this today. That traitor horse wants to treat this like a game, huh? Then it's time we send her a message."

The voice came from the armoured unicorn, filled with burning anger, rage, hate, but also steely resolve and control. It was the voice of a calm person pushed beyond their limit.

"Enough is enough. This. Is. *War*. No more holding back. No more conserving our strength. We're using everything."

"Every-?"

"Everything. All of the artifacts. If anypony can wield them, then they can use it. I'm authorising the use of any and all of the relics from the vaults. Even the forbidden vault. Selenia's Pincushion still has one charge left, right? We're even taking that."

Sharp intakes of breath, protests, "That's too far. The cost-"

"I'm authorising it. I'll take responsibility if anything is lost. I'm aware of the risks, but this has gone too far. This is *war*. We're ending this. This heretic has murdered for the last time!"

Quiet, then solemn agreement came from all of the hooded ponies. They all felt the same bubbling anger too.

"Aye."
"Aye."
"This has been too long in coming."
"Yes."
"By Celestia's will."

"And what about us?" The alpha diamond dog rumbled. Lemon could sense the warm blooded bulk of the dog holding the quietly crying bitch who'd lost her hindpaw, the stump now tightly bandaged. The rest of the pack was crowded around, pressing in close to comfort her.

"We're finishing this." The lead unicorn repeated, voice iron. "We're sending a message, or making a challenge, call it what you will."

Then the voice turned sorrowful, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have led you in here. I thought together we could at least manage... But that doesn't matter now. The plan has changed. Only Hammer and I are proceeding from here on out."

"Why? You said-"

"The plan has changed. We were going to try to take the traitor's lair under the mountain, but now, we're just going to destroy it instead."

"Destroy? Only two of you ponies. How you destroy crystals and stone? Can't be done."

"It *can* be done." The hooded figure shifted, uncomfortable, resigned, "I didn't say, but I've already brought one of the artifacts with me from our vaults."

From under his cloak, the stallion brought out an object. There was no way for Lemon to see what it was, but she had a bad feeling.

The other ponies jerked in surprise, protesting again:

"You broke the rules? It's forbidden."

"That's the Cataract of The Sun, we can't sacrifice that!"

"Did you know it would come to this all along?"

"Of course I didn't know. If I had known I would've-No. I didn't know. But I feared it might be needed. But since we're going to go all out, there's no reason to hold back."

"But the Cataract of The Sun... Two of our founders..."

"Gave their lives to prevent it falling into evil hooves. Make no mistake, they didn't die for some artifact, they died to protect lives. They willingly paid the price so others wouldn't have to. If the cost of making sure not even one more pony dies is sacrificing the Cataract, I'll gladly pay it. This is a war against evil, we cannot afford to hold back. So I'll use up the whole Cataract and blow that place to Tartarus without a second thought."

Blow up? Destroy? They were talking about the abandoned crystal cave, where Prey had so very nearly finished constructing his lair. The thieves had failed to take it on their first raid, losing many diamond dogs in the attempt, but they'd still succeeded in slaying Prey's first veropede and nearly killing the second one too. They'd also blocked off Prey and Lemon's access to their safe retreat by threatening to return at any time and finish what they'd started.

'And that's exactly what they aim to do now. No. That is an unacceptable loss. Prey will not accept it.' Lemon thought.

Losing access to the lair was one thing. If all the thieves could be slain, then the precious cave could be retaken. But having the

whole place destroyed was something else entirely. The crystal lair represented hundreds of hours of work, runic arrays, defences, research, but most importantly, safety.

'Unacceptable.'

But when Lemon returned her focus, she realised with a surge of alarm that the unicorn leader and his one chosen helper had already gone ahead, leaving the others to regroup and retreat. The two unicorns were moving fast, their speed that of galloping ponies. They must be magically hastening themselves, there was no other explanation for such sudden acceleration.

'Too fast.' Lemon had no way of stopping them in time. But she *had* to stop them, it was imperative to her standing objectives. What resources did she have here at her disposal?

'I have nothing.'

Nothing relevant anyway. They were moving too fast for Lemon to intercept in time.

But the crystal lair was not without its own defences, as proved by how the thieves had been driven out the first time. Plus, the route the two thieves were advancing down would lead them right into a number of traps. This included a defended choke point, defended with runes *and* magic.

'Anticipation. They will not break through that.'

But what if they did?

No, they would not. But she was going to lose track of them soon, the wickerwatch only extended so far, and only through pipes where water flowed.

The two figures raced into a tunnel, and Lemon lost them. However, they were about to run right into a razor wire, set at neck height, coated in poison, and obscured by the dark and a simple illusion.

Lemon waited, not knowing if the trap had succeeded. She could only wait to see if they showed up again on the wickerwatch's web.

Had it worked?

One minute... Two minutes....

The pair suddenly reappeared on her wickerwatch senses again, still moving as swiftly as ever, heading for the mountain and halfway to the lair already.

It was fine. Lemon Pink already knew they were shielding themselves, she hadn't really expected the near invisible razor wire to catch them out. But there were other traps yet for them to get through.

The pair went through another bone rot mine, but they emerged unscathed from the blast of corrosive liquid. The blinding splinter trap didn't stop them either. Neither did the next bone rot mine. Not even dropping a chunk of the tunnel on their heads, weighing at least a quarter of a tonne, was enough. They had artifacts, and the ability to ignore solid matter or shrug off magic.

'Anxiety. But the runic defences will be enough. Those are not merely physical threats.'

The ones the thieves were about to plough into could rupture internal organs without ever touching the skin, freeze the mind, make the eyeballs burst, and disrupt even ambient magic. It would catch them completely off guard and then kill them. It was near instant, and there would be no time to react.

Lemon waited. She only had a wickerwatch tendril right at the end of the tunnel, so she only had distant vibrations, faint heat, and echoing sounds to work out what was happening.

A pause. Silence. Then a huge flare of white magic. A shout was carried through the wickerwatch to Lemon's mind; "Aegis of the Sun, Guard my Light!"

Shadows bled backwards as they were scoured away. The radiance blasted through the tunnels, grating vibrations making the air shake. The white radiance grew in intensity, waves of pressure knocking dust from the tunnel roof.

It stopped. Lemon had nothing to go on. The runic arrays on the choke point had worked, right?

"Halberd of the Sun, Burn my Foes!" The distant shout of defiance gave lie to Lemon's hopes.

'No.'

This was unacceptable.

That had been the last defence. There was now nothing stopping them from diving into the mountain's tunnels and reaching the crystal lair itself.

'Helplessness. I must attempt something. This cannot be allowed to happen.'

The two thieves had punched right through the arrays with the power of this Sun Cataract artifact. And if they'd managed it at the choke point entering the mountain, why couldn't they do it again when they reached the lair?

Runes didn't fade, (if they were the right type), and could sit dormant for decades or even centuries, just waiting to activate. Just because there was no one inside the cavern didn't mean the defences weren't active, but that was only on the inside.

'The arrays to guard Prey's lair are strong. More time was invested. They will not be able to break through so easily.' However Lemon knew bitterly the difference between wishes and reality.

But it *should* be strong enough to keep them locked out.

'Dread. What if they don't need to enter the cavern?'

What if they could destabilize the rock from the outside somehow? Prey hadn't gotten around to the truly massive arrays needed to reinforce the rock itself. Or what if they just hurl something in through the entrance without ever venturing hoof inside? There wasn't an array against that yet, either.

Anger. Rising alarm. Panic. But most of all, it came to Lemon in a

fatalistic realisation that it was all about to go horribly wrong, and that there was nothing she could do to stop it in time.

'No. No one steals from me-from Prey, and gets away with it.'

War, was it? Take what was hers, dare they?

Lemon Pink reached out with her mind, feeling the connection that was always there. It sat in her head, in her very blood. She reached across the bridge of blood and rune magic and called to the veropede.

In the pitch dark of its tunnel, the malformed veropede turned its attention towards the rest of the raiding party, who were falling back through the sewers towards safety.

Anger thumped in Lemon's heart. It felt so unfamiliar, a foreign half forgotten concept only. Where was the dispassionate, unfeeling calm? Was this really her own anger? It didn't matter. If it was too late to stop the duo from ruining the crystal lair, so she'd just have to repay the favour.

She'd take her pound of flesh in recompense.

Unheard by all but three people in the world, a righteous shout of anger and vengeance echoed faintly under Mount Canter, although one of the three only heard it via vicarious means; "Vengeance of the Sun, Burn all with Last Light!"

Then there was heat, and a roaring light blasted through the tunnels, turning the eternal dark into noonday.

It felt like there should've been a thump, a rumble in the earth's depths, or a tremor above ground at the very least so destructive was the blast. But there was none to mark the destruction of the crystal lair.

The hidden cavern was but one of many in the huge expanse of

Mount Canter, and it had been situated deep enough for the surface to see, hear, and feel nothing. There would barely be a blip up on the magical geological monitoring devices above in Canterlot. It would just get written off as a cave in.

Not even the intense magical spike of destructive magic would register. Prey had settled on the crystal cavern as his lair for a reason. It was a well documented phenomenon of the vast crystal structures under Mount Canter that it blocked or messed with magical scans and teleportation.

And so there was nothing external to mark the localised destruction. Only those in the know marked down the grudge to be repaid.

The injured diamond dog was being carried by three members of her pack back through the tunnels. She was still in great pain. The four remaining hooded ponies were evenly spaced out through the group with their shielding spells and magical artifacts ready to be deployed at the first hint of danger.

They were falling back, retreating towards safety by retracing their tracks along safe paths. It should've made them feel safer. But somehow, even knowing crawling the paranoia and dread they felt was being artificially induced, those feelings were only growing stronger.

It was in the dirty water, in the foul air, in the old tunnel walls, in the lingering dark.

The feeling wasn't just getting to all of them, it had already gotten to them. They knew it, but they couldn't seem to do anything about the slowly building fear. They weren't going to break, they were sticking together and not leaving anyone behind. But bravely had never been the absence of fear.

"They done yet?" A big dog growled nervously.

The even bigger alpha repeated the question to the pony in command, "They finished yet?"

"No word yet. Maybe they have, maybe they haven't. I pray to Celestia it's the first, though." The unicorn responded tightly, attention fixed ahead.

"You can't use spell to ask them?"

"They're under the mountain. They couldn't send a message out even if they had the means on them. The crystals prevent it."

"So you not know." The alpha stated.

"No."

"Hrm. Don't like. Need to get out. This bad place and getting worse. How far?"

"Until the closest usable exit? We need to get to one clear from civilian activity. We can levitate your injured packmate up and out-"

The veropede tore into them with no warning. There was no tell-tale movement, not even a hint of the beast as the hovering light spells revealed a wide shadowy tunnel mouth. Then the next moment it was a real mouth, full of teeth.

There was a whip crack, a cut off scream, a hooked, harpoon like antenna lancing into the closest diamond dog in a blur too fast to see, and then in the exact same blur the dog, over two hundred pounds of fur and muscle, was yanked back into the jaws of death.

Howling. The packs' howls filled the echoing tunnel. Fury or terror, it was one and the same.

A head hidden under mouldy sack cloth, a body of dully gleaming segmented armour, jagged spines, rows of stabbing legs, some missing, some metal. The veropede powered out of the side tunnel in a skittering rush. It was fast, not galloping fast, but too fast to avoid in the cramped space.

But it wasn't faster than the speed thought and artifact enhanced spell casting. The first dog had died in the element of surprise. Two unicorns got up their glowing shields just before the veropede

managed to drive right into the midst of them.

An arched dome of honey yellow magic, and a second flat shield of interlocking crystalline planes appeared in front of the first shield.

The crystalline shield tried to physically block the charging monstrosity. The yellow dome tried to repel it. The first defence survived, the second one didn't, but neither worked.

The veropede hit the interlocking crystalline panes and kept going, shoving the blue shield back, smashing it into the larger dome without slowing, shattering the first like yellow glass, and just kept on going.

"Oh buck!"

The monster powered right into the middle of them. Diamond dogs and ponies dove out of the way. Immediately, the veropede lashed out with its serrated antenna almost too fast for eyes to follow at the closest unicorn.

A gem encrusted clasp on the rolling unicorn's cloak flashed burning purple all by itself. The hooked antenna rebounded off the magic, then stabbed forwards again, not delayed for more than a mere second.

That second still momentarily saved the pony's life. A golden ring around the stumbling unicorn's horn glowed, and the merest breadth of a hair was all that the antenna missed by as they emergency teleported. Displaced air **Cracked** as the escapee tumbled out barely a few yards down the tunnel.

Momentarily thwarted, the veropede turned to attack the next closest target. A diamond dog looked up in helpless horror, trapped against the tunnel wall, fangs bared in a terrified rictus. There was nowhere to run down here. He howled as the veropede lunged.

It was like watching a bear trap snapping shut, all springs and loaded power too fast to stop or even see. A light spell winked out as its owner lost control. Dark liquid spattered. The hulking insect filling the tunnel was rendered in nothing but shadows for a

moment.

"No more!" With a roar that sounded even over everything else, the shape of the alpha dog bounded forwards.

The leader of this surviving splinter of the diamond dog pack was huge for a member of his species, his bulging forearms and paws were scarred and broad.

He was small compared to the veropede.

He leapt onto the veropede's side, thick claws which could dig through rock sunk in and the alpha ripped. Deep gouges opened up in the veropedes carapace wherever the dog could reach, rents and tears as he furiously clawed and howled.

None of the gouges went deep enough. No acrid blood welled up.

The veropede paid the alpha no mind as it scuttled forwards to continue killing, almost crushing the clinging attacker against the tunnel walls as it did so.

"Stand clear!"

A crackle filled the air, retina searing white and blue bolt danced. The last unicorn had thrown their cloak to the side. The hood stayed up, but on their back was now revealed a glittering set of metal, almost wing-like extensions standing straight up. Thin, ridged, far too short and immobile to match a pegasus's wings, but right now they were cracking with charged lighting.

Deadly electrical energy arced between the two erect metal wings. Then in one breath, the lightning leapt to the tip of the unicorn's horn, a white sparking ball of unstable power. The unicorn pointed their horn.

Just like real lightning, the bolt was instantaneous, and then came the thunder. Ponies and dogs stumbled against the tunnels walls and each other, blinded and deafened for a moment.

A desperate, horrible screaming howl snapped them out of it.

"Help, Help, Help! Help me!" A diamond dog was crying, her voice choked with tears, snot, and pain.

The veropede was completely unharmed. The lightning had struck it full on, and had somehow earthed itself harmlessly without touching the veropede at all. The wounded bitch from earlier, the one who'd lost a paw to the bone rot and couldn't run, was lying beneath the monstrous centipede.

Horrified exclamations. Only now did they realise they'd dropped her! In the panic, they'd somehow dropped their weakest and most vulnerable member. How could they have done such a thing?!

The huge maw snapped down, coarse sack cloth obscuring the view.

"No!" The alpha howled, clawing and tearing for all he was worth, trying to get through the veropede's armour.

The alpha sunk both forepaws into the veropedes armour as deeply as possible, braced himself, and heaved. Muscles strained, tendons bulged. The diamond dog roared with effort.

"RrrrrrrraahhHH!"

**C*-C-*C*-Crack*

The veropede's antenna curled around and lashed back to get at the alpha, as its carapace broke and the muscles attached underneath the plate were levered up.

"Protect him!"

The shout came, and magic flared. The blue crystalline shield, the only type which'd held up against the veropede earlier, snapped into existence around the staining diamond dog and the barbed antenna bounced off.

The alpha roared again, more cracks sounding out as the dog broke more carapace. The shield continued to hold under the whiplash antenna, the whip strikes not possessing enough weight to break through. The veropede coiled around like a snake, almost doubling back on itself, impossibly agile as it sought to bite or crush the dog

instead.

The surviving diamond dogs flung themselves at the veropede with howls of fury and vengence, desperate to protect their alpha. The monster's killing maw was turned away, seeking the huge dog's flesh instead. The other dogs bounded into its exposed side, huge forepaw claws scrabbling on concrete and stone.

A pony yelled for them to get back, to get out of the way! But they were too incensed to listen. Or too afraid. Hot blood mixed with sewer water. There wasn't any time to think. To stop and think was to die.

A wielded stone axe sheared into a jointed leg. Stone, crude, but sharp and swung with incredible force. The severed leg ricocheted off the ceiling as the dog followed through on their swing, reared back, and hammered their axe down again.

Triumph. Failure. Rage. Terror. Dancing shadows. Magical light.

The veropede dropped itself back to the tunnel floor to guard its less armoured underbelly. Dirty water splashed everywhere. The hooded ponies were rushing to get together, magic gathering, artifacts glowing, the one who'd teleported now back on his hooves. Where had the blurring unicorn gone? The interlocking panels of the blue shield continued to hold, protecting the alpha. The diamond dog was now tearing powerful claws into the exposed patch of flesh, claws shredding unguarded muscle fibres like putty.

A gaping side tunnel. A heaving crush of mass. People screaming. Deafening echoes.

The alpha couldn't be pried off. The other diamond dogs clawed, bit, hacked, and stabbed. The two veropedes had decimated this pack of diamond dogs back in the crystal cave like so much chaff before the wind, but back then, the lairs runic defences had been doing just as much damage as the veropedes. None of the invaders had known what was happening back then. But it was different now.

Now they knew what their hated foe was capable of, there was only

the one this time, and no burning rune magic to back it up either. The close confines of the tunnel could be a two edged sword to both sides. How swiftly the tables can turn!

The diamond dogs were doing it, they were doing damage. They were winning, they were-!

The dogs were hacking and shoving into the veropede, pressed in close. No one saw how back up the tunnel, the insectile monster anchored its rear half, dozens of legs biting down.

Abruptly, the mass of armour, teeth, and legs smashed sideways into the tunnel. The attacking diamond dogs were crushed up against the curved wall.

The veropede's upper half and sides had backwards facing spines.

Screams, howls. Diamond dogs were strong though, they hadn't been crushed flat. If it weren't for the spines, they would've only been winded, perhaps with cracked ribs. But there were spines.

Some were impaled, fighting to get free. The lucky were only trapped, imprisoned between the spines cage like bars, or perhaps only lightly gored.

"By the Sun!"

It had happened so fast. One second a melee, the next, the diamond dog pack crushed against the tunnel.

"Shoot it, blast them free!"

The shouted command came too late.

And now again, the close confines of the tunnel could be a two edged sword to both sides. How swiftly the tables can turn. The dogs were struggling, pushing to get free, reaching out between the cage of spines towards their most badly impaled and howling brothers and sisters. Trapped.

And then the veropede dragged itself backwards over the tunnel wall. Spines dug in and grated.

The dogs died, only having time enough to realise what was happening. Eyes went wide in horror. Rending squelching filled the sewer tunnel.

"Oh my Celestia."

One of the frozen ponies said it. It wasn't clear who. The pronunciation was quiet with shock.

The veropede's dark bulk juddered, and with a slurping sound, it pulled free of the tunnel wall. Shadows hid the details, but bits of some*thing* clung to its side and stretched stickily after it.

Some dark, body sized shapes slid wetly down to the tunnel floor. Others stayed lodged in the veropede's spines. The dogs were dead. Just like that. The alpha was gone, the crystalline shield nowhere to be seen. Had any of them survived that? Was it possible?

That first splinter pack of dogs which'd first been employed, and then murdered, by Lemon Pink to hatch this very same veropede. The first of the splinter pack's would-be avengers died in the crystal filled lair, then the rest now. They died far from home, beset by dark magic, fighting against a monster, in a filthy pipe under a pony city. Gone. A whole diamond dog pack wiped out.

Not that the thieves could know of the finer details or the dark irony of the diamond dog packs demise. All they saw was the veropede and death.

"Destroy it!"
"Bucking abomination!"
"Light it up!"

In their deaths, the dogs had managed to buy two things at a terrible price. Space and time. The unicorns had managed to regroup out of range, behind their shields, with enough time to charge up their magic, and now nothing to stop them using it.

They'd been holding back, unable to shoot with their allies still in the way. Now there was nothing to block their rage as they let fly with their magic and artifacts.

Crackling lightning, purple fire, jagged spells, and lances of light screamed down the tunnel in one spiralling blast.

Filthy sewer water vaporized instantly. The explosion roared back up the tunnel, debris, smoke, and shrapnel carried before a rushing cloud of fire.

A silver shield filled the tunnel. The explosion bowed the shield in like a bubble. It let the scorching air blast through, and the unicorns weathered it under hastily summoned additional personal shields or just with their artifacts. The smoke, debris, and shrapnel stayed on the other side of the bubble.

The ringing echoes in the tunnel faded, and the shimmering shield dropped. Rubble and bits clattered noisily onto the floor. Hot, foul air filled the tunnel. One of them recast their floating light orb spell. It revealed that some of those bits of debris were scraps of fur and glistening red.

"Clear it." Someone ordered.

Magic swirled through the air, and the smoke and vapour was all sucked into an opaque sphere in the air. The light globe grew in strength, casting its light up the tunnel.

"Watch-!"

The veropede surged out of the smoke and down the tunnel like a tidal wave of legs, teeth, and armour. It was already nearly on top of them. It had started charging forwards before the explosion had even ended.

The veropede didn't need to be able to see to find its prey. It could hunt in perfect darkness. What was some smoke going to do?

Prey had not made the veropede to simply be a guard dog. He had made it to be a weapon. A mage killer. All those runes and dark magic he'd performed over it when it lay broken hadn't been for nothing.

The lightning hadn't touched it.

The fire hadn't burnt it.

The bolt which was supposed to disintegrate a hole right through it had been deflected.

Other magic had simply dissipated across more surface area than it could damage.

Only the direct impact spells using real physical force had worked, but those hadn't been enough to break through the veropede's carapace.

And now it was too late and the veropede was right on top of the thieves as they stared up from their hooded faces.

"Scatter!"

The ponies dived, rolled, or teleported away, every single one of their efforts boosted in some way by one magical enhancing foci or another. But one of them was too slow.

Barbed antenna coiled about one cloaked figure and yanked them back. They screamed. Some sort of protection saved them from being torn open by the hooks and spikes, but that did nothing for the crushing force still applied.

Bones creaked. The thief's scream cut off as they choked for air.

More lightning strong enough to scar stone struck at the veropede's body followed by rolling thunder, but it deflected into the ground without even setting the sack clothing alight. The veropede constricted tighter.

A portion of the tunnel wall twisted, stone warping as something began to take shape. But a different pony beat the stone transmutation to competition. The blurring pony leapt out of a shadow right beside the veropede. Their cloak flew back, and two bladed metal tails reared up like some scorpion's. The prehensile metal tails slashed downwards onto the antenna, bladed edges a blur of glowing magic.

The one glowing blue bounced off. The one with the orange edge

severed the metal antenna.

Multiple auras grabbed the dropped pony and dragged them away to safety. The shadow pony ducked and weaved for their life as the veropede lunged after them, mandibles and remaining antennae snatching at their cloak's edge.

The transmuted stone limb had finished forming, the size of a wagon, and now it swung. Slow, clumsy, but with the power of weight behind it.

Crunch

More fire blasted down the tunnel. It exploded, and in the after flash of its useless detonation, the shadow pony popped up again. They tried to stab the veropede in its head with their two scorpion tails.

They hit something, the bladed tails plunged in, but the veropede didn't even slow. The daring thief almost lost a leg in recompense. Mandibles clacked just short, shearing through the cloak instead of flesh, and the unicorn darted away again, somehow vanishing.

The ponderous stone limb of the tunnel was still seeking to pin or crush the veropede's head. Magical flashes and bangs were coming fast and hard now, in almost every colour, and the rapid fire barrage didn't let up. The unicorns had managed to set up a firing platform at long range and were throwing everything they had.

The noise was deafening. The stone and mortar of the tunnel was breaking and cracking everywhere.

Through the link to the veropede, Lemon Pink made the call. Things were about to go badly wrong. The invaders had regained their footing, and were rapidly closing down all possible avenues of attack. It was only a matter of time until they tried a spell that worked and circumvented the veropede's runic defences. Most of the diamond dogs had been slain, a few yet lived, but the attempt to wipe out the whole group of both dogs and ponies as they retreated was a failure.

'No choice. Time to cut and retreat.'

The veropede didn't give a last defiant hiss or roar. It just left, scuttled backwards, able to move its legs in reverse unlike normal, non-monstrous insects.

The thieves shouted something about "It's giving up" or "Trying to run", but it was just snatches of noise over the ongoing explosions and thunder.

However not all of the dogs had been killed in the veropede's cheese grater attack. The veropede grabbed a prone diamond dog, badly injured but not yet dead, clasping the dog up to its underbelly.

A last spell deflected off the veropede's shrouded head as it withdrew. The shadows pressed in, covering its retreat. A unicorn tried to run forwards, but was stopped by their fellows. They couldn't follow. It would certainly just be another trap.

The scuttling bulk of black chitin faded into the dark, the trailing hooked end of one antenna was the last thing to disappear like a snake.

A blood stench lingered in its wake. The fight was over. The lair had been successfully found and the cavern roof collapsed, but at what cost?

'And what a cost it is. This is war.'

Prey finished reviewing Lemon's memory packet for the second time and opened his eyes. He stared at nothing in his flat. He mechanically rubbed at the light, fur hidden scarring on his cheeks. He unconsciously moved to tugging at his drooping ears. Then transitioned to twisting the ribbon.

All the while, he continued to stare at nothing. His jaw clenched.

Why did he keep failing? Why did he keep making mistakes and messing up? He should've foreseen this, he *should've*. If he'd just taken a moment to stop and think before all of this had happened- But *no*.

Lemon wasn't him despite all the similarities. She didn't see what he saw. He knew what she knew, but she didn't know all that *he* knew.

Too little, too late. Mistakes, he'd made so many mistakes. Anger. Red anger. But it was no one's fault. The world isn't fair. Never fair. Nothing he could do. The world isn't fair, it's red.

'Sometimes you hook the fish. Sometimes a shark takes the bait, and hooks you instead.'

Prey was just as afraid as he was furious. He knew he was all too likely to die. These were powerful unicorns, each armed with as many powerful artifacts as they could wield without catastrophic interference. He'd heard what Lemon had overheard. Whoever these thieves were, they were people of means and vast magical resuorces. They were breaking out their full artifact arsenal with their sole intent being to hunt him down. Prey could only fearfully imagine what such artifacts might do, and in passing that unicorn had mentioned a name that frightened Prey. Selenia, the Great White Witch.

Witches weren't like mages. They couldn't do traditional, straight up spells. Witches used rituals, brewed potions, and made dark artifacts for their power. That's where a witch's power lay. And Selenia had been infamous in her day, nearly a hundred years ago.

There was only one tiny, miniscule, sliver of light in this whole disaster.

Lemon Pink had at least managed to take a prisoner. That one unfortunate diamond dog. Lemon had already stabilised the dog. They would live, at least until Prey was done. They would know the answers to some of his questions. They didn't even need to be conscious to respond. He'd be ripping the answers directly from their mind.

A distant part of Prey told him through the crystal clear anger that he'd been the one to start all of this by creating Lemon Pink. A knife can't be blamed for the hoof that wields it. Prey acknowledged the voice, it was part of him after all. But the world isn't fair. It wasn't fair to him, or to the diamond dogs.

'There is no right choice here. Only wrong. And red revenge. There is always room for more red to spill down here in the gutter.'

Prey looked down at his hoof with its irremovable golden tracker band. His hoof was lightly trembling. Then he punched himself in the stomach as hard as he could.

Once he managed to uncurl and stop gagging, Prey pulled himself together, and left to visit the captured and prepared diamond dog prisoner.

As the capital city of Equestria, Canterlot thrived on tourism. It was the New Unicornia, the Heart of Royalty, The City of Invention, with the most famous mage towers, universities, and scholars all contained within it. And, of course, Canterlot served as the seat of power for the beloved Goddess of the Sun herself.

All ponies, no matter where in Equestria they resided, deep down held the vague plan to visit Canterlot at least once. It was just what you *did* if you were a pony. Seeing the shining golden jewel of a city, it was impossible for anypony not to feel uplifted and proud of what ponykind could accomplish.

As a result of this tourism, there were naturally businesses devoted to taking advantage of this boon.

There was one such travelodge near the lively train station and teleport arrival platform, seeking to cater to any such tourists who arrived. Although if a review was completely honest, this travelodge would only score three stars. It was just a bit too far away from the train station, a bit too quiet, a bit too subpar and out of the way to be anything but medium. Neither good nor bad.

It was what made the place perfect for a meeting point. It was in one of the travelodge's rooms, on the ground floor, and closest to the buildings fire escape, that they had gathered.

This room, and each room on either side of it, had been booked out for the week under a false, but also perfectly legal identity. The curtains were drawn. There was an ongoing magical silence bubble inside, but one which only blocked noise from getting out. A constant magical shield was also in effect, and at least three different alarm triggers.

After what they'd encountered, these ponies were taking no chances. Ponies and one diamond dog. The alpha. He alone was all that was left of his pack.

The huge dog sat slumped in the middle of the floor. He still smelled of death and ripe sewage.

Around him, the hooded ponies sat or stood. They were quiet. The dog had just lost his whole family, everyone and everything he'd ever loved. They'd only found the alpha an hour ago, the dog having limped back to one of the pre-arranged emergency fallback points. He hadn't said much, just looked at them with dead, tired eyes.

Of course, they'd checked him for mind tampering, as they had themselves too, but if there was anything amiss, none of them could find it.

The collapsing of the traitorous warlock's foul lair under the mountain had gone off as planned, albeit at the regrettable cost of a valuable artifact, but after what'd happened in the tunnels... It couldn't be called even a draw.

That monster, that *thing* had slain their allies. The diamond dogs were gone. All but one.

The gathered ponies were waiting for the alpha to speak as they slowly recovered their mana. There were eight of them here. Their whole order. All of the survivors were here. Even Nova, who wasn't completely recovered from the burning poison powder. This was

war.

They'd been making a plan of attack, grimly deciding which artifacts to use now that everything was on the table, when the diamond dog had said he had something important to say. They were waiting for the grieving dog to gather his wits.

The slumped over diamond dog finally took a deep breath and spoke. His voice was weary, but there was a burning quality to his words; "Where did you go?"

"What do you mean?" A unicorn quietly asked.

"Where you all go? Was just me. Got crushed against roof, speared, hurt. You no help."

Here the alpha lifted one massive paw and briefly touched his legs. They'd disinfected and bandaged them the moment they'd gotten the alpha back in here. All present had seen the deep, tricking puncture wounds, but considering the damage that centipede monster had done to the other poor diamond dogs, the alpha had gotten very lucky. None of them were callous enough to say that, however. The shield Sierra had been casting over him at the time had saved the alpha's life.

"Was just me. Insect monster took Goldie. Saw it. Was carrying him. Saw it going past. I went after, had to follow. My pack, my dogs, my responsibility. Thought you were behind me, thought you were chasing after monster too. Heard Goldie howling. Looked back, but was just me. Where were you?"

The alpha looked around at the gathered, hooded unicorns. Even now, they all still wore the enchanted hoods.

"We didn't know you were still alive or that you were going after that foul creature. No pony saw you or Goldie. I'm sorry."

The alpha grunted hollowly, like he barely cared. He seemed too drained to be angry. "You didn't follow. Just me. And Goldie howling. I hurried, but wasn't fast enough. Howls faded. Had to follow blood trail. Went cold, but follow it I did. Found it."

"You found the monsters nest?"

"No. Yes. Found monster's den, but not insect monster. Found evil pink pony and tiny sheep pup. They think they so clever. Took Goldie, didn't know I followed through tunnels. But I wasn't fast enough to save Goldie. Wasn't fast enough. Wasn't, wasn't... Wasn't. Fast. Enough."

"Where? What did you see? How long ago was this? I'm sorry, but please, this could be our chance." Everypony was holding their breath.

The alpha slowly seemed to come to himself. Anger kindled in his deep black eyes, "Chance? Yes, I found a chance. A chance to kill them. Make them hurt, make them bleed like Goldie, like pack. Make them pay. Found the chance I did. Found their new secret hiding den."

"Where?" The question came from all sides.

The diamond dogs fangs gleamed in a silent snarl, "Me show you. We go, tonight."

"Tell us where to go, we'll do it," One of the cloaked figures began in concern, "You're injured, and after what's happened-"

"No! My revenge is my own! We go tonight yes, but you not leave me behind. This *mine*. Even if I die, I must go. I owe it to my brothers and sisters."

The lead unicorn nodded heavily, sighing, "I guess so. Celestia knows if it was me in your place... You'll have your revenge, I'll see to it. We owe you that much at least."

"Yes. Revenge. First though, I must pay respect, do the last rite. My pack, I am only one left now. I am alpha... was alpha. Must be me. My duty. Must do it alone."

The attempted raid into the sewers had taken place only two hours ago. It felt far longer in the darkness of those tunnels. The diamond dog leader had returned less than one hour ago.

Now the dog painfully pushed himself upright, wounded legs wobbling and teeth gritted. It was a testament to his sheer willpower that he stood without aid, and not a single whimper escaped his muzzle.

"You're badly injured. Let at least one of us help-"

"No!" He growled, "No. Only me can do it. Must do it alone."

The anger drained away like water, "Me alone. Must do it alone."

"We just want to help you, I promise. I understand you have to do the rites yourself, but you shouldn't be alone. If nothing else, at least we can disguise you with an illusion so you don't have to hide while in your state. Please, let us help."

The alpha just looked at the unicorn. "You are too late. Where was help when I was alone in tunnels following insect monster? No. Me do this alone. You pony. Me diamond dog."

"I swear on the Sun, if I'd known-"

"No," The dog cut him off tiredly, and began shuffling for the door, "You pony, me dog. It is the way of it. Worked together, but you value your pack over my pack. It's fine. That is how things are."

One of the ponies tried to stop him, "It wasn't like that. We were all comrades fighting side by side. Your pack was brave, their loss isn't devalued just because they weren't ponies."

"I value my pack over your pack. They are... were more important. So I must do the prayers so they may sleep in peace."

The last diamond dog raised one huge paw and brushed the stallion out of his path. The unicorn leader gave a shake of his head to another hooded pony who took a half step forwards as if to follow the alpha. The hulking dog had to crouch to fit through the door.

"I go alone. Be back soon. You stay. You be ready. For tonight we hunt."

---< < <O> > >---

Scenic Paint leaned into the soft shoulder of his much bigger earth pony marefriend with a smile. She beamed back and lent down to give him a proper hug and nuzzle his head. Her mane was soft, and his fur was warm.

Scenic sighed in contentment as they both sat on Carton's porch, watching the sun kiss the points of Canterlot's spires. It was rather a sappy and cliché romantic activity, but Carton Juice had suggested it, and Scenic had absolutely no complaints. He was trying to never take such moments for granted ever again. The horrible scar tracks Scenic saw in the mirror every morning under his eyes were a daily reminder of that.

Scenic hated his scars, but Carton Juice didn't care, and he only had to momentarily think of everypony else who'd been there, especially Lilly Blossom, to guiltily banish those thoughts.

He was lucky. So very lucky. His life was good. And this right here? Cuddling on the porch with someone far more kind and compassionate than he deserved? This right here was nice.

---<<<O>>>---

Saffron Swirl paused outside of Lilly Blossom's new apartment and took a fortifying breath. The mare model wore a very fashionable coat, sunglasses, and hat to hide her distinctive appearance. In through the front window, no lights could be seen despite the late hour.

Saffron closed her eyes for a moment, reminded herself of all the reasons she had to be content, smoothed down her coat, and, fixing on a warm smile, knocked.

She was here for Lilly, not for herself. The carrot and mushroom pie still warm in the baking tin she carried was for Lilly. Saffron had baked it herself, having grown up without use of her magic and so well used to it, unlike poor Lilly. She'd had to fight to get even the hour it took to bake the pie free from her job, usually her various agents just ordered in cuisine, but this was far more important than her job.

There is true joy to be found in helping others, and the fastest way to help oneself was to help another first.

---<<<O>>>---

Gloom put down the quill and blew lightly on the page to dry it. Then he folded it away into the envelope and gave the edge a lick. The envelope was addressed to his grandfather back in Clan Cilldara. A Royal Equestrian Mail flier would take all packages to a drop off point, but no further. A thestral would come by in the night and pick the bag up, keeping the location of the clan caves secret, although it was no longer such a grave matter of survival.

Times really had changed. It was only four months ago the clans had all still been in hiding. Now look at them. Back out in the open and serving their long lost, recently returned Princess of the Night.

Gloom blinked at the shadows, pausing in scratching the puckered flesh on his chest. The sun would be setting soon. He'd light a candle. One candle was a plentiful light source for a thestral.

Or perhaps he'd go out for a flight under the beautiful stars and moon. Yes, why not?

---<<<O>>>---

Nighthawk signed, stamped, and shoved yet another pointless paper form to the bottom of the stack. He glanced up at the clock in the dim light of the Night Guard Captain's office. A scowl appeared on Nighthawk's severe brows.

Time was wasting, and there was never enough of it. The Night Guards' workload was increasing nightly, but Princess Luna's will must be done.

Fall was coming, along with Nightmare Night. Fall would be ushering in more changes than just that however.

---<<<O>>>---

Prey sat on the cold earth. Boulders and fallen hunks of stone cast long silhouettes in the orange light.

The air was chill. Every so often, a shiver danced down Prey's back, and his hooves kept up an almost incessant light trembling. Neither had anything to do with the temperature.

High up the mountain above Prey, Canterlot shone and glittered, larger than life in a warm golden glow. An invitation to safety and warmth. A beautiful lie.

---I---

Author's Notes:

Well, you know what I said last time? And the time before that? About finally finishing this Arc?

So, uhhh... I can explain? It's not this chapter that's the last either? [image]

Editor who did some great work on this chapter: **Sweetolebob18**

65.4 Steal the Stars Right Out of the Night

The air had a chill.

Prey sat in the shadow of a boulder, just a small shape in the fading light. The stone was tinted a faint green by the sinking sun. Set high up on the mountain, the capital city of Equestria glittered and shone. But down here at the mountain's base, there were no other light sources.

A light down here would only draw unwanted attention.

Set into the rocky base of Mount Canter, less than twenty yards away from Prey's hiding spot, a half obscured tunnel mouth emerged. There was no path leading to or from the tunnel. No one ever came this way. The deepening darkness had slowly turned the lush grass and soft plants of Equestria growing around here pale and cold.

An owl silently winged by overhead, a ghost in the coming night.

If you listened very intently, you could catch the occasional high pitched squeak of bats.

Stars sleepily blinked into existence far above.

A cool breeze briefly stirred.

Somewhere a fox barked-

-A point of burning orange in the night. A blink. It struck right in the middle of the boulder strewn ground. Orange bloomed in an explosion of magical energy. It flared upwards, like an enormous burning flower, banishing shadows in brilliant blinding orange.

The sound of the explosion was very tame in comparison to its size. Nor did it seem to do any physical damage. No heat or shockwave

reached Prey where he hid.

And then the air between a clump of three huge boulders, as tall as houses, a clear patch of nothing warped. The night air twisted, and then seemed to snap, like an elastic band stretched too far.

Suddenly revealed in between the trio of boulders, a rough wooden hut appeared, lantern light spilling out of the doorless entrance.

Lemon Pink ran out of the hut in alarm, a heavy cloak around her shoulders, and cast about wildly in the night.

Blinding electric blue split the night in a flash. Thunder cracked. Lemon Pink disappeared in the lightning flash.

Disappeared, as in, vanished like a popped soap bubble.

Before the thunder had even finished echoing off the mountainside, three separate Lemon Pinks burst out of the hut. Once again they cast around wildly, heavy cloaks flapping, then each identical Lemon Pink took off galloping in a different direction.

A second lightning bolt ripped out of the night before the Lemon Pinks had gone more than five steps. Thunder cracked, and white storm fire scorched a rock black. But the two remaining Lemon Pinks ran on.

They didn't get far.

A tight ball of magical light sprung into existence right in the path of one of the fleeing duo. The hovering magical flare swelled alarmingly, bleeding green sparks. The Lemon Pink swerved away, but the spell kept swelling, bulging with pressure. It shook, an overfilled balloon about to burst-

The fleeing pink mare vanished as the spell finally detonated, some kind of vine tangle engulfing everything in the area.

The last running Lemon Pink looked back, and a hooded pony appeared out of thin air mid leap. Twin metal scorpion tails blurred and cut the last target in half. Or would've done so if that mare hadn't also been an illusion.

The dual tailed thief leapt back into the night and vanished. Literally two steps, and they were gone. Where had they gone? Where had the Lemons gone?

For a second, the night held its collective breath as all the hidden combatants paused. A disturbed pebble rolled noisily down a green stone boulder.

And then another burning orange flower bloomed in the night, the explosion rising as high as a tree in an instant. Twenty yards away, a cloaked Lemon Pink with her head down and sneaking away popped into existence. She looked back. Purple eyes widened in the dark.

For the third time, a lightning bolt lanced out of the night, crossing the distance instantly. This time, Lemon Pink didn't pop like an illusion.

She shrieked in a deafening squeal, her cloak catching fire. The burst-*splat* was lost under the thunder crack. In the moment after, a scattering of burnt chunks dropped out of the night.

Deafening silence descended.

On the scorched dirt, the figure and cloak continued to burn.

...eight, nine, ten, eleven...

The artificially twin tailed pony stepped cautiously out of a deep patch of shadows, one foreleg covering their muzzle. One bladed stinger reached out and cautiously prodded the lumpy shape under the burning cloak.

The hooded pony withdrew with a hiss of disgust.

"It's a pig," They called out loudly, "Like a real actual pig."

Silence. Then a lightning bolt tore into the abandoned ramshackle hut. For good measure, another one of those vine explosion spells appeared, charged up, and detonated over the remains a few seconds later. But otherwise nothing happened.

Another silence. Then, a cloak was thrown back and the armoured unicorn leader, the same one who'd destroyed Prey's lair, stepped out from behind an illusionary veil. "Seal the area. Use it." He ordered.

From out of the stony ground right next to the scorpion tailed pony, who was backing away from the burning pig carcass, a unicorn's head popped up. The rest of him followed, stepping up and out of the earth like they were just climbing a staircase.

The newly emerged pony looked around, standing right in the middle of the dark area. From under their cloak, they whipped out a short staff. It was platinum, encrusted with glowing, obviously magically charged gemstones, winking in the night.

With a word of command, they raised it high in their aura, and then stabbed it down into the hard earth. The staff shook, the myriad gems flashed in patterns too fast to follow, and a charged hum filled the air.

Prickling needles assaulted Prey's hooves, as a powerful wave of magic surged out from the planted staff.

Above, the stars in the sky faded under a blanket of golden mist, which swirled into being from nowhere. At the same time, more mist noiselessly appeared on all sides, growing upwards to meet the descending dome. It wasn't just golden curls of mist either, there were also bright patches of light drifting randomly along inside the walls of mist. These drifting patches sharpened even as the night of the outside world faded from view, locked away under the huge golden dome of mist. Those bright patches now looked a lot like drifting stained glass windows.

The phasing thief let go of the platinum staff and stepped back, the glitter of the blue jewel set in their chestplate joining the flashing patterns of the staff's gems.

Prey crouched lower in his hiding place, breathing as shallowly as he could.

All around the expansive mist dome's perimeter, more hooded

ponies appeared. Some stepped out from behind illusionary veils, one pulled off an invisibility cloak, one shimmered into focus with a red glow from a hoof anklet, and yet another appeared in a crack of teleportation.

"There's no way out! You're trapped in here now." The lead unicorn called out loudly. He stood strong in his indestructible armour, measured voice like tempered steel, shoulders thrown back, braced and ready for anything.

No answer met his challenge.

Around the dome, each of the other eight ponies held magic and artifacts at the ready, prepared to act in a split second. Nine unicorns in total. Next to one cloaked pony who was levitating an oversized shimmering blade without any hilt or handle, the alpha stood, huge bulk hunched over as he rested his weight on his forepaws. Despite the bandages adorning his legs, the last diamond dog still stood, a brooding figure waiting for revenge.

"There's no escape now," The leader called again, voice never breaking from its level tone, "You've no more tricks left! No more foul creatures at your command, no more traps or twisted magic. This is the end of the line. It's just you, and us."

Such bold words should've sounded trite, they were exactly what you might read in one of those ridiculous hero books ponies were so fond of, but here in real life, it didn't sound trite. It wasn't some idle boast. It was a promise of the inescapable.

"There's nowhere to go. Come out and face your judgement."

Had that challenge ever worked? Ever? In the entire history of the world?

Pause. A long moment. Finally, a jagged slab of rock shifted, lifting up on previously unseen hinges and thumped into the dirt. A cloaked mare crawled out from the dark hollow underneath, and stiffly got up.

No one shot at her or said a word as she jerkily straightened. Her

smooth pink fur was almost dark blue in the low light, and her waterfall mane was all tangled. She looked around, head jerking between each pony of her encirclement. Lemon Pink stood, shoulders hunched, looking like a cornered animal.

"Well?" Lemon spat after a tense silence, "What grandiose speech do you have prepared? Throw the book at me, maybe? Go on. Here I am! Let the trapped and outnumbered mare have it."

The armoured leader looked at Lemon for a long moment, expression hidden under his enchanted hood. Then he sighed and gave a half shake of his head, "No, I don't think I will. What's the point? Your sentence is set. We are not ordinarily judges or executioners, but for something like you-"

The alpha let out a rumbling snarl, cutting the night, "No! Want to know. I *will* know. Want to know *why*. Why is my pack dead?"

"Whatever the warlock says won't bring them back. She'll just hurt you more with her lies." The pony beside the bristling alpha tried to dissuade him, but the huge diamond dog didn't care.

"Tell me! Why did you murder my pack!" He all but roared.

Prey opened his mouth, and Lemon Pink opened her mouth and spoke his words for him by proxy, "Because I'm selfish. Because I needed sacrifices to save my own life. Because there were no other bodies readily to hoof. It means less than nothing, but for what it's worth, I'm sorry. However if you're talking about the diamond dogs you came to Canterlot with? I didn't kill them."

"Liar."

"*I* didn't kill them. *You* did. You led them in the attack on my lair. *Both* times. That's on you and your thief friends. You could've just walked away, all of you, but no, you just had to steal my safety. I merely acted in self defence, so all those deaths are on you. There. That's the reason why."

The alpha didn't move. He stood, hunched over in the dark, "That is all?"

He started lumbering slowly forwards, a deep growl building up, "That is all? That reason why? That is all? No, can't be. My pack, all dead for that? No! I refuse! Tell me the truth! Why?!"

"Don't. She's just goading you-"

The alpha kept going. The unicorn tried to block him, but he may as well have tried to stop a rolling boulder. The hulking diamond dog didn't even seem to notice him as he pushed forwards.

"No. Stop."

"Why?" The dog howled, voice full of fury and pain, "Why? Tell me *why*."

Lemon started backing away, and the floating blade appeared against the back of her neck. It had flown so fast and cut the air so smoothly there'd barely been a whisper. Lemon froze as the hovering blade halted her retreat.

The pony getting pushed ahead of the alpha was leaving furrows in the dirt, but he didn't try to halt the dog with magic, "Stop it, it won't help. She's just goading you. Listen to me-"

The dog stumbled badly, and blood blossomed a dark stain on the bandages on his hindleg. The unicorn cursed, "You're aggravating your injuries. Don't. Hey, stop!"

The shadowy pony with the scorpion tails faded into view in front of the alpha, "Listen to Avocado. Stop, you're only hurting yourself. Remember what we said, yes? I'm your friend, you can trust me, but you need to stop. Your stitches-"

The alpha stopped. He looked down in a daze at the two hooded ponies baring his way. Even hunched over, the taller unicorn's horn tip barely came up to the dog's chest. The alpha's face was utterly blank.

'Two is likely as good as I'm going to get.' Prey decided.

The diamond dog unbent, wounds forgotten, and lunged. A huge forepaw swept up both ponies in a crushing embrace as the alpha

folded himself over them.

Then he erupted in an explosion of bone rot.

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There never had been a second diamond dog captured by the veropede. There'd been no Goldie for the alpha to track, wounded and bleeding, back through the tunnels to discover Prey's hideout. The alpha and the captured diamond dog were one and the same.

And when the veropede had delivered the wounded diamond dog, thrashing, fighting, and glaring fit to burst with hate, Lemon Pink had broken his mind. She'd removed his memories, implanted false ones, and imposed mental commands. She'd made a puppet out of the last diamond dog.

Then she'd quickly sent her broken puppet back topside just in time to meet up at the emergency rendezvous point. From there, the dog had been picked up by the thief left on watch, patched up, and hurried back just in time for the meeting in the travel lodge as the sun was rising.

When the diamond dog had spoken to the assembled thieves, he'd only been parroting words given to him.

When he'd demanded to be left alone to perform the last rites for his dead pack, he'd actually returned to the sewers, as per his mental commands. Whereupon, Lemon Pink had brought her puppet to Prey, so the lamb could turn the dog into a walking bomb.

And when the alpha had guided the thieves down the mountain to this place, the loyal, helpless, and obedient puppet had really been guiding them all into a trap.

This whole area, purposefully chosen down here at the base of the mountain and away from Canterlot city, was layered with runes. Invisible to the ponies, the green stones of the tunnel and this area were crawling with the efforts of Prey's ceaseless labours. This was the battleground Prey had been preparing in advance, and the

thieves had trusted and faithfully followed the alpha right into the middle of it.

None of the diamond dogs had ever actually lived to escape the sewer.

Down to the last dog, through one means or another, Prey and Lemon Pink had been the means of the whole pack's death.

---<O>---

*Sssccchkk-*HHHss**

The brand new pool of bone rot splashed as the surviving, non-organic items the two liquified thieves had on them at the last fell in. The twin scorpion tails created the loudest splash.

They all froze. Even now, even after all the terrible ways to die they'd encountered fighting Prey, even after all that, these ponies were still frozen into shocked immobility for a moment.

They couldn't help it. They gaped at what until only two seconds ago, had been a trio of living, breathing, sentient beings. Death. It always caught you off guard.

And then, terrible outrage and fury; "You die!"

The floating blade pressing into the back of Lemon Pink's neck snapped down like a guillotine.

Lemon's head fell off. Blood sprayed across the dirt as her body collapsed, legs kicking in wild muscle spasms.

Another pig carcass suddenly lay there. Headless, kicking, spurting blood, but a pig nonetheless, not a pony. A wicker skeleton frame had been grown over and *into* the pig's body.

Prey may never have recreated the evil of the kindersnatches, but he was not above taking tips. A real flesh and blood body had tricked the thieves' spells, and the runes carved into the dumb animals hide, now fading, had fooled their eyes and ears. Lemon Pink had merely been controlling her simulacrum puppet via these

runes and the wicker parasite.

"Shields!" The unicorn leader bellowed, "Fall back. Sierra, unseal us!"

The thief with the phasing artifact was still staring motionless at the puddle of bone rot and what used to be people he knew and possibly loved.

"Sierra!"

Sierra jerked, wrenching themselves away. They leapt for the platinum staff, snatching it up. The golden dome of mist immediately began to silently unravel, the bright stained glass window patches rapidly fading away.

'Too late. There's no escape now.'

Prey's hot fury had guttered out at the alpha's violent death. Now it was all just cold anger and an unbending determination to finish this.

An invisible barrier halted the thieves flight back towards the tunnel. The cloaked ponies who ran into it just... stopped. All their forward momentum simply ceased. They just couldn't step past an invisible line of runes in the green stone.

"Ponyfeathers! There's a shield!"
"It was all a bucking trap!"

Yes, a trap. Too late the cry, too late the wisdom. There was no leaving now. The various fake Lemon Pinks had only existed to bait the thieves into stepping inside. The staged interaction between the illusionary pig puppet and the mind controlled alpha had only been a performance to further that goal.

Once Prey was certain he'd lured them all inside, he'd activated the huge trap array he'd spent so much time working on. The thieves sealing the area with their artifact in an attempt to stop him from escaping was darkly ironic, because his plan had been the exact same thing. None of them were getting away. Not this time.

Prey stood up from the shadow of his boulder. Above, the stars coldly twinkled, impossibly far away. Prey was outside of the thieves' encirclement. He'd never even been inside of the golden mist dome, whatever that was. He'd merely been observing everything from afar via runes.

The thieves were shouting, exchanging calls and instructions, backing away from the invisible barrier. None of it mattered, because it was too late. They were already completely trapped.

This was why you *never* monologued or talked. If you were going to kill someone, you just did it.

Prey looked towards them. The hooded thieves. They were trying to break through the barrier now, but they couldn't. It'd taken them mere seconds from discovery to switch to trying to brute force their way through the shield. Too late the wisdom, too late the escape. Too soon the death.

Prey half squinted as bright flashes of multicoloured light lit the inside of the barrier. Powerful magical spells were being hurled, but they were immediately misdirected and syphoned into the ground. They were trapped in a circular area with roughly a thirty-five yards by thirty-five yard radius. But none of the seven surviving ponies had yet realised the true extent of the trap.

Prey looked down. His hooves were still shaking. His body felt full of jitters. He was about to kill again. It was so *easy* to kill, but it still never got *easier*.

One of the hooded ponies tried to teleport out, a logical next step.

Logical -but fatal.

Prey saw him charging the spell and averted his eyes just in time. There was a flash of yellow and the distinctive loud **Crack**

Unicorn's had long ago invented anti-teleportation enchantments to ward their secure areas against intruders. Leylines and bedrock were a naturally occurring example of this. But what all warding methods had in common was the effect of shunting the intruding

teleporter off to the edge of the protected zone. That, or the teleportation spell simply fizzled out upon being cast.

That was just how anti-teleportation enchantments worked. Magic and matter had to go somewhere, it couldn't just disappear. That was a universal law.

Prey's runic array didn't break that law. But the teleportation didn't fizzle, nor did the unicorn simply reappear, pressed up against the invisible barrier.

A teleportation spell was an immensely complicated bit of spell work. It needed to be, for first the spell needed to work out if the user could arrive on the other side safely, and if not, then make course corrections, and only then initiate the switch between the two places. The mathematics involved were mind bendingly complex, but the spell matrices performed all the necessary arcane calculations under the surface without the caster ever being aware, provided they had enough power and the skill to pull it off.

Teleportation spells also had fail safes built in, and the spell also automatically cast a shield over the user during the exact moment of transport to protect against external forces.

The spell was designed to just safely fail if any of these conditions weren't met.

But what if in that moment of instantaneous transit, those fail safes themselves simply ceased to exist at the same time as the whole spell failed?

The teleport cut out midway as all the magic was syphoned off. The result was messy.

Red viscera sprayed the inside of the barrier so violently that the splatters shot up over ten hooves high.

This runic array was Prey's work. It was his weapon and his trump card. It was what he'd poured all those hours into preparing for this inevitable confrontation. And even if he hadn't had time to include more lethal arrays inside, like more flare traps to finish the thieves

off, he'd had long enough to perfect the barrier itself.

Nothing was getting through, except for light. But not heat, not magic, not force, not even air.

The only reason Prey could hear the thieves' shocked screams and neighs at the sight of the violently failed teleportation was because of the runes he'd included, sending out what was said on the inside to the outside.

Within the null-magic barrier, the thieves were all falling back from the huge red splatter, as the viscera slowly began to slide down the invisible wall.

Prey hadn't had a few hundred extra hours to include arrays inside the barrier to properly circumvent the thieves' artifacts and finish them off, but he didn't need to.

He'd nearly perfected the barrier. He'd said it earlier. Air could not pass in or out.

The hourglass had already been turned over. The thieves' sand was already trickling down.

That was how they would die. Trapped, unable to escape, with their oxygen slowly dwindling and strength fading. Prey had not dismissed the possibility that perhaps one of them knew an air purifying spell, or might even have an artifact on them to that effect.

Even now, they were trying to employ said artifacts to break the barrier. Nothing was working, though.

But it wasn't just their air that was limited. Their magic was too. The whole array was draining away magic from the area, even the ever present ambient magic of the world.

Prey half closed his eyes against the intense magical flashes banishing the night, enduring the deafening thunder cracks and booms. He couldn't even work out half of the spells the thieves were trying, but it didn't matter. None of it was working. If they kept it up, Prey estimated it wouldn't be too long before all the magic

within the barrier was completely used up. They were already burning through their available mana at a rapid pace.

First they'd run out of magic, then they'd run out of air.

'They'll get to experience what it's like to be powerless before the end, what every other non-magical person feels everyday of their lives.'

Prey stepped out from his shielded hiding place. The unicorn with the floating magical blade who'd decapitated Lemon's simulacrum was now trying uselessly to cut through the barrier. Even their telekinesis on the weapon was sputtering out every time it touched the invisible divide, and the physical blade itself was turned aside every time without fail.

Prey looked at the futilely struggling thieves for a long moment, caught inside his trap. They were refusing to give in. One was trying to dig under the barrier. Smart, but it wouldn't work. The runes encapsulated beneath the ground too.

'It's because they haven't realised the extent of their situation yet.'

Lemon Pink quietly emerged from her own shielded hiding spot. She walked up to stand beside Prey in the shadow of the rock, joining him in watching the trapped ponies. There was a spark of cold contempt in the dispassionate set of her face; "Typical ponies. Defiant and self righteous to the end. How like Captain Fire Strike."

Prey nearly snapped at Lemon that she hadn't even been born when Fire Strike was alive, that she'd never actually faced him. But then in a way she had, through Prey's memories that were also her own.

"They don't have that long," Prey stated, "Maybe half an hour of air. More if they spend their mana on purifying that instead of attempting to escape. Less if they try fire spells."

"Then it would be good if they did not realise that until it is too late." Lemon stated, as more magical flashes split the night.

Prey twitched an ear without looking away. It was the signal for her to explain.

"Distract them. Give them a target to rage against. Let them use up all the magic and all the air." Lemon said.

Prey understood what she was suggesting immediately. Provide a distraction so the thieves didn't realise the dwindling air and magic were limited resources. In other words, do the stupid thing and go out there to gloat instead of just sitting here and waiting them out. Right now, the unicorns flexing their collective magical might down there only thought they were trapped, and that with enough effort and ingenuity, they could escape. They hadn't yet realised what was really going on.

But if one of Prey's rules was to never take unnecessary risks, another was to never underestimate magic.

Just because it *shouldn't* be possible for the thieves to escape didn't mean it *definitely* was. A one percent chance was still a chance. Prey didn't believe they could escape, but he'd been wrong before. Besides, a cornered animal is the most dangerous. If they knew about their dwindling air supply...

He sighed to himself, 'I should've created the array to just drain all the air in one go.'

But doing so would've created a risk. The required array and runes would've left a physical loophole in the barrier. If they'd been fast enough, one of the unicorn's could've exploited the weakness, shot a spell through, or magically affected the world outside in a way Prey couldn't have predicted. But back to Lemon's suggestion:

"Alright. Summon up an illusion of me and you. Just visuals will do, no need to waste magic making it perfect. The runes will do the actual projecting of sound in and out." Prey ordered.

"Yes, Prey." Lemon lifted her unusually sharp horn as it lit with a sickly silver glow, then she paused:

"What shall I say to distract them with, Prey?"

"Gloat, monologue, make it up. Try tricking them into answering some questions maybe. It doesn't really matter. They're going to die

here, but I hate torture. I hate pain."

These ponies had attacked him and his. He hated them, and he was going to kill them. He was disgusted at their galling arrogance, and furious that they'd posed a risk to both him and Crimson. They deserved this.

But even as he hated them, he also hated seeing pain and death.

And while Prey most certainly would fervently wish it upon his worst enemy, he still hated ever having to see it. Because he knew what it felt like. It reminded him. Prey hated being weak like that. Really, he just hated this whole thing. Anger, hate, and black bitterness. What a potent cocktail it made for. All with the added cherry of self loathing over the diamond dogs floating on top.

"I don't torture for the sake of torture." Prey repeated again, and honestly believed it was true.

"Yes, Prey." Lemon Pink acknowledged, and cast the illusion.

Through the invisible null-barrier, the surviving thieves spotted the approaching illusion of Lemon Pink and Prey almost straight away. Most of the hooded ponies were visibly panting from the strength of their magical exertions.

"There! There she is."
"Traitor! Warlock!"

The unicorn leader, the one in the armour was visibly shaking with barely suppressed fury as Lemon Pink and the lamb obediently following by her side came up, but the stallion still retained control of himself. He didn't speak or shout his hate like his fellows were doing. He merely waited.

Lemon Pink halted her and Prey's illusionary doppelgangers about fifteen hooves away from the barrier. Far enough to hide any finer, inconsistent details in the illusions. The fake pink mare's head turned slowly, as if regarding each of the trapped ponies. She spoke:

"Well, how do you like your war? Not how you thought it would end, I'm sure."

"End?!" The unicorn with the floating blade spat, "This hasn't ended. It's only just begun."

Lemon arrogantly ignored him, just smirking down her muzzle's length at the fuming leader, "I asked you a question; how do you like your war? You declared it was a war oh-so confidently when you went down to destroy my home, I've merely answered your challenge."

"You were watching us down there?" The armoured unicorn ground out from between clenched teeth.

"Watching and listening. The gall of your precocious arrogance, 'This is war'? Please, don't make me laugh. Actually, do. Your pathetic ideas of war are hilarious. You think you know war? You know *nothing* about war. Go survive a week in the Resistance under Torment's claw, earn your name and your mask, *then* you can talk to me about war."

"You're disgusting." The armoured unicorn stated, voice flat. "You're proud, actually proud of being good at killing people."

Surprisingly he said 'people', not 'ponies'. "You're using your tally of murders like an achievement and a mark of wisdom. You're disgusting. You shall be number three, but this time I'll take on your burden with no regrets."

"Oh? Number three what?" Lemon's illusion asked challengingly.

The stallion regarded her, and for a long second it looked like he was done, but then he spoke again:

"Only twice before in my long years of protecting Equestria have the Order had the misfortune of digging out a worm as foul and far beyond redemption as you. But when we get out of here, you shall be number three. There is no rock you can hide under where we cannot find you. No prison cell awaits you, no mercy or pardon. You, traitor to Celestia, are not even a pony. You've wilfully erased

the gift of the light of Harmony from your soul. You merely are a monster. You shall be number three, but this time, there shall be no guilt. You can't feel guilty over putting down a monster."

"Poetic. Really, you touched me with that last part. I've heard a lot of last words, forgot them all too by the way, but yours, I think I'll make an effort to remember."

A magical fireball launched at Lemon flared across the barrier, and vanished. The pony who'd fired it glared as they panted, or at least Prey assumed they were glaring under the hood:

"I hate you. *pant* I hate you so much. You're everything I hate. *pant*. You've got your own internal narrator going in your head right now, thinking; 'Oh, I'm the misunderstood good guy'. Well guess what!? You're not!"

This second cloaked pony sucked in great lungfuls of air, "You're just another filthy warlock! You're nothing but a wretch, a deluded horse! *pant* You're always the same, thinking you're better than everyone who doesn't have magic. I'm ashamed to even be the same race as you. *pant* Those diamond dogs were a thousand, no, a *million* times the pony you'll ever be."

The unicorn leader rested a hoof on the gasping stallion's shoulder, but his hooded gaze never left Lemon Pink, "I don't think you were listening Quarter Staff. I already said it didn't I? That there isn't a person, it's just a monster."

Lemon Pink raised her eyebrows, next to her, the illusion of Prey all but ignored by all, "And you call *me* arrogant? That I'm the one who treats non-unicorns as lesser? Have you looked in the mirror, horn-head? You're the ones who led all those diamond dogs to their deaths. Tell you what, cut off your horn and go without magic for the rest of your life, then I'll take your words seriously."

The furious thieves stared at Lemon Pink in disbelief. She was clearly also a unicorn, same as them.

"So she's a mad hypocrite as well as a filthy, lying, murdering, evil, sick twisted, bucking, pile of road apples." One of them laughed

harshly, but without any sort of humour.

The illusionary Lemon Pink paused, "Don't presume to know me, or what I am. Or speak of madness to me." She added as an afterthought.

The lead thief turned away in disgust, still half supporting the panting Quarter Staff, "Ignore her. She's trying to distract us. She obviously can't hurt us in here, or she would've done it already. Find a way out and don't listen to her lies."

"Aren't you going to preach to me about the righteousness of your 'Order' and how good will always prevail?" Lemon mocked, flapping a hoof insultingly.

"No. You are a waste of breath." The leader didn't even turn to look back at her. He began casting some sort of scanning magic over the area.

Hurriedly, Lemon tried for another distraction, "Oh well. I guess I'll just have to 'ask' whomever your precious order sends out on crusade next. With as many artifacts as you've stolen to hoard like dragons, they'll definitely come to reclaim yours once I've pried them all out of your cold, dead, hooves."

A thief let out a whiny of mocking, but utterly forced laughter, "Ha. *Ha*! You'll not get a single artifact even if you could defeat one of us. You think we didn't think of that? Greedy traitors like you are all the same! *cough* None of these artifacts can be allowed back out into the world. We'll defend them with our lives. If we should fall, you'll lose any chance of getting them."

'So they all have a self destruct of some kind, then.' Prey thought. He wanted those artifacts. He'd so far been letting Lemon make her speech up as she went without interrupting, but now he did.

"Try baiting out more information about this self destruct." He ordered.

Next to him, the real Lemon Pink nodded. Illusionary Lemon Pink flicked her tail dismissively, "Oh that's no problem. You'll either

eventually trade the artifacts to me yourself as payment to release you, or you'll tell me how to undo whatever self destruct enchantments you've placed upon yourselves."

"We'll tell you nothing."

"But you will."

"A weak bucking warlock like you will never break one of us. *cough* Do your worst." The unicorn spat.

"I do not torture." Lemon Pink said, voice as even as a summer breeze, "There's no point. You see, your minds will betray you."

The utter disgust and hate filled contempt seemed to ooze through the invisible barrier there was so much of it. "Vile. *Mind leeches*, all the same. They all think they're chessmaster geniuses. Ha! As if. My grandfoal could beat you blindfolded in real life."

"Just try reading my thoughts, I'll break you, you twisted bucker. Bring it on! You're talking big and you haven't even taken the first swing. I've known all about your dirty underhoofed magic ever since you mind warped that poor maid and made her take the blame." The second thief finished with a cough, tone all but dribbling venom.

They were trying to find strong enough words to hurt Lemon with, trying to adequately express their fury, since they couldn't do anything more effective. But they were ponies. Vitriol did not come naturally to them.

Lemon wasn't phased by their words or their threats, "Defensive enchantments and mindlocks won't save you. They're easily enough removed. And I can see none of you has ever encountered a real mind leech before."

She pointed between them one by one, "None of you have. I can see it. You're not afraid enough. I could leave a hole in your mind with surgical precision. Prey doesn't see any reason to be so kind."

In their hiding place out of sight, Prey snapped his head around to frown at Lemon Pink. Why'd she gone and given them his name?

There was absolutely no need to. The thieves were already all dead anyways, so don't give them any more information. Or was Lemon Pink's own creation affecting her into ranting?

The thief named Quarter Staff was still panting heavily beside the armoured leader, who was looking hard at them, "Quarter Staff?" He asked sharply.

"Just used too much magic at once. *pant* I'll be fine."

The leader looked up, ignoring the illusion of his enemy just beyond the barrier but far beyond his reach. He looked around, then abruptly upwards. The stallion's horn glowed beneath his hood, and a white flare shot up. It winked out as it hit the barrier ceiling, about thirty yards up.

"Everypony, report! What's your magic like? Who feels it's off?"

The thieves stopped. A unicorn who'd been attempting to use something that looked like a conjured sand storm of glittering diamond dust to bore through the barrier was the first to answer. "My reserves are... nearly gone. And... I don't know why."

"I, mine are the same."
"My spells don't feel as strong as they should."
"Mine neither."

A moment of dreadful silence as the hooded ponies all looked at each other and glared killing hate at Lemon and Prey's illusions. "Is... Is this place draining our magic?"

"No, that's not possible."

"We'd be able to tell straight away. There's nothing draining magic from me."

"No, this bucking barrier must be weakening us somehow."

"It's not draining our magic," Quarter Staff gasped in realisation, "We're just not regaining any!"

He pointed at Lemon Pink, shouting, "You! *pant* What did you do

to curse this land?"

Lemon's image did not reply. It didn't move at all.

"Aaaarh! Buck!" A golden spear head of magic struck out uselessly at Lemon in an expression of futile hate.

"Stop!" The leader barked.

"No more spells. Preserve your magic and your strength. She means to exhaust us all first. No doubt she'll send in her 'pet' to finish us off afterwards." He added, shooting a hidden glare at Lemon and Prey's figures.

Ponies, unlike other races, had magic woven into their very beings. They passively utilised its benefits all the time. Even earth ponies, who had the fewest leylines, got to automatically enjoy extra strength and stamina in everything they did. It was also why ponies, especially unicorns, got to live longer than all the other races. It had to do, quite literally, with how magical they were.

So when this magic disappeared, those enhancements a pony had been enjoying their whole life and had never experienced life without, the sudden withdrawal left them feeling empty, nauseous, and shaky. Normal.

All of this went doubly so for unicorns, thus why they hated overdoing it magically and burning all their reserves. Because it felt horrible to them.

It was why the thieves had all completely overlooked their own shortness of breath and panting as just a symptom of this.

The lead thief drew all of the surviving unicorns back from the barrier, speaking in an undertone he obviously didn't know Prey and Lemon could still hear; "Save your magic, the warlock wants us powerless. We're not passively losing any magic, so as long as we don't use any, we'll still have our reserves. What's left of our reserves, at any rate."

"So we just wait her out? Once Celestia's dawn has come, somepony will eventually notice all of this going on down here at the base of

the mountain and call the Guard. We can talk our way out." The thief with the blue jewelled chestplate, the one which allowed them to phase, had either been too scared or too smart to try it on the barrier after what'd happened to the failed teleporter.

The armoured leader shook his head grimly, "No. We cannot wait. That traitor is just there beyond the barrier, demanding justice. This is a war, so we'll use everything we have."

Prey tensed.

The unicorn pulled out a little plain wooden box, awkwardly using his hooves instead of his magic, and flipped up the lid. Inside was a patched ball of scrap cloth. A rough pincushion. It looked utterly normal. There were three large pins in it. Two of the pins were pushed all the way in up to their heads. The last one stood out.

Nearly all the thieves couldn't help but draw back in distaste, but with just as much caution too. Dangerous. Powerful.

'There. Attack.'

The armoured unicorn warily reached towards the last pin.

"Sir, wait. Shouldn't-?"

Prey had no idea what the artifact did, and no interest in learning.

The hard earth and stone beneath the thieves' hooves bulged, then erupted. A geyser of dirt and rocks showered the area. The veropede lunged out of the earth, a blurred rush of teeth, legs, mandibles, and death.

The other cloaked thieves, still in the act of falling down were ignored, as it went straight for the leader and the pin cushion.

Prey'd had the veropede dug in and hidden under the area from the very start. The monster was his insurance, his backup plan, but not one he'd wanted to use. After experiencing the veropede first hoof, the thieves would've had to be mentally impaired to head into this fight without being confident they could kill the veropede. An artifact, a specialised spell, Prey didn't know what they'd prepared,

and he had no intention of finding out the hard way.

The veropede was just hidden there as backup while the trapped unicorns slowly suffocated. It didn't need fresh air, not like the thieves did at any rate, not after what Prey had done to it to keep it alive.

Earth and dirt sprayed everywhere. The veropede bit forwards like a bear trap snapping shut. Blinded by dirt, knocked off his hooves, and falling, the leader of the thieves never had time to react.

*Ca-crrunc-*krang*!*

The power of the stallion's armour saved him. Not the steel of the armour, such a weak metal was nothing in the veropede's teeth. But the golden projection of light that covered the stallion's whole frame in an invulnerable aura? That was another matter entirely.

The veropede thrashed its head, teeth breaking on the shield, and the invulnerable unicorn was hurled far into the air. The stallion soared over twenty hooves up, cloak flapping, before gravity reasserted itself.

He landed on a boulder. The boulder cracked, but the leader rolled back to his hooves completely fine, his invincible armour shining. But the box and the pin cushion it'd contained were gone from his grasp.

'There. That. It's food. Take and leave.'

The veropede twisted around, its segmented upper body still reared up. A magical **Boom** of conclusive force shuddered into its side, and was promptly ignored as the veropede dived towards the small raggedy ball of dropped cloth, half buried under fallen dirt in the night.

"It's after the pins!"
'Take and leave.'
"Don't let it!"

The levitating blade from before came spinning in so fast the air shrieked.

The veropede twisted its upper body to the side, and the spinning blade only buried itself in the armoured plates of its side instead with a wet thunk. Prey's tool barely slowed.

"No!"

A magical shield projection, the same interlocking crystalline one from the sewer, barred the veropede's way.

The veropede crashed into it like a battering ram, buckling the knees of the unicorn casting it. What had once halted the veropede underneath Canterlot couldn't function to the same degree without enough magic. The shield disintegrated into pieces. Not enough.

"Stop it!"

A magical artifact of some kind lit up under a unicorn's cloak as he threw himself in the way.

The pony breathed, and fire erupted from him like a dragon's breath. The fire wrapped around the pony, moulding into flaming extensions of their limbs. A helmet of fire blazing in the shape of a dragon's head opened its mouth in a roar, shimmering flames so hot the surrounding air began burning-

The veropede crushed the unicorn into paste, bringing its reared upper body slamming down on top of the flaming figure.

It was a whip strike, but the whip was as thick as a tree trunk. The impact shivered through the ground, the unicorn's skeleton snapped like twigs, and the fire was smothered instantly.

The veropede tramped the crushed body underfoot, sharp legs puncturing holes, and skittered for the dropped pincushion. Stunned shock, then:

"Nooo*hohooo*." Someone scream-sobbed.

Half a hoof before the veropede's reaching antenna hooked the pin cushion, an aura snatched it away.

'Enemy. Rival hunter. Attack it.'

The veropede rounded on the panting unicorn with the hovering rag pincushion held before them, horn aglow. Quarter Staff looked up as the veropede reared above him, armoured mass, legs and spines mere outlines in the night. Quarter Staff turned his head. No one was close enough to help him. He looked towards the phasing unicorn, sprinting forwards but still too far away.

"I'm sorry." Then his telekinesis flung the pincushion towards his friend.

The veropede jerked after the flying cloth ball, but not before its second to last remaining antenna, covered in barbs and hooks, ripped off most of Quarter Staff's face in a wild blow as it skittered past him.

The corpse formerly known as Quarter Staff fell to the ground, hood torn away, but his horn was still glowing in a last act.

The fallen pony's cloak bulged and ruptured. Huge spines of ice ripped out, shooting forth from an amulet, only visible hanging around the pony's neck for a moment, before Quarter Staff's body was crushed in the expanding mass of freezing spikes. Cracking and shattering noises resounded.

The ice stabbed into the ground, shoving ice's mass off center, filling the air with reaching spines and catching the veropede in the side.

Ice tips broke on the hardened carapace, flowed over the veropede's body and under it, still expanding and freezing solid in the span of a heartbeat.

The sudden explosive expansion of deadly ice came to an end with a last shattering crack. Icy fog billowed. Frozen nearly completely around the veropede's middle, a huge chunk of ice now held it trapped.

The veropede squirmed, dozens of sharp legs grating jarringly on the slippery ice. It flexed its long body, and cracks shot through the frozen water, but it wasn't enough to break free from the dead weight trapping it. In the end it hadn't been fast enough.

The phasing unicorn who'd been thrown the pincushion in Quarter Staff's last moments, Sierra, clutched it to his gilded chestplate. More fog was rapidly filling the air, billowing off the ice. Sierra stared at what remained of the pony, as frozen as the iceberg, unable to look away. His chest heaved.

"Nooo!" He screamed in horror, and then again in rage, "NOOO!"

The veropede heaved, and more sounds of ice breaking rang in the night.

"NO! NO! *NO*!"

Rage shook the hooded stallion's whole frame, he shouted at the veropede, at Lemon and Prey's illusions beyond the barrier, at everything. "*NO*!"

He reared up, raising the pincushion above his head.

For a moment, even hidden more than thirty yards away, Prey thought for a moment he saw the single extended pin glint in the night. A terrible premonition seized his heart. His stomach dropped. His eyes widened. He reached out a hoof. 'Attack, kill-'

"No more coward! Face us." Sierra screamed, and brought his hoof down, hammering the last pin home.

Something seized a hold of Prey. He couldn't move. It grabbed him from the inside, from the outside, every inch of his wool was suddenly gripped in the power of something else. He couldn't move, he couldn't breathe, react or think. He'd been nailed to the spot, pinned.

Everything was dark. Blackness. He couldn't see.

Premonition. It was so strong, both the gripping power and the feeling that it blanked Prey's mind to everything else. He'd felt this knowledge before, and it was utterly wrong. Prey was terrified.

And suddenly the whole world was made of cloth. Everything, from the earth to the sky, it was all just one big patchwork. It was only the stitching which held everything framed in its proper place.

'*~A stitch in time, running through the hangmare's twine~*'

The force grabbed Prey, and it ripped him from his sewn position in the world, and mercilessly darned him back into another.

But that wasn't the worst. In that briefest sliver of time, if it lasted long enough to even be called time, as Prey was torn free, he looked back. There was a hole in the world where he had been. The torn out stitches were already reaching across, sewing the hole back shut in an instant.

But it wasn't before Prey caught a glimpse of the black hole being sewn shut, a glimpse of what was on the other side of the cloth.

Prey *knew* what was on the other side. Hungry Things. He saw again a glimpse of one, or maybe hundreds of them.

The thieves were wiped from anything Prey cared about. They didn't matter, because there was a *hole* in the world. This was his fault. He wasn't meant to have been stitched in there, he shouldn't have existed! Prey would've given anything in that moment to not have that hole there ripped in the shape of his shadow. But it was too late, Prey had already seen.

Hungry. Eyeless heads stirred in the depths of Prey's head, looking blindly up towards the mind ocean's bright surface. Hungry to join in.

The stitches pulled across. The hole shrank. Mental cage bars bent. Hungry. The hole shrank. Hunger stretched out a claw, rising through the water, or was it through the black hole? Stitches flew. So *h**U***n**g**R*y*.

The fabric yanked shut, the hole vanished, the stitching finished-

------x-x-X-x-x------

-Prey gasped stale air. He was on his back.

The real world was all around him, the night, hard earth, chill air, the stink of death and blood. He could move, he could see! The world of cloth and stitches was gone. It'd never existed. Here and

gone in an instant.

Prey's stomach abruptly rebelled. He rolled onto his side just in time to throw up. His body shuddered. It came out incredibly acidic and bitter. Prey retched again. He was shaking. An almost insatiable hunger gripped him, but the thought of food brought on yet more retching as his stomach cramped up.

He gasped for air, it was hard to breathe.

"What-?*No*. This isn't what I wished for! Where's the warlock?"

"What did you do?"

"The monster, it's breaking free!"

Those voices screaming and shouting were the thieves. That cracking of ice was coming from the veropede breaking free. Bile still stung his throat. Prey could feel the mental connection to his tool, but it was in the wrong place. That wasn't right. The veropede was not where he'd left it.

It was too loud, too close, it wasn't right. There was supposed to be a null-barrier in the way. Prey pushed up with his hooves and shakily raised his head.

Before Prey could react, an armoured unicorn, face hidden under a hood, loomed above Prey. The thief leader. A hoof lashed out, the kick knocking Prey onto his back, half splashing into his own sick.

Prey's head was spinning with disorientation in the stale air, but he wasn't hallucinating. He was inside the barrier. His anti-magic barrier which was supposed to block any kind of magic. Yet somehow, Selenia's pincushion had ripped him from safety and dropped him here. Right into the surviving thieves' hooves.

'Oh no.'

"It's breaking free!" Someone yelled again.

The armoured unicorn looming over Prey twisted around at the desperate shout, distracted from the lamb. "Celestia have mercy-*Get*

clear!"

Prey didn't understand the finer details of what had just happened. He was scared and shaking. Something bad had just happened and he'd been ripped from the world to here. But the thief leader had just inadvertently exposed his back. Prey couldn't hear the stallion's thoughts, they were locked away, but he was still within range for Prey to touch.

'Die!'

Prey rolled onto his belly and swiped out. He just needed one touch.

Prey didn't need to take over a mind nor absorb it if he didn't want what was stored inside. Right now, he wasn't interested in whatever secrets the thief's mind held. Prey just wanted him to die.

Gold light flared. The leader jerked, twisting back around in surprise to look down at Prey where the lamb had his extended hoof nearly touching the stallion's rear leg. Nearly. Prey's hoof pressed uselessly against the hard, slippery barrier of the invincibility magic. So near and yet too far.

Prey recoiled. The leader kept staring down at where his armour had kicked in and protected him from destruction. But another shout snapped him back to the present.

"It's not going to hold!"

Ice shattered, and the veropede broke its middle free.

The leader spun back around again, assessing the dire situation in a heartbeat. The other three remaining thieves had spread themselves defensively around the veropede in a wide arc.

"Celestia damn it! Why'd you waste the last charge on grabbing that stupid sheep?"

"I didn't! I said I wanted the monster's master, not the filly!" The phasing thief shouted back, half hysterical with fury and fear.

"You could've just killed the monster instead!" The other thief screamed back. The veropede picked that one to lunge at. They just simply had the bad luck of being the one in the path of getting to Prey and the thief leader the fastest.

Prey desperately grabbed at its cold insect mind, 'Protect your hatchling.'

"Ponyfeathers!" The cloaked pony backpedalled, the veropede closing the distance in mere heartbeats.

"Azurite run!"
"Get out of the way!"
"Move!"

The targeted thief tried to cast something, but whatever it was sputtered out halfway through. Not enough magic left.

Telekinesis seized a hold of Prey. Prey screamed in response, trying to clutch at the ground, but it was hopeless. The armoured leader yanked Prey up in front of him. Prey's head spun dizzyingly and the world rocked as he dangled upside down.

"Stop!" The leader bellowed at the frozen illusion of Lemon Pink, "Stop or I'll-"

The veropede didn't stop. It was too fast and even a veropede couldn't just suddenly halt that much charging armoured mass over the course of only two yards.

Prey's own ears were flopping over his eyes as he was shaken in the aura, so he only half saw the cloaked thief dive out of the way. Too slow. Their rear half was still in range of the veropede's spread mandibles.

With those mandibles, veropedes could bore through solid stone.

A bangle around the leaping pony's foreleg flashed blinding white and shattered.

Crack

The empty cloak was snatched up in the veropede's mandibles and shredded in an instant, but the thief was gone. Where-?There. The unicorn had been teleported about ten paces away and next to the phasing thief.

They landed from their leap, sans cloak. They were actually a caramel speckled stallion, clad in light chainmail.

"Stop right now or she gets it!" The leader bellowed at Lemon Pink again, shaking Prey until his teeth clacked.

Lemon's illusionary image was still frozen, utterly immobile. The real Lemon Pink couldn't do anything, she wasn't the one in control.

'Danger! Stop.' Prey screamed across his link into the veropede's mind.

The monster's many legs locked, digging in. Its armoured length ground to a halt over the course of ten hooves. When it stopped, it was less than five yards outside of the antenna attack range of the leader holding Prey hostage.

The leader was indestructible in his armour. The veropede couldn't harm him. 'Filthy, *filthy* magic.'

Prey struggled wildly, still suspended upside down, ears and dangling ribbon swinging. He had to get out right now. But the unicorn tightened his telekinetic grip, locking Prey's limbs into place.

"Back off. I've got your foal, apprentice, paramour or whatever, and unless you want to see what I'll do to her, back off. Now. I said now!"

"Let me go!" Prey squeaked. He was sick with fear, he was going to throw up again. His head was thudding with blood.

"NOW!"

"Stop!" Lemon's image flickered out and vanished outside the barrier, but her voice still came through, "Stop it at once."

"Have your evil beast back off, or else." The leader barked.

It was hard to concentrate, but Prey had to force the connection through, 'Go. Over there. Away. Go.'

The veropede waved its two remaining antennae in the air, furling and unfurling them unhappily. Meat was so close, and one of its hatchlings was in danger. It started forwards.

'Go away, go away. Stop. Over there. Food, food over there!' Prey mentally screamed.

"Last chance!" The leader lifted Prey higher in his aura threateningly.

"Stop it. Don't." Lemon's voice came, strained.

The veropede halted. Then it finally turned and began to scuttle away towards the remains of the pig which'd had its head chopped off.

But Prey couldn't breathe a sigh of relief. He was still captured. His eyes stung, 'Oh please don't start crying right now.'

A tense moment passed as the last four thieves all stared at the departing veropede. The de-cloaked, caramel coloured one, Azurite, was still lying on the ground next to the phasing thief, clutching a hoof to their chest and wheezing badly. Their ears were splayed as far back as they could go.

"Good. Now drop the barrier and let us out." The leader demanded.

No response came from Lemon Pink, still hidden out there in the night.

"Didn't you hear me? I said, drop the barrier and let us out." The horrible aura holding Prey frozen fluctuated around the edges. Prey bit down on his tongue. Emotional instability? No, the magic was fading. It just wasn’t fading fast enough to save him.

"Let us out."

"....I cannot do that." Lemon Pink finally answered, tone closed.

"Release us!"

"I cannot do that," Lemon repeated, "The... barrier can't just be disabled. It wasn't made to be turned on and off like that. I can't do it. Don't hurt hi-her."

'What is she playing at?' Prey thought frantically. They were going to kill him! Or torture first, then kill. Lemon Pink knew how to disable the null-magic barrier, Prey could do it himself from within here if he could get access to the right runes.

'Lemon's lying. Why's she lying? She can't betray me like this. What's she trying to do?'

The other three thieves were hurrying over to the leader as he shouted back his reply, never turning their backs on the veropede, "Don't spout your lies to us! Do you think we're stupid? Of course you can turn it on and off, you meant to come in to steal all our artifacts. So turn it off right now or I'll be forced to kill your foster foal."

"Kill Pr- kill her, and you're all dead. My veropede will rip you all to shreds." Lemon Pink immediately threatened.

"Veropede. That's that **cough** monster, right?" The phasing thief with the gilt chestplate spat.

"Yes. That is my veropede. It will obey my every command. You have no chance of beating it, especially with your magic rapidly running out. If I wanted to, I could have it kill you all. The only thing keeping you alive right now is my adopted child's life. But if h-she dies, so does each and every one of you."

Lemon's voice was flat, cold, but she kept slipping. Lemon didn't panic like a normal pony did. The thieves didn't know it, but those repeated near mistakes showed Prey how off balance and unstable Lemon Pink was.

This had all spun out of control so fast. Prey blinked hard as he uselessly struggled. He was very afraid, his heart racing. He had to

think, had to figure out how to get out of this alive.

It wasn't just the thieves, the air was also going to run out soon. Everyone was already breathing heavily, or coughing and gasping, even if they hadn't yet drawn the connection.

"So it's a stalemate, is it?" The thieves' leader asked. His tone said he had something bad planned.

"An impasse. Your mutually assured destruction should you kill my child." Lemon Pink echoed.

"You don't seem to understand..." The leader said from behind Prey. He couldn't twist around to see, "It's not this foal keeping us alive, it's us keeping this foal alive. If we die, then so does your child."

"But so will all four of you." Lemon Pink shot back.

"No, all *five* of us. Five. Your little filly is stuck in here with us, remember?" The aura holding Prey gave him a shake up and down. Prey's wool was crawling in disgust.

"H-She's only a child. She's innocent. Are you prepared to murder a child in cold blood? Will the rest of you just stand there and let him do this?" Lemon asked.

"I can't believe it, you're honestly trying to pull that?" The de-cloaked caramel unicorn spat, eyes still fixed on the veropede.

"Your lies are completely transparent, you're only trying to turn us on one another."

"Foal she may be, but after everything you've done to us, to the diamond dog pack, how both of you've betrayed and murdered and killed and stolen and lied-No, this is justice. You're the one who took and corrupted this foal. You have no one to blame but yourself for her fate." The leader responded, not moved an inch.

"So we're back at an impasse." Lemon repeated.

"Hardly. I see a very easy way past it."

Prey wanted to scream. He could feel it bubbling away in the back of his throat.

He was helpless in the magical grip of this unicorn. He hated unicorns, he hated magic, he hated these thieves and all they'd taken from him. But he was too weak to fight back. He'd been overpowered and beaten in an instant by the filthy unicorn and their filthy artifacts. They were the same. They were always the same! Using their power to crush others.

Hot tears blurred in his eyes. Tears of terror and hatred.

Prey understood it. He knew what both the thieves and Lemon Pink were each angling for. It was so simple for someone like him to figure out. If only he wasn't caught in the middle, like a bone between two timber wolves.

Lemon couldn't immediately give in and do whatever the thieves demanded, even if her whole reason for existing was to serve Prey. If she folded and lowered the null-barrier, not only would the thieves escape, refill their magic reserves, and immediately attack, but they'd also realise how valuable of a card Prey was to hold. They'd know they could demand anything from Lemon. There would be no way the thieves would release Prey after that, even if they hadn't already made their plans of destroying Lemon Pink abundantly clear.

No, they wouldn't let Prey go afterwards either. They'd execute him before Lemon Pink's body had even stopped twitching. There was no means of forcing them to keep their word later if Lemon Pink folded now. And then there was the hate. You couldn't forget the hate. It wasn't the sort you could just move on from.

The thieves hated Lemon Pink. In their eyes, she was the cause of the deaths of so many of their order. They didn't have a clue that the lamb they now held captive was the one really in charge, not Lemon.

But even without them knowing that, there was obviously no way they'd let Prey go. If they did, the veropede would just attack, and with their rapidly dwindling magic, they wouldn't be able to win.

Unless, of course, they could get Lemon to lower the barrier. Thus, the thieves were tied into not accepting any deal which didn't involve the null-barrier getting turned off.

They were trapped inside here, but so was Prey.

But so was the veropede.

But Lemon was the only one who could let them out.

But she wouldn't.

But they wouldn't release Prey if she didn't.

But they wouldn't keep their word even if she did.

But she couldn't let Prey die either.

"The way I see it, even if the barrier goes, we've no reason to release your foal, because the moment we do you'll just stab us in the back with your Nightmare conceived centipede abomination." The thief leader paused, breathing heavily.

Prey stilled his struggling for a moment. What was he going to say?

"So for us to even consider any deal where you don't betray us immediately like the liar you are, first the veropede has to go."

"Impossible. It cannot leave the barrier, same as you." Lemon refused.

"Let me rephrase that. 'Kill your veropede'."

"What?"

Lemon wasn't alone, 'What?' Prey echoed, although he could not speak.

"Kill it. We refuse to negotiate while you hold a knife to our throats. So kill it, destroy it. Then we'll talk." The unicorn demanded.

"No. Why on Equus would I even consider that?" Lemon Pink projected abject disbelief.

"You'll do more than consider it if you want your foal back safe and sound. The veropede has to go for either of us to have any chance of reaching a compromise."

"No. Have you forgotten who holds the power here-?"

"And it is not you. Your foal is in our power. It's *you* who's forgotten. You made a mistake trying to trap us like animals. There's nothing more dangerous than a cornered animal."

"If my foal dies, so do all of you. In fact, why don't I have my veropede start to kill you one by one until it's just you left? A life for a life, one for one. That'll be more fair."

"Come and try it!" One of the thieves yelled, but it was the leader who answered Lemon, cutting her threat off cold.

"If you want to make threats, so be it. Here is my threat; do that, and your foal loses a leg. Or maybe an eye. Or their tongue. Or how about one of these long ears?"

Prey squeezed his eyes shut as the unicorn's aura levitated his right ear up.

"You wouldn't." Lemon stated.

"You think not?"

"You wouldn't." Lemon reasserted.

"It would only be justice."

"You still wouldn't."

"Try me. You choose, your monster, or your child."

Prey was ninety-nine percent certain the unicorn meant it. "Choose" he was saying. Prey or the veropede.

That wasn't even a choice. There was nothing Prey wouldn't do to survive. Prey had bought this veropede in blood and guilt, much like Crimson had bought the powers of his jade necklace before it'd

been stolen. These thieves had already stolen his first veropede, invading his base and killing it, and now they wanted to kill the second.

'No one steals from me.'

Prey kept telling himself that, but it was just a lie. Wishful thinking. He didn't have the strength to back up his claim. He was weak, and the strong take from the weak.

The thieves had stolen from him, and they were going to continue stealing from him. Ruin had stolen Prey's brother, Breaker. Captain Valour had stolen his hope of escape. Luna had stolen his freedom. All of them had stolen from him, and he'd never succeeded in taking anything back from any of them.

"No one steals from me?" What a ***joke***.

There was a long silence from Lemon Pink. Prey's head was swimming. Was it just the blood from being held upside down or was it the lack of breathable air adding up? What was Lemon doing? She knew there was no choice here.

"I cannot." Lemon stated.

Prey's eyes shot open. No. Nonono, what was she doing? She *couldn't*!

"Then your foal dies." The leader replied simply.

"No, stop! I cannot just kill my veropede. How would I even do that?"

"Stop lying. Warlock's like you are all the same. You never trust anything you can't control. You must've cast a self destruct on that monster just in case you lost control." The unicorn retorted with pure disgust.

Prey had put that rune on Lemon Pink's neck himself, just in case.

But there was nothing like that on the veropede, because if it came down to it, Prey and Lemon Pink had access to the veropede's mind.

It was bound to them through blood magic. What comes from you belongs to you. Lemon Pink wasn't bluffing.

"There is no spell like that. I cannot just kill it with a mere command, it's not possible." Lemon said.

"You think you're so clever? Fine, we'll pretend and play along. Have your monster swallow this then, and it'll do the job."

Prey couldn't turn his head to see what the leader was holding, but his mind flashed to that artifact they'd used to blow up his crystal cave underneath Canterlot Mountain. Anger boiled up in Prey, but it guttered into ash just as quickly as it rose. These people would kill him if he didn't kill his veropede. Not in the future, not soon, but *right now*! They would kill him right now unless he gave into their demands.

His veropede. He'd spent so much time and effort to preserve its life. But Prey had to survive.

All tools are discardable, that's what made them tools in the first place. The veropede wasn't a person, it was just a thing, a weapon, not even a pet. There couldn't even be a comparison.

'...Come. Here. Rest and food here. Come.'

The veropede turned its spined length around, peering with an eyeless sack covered head. It started scuttling forwards in the near dark, remaining antenna questing out ahead.

Seeing it move, Lemon Pink speedily spoke to confirm Prey's decision, as if she were actually the one controlling it. She spoke coldly, with the tone of someone reluctantly compromising for something they didn't think was worth it:

"Do not think this means you've won. I'm only doing this to get P-my child back. You're still trapped inside my barrier. If you want to get out alive, you'll have to take my deal."

The aura holding Prey up was starting to stutter more and more. It was getting hard to breathe. Tersely, the leader shot back, "Don't delude yourself. You'll take *our* deal."

The thieves all tensed up as the veropede came closer, "Uh, I don't think-"

"That's far enough. Have your beast stop or else."

The veropede stopped. An object was thrown past Prey. It thunked heavily of the stony ground in the dark.

"Eat that. Make it eat that right now. I'm warning you." Their lead ordered, breathing heavily. His telekinetic grip was starting to jerk Prey erratically around.

The moment Prey had learnt the thieves had some sort of self-destruct on their artifacts, he'd known he had to stop the veropede from consuming any of the thieves. But now they meant to force feed it a bomb of some kind. Prey's runes couldn't protect it from the inside out.

'I'm going to kill you. You're going to die and it's going to be me killing you.' Prey silently promised. His head was pounding, his eyes swimming, the thin air just wasn't enough. Oh wait no, those were just unshed tears of helpless frustration.

"Sir, your magic-" The cloaked thief started.

"I know." He snapped back, then shouted again at Lemon Pink, "Stop stalling! Have it eat that, or else."

Prey could only watch as a hooked antenna slowly reached out and picked up the object. It looked like a ruby encrusted sphere.

Clumsily, the veropede passed the ruby sphere beneath the obscuring sackcloth.

'You've stolen from me. I'll make you pay.'

CrumP The verpede's huge frame jerked violently.

It twisted back on itself, antenna thrashing. There was something wrong halfway down its throat. It reared up, a horrible hiss splitting the night, and out of its maw, thick, stinking smoke poured, even blacker than the night. The veropede slammed itself into the

ground, then whipped around and smashed into a boulder. The boulder cracked and the earth shuddered. Its mandibles tore of hunks of stone, it was frantic, thrashing and flailing, antenna wildly whipping.

It reared up even higher, head straight back, spewing more smoke. It screamed, a twisting grinding hiss, then it fell over.

Prey watched his weapon's death.

The veropede didn't die just then though, death is rarely instant or clean. It shrieked again, lying prone on the earth, spitting stinking acidic smoke, it's whole length shuddering. It's legs began to curl up. Another hiss. It twitched. It twitched some more. It kept twitching and shuddering for an interminably long minute.

Cough "Finally." Azurite spat, glaring and panting. He was sweating now too.

Prey struggled upside down in the unicorn's aura, but it still wasn't weak enough to break free from. His weapon, his mage killer, was gone. No weapons or tools left, he was trapped inside his own trap now.

Prey managed a strangled sound, but he couldn't talk. The unicorn's telekinetic grip was holding him rigid and immobile, including his jaw.

How was he going to get out of this?

'I don't have a plan. There's nothing. I have nothing. Nothing.'

Prey had come to this fight knowing he could die. You couldn't hold back in the hunt, you had to go into every fight giving it your all. But now he'd lost. The thieves had captured him.

But give up? Never. Never never never ever. Survive, live, do whatever you have to. But Prey couldn't even beg, because he couldn't talk. He was powerless in the unicorn's grip. Prey hated magic. He loathed its touch with every fibre of his being. Giant corpse maggots crawling across his whole body looking for an open wound would've been preferable to this magic prison.

Lemon Pink's voice came through the barrier, cold and angry, "There. You've had your show of trust, now it's my turn. Release the child."

"Not a chance, *witch*. Not until your barrier is gone."

"And what assurance do I have that you'll release her once it's gone? One of you will have to stay behind in my power if you want an exchange."

"I'll say it again, not a chance. *Pant* You'll get none of us. Now lower your barrier."

"No. Not unless you can provide me assurance you'll release hi-her. I want at least one of you as insurance."

"I want doesn't get. You can have my word and nothing more."

"That's not nearly enough. You will just lie."

"You're a traitor to Celestia, a betrayer. Out of the two of us, it's only my word which is worth anything. Take it or leave it. Now lower the barrier, or else." The thief leader challenged, laying out his ultimatum.

There was a silence. A long silence. Then Lemon Pink answered:

"...No. You will simply kill P-her once you are free. So you will simply stay trapped in there until you can provide me with the assurance I want."

Prey so desperately wished he could speak with Lemon, so he could know what she was trying to do and instruct her what to say. She'd made so many mistakes already. Prey would die if she made another one right here. If nothing else, if she carried through on her threat and left them in here, they'd still run out of clean air and die.

"Fine."

The magic holding Prey paralyzed winked out. Prey gasped and fell, suddenly able to open his mouth. He only just managed to cover his head and curl in. Prey hit the stony ground on his back. What little,

weak breath he had fled. He panted, not able to get enough stale air, but immediately tried to scramble to his hooves anyway. If he could just touch one of the other thieves-

Telekinesis violently yanked his rear hooves out from under him. Prey hit the hard ground again on his front. His wool did nothing to soften the impact.

Then the aura let go again and a strong hoof drove down into the middle of his back.

For the third time, the dirt pressed up against Prey's face. Stone chips dug into his cheek. He gasped, the hard horseshoe digging into the ridges of whip scar tissue, but that pain was secondary to trying to breathe. The air was so thin, his chest was heaving, but getting crushed into the ground, he could only half fill his lungs.

He was a runt. They were full grown adults. They didn't need magic to keep him physically immobilized.

" 'et me go." Prey wheezed weakly. He was ignored.

Prey tried to push up, trying to get more room to breathe. He may as well have been trying to push a tree off his back. In his armour, the leader's hoof was as steady as a rock. He didn't even seem to feel Prey's efforts as he spoke back to Lemon:

"Fine. That's fine. Waiting here until morning is completely fine by me. You think we need our magic? I can crush your foal at any time with my bare hooves, no matter how repugnant the idea is. **Cough** Now that your monster's gone, you have nothing left to threaten us with in here. **Gasp** We can out wait you. **Cough** When the sunrise comes, ponies will see us down here and come to help."

The hoof driving into Prey's back pressed down harder, probably without the leader even meaning to, the magical armour distorting their perception of their own strength. Prey struggled, but even if he could touch the unicorn, the invincible armour's shield would again protect him.

"Hear that, *witch*? We will outwait you! And if you try and run away

right now, your foal's life is forfeit. Hear me?! *_Pant_* If you don't stay until morning, and don't surrender yourself, your foal dies."

The thieves leader was using his first hostage, Prey, to make a second hostage out of Lemon Pink. How quickly the tables can turn. The sheer audacity and iron confidence needed to make such a threat when under this pressure was stunning. But the thieves were operating under one big misconception.

"That's where you are wrong..." Lemon's voice came, "...You do not have the time to outwait me."

" 'no." Prey tried to gasp out. 'Don't tell them!'

"Your air will run out long before morning comes. That is why you'll make a deal with me, or you will all die. "

The thieves, all of them, they each instinctively stopped breathing for a moment as Lemon's words hit them. All that coughing and wheezing, it was only now that they realised what it meant.

"She *didn't*." The Sierra pony whispered in fury.

"Going to suffocate us?" Azurite echoed.

Prey struggled uselessly, cold dirt grinding into his cheek. He was unable to see their reactions, only hear. 'That *idiot*. Why'd she go and give it away?'

"What-I,-what do we do? What *can* we do?"

"I'm not dying like that. No way. No way."

"Noponies dying like that," The leader cut in, having regained his voice. Now he was even more angry, "Not unless this witch is also prepared to smother their dear adopted daughter along with us."

"Which is why you will make a deal with me." Lemon broke in, projected voice coming to each one of them.

"I wouldn't trust you to keep your word if my life depended on it." The leader spat back, "And it does. You are a liar through and

through. Nothing has changed. You will never let us go if we don't hold your foal. *_Cough_* Therefore, I now know I can *never* let your foal go."

"But, how are we going to escape?" Azurite asked, voice trying to be brave, but the lack of air made it sound hoarse and afraid. No, he *was* afraid.

"You won't. Not if you don't take my deal. You'll die." Lemon's voice hissed, finally cracking and giving into anger.

"Sir? How...?" Sierra's voice trailed off, asking for reassurance.

"Do you all trust me?" The leader asked from above Prey, still pinning the runt to the earth.

There was almost no hesitation, "With my life. You've saved me more times than I can count." Sierra answered.

"Me too. I promised- *_Cough_* To Tartarus and back." Azurite echoed.

"To- *_Pant_* To the end, whenever or wherever that may be." The last thief answered, wheezing breathlessly.

"Thank you. I hold your trust most precious. If we get out of this...But now isn't the time. If we give that hateful witch back her foal, she'll never lower the barrier. But if we keep her-"

"-Then if the barrier stays up, *_Pant_*, and we suffocate, *_Cough_*, but so does her foal." Sierra finished in understanding.

Prey didn't have any breath left to swear. 'Why why why *why*?'

"It's a game of chicken. Whoever breaks first, loses. We've no choice but *_Cough_* to hold out."

"No!" Lemon's voice burst in, "I will let you go, I promise. You can have me instead."

"Lower the barrier. That's the deal." The leader ordered, unflinching.

Lemon Pink seethed, "That isn't a deal! You will just kill us both the moment I do. I will come inside the barrier if you let P- I mean, let the lamb go. You can have me instead."

That was a good bargain, surely the thieves wouldn't refuse when they were all about to suffocate-

"You're lying," The leader responded with complete conviction, "Lower the barrier."

Turn off the null barrier and they'd kill Prey. Leave it up, and he'd suffocate. Guaranteed death either way. It was getting harder to breathe by the second.

"But you'll all die! Don't you understand?" Lemon hissed.

"We understand completely. But, **Pant** for **Pant** Celestia and Equestria, **Cough** we are all willing to make the ultimate sacrifice."

What could you do in the face of such suicidal zealotry? When someone is prepared to die right here and now, not at some vague undefined point in the future, but with death staring them in the face, how can you possibly change their mind?

You can't.

There was nothing left for Lemon or Prey to threaten them with.

The last four surviving thieves were willing to die rather than give in.

Prey was not willing to die just to kill them. He was not willing to die for anyone or anything. He pushed as hard as he could against the ground, muscles rubbery with the lack of oxygen. His head pounded with black spots. He strained and kicked. The hoof digging into his back was immovable.

The strain proved to be too much. The muscles along his arched back gave up and cramped. "Gak!"

Prey collapsed under the leader's hoof. His back was being screwed

up, like the muscles had been stabbed with a pitchfork and the fork was now being twisted around and around. He couldn't get enough air. 'Why now? Why? Just *why*?!'

Dirt ground into his cheek. Prey stared sideways at the night, eyes wide. He couldn't get enough air to breathe, let alone make sounds of pain. He was hyperventilating uselessly, there just wasn't enough air. He was getting dirt in his mouth, trying to pant.

There was a roaring in his ears. His back was rippling with fire. The thieves' voices were muffled. They were talking, also panting and wheezing. They were too far away to hear.

His lungs and his back were on fire.

'You're going to pass out. Stop gasping, breathe slowly. You can't pass out here.'

But he couldn't stop. Pain was pain. When you're in pain, making the pain stop comes before everything else.

His lungs were hurting so badly now, rapidly growing worse, drowning out the muscles cramping under the thief's cruel hoof.

'Stop gasping. Stop gasping, stop *stop stop*.'

Black. Prey opened his eyes. The first thing to strike his senses was stale, foul air filling his nose and lungs. His back arched fiercely, but the cramps had stopped.

'I blacked out. How long? A few seconds? A minute?'

It couldn't have been longer than that, since he'd woken up. The air was running out too fast.

'I almost died.'

He was still going to die. With great effort, Prey raised his head off the dirt enough to turn his protesting neck and look.

He saw the other three thieves, Sierra, Azurite, and the last unnamed one. They were all laying down on the ground, heads drooping, breathing heavily. Prey didn't know what'd been said, but they were obviously trying to preserve their remaining strength.

The leader? He was still standing over Prey, pinning him like a bug to the earth. He was swaying, also breathing hard, but his strength was still far greater than Prey's.

Lemon's voice was still coming through the barrier, trying to make the thieves see sense: "Your deaths will accomplish nothing. Surely you can't be serious, think of how much you each have left to live for. Families, a lover you always meant to go back to, children? What about your parents? Grandparents? Did you ever say goodbye? Siblings even? Think about all those who need you."

Lemon Pink's entreaties were being stoically ignored. The thieves had set their course unwaveringly.

'She'll lower the barrier, right? Drop it at the last possible second once everyone's fallen unconscious from the lack of oxygen. She can't have not thought of that.'

"What will your deaths accomplish? Your Order will die here with you, and I'll still be free and alive. There'll be no one to stop me going on a killing spree of revenge. If you die here, I'll kill a hundred people for each one of you. Poison, bone rot, blood magic, kindersnatches! I'll kill scores of ponies before anyone stops me." Lemon Pink threatened.

Finally that was enough to get a reaction, but not the one Prey or Lemon wanted, "You're only, **Gasp** proving that, you cannot, **Gasp** ever be allowed to go free. **Cough** This must be done."

Lemon's threat hadn't worked. It had done the exact opposite of work, only reinforcing the thieves' resolve. Prey weakly struggled under the hoof, but he didn't have any strength. He felt sick to his stomach. He was light headed, but conversely his head was also

pounding.

Bitter spite. That is what Prey felt. What did his thoughts turn to as he lay slowly choking?

Hate.

Hate. Fear.

Hate hate hate. And fear. And hate. And *fear*.

It always came back to hate and fear in the end. If someone sunk deep enough into hate, they'd discover a truth. That there isn't a bottom. There was always space for that extra little bit of suffering and hate in the world.

Hate at life for being so uncaringly unfair. Hate for himself for being a weak runt. Hate at Lemon Pink for not saving him. Hate for the now dead diamond dogs. Hate for Luna trapping him here in Canterlot. And most of all, hate for these thieves.

The hoof crushed him into the dirt. With great difficulty, Prey painfully twisted his leg around behind his back and tried to touch the leader's hoof again. To break, to mind kill the hated one who'd done this to him.

The slippery, immovable aura of the armour stopped him again. Prey slumped, utterly spent. He couldn't find any strength, and the stale, bad tasting air was so thin. Paper thin. Trying to breathe the paper. The pounding in his head was getting worse.

'Hate you. Hate you. Hate you. Hate you. Hate you. Hate you.'

Would it be so bad to give in? He was dying.

'I don't wanna' die. No. Please no.'

He could do it. With his death, he could do it. Make them pay. Make them all pay.

'Hate you, hate you, hate you, hate you, hate you, hate you.'

Prey knew how. He could tear a hole. He'd seen it. He'd always been carrying the necessary piece in his head, hadn't he? If not for this, to make everything pay, then what for?

But... 'No, never, no no no. Not me. Please not me.'

His extremities were tingling, going numb. His ears felt freezing cold, but his lungs burned with a fire.

Garrow whispered, 'Would be so easy, yez'? No reason not to. Easy. Easy-peazy-heart blood-squeezy.'

Prey tried to tell him to go away. His face was freezing, his heart racing away. Was the leader still pinning him down? He didn't have the strength to move to check.

Of course, Snake had to slither out of his mind to say his piece too. Or was it actually just Prey himself thinking it, and not the old voodoo witch?

'Your pitiful life means nothing. Good, bad, these are only concepts. They have no power. Only nature will endure. Centuries after the mud has reclaimed your bones, the Deeper Green will still stand.'

Was there any reason not to? Drain his ocean, break the rusty cage, and let them out to eat? Starving, ravenous hunger.

'But I'll die. And I don't want to die. Hate them. Hate you. Hate you hate you hate you hate you.'

Prey's list still had names on it that needed crossing out. Circled in red and underlined. Who was going to do it, if not him?

In the end, it all came back down to hatred. Pure, petty, and simple. Hate.

You hate what you fear. And by everything dark and unholy under the Wolfing Wood, did Prey *hate* the idea of dying.

The rituals, the curses, the lich's mirror. All committed in the pursuit of survival.

Prey blinked fuzzily. He was gasping continuously, but it wasn't doing anything anymore. So he stopped. He blinked again, scared to close his eyes because his body was telling him to. His ear was half flopped over his face as he lay there. Vaguely, he saw blue.

What was...? Oh, right. His ribbon.

His... ribbon. His little joke on the whole world.

It wasn't such a little joke anymore. Its glossy silk surface reflected black in the night, the end lying an inch from the end of his nose. Prey fancied he could see his own wide eyes reflecting back in the dark silken sheen. It quivered each time he exhaled.

Why hadn't he used the ribbon?

Oh, he remembered now. Because of the unicorn's stupid, unfair armour.

That Indestructible magical armour. No match against thin thin *thin* air.

Prey's lungs were shrivelled up. His head pounded with blackness. It wouldn't be long now.

Were the thieves already dead? Unconscious? Lemon Pink wasn't going to be able to lower the barrier in time, was she? The window was too small. Prey was scared.

The ribbon stopped quivering.

Prey didn't close his eyes. He was afraid of what might be hiding in the dark.

---<O>---

There was a memory, remembered forwards, instead of backwards. It didn't fit with Prey.

A button eye, forever staring at nothing. Stuffing pulled wide at the stitches, letting the straw spill out and the blackness contained within gape wide from between the threads.

Now why was that familiar?...

It didn't matter anymore, not now. Gossamer was long dead, led to his death and killed by Prey in his own cleverness.
How pathetic.

---<O>---

'I hate.....'

I fear.....

[End of Arc 4]

Author's Notes:

Well, finally got to the end of this ARC. There ended up being quite a lot of problems with the editing so bi thank you to: Sweetolebob18

As always, if you noticed any silly mistakes, please let me know so I can fix them, thanks. [image]

66.5 The Finish Line has been Extended?

[Start of Arc 5]

In the end, it wasn't Lemon Pink lowering the barrier in time, because she didn't. It wasn't the veropede resurging, because it was well and truly dead this time. It wasn't a secret runic contingency built into the array, because there hadn't been time to include one.

No, in the end, it was just the Jaw of Hearts in Prey's chest, that misappropriated torture device, which forced his heart to keep beating.

In the end, it wasn't the end.

Burning. His lungs were burning. A weight, pressing down on his face and over his mouth.

His chest violently contracted, and Prey gasped, or would've gasped if something wasn't blocking his airway. He flailed, trying to break free, limbs full of dreadful pins and needles.

"Prey!"

Lemon Pink pulled free of his face and suddenly Prey could cough.

And cough he did, unable to breathe but trying to drag air down into his burning lungs in gulps just as desperate as his hacking cough was.

Prey tried to sick up his stomach, but he'd already done that earlier, and there was nothing left. He hacked and coughed, lungs burning and his whole body wracked with leaden pins and needles. Lemon was helping him to sit up, he despised her touch fiercely, but that was hardly his focus at the moment.

He could breathe again. He was alive. Alive! His body hurt, especially his extremities, like his hooves and the ends of his ears, which hurt worst of all. It wasn't normal pins and needles, it *hurt*. Like raw frostbite.

Prey's eyes streamed. He gagged and coughed again, and just tried to focus on getting down as much air as he could to stop his lungs from deciding he was a poor landlord and that they should move out.

"You were dead, Prey." Lemon Pink said from somewhere next to him, he hadn't cleared his eyes enough to pinpoint *where* exactly yet. Lemon sounded shaken, or maybe unhinged.

"Wha'?" Prey coughed.

"You should've been dead, but your heart kept beating. I didn't need to restart it, I just-I just kept providing air and breathing for you, with CPR I mean, so your heart could pump it around."

It took a moment for Prey's sluggish mind to put together what Lemon's words meant. The pain in his lower legs were growing worse as fully oxygenated blood began circulating through what had been, for a minute, dead flesh. His whole face also felt swollen and tender, like he was sitting too close to a blazing fire.

"Oh. Right." Prey wheezed. He clumsily lifted a foreleg to try and wipe at his steaming eyes. He missed and clocked himself in the cheek instead. Prey realised he had one of Lemon Pink's long mane hairs in his mouth. He began trying to spit it out.

'You don't exactly have time to tie back your mane when trying to perform CPR. But hey, if I ever had to do CPR, I'd have to worry about where my ears are swinging instead.' Prey thought. He didn't have the breath to giggle.

He finally managed to get one shaking foreleg up and wipe his eyes clear, although the action itself just made his eyes start watering again. His whole body felt like it was a bruise.

"Prey?" Lemon repeated.

"Sorry, what?" Prey asked, voice a hoarse croak.

"I need to go make sure the thieves are truly dead. Should I do that, or should I carry you and run, Prey?"

"They-? Leave me. Go make sure." Prey hastily wheezed.

Lemon removed her hoof from Prey's back, and when he didn't immediately fall over, even if he did slump forwards, she seemed to take that as a good sign. She reached into the hidden pocket under her cloak, and pulled out her knife with her teeth.

Trying to ignore the savage pricking of the pins and needles, Prey realised they were right in the middle of the deactivated runic array area, with the last four thieves lying where they'd collapsed when the air ran out.

'Enough ambient magic hasn't seeped back into the area yet.' That explained why Lemon wasn't levitating her knife instead.

Prey painfully looked about in the dark. Around him, there were blackened patches from fire and lightning scarring the rocks. Twenty paces over that way, he could just make out the reflection of moonlight off where the puddle of spent bone rot. And over there was the huge block of ice spikes, slowly melting. Blood smears on stone.

And there lay the curled up body of the veropede. His veropede. His tool, his weapon, his greatest achievement, to date. His failure. Dozens of lives and countless hours of effort. And it had been stolen from him. Prey couldn't see the details in the dark. His jaw clenched as he looked at the unmoving mounds of dully gleaming carapace.

Just to be sure, Prey tried to reach out over the blood link and connect to its mind, 'Come. Food.'

But there was nothing from the veropede.

Prey looked away from the huge corpse, and to Lemon Pink instead as he saw her leaning over one of the bodies on the ground. She had one foreleg pulling the pony's chin up, and was bracing their neck from behind with her own body. She flicked her mane to the side,

then with the knife still in her teeth, (since it was a knife designed for use by unicorns and thus didn't have a hoof loop), jammed the blade up to the hilt in their jugular.

There was no gush of blood. It still flowed out, but it didn't spray out. There was no heartbeat to pump the blood. The pony was already dead.

Fortunate, or Lemon would've gotten blood sprayed all across the muzzle. Not that it would've deterred her from doing what was necessary. Prey neither. He'd plunged up to his shoulders in steaming guts and intestines before.

Prey watched, never looking away as Lemon Pink went around to the other three bodies and repeated the procedure. All were already dead. Lemon still ended up with blood sluggishly dripping down the side of her face.

When she came to the thief leader, his armour didn't activate. No invincible golden shield sprang forth to stop Lemon's knife, proving he was well and truly dead before she even struck.

Prey's lips warped up into an unhappy smile. Finally, he was satisfied. Not *happy*, only hatefully satisfied.

The diamond dogs hadn't deserved their deaths, but the thieves all had, down to the very last one of the accursed, arrogant, deluded, selfish, greedy, harmony blessed unicorns.

Prey winced as his legs really started to sting something fierce. He bit down the whimper. But the pain was a reminder that he was alive. Still alive even after his own trap had been turned against him. When the thieves had somehow captured him, he'd been terrified. He'd been helpless, once again bound and controlled by someone else's magic, all his choices, all his freedom rendered void by the grip of magic. How Prey hated unicorns and their magic. And feared. He'd been so scared.

He'd cried. He'd trembled. He would've begged if he'd had enough breath at the time. He'd been afraid. Despite all his preparations and all his rune work, in the end, the thieves had still gotten around

his null-barrier and ensnared him.

Prey refused to think about exactly *how* they'd captured him, about that moment of being pulled through an in-between world of cloth. It was dangerous to even remember those things, because what if those things were remembering him too and noticed?

Prey didn't even know how to be scared enough of what he'd seen in that moment. The horror was just too disconnected from the real world.

He wasn't even sure how much of that experience had been real. He had reason to doubt his own eidetic memory in this.

Prey jerked up as straight as a ruler. Lemon Pink immediately dropped the cloak edge she'd been using to clean her knife and face.

"What is it, Prey?" The pink fur on the side of her face was ruffled and still smeared with blood.

"The pincushion, from Selenia. Where? Find it now." Prey croaked, casting around on the ground for it.

Where had it gone? He couldn't see the small cloth ball anywhere in the dark. It had to be here somewhere. That artifact had been the thing to drag him through his own null barrier. Prey *had* to find it.

Lemon closed her eyes in concentration. It obviously took some effort, but with the focus the electrite choker provided, she still managed to cast the spell, and a white globe of magic light flickered into existence above her sharp horn.

The ambient mana must slowly be returning to the area. But not enough of it, and not fast enough, apparently.

The white light sputtered, winked out, came back, and then vanished for good.

"It's no good. There isn't enough magic, Prey." Lemon apologised.

"Forget the light. We have to find that pincushion." Prey coughed, waving his hoof. He had to have it, because he was too scared to

leave something like that lying around.

The rest of the thieves' artifacts were secondary. If any of them had even survived. The thieves had all but outright stated he'd never steal their various artifacts because of the self-destructs they'd placed on the items. But if not, then there was a veritable treasure trove lying around here valuable enough to make any mage tower drool. He hadn't seen any evidence of Crimson's jade necklace among them. However, if he couldn't recover Selenia's pincushion-

Prey took a few deep breaths of air. How sweet it was, to be able to breathe air. He was still alive. The leader of the thieves had thought Prey would die with them. And Prey had died, his lungs had stopped, but his cursed heart hadn't been able to. And now he was alive.

Everything comes at a price though. Time, blood, tears, pain, sacrifice, fear, near death, and the lives of others exchanged for his own.

Prey had heard people say victory is sweet. Liars.

Often, the only prize for victory was being able to limp away afterwards.

Lemon Pink was carefully sweeping the ground in the dark, casting about for the pincushion. The ground was uneven and stony, but Lemon's search was methodical. Where had it been last? The pony with the phasing chestplate, Sierra, he'd been the one to use the strange pincushion. But where'd it gone after that? Prey hadn't seen, he'd been a bit preoccupied at the time.

Prey's ears were good, better than his lightly damaged eyesight for sure, especially in the dark of night.

His ear twitched, 'What's that?'

With effort, Prey shifted to look up into the night. High, high up on the mountain side, the huge city of Canterlot glowed, warm and bright against the dark, like a giant golden bauble. Prey's eyes searched the star speckled night sky vain. He could hear, but not

see, the approaching flap of large wings. Not feathered, he knew what those sounded like. These sounded more leathery, like skin.

Exactly like a thestral.

"Prey?"

He heard Gloom before he saw him.

The thestral swooped out of the dark, splaying his wings to land about ten paces away from where Prey was seated. Gloom stared at Prey, and past him at the sight of the battlefield.

"Gloom." Prey stared back, somehow not even surprised. He was drained past caring. If something further could go wrong tonight, *of course* it would go wrong.

"Prey, I have found..." Lemon Pink came to a halt, the small rag bundle of the pincushion wrapped in a crook of her cloak. Her purple eyes blinked slowly at Gloom, then at Prey. There was still dark blood matting the fur on one side of her face.

"...Oh."

The three of them formed a rough triangle, Prey sitting upright on the ground, Lemon and Gloom standing. The chill quiet of the night held its breath and waited.

"What happened here Prey?" Gloom asked, uncertain even as he stared past him at what was clearly laid out. Prey knew the thestral's slit gaze could easily see it all in the dark. The blood, the bodies, and the dead veropede.

"What are you doing here?" Prey asked in return. Gloom was outside of his perception range, he didn't know what the thestral was thinking.

Gloom answered seemingly automatically, still staring, "I was just out for a night flight. I was flying, and then I just felt I should fly lower. And then I came this way. And now I'm here."

'Of course. His cutie mark just *had* to meddle.' Prey thought.

Gloom's wings and ears were holding very still from what he could see of them. No visual cues. This night just kept getting better and better.

Lemon Pink very subtly tilted her head Prey's direction, signalling with her eyes. Prey twitched his hoof in the manner to signal a negative.

"What happened here Prey? Those are dead bodies."

"That wasn't a question."

"No, it wasn't. Those are dead ponies. And, whatever the Tartaras that thing is. It looks... like what Crimson described ate the reaper king in the end." Gloom nodded at what remained of Prey's destroyed tool. He didn't take a hoof off the ground to point with though.

'In case he needs to react fast.'

"Yes. A veropede. Dead now." Prey didn't expand any further, just sitting slumped there.

"Prey, what happened here?" Gloom asked for the third time.

"I think you already know what happened." Prey said, looking at a point just above Gloom's head rather than his face.

"I don't want to jump to any conclusions." Gloom answered. Was that a quaver in his voice?

Prey sighed, far too world weary and tired for a lamb, "Come on Gloom, you know better than that. You can smell the blood. You can see just fine in the dark."

"I...Yes, I can see. But, you...I want to hear it from you. You're Prey. My subordinate. My friend. I know you, and I know what you're capable of. Or I thought I did, with the cellar, and the kindersnatches. But I still know you, you personally Prey. So I want to hear the explanation in your own words first."

Yes. There was a quaver indeed. It was the sound of

disappointment. 'No. You don't get to be disappointed in me.'

Prey still couldn't muster up the strength to look Gloom in the eyes, though, not even to defend himself; "This is really all just bad luck. I chose this place purposefully because no one ever comes here. No one else was supposed to come by but them, least of all you or Crimson. But I didn't account for a vague and arbitrary special talent, did I?"

"What happened here, Prey?" The fourth time.

Prey took a deep breath. How nice it was to breathe. "You have to be told? Then *be* told. Murder is what happened here. There were a whole pack of diamond dogs. Because of me, they're now all dead. Young, old, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. I killed them all. They did nothing wrong, but I still killed every last one of them. I used bone rot, I used traps, I used a monster. I murdered them all."

Prey couldn't help but see Gloom flinch, "Diamond dogs? What? Prey I, you-"

But he wasn't done, "I took everything from them. Their friends, their family, and finally their lives. I could argue it was Lemon Pink who first-No, it was me. It was me who murdered them for no good reason. And you know what? I did the exact same thing to the captured townsfolk of Alfalfa Dale too."

Gloom took an involuntary step backwards, "Impossible. What are you talking about?"

"That," Prey pointed wearily at the veropede's corpse, "I fed them to that. Hard Baked had them all captured and drugged inside a pit. It was guarded by kindersnatches. I needed flesh to feed the veropede so it could fight the reaper King. So I murdered them too. They were drugged, and going to die anyway, but I was the one who murdered them, not Hard Baked. I weighed all of their lives on a scale and found them not worth anything when compared to my own."

"And... what happened to these ponies?" Gloom asked, voice and posture strained.

Prey hissed, "Them? *They* were thieves. Zealots, or patriots I suppose. I lured them here, because they dared to fight against an evil like me, and then I trapped them. And killed them. I hate death. I hate pain. Do you want the specific details? I'll give them to you if you really want to know Gloom. But you know what?"

It wasn't a question, because Prey went on before Gloom had any chance to answer, "I don't care. I murdered them, and I don't care. They deserved it. I'm glad they're dead, and I'm not. I'd kill them again in a heartbeat if they were alive again. Heh, a trapped heartbeat, keh keh. Sorry, you wouldn't get-Never mind."

Prey coughed, then grinned sickly at Gloom, a real grin, the type he usually hid, "Look, forget them, they were just greedy arrogant unicorns who thought a few magical artifacts gave them the right to judge others. The diamond dogs and the townspeople, I murdered them. Them, and so many more, I couldn't even begin to tell you."

Prey couldn't see much of Gloom's face in the dark. What he could see was enough to get the picture. A painting made in strokes of revulsion, horror, but also a resigned sort of disappointed sorrow.

"I... can't believe it." Gloom muttered weakly, "I can't, you wouldn't... But I'm seeing it. I can't, I can't say it isn't so. I just don't, how does one even...? No words, Prey, no words. Where did you go so wrong? Where did I fail so badly?"

"You fail? You? This has nothing to do with you Gloom. I'm not some mistake someone else made, I made me! I'm Prey. I killed Gossamer, I took his place."

"You killed your own father too?" Gloom gaped, "What else have you-? No. No, don't tell me, I don't want... Just don't."

"Huh? No, Gossamer wasn't-No, you're misunderstanding, there wasn't... Actually, it doesn't really matter. What's one more sin on the pile? Yarn was a good father. A good father, but he made a poor husband. The worst. How *dare* he do that to Gossamer's mother-I should've, why I should've...!"

Prey gave up gesticulating and let his hooves go limp. He slumped.

He sniffed deeply and let his head loll backwards, tiredly regarding Gloom from under half lidded eyes. "You needed to be told? Well, there you go. Now you're told. That's what happened here. Premeditated murder, and lots of it."

Gloom himself looked even more tired. His shoulders drooped, his ears drooped, his head, wings, and tail all drooped too. He muttered something to himself, which Prey just caught with his sharp ears, "The flight is long, but the moon is bright. Luna guide my path tonight."

Gloom straightened up, "Come on Prey. We'll, we'll go straight to Princess Luna. You can make your confession to her."

Prey stiffened, "Are you insane? I'm not confessing anything to Luna."

Gloom sighed, "You'll have to, Prey. This isn't, you don't think I can ignore this, do you? I'll have to tell Her Majesty. You've told me, you can tell her too. It... won't be easy, but there's no hiding this Prey. No more lies. Just come clean. It won't make anything better, but... It's the right thing to do. Moon knows, there's nothing else right."

'He think's I'd ever throw myself on an *alicorn's* mercy?!'

"Luna has no right to judge me. She has no right to judge anyone considering what she is." Prey responded coolly.

"She's not Nightmare Moon Prey, she never was. You already know this." There was no anger in Gloom's voice, just exhaustion, and the longer this conversation went on, the more exhausted he was likely to become.

"I have my own opinion on that matter, but that's not what I meant. She's an alicorn. She's immortal. She has no idea what it's like to be a lesser being, to not be all powerful. She's had centuries to learn, what right does she have to judge anyone who's only had years? *None*."

"Her Majesty is still a pony Prey, exactly the same as me or y... She's

still a person. She understands far more than you know. She is a kind ruler, not some tyrant." Gloom asserted.

Prey gave up. What was the point? Gloom would never accept his words. Thestrals grew up their entire lives hearing stories of Luna, their Goddess of the Night, and how it was their duty to serve her so she never slipped up and made a mistake again. If they could see the whole Nightmare Moon incident as nothing more than a regrettable mistake, a mistake which could've killed the whole world, mind you but was still forgivable, how could Gloom ever agree with Prey?

'And, really, is that what I'm concerned about right now?' Prey thought. He was so utterly, utterly drained. He wanted to go back to the safety of his flat and sleep. He didn't want to think about this, about what he'd done, or about the look on Gloom's face.

'Why do I care so much? Gloom isn't Crimson. I don't owe Gloom. If anything, Gloom owes me. So why should I feel so angry at letting his expectations down? It's all been a lie and an act from the beginning anyway. Just another one of my masks.'

"Are you... going to come Prey? And you?" Gloom asked, his eyes flicking over towards Lemon Pink. He hadn't asked who she was, or why Prey was confessing all of this in the presence of a total stranger. Likely, he didn't want to know the details.

"Are you going to try and force me?" Prey asked back, as Lemon remained silent.

"You can't run Prey. Princess Luna will simply track you down if you do. Oh Luna, this is going to destroy Scenic and Crimson. How am I going to tell them?" Gloom mumbled wretchedly.

Prey blinked. 'Hasn't he even considered that I might kill him? He can't tell anyone if he's dead. Isn't he afraid? Does he think I can only fight through traps? Or just that I won't because I know him? I... don't actually know. Is that the truth?'

Prey wasn't sure, because he wasn't considering killing Gloom. He never had been. Prey folded his hooves, "No, I'm not coming."

This was all so surreal, so disconnected from any real consequences. It was also all pointless. Prey had known it was from the start. Gloom wouldn't choose him over doing what was right. Gloom had to believe there was justice, because if there wasn't any justice, then what was Gloom's purpose? He had to believe in justice, he had to believe in Luna, because he'd seen the unfairness of the world. The kindersnathes, the scarecrow, and the rats in the cellar.

Gloom was a Night Guard, a thestral. It was his duty, even if it hurt.

'Why did I even try to explain anything? I knew he wouldn't accept. I learnt that with that spineless therapist already.'

"Prey, there's no running from this. Come with me, I'll go with you. I know you hate being touched, so don't make me have to carry you. Please."

Prey looked away from Gloom, "Just get on with it please." He sighed.

Gloom jerked like he'd been shocked, then folded up silently on the ground, wings sprawling open in unconsciousness.

Lemon Pink stood there, her hoof still pressed to Gloom's shoulder, the illusionary veil now gone. Where she'd been previously standing, her illusionary double rippled and vanished.

It hadn't mattered what Prey had said, because Gloom had never been going to remember any of it. Over the course of the conversation, enough ambient magic had returned to the area for Lemon Pink to cast both an illusion of herself standing in place, and a veil as she crept forwards. Lemon stopped holding her breath and began panting, her mane sticking to her forehead.

Enough magic to cast didn't mean enough magic to cast easily. Lemon's own reserves were small enough to begin with, and she'd been casting plenty before when deceiving the now dead thieves. But still, she'd pulled it off undetected. Gloom had been completely focused on Prey anyways, which'd helped.

'Why'd you have to listen to your cutie mark tonight of all nights,

Gloom?' Prey silently asked himself.

A worthless question. Why did the wind blow? Why was his wool white? Where did magic come from?

"Selenia's Pincushion?" Prey asked Lemon Pink.

"I have it here," Lemon indicated a pocket under her cloak, "I will begin removing Gloom's memories."

"No, don't."

Lemon started, "Surely you cannot mean to-"

"I'll do it myself. I may as well. We need to clean up here and leave before morning. I'd meant for the veropede to eat the bodies after the fight, but now..." Prey sadly looked at the dead creature. "...Now we'll have to find a way to get rid of its body too."

"I see. Yes, Prey."

"Go check the bodies. See if you can recover any of their artifacts. Watch out for booby traps. I'll deal with Gloom." Painfully, Prey got to his hooves. He still felt like he was bruised all over, but the pins and needles in his blood were just a dull buzz by now.

"Yes, Prey." Lemon left Gloom and stared towards the nearest body, the corpse formerly known as Azurite. A pony who was now dead.

Prey sat down in front of Gloom's prone head. This close, Prey could see the scars under Gloom's closed eyes, even in the dark. There sat Gloom's clan earring, set in a familiar tufted ear. The thestral's brows were creased, even in unconsciousness.

'Don't worry. This won't even be a bad dream by the time I'm done. Just the sire of all headaches.' Prey thought. Carefully making sure his ribbon wasn't anywhere near trailing against Gloom as he leaned over, Prey focused his tired mind into sharpness and touched Gloom's forehead.

'I'm sorry about all this.'

Prey did not sleep that night, even though he and Lemon Pink limped back out of the tunnel and into Canterlot with two hours of restful darkness to spare.

Prey lay in his too large bed, staring up sightlessly at the ceiling. His ears were sprawled out on either side of the pillow. His ribbon was still on, it was always on, now. Prey felt too hot, but he still pulled the blankets close. And he stared at nothing.

He just couldn't close his eyes. He hurt, he was tired, his eyes itched, and his hooves ached, but he was unable to sleep. His mind wouldn't let him. It kept going over and over everything which'd gone wrong, all the mistakes he'd made:

He'd almost died. He'd stopped breathing. His last veropede was dead. The thieves and the diamond dogs were dead. Gloom had almost discovered him. He'd been captured. He'd choked and gasped for air. Disgusting hooves had been laid upon him, and even more disgusting magic had been used on him.

His heart was heavy. It shouldn't be, because he'd won. He'd been the only one to survive, and at the end of the day, that's all that mattered.

But his heart was still heavy with bitterness.

He'd dealt with Gloom, erasing the thestral's memories of what he'd seen tonight before sending him off. Prey had momentarily considered delving deeper into Gloom's mind, to see what secrets the Sargent might be keeping back, but he hadn't. He should've looked, but he hadn't.

Prey had been exceptionally careful with Gloom's mind, being as gentle as he could, but Gloom was still going to feel sick with a headache tomorrow morning. Or rather, *this* morning.

Also unfortunately, the thieves had been telling the truth about their artifacts. All the artifacts had all been enchanted in one way or another, (depending on the individual nature and properties of

the artifact), to break or self destruct.

Those kinds of enchantments weren't the sort that could've been mapped out or implemented on the fly. The thieves must've had those self destruct contingencies planned for a long time. Years.

Prey couldn't even ask one of the thieves about it anymore. They were all dead. The location of any other stashes of other artifacts, money, secrets, or most valuable, knowledge, had died along with them.

Prey would also never find out their deeper motivation for what they did, or where their Order of the Brotherhoof of Sol had sprung up from, or how long it'd existed, or if there were other members. All he had were a few physical descriptions, matching cutie marks, and a few of the names he'd overheard, such as Quarter Staff, Azurite, and Sierra, but that was it. He'd have to see what he could turn up. Assuming those were even their real names.

He'd likely never know. Death came, it took, and you were left forever without answers.

The thieves' bodies, along with the remains of his loyal veropede, were safely buried, locked away beneath the very ground where the battle had taken place. Prey'd had to cannibalise his nullification barrier array in a hugely inefficient and costly way to manage that. Lemon had nowhere near the kind of magic needed to pull it off, and he hadn't had the required hours to build an excavation array from scratch. Morning had been coming, and he'd had to rush.

'It's not like I was ever going to get a chance to use the null barrier again anyway, down there in the middle of nowhere.'

It was still a loss. *Another* loss, to be precise. In fact, the only thing he'd gotten out of this whole catastrophe was the pincushion. And even that was just so no one else could have it. All three pins were pushed in and the charges used up, and Prey didn't have the first clue about how to recharge it. He doubted it was as simple as just pulling the pins back out and supplying it with enough mana.

'Lemon saved my life again tonight. I should say thank you. And

find out what she's hiding.' He had time to focus on that now. But he didn't want to find out. It could wait, just a little while longer. Until he finally managed to drift off to sleep, at the least.

The thieves' were gone. Finally gone. He was alive, and Crimson was safe. Not that he would get to tell Crimson the danger had passed. He couldn't know. No one could know. This was a victory. Every loss, even his veropede, had been an acceptable loss, because he was still alive. But victory wasn't sweet.

Prey wasn't satisfied with this ending. He couldn't even know for sure if it *was* an ending.

'Tough. Life isn't fair. The world doesn't care. What's the life of one twisted little runt lamb in the scheme of the universe? Nothing.'

Prey wasn't satisfied, but it was an ending, although not the end, at least, not for him. For others, not just those Prey and Lemon Pink had killed tonight, it had been the end, but for thousands more, it was just one night among many, the setting of the moon, and the rising of the sun. Another start in the new story of a new day.

'I'm safe and still alive. Crimson is alive. The threat of the thieves is gone. There's nothing else pressing hanging over my head. So what should I do now? What precisely shall I do when I get up this morning? Or afternoon even?'

Wake up.

Stare at the empty ceiling.

Bright sunlight shone through the glass.

Prey kicked off his blanket and lay there for a while.

He should get up and get to work. Life hadn't stopped.

Runes weren't going to lay themselves. There was always work.

Down on the streets outside, Canterlot was already bustling. Busy ponies starting their day.

'I really, really, really, *really* hate Canterlot.' There was nothing for it. With a pained groan, Prey got up.

Prey went through the day in a sort of surreal haze. It was understandable. Just last night, he'd fought the thieves and their self proclaimed 'Brotherhoof' to the death in a final culmination of all his runic preparations and magic. But now it was over, just like that.

And, if he were lucky, no one else aside from Lemon would ever know what'd happened.

Gloom had seen, but he'd been dealt with.

His veropede had been lost, but Prey was still alive.

The thieves were gone, and he was safe.

The whole fight had happened right under Canterlot's nose, and no one had noticed.

He, Prey, had won. He was still alive.

Just like that. Finished and over. Oh there was still cleaning up and insurances to put into place, but the pressure, the constant looming threat in the back of Prey's head was over. 'Surreal' really was the only word to describe the feeling.

The unknown threat of the mimics, Strange Happenstance, and of course, Luna were still there. But Prey would deal with those tomorrow. Or later. Just not right now. Right now was a moment of blessed respite to recover. Surely it was owed to him just to take it easy for one day?

'I want some candy. I want some candy, and I want to speak to Crimson.'

Well, one of those was easy.

Prey chewed the liquorice, and decided he didn't like it. It wasn't *real* candy. He stuck his hoof into the paper bag and pulled out something brilliant orange, round, sticky, and crystalized in sugar. Much better. Now this was a *real* candy.

Prey decided he'd probably never get used to the concept of food you got to eat for pleasure. He'd been hungry too many times in his life to ever go for taste over availability, but sweets, cakes, pastries, chocolates, eclairs, tarts, jams, pies, candies, and the myriad multitude of other tasty indulgences Canterlot took for granted seemed to be everywhere. Every street had a bakery, an ice-cream parlour, milkshake stands, or a candy floss stall. Well, those streets which weren't in Upper Canterlot anyways.

Apparently, being upper class meant you weren't allowed to be seen indulging in public. You had to keep that for private.

Prey slowly crunched up the candy, savouring the bright sweetness of sugar. He hadn't had to venture far from the apartment block to find an appropriate candy store. He'd patiently ignored the vendor's surprise and his getting cooed over and called a filly, gotten himself a big bag of candy, and was now making his meandering way back to the flat.

His slow pace was mostly to do with still aching from basically suffocating last night. Imagine that. Near death experiences have a way of draining the whole body, not just affecting the muscles or organs you expected them to. He was honestly surprised with how everything else had gone wrong that he hadn't suffered brain damage.

But despite the approach of fall, the sun was warm on Prey's wool as he stuck to the edge of the paved sidewalks. One could hardly expect the ponies of Canterlot to have to put up with such things as 'normal weather', or 'seasonal changes' now, could you? Rot their overprivileged little hearts.

Prey bit down on the sweet, 'Arrogant and blinded by assumed privileges, down to the very last one of them.'

Prey climbed the stairs back up to his flat one at a time. It was time he checked in with Crimson. The pegasus was still recovering from his way over the top, off the record, training session.

'Hopefully, neither Scenic or Gloom, or that annoyance called Saffron, will think to do so before he's recovered enough to act normal.' Prey thought.

He should check on Lemon Pink too. She was also a person, even if she was his tool. She needed to sleep, eat, rest, and recover, the same as anyone else. But Prey knew Lemon's flat to be just as bare of comforts as his own.

Back before any of this mess had kicked off, so very long ago, Lemon had been going to procure herself a flat in this very apartment block, as per Prey's instructions.

What with one thing and another, it hadn't happened, but it wouldn't be hard to achieve.

All Lemon Pink had to do was get Cosy Holding, the landlord, alone and 'convince' him to provide her a flat, at a hefty discount too. There was nothing like a little abuse of mind magic for making someone see things your way.

'A perverse violation of a person's very being.'

That wouldn't stop Lemon from utilising it anyways to force Cosy Holding to kick out some other tenant if needed and provide her with their flat instead. Prey had been too soft in the past, and look where that had gotten him.

Now he could finally get back on track, along with starting up his other research plans again.

The candy soured on Prey's tongue as he climbed the apartment block's stairs. The thieves had collapsed his secret crystal cave lair. He hadn't even had a chance to go down there to see the remains for himself. There probably wasn't any point. He and Lemon Pink

would have to find somewhere new and start their exhausting rune work all over again. Or rather he would.

Hundreds of hours of work, gone. The loss stung bitterly. Not as much as the loss of his two veropedes, but it still stung.

Prey shut the front door and went down the corridor to knock on Crimson's own closed door.

"Crimson? It's me." Prey called out around his candy.

Prey waited. It took an entire two minutes before Crimson cautiously opened the door. When he saw it was just Prey alone, he opened it fully.

"Come in if you want." Crimson said without preamble, leaving the door open.

"I came by to check up on how you're mending. And change your bandages, if needed." Prey said, stepping inside.

"Ah. Thank you. Sorry about this, again."

Crimson was still a mess. The bruising along his jaw had turned a nasty yellow, he was limping heavily, one eye was swollen mostly shut, his wings were held awkwardly and loose at his sides, and that was to say nothing of all the bandages.

"Anytime. Although having said that, I would much prefer it if 'anytime' was never again. Regardless, I'd like to check on your stitches first." Prey said briskly, getting straight down to business.

"Right here?"

"Yes. Just lie down on your front, anywhere is fine. Actually, lying on a floor cushion would be better than-ah, never mind. You don't have any of those. Just on the floorboards then."

Stiffly, and slowly, Crimson lowered himself down, folding his legs painfully under himself. Prey moved around to his side, going to check the most serious hook puncture wound first. However he hesitated before moving in close enough to touch. He couldn't help

it. He hated physical contact.

"Right, so, just stay still again. Don't move."

"I won't. I know." Crimson assured him.

"Okay. Right. Don't move."

Prey carefully peeled back the bandage and padding to get a look at the stitching. He'd of course cleaned the surrounding fur of blood beforehoof, but the padding under the bandage was still stained. None of it was fresh though, which was good.

The stitches were still all in, which was also really good, as having to re-stitch a wound was no fun for anyone. There was some swelling, but that could mean nothing. He touched his fetlock to Crimson's flesh lightly, feeling for any excess heat. It felt relatively okay.

"Hmm. You've drunk plenty and haven't experienced any fever like symptoms, right?" Prey checked.

"Yes, and no. In that order." Crimson answered, not turning his head and staying still.

"And painwise?"

"It hurts a lot." Crimson said bluntly and honestly.

"I'll get you some more leaves for the pain in a second. I should've left some more with you before, sorry." Prey apologised.

"Thank you."

"Okay, this one seems relatively fine for now. Let's have a look at the rest of them." Prey decided, removing his hoof and turning to the rest of Crimson's bandages.

"Have you thought of what you're going to tell anyone if they ask what happened?" Prey asked as he worked.

"No. I hope to heal before anyone notices."

"No chance of that, I'm afraid. Those stitches are going to be in for at least a week, minimum. Probably longer. Someone will certainly come by before then."

"Alright. I hope to heal sufficiently that I won't look too bad by then." Crimson amended uncomfortably.

"And the excuse?" Prey prompted.

"The truth. A training accident caused by my own foolishness."

Not what Prey would've gone with, but it was Crimson's choice. He could suggest alternative excuses, but Crimson wouldn't approve of a lie, any lie, so Prey kept his suggestions to himself.

After a minute, Crimson spoke again, "I can't remember if I told you this already Prey, I was a little out of it at the time, but we get to resume our duty soon."

Prey nearly fumbled, "Our duty? Do you mean start working as Night Guards again?"

"Yes, that's what I mean."

Prey's mind swiftly drew the connections, "So then the Royal Inspectors are finally giving up, or just getting kicked out. Just who, exactly, did you train with in the Night Guard command structure to find out about this? Don't tell me it was Nighthawk himself."

Crimson's ears twitched back, "Yes."

Prey looked up at the ceiling, vainly calling for strength. "Of course it was the Captain himself. And you just walked up and, what, asked him and the Lieutenants for a no holds barred fight?"

"Yes?"

"And he went for that? Why would he even entertain the idea? He's the one who placed us on indefinite leave in the first place. And doesn't he have his position as the Captain to uphold?" Prey asked.

"We did not fight in our capacity as Night Guards, we were all off

duty. We would not disgrace Princess Luna's Guard like that."

Prey had been concerned about Crimson getting into trouble for his secret training brawl with the Night Guard, but it seems this went all the way to the top and his fears had been for naught. It made a sort of sense in a thestral way. Of course Nighthawk and the other officers would be excellent warriors, although their positions weren't based on martial prowess, but leadership skills.

Even so, it made complete sense when Prey thought about it. Not common sense, just sense. Crimson wouldn't risk getting lesser Night Guards into trouble, off duty or not, so of course he'd challenge Nighthawk instead.

Prey would bet Nighthawk had seen it as his grave duty to fulfil Crimson's request too, as a sort of informal apology after the ISND's suspension. Only thestrals would see being granted a holiday as a punishment.

Prey sighed, "Well I hope you found it worth it."

"Nighthawk is quite skilled with griffin claws. It was good experience. Getting used to fighting with your gift, I mean." Crimson shifted his right wing slightly, giving away where the electrite feather Prey had made was hidden.

'So Nighthawk was the one who ripped a hole in your side. I bet you thanked him for it too, you battle maniac.' Prey thought wearily.

So they would be forced to return to serving Luna soon. How truly wonderful.

"Lilly isn't up to serving. Scenic may yet quit, too." Prey said out loud.

"We will see." Crimson said simply, not an ounce of condemnation for the two ponies in his voice. They'd all suffered, and Scenic and Lilly weren't like the rest of them. It wasn't their fault they hadn't ever been forced to learn resilience before.

'They're not prisoners. They both have a choice.' Prey looked down

at the golden tracer bands. He didn't even notice their weight anymore. It'd been the same with the shackles in Dreverton. Gradually, you got so used to imprisonment that you could hardly even remember it ever being any different.

Prey knew Crimson didn't see it that way, though. This was Crimson's life, his duty, so Prey kept his discontentment to himself.

Anyway, there was nothing Crimson could do about their circumstances.

'And I'm still alive.' Last night he almost hadn't been. But he'd survived, and as long as he was alive, he'd have another chance to find a way to escape. One day.

Prey stepped back from examining the stitching in the long slash down Crimson's shoulder, allowing Crimson to untense and move again now that he wouldn't accidently bump Prey. "Good news. All your wounds are about where I expect them to be. Bad news, they're about where I expect them to be."

"There's no shortcut to proper healing." Crimson said fatalistically.

"Unless you have a powerful magical artifact." Prey shrugged.

Crimson's right wing instinctively jerked, "Wait, do you mean...?"

Prey shook his head, "Sorry no, it's nothing as powerful as that. Like I said before, almost all its benefits are passive, small but constant."

Crimson almost certainly still questioned how and where Prey had gotten the feather, but he kept to Prey's wishes and hadn't asked even once.

"Too bad it doesn't heal. No, that's not what I meant. I mean, I'm very grateful Prey for your gift-"

"I know what you meant. Here, stay still, I'll go get you some more leaves for the pain. Back in a minute. Oh, and feel free to have any of my candy if you want. The orange ones with the sugar are really nice."

Back in his own flat, Prey hurried to the windowsill and began picking the correct ratio of leaves from his pot plants. Wait, 'his flat'? Prey almost paused, but Crimson was waiting. It wasn't really worth ruminating over, but since when had he started thinking of this as *his* flat, rather than just 'the flat', or 'the flat I'm renting'?

It wasn't like it was that important, but still.

The flat wasn't a home, and never would be, but it was definitely a nice place of safety with all the defensive runic arrays now placed here.

A leaf slipped from between Prey's hoof cleft. He scowled and picked it back up. He dropped it again. And then a third time.

Prey looked at his hoof, already knowing-Yes, it was trembling. His leg was starting to shake too. Prey breathed out in angry frustration, and it caught in his throat as a choke.

'Damn it, why? I'm still alive, that's all that matters. Get it together crybaby.'

What kind of damned delayed reaction was this? Prey ground his teeth. His hoof was really shaking now. Actually, he was shivering, that's what was causing it.

'I'm alive. I'm still alive. *Stoppit*, you hear me? I'm alive. Still alive.'

The sun shining in from the window was no longer warm. 'Oh get it together already! I survived. That's all that matters.'

But it didn't stop. Why did he have to go through this or something infuriatingly similar every single time? It wasn't fair, he should finally be used to it. It was pathetic. *He* was pathetic. How many times has this happened now? How many more times would it happen again? Prey silently snarled, locking his legs and pressing down until the shivering stopped.

Prey carefully forced his hoof to pick up the leaf. When it trembled, he made himself drop the leaf and start again. And again. And

again, until...

'Finally.'

Prey gathered up all the required leaves and went back to Crimson's flat. Life went on, and he had things he needed to prepare for. Crimson's news about their imminent return to the active ranks of the Night Guard had thrown some perspective on things.

The surreal could move over. Real life and survival were taking its place.

"Here you go Crimson, sorry about the wait. Eat one of these for each of those leaves, same as last time. Did you have some candy?"

"Thank you. And yes I did, thank you again."

"The orange sugar ones are nice aren't they?"

"Actually no, I didn't like them."

"What?"

"I like the black chewy ones though."

"Liquorice?"

"Oh, is that its name?"

"... No offence Crimson, since you're my only friend in the whole world, and I'm hardly one to talk, but you're weird."

Candy, death, liquorice. Who would've thought? War makes for strange survival stories.

The Royal Inspectors, contracted by the Royal Guard to carry out a licenced review of the Night Guard. What had been scheduled to take two weeks, (nearly three times as long as the ISND's own inspections had taken), had instead dragged out into nearly a

month.

The inspectors had left no leaf unturned, no stone unchecked. Everything had been thoroughly, vigorously, and pedantically checked. Files, records, budgets, minutes of meetings, procedures, it'd all been reviewed to death and back. Prey'd heard they'd even gone so far as to count the office supplies down to the last rubber band, paperclip and staple. Twice.

Officially, the Royal Inspectors were being thorough. Really, they were just dragging their hooves. Someone in the Royal Guard had wanted them to very specifically investigate the ISND.

The same ISND Nighthawk had been keeping hidden on indefinite sick leave.

The Royal Guard and the Night Guard had never been friends. At the beginning, when the Night Guard were first reorganized by Luna with the return of the thestral clans, they'd been rivals. Now though, they were unofficial enemies.

Captain Shining Armour had made efforts to try and overcome this growing divide. Token efforts only, he was not so silently accused of. Nighthawk refused to do any more or any less than he had always been doing.

The Guard was supposed to be completely free of any outside influences, indifferent to position and power. And in theory, it was. In practice, perhaps only the Night Guard could make such a claim, and only because Luna had already claimed all of their loyalty. The Royal Guard was much larger, had existed for far longer, and couldn't say the same.

Nobles and lords behind the scenes had been pushing the Royal Inspectors onto the Night Guard. It was never anything overt, but their guiding hoof had been there if one but looked and knew what you were looking at.

Shining Armour had declared his strong disapproval of this. The Guard was supposed to be impartial and justice was supposed to be blind. However most of the Royal Guard officers weren't even

aware they were being gently goaded, influenced by certain policies and rules being implemented in very certain ways.

Regardless of all this, in the end, the Royal Inspectors had no more reasons, or excuses, to carry on any longer.

All they'd turned up on the Night Guard were some minor miss-filing clerical errors, and unimportant slips in procedure. Oh, they'd tried to hammer the Night Guard for everything they were worth, but they had nothing and they knew it. What's more, Nighthawk and Shining Armour knew it too. Celestia and Luna at the top probably just didn't deign to care, but down at the mortal level, everyone who was someone knew it.

And, really, the Night Guard had only existed for a little under five months. Realistically, what skeletons were they ever going to uncover?

Thus, as the week finally drew towards its close, the inspectors packed up their briefcases, put away their ledgers, straightened their tweed bow ties, and prepared to depart with their trimmed tails tucked between their legs.

The noble ponies moving behind the curtains and trying to gain something out of all of this would be left disappointed. Unless this outcome was what they'd been angling for all along. Maybe. Who knows all the games of court, or which side was playing with pawns and which with dice?

It was a fact most overlooked, but there'd been no comment from either Princess Luna or Celestia throughout the proceedings, neither praise nor condemnation, not even once.

Lemon Pink hooked the new crystal lamp onto the improvised nail hook in the Sewer's Heart. Up to her knees, the cold and slimy wickerwatch bobbed in the chilled water. Two days had passed since the confrontation with the thieves, or the Brotherhoof of Sol as they'd so arrogantly named themselves.

Now their self righteous group were gone forever, reclaimed by the mud, but the weapons and tactics which'd been employed against the artifact wielding ponies still remained.

Namely, the wickerwatch, and the hex it carried through its rubbery tendrils wherever it reached in the sewers. And wickerwatch was still growing. For now, it was all that was left. It would have to do as a foundation on which to rebuild.

Willingly or unwillingly, the sewers would be housing its new silent watcher for a long while to come. Possibly as long as Canterlot existed, if no one noticed and managed to eradicate the artificial plant.

They would have to be a brave person to do so, though. The invisible malice of the hex was only growing stronger day by day. A sewer worker who just popped down for a maintenance check up would probably suffer nothing more than mild paranoia and a restless night's sleep afterwards.

But to anyone who ventured deeper into the artificial tunnels? The darkness would relentlessly gnaw away their resolve and rationality. Insanity might eventually follow after long enough exposure, dependant upon the willpower of the victim. Not madness, that was something else entirely, but a period of temporary, or even permanent insanity, was entirely possible.

Lemon herself and Prey were only immune because they knew what the effect was, and were mentally strong enough to ignore it. Weak of flesh and magic, but they were both strong of mind.

Maybe 'strong' was the wrong word to use. Perhaps 'cruel' of mind was more accurate. It's better to already be broken than to break.

So the sewer now had its wicked wicker watcher waiting in the water. However, with the veropede's death, there was no guardian left to match it. Unfortunately there was as yet no helping that.

Lemon Pink had just come from dismantling the last of the traps they'd set for the thieves, since they were no longer needed.

Around the pink mare, water splashed in continuous trickles out of the tunnels leading into the basin of the Sewer's Heart. The splashing made for a ceaseless watery drone in the background. It echoed dimly in the unpleasantly damp air, endlessly bouncing off down the dark pipes.

Lemon Pink closed her eyes, focusing on the runic array set here to connect with the wickerswatches' network.

"Hello Lemon."

Lemon Pink instinctively jerked around to bring her horn to bear, cold water splashing, before she recognised the voice and stopped.

"Hello, Prey."

Prey was sitting in one of the higher adjoining tunnel mouths. The pipe was dark, and only Prey or a small foal could've sat inside. Cold water ran around Prey's hooves where he sat unmoving, splashing down to add its voice to the never ending background echoes in the sewers Heart. He'd been sitting in the pitch dark, waiting.

Lemon had not sensed him, which was wrong. She should be able to tell whenever she was close to another sentient mind, especially Prey's.

"I apologize for being late, Prey. Have you been waiting long?" Lemon enquired.

"You said you would be working here in the Sewer's Heart two hours ago. I arrived here one hour ago." Prey said.

"I apologise again. I was delayed."

"That's obvious. Because why else wouldn't you have been here on time?" Prey looked down at her.

"By the way," He added, "I wanted to say thank you for saving my life, again."

"It is my purpose, Prey."

"I know. I made you. You were me, at one point. But thank you again anyway."

Lemon tilted her head to the side, just a bit too far to be normal to an outside observer, "Oh. Well. Then you are welcome, Prey."

There was a pregnant pause in the midst of the Sewer's Heart. Prey brushed one ear back with a wet hoof, sky blue eyes assessing Lemon Pink, "What was it that delayed you?"

There, the tiniest hesitation, a flash in the back of Lemon's eyes.

"I was resting, Prey."

Prey had instructed Lemon to take all the time she needed to recover. You worked best when you were also at your best, after all. It was all too easy to make mistakes when you were tired. Prey didn't believe it.

"Resting. Understandable. Resting is a broad term though..." He stared into Lemon's face, feeling her mind tighten up. He made his decision.

"...I was prepared to put this off, and I have been doing so for quite a while now. You've saved my life, you've worked hard, and I was trying to give you space to develop a better mind, one which isn't stunted by how I made you. All that meant I was prepared to hold off. Not anymore. I'm getting the full, complete, unfiltered story today and I will be its judge."

Prey did not make any threats. There was no need. Lemon Pink was his tool. He'd created her. Her whole purpose in existing was to serve him. She knew it. He knew it. There was no getting around that. And if she tried...

"What have you been hiding from me, Lemon Pink?"

---I---

[[[Random Bonus Picture, because Christmas! - Candy]]]

[image]

Author's Notes:

Ho ho ho! Merry Christmas to everyone reading this on the day of release. To everyone else reading this later, er... Hope you liked it anyway?

So, start of a new Arc, but it was a lot of wrapping up the last Arc, really. The next Chapter is going to be a bit, 'different' I have decided. But have fun all!

Helpful Editor, with thanks: Sweetolebob18

67.5- A Change of Pace

Author's Notes:

Hello to all! This is my first attempt at this sort of chapter in the story. Probably will not do it again, but until then, enjoy it anyways.

BIG NOTE: This chapter is not actually edited by the kind Editor. He's indisposed at the moment. So yeah, this is a rough*er* draft. Sorry about that. Here's to wishing my kind editor a swift recovery.

Randy knew he was a simple earth pony. And he also knew he was blessedly lucky. Sometimes he privately joked that was his special talent's *secret* talent.

It was a dumb joke though, so he didn't waste anypony else's time by telling it.

Randy remembered the first time he saw the pink mare sitting on a park bench. There was no such thing as love at first sight, but Randy thought 'interest at first sight' was certainly a thing.

But Randy knew she wouldn't be interested in him, not even enough for a passing conversation about the weather schedule. So he ducked his head and got on with his job, turning over the flowerbeds in Canterlot park. The pink unicorn mare looked upper class, and he was, well, a simple earth pony. They had nothing in common.

When he finished and stood up, brushing the rich earth off his Park Gardener's uniform, the unicorn mare had already left. A missed opportunity that he'd never been going to take.

So Randy picked up his spade and bucket, and moved on to the next

flowerbed, humming a tune.

Quite by chance, Randy saw the same mare during his shift again, raking up fallen oak leaves this time. He blinked. There she was, sitting on the very same bench, once again by herself.

Randy tilted his gardener's hat back to check the sun. Yep, it was about the same time of day too. He snuck a closer glance.

She really was rather striking, his eye couldn't help but be drawn to her smooth pink coat and tri-colour mane. She was reading a book, levitated in her silvery magic. Was she studying, perhaps attending a university here in Canterlot? If she was here in the park again by herself, maybe she wasn't upper class like he'd first thought.

'It doesn't matter, you'll just be a bother with your big mouth if you try to say hello-'

The mare glanced sideways, looking straight at him as if she'd felt the weight of his gaze. Randy froze. The mare's face was blank, utterly so. Randy felt like he was looking at an unmoving painting.

Hurriedly, Randy got back to raking up the leaves, quickly working his way around a tree to block her view.

'Yikes, that was scary.' He didn't know why, but for some reason, the mare's blank look unnerved him. He picked a cheerful tune out and started humming it loudly.

Randy got on with his job, covering a couple of overtime shifts, and earning some extra bits. Canterlot was an expensive place to live, but it was Canterlot and he was lucky to be here. Randy had only moved here only a few months ago, just before Princess Luna's return actually, however he already in love with this great city.

He enjoyed his new job as a Park Gardner, and knew he was lucky to have found employment within Canterlot that specifically called for his earth pony talents. It brought a big smile to his face, and

then an embarrassed cough when the two mares he was passing on the street gave him an odd look.

He went out. He saw the museums. He wrote letters to his folks, and got some happy, a few melancholy, replies in return. He even made a new friend, a unicorn stallion the same age as him who was training to become a firefighter.

Randy got on with his life, but he still noticed that nearly every day, like clockwork, the same pink mare would be sitting alone on the same park bench.

Randy gathered up his courage, then gathered it up yet again when it ran away from him.

Randy had his lunchbox balanced on his back. The sun was shining. Ducks and geese were paddling in the park's sparkling pond. There was a mother giving her foals bread to throw to the eager water fowl. Randy tried to hum something brave, but he couldn't keep his focus and the tune petered out.

His focus was instead on the park bench, set back from the pond near the oak trees and out of the way. It was one of the less popular park benches, although Randy personally thought it was a lovely spot.

Maybe his opinion had something to do with the pink mare who frequented the same bench most days. Randy thought she must be lonely, sitting here by herself everyday.

'But maybe she likes it like that, and I'm just about to intrude.' Randy thought, losing all his courage again and turning tail.

'Today. Today for sure. Come on, I can do it. Just walk up and sit down. It's a public bench, anypony can sit. I don't even have to say anything. If she doesn't want to talk to me, that's fine.'

Randy sent a prayer up to Celestia, then he added one to Luna too.

She was also a goddess afterall. If she heard, surely she'd be just as inclined to smile on him as Celestia was. He hoped.

'Here goes nothing.'

Somehow, Randy found his hooves carrying him across the distance. The mare looked up the moment Randy started walking towards her, somehow immediately noticing his approach.

By some minor miracle, he didn't falter. His heart still felt like it'd found new lodgings in his throat. He didn't have dirt or leaves in his mane, did he? Oh please no, he'd die of embarrassment if he looked exactly as stupid as he felt. The mares' mane itself looked amazing, perfectly straight and tossed to the side. It possessed the kind of look which said 'uncaringly practical'.

Randy swallowed. The mare had gone back to reading her book. He made himself sit down on the far end of the bench. He methodically unpacked his sandwiches, rigidly not looking over at her.

Peanut butter. His mouth was dry as he chewed. He still didn't dare peek even out of the corner of his eye. He tried to focus on the pleasant park scenery, but he worked tending the grounds here. He knew the whole park already. He gave it his best shot anyway.

The ducks quaked in the pond, sunlight sparkling off the water. Some more ponies were leisurely throwing them bread again today.

Randy started on his second sandwich. He still hadn't looked. He didn't feel hungry anymore. Was he chewing too loudly? He didn't know any fancy manners, only what his mother had taught him. Was he doing something stupid?

With how nervous he was, Randy wouldn't have been surprised to find out he was actually wearing a clown's nose, and just hadn't noticed. Oh Celestia, he was chewing too loudly like a great big country bumpkin, wasn't he?

He couldn't even hear the mare breathing on the end of the bench, she was so quiet and still, not even the rustle of a turning page. Once again, he was reminded of a still life painting.

He couldn't take it any longer. Randy glanced sideways.

She wasn't looking at him. She was calmly reading her book as if he wasn't even there. She looked so calm, her indigo eyes so empty, face so blank as if nothing of importance could ever happen that Randy instinctually startled.

Sensing the weight of his quick peek, one opaque indigo eye focused on him. Her ears didn't twitch, her face didn't change, she didn't so much as blink. Randy found he couldn't move either as she studied him for one long second.

Then she went back to her book. Randy breathed. Then realised his mouth was still full and swallowed. He noticed something he hadn't seen on any other unicorn in Canterlot. Her horn was unusually curved and pointed. In fact, it looked positively sharp.

He was intrigued, but far too embarrassed to be caught staring again, and nowhere near brave enough to actually ask her about it. He'd behaved like enough of a fool already, and all without having even said one word. He was *such* a doofus.

Picking up his lunch box, Randy hurried away, trying not to let his ears give him away while his face burned.

Randy ate a spiced potato wedge off the plate. He liked hot food. Firea always accused him of cheating by having an earth pony's stomach and claimed it wasn't fair. The Healthy Heffa' pub was starting to fill up with the evening crowd. There was going to be a musician playing tonight.

"Hey, uh, Firea?" Randy asked around his potato wedge.

Firea looked up from hungrily devouring his pasta bake, fork paused mid levitation, "Yeah Randy?" He asked brightly.

"What does a curved horn mean?"

"Eh?" Firea looked blank.

"Um, I saw this unicorn, she had a curved horn and it looked sharp. I'm new to Canterlot, but I haven't seen anypony with a horn like that before. Is it rare?"

"Oh," Firea put down his fork, looking shifty, "Well, it's not something nice to talk about. Unicorns with those kinds of horns as supposed to be bad sorts. That's what's supposed to happen to your horn if you cast-"

Firea leaned in close and whispered, "-Dark magic."

"What, *really*?"

"Uh hu. Well, to be fair, I don't think it's completely true, but still. The story has got to come from somewhere, get what I mean?"

"Um, not really?"

"Huh. I suppose you wouldn't really get it. Just watch yourself around anypony with a horn like that is what I'm saying. Hey, that musician guy is finally here. Sweet!"

Randy sat back, absently eating his spicy potato wedges as the unicorn musician, playing both a base and a banjo at the same time, started up. It was impressive, but he was thinking more about the pink unicorn mare and what Firea had said.

Rather than be warned off, he just felt sympathetic.

'Poor her. Imagine having to grow up with ponies constantly judging you just for having a different horn?' His grandpa kept chickens. He remembered there was this one albino chicken which was mercilessly pecked all the time by the others.

Randy briefly thought of the bat ponies as the first song came to an end. He hadn't seen a single one of them yet, despite his time in Canterlot. Apparently, they only came out at night.

'Yeah, but bat ponies have fangs and are scary. She wasn't scary. Okay, she was sorta', but she's probably sick of ponies avoiding her because of her horn. That's sad.'

Randy made up his mind. He was going to go back and sit by her again. He'd try to be friendly. That was the right thing to do for a fellow pony. Plus, she was pretty. The tips of his ears inadvertently heated up.

No, don't be chauvinistic, he told himself. He was just a simple Earth pony, not born within Canterlot. Just be friendly. Everypony needs a friend. Randy didn't think of himself as good friendship material, but after what Firea had said, he'd feel bad if he didn't at least give it a try.

Resolve was all well and good, but when the time came in the bright light of day, Randy still found his heart back in his throat again. He couldn't find any tune to hum for courage.

But somehow, he still managed to make his way across the park during his lunch break to seat himself on the bench.

After his conversation with Fiera, he couldn't help but sneak a glance at her horn again. Yep, still sharp and curved. But he couldn't see anything ominous or dark about that.

And once again, she didn't react to his presence, either with annoyance or surprise. Nothing, just completely blank as she read yet another book. But Randy was positive she knew he was here.

He quickly looked away and unpacked his lunch to eat again. Perhaps today she would say something? Could she want a friend?

'Nope', was apparently the answer a quarter of an hour later.

'Maybe she's just shy?'

She didn't seem shy to Randy. She seemed utterly indifferent. It was off putting, and even a bit intimidating. Not even her ears twitched to signal if she was enjoying her book or not.

Randy tried to think of some excuse to start a conversation. His mind helpfully drew a blank.

He was still trying to think of something by the time he'd finished his sandwiches. He was sweating by the time he'd slowly put away his lunchbox, and still had nothing.

What should he say? Just shut up and go? Try again tomorrow? Run away and never come back?

No, he had to say something. He wasn't allowed to go until he'd said at least one thing to her.

"See you tomorrow." He finally blurted, and turned to go.

'Stupid mouth, why'd you say that? Stupid, simple brain, why didn't you have anything better!?' Randy thought as he hurried away in embarrassment.

"Perhaps." The one word answer came from behind him, utterly disinterested.

But unseen Randy beamed. Yes! He'd gotten a response. An actual conversation. And she hadn't immediately leapt up upon the bench to scream at him to stop harassing her for everypony in the whole park to hear. A *double* success.

Randy was humming as he finished emptying his net of the pond weed out into the wheelbarrow. It was finally lunch time, and he had an appointment with a bench to keep.

"A good day?" Jumbo Junior asked, raising his eyebrows as he passed Randy pushing his own wheelbarrow.

Randy just grinned back, a bit embarrassed, and kept briskly humming as he went to dump the pondweed and get his lunchbox.

His upbeat tune lasted all the way until he saw the pink mare sitting on the bench reading, and all his nerves from before came rushing back. It occurred to him that he didn't even know her name.

He swallowed, and trotted over to take his seat.

Just like every time before, she didn't even glance at him as he unpacked his lunch and ate.

He finished his sandwiches, jam today, with still nothing being said in a re-enactment of yesterday.

'She said we'd see each other again today. But she didn't say she'd be happy about it.' Randy's mind helpfully told him.

Randy sat there, feeling dumb and stupid, and wishing he'd thought this through better.

"Hey, can I ask your name?" Randy blinked. Oh sugar! His mouth had asked that without him meaning to.

"Yes." She said without looking away from her levitating book.

"...Um, what is it?"

A pause, "Lemon Pink."

"It's nice to meet you Miss Lemon Pink. I'm Randy, Randy Pickaxe."

"A pleasure." No change in her coldly calm demeanour to indicate it was actually a pleasure, and those pretty lilac eyes of hers never ceased roaming the lines of the book.

Nevertheless, Randy smiled, because there'd been no annoyance in her tone either. A win was a win. He sat back on the bench and enjoyed the sounds of the park and the sun until his lunch break ended.

He returned to the bench the next day, to find Lemon Pink sitting there once again. She came for an hour nearly everyday, arriving and leaving like clockwork.

It was probably her lunch time too, and she came to enjoy the nature of the park. Although he'd never actually *seen* her eating anything, just reading. She must be really dedicated to her job, or studying, or whatever it was she did.

Randy sat down on the bench and put down his lunch box, "Hello, Miss Lemon Pink."

"Hello. Just Lemon Pink."

That was all she said, reading yet another new book title today.

There was a ten minute silence as Randy ate his sandwiches. A warm breeze blew through the park and faintly rustled the oak tree.

"Can I ask what you're reading, Lemon Pink?"

"Spell formula construction affinity."

Randy craned backwards on the bench to catch a glimpse of the page Lemon Pink was on. He saw paragraphs and paragraphs of cramped text, interspersed with mathematical diagrams he didn't even have the faintest chance of understanding. Definitely not a good old fashioned picture book.

'Smart *and* good looking.' And way out of his league. Not that he even had a league. He was just simple Randy Pickaxe. He was happy to settle for some friendly company on a park bench.

Randy was lucky, but he was also realistic. Possibly making a new friend was lucky enough for anypony.

"What are you thinking so deeply about?" Firea asked suspiciously, pausing in mid-trot.

"Nothing." Randy quickly said.

"Okay, sure. Hey, we're playing hoofball on Wednesday as part of a team building exercise, but we can invite anypony along too. Wanna' come?"

"Yes thanks, I'd love to." Randy sucked at hoofball, but it would be a good laugh.

Time continued on like that. The first week, a second, and a third. Randy would come to the bench each day he was at work to eat his lunch. Sometimes Lemon Pink wasn't there, and sometimes when there was a lot of work which needed doing when somepony else was off sick, it was him who wasn't there.

But Randy appreciated it when they were *both* there. He got to sit and eat in what was, to his mind, friendly silence. Although he did wish it wasn't quite so silent. But it was still nice.

Randy got on with his park job, had to change flats, which Firea and a couple of his firefighter-in-training mates helped him move into. He wrote back home, put up with his younger sister when she came to visit and had to sleep on the couch so she could have his bed, and generally enjoyed everyday Canterlot life. Some days were a pain in the flank, but most were great.

That was normal pony life.

Lemon Pink was still as detached and calmly unemotional as when he'd first plucked up the courage to sit down next to her, but Randy no longer found it off putting. That was just Lemon Pink, and since it was him she was tolerating, Randy would happily take it.

Lemon Pink usually sat in silence, but today, very unexpectedly, she asked a question.

"What do you think of the night?"

"Um, sorry? The night? Do you mean like the stars and stuff?"

"Yes. How do you like the night?" Lemon Pink's tone gave no indication one way or another how she might feel on the matter herself.

Randy shrugged, feeling a bit self conscious. Lemon Pink almost never initiated any conversation herself. "I guess I do like Princess Luna's nights, yes."

Lemon Pink slightly turned her head away from her book, "Princess

Luna. What are your views on her?"

Randy was confused, "What do you mean? She's Princess Luna, she's a goddess."

"A goddess of the night. But how do you see her next to Princess Celestia?"

Randy was now more confused. Luna and Celestia were the Princesses. They just *were*, like water is wet and the sky is blue. "Uh, the same? They're both the Princesses, and they both protect and watch over us. Sure, Princess Luna has only come back recently, but two alicorns are better than one, right?"

Randy thought he might have seen the slightest downwards twitch of Lemon's mouth, but no, it was gone, "Yes. Princess Luna is Celestia's equal in all things. Day and night. Both are just as important."

Lemon Pink half lowered her book, surprising Randy. She was always reading. He'd bravely asked about that before, and Lemon had said she came to the park for a "Mandatory rest period", but that she read and studied anyways because; "There is never enough time", and that she; "Could not afford to fall behind".

Lemon spoke slowly, to no one in particular, "Before Princess Luna's return, I watched the night time heavens avidly. The mare in the moon especially. I waited. But then I found a new master and my goals changed."

"A 'new master'?" Randy asked. That sounded a bit iffy to him.

"A new boss. I'm working under them right now."

'Ah, that makes more sense.' Randy nodded, "Do you like your work? You're always very busy and studying, so you must like it, right?"

Lemon Pink looked at him blankly, "Enjoy? No, it is my job. I do not need to enjoy or hate it. It is simply my purpose."

Randy shuffled his hooves, "Uh, that sounds a bit too intense for

me. I couldn't do something as full time as you do. I hope your new boss appreciates all the hard work you put in."

Lemon tilted her head to the side, just a bit too far if Randy was being completely honest, "He works just as hard as I do for the advancement of our projects."

'He. Darn it.' Part of Randy immediately thought.

Lemon's answer marked the end of the conversation for today, as she lifted her book back up and returned to casually reading about things that Randy knew would give him an immediate headache. School was not one of his fondest memories.

Randy wished her goodbye as his lunch break came to and end, and left to get on with digging guidance post holes for those new silver elm saplings.

"See you tomorrow, Lemon Pink."

"Perhaps."

"You are very quiet."

Randy started. He twisted on the bench to look at Lemon, who'd spoken, breaking the peaceable silence.

"I, uh, yeah." He replied intelligently. What did she mean? This is what they always did.

Lemon Pink seemed to have heard his thoughts; "I don't mean today. I meant overall. You are a quiet person."

That was another one of Lemon Pink's eccentricities. She said 'people', not 'ponies'.

"Ah, thanks. I think?"

Today, Lemon decided to expand on her statement. A rare treat. Usually, she would only say the bare minimum. She lowered her

book to look at him sideways past a strand of silver mane; "Most ponies don't do well with silences. They are sociable, forward, and seek to engage everyone. What would merely be taken as reservedness among other species is anti-social among ponykind."

"You've gotten to travel and meet other species?" Randy asked, a bit surprised.

Lemon's expression didn't shift, but Randy got the definite impression she was giving him 'a look'. "One doesn't need to travel far to meet other species."

"Really?"

"Donkeys. Sheep. Cows. Goats. They don't have to be griffins, minotaurs, zebra, or diamond dogs."

Randy blinked. He'd never ever thought of it like that. Wow. But Lemon was right. A bit guiltily, he tried to remember if on any of the few rare occasions when he'd met goats, cows, donkeys, and sheep if he'd inadvertently been making them uncomfortable by being too, well, "ponyish".

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Then perhaps you should. But back to my original point, you are a quiet and patient pony, Randy Pickaxe."

Randy nearly blushed. That sounded like a compliment, but it was hard to tell with Lemon. Her expression and tone were always so closed and guarded.

"Is that...a good thing?"

Lemon looked him over critically, making him freeze, "To be frank, it is a welcome surprise. As I said, most ponies cannot keep quiet and simply 'be'. It is... appreciated."

Now Randy did blush, his face and ears heating up, "You're welcome."

He was so glad he'd kept his big mouth shut all those times he'd

really wanted to start a conversation instead. But she'd said she appreciated it. His mouth started to stretch into a smile, "Heh, I'm just glad I wasn't boring you and you were just being too polite to tell me to eat lunch somewhere else."

"Don't worry. If your company was an annoyance, I would simply get you to leave."

"Ah." Randy faltered slightly. He somehow didn't doubt Lemon Pink could've done exactly what she'd said. She was a slight and rather beautiful mare, but not once had she ever given him the impression she wasn't in control. In control of what, he didn't know. Just in control generally, he guessed.

Lemon Pink returned to reading her book.

Randy bit his tongue, looking around at the greenery of the park around them, the oak tree rustling overhead.

'Well now, how am I supposed to say anything after getting told that my best feature is staying quiet?'

Lemon let out an almost imperceptible sigh, and lowered her book on 'A History of Unexplained Magical Phenomena Through the Ages' again:

"Ask."

"Bhwa? How did you-?"

"You're a very obvious and straight forward person. Ask your question."

Those were good qualities, right? Those also sounded like compliments, right? Randy shuffled his hooves, unable to help himself, "What's your job? You've never actually said."

Lemon didn't answer straight away. She looked at him. This wasn't 'a look' like before. For absolutely no reason that he could think of, Randy sensed he'd asked a dangerous question. Randy wasn't used to danger. The most dangerous thing he'd done recently was going in for a tackle in Hoofball. Randy swallowed. 'Why's she looking at

me like that?'

Lemon shifted her gaze back to her history book, letting Randy breathe out. "My job is sensitive. I'm not supposed to discuss the details."

"Oh, er, I didn't know..."

Lemon paused for a moment, "But as a general description, by job role involves research, both magical and normal, and also looking for some investment opportunities."

"Ohhh." That made all those books Lemon was always studying fit.

There was another silence. Randy fidgeted with his hooves.

"You have another question." Lemon stated flatly.

"Uh, yeah, sorry. It's not important though, please forget-"

"Just ask."

Randy took a breath, "Do you like hot chilli and spice?"

Lemon Pink paused, and then she lowered the book for a third time and blinked at him, "I did not expect that. You've managed to surprise me."

Randy got the feeling that was unusual. He hoped it was a good unusual, and not a bad unusual. "So, er, do you?"

Lemon considered, lilac eyes staring thoughtfully at nothing, "...I don't rightly know."

To Randy's secret delight, it turned out that Lemon Pink *did* like spicy food.

Lemon chewed the samosa without a twitch. Randy had stopped by on the way back to his apartment yesterday and picked these samosa up especially for today. They were made from a mix of

mashed peppers, mixed with chilli and curry spices, wrapped in thin pastry and fried. They were *hot*.

Randy had a greasy paper bag filled with them. He'd never found anypony who could eat one with a straight face before. And Lilly wasn't even an earth pony! Ha, take that Firea.

"That wasn't bad." Lemon said consideringly after swallowing.

Randy grinned, "Want another?" He challenged.

Lemon blinked at the bag, "Sure."

They ate the whole bag of samosa between them. Not even once did Lemon Pink hesitate. Hay, she didn't even have any water like he did. Randy was left slightly in awe.

'Pretty, smart, and with a stomach of iron. What's not to admire?' And still way beyond his league. Which he wasn't interested in anyways. No'sir'ee. Lemon Pink was nice friend.

"See you tomorrow?"

"Perhaps."

"No way." Firea protested.

"Yes way."

"No way."

"*Way*. Lemon ate the chillies just fine so it's you who's the weakling-"

"Randy's got a marefriend!" Firea interrupted in delight.

"What? No!" Randy squeaked, coughing on his apple juice.

But Firea wasn't deterred as he leaned eagerly across the pub table, "You've got a marefriend, you charmer."

"I, no, that's not how it is."

"Don't pretend you'd say no if she asked you on a date."

Randy spluttered, ears and face feeling like they were on fire, "That's, you, that has nothing to do-Lemon is not my marefriend. She's a mare, and she's my friend. That's it."

"Aww, poor Randy, it's far too late for you already. It's happening, you should just ask her out already. It's been what, three weeks? She obviously likes you."

"I'm not sure she likes anypony like that..."

Randy's protests were ignored.

"It'll be good for you to start dating properly Randy. A gentlestallion needs to treat a lady properly. Take her to see a show, heck, we can do a double date. I'll come with you and bring a mare along too to back you up. Trust me, it's going to be great. You said she's pretty?"

"I, I, I, I didn't-"

"So that's a yes. Very pretty. Good on you Randy, I didn't know you had it in you. Now, the important thing is to both have fun-"

"Firea stop. Will you just listen to me!"

Firea finally stopped to let Randy speak, although he was still grinning widely across the table. Firea was Randy's friend, but right now, he was really frustrated with the stallion.

"Lemon Pink is not like that. She's, she's quiet, and reserved."

"So she's shy?" Firea raised his eyebrows, but he wasn't being rowdy, he was listening now.

"Uh, no. I definitely can't say she's shy. I... well, I don't mean it like this, but she's kinda' cold."

"Huh?"

Randy took a drink of his apple juice so he could get a moment to think. And maybe quench his burning face. "She's not nasty, not at all. She's just... cold. Very reserved. Hard to read. Not like other ponies, I guess."

"Those don't sound like good traits." Firea suggested cautiously.

Randy chuckled, "Ha, she said something like that herself. Not like normal ponies. Look, what I'm trying to say is, she's totally focused on her job, she likes quiet and being left alone, and definitely isn't the sort of pony to want a normal, boring, coltfriend."

"Got the mare of mystery trait going for her, does she?" Firea asked, only half joking.

Randy felt the need to defend Lemon, even though it was true, "She's not like that. She's a normal pony just like you or me. She's just a bit different on the outside, that's all."

Firea held up his hooves, mug levitating beside him, "Hey, I'm not arguing. You know her far better than I do, and I can't judge anypony I haven't met yet. But just so you know..."

Firea leaned forwards, and Randy did the same so her could hear as Firea lowered his voice, "I'm still totally calling it now. She's going to be your marefriend."

"Firea!"

"Ha ha ha!"

Firea wasn't laughing the next day though. Neither was Randy.

Everypony knew about the inferno down at the Oak Quarter Lumber Yard from last night. It was in all the newspapers. Randy had been very disappointed when reading them and learning how ineffective the new Night Guard had been on the scene.

He'd been even *more* disappointed though at lunch time when Lemon Pink hadn't been at the bench. Their bench as he was

coming to think of it. Randy knew the chances of Lemon Pink having gotten caught up in anything to do with the fire were remote, but his mind was still worrying. He really hoped she was okay.

But his disappointment still paled next to Firea's. Randy was here for his friend tonight. Firea had bags under his eyes, and his mane was still a bit tussled up. He and the rest of the firefighters in training had been woken up and summoned out to help with the fire too.

Firea was so downcast because he hadn't been able to help. Once there, all the firefighters not officially qualified had been stuck on the side lines and told to keep out of the way.

Then, early this morning, the news had come that somepony had died on the scene. Or some griffin? The newspapers weren't exactly clear. Firea was taking it hard, despite it not being his fault or responsibility in any possible way.

Randy patted his friend on the back. He felt for Firea, he really did. What kind of pony wouldn't care when their friend was in distress? Randy was paying for the drinks tonight, and they were actual drinks, not just cider and apple juice.

'I hope Lemon Pink's okay wherever she is.'

"Oh thank Celestia, you're back." Randy exclaimed without thinking when he came to the park bench and spotted Lemon already there under the oak.

Randy didn't notice the twitch in Lemon's face at his choosing to thank Celestia, "Of course I am. Did you have any reason to think I wouldn't be?" Lemon asked flatly.

"No no, it's just, you weren't here, and there was the big fire... I know it was silly, but I couldn't help but worry." Randy coughed awkwardly.

Lemon lowered her book in her magic. She'd been doing that more

often recently to talk to him directly. Randy took it as a good sign, "Your concern is noted, and appreciated. But not warranted. I am fine as you can see, thank you."

Randy smiled and relaxed, that final niggling worry in the back of his head lifting away, "I can see. I'm glad."

Lemon tilted her head, just that little bit too far as he took his seat on the bench, "You were genuinely concerned after my wellbeing." Lemon observed.

"Well, yeah, I sorta' was I guess" Randy admitted, embarrassed.

Lemon Pink's face didn't chance. She just studied him for a long moment, "Hmm. Yes, I suppose you would be worried, even if only for a passing acquaintance."

"Of course. You're my friend, yeah, but I'd be worried about anypony getting hurt in that fire." Randy said. He didn't add that somepony had actually died already. If Lemon didn't know, he didn't want to possibly dampen her mood with gloomy talk.

'Actually, would she...care?' Randy asked himself worriedly.

"Ask your question."

Randy jumped guiltily, nearly dropping his lunchbox, "How did you-?"

"You really are a straightforward person. It's refreshing. Now, ask your question."

Randy gulped, but Lemon had asked. "I don't want to offend you, but... Would you be worried about a stranger? Were you worried about me?"

Again, Lemon's face did not change. She blinked her lilac eyes slowly at him, once, "Not really, no."

"Oh." Randy had already suspected that would be the answer. 'Then...'

He squared his shoulders, "Then, I hope one day I might be worth being worried over by you."

Lemon's ears rose half an inch in surprise, showing she truly was caught off guard by his words. "Perhaps."

No, 'You already are', or 'I hope so too'. That just wouldn't have been Lemon Pink. Still, Randy felt a jump in his heart. 'Perhaps' could so easily become 'yes'.

Randy hid his silly smile by taking a bite of his sandwich. He sat, and enjoyed the companionable silence as the ducks qwacked and the trees swayed.

Lemon Pink was not his marefriend. Hay, he'd only ever had one marefriend before, but that only served to make him feel even less sure about Lemon Pink. His first and only marefriend had only been his marefriend for a grand total of one week.
'And let's be honest, that doesn't really count.'

Lemon wasn't his marefriend, and no way would she be interested.

Randy couldn't help but think about all of Firea's teasing, though. His heart always seemed to kick up a notch whenever he thought about Lemon though.

'This is silly. I need to get some more marefriends. No, wait, no no, not that. Mare *friends*, not marefriends.'

Randy slapped himself on the cheeks.

'Damn it Firea! I'm blaming you for this.'

Randy sat down on the bench. His hooves were shaking. He was sweating. There was a frog squatting in his throat. He was as nervous as a colt asking out a filly on a date for the first time. Which was rather accurate.

But it wasn't a date! It wasn't! It was just a meal, not a date, only a friendly meal, no date or calendar in sight. Definitely not a date.

Randy cleared his throat and spoke, facing forwards, "H-Hello Lemon."

"Hello, Randy Pickaxe."

Alright, good. He'd said hello. The required greetings were out of the way. Now he just had to ask Lemon on a not-date. All he had to do was ask nicely..... Any second now.

Randy ate his first sandwich to buy himself some time. Then he ate his second one.

'Any time now mouth would be great.' Randy's brain said. His heart and his mouth both told his brain to shut up.

"Ask your question."

Randy jumped yet again. How did she *always* know? Not even his mum could always call him out so accurately!

Lemon Pink was looking at him over the top of her levitating book, sharp horn gently glittering silver. Randy's brain abruptly chickened out and screamed it wasn't ready. His heart and mouth both smugly informed him; 'I told you so'.

Randy cast about frantically, and seized upon the first thing he saw to provide a distraction. A couple of unicorn colts across the pond, throwing a ball back and forth and laughing.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"No. No siblings."

"Oh, and only child? Did your parents spoil you then? My sis is my mum and dads favourite. She was so cute when she was younger, she had everypony wrapped around her hoof. She got spoiled rotten and could get away with anything. Still can, actually. This one time, mum took us over to old grandpa Pickaxe's house, and she broke this antique zebra tribal mask he had on the wall, and then she

made these big eyes, and wobbled her lip, and tucked in her ears, and you should've seen how fast grandpa folded-"

"No, I was not spoiled. I have no parents. I was raised in an orphanage." Lemon calmly interrupted.

Randy felt his stomach take a nose dive off a cliff. His jaw flapped uselessly a few times. Now he'd done it. How could he be so insensitive?!

'Stupid, stupid mouth! You were blathering, and even worse, you were blathering all that to an orphan.'

What should he do? What should he say? He'd had no idea. Suddenly, Lemon's behaviour and reservedness took on a much more tragic light in Randy's head. He should apologize, right?

"I'm so so sorry-"

Lemon's brows snapped together. Randy almost swallowed his tongue as he froze in fright. Lemon Pink was scowling at him. Randy had never seen her make anything but the mildest hint at an expression before. No frowns, no smiles, a raised eyebrow, nothing. She was always so calm. But now he'd actually managed to inadvertently say something offensive enough to get a reaction from her.

Randy had been hoping he could garner a proper reaction from Lemon Pink for a while now. But he'd been hoping for a smile directed at him. Not a scowl.

Randy had always thought Lemon Pink was a bit intimidating, but now she was actually scary, and all she'd done was frown at him!

"Don't insult me. Your apologies are offensive. I never knew my parents, and I have no attachment to them. I am not some poor, pitiable, homeless waif, and even were I, I would not thank you for so much as nodding to me on the street. I am a person, not some grief-cripple. I am what I've made myself into by myself."

Randy wilted on the bench, "I uh, uh, I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Lemon asked sharply.

"I mean I'm sorry that I said sorry! Not sorry that you have no parents. I mean, not that either." Randy cringed.

Lemon Pink kept up the cold scowl for a long moment more, before letting it dissolve and her face smoothed back into impassive calm. Her ears hadn't even gone back in anger throughout the whole thing.

Randy breathed again. It was official. He, Randy, was a simple simpleton of simpleminded simpleness that loved to eat simple pie.

"Hmm. That was a bit of an overreaction on my part." Lemon mused, gazing at her book.

"No no, you were well within your rights to feel that way." Randy hastily reassured her.

"I know I was. I'm not second guessing myself," Lemon cut him off, "Only that my reaction was a bit strong. You didn't know any better and meant no harm. You're too honest and straight forwards for that."

"Um, thank you?" Randy said cautiously, not quite sure if he should relax just yet.

"That was a compliment. I find those characteristics rather hard to come by in a person."

Randy felt his stomach do a funny little flip. Did that mean... he didn't just look like a huge idiot to her? Could she possibly see him as a tiny wincy little bit endearing?

'It's now or never.' Randy's mouth seized his courage before his heart could work out what he was doing or his brain could stop him.

"I know you're very busy with work and all, and this is out of the blue, and I don't want to impose. B-but, could I invite you for a meal? Dinner, I mean. At some point. Not today. I mean it doesn't have to be today. But today would be fine too."

Randy suddenly regretted everything. But it was too late now, the words were already out. He held his breath.

Lemon seemed taken off guard. She turned and tilted her head at him, just that little bit too far to the left as she was wont to do. "I am busy. I am always busy. I have a job I must do, there isn't further time for more free time."

Randy was crushed. Lemon had no interest in anything more than a conversation partner at lunch, and now he'd ruined even that by being greedy.

It was official. He, Randy, was the biggest, dumbest, most stupid colt who ever did speak to a mare.

Lemon Pink stared into nothing, "I have a task, yes. I don't have the free time, yes. But-no, I have more important...But if I wanted-No, if he knew-But, no, yes. No. I should not..." Lemon's mumblings petered out:

"...We, I would not mind doing that actually, Randy."

Randy's crushed chest felt like it had miraculously been reinflated. Had he misheard? Did Lemon really just change her mind? Oh thank Celestia! Oh thank Luna, too!

"Do you mean it? Are you sure?" Randy asked, trying to bite down his excitement.

Lemon Pink certainly didn't look sure. She looked... indecisive. Another expression completely out of place with his experience of Lemon. "...I would not mind doing that." She finally repeated.

'Yes yes yes yes yes yes!'

"Brilliant." Randy beamed.

It was official. He, Randy, was the simplest colt in Canterlot. Simple, but also the luckiest.

Randy couldn't stop grinning to himself all through the rest of his day and on the way home. He didn't even complain when Jumbo

Junior asked him to take on an extra turn trawling the parks canals of pondweed.

"*You're* Lemon Pink?" Firea exclaimed as they took their seats.

Lemon coolly examined Firea and his double date for the evening, a friendly beige mare by the name of Astra, who Randy had seen about a couple of times. "Yes, that would be me."

Firea's eyes flicked up to Lemon's brow, but her sharp and slightly curved horn was hidden under the large sunhat she wore. They were inside, but Lemon hadn't left her hat on the pubs hat rack. Randy didn't think it detracted from her looks at all. Something Firea didn't look like he could disagree with either.

"Uh, it's nice to meet you finally. I'm Firea, and this is Astra." Firea introduced themselves, offering his hoof.

"Pleasure." Lemon very briefly bumped hooves with the stallion, then Astra, who smiled happily at Lemon.

"Hi, I'm so glad you decided to come. Once again, I'm Astra, Astra Sample, and the pleasure's all mine."

"Pleasure." Lemon repeated smoothly.

"So who wants the Wednesday special?" Firea asked, getting straight down to business, "It's great. Roasted almond potatoes, cream, and asparagus. I always get it."

"Oooh yes, that sounds great. I'll have that too." Astra immediately agreed.

Randy sent Firea a smirk, which his friend quirked an eyebrow at. Randy felt his grin grow, "Oh, I'm going to have the extra hot chilli."

Lemon barely glanced at the menu, "I will have the same."

Firea and Astra both stared.

"No way. You really weren't telling porkies!"

"So... Did you think tonight went alright?" Randy asked nervously as they exited the pub into the evening light of Canterlot.

'Even if she didn't enjoy it, I'm not going to act disappointed. She's gone out of her way to come tonight, I'm lucky to have even gotten this much.' Randy told himself.

Lemon was taking a long time to answer as they began trotting down the sidewalk. Randy could feel his ears correspondingly dropping with every second.

Finally Lemon answered, "I don't know."

"Huh? You don't know?"

"Exactly. I have not done...'this' before. I don't have anything to make a comparison against. I have not been asked to dinner. I have not gone out to dinner. It's never been important. As such, I don't know."

"Umm..."

Randy didn't know what to say to that, but it sounded kind of sad.

"...Do you want to do it again?"

Lemon thought for a time. Randy watched her face anxiously out of the corner of his eye as they walked, the pink fur of her slim neck and face tinted a lovely orange red, like copper, by the evening sun.

"Perhaps."

Randy could practically hear a tiny Firea cheering for him in the back of his head. He really was a very lucky stallion.

"I enjoyed dinner very much Lemon. Thank you for coming. See you tomorrow, yeah?"

"Yes."

No 'perhaps'. But yes.

One dinner became two, then two became three, and three finally became four. It didn't happen very often, Lemon Pink was very busy all the time with her work. As far as Randy could tell, she never got to actually clock off, but was on call twenty-four seven.

Randy didn't think that was very fair, but Lemon herself never complained. She seemed to live for her job, perhaps to an unhealthy extent, but hey, who was Randy to judge when someone was hardworking and motivated? He was a simple earth pony, with simple wants who knew how to be contented. He knew other ponies had greater drive than him, and he wished them all the luck in the world in achieving their goals.

But he, Randy, was currently happy with his simple lot in life.

The first sign Randy got that something was wrong was when Lemon Pink wasn't on the park bench at lunch. He pouted to himself, but occasionally now and then, Lemon was too busy to visit the park. It happened. So Randy ate his sandwiches and then went back to weeding the park flowerbeds.

But Lemon Pink wasn't there tomorrow either. Or the day after that. Or the next.

Or the one after that.

Or the next.

Or the next.

Or the next.

Or the next.

Or the next.

It was a full three further days after that before Lemon returned. During that time, Randy had gone from worrying, to ineffectual anger, and back to worry again.

And then Lemon just turned up on the park bench, sitting there reading her book, as if nothing had happened. Randy had done a double take, almost walking past before his mind caught up.

Randy dropped the rake he was carrying and galloped over, headless of the dirt and leaves still on his uniform. "Lemon! I-you, you're back. Where have you been?"

Randy skidded to a stop. Lemon Pink looked up. She seemed thinner, she wore a cloak now. She looked tired, and there was an unfeeling cold glint in her eyes.

Randy took half a step back. Lemon blinked, and the look was gone, replaced with mild surprise. The very corners of her lips twitched upwards, "Hello, Randy Pickaxe. Yes, I am back now."

"Yes, I-Where have you been? Have you been sick?" Surely not, she would've still told him if that were the case so he wouldn't worry at least, right?

Lemon glanced over his uniform, then all the way back across the grass to his dropped rake. Lemon missed nothing. "Your lunch break isn't quite yet. You still have a quarter of an hour. Go, finish. I will still be here for another half an hour of my own allotted break hour."

Randy wanted to protest. He'd been really worried, and now she was back, he didn't want to have to wait. But he dumbly nodded and turned around. That look. For the second time, Randy had been uncomfortably reminded that Lemon Pink could be a scary pony for reasons he couldn't quite put into words.

Had he imagined it? Where had she been? What had she been doing? Randy's mind whirled as the last quarter of an hour flew by, and before he knew it or could decide what he wanted to say first, Randy found himself back at the bench, now devoid of rake and gardener overalls, before Lemon Pink.

Lemon Pink lowered her book and patiently waited. Randy blinked, and then gave himself a mental kick, taking his accustomed seat on the bench beside her. It hadn't been that long since he'd sat here, but it felt plenty long enough to him.

"So... You're back." He started rather lamely.

Lemon waited. That hadn't been a question, and it would've been a stupid one if it was anyway. Obviously she was back. She was sitting here, wasn't she?

Randy didn't know what to say, so he decided to just go with the most obvious, "Where did you go? You just... disappeared."

"I was called away on unexpected travel as part of my job."

The answer came smoothly and quickly, but for the first time ever, Randy felt Lemon Pink was lying to him. Or at least, misleading him. Usually if he asked something and she didn't want to answer, she'd just bluntly tell him "no". It just didn't fit.

Randy swallowed, "Okay. Right, okay. Where'd you go, though? Was it really important?"

"It was outside of Equestrian borders. The journey was rather arduous. I needed to catch several overnight trains in a row to get there as fast as possible. The issue, which I am not to discuss, was of a time sensitive nature. It was a serious case of time-is-money, and money-is-time."

"Why though? I mean, you're working so hard all the time, can't your boss ever send somepony else? Or go himself? It's not fair it's always you who has to do it." Randy protested. Lemon looked drained and worn, that wasn't fair.

Lemon flipped a page in her book as she read. She wasn't looking directly at him, but Randy felt she was watching him intently all the same, "It was an emergency. My boss was dealing with it, but he needed help."

"Couldn't you just say no and get him to ask somepony else?" Randy insisted.

Lemon stiffened, "No. I cannot."

"But that's not fair! You could totally say no, there's workers and employment rights. He can't keep forcing you to work twenty-four seven, it's illegal."

Randy was upset. How dare somepony treat Lemon Pink like this? Maybe a tiny part of it was because he was angry that because of this selfish boss, he hadn't gotten to see Lemon Pink for all this time.

"No. I cannot say no, and I cannot say no in the future either. You do not understand the importance of my work. Or who I work for."

"Then explain it to me. Please. Help me understand. What's so important it seems to, to, to consume your whole life?"

Lemon didn't move for a moment. Then she snapped her book shut, and put it carefully down on the bench. Then she turned her full attention to Randy.

Randy was a bit astonished and taken aback. He had Lemon's full attention, something he didn't think he'd managed to achieve before. Not even on their meal-dates, where she was always watching everything. He'd wanted to gain it before, but now, Lemon's hard eyes were boring into him. Could she see his soul?

Lemon considered him, and Randy couldn't help but feel like he was found wanting. "I have said before you are not like most ponies, Randy Pickaxe. That is a good thing. You are straightforward, which is also good. But as a result, you often miss what goes unsaid. For your benefit, I will say it clearly."

She lifted a hoof, cloak spooling over her leg, and pointed at his chest, "I do not want to tell you where I went."

She paused, expression closed, "...And you would not want to know, either."

A cold thrill went through Randy's heart. He'd thought it before, but Lemon Pink could be a scary pony. Actually scary, not just scary like a bully or something. If her words were true, and he really

wouldn't want to know, what could that mean? What could've happened?

Randy licked his dry lips. Another thought occurred to him. 'Is that why she insists she can't say no to her boss? Are the consequences if she says no?'

This was scaring him. Randy was a simple pony. He was just sitting on a park bench on his lunch break, he wasn't supposed to be dealing with all this. He didn't have the first idea of what to do, he was just Randy, simple and lucky.

Lemon Pink was his friend and he was hers. He didn't want any of this to happen to them. 'I can't deal with any of this, I'm just Randy Pickaxe!'

"This is all...I, I don't know-"

Lemon sighed softly through her nose, "You really are easy to read. So straight forward. You want to help, you see this as something you need to get involved in to help with. Stop. This isn't your problem."

"But-"

"It's not your problem. Stop trying to solve it. There is so much you don't know and are misunderstanding. So stop, step back, and leave it alone."

"I don't-"

"It's not your problem. Leave it alone."

"I'm just worried-"

"I'll say it one more time. Leave it alone. There is nothing you could do, anyway. You are missing all context to the situation."

"...You could tell me the context?" Randy dared to venture.

Lemon shook her head firmly, "No. And truthfully you would not want to know, either."

Randy believed her. He didn't know what it was, but it had to be something dangerous, bad and secret. His mind couldn't help but throw up some suggestions, 'Black mail? Espionage? Spies? Some kind of gang?'

Should he go to the Royal Guard? No, Randy rejected the idea almost as soon as he had it. No, this was Lemon Pink. She did not want his help, and if the Guard *could* help, surely Lemon would've gone to them already. Plus, she kept insisting he misunderstood the situation. Well, he was a simple pony, so she was probably right. He almost certainly *was* completely misunderstanding.

That thought brought him a measure of comfort. Lemon was much smarter than him. She must know what she was doing, or if she couldn't deal with it, then at the very least, she would do a much better job than he ever could.

Lemon must've seen the acceptance on his face, because she nodded, allowing herself to lean backwards, "Don't overthink this. It is nothing I can't handle. Don't worry, Randy Pickaxe, I know what I'm doing."

"Okay. Alright, okay. I'm sorry for making a fuss." Randy said, lowering his ears in contrition.

Lemon Pink tilted her head in that slightly strange manner of hers at him, "Hm. You really aren't like most other ponies if you can just accept that. Most wouldn't. They always have to stick their noses in."

Randy ducked his head, "Yeah, well..."

'...I'm just simple Randy."

"There is nothing wrong with being simple and straightforward."

Randy jumped in shock, "How-?"

Lemon shrugged blandly, "You really are easy to read. So honest. I like that."

Randy blushed. He didn't even quite know what was happening any

more, he kept getting thrown for a loop. First he was worried about Lemon disappearing, then he thought he'd offended her, then he was getting worried again, and now Lemon was praising him?

"Um, thank you. But I don't even know what you mean."

"Simply put, I find your straightforward honesty an endearing characteristic. One I wish I saw more of. Ones which I wish I had more of myself." Lemon said, almost wistfully.

"No no, you're great Lemon. Take my word for it! You're so smart and you always know what you're doing."

Lemon Pink didn't seem to hear his words as she continued to steadily look at him, "Straightforward, honest. Oh it's so...quaint. A breath of fresh air. A reminder. But of what? Hmm, I don't know."

"Lemon?" Randy hesitantly asked.

Lemon refocused on him, "Yes, Randy Pickaxe?"

"You uh, you alright?"

"Yes. I'm well enough. My problems are not your problems. I will keep them that way too. I would not like to see your straightforward honesty fade. Perhaps... I don't know. You should stop coming here."

"What?!" Randy yelped.

Lemon shrugged, "You should stop coming here at lunch, stay away instead. No, actually, I will find somewhere else to go. It will almost certainly be for the best in the long run for all parties concerned."

"No, I don't want that!" He protested. How had the conversation transitioned so suddenly onto this?

"That is a relief. I don't have any experience with...'this'. But I don't want to end our meetings either. I am selfish, but I wish them to continue. Still, I felt the need to offer, even if only once."

"I, er, what?" Randy was thoroughly confused, and worried too.

Lemon was a strange pony, but right now she was being really strange.

Lemon waved her hoof in a circle vaguely, "I don't have any personal interaction experience. I'm bad at it. I am not... my point is, think carefully. I have my job. I will not, and cannot put anything else first, nor will I explain things to you. Do you understand that?"

Randy blinked at her, "Uh, yeah. I think I do at any rate?"

"Good. Then nothing needs to change, for which I am glad. I like this park. It is peaceful. And, your quiet company is, agreeably pleasant."

Was that...was that another compliment? Within five minutes? Was Lemon Pink... was she slightly flustered? No, not Lemon Pink. He was imagining it. However what Randy was not imagining, was that Lemon Pink, despite all her warnings and hints of danger, was saying she wanted to keep meeting up with him.

'She cares that I care.' He felt the inexplicable need to sniff.

This was better than he could've hoped for. Lemon Pink was back, and although he didn't know what had drawn her away, nor would she tell him, things were shaping up to be a happy ending. Randy smiled hesitantly, "I-thanks. Your company is agreeable too."

"Thank you, Randy Pickaxe." Slowly, Lemon Pink levitated up her book back up in her pretty silvery magic and resumed reading. But her lilac eyes kept flitting back over to him. As if double checking he wasn't going to change his mind.

Randy was a simple pony. He didn't need to know any of Lemon's secrets. He was lucky. He had a friend. And maybe, possibly, one day conceivably, (he barely dared acknowledge the possibility as real), a marefriend.

If he were braver, or if this had been a romance storybook, or if he'd been more confident like Firea, he would've asked Lemon Pink out right here and now. This was the perfect moment everypony

spoke about, right? After having a deep talk about feelings, right?

Randy's cheeks burned, 'Nope. Not today. I'm lucky, but not that lucky.'

Lemon Pink was there, waiting on the park bench at lunch time the next day. And the day after that.

And the next.

And the next.

Not the one, but the following day after that.

And the next day too.

Lemon came out to dinner with him again, although for the first time, it was her who suggested a meal and the place to eat. It was a nice open air diner in Lower Canterlot, predominantly catering to pegasi because of how it was raised off the ground, but its spicy broccoli bake was just fine by Randy. The rose bush planters were a nice touch too. He told himself not to read anything into the roses just because Lemon had chosen to eat there.

His gardening job in the park was also coming along fine. His probationary period of employment was finally finished, and he'd even gotten a slight pay rise, which was always nice. They were busy planting lots of bulbs at the moment, getting the park ready for spring even if it was a long ways off yet.

The park was going to look spectacular in three or four months time. Randy told Lemon Pink about it during one of their joint lunch breaks, sitting on the bench under the oak trees.

Randy liked his job, he liked working outdoors with his hooves, and he took pride in his work, even if he was just a simple gardener. It may not have been related to his rather niche special talent, but that didn't mean he couldn't be good at it.

Perhaps one could've gotten the wrong impression about their

meetings in the park. Most of the time they didn't actually speak or discuss anything. Often, they just sat in companionable silence in the fresh air and sunshine as Lemon studied her latest book, and Randy ate his lunch. It was nice though. Very... 'serene', Randy believed the term was. Probably. He should go check the dictionary, just to be sure.

In a reverse, Firea was always boisterous, enthusiastic, and a chatterbox every time Randy met up with him over apple juice and cider, or on occasion, something stronger. It really did bring home the contrast to Randy between the two unicorn's, and just how subtly different Lemon Pink was to the other ponies of Canterlot once you got to know her.

Also, she was a lot prettier than Firea.

He hadn't dared put anything like that down on paper in the letters he wrote back home bi-weekly. In fact, he hadn't even mentioned Lemon Pink once. He knew what his mother and sister could get like at the first whiff of budding romance in the air. They'd demand to know everything, all the details of every conversation, all the time, every time.

Randy definitely couldn't do that, Lemon Pink had made it clear she had her secrets, and he needed to honour her trust in him to be discreet.

And then, just when everything was back to going great, something had to happen once again.

At first, Randy didn't know it, because Lemon was still waiting on the bench, unlike last time. But she wasn't reading. There was no book in sight. She was wearing her cloak, and her sunhat today. In fact, Randy had somehow almost missed Lemon sitting on there at their bench.

Randy slowed as he trotted over, a niggling worry forming in the back of his head.

He didn't know why, put something about Lemon Pink was putting him on edge today.

"Afternoon, Lemon." He greeted, taking his seat.

"Hello, Randy Pickaxe."

Lemon didn't otherwise react to his presence. She looked tired, her angular face cast in shadow under the wide brim of the sunhat. Randy belatedly noticed she now sported a thin, silver choker necklace.

He blinked. Randy didn't think he'd ever seen Lemon wearing any kind of jewellery or makeup. She really wasn't the sort. He privately admitted to himself though she looked good with it.

Except, she didn't look good today. She looked like something was wrong.

Dare he ask? Randy teetered, unsure if he should. Unexpectedly, it was Lemon who beat him to it.

"I will not be able to attend our lunch break meetings from now on. Nor dinner invites. Something has come up." Lemon informed him, not turning. She was watching the park around them.

Randy tried not to droop. At least Lemon was telling him this time, "How long will you be gone?" He asked.

"I don't know. I don't know when or if this problem will be resolved. But I will not get another chance to warn you."

"Well, thank you for taking the time to warn me, I really do appreciate it. Is your problem... bad? If you are allowed to tell me about it. I mean, if you can still come here, at least it can't be as bad as last time, right?" Randy attempted to cheer Lemon up.

Lemon still didn't glance at him, "Today, right now, it's just the calm before the storm. A false respite. Ready or not, it is still coming. The wolf only needs enough luck to find you once."

"Huh? What's that mean?"

"It means you will not be seeing me again for... I do not know how long. But do not look for me. In fact, it would be best for you to not mention me to others if at all possible."

Randy really didn't like the sound of that. He had a bad feeling.

"Is this problem... something dangerous?"

"No," Lemon swiftly denied, "You just don't know the context of what is happening again, that's all."

But she still didn't look at him. In fact, Randy suddenly realised, she was constantly watching their surroundings. Like she was on guard against a threat.

'She said no. But why then isn't she reading like normal, and instead is watching the park?'

Was she in danger right now?! Was somepony after her? Was he also in danger, is that why she didn't want to be seen with him? To protect him?

Randy felt his throat constrict tightly, and his heart began to pound in his chest. The open beauty of the park, his park, suddenly felt like it could be hiding anything or anypony.

Lemon sighed, "Stop panicking, Randy Pickaxe. I've said it before, my problems are not your problems, and I will keep it that way. You shouldn't have anything to worry about."

"But you-"

Lemon abruptly hopped off the bench, interrupting him. "Sorry, but I cannot stay any longer. This was already more than I should've risked. I need to go."

"Wait!" Randy half reached his hoof out after her before he caught himself.

Lemon Pink looked blankly at his hoof, and he snatched it back in embarrassment. Lemon made a small movement under the short travel cloak as he did. She paused, then stiffly reached out her hoof.

Randy froze as Lemon awkwardly, almost reluctantly, patted him twice on the shoulder. "I am not him. Yes. I am Lemon Pink. I can be different." She murmured.

Was that supposed to be at him? "I-I don't understand. I don't understand any of this."

Lemon patted his shoulder again, two awkward pats once again, "No, I don't imagine you do. It's for the best that it remains that way. I will see you when next I see you, and not before."

Randy had things he wanted to say, questions he desperately wanted to ask. But he knew Lemon wasn't going to answer any of them. He looked down at his hooves.

He was just simple Randy. How had it gone from wonderful to scarily complicated all within the space of a few minutes? He hadn't gotten any sort of warning or premonition when he woke up this morning. Surely that wasn't fair.

He glanced up, mouth opening, "L-"

Lemon Pink was gone. Randy blinked. Still gone. He twisted on the bench, looking around the park. Randy couldn't spot her anywhere he could see from here. The only other pony even in sight was just a completely ordinary yellow mare trotting off down the other path. Lemon was gone. He hadn't been looking down for more than ten or fifteen seconds.

Randy's shoulders hunched. He was unnerved. He didn't know what was happening with Lemon Pink. Her words had made him feel unsafe for the first time since coming to this marvellous city.

'Isn't this supposed to be Canterlot? This can't happen here.'

But it was, and it did, and Lemon wasn't there the next day.

Lemon Pink did not re-emerge either, even though he still looked each day despite her warnings. Randy even went to the park on his days off just to check.

Randy tried to focus on other things, telling himself there was no use worrying over Lemon. And there were things to claim his attention. His life was more than one pony.

He wrote home, he met up with Fiera and the stallion's new marefriend. He cleared out the attic of his new apartment, painted the wall, cooked for himself most nights, ate out once or twice, got a nice secondhoof sofa for free, went to see an amateur magic stage display, did the newspaper crosswords at breakfast, but-

-But always in the back of his head, he would always return to worrying about what was happening to Lemon Pink.

He felt small whenever he thought about it. He was just a simple pony, living a simple life. Lemon said she liked that about him, but she was a much bigger and more complicated pony compared to him.

She here and then gone, she had secrets, she was confident. While he was just sort of...here. Left waiting hopefully for Lemon to come back.

'But I'll be patiently waiting' Randy decided.

'When she comes back, I'll be her friend again, for as long as she remains next time. I can be her simple, normal friend. I can't be anything else, so I won't be anything else. I'll just be simple, straightforward Randy, happy to see her whenever she's here.'

Still though, he couldn't help but worry. It was the worst for the first two days, where his mind was conjuring up all sorts of terrible possibilities, until he finally realised how unrealistic his imagined disaster scenarios were.

He still only just managed to stop himself from telling Firea when they met at the local pub, but he remembered Lemon Pink's trust in him and managed to keep his mouth shut.

Plus, Firea wouldn't understand. By Celestia and Luna, Randy didn't understand, so how could Firea?

However, he still couldn't help but remember Firea's first warning

about unicorns with sharp horns. That they were dodgy, shadowy ponies. Lemon wasn't like that, but...something bad seemed to follow her around.

'That rumour's such rubbish. Harmony created all ponies equal.'

But he still thought about it, and hoped Lemon Pink was okay.

Completely out of the blue, Lemon Pink knocked on his door two days ago.

Randy had just been staring blankly into his ice-box, trying to decide if there was anything in there he wanted or if he should go down to the hayburger stand, and somepony knocked on the door.

Ba-kang *Ba-kang* *Ba-kang*

'I really need to get a different door knocker. Who could it be at this time-?'

Randy pulled the door open, he hadn't locked it. Waiting on his apartment doorstep, there was a pink mare in a floppy sunhat...

'WaitwaitwaitHangOnASecond.' How had he not immediately recognised her!?

"Lemon P-Pink?" Randy gasped.

"Hello, Randy Pickaxe."

Randy became aware he was staring open mouthed. What was he doing again? Oh yeah, he was trying to decide what to eat. And now Lemon Pink was on his doorstep.

What? How?

"You're back-Lemon you-how did you know where I-? You're okay! Wait, are you okay? You look okay."

He couldn't see anything obviously wrong with Lemon as he

anxiously looked her over. Her familiar pink fur was as simplistically groomed as it always was, her thin posture straight and unbent, and when he peered at her smooth face, the blank, calm expression he'd come to expect was there.

But... There *was* something different. Lemon Pink was physically okay, but... Randy guessed something had gone wrong. But she was here, so she was okay at least.

"I wanted to see you," Lemon abruptly stated, "And to inform you I am back, and we can start meeting once again. The problem has been dealt with."

"That's great! Great news." Randy belatedly realised that he was keeping a lady waiting on the doorstep, "Oh, I'm sorry, come in. Please, feel free."

'I'm so glad I cleaned this place up today.'

Lemon didn't immediately take up his polite offer. She glanced around, cautiously looking both ways first. "I suppose it couldn't hurt."

As Randy led her into his small living room, he wondered again how she'd even known this was his house. 'I must've mentioned where I live sometime. Probably just can't remember when.'

He was just happy that she was back. His step felt like it was physically lighter. And she'd sought him out all of her own accord, too! How great was that?

Randy turned around in his living room, "It isn't much, but it's home sweet home."

Lemon's eyes flickered around assessing as she paused at the entrance, "Don't be so dismissive. There are many who have less."

Randy winced. Did Lemon mean she herself had less, or just that she'd seen ponies with less? He felt immediately guilty, and then ashamed. How could he be so quick to forget? Lemon had just returned from struggling with Celestia only knew what. He shouldn't have said anything like that. "I'm sorry. Are you really

okay?"

"Yes, I am well enough. I could certainly be much worse if things had happened only slightly differently."

Randy sucked in his breath, "What things-? No, I forgot I shouldn't ask. But, um, you're back now, right?" He smiled as brightly as he could.

Lemon nodded, still looking around his house. She hadn't moved to take the sofa seat he'd proffered her. "The problem at my work has passed, and my boss is okay now. It... Nevermind, it isn't important. But yes, I am back and around in Canterlot now."

There was a long silence as each of them stood there.

"So, can I ask why're you here? You're more than welcome of course. I just, wasn't expecting..."

"I wanted to come see you." Lemon stated.

The tips of his ears were starting to burn. He coughed, and mumbled something unintelligible.

"Ah. It seems this is a bit sudden for you. I don't have any experience with having friends. Would you prefer I leave your home for now and we can meet as normal tomorrow?" Lemon enquired, very politely.

"You don't have any friends?" Randy asked before he could stop himself.

"You're mistaken, I do have friends."

"Oh good, when you said that I thought-"

"You are my friend."

Randy looked at Lemon Pink. He remembered getting to know her, remembered how reserved and cold she was. Sadly, he could all too easily imagine it. An orphan, with her crooked horn, self-dependant, confident, and having earned everything she wanted in

life through her own hard work and dedication all by herself. Lemon Pink was really strong, but she also sounded like she was lonely.

'That's really so sad.' Randy thought, but Lemon didn't want his pity. He'd just be insulting her. Yeah, Lemon was so strong she didn't need pity. Randy straightened himself and put on a smile.

"Well I'm really glad you're back safely. I've missed getting to sit by you in the park. I really do appreciate you coming to let me know. I was worried but now I'm not, so thanks."

Lemon blinked at him.

Randy faltered only briefly, but he couldn't let his courage flee this time, "Lemon Pink, can I ask you out to a meal? Tonight? As a date?"

Lemon looked at him sharply, "A date, by which you mean, as a partner in a relationship?"

"Um, yes please?" Randy squeaked.

There was a long silence while Randy sweated. His mouth was dry. Lemon Pink didn't move. Presently, he realised she wasn't going to either. His heart sank into his hooves.

"If, if you don't want to, that's fine, I'm sorry for pressing you." He mumbled.

Lemon Pink finally stirred herself, "I... do not know. This is not, I have no experience with this. I don't know what the correct answer is."

"That's, that's okay. I understand, you're trying to let me down easy, I'm sorry I asked-"

"No you don't understand. You're misunderstanding my meaning. I mean I don't know if I want to answer yes or no."

Randy's heart jumped back up out of his hooves. Dared he hope...?

"So, does that mean...?"

"I don't yet know. I need to think on it more, my orders, no, this is my decision. Yes. I haven't decided. So, for now... Perhaps."

"Yes!"

"I said only perhaps," Lemon Pink interrupted his celebration, "Let's go to dinner, not as a couple, as friends. I will let you know either way once I've decided."

But Randy couldn't stop grinning. His face was hot and he knew he was blushing, but he was so relieved. He hadn't ruined everything after all, and even better, he had a chance! His tail was almost wagging.

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After a meal of extra hot green chilli curry, Lemon Pink provisionally said, "Yes."

---< < < > > >---

Ba-kang *Ba-kang*

"Oh!" Randy dropped his pencil on the table, jumping off his stool and hurrying for the door, dodging around the sofa on the way. He was already smiling in delight and anticipation.

He all but threw the door open, exclaiming, "Lemon Pink!"

And indeed, it was Lemon Pink waiting outside, just as it had been the day before yesterday. Although no sunhat this time.

She lifted her chin slightly, so she could coolly examine him past a wispy strand of silver mane, "Hello, Randy Pickaxe."

Randy couldn't help it. He smiled when she said his name. Lemon did not return the smile.

Randy stepped aside to let her inside, mostly because he was being polite, but partly because... He didn't know why.

"I was hoping you'd come by again, Lemon. I didn't know if you would, and I didn't want to expect you, since I know how busy you are, so thanks again." Randy chuckled nervously as he lead the way into the living room.

He knew Lemon appreciated silence and disliked pointless chatter, but he didn't quite seem able to stop himself today.

Just like last time, Lemon stopped at the entrance to fully examine the room before entering, even though she'd already been in here once. Strange.

"Take any seat you want. Can I get you anything? I can put on the kettle."

"No, I am fine. You aren't expecting anyone else to visit this evening, are you?" Lemon asked, pausing to look at the letter he'd been writing on the table. He hadn't gotten much further than merely addressing it: 'Hi Mom and Sis and Grandpa Pickaxe if he's staying. Send Dad my...'

"Nope, Firea's got some night time firefighter exercise today, or tonight even, and, er, nopony really comes around anyway." Randy answered sheepishly. Lemon might not have any other friends at all, but he himself also had less than he'd like.

Lemon didn't quite look at him. She looked past him, not meeting his eyes. "I see. Thank you."

'Huh? Thank you? For what?'

Randy didn't get to ask. Lemon moved around the table, coming closer.

"So this is the one." An airy, childish voice spoke. Randy nearly jumped out of his skin. There, standing next to Lemon Pink was a white foal-NoWaitNotaFoal, a lamb.

"Bhuh?"

"Yes, Prey. This is him, Randy Pickaxe."

"Bhuh?" Randy repeated intelligently. Lemon had never said anything about her foalsitting before.

The young lamb was smiling cutely at him, the blue ribbon she wore nicely matching the sky blue of her eyes.

"An earth pony. That's something I guess."

Randy finally snapped back to reality, smiling at the foal and bending his head to address her, "Hello there. Why yes, my name is Randy. Has Miss Lemon Pink been talking about me? It's very nice to meet you. What's your name?"

'My word, she's as cute as my little sis was at her age.'

The lambs smile grew an inch, "Lemon already said. I'm Prey."

Randy did a double take between Lemon and the filly, 'What kind of a name is that?!'

"That's a...lovely name?" He proffered.

If the lamb was smiling before, she was positively beaming now, so wide that her eyes scrunched shut. "You were right Lemon. He does make an awful liar."

Randy blinked a few times. He peered closer, he couldn't help it. The fur beneath the little lamb's smiling eyes was off. Oddly raised. Scars.

Randy jerked his head back, "Wha?"

"Alright, that's enough. Stun him Lemon."

Randy gaped. Had he really just heard that? He couldn't have. Randy glanced to Lemon and with a thrill of fear, saw her sharp horn was glowing silver.

"Woah, wait wait!"

Prey was still smiling, "Do it. Why are you hesitating, Lemon?"

Randy stared into Lemon's face. It was closed, her lilac eyes glinted silver in reflection of her horn light.

"Wait, hang on a second here-!"

The lamb's smile vanished. She looked levelly at Lemon Pink, on hoof half raised. "Are you going to disobey?" Prey asked quietly.

Lemon jerked her head, and took a breath, "No, Prey. I obey."

"Stop don't-"

Silver. Blank. Nothingness. No thoughts. Peace.

Prey opened his eyes. He blinked, back to his own slightly blurry vision after watching past events through Randy Pickaxe's own eyesight.

With a shudder of disgust, Prey stopped touching the stunned earth pony's leg and wiped his cloven hoof on the floor. Randy was laid out across his own floorboards. On Randy's other side, Lemon opened her eyes as she too returned to the physical world. She had been in there, reviewing Randy's memories side by side with Prey.

Prey had been taking no chances. He was keeping Lemon alongside him and in view at all times. He didn't want to believe the worst, but he'd been wrong before.

Rather than look at Lemon, he glanced downwards instead. The unconscious chestnut stallion was about average size for an earth pony, meaning still bigger and stouter than Lemon, and much bigger than a runt lamb.

He could feel the weight of Lemon's eyes as she silently looked at him, waiting. Prey didn't let anything show on the mask of his face as he considered what he'd seen. He shouldn't be having to wear a mask around Lemon Pink. She was supposed to be his completely trustworthy tool. But that was the difference between a person and a tool.

She'd kept this from her reports, lying by omission.

No harm had come of her association with Randy, but that wasn't the point. No harm had come of it *yet*. What if Randy had mentioned any of Lemon's suspicious activities to someone? Lemon had not been as subtle as she could have, making allusions and inadvertently dropping hints that he himself would never have done in her place.

'In a way, that's yet another point that she's a some*one*.'

But that didn't excuse her actions. Even if Randy himself never caused any problems, what if Lemon was off visiting her smitten coltfriend when an emergency happened and Prey needed her? He'd created Lemon Pink for a reason. She was supposed be *his* tool, one he so desperately needed to survive. She wasn't the playmate to some despicable, soft, and racist pony.

What's more, Prey could tell Lemon didn't even care for Randy as a coltfriend. She didn't feel strong emotions for one, and for another, she just didn't have any experience. She didn't know what romantic love was. On the one hoof, Prey didn't either, however he knew for certain it was not what Lemon felt.

Interest. That was what she felt, and nothing more. Like one might feel for their pet dog.

Prey had created Lemon as best he could, blending a copy of his memories with the scraps left of Night Watcher, but even so, she was less than whole. So she was trying to fake it until she made it.

It was likely Lemon Pink would've responded this way to the first other person who showed interest in her, but it just happened to have been Randy. Prey could see right now that if Lemon had been allowed to continue to interact with Randy unnoticed, it wouldn't have ended well. For Randy.

Or maybe not for Lemon Pink either. She had acted outside of his expectations here, who was to say she couldn't do so again? That's what people did, they acted outside of your expectations. Tools didn't.

Lemon was still silently watching him. She was tense, but she would

do whatever he said... Wouldn't she? Could he answer yes with a hundred percent certainty?

'She saved my life. She crossed the mountain range, she fought the thieves. But she also murdered all of her diamond dog guides to hatch her veropede...'

Just like Prey had murdered the people of Alfalfa Dale.

Prey thought of the diamond dogs. He thought of the alpha. He thought of their deaths, here in a strange land, far from home, orchestrated by the cruel plans of others. Helpless, betrayed, and alone in pony lands. A bitter tragedy. They'd been people, individuals with just as much right to live free as of the so called less races; donkeys, sheep, cows, or goats.

'That's what it comes down to in the end, isn't it? Is Lemon Pink not an individual too?'

Just for a moment, Prey felt his gaze drawn down to the golden bands sitting snugly around his forelegs.

Prey made his decision.

"This Randy Pickaxe seems to be harmless enough. He really is just an average, straightforward earth pony. Better than a unicorn, at least."

Prey's eyesight may not have been perfect, but he could still see some of the unconscious tension leave Lemon's shoulders. But he wasn't done.

"However you've let slip far too many unsubtle hints already, and furthermore, he serves no purpose other than a distraction. He is smitten with puppy love, and nothing more. Do you disagree?"

Prey observed Lemon. She could only shake her head, "No, Prey."

"I'm glad you agree. Your minor relationship with him serves no purpose. Thus, it ends tonight."

"Yes, Prey."

"And you're going to be the one to do it."

Lemon would know this was a test, it was transparently obvious. She had blundered, brought her loyalty and competince into doubt, so it was up to her to restore it. But trust, once lost, is a hard thing to regain.

Lemon's gaze lowered, "Yes, Prey."

Lemon's curved horn began to glow silver, mixed with red, and she lowered it towards Randy's gently breathing form.

"Stop. What are you doing?" Prey interrupted.

Lemon stopped. She flicked her eyes back up to Prey in confusion, "I am going to erase his memories of you and this meeting. Then I will plant a false memory of me knocking on his door to say I've changed my mind, and that I never want to see him again."

Prey sharply jerked his head in the negative, making his ears and ribbon swish, "A standard approach, but you're wrong this time. Memories are so easy for people like us to erase. Including false ones. What's to stop you returning here in the future behind my back to resume your relationship with Randy Pickaxe?"

Prey watched Lemon closely, waiting for her answer, whatever her answer.

But it seemed Lemon couldn't say anything to that. Any assurances she might give, while most likely true, weren't unquestionably true anymore. If she'd done this, why couldn't she do it again? Her words couldn't prove her sincerity. All she could do was give her word, but someone's word only means something up until they break it.

Prey could've gone into and read her mind to be sure, but he was asking for more than that. You could never fully trust a mind leeches mind anyway, even your own.

Prey wanted something more, he wanted tangible assurance.

Lemon looked around Randy's apartment, "What then, Prey? What

would you have me do?"

Prey didn't show any hesitation, "The simplest solution of course. Kill him, and burn his apartment down. It'll seem as if he was caught in the fire. Maybe it'll even be his friend Firea who turns up to extinguish the flames."

Prey shrugged uncaringly, and pointed at one of the cushions on the sofa, "Use that. Smother him. That way, if there is somehow a body left, it'll look still like he died of smoke inhalation. It only takes one or two breaths, after all"

Lemon looked at the pillow, "Is this to be my test?" She asked.

"Yes. Kill him. That's an order. I'm giving an order. Are you going to listen to the order? Get rid of this distraction."

"Yes, Prey. I understand."

Lemon went over and picked up the cushion. She turned back around and took the three paces over to Randy. She didn't drag her hooves, and her face was blank. She used her hooves, not her magic.

Prey stopped tugging at the end of his ribbon and silently raised his eyebrow in challenge; 'Well? I'm waiting.'

Lemon looked away and pressed the cushion down over Randy's muzzle. She pressed down firmly with her weight. The stunned Randy Pickaxe never woke up.

.....Ten seconds..... Twenty seconds.....

Prey didn't blink. He stared, waiting until Lemon looked back up at him like he'd known she would. He met her lilac eyes, and let her see the merciless answer in his silence; 'Yes. You really are going to kill him. It wasn't a test or a bluff.'

Lemon took a deep breath, the one that Randy wasn't taking, and nodded quickly just once:

"Yes, Prey."

"Stop."

Lemon's head jerked back up to face Prey in surprise, "What?"

"Stop. You're going to kill him."

Lemon jerked the cushion away. The unconscious Randy's body breathed deeply, the slightly blue tinge of the skin under the fur of his face returning to normal.

"It really was a test?" Lemon asked quietly.

"Yes. This time." Prey felt like scum, but he had done far worse in the past before. Nearly killing someone? That was nothing. Literally nothing. What was nearly murder compared to actual murder?

Prey waved his hoof, taking in both Lemon and her stunned coltfriend, "This is on you now. You... you're a person. You can keep him as your coltfriend, or breakup, it's your choice. However, he's your responsibility. No more letting slip hints. Find a better excuse to use. You will have to review his memories periodically to make sure he's not going to pose an exposure risk. If I have to do it again myself, there won't be a third time."

"I, yes, Prey. Thank you."

Prey turned away, "Don't thank me. Not murdering someone isn't something you should be thanked for. You are my tool. It may as well have been my hoof holding the cushion. But if you're not my tool, then you're a person. And if you're a person, that murder would've been on you. So think long and hard, and make damned sure you like the answer you pick. Just..."

Lemon Pink was not compromised. She'd proved she would kill even Randy if he ordered it. Was that good or bad?

Prey sighed, "...Just erase his memory of this meeting. You can stay afterwards if you want. Have fun. I'm going."

"Yes, Prey."

Prey left the apartment and walked down the emptying street, ponies returning home for the day. He avoided all he saw, although they didn't even look at him. The runed sunhat sat on his head, despite it now being twilight. He needed to make another one of these, although something other than a hat this time would be best.

High above in the twilight, the north star was already out, and the first silver sparks of the other were starting to follow it's lead.

Prey didn't stop next to the stone drinking fountain at the street's end to look up at the stars suspended in the heavens. That was more Lemon Pink's thing. Along with Randy now, it seemed.

Randy Pickaxe, a name that Prey wouldn't have to add to The List with a line through it. The List wasn't just for those who had yet to die. At the bottom, it contained names of those who Prey had never meant to kill, but whose names were still crossed through. The most recent:

Seashores, the mare crushed under the collapse at the lumber yard.

Barley, Happledap, Otto, and Parsley, four of the only names he knew from Alfalfa Dale. The rest of the villagers had blank spaces, ones which would never be filled.

But the names diamond dogs, which Prey knew all of, taken from the alpha's mind, weren't there at the bottom. Prey had meant to kill them.

Prey didn't know if he should be adding the names of the deer holt to the bottom of his list. No one knew what'd happened to them, so he was hoping for the best and leaving them off. But there were others there.

He knew so few of their names. He didn't know the number missing. He couldn't even make an educated guess, and he didn't want to either. But there would always be a large blank space at the bottom.

'My list never gets any shorter. But tonight, at least it won't grow any longer.'

Prey shook his head to himself, watching the paving stones passing

beneath his hooves, 'Thanking me? What a ridiculous notion. You should never have to thank someone for not committing murder.'

But he hadn't committed murder. He hadn't killed anyone today. After fighting the thieves only two days ago, barely any time at all, he'd been expecting...

Well, it didn't matter, because it hadn't come to that. No one was dead.

Prey stopped in the deep shadow of an unlit house. He looked around. He saw and sensed no one. His lips started to twitch, and he sat down, just for a moment.

No one had died. Prey's hoof rose and brushed down his ear in the dark, the opposite ear to the one which bore his ribbon.

Prey smiled, a real smile. Wobbly, unhinged, rusty, and bittersweet. But bittersweet tasted far better than just bitter. He smiled and laughed quietly to himself with no one to see or hear.

"Khe-khe-khe-khe."

'I didn't murder anyone today.'

Really, what a stupid thing to be happy about.

Prey returned to his flat that night and checked up on Crimson's recovery again. They talked of nothing, exchanged words, and just sat in silence. Prey cooked them both something, for a given definition of 'cooked', and they ate, before both retiring for the night.

Prey stayed up late into the night, laboriously building the base for more runic arrays once again. Time waits for no one, no not even the all powerful alicorn sisters up in their Palace, and this might well be the last opportunity Prey got for a while.

Tomorrow, at dusk, he would be going with Crimson to meet up with Gloom outside of the Palace to return to active Night Guard

duty. It was still as of yet completely uncertain whether Scenic, let alone Lilly, would be joining the three of them too.

The long absence was over. Fall was here. The ISND awaited.

---I---

68.5 On a Clear, Moonlit Night

Under the waning sun of evening, Prey, Gloom, and Crimson met outside the entrance to the Guard Compound.

The air had that minor nip to it that let you know the turn of the seasons was finally here. It wasn't cold by any means, since the ponies of Canterlot wouldn't put up with something as inconvenient as cold if they didn't at least get some pristine white snow to go along with it. Preferably only at Hearth's Warming, and not before.

"Well. Here we all are once again." Gloom said simply by way of greeting.

Crimson nodded back politely, but silently.

"Hm." Prey grunted, suspiciously eyeing the pegasus Royal Guard on the gate.

Gloom wryly quirked a lip, "I missed working with you both too."

Prey looked Gloom, who would shortly be his Sargent once again, over. The thestral wasn't kitted out in his Guard armour, despite the return to his post, but then, neither was Crimson. Their armour had been thoroughly trashed in the ill-fated trip across the Ridgeback, and had been recalled when they were all rushed to the hospital. It seemed like an age ago.

Regardless, as a result of that, Gloom was his normal lighter grey self, and Crimson his deep red. However, Gloom had worn that loose fitting black scarf to cover the puckered scar tissue on his chest for his flight over. Other than that, the Sargent-to-be was back to normal health.

But it was Gloom's face Prey carefully looked at.

He studied Gloom's yellow eyes, saw the now familiar poison burn tracks underneath, watched how his tufted ears stood, and noted the set of his shoulders.

Gloom looked ready. Not so tired, not so worn, although those elements were of course still there, but nevertheless still ready.

Gloom was back, ready and willing to do his duty.

Also, and Prey was looking very carefully for this, there were none of the subtle signs which indicated lingering negative after effects caused by his forced editing of Gloom's memories. Prey hadn't wanted to do it, but there hadn't been a lot of choice at the time. But Gloom now seemed fine.

'-just wish Scenic and Lilly could've been here for this little reunion too-'

A reunion? Well, Prey supposed it was, of a sort. It was just the three of them again, all about to re-join the ranks of the Night Guard. Two out of the three of them willingly so.

Prey next glanced up at Crimson, who was standing stiffly beside him, but still safely outside of hoof's reach.

He'd helped Crimson get ready earlier, instructing him on how best to mask and downplay his still very obvious injuries caused by his 'little' training incident.

It was a bit hard to hide stitches, and any bruising on someone's face always stood out, but those ones were along Crimson's sides he could hide if he held his folded wings right. Smaller cuts were also easy, especially in Crimson's red fur, and were mostly old by now anyways.

Prey'd also had Crimson tie off his warrior's braid long and hang it just so to cover a portion of his neck and back too.

Still, Prey counted it lucky Nighthawk had been involved in Crimson's 'training accident' himself, or else there might be some uncomfortable questions. Obviously, Gloom had asked what'd happened the moment he'd seen Crimson.

"Training gone wrong." Crimson had answered stoically.

Gloom had raised both brows, "Really?"

"Yes."

Gloom had favoured him with a slightly disbelieving look, but out of trust born from all they'd done together, decided this training wasn't some sort of self-inflicted punishment and that Crimson probably knew what he was doing, "Alright then. Please just be more careful in the future."

Prey had been telling Crimson he needed to eat plenty of protein, along with delicately reminding him to drink extra blood, or 'clan wine' to stay healthy. Crimson had grimaced, Prey knew he along with Gloom strongly disliked it whenever he mentioned their unsavoury dietary requirements. Not least because to Crimson, blood tasted exactly like blood. Disgusting. But medicine was often disgusting, and Prey was sure Crimson had still followed his suggestion anyway. So that was good.

Right now, Gloom was looking up at the gate arch of the Guard Compound's entrance. Set at the arch's peak was a large golden carving of the Royal Guard's symbol, a rising sun on a shield. No sign of a moon. Beneath the proud crest and inside on the compound's courtyard, Royal Guards were coming and going as always.

"Shall we?"

Prey squared his thin shoulders, "May as well get it over with."

"Come now, Prey. I know you don't hate it all that much." Gloom chided.

Prey did, he really did, but he decided to match Gloom's upbeat mood instead, "Don't you realise what's waiting for us through those gates?"

Gloom raised an eyebrow, "Our duty?"

"A month's worth of backlogged paperwork."

Gloom and Crimson both winced.

"Ah. Yes. That. Wonderful. Taffy's going to be insufferably smug, I

can feel it." Gloom sighed.

"May as well get it over with." Prey echoed again.

Gloom half grinned, and lead them in through the open gate.

The pegasus Royal Guard glared at them as they passed, or did until Gloom glanced back at him, at which point, he snapped up straight and stared straight ahead as if he hadn't been doing anything:

'-freaky bucking backstabbing batpony-', Prey heard the Guard think as they entered.

'If he's that sore over the inspections still, it's surprising he didn't halt us just to be a pain in the flank.' Prey thought. Gloom still had his Guard badge, so they could've gotten past in a moment anyways, but maybe some rumours had gotten around about the Sargent of the ISND?

It would be mildly interesting to discover how accurate those rumours were.

Prey returned his attention to the Guard Compound as they crossed the courtyard, going past the office buildings and overnight holding cells. Prey recalled interrogating Copper Pot in there.

The Royal Guards who noticed them in the waning light gave them a wide berth and looks ranging from angry to worried. Other than a wing flick, Crimson ignored their attitude, and Gloom simply dismissed it.

'-after everything that's happened, it's almost a welcome relief-'

Even fewer Guards noticed Prey himself, since he'd positioned himself with Gloom and Crimson's legs to obscure anyone's view. But to those who did, Prey smiled at as brightly as a sunflower.

'Racist bigots, the lot of them.'

But as long as they kept their distance, Prey didn't care either. He didn't need to interact with any of them to complete his enforced tasks from Luna, the betrayer.

First things first, they were supposed to report in, being out of uniform notwithstanding.

The Palace and Captain Nighthawk awaited.

Nostalgia wasn't the word as Prey followed behind Gloom and Crimson through the Lower Palace, the latter trotting with a stiff step to hide a limp. No, nostalgia *definitely* wasn't the word. Nostalgia implied fond memories, and Prey had not even one of the glittering gilt Palace which belonged to the Sun Wolf.

But even so, the time the ISND had spent inside these walls had been time when they weren't fighting for their lives, or cowering in some dark corner in terror, or facing mentally scarring horrors.

Was there a different word to describe that feeling instead, perhaps?

As they turned right and entered the Night Guard section, they happened to meet Lieutenant Screech in the company of two other thestrals coming the other way.

"Sargent Gloom."

Gloom stopped and saluted, "Lieutenant Screech."

Screech looked first to Gloom, and then the rest of them up and down. Prey vaguely recognised the two lower rank Night Guards following Screech. They'd been in the throne room when he'd first been dragged before Luna, he recalled.

"It's good that you're finally back, Sargent." Was all Screech said formally, but the respectful nod of his head and friendly tilt of his ears showed he really was glad.

"Yes sir. Thank you sir." Gloom answered, with just as much unsaid feeling.

'-after everything, your resolve is an honour to Princess Luna and us all-'

'-it really is good to be back among those where we belong-'

"I won't keep you, but we'll catch up at some point Gloom, outside of work. Soon." Screech's eyes conveyed a silent message that there was something important to discuss.

"Yes sir. I look forward to it."

"Soon. Until then." Screech nodded again seriously to them all, "Continue as you were, Sargent. Crimson, Prey."

The two accompanying Night Guards also nodded their goodbyes as Screech marched off, no doubt with a hundred and one things he still needed to do tonight alone.

'I wonder how many of those problems are going to end up on my plate? Or our plate, even.' Prey wondered sourly. Nighthawk would no doubt tell them.

Knock-knock

"Come." Came the same familiar gruff bark.

The Captain's office hadn't changed much either, still just as packed with dumped Night Guard equipment which had nowhere else to go, and uncomfortably dark to Prey's eyes. A bit worse actually, since the Reaper King's poisoning had happened between then and now.

What *was* different, was Nighthawk's desk. Prey remembered how the last one had been half teleported in the pine forest, emphasis on half. But the thestral Captain appeared just the same as always as he looked up from scribbling on a form.

"Captain Nighthawk."

"Sargent Gloom, at ease. Crimson, close the door behind you."

"Yes sir." Crimson gave no hint of resentment at Nighthawk for his current injuries.

Nighthawk himself showed no sign of mentioning it either, although Prey would not be forgetting Nighthawk's hoof in this.

"By their absence, I take it Scenic Paint and Lilly Blossom are still not fit to return to active duty?" The Captain asked bluntly.

"Sorry sir, no. I'm not sure Lilly ever will be, not in her condition. And Scenic... Well, not him either really. He's doing much better than Lilly, but even so... If he doesn't return to active duty of his own choice, I wouldn't hold it against him in the slightest."

"Nopony here would," Nighthawk stated, "Their return to active duty was conditional upon their own volition, and their positions will be held open indefinitely until they make a final decision. It would be a dishonour to offer them any less for their sacrifices."

'But not us, eh?' Prey thought, blank faced.

There was a moment's silence as everyone considered the circumstances which had led to all of this.

Like a string of bells tied about your neck, unpleasant memories only ever took a careless bump to chime again and remind you of their existence...

Gloom took a breath, "Yes sir. I hope they'll come back, but it's up to them at the end of the night."

"Correct. But you three are back, and not before time. Those conniving inspectors have delayed and set us back even farther behind schedule, and Her Majesty's work has gone opposed for far too long already. That is unacceptable, and things are going to change." Nighthawk stated, a rasping growl vibrating in the back of his throat.

Prey saw that Nighthawk was genuinely angry about that, utterly fed up with the Royal Inspections and the nobles who'd been surreptitiously playing in the background.

'-it's only because Princess Luna in her wisdom ordered me to stay hooves off that they're getting away with this. For now. They're making their own noose for later-'

"Things are going to change." Nighthawk repeated with gruff feeling.

"Yes sir." Gloom agreed, even if he didn't know what precisely Nighthawk was speaking of. But obviously, the Captain had a plan.

Prey mentally braced himself, 'Here it comes, another hairbrained, impossible task for us to complete.'

"However, there are a few things to get out of the way first." Nighthawk leaned across his desk.

"Prey. You're first."

'Oh wonderful.' Prey thought. "Yes, sir?"

Nighthawk's bright yellow thestral eyes bore down into him, "You've been written up for breaking the restrictions of your probation once already. Am I wrong?"

"No." Prey answered calmly. He noticed Gloom and Crimson each shifting unhappily.

Nighthawk's mouth pressed into a line as he continued to stare down at Prey, "You remember what we spoke about while you were in the hospital, correct?"

"Yes."

"Then this just amounts to the same warning. You don't want to incur an actual review hearing. If you do, it'll be outside of the Night Guards purview."

"I never signed those restriction papers." Prey said.

"Good, but you know that won't fly with them, Prey. The law is still the law. For your own sake, don't get caught again. That's all I'll say."

'Don't get caught again'. That wasn't the same as don't do it again, just don't get caught.

'-been forced to grow up too fast and too broken. But authority is not his enemy, I must make him understand that-'

'Do you expect me to be grateful for a useless warning?' Prey gritted his teeth. Nighthawk was unwaveringly waiting for a response though.

"I'll do my best, sir."

"Good." Nighthawk nodded once and sat back, releasing Prey from his piercing yellow stare.

"The second item of business concerns everypony here. Have you all been attending the mandatory therapist appointments?"

Gloom nodded, "Yes, we all have."

"Then I don't need to say anything further on that topic. Third, a warning to each of you." Nighthawk grimaced.

Seeing that, all three of them warily braced themselves, "Yes sir?"

"There is going to be a medal ceremony at some point, held before the assembled Guard on duty. The ceremony is set after Royal Guard tradition, and each of you are required to attend in uniform on the day."

"They want to give us a *medal*?" Gloom couldn't keep the distaste from his tone.

'-all those ponies died, and for that we get a medal!?-'

"I thought you'd feel this way, which is why I'm warning you now." Nighthawk answered.

Crimson spoke up, his wings stiff at his sides, "Sir, a medal... that would just be wrong. Cheap. All those po-people are dead. They were murdered. It would be a medal bought in their blood."

Prey agreed. A medal? The presumptuousness of it angered him. It was like they were saying: 'Congratulations! You survived the horrors we threw you into caused by our own incompetence. But

don't worry, here's a shiny bit of metal, so that makes up for all of it.'

Further more, *they* were going to be *giving* the medal, as if they had the right to judge the ISND and decide what they'd done was good or bad. It was a piece of worthless metal, but they were going to stomp their hooves and cheer like the ISND should be proud. Ha! They knew *nothing*.

"I agree," Nighthawk said, "Trite medals and empty trophies are not the clans ways. But it is the Guard's way, and Princess Luna has approved."

Which was the same as saying it was going to happen whether they wanted it to or not.

"Oh. I see sir." Gloom deflated.

'-well, if Her Majesty's wishes it to be so...-'

They'd barely been back in the Night Guard for fifteen minutes, and already Prey was sick of it all.

'One day. One day I'll be free.' He told himself.

"I don't see it as a likely possibility, but Starry Wing and Captain Armour have both suggested the medal ceremony might do some good in calming tensions between the Royal and Night Guard." Nighthawk's shrug showed his personal rating of the chances of that happening.

"Captain Shining Armour thinks that'll actually work sir?" Gloom asked, trying not to sound too dubious of a Captain's opinion.

"It's probably more of a gesture on his behalf. I'm not holding my breath. But now on to the good news." Nighthawk announced.

There was any good news to be had? Prey was immediately suspicious. This was just the sort of thing that turned out to be even worse news in the long run. But Gloom and Crimson's ear tufts both twitched.

"Yes sir?"

"Your new armour. Now that you're back, you can go pick it up." Nighthawk smirked.

Why was Nighthawk smirking?

"New? Was it that badly damaged it couldn't be repaired?" Gloom asked, but feeling there was something further to this.

"No. You have new armour."

"We do sir? Wait, you just said no."

"You have *new* armour. Completely new. Do you recall that unique armour sets were commissioned by Princess Luna when she reinstated the Night Guard? Ones with better coverage and protection."

Gloom thought way back, to before even Crimson and Prey had come along, "Now that you mention it, yes."

Nighthawk flicked a leathery wing, "The smiths have delayed, postured, and whined incessantly for months about pre-existing orders while making no move to speed up, but Princess Luna finally had enough and I sent Starry Wing to make it clear that their delays would no longer be tolerated."

Prey had seen other Night Guards on their way here. None of them had been wearing anything but the standard recoloured Royal guard armour.

'-wait, Lieutenant Screech was wearing normal armour. And so are you-', Gloom thought, looking at Nighthawk's own armour and helmet.

"Am I missing something, sir?"

Nighthawk snorted, "No Sargent. Merely that the smiths are still completely inefficient and have produced only a hoofful of the required number."

He pointed with his wing claw first at Gloom, then Crimson, "The ISND will be among the first ponies in the Night Guard to get one of these new armour sets."

"Thank you sir, but aren't there other ponies who-"

"No. You are one of Princess Luna's most successful units. With the unforeseen danger the ISND keeps unexpectedly running into, you'll likely have need of it." Nighthawk said seriously without an ounce of flattery. He looked at Prey.

'-out of all of them Prey needs the extra protection the most, but there is none for him. I don't like it-'

Gloom and Crimson both shot Prey sideways looks of their own, but what could anyone do? There was no armour for a child. You weren't supposed to send children into a fight, period. Besides which, Prey couldn't have moved in heavy plate mail even if there had been any in his size.

"That means it's up to me and Sargent Gloom. To be your armour, I mean Prey." Crimson said. Gloom nodded solemnly.

Prey grimaced, because that tactic had been working *so* well in the past, hadn't it? But Gloom and Crimson were being serious, and there was nothing he could do about the situation anyways, aside from making sure they never got into dangerous situations in the first place.

'Yes. That's going to be my goal from here on out.' Prey decided. The disguised electrite feather he'd given to Crimson should help in that regard, assisting in keeping them all safe.

Nighthawk went on; "I think you'll like your new armour. Go see Quartermaster Carrot when you're done here, and get outfitted. Now, Crimson. Your wingblades."

Nighthawk got up and briskly strode over to the safe on the wall, boxes of padded training equipment piled on top. He hooked his hoof under the metal bar and pulled the door open. Unseen, Prey narrowed his eyes. Behind the dark confines of the safe's thick metal

door, there were stacks of unmarked files, bank bags of what looked like pre-counted gold, a loaded crossbow, and there placed on the top, Crimson's wingblades. They'd been carefully placed and stored, just like Nighthawk had promised.

However, that wasn't what Prey was interested in.

From the way Nighthawk had easily pulled the safe door open, it might've appeared like the door had been unlocked, but Prey knew that wasn't the case. With his larger ears, he'd heard the very faint 'click' of the safe unlocking as Nighthawk pulled.

'A magical lock without a standard key.' Prey thought. Obviously, the lock was linked in some way to Nighthawk, or rather, some 'key' on Nighthawk's person.

What could it be? Nighthawk's Guard badge? Something the thestral was carrying under his armour maybe? Or something more obvious, like the Captain rank pins on Nighthawk's shoulder plate? That would fit, since it was a safe set in the Captain's office for the Captain's use, after all.

Just a little something to remember for later.

"Thank you." Crimson said as he received his father's wingblades back with care, and perhaps just a bit too much haste for politeness. He immediately spread one wing, then the other and began strapping the sheathed blades back on.

Prey sighed quietly. So much for Crimson hiding the bruising on his ribs.

However, although Gloom obviously saw them and was privately concerned in his head, he didn't comment. Meanwhile on the other hoof, Nighthawk had known they were there all along.

"And another thing." The Captain had closed the safe and repositioned himself behind his desk again. He pulled open a drawer stuffed with paper and scrolls, and rummaged around until he found what he wanted:

"Here." Nighthawk thrust a crumpled scroll in the direction of

Gloom and Crimson both.

Crimson paused in tightening the straps on the second wingblade to look, and Gloom scooped up the scroll in one wing in interest, "What's this sir?"

"Paperwork. An escalated request from another department. A jumped up flyboy was pulling rank, or else Starry Wing would've already thrown this in the trash. You both need to sign in the negative to make this ridiculous request go away."

'-get this done so they'll shove off and leave us well alone in future-'

Someone had actually dared to try and use their rank to get Nighthawk to pass on their request? And they'd actually expected that to work? Obviously, they didn't understand anything about thestrals. But who even had the authority, never mind the guts, to even try?

Prey had an idea, and it was confirmed when Gloom unrolled the crumpled scroll between his wings and read.

'-the wonderbolts *again*? What does it take for them to take no for an answer?-'

Gloom rolled his eyes as he borrowed a quill from Nighthawk's desk and scrawled his signature without prelude or even explaining the contents Crimson, "Here. Sign there Crimson."

Crimson glanced at the page as he accepted the quill. He frowned down at the page, "A 'cross unit recruitment request'?"

"The Wonderbolts. Seems they're now trying to use the official channels to get you sign up to their flying circus again." Gloom snorted.

Crimson immediately scrawled his name in the 'Decline' box.

"Their audacity and overconfidence is almost impressive. I mean, do they even understand what the ISND does?"

Nighthawk took back the transfer form with contempt, "No. Their

commanding officer has it stuck in her head that your talents would be better utilised with their fake military group inside a flight exclusive unit. Somepony let slip you flew thirty miles in twenty minutes at night to help save Private Lilly Blossom. I would've thought she would've found a new interest to fixate on by now."

Crimson's wing gave a curt little flick, "My duty is to Princess Luna. I would never waste my time like that, sir. And besides, that was only because I had an artifact at the time. And I collapsed into a coma afterwards. Do they know those details?"

Nighthawk shrugged. It was a good shrug, artfully expressing how little it mattered or he cared about what the Wonderbolts might or might not know. He carelessly tossed the now signed scroll in his 'Out' tray.

Prey bet the only reason Nighthawk had even bothered wasting the time it took Gloom, as Crimson's officer, and Crimson, as the person in question, to sign that document was because Nighthawk was sick of being pestered. Now that the request was officially denied on paper, he didn't even have to pretend to entertain any such requests in the future.

That, and Nighthawk thought so little of the Wonderbolts as a military force that they were practically civilians in his eyes, and thus, it was wrong to hold any higher expectations of them.

Nighthawk wasn't the sort to tolerate fools otherwise.

"There's only one further thing before you go see the Quartermaster." Nighthawk said.

They all straightened, although once again it was only really Gloom and Crimson Nighthawk was speaking to.

Nighthawk paused, "It's fortunate you returned tonight specifically. You missed the announcement last night, but all Night Guards are to assemble on parade ground one at oh-four hundred."

They waited, but Nighthawk didn't elaborate on the reason why.

When no further details were forthcoming, Gloom didn't question it.

It was an order from Nighthawk:

"Yes sir. We'll be there."

Nighthawk gruffly smiled, fangs showing, but it wasn't an aggressive smile, "It's something nopony will want to miss."

"No fear of that, sir."

"What do you think's going to be happening at four in the morning?" Gloom mused when they were outside, heading towards the supply depo.

Crimson shrugged, a bit stiff because of the stitches in his left shoulder.

"I'm pretty sure I know." Prey said.

Gloom cocked his ear, "Really?"

"I picked up some hints," Actually Prey had overheard Screech and Nighthawk both thinking about it, "But it's probably supposed to be a surprise."

"The good kind, I take it?" Gloom checked as they turned a corner in the corridor.

"Yes. Do you want me to tell you what it's going to be anyway?" Prey asked.

Neither seemed to consider for a moment that Prey might be mistaken in his guess, "Hmm, if Captain Nighthawk's keeping it as a surprise, then no, I'll wait and see." Gloom decided.

"It's fine, we'll see when it happens." Crimson agreed as they made way for a couple of hurrying Night Guards.

Prey flicked the trailing end of the ribbon back, unconcerned since it really wasn't going to be a negative surprise, "Sure. Suit yourselves."

Quartermaster Carrot glared.

"You're the two damned foals who were incapable of looking after your own armour, aren't you? What happened? Mama wasn't there to hold your hoof? I told you the first time, if you can't look after your equipment, I'll take it back."

'-he hasn't changed even slightly I see-', Gloom thought in resigned frustration.

"When you're fighting monsters it's a bit hard to-"

"Save your excuses for somepony who cares, bat pony." Carrot snapped, "If I'd been allowed to do my duty without interference, you'd both still be paying back your armours repair costs, plus the set you lost, plus the misappropriated spear."

The earth pony glowered, and reluctantly forced out the next bit through gritted teeth, "*Unfortunately*, somepony getting paid more than me made the call that you should be rewarded for your incompetence instead. How lucky for you."

Gloom kept his face neutral. Carrot was rude, aggressive, and abrasive, but normally that wouldn't be enough to get to Gloom. However, Carrot's uninformed dismissal of their fight against the scarecrow and reaper king as simply them being careless grated on Gloom. Ponies had died, and here Carrot was shouting at them about lost equipment without knowing any of the facts.

Prey spied Crimson's feathers bristling at that too.

"Good thing it's not up to you then, sir," Gloom said flatly, "We're here for our two new-"

"I know why you're here. I know my job, unlike some *other* ponies." Carrot interrupted, scowling. He turned around to the cage door behind the counter and roughly unlocked it.

'-bucking jumped up foals all thinking they're some new hot stuff-'

Carrot grumbled under his breath as he replaced his keyring and yanked the cage door open, "Stay here."

"By the moon, he's even more annoying than last time." Gloom hissed quietly as the earth pony stomped off down the neat racks of polished armour, divided by size, along with gleaming spears, swords, wingblades, hammerhooves, and crossbows. Every item gleamed in the bright lantern light.

'-I bet he gives out punishment detail to polish everything. Not that most of it ever gets used-', Gloom thought.

"You might not have noticed, but the Royal Guard really dislikes the Night Guard at the moment." Prey commented.

"There is still such a thing as being professional." Crimson stated, coolly looking after the departing Quartermaster.

Carrot reappeared around the isles pushing a cart with two medium sized wooden crates on it. He gave the cart a measured kick, and it rolled accurately down the isle and through the open cages gate to bump to a stop against the desk.

Carrot stomped out after it, swinging the gate shut with a clang and locking it with a jingle of keys. The ISND waited while he flipped up the counter board and pushed the cart out. He eyed Crimson's wingblades as he unlatched the plain wooden crates.

"Those aren't standard issue wingblades." He stated accusingly.

"No. They're mine." Crimson answered.

"You got a non-standard carry permission?" Carrot challenged.

Crimson flexed his wings, making the sheathed blades give just the slightest metallic whisper, "Yes."

Carrot scowled, "Doesn't matter. I see you don't have a blasted clue how to use them anyway." He snapped, jerking his chin at Crimson's bruises and stitches. Crimson didn't bother to correct him. Unseen, Gloom rolled his eyes to Prey.

Carrot grunted, apparently satisfied to have gotten the last word, and turned back to the two unlatched crates on the cart and flipped off the lids.

"Congratulations. Your new armour. And Celestia have mercy on you if you mess up again, because I bucking won't."

Being a runt, Prey couldn't see over the top of the cart or into the two wooden crates, so he instead looked to Gloom and Crimson for their reactions as to what they saw inside.

Both of Crimson's brows went up high enough to disappear under his lanky mane.

'-oh that is nice-', Gloom thought in appreciation.

"Hurry up. Some of us have to go home and sleep tonight, like normal ponies." Carrot snapped.

Gloom ignored the disagreeable stallion and reached in with both wings, lifting out a helmet clasped between both his wing claws.

Prey was immediately impressed. The helmet didn't have one of those stupid plumes like the Royal Guards, (and currently the Night Guards too), all did. A red plume for the golden clad Royal Guard, and purple for the silver armoured Night Guard. Those bells and whistle things were just the sort of pointless decoration to get snagged in a fight.

But this helmet looked far more practical, with no plume, and with a much more close and sleek fit despite being visibly solid and robust. It was, however, definitely styled after the patron of the Night Guard, Princess Luna, with crescent cheek guards like a moon and the metal was a silvery purple hue.

Gloom turned the helmet around and ducked his head to slip it on, his tufted ears sliding out of the protected ear slits. The dark metal fit snugly, and the sharp points of the crescent shaped helm and cheek guards really made his slitted yellow gaze almost seem to glow.

He raised his head and grinned at Prey. He didn't try to hide his

fangs when he smiled at Prey anymore.

"Much better. I like this."

"I completely agree." Crimson said. In his hoof, he held a set of the neck plates. Again the metal was a dark, silvery purple, and very obviously moon themed. However the appreciable difference was in how it now would also guard the underside of the throat when worn, not just the sides like their old armour had.

Prey was willing to bet the rest of it was like that too, a definite upgrade to their old repurposed Royal Guard armour. He felt a bit jealous at the additional protection they were getting, whereas he had none. But once again, he wasn't strong enough to bear plate mail, even if a set had been forged in his size.

It would be completely ridiculous if he even tried. Prey could only sigh to himself and think for the thousandth time, 'I hate, hate, hate, being a runt.'

"Oh, Wow~" Taffy exclaimed. The three of them were standing in the frizzy mare's office. Apparently, she was working late tonight, not something Prey was happy about since it meant they were here.

"*That's* your new armour? It looks amazing, and you guys totally deserve it. Really got the intimidating, 'don't-mess-with-me-bad-guys' look down pat."

"I will agree it is quite a bit nicer, ma'am." Gloom admitted, twisting his head to look back over his new darkly coloured armour. The metal had this new gleam to it which Prey didn't approve of, but he supposed you couldn't have everything.

"Totally." Taffy agreed enthusiastically, "It's great, and it's also great you're finally back."

Taffy paused and blinked as she reconsidered her words, and her grin slipped, '-oh. But Scenic and Lilly aren't back. I don't know what happened, but still, maybe that was really insensitive of me-'

"It's good to be back working where I, where we belong." Gloom stepped in, choosing to politely overlook Taffy's slip.

'Speak for yourself.' Prey thought, edging around one of the teetering stacks of precariously balanced paper files that took up most of Taffy's office. Crimson was also keeping a careful eye on where he placed his hooves.

The mare hadn't asked Crimson about his injuries. Then again, most of them were now hidden under his brand new armour. Still though, it should've been obvious from the way he walked. Or at least it was obvious to Prey. Although, thinking about it, that probably wasn't the sort of thing Taffy would know how to spot.

"Oh, by the way Sargent, I dumped a bunch of boxes and files in your division's office." Taffy added.

Gloom paused suspiciously, "May I ask why?"

"Hey, it's not like you were using your office, and I didn't know when you'd be back, so..." Taffy shrugged.

Gloom let out a mental sigh of relief, '-thank Luna. I was afraid she meant it was all boxes of paperwork for *us* to do-'

"So do you want us to bring them back then, ma'am?"

"Nah, that wouldn't be fair. I'll find some strapping ponies to come by tomorrow to collect all the boxes. Now, who to send? Which pony's in the naughty book and owes me paperwork at the moment?" Taffy mused, tapping her lip thoughtfully.

Prey decided to have a glance in those boxes to see for himself. Maybe the paperwork was sensitive? He'd never passed up the opportunity for free, potentially useful information. *Especially* if it was the sort he wasn't supposed to see.

'-as refreshingly... harmless as this all is, we did come here for a reason-', Gloom took a bracing breath, resigning himself to his fate.

"Well if we don't have to deal with that, then great. However, I think there was something about a stack of paperwork you were

saving for me, ma'am?"

Taffy cocked her head, her uniform's cap somehow staying on top of her frizzy orange mane, "Well yeah I do, but I thought you'd want at least a day, night, whatever, to settle back in before you tackled it."

Gloom winced, "That's very kind of you ma'am, but we thought it best to get the paperwork over with as soon as possible so we could resume doing the rest of our job afterwards unimpeded."

"Meh. Well it's your funeral." Taffy shrugged, turning to a stacked corner of the office and lighting up her horn.

Gloom saw the size of the pile Taffy was levitating up and his wings sagged, "Crimson, help me carry this, will you?"

"Aw don't be so melodramatic. It's not *that* bad." Taffy grinned, then gently slapped a hoof to her forehead as she remembered something.

"Hey, I'm about to clock off and get some well earned sleep, but I nearly forgot to ask, you guys are all coming to the Nightmare Night party, right? Did Prey give you the invitation I dropped off, Crimson?" Taffy asked.

There was a subtle shift from both Gloom and Crimson. Prey had indeed shown the irritating invitation to Crimson, if only because he'd known Taffy would follow up. But their pause had nothing to do with that and everything to do with the celebration in question.

Nightmare Night. The celebration of the banishment of Princess Luna a thousand years ago.

Obviously, the celebrations meaning was a lot different nowadays to the ponies of Equestria, but to the thestral clans, it obviously held a very different symbolic meaning. Taffy of course was completely oblivious. To her and the rest of Canterlot, it was just a festive celebration and reason to party.

Prey hadn't ever celebrated Nightmare Night before either, but now they were being asked. He shot a surreptitious glance up at Crimson, and saw that the pegasus was exchanging his own look

with Gloom.

"The party's on the 31st, right?" Gloom asked.

"That's right, and it's gonna' be great!"

"And it's from seven until eleven o'clock at night, right?"

"Yep. Someponies have foals, so they'll probably go home early, but everypony else is welcome to stay later."

Prey watched Gloom relax, "Then yes, if we're off duty, we'll be there until eleven or so, thanks."

"No problemo'. Make sure to come in costume. Now, I'm done for the night, see you later. Bye Crimson, bye Prey!"

Taffy Hopes had not been exaggerating about the boxes of files she'd temporarily stored in their office. With emphasis on the word *boxes*. There was a stack of them, set right in the middle of the floorboards. There was just the lightest layer of dust across the cardboard lids, and indeed, also across most of the ISND office, signalling the passage of time.

It really had been a while since they'd been here. A long time. Prey looked around the wooden shelves, the desk, unbalanced stools, and three cluttered alcoves. Actually, it had been longer than a long time. You measured time differently when you were counting survival. And those who hadn't made it.

Prey narrowed his eyes at the piled up boxes as Gloom fanned his wings, sending the skimming of dust kicking up, where upon he and Crimson both direct most of the resulting dust billow into the far alcove with steady beats of their wings.

Now why had Taffy really chosen to store those boxes temporarily in their office? The self important pencil pushers in the Records Department had plenty of space in their archives.

'Or more specifically, what's in the boxes that she didn't want the

Royal Inspectors to find while they were here?'

Taffy had said she'd send someone around to collect the boxes, but hadn't wanted the ISND to return the boxes themselves. A bit suspicious. The boxes looked like they were filled with only papers and files, but without emptying every box, how could you be sure that was true all the way to the bottom?

Prey couldn't feel even a faint painful tingle in his hooves which would signal any active magic coming from the pile, nor could he feel anything off about the boxes through the runes he'd placed in the office what felt like ages ago. Nowhere near the number of arrays his flat had, or his lair inside the mountain *used* to have, but still.

'That doesn't tell me much, just that there's nothing strongly magical or probably actively dangerous in any of the boxes.'

But paper could be just as dangerous, and no, not because of black magic spells written down which forced the reader to use them, but rather the more simple reason paper was dangerous.

Because information was power.

Prey thought it was likely Taffy wasn't actually hiding anything, and that he was completely overthinking this. In fact, the chances were eighty-five percent that's what this was. Him being paranoid, and Taffy being too lazy to dump the boxes anywhere else.

'And there must be ten thousand forms and pages in those boxes. There's no way to read them all anyways, especially not before tomorrow.'

Prey looked at the stacks of boxes, and decided, 'No'. He didn't need to know.

The chances of it affecting him were utterly minimal, he could always go back and read Taffy's mind in the future if it did become pertinent, and he hadn't heard Taffy thinking anything suspicious earlier when they were with her. So no, he didn't need to know what was inside all these boxes.

"I'm glad." Crimson said as he walked up next to Prey, carefully refolding his wings properly. "I mean, I'm glad that all those boxes aren't ours."

"You can say that again, we'd be here for months. This pile is bad enough." Gloom said, tapping the stack of forms Taffy had given him."

"Here, give me a hoof. Everypony gets a third. Many hooves make light work." Gloom added, splitting the paper pile up and passing them each a thick wedge.

Crimson bleakly considered his wedge. The scar traces under his eyes as he looked down at the pages really did unintentionally enhance the melancholy look.

"I'll give you a hoof if you want." Prey offered.

"Yes please."

"Are you offering?" Gloom asked, a tad too eagerly.

"For you? No."

"Darn it. And that's; 'No sir' to you, Prey."

And so, they were back. The ISND were back. As simple as that.

It was disturbing how much and how little had changed. Everything they'd survived on the other side of the Ridgeback, the trip back and the recovery in the hospital, the enforced therapy sessions, Lilly and her parents, Saffron Swirl, Lord Vanish stealing Crimson's jade necklace, the subsequent theft following that, and the unjust arrest of Crimson. Actually, the alert against the real thieves was still ongoing.

Prey had no way of letting the Guard know that the thieves were no longer a threat, and never would be again.

At least, not the *same* order of thieves. But there was a chance there

were others. Prey and Lemon were still on edge, waiting for the other horseshoe to drop. His terrifying near death experience had been a reminder of the incessant precariousness of his position. He walked a knife edge, the slightest slip meaning discovery and death.

What if the thieves had left a failsafe behind for someone else to find? And what about the rest of their artifacts? Could someone have been secretly funding their organization? Did they have family who'd look into their disappearance?

That, and then there were the deaths of the diamond dogs, and of both his precious veropedes.

But despite all of that, Prey and the original ISND were back. Back, and doing paperwork. The endless cycle of reincarnating forms returned no matter how many times you slew them with the quill and ink.

Prey finally dropped the quill back into the ink pot, shaking out his near cramping hoof. "Ow."

He groaned and leaned back precariously on the wobbly stool, flipping his ears out of his face and stretched. It had been nearly five hours craned over the desk, filling in form after form in the dim light. Well, dim for him.

Gloom and Crimson were comfortable with the low light level, as usual, but even so, the permanent trace damage left behind by the Reaper King's poison meant they weren't *quite* as comfortable as they'd once been.

"Thank the moon. Finally done." Gloom pulled off his new helmet and vigorously shook out his tied back mane.

Gloom sighed in relief, pulling his messily displaced mane back with a wing claw, "The new armour's nice, but I've gotten quite used to not wearing a helmet. It's going to take a night or two to get used to again."

Crimson wordlessly nodded his agreement.

Prey paused mid stretch as he realised Crimson was watching him arch and stretch, or rather, looking at his back, "What?"

"Nothing."

Prey wasn't stupid. He could add one and one. He straightened back upright and scowled, "Leave it. I'm fine."

"I didn't say anything."

Right. He hadn't said anything out loud. 'But you were thinking it.'

Prey wasn't a weakling. He wasn't about to suddenly break down in whip scar cramp just by stretching, thank-you-very-much. It still ticked Prey off that Crimson had walked in on him in that state of weakness. In fact, if it'd been anyone else, anyone else in the whole world but Crimson, he would've wiped their memory.

Prey shook off his annoyance and turned to Gloom, who was pulling his helmet back on, "So I have to ask, what are we solving now? Sir."

Gloom looked up, shiny new helmet back in place, "Solving what now?"

"He means us. The ISND as a whole, I mean." Crimson said, catching on.

"Yes, what case are we solving next? First it was Rocky Bed, then the riots and the Crop Sharer's, then investigating the salt trade, followed by investigating the Royal Guard for traitors, and finally Mayflower. So the question is, now what? What fresh miracle will we have to perform?" Prey asked, idly twisting one of the golden bands around on his foreleg.

'-did we really do all that? Huh. I guess we did-', Gloom thought, blinking and leaning back in contemplation.

Not happy contemplation, but he could deal with it, just the same as he dealt with it every single day. That was the thestral way. Square your shoulders, don't complain, and do your duty.

But Prey raised a good question. What were the ISND going to do now? They hadn't been assigned an active case, (yet), so until they were, they would be looking into old ones.

Gloom looked around at the shelves lining their office's walls, filled with files and scrolls. All were inactive cases or mysteries that the trail had gone cold on. Half weren't even technically crime reports, just mysteries or accidents.

"Do you remember what cases we've got?" Gloom asked.

"Yes." Prey answered.

"Only the details of a few." Crimson admitted.

"I'm the same as Crimson. You're the one with the eidetic memory Prey. I know we sorted through them all before, well, before. Fill me in again on the ones that looked promising."

"You mean the cases with a one in ten chance of solving?" Prey checked.

"...As opposed to the cases with even less than a ten percent chance, then yes."

Prey refrained from snorting at Gloom's optimism. That low of an estimate of success was representative of the rest of the multitude of old cases they had. 'What was madmare Luna thinking when she dreamt up the idea of the ISND? Or does demanding the impossible of your slaves seem realistic when you're an alicorn?'

But there was nothing for it. Prey sat up straighter and cleared his throat, "There's still about four hours before we need to get to the parade ground for Nighthawk's-"

"-Captain Nighthawk."

"-Captain Nighthawk's surprise. That's about enough time to pick out a new case and make a plan of investigation. So here are the most 'solvable' cases. And I use that word very lightly."

Prey pointed to a high shelf where he even now remembered the

case file to be, "A missing person incident. Grown stallion, earth pony, last seen near the Everfree forest eight months ago. Happy family stallion, no debts, illnesses, or criminal history. No signs or traces of him having gone in anywhere but into the trees. He's been pronounced dead, but the Guard never actually found anything to prove his death."

Prey delicately cleared his throat, "If we were to take that case, all we'd find in the unlikely event we succeed in even that much is a few bones."

Gloom and Crimson didn't ask the dumb question; 'But what if he's still alive?' They knew the chances of an unskilled person like that surviving in the wilds. If the stallion hadn't returned by now, he never would. There was always hope, but it was a fools hope.

"I... don't think we'll take that one, then." Gloom winced.

Prey nodded. He could remember the misty pine trees just as well as the other two now where. He pointed at a different shelf:

"Over there is following up on the salt trade. After stopping Garrow-"

Hearing the dead griffin's name from Prey, both Crimson and Gloom twitched, but Prey didn't.

"-all arrested salt workers were interrogated, and everyone they named was thoroughly followed up on by the Night Guard and either arrested or rehabilitated. However, there's bound to be a few buyers on the street who slipped through the net. We could try tracking these old addicts down. They're almost certainly nobodies, and what with the salt supply into Canterlot being eliminated, it's kind of a null and void task anyway." Prey said with a shrug. It sounded like an innocent and boring enough task.

"Okay, and the next?" Gloom asked.

"There's over seven years of filed assertions of theft from a noble by Lady Grey's estates, but she refuses to elaborate on theft of what. She always demands each of her reports are investigated. The Royal

Guard have been back and forth over the years, and never found anything. There's never any damage or witnesses."

"That's sad, but probably not related in any way. Is this Lady Grey, uh, old?" Gloom asked.

"Seventy-six this year."

"I don't think there's any truth to her reports, but we'll bear it in mind. Next?"

"Disappearing town square statues."

"Pardon?"

"Over the last ten years, with no discernible pattern, dotted all across Equestria, without rhyme or apparent reason, the occasional statue in a town's square will go missing overnight. Magic is involved in some way. In and of itself, it's only public property damage, and not a big concern, but no one has any idea who might be doing it, or why."

"Huh. That's... Okay, I have no opinion aside from that it sounds annoying. But let's move on." Gloom said, Crimson nodding his agreement.

"This ones a bit more... circumspect shall we say. Investigating the nobility."

Gloom waited, "And? Investigating which ponies? And for what?"

"Just investigating the nobility in general. There's always a constant stream of gossip and rumours about this or that noble breaking some law, or cheating their neighbour out of land, or tax evasion, or secretly buying out stocks under a false name, or starting scams to drive up their house prices, that sort of thing."

"Let me guess, there's no evidence of any kind to support any of it, and no two reports agree?" Gloom guessed skeptically, leaning on his hoof.

"Correct. Those that did have any evidence more than mere heresay

have already been looked into by other Guards before. Or sometimes by private detectives or law firms."

'-so in other words, it's just disgruntled and spiteful citizens making up stories about the nobility-'

"I'm sure if we looked long and hard enough, we'd find something done by somepony, but our time could better be spent elsewhere. What else?" Gloom asked.

"The last case within that margin of possible success is spy hunting."

Gloom and Crimson both paused incredulously, "Spy hunting?"

"Yes. We're the Intelligence and Secrecy Night Guard Division. That includes anti-intelligence and stopping spies."

"But, spies? Really? In Canterlot?" Gloom raised his eyebrows.

"Are there really nations spying on Canterlot? Wouldn't they, stand out?" Crimson asked.

He did have a point. You couldn't exactly have minotaurs, or griffins, or diamond dogs as secret agents in Equestria. The whole idea was ridiculous.

"I mean, what's there to find? Both their majesties are very open about almost everything," Gloom waved his wing, "Equestria isn't at war with anypony. Or even hostile. Neutral at worst."

Prey shrugged, "There'll still be pony spies. Nothing like the ridiculous stories with overblown cloak and dagger stuff. These spies probably don't even consider themselves spies, merely... entrepreneurs. Here's an example. They're paid to write up and mail a letter overseas to a certain address about how many tonnes of barley farmers in an area really harvested this season, or look into private company records of how much ore they really use. Or how far weather teams are willing to lower prices if really pushed. The sort of information which allows other nations to leverage much better trade deals."

"I can't see that making very many thrilling tales of adventure and

intrigue." Gloom said dryly.

"That's most of it. But I'm sure there are at least a few real spies mixed in there too, of the more hidden an insidious kind. Of course, I have no actual basis for this, but it stands to reason." Prey said.

Gloom and Crimson looked at each other, suddenly much more serious, "Hmm. That's even less thrilling."

"I doubt we'll ever catch any real spies, but those are the cases I judge the best chance of success in. For a given definition of success." Prey shrugged.

Prey couldn't help but wonder in the back of his mind whether he was condemning them to some fresh, stomach heaving, soul breakingly awful horror, just waiting to spring out like a jack in the box the moment the ISND opened their chosen case.

"And those are all of the potential cases?" Gloom asked.

"No, but those are the ones I think we're most likely to be able to do something about." Prey said. Keeping up a steam of successes would prove he was still useful and keep Luna content. Prey had no interest in returning to languish in pony prison.

"Alright. So the big question is; which case should we pick?" Gloom asked, looking around.

He was the Sargent. The decision was technically his, but in reality it wasn't really. The three of them weren't really a Guard unit anymore. They were more. The ISND was a team, one with lots of disappointment, occasional distrust and friction, but a team nonetheless.

Which case to pick out? Which one to take?

"I feel either the spy one or cleaning out the last salt dealers. I don't like to leave a job only mostly finished." Crimson stated.

"And you, Prey?" Gloom prompted.

"It's trivial, but catching the person displacing the stone statues will

probably be the easiest."

Actually, Prey had no doubt finding some noble or rich pony doing something dodgy would be far easier, ponies were greedy, but he had a reason not to want to tackle that never ending case just yet. He *really* didn't want to risk drawing any more negative attention. The last noble he'd gotten mixed up with had been Lord Vanish because of Crimson's jade necklace, and look where that had led in the end?

A fight to the death, the diamond dogs, and the loss of both his veropedes.

"I don't think we should just pick the easiest one. We should take the most important one or ones," Gloom said, "I'm thinking the same as Crimson, actually. Either cleaning away the last remnants of the drug trade, or attempting to root out any spies in Canterlot."

"That's a tie on both of those options, then." Prey observed.

Crimson half cocked one ear, "How shall we decide then? Bounce a stone?"

"Bounce a stone?" Prey queried.

"You don't know-? Oh, it's a clan thing. Bounce a stone, I guess it's the same as tossing a coin here in Canterlot. We had no use for bits in the clans." Gloom explained, shrugging.

"Ah, I get it."

"Actually though, since it's a tie between those two, I think you should make the call Prey. That fine with you Crimson?" Gloom asked.

"That works too."

Both of them looked at Prey. Seemed it was up to him in the end to decide what they were going to be doing for the next however long.

'Sniffing out spies, or sniffing out salt. Which one do I hate the idea of the least?' Prey considered. He had a bad feeling that this

seemingly innocuous decision would have far reaching consequences. Everything always went wrong, that's how life worked.

But Prey couldn't see the future. For all he knew, both options would turn out equally bad. He had no reason to pick one or the other.

'I don't want to pick. I don't want to risk whatever is going to happen afterwards.'

But he had to pick one. Gloom and Crimson were waiting, and from the way they were looking at him, yellow eyes intent, they both felt the same ridiculous superstitious fear he did of the choice.

Prey sighed, and looked up at the office's ceiling, "Well in that case..."

It was ten minutes to four in the morning. It was dark on parade ground one, with not a lantern in sight. But it was still occupied.

Quietly, and without fuss, thestrals appeared one by one out of somewhere in the dark and silently fell into line on the parade ground.

They didn't talk, or exchange any greetings, they just took their place in line and silently waited. Prey couldn't even tell where they were all appearing from, apparently they were just dropping out of the night. He bet Crimson and Gloom could see where the thestrals kept coming from just fine. But he could at least tell from listening in on the thoughts of those closest line around him that they didn't really know what Nighthawk's surprise was either.

Stars winked coldly in the dark above, the moon a brilliant silver coin.

Prey sat impatiently on his haunches and absently batted the end of his ribbon. 'This is taking too long. Really, the whole thing's been too long in the coming.'

Prey could be rather impatient at times, when there wasn't a dire need for patience. He'd learnt patience in a cell in Dreverton, but he'd also learnt how boring it was. Year after year after year with no end in sight, with no hope for release, and only your own mind for company, now that was *true* patience.

More thestrals appeared out of the dark, and took their place in line. The ISND stood out and also simultaneously didn't in their new armour. The first because it was different to everyone else, the second because although the armour was sleek, it was also unassuming if you weren't looking. If you didn't know armour, it might look a bit disappointing compared to the pomp and golden finery of the Royal Guards' own.

Nighthawk appeared, dropping out of the night to take his place at the head of the silent parade. He bent his legs and absorbed the impact of his swift landing flawlessly. As he refolded his leathery wings, he turned his head to look back over the assembled Night Guard legion. His yellow eyes shone in the dark as he gazed across his command. However small the Night Guard, he was still their Captain.

Looking carefully around, Prey counted nearly every single thestral Night Guard in attendance right now. The ones drafted from the regular Guard weren't here. Only around ninety ponies, not many compared to the Royal Guard, but they'd all still been summoned here to bear witness.

There was a feeling in the night air, anticipation, intensified by the silent rows of thestrals.

It was past four o'clock in the morning now, but the promised surprise hadn't appeared yet. They all waited on, the night chill just below comfortable. The silver moon watched on from its unmoving vantage point.

Prey was picking out a knot in his wool, tugging hard. He stopped and sat up, listening. It wasn't anything he'd heard as such, more... what he wasn't expecting to hear. Prey's brows scrunched up, he closed his eyes to better focus on his hearing. A cold prickle touched his hooves, coming from inside.

'Zoma'Grika!' Prey scrambled back to his hooves in line. Damn damn *damn*.

There was an inhale of air, a breathless moment of stillness, and Luna appeared. She stepped out of apparent thin air, a starry curtain of night pushed aside with a glow of her long horn as she appeared, standing before Nighthawk at the head of the Night Guard. Or rather, it had always been *her* Night Guard.

She tilted her chin just slightly, and looked down on them all, her existence as an alicorn immediately capturing everyone's attention. Love her, hate her, she was still an alicorn.

Nighthawk immediately bowed, going fully down onto one knee. Behind him in a wave, every thestral emulated him and bowed before Luna. Pulse pounding, Prey hastily lowered his head, staring at the dark paving slabs of the parade ground. However he couldn't help but raise his eyes just high enough to see a moment later. She was here. It was the Moon Wolf, the architect of his imprisonment. The last time he'd seen the hated alicorn, she'd knocked him unconscious for daring to stand up for Crimson.

'Stupid!' Why hadn't he thought that Luna would be here for this? Of course she would.

"Your Majesty." Nighthawk gruffly intoned.

"Nay, we art your Mistress Nocturna tonight."

There was a significance in that imperious statement.

"Mistress Nocturna of the Night." Nighthawk corrected himself.

Luna dipped her horn a fraction of an inch, "Our Guard Captain, thou may rise."

Only then did Nighthawk get off his knee. The rest of the assembled thestral force also rose, standing in their stoic rows, but with all their yellow eyes and tufted ears focused on the tall alicorn at their head. Prey fervently hoped she didn't look this way, because if she did he'd-

Zoma'Grika, she was looking this way! He hurriedly dropped his head, fighting down a shudder at having an alicorn look at him.

Luna's emotionless gaze was lingering overly long on him, on the three of them, weighing them up.

'Judging if we're still worth anything to her.' What had made her choose some greedy selfish noble over Crimson's misplaced loyalty in the first place? Apathy? Or maybe just her own amusement? A test?

"My faithful ponies, my soldiers of the Night." Luna's voice was imperious, regal, but to Prey's ears it still rang with undertones of uncaring detachment, "We thank thee all for thy service to ponykind, even when it goes unknown."

Barely a stir. These thestrals wouldn't do something so crass as to stomp or cheer as the dark alicorn paused to survey her audience again.

"Equestria has changed much from whence we knew. It had changed from what thy ancestors knew. We art all still adapting to the Equestria mine sister has raised. These changes matter little, for duty remains the same. Thy duty, and mine own. Once we did slip, but now we art back, and our duty remains to be resumed."

A slip. Only a 'slip'. Nearly dooming all life to darkness and freezing death only counted as a slip. Luna's statement was cold, factual, and blunt. Prey heard no apology in her words or her tone. A thousand years of imprisonment on the moon, what kind of apathy must she have come to terms with while up there? All of this must matter to her so little when compared to an eon.

"Duty." Luna repeated heavily, voice carrying, "Always watching, soldiers of the night. Your vigil has begun anew once again. On this full moon of my night, we gather to welcome thy new brothers and sisters into the fold."

Luna turned, spreading her wings. They rose up above her, larger than Crimson's, massive, a halo of feathers framing her head as she faced the moon. Her head tilted up, Prey couldn't see her face as she

stared up at the silver moon, no one could. But the night was not dark around where she stood, it was somehow almost bright. It showed off where Luna stood.

There was no actual shaft of moon light or physical brightening in spectrum, but Luna's whole presence seemed to be glowing.

Prey heard the thestrals all around him in line breathe out as one, and the night breathed with them.

Prey saw something different to all of them as Luna's wings spread wider, casting everyone behind her in shadow. He saw power.

Prey sucked in a shaky breath. His mouth was dry. Powerful magic. But he didn't feel any agonizing stinging from the runes on his hooves, just distant numbness. But he felt it just as surely in his bones instead.

It wasn't unicorn magic. It was *other* magic.

It looked simple, an understated muted effect, but Prey could feel it rolling off Luna in invisible waves. Power in use. Awesome in scope. Foreign, but now that he was aware of it, it thrummed in his ears. He didn't know what it was.

'Alicorn magic?'

It felt to Prey like he'd been standing on a flat plane of sand and never noticed. Only know that he felt the slightest shift under his hooves did he look down, and realise how vast the desert was. The unimaginable weight and mass of all that sand. As if he'd never noticed the desert he lived in until now.

Prey didn't want to be here. He didn't want to be anywhere near this old magic. He looked around. No one else seemed to sense it. Was it just him? How could they not feel that?!

The moon was sinking. Prey jerked, but of course it was sinking, Luna was lowering the moon. He was seeing the vast power of an alicorn's magic.

'I hate magic. I hate it I hate it I hate it.'

The moon was sinking fast, not lowering in the usual gradual fall as morning approached. Luna was taking direct control and making an astral body speed its course.

Prey's mouth was numb, his tongue felt like lead, 'How am I ever going to break free from that?'

"Welcome," Luna boomed up into the night, "Lady Nocturna bids you come!"

And as the moon slid down into the dark horizon, it became the silver backdrop to an approaching formation of black silhouettes growing larger. Winged shapes, flying in a 'V', growing larger. First it looked like only ten, then a second 'V' was revealed in the shadow of the first as Prey squinted.

Twenty. Thirty. Forty. Forty-three in total. The thestrals spiralled out of the night, travel saddlebags on their flanks. Each carried a weapon of some form with familiarity, but little to no armour. Sheathed wingblades, holstered javelins, hammer hooves, retracted griffin claws, or a spear.

More thestrals from the two loyal clans had finally answered their Princess's call and come to Canterlot.

---I---

[[[Bonus Picture - Randy and Lemon Pink, since so many people liked him]]]

[image]

Author's Notes:

Heed ye all! GreatSpaceBeaver has made another amazing picture ☆HERE☆ of Prey in the Resistance and the Deeper Green and you won't regret checking it out. It is wonderful, seriously. Thank you very much.
Also, because they helped with a rough edit of this chapter too! 😊

69.5 Flights of Bat-Winged Fancy

The sinking silver moon shone over Parade Ground One, as the thestrals spiralled out of the night.

Forty-three thestrals landed in front of Luna, leathery wings flapping and folding away. Prey saw how all of their attention was fixed in awe on the night alicorn before them. This was almost certainly their first time seeing the Princess they'd flown all this way to serve.

"Welcome, we welcome thee all to our home of Canterlot, may your stay be long and fruitful." Luna boomed.

Immediately, the new thestrals bowed. They didn't prostrate themselves, but each one bowed deeply in respect, weapons and saddlebags shifting as they did.

"Mistress of the Night." The murmur came from multiple throats.

It seemed to please Luna, because she continued to boom, making Prey wince at the volume, "Thou hast not forgotten the ways of tradition. We art pleased. Come! Whom do thee claim to speak for all of thee?"

There were no looks exchanged or shuffling of hooves, despite the forty-three new thestrals being from two separate clans. All the thestrals clearly knew who among their number they jointly respected the most, and thus, who was their unofficial "leader" for now. And if that leader didn't know who they were, then obviously they weren't much of a leader.

A grizzled thestral mare stepped forwards out of the line from near the back. She was a spotted silvery grey. Despite the darkness, Prey could see the signs of a rough life on her body, although most of his attention was still fixed on Luna and anything she might do, not the mortal mare.

She bowed before Luna again. The grizzled mare was either missing or blind in one eye, for it was covered by an eyepatch. She wore a griffin claw boot on her blinded side, and a wingblade on the opposite side. A smattering of raised scars showed up on her rough silver coat. Prey didn't miss the limp in her left rear hoof either.

"Vivid Edge, at your service, Lady Noctura. It is an honour."

"Rise, Vivid Edge. Didst thou make thy flight unmolested?"

"Yes, Lady Nocturna. It was an easy flight both nights once we were over Equestrian lands, and the skies were calm. Nopony saw us camp during the daylight." Vivid supplied.

That gave Prey a rough estimate about where the ancestral clan caves could be. Vivid Edge obviously hadn't spotted him amongst the ranks of Night Guards or she probably wouldn't have said that. Not that it mattered. Prey could find out at any time by breaking into the mind of any thestral. And he more or less knew anyway.

"That is good. We have been anticipating thy arrival with great patience. There is much to be done in Equestria, and thy brothers and sisters always have need of extra hooves. But come! Dawn is soon upon us. We wilt speak of that later, for thou hast all flown far this night and must be tired. Thou shalt eat and rest for this coming day, and we shalt speak this night. Captain Nighthawk will see to it."

"Thank you Lady Nocturna, we are all honoured." Vivid Edge accepted. The moon was just a sliver over the dark horizon by now.

Luna stepped aside, and Nighthawk took his cue and stepped up. Prey saw pleased recognition in Vivid Edge's posture, and also the faces and postures of some of the other new thestrals as they saw Nighthawk. Obviously, these ones knew Nighthawk and came from the same clan, even if Prey wasn't close enough to see the matching clan earring's in the dark to confirm it.

But his attention never wavered from Luna. No one else seemed to have sensed it, but he'd felt the awesome power just now when she'd lowered the moon. It was impossible to forget.

Prey had always known of the unparalleled magical strength Luna wielded, but this had been a visual reminder.

Not for the first time, Prey bitterly wondered where alicorns had come from down the eons of history. They had to have begun somewhere, because apparently there was a time before even the two sisters ruled. However, no one knew the answer to the big question, and no two wild theories agreed or were based on anything more than conjecture. Celestia wasn't saying, and neither was Luna.

Or if they had said at some point in the past, the knowledge had since been forgotten or purposefully extinguished.

Why did the world need alicorns? Why were ponies the only ones who had living, immortal deities protecting them?

The only other beings which could even come close were the oldest of dragons, and just as little was known about the reclusive and highly dangerous species of flying magical reptiles as was alicorns.

Nighthawk was talking to Vivid Edge, introducing Lieutenant Screech and Starry Wing, briefly explaining about how they would need to double bunk until things could get properly sorted out tomorrow, along with giving Vivid and all the other new thestrals the bare basics of how things were going to work. Princess Luna stood by, an observer but not interfering or helping in any way. She was just passively examining the new additions to her Night Guard.

'-this is wonderful. It also means we can finally release those drafted Royal guards and finally replace them with loyal ponies-', Prey overheard Gloom thinking, sounding greatly pleased and still mightily impressed with his Princess.

Prey wanted to tell him; 'That's the same Princess who sent us blind into Mayflower, gave away Crimson's necklace to Lord Vanish, chose her nobles over us, and blasted out my ear on the very first night we met.'

But he was surrounded by thestrals, and Luna was standing right there, so he'd just be committing suicide. In fact, Prey wouldn't

have even dared think that if he weren't a mind leech, and safe in the confines of his own head. No one could attempt to touch his mind without him feeling it.

Now Nighthawk was briskly asking about whether any of the arriving thestrals had any immediate needs that needed to be taken care of. Any non-pressing injuries received on the trip? Anything medical? Or in need of clan wine? He specifically termed it 'clan wine' instead of just saying 'blood'.

Vivid blinked her one eye, then swiftly turned to scan the gathering. She didn't spot Prey though where he stood, only thestrals. Prey's natural height and size really didn't lend to him standing out in a crowd, even when he was the only 'white' sheep in a sea of 'dark' thestrals.

Still, Vivid Edge answered Nighthawk carefully, "That won't be necessary. Wine drinking after a long flight isn't a good idea."

Yet while they were talking, discussing and answering questions, everyone was still firmly mindful of the dark alicorn watching it all. Luna stood there, smiling and presiding over it all, giving her silent approval.

She seemed to be waiting for something, but what, Prey didn't know. Luna just continued standing there as he anxiously waited, regally looking on as Nighthawk and Vivid quickly worked out the details yet while both being careful to remain deferential to their ruler at all times.

But Luna just kept standing imposingly there and waiting while still being the centre of everyone's attention.

'What's she waiting for?'

The moon was fully lowered, but it was still at least an hour until dawn. Unless, of course, Luna decided it wouldn't be an hour until dawn and decided to end the night for the whole world right now because she was an alicorn.

Prey nervously flicked his gaze about and up at the Palace's dark

rooftops and balconies, but of course he couldn't spot anyone watching them. But he was surrounded by people who could see in the dark, and none of them were reacting or thinking about anything suspicious.

'So are we just going to keep standing here until further notice?' Prey disliked being anywhere near crowds, especially pony crowds, even if they were thestrals and therefore less objectionable. However like any crowd they were giving him a headache, what with being forced to constantly listen in on everyone's cluttered thoughts.

'-Lady Noctura, the symbolism-'
'-there's Blood Orange, she made the flight too-'
'-night is beautiful after-'
'-brought any news of the den-'

What were they waiting for? Surely something must be going to happen. The air of anticipation that had preceded the new thestrals arrival was back. Something further was going to happen tonight. Prey could *feel* it. Everyone was watching Luna as her mane slowly billowed into nebulas and galaxies.

So when Luna spoke from out of the blue, the single word cut through everything else.

"Hark."

Everyone stopped, some even not breathing. What were they supposed to be listening to? Luna was still standing in the same place, her long horn pointed skywards. Then one by one they looked up into the night.

Prey didn't see it before he overheard it.

'-it's a comet-'
'-falling star?-'
'-no, a shooting star-'

Prey squinted, and finally saw it in the West, the darkest part of the night. Against the endless rich black of the night and stars, a streak

of light was moving. He couldn't tell what colour it was. Red? Yellow? Blue? Maybe green?

Silently the comet arched across the night sky, glittering in a colour Prey couldn't quite determine. It was certainly a sight, but Prey didn't see the significance.

'-hang on, a comet on the night of Lady Nocturna-', A thestral in the line behind Prey started to think.

Another one was making another connection; '-the elders told me a story about a rainbow comet, I'm sure of it-'

'-I know this, I'm sure of it. What was it? On the tip of my tongue-'

'-something's Comet. Somethings Comet. That's it, Harmony's Comet!-'

A moment later someone exclaimed it out loud; "Harmony's Comet."

It took a moment for every thestral to recall whatever they were talking about, some faster than others, but there was a general intake of breath all around as they stared up with fresh eyes.

Prey had no idea which obscure piece of clan history was currently being referenced, and didn't really care. One star in the sky out of a thousand. Could it help you? Protect you? Feed you? No. Yet everyone but him was staring up at the multicoloured streak in reverence.

Prey looked around without moving his head. Everyone here but him was caught up in the moment of what they were seeing. But not him. To him, it was just a pretty light up in the sky. He didn't believe in prophecy or a destiny written in the stars. If the night was such a thing of beauty, then why had Luna been banished to the moon for a thousand years as punishment?

There was nothing up there of worth. Just freezing empty blackness. Just the idea of it prickled at Prey's thoughts and made him shiver.

"Harmony's Comet. Only once every five-hundred and two score

years may a pony gaze upon its passage."

Luna's loud voice had the storyteller tone you could imagine one of those bards in stories having five hundred years in the past. Or even a thousand. It wasn't an outdated past to Luna, though:

"When last Harmony's Comet did pass, we were sadly not able to gaze up upon it from the warm lands of Equestria. No, we at the time we were banished to the rocks of our moon. T'was not us who did view it's blessed passage overhead, but another in our stead. The filthy demoness Nightmare Moon, who did so cowardly usurp our mind and attack our beloved sister. Knave. Despicable *whore*. A vile coward of the worst kind. If only we had been but more vigilant, such a loathsome creature should never have caught us off guard."

Prey listened, and felt something different to the anger and regret being projected from all the thestrals round about him. He felt disturbed alarm.

'She speaks of Nightmare Moon as if they were never the same person. Either she's in denial, straight up lying, or Nightmare Moon really was a dark magical parasite. A parasite strong enough to take over an alicorn.'

So which was it?

Luna was still speaking, head slowly turning to track the rainbow comet which had already crossed half the night sky; "When last we witnessed its blessed passage, we were a princess. Now we can say the same. The prophecy foretold the stars would assist in Nightmare Moon's escape. If that be the case, then Harmony's Comet heralds the sign of a different era entirely. One of change and new growth. One of renewal."

Lemon Pink had spoken of this star prophecy, back when she was still a cultist. Prey didn't believe in any of it, but now it seemed Luna was referring to a second make belief prophecy from the way some of the thestrals were reacting.

"Yes," Luna spoke without taking her eyes from the heavens, "We

speak of the clan summit nine generations passed of the Autumless Winter, when last Harmony's Comet flew. Your elders met, and from the elders of clan Myrrdon came this prophecy. When next the eye of Harmony graced the heavens, you would witness it from under the wing of The Lady of the Night once again."

Clan Myrrdon. That was Crimson's old traitorous clan. Although that far back in the past, they'd probably been just as upright and respected as the other two clans. What had they been doing, making wild predictions like that? They could've made any sort of prediction back then, safely knowing they'd be long gone before any proof was required.

Luna turned to face all in parade ground one once again. Her eyes glittered fiercely. Prey saw it as pride and arrogance as Luna announced; "The present descendants of Myrrdon have gone astray, but their ancestors spoke true. This day in your eyes, is this prophecy fulfilled."

'Am I supposed to be impressed?' Prey thought. But he was alone in his view. Around him, his sentiment was drowned out because every thestral, and pseudo thestral in Crimson, bowed one after another.

It spread in a crescent wave, plumed helmeted heads and those who didn't yet have, all lowering in acknowledgement of something greater than themselves. And from its center, the reason and origin, Luna looked down at all her assembled ponies and smiled.

It was not a big event as far as the world went. No natural disaster, no war or famine. It was a happy event. Although to nearly everyone, it wouldn't be remembered.

In their rich and enchanted mage towers, no doubt the magi noted the passing of Harmony's Comet through their telescopes, scribbled some notes, and ticked it off on their astronomy calendar before going to bed. It was just a single pretty light for a single night every five-hundred plus years. And while that made it rare, it didn't make it important.

Out there in the rugged mountain ranges of Griffonia, the rolling sun scorched plains of Zebrica, the fortress city of Minos, and the rest of the nations beyond, no doubt some noted the comet for themselves. Different scholars, different astronomers. Perhaps some of them even had their own prophecies or historic events of importance?

It was not a big event to the world, but to the small individuals who lived upon the land, it might be made it into one.

After all that, it was a rather anticlimactic dawn that rose over Canterlot, or anticlimactic for the Night Guard at least. Both the old, and shortly to be new members were still struck with quiet, contemplative awe of what they'd witnessed tonight.

One thing was for certain, this might've been a time of change, but what had happened here would remain in every thestrals' memory... Regardless of the everyday mundane events which would proceed this momentous event.

Like needing to go get breakfast.

Or rather, their lunch, but according to the day schedule, it was breakfast. For the ISND, it was a very late lunch at best. Later, the mess hall's official lunch would be their early dinner, after which their shift would finish and they could finally clock off and get some sleep.

Which meant being reunited with a certain grumpy mare. Cookie the cook.

"Prey dearie! I've been so worried." Cookie exclaimed the moment she realised just who it was standing in the early morning breakfast line at the hatch.

Prey gritted his teeth and put on a bright, totally realistic smile good enough to fool anyone, "Good morning Miss Cookie."

The three of them, Gloom, Crimson, and him, were first into the mess hall, the doors having literally just opened.

The earth pony mare's faced creased into a fond, wrinkled smile, "Just Cookie is good enough, dearie. Where've you been? I haven't seen you for what, going on two months? Have you been doing okay?"

'Oh, and here I was under the impression I didn't answer to you.' Prey sarcastically thought, still smiling happily on the outside up at the mare:

"Oh, it's had its ups and downs, Miss Cookie. We had to go over there, but now we're back. We needed to go do some of this, and some of that."

Prey caught the nearly inaudible sigh from behind him that escaped Gloom at his antics.

'-I heard that!-'

Oops. Seemed the crotchety cook had caught it too.

"You two. Where've you been? Why haven't you been bringing Prey here for three meals a day? He's a foal, for Celesita's sake, do I hav'ta spell out the decent thing to ya?"

Gloom and Crimson were still both in contemplative awe over the night's previous events, and Cookie's words weren't enough to dispel their good mood.

"No ma'am, nothing of the sort." Gloom answered, letting the cook's words flow off of him.

"We've been on leave." Crimson supplied helpfully, not visibly put out either by Cookie's attitude.

"Leave? *Extended* leave? What for? What'd ya' do?" Cookie demanded suspiciously.

Cookie didn't see the scar tracks under any of their eyes, despite her definitely being close enough to see if she had just looked. Nor did she pick up on Crimson's hidden injuries. However ponies could swing between being mostly blind and startling insightfulness. The latter was highly annoying, but thankfully they were mostly just

blind. Like right now.

"I'm sorry, but that information is restricted. We can't tell you. Just that we've been away, and have been on leave ever since we returned." Gloom shrugged.

"You didn't tell me you were leaving the city." Cookie scowled accusingly.

Gloom and Crimson blinked at her. Why under the moon would they have told her?

The cook's scowl grew bigger as Prey watched. He was abruptly tired of this. Tired of playing the innocent lamb and tired of having to deal with ponies' pushy stupidity. Had he ever really found any amusement in this? This tricking the cook and play acting to egg her onto others? He found the answer, not really.

Cookie waved the wooden serving spoon she held in a vaguely threatening way at Gloom and Crimson, "You've been up to something dodgy, I can practically smell it on ya'. You're trying ta' hide something. Mark my words, whatever it is, t'will come out in the end no matter what ya' do. Maybe not to me, but it will happen eventually. It always does. Here, take your food and get. Shoo. I said shoo!"

"Thank you so much, Miss Cookie." Prey said as Crimson picked his tray off the counter for him.

"There's no need. Now, you have a nice day, you hear me?", The cook said, all wrinkled smiles again.

'-oh, if only dear Kelly had been more like him at his age-'

'I'm older than whatever son you might have. In fact I'm probably older than you are too.' Prey thought, pleased to finally be able to get away from the mare and just eat. He was hungry. Neither Crimson or Gloom seemed bothered anymore about how he handled Cookie by play acting.

Although perhaps this morning wasn't such a good measuring stick, with how content they both were at the moment.

As they went to grab a table across the hall, finally a few more early Guards were filtering in for breakfast. Or dinner, since they were thestrals. They also all wore this familiar contemplative look on their faces as they wondered inside.

"Okay, I'm obviously missing some context," Prey said the moment they'd sat down, "Can someone fill me in on what all of that was tonight?"

Gloom, halfway through removing his new shiny helmet, shared a quick look with Crimson. Gloom flicked a tufted ear, Crimson motioned.

'-how best to explain this?-'

Gloom set his sleek helmet on the table, "Okay, so, obviously you picked out the basics about a prophecy being made by clan Myrrdon, right?"

"I got that much yes, but there's something more to it than what Princess Luna said." Prey made himself include the distasteful title of 'Princess'.

Gloom smiled. It was a happy smile, full of genuine positivity. "You saw, well, we all saw something amazing tonight. It was a privilege that Princess Luna granted us all last night. I don't think you'll get all the nuance to it Prey, but..."

Gloom paused, considering how to explain. Crimson beat him to it however.

"It shows that their prediction really came true. I mean, it proves the elders of the time weren't just making it up to inspire hope after the Autumnless Winter. It's been, 'discussed' rather a lot about whether it could ever come true. And now it has."

Not that Prey believed in prophecies for a second, but he could draw his own context from Crimson's words. He frowned, "Ah. There are other prophecies, aren't there? And you're thinking if this impossible sounding one came true, then those might as well."

Gloom raised his brows at Prey's evident scepticism, "It's true

though, you saw it tonight for yourself. Harmony's Comet, and Princess Luna was there."

"Okay, and?"

"So it was true."

"Okay, and?" Prey repeated.

"So that proves if one can come true, so can the rest."

"I don't know any of what you are referring to." Prey pointed out.

Gloom blinked, '-oh, yeah that's right. Sometimes I forget with you Prey-'

"I...huh, I guess you'd have to be a thestral to get what that means." Gloom admitted.

Over his plate, Crimson nodded his agreement, "It's probably not important to you Prey, but it is important to thestral kind. It's been a fang of contention between a lot of thestrals for centuries. Those who hoped, and those who did not have hope."

That sounded rather impressive and poignant, but Prey still didn't believe for a second that was proof of seeing the future. For one thing, it was just complete blind luck, and for another, Luna could've summoned the comet for all any of them knew. She could raise the moon, so why not? And Prey had felt that otherworldly power she'd wielded out there on the parade ground, even if no one else had.

'Actually, the more I think about it, the more sure I am it was just Luna taking advantage of their ridiculous prophecy by forcing it to happen.'

Yes. Luna had probably faked the whole thing. With an alicorn's powers, it was quite a realistic likelihood. There were no such things as real prophecies.

But Gloom believed it, or at least, he was willing to suspend disbelief. The rest of the thestrals too. And Crimson. That thought

made Prey unhappy. Very unhappy. Luna was a filthy alicorn, utterly unworthy of the devotion the thestrals unswervingly offered her. She was a false hope, promising restoration to the thestrals, but really just playing with the clans.

No. There was no point dwelling on what he already knew, it wouldn't help. Prey instead turned his mind to analysing what he didn't yet know, 'What does this change?'

Now that the thestrals had a reason to believe that prophecies could come true, what did it change? Not much, actually. This night was of momentous importance to the thestrals, but not to Prey. From his point of view, all this Harmony's Comet had done was harden the clans' loyalty to Luna even more. She'd already had them wrapped around her hoof, but now it was just more so.

'I should find out what these other supposed prophecies entail.' Prey decided, making a mental note to do so. After breakfast. He'd ask Crimson, although Crimson didn't seem the sort to have memorised ancient historical predictions, but he could still ask. If Crimson knew any, he'd happily fill Prey in on them.

But later. Right now he was hungry, and free food was free food.

After subtly checking for poison, (because you could never be too careful), Prey grabbed his fork in the cleft of his hoof, and began shovelling down the salad and porridge, alternating between the plate and the bowl.

"That's disgusting." Gloom informed him flatly.

"One by itself is bad enough. Why must you mix them?" Crimson echoed.

Prey pulled his breakfast closer defensively and waggled his spoon at them as he furiously chewed, then swallowed, "Free-"

"Free food is free food. We know. You've only said it a hundred times." Gloom joked.

Crimson resignedly ate a limp kale leaf, "This is the second thing I have not missed."

"The first being paperwork?" Gloom guessed.

"Yes. But this is definitely second. I mean, it's still better than..." Crimson trailed off, letting the sentence hang. He didn't need to finish it.

"Yes. Better than." Gloom agreed soberly. There was a moment's uncomfortable silence, as the Night Guards who'd come in after them got served and moved to find tables.

Crimson shuffled his wings, "Yes, well, but I am still surprised you eat that stuff, Prey. It never fails to amaze. And dismay."

Prey, having not stopped eating despite the grim moment of reflection, had his mouth full. He twitched one ear in question at Crimson, who effortlessly interpreted the gesture without any of them even noticing how he did so.

"I mean, you happily eat this slop, but I've seen you cook better food than this yourself." Crimson elaborated.

"Really?" Gloom asked in interest.

"I mean, Prey's food is not amazing," Crimson bluntly evaluated, "But it is better than Cookie's."

'-not exactly setting the bar high there-', Gloom thought, tempering his expectations.

Prey shrugged and held up a hoof for them to wait until his mouth was empty again, "It's not that I know anything about cooking, it's just that I'm not completely incompetent. You could try doing some yourself, you know."

The truth. It wasn't him, it was the remnant of Garrow who had known how to cook. Actually, Snake knew how to cook too, it just wasn't the type of cooking you ate. It was the type your enemies ate.

Prey paused, peering between Gloom and Crimson to the doors at their backs, which he'd been half watching out of habit, "You never told me much about your clan Gloom. Or the clans in general for

that matter. But did you know any of those who arrived tonight to join?"

It only took Gloom a second to realise why Prey was asking and he twisted around on the bench. Coming through the mess hall doors, led by Starry Wing and a few uniformed Night Guards as guides, came the forty-three new thestrals. They'd divested themselves of their packs and weapons, but even putting aside the lack of normal Guard armour, they would've stood out. It was impossible for them not to.

Discounting the missing uniform, firstly they were new faces, and second, the number of them all arriving at once. The Night Guard was always busy and overstretched.

The new thestrals were peering around, heads swivelling in both interest and wariness at everything, squinting as they passed by bright lanterns. It was understandable. Never before would they have seen such a building as the Palace.

And while Prey didn't imagine for a second their clan caves were the damp, dripping affairs one might associate with the word 'cave', they still could've been nothing like anything in Canterlot, let alone the opulent Royal Palace itself.

"So, you know any of them?" Prey asked again.

Gloom smiled in recognition, "Yes."

'-there's Blood Orange, and Weft and Thorny. I thought I wouldn't get a chance to greet them until tomorrow-'

"Starry Wing has brought them for breakfast," Crimson pointed out the obvious, then added, "Or perhaps as a warning so they know not to come here in the future, if at all possible."

"Think of their first mess hall meal as an initiation ritual." Gloom said as he stood up, still smiling in pleased surprise.

Gloom started walking over to say hello to his old clan mates, or possibly even relatives, leaving Crimson and Prey behind at the table.

Prey spotted how Crimson was thoughtfully reviewing the new arrivals too, or more specifically, reviewing how they carried themselves. It was the unconsciously controlled, balanced walk of every step that loudly pronounced to anyone who knew what it meant; 'Trained warrior'. Prey remembered the *other* Night Guard initiation ceremony.

"No." Prey said over his half finished porridge and salad.

Crimson half twisted back around so he could blink at Prey uncomprehendingly with one yellow eye.

"You're still recovering from your last bout of training. You're not going to be the one to fight a round with any of them in the cage." Prey admonished the full grown and armoured pegasus.

Crimson hesitated, shifting in his seat to check how his stitched injuries and bruises felt. "You're right." Crimson conceded after reviewing himself.

"And nothing so stupidly over the top ever again either, right? It's just training." Prey pressed.

"Training is highly important, and you are not a warrior, Prey. What I mean is, if you balk in the face of harsh training, when death really comes, how will you win?" Crimson responded, turning fully back around to converse with Prey.

Prey wasn't deterred, "Fine, I'm not a warrior of any kind. I don't and can't fight, but I can still tell when something's too much. If your life is genuinely in danger while 'training', you're doing it wrong."

"I'm not disagreeing. I am aware I foolishly went... overboard. I just mean that there is no such thing as completely risk free training. There are always accidents." Crimson said.

Prey remembered the horrible 'training accidents' which used to happen in the Resistance, and also how Torment cruelly used to use him as her personal display dummy. Thestrals were far too disciplined to do anything like that though, so Prey conceded the

point with a shrug and a nod.

Gloom was currently speaking with a few of the newcomers, locking forelegs in greeting with each other and even exchanging a wing hug with one of them. He wasn't the only one catching up with the new recruits. Other Night Guards, still wearing the old, re-purposed Guard armour, were doing the same as they lined up outside the breakfast hatch. Prey spotted the eye-patch mare, Vivid Edge, at the back listening to Starry Wing as the Lieutenant provided what was probably a tonne of information.

It was going to be a busy few days for all of the Night Guard, for certain.

'But then, when is it ever not?' Prey thought with a mental shrug of acceptance. He only really cared how much of a headache it was going to make for the ISND specifically.

Plus, this would all help serve as a distraction to anyone who might've been waiting for the ISND's return. Prey just wanted to slip back into the cracks, where he, Gloom, and Crimson could get on with their work, or rather appeasement of Luna, without getting embroiled in anything else ridiculous. Such as Guard politics, or interfering nobles.

Prey sat and polished off his rather unappetizing breakfast, (dinner if you were being technical), while Crimson made steady, if reluctant, progress on his own.

The other thestral Night Guard, both old and new, continued to mingle and get reacquainted. In a reserved, thestral sort-of-way.

Prey stopped half way through gulping down his glass of water. He cautiously lowered the glass, looking at Crimson over the top of it as he looked between the gathered thestrals and his only friend:

"Do you feel... left out?"

Crimson was the only person from his whole clan in Canterlot. Crimson had privately explained what'd happened between him and his old clan, but even so, they'd been his extended family at one

point. Love or hate, those sort of connections didn't just disappear. For better or worse.

Crimson's face smoothed into blankness. He looked Prey in the eye, "I could ask you the same question."

Prey was surprised for a moment, but yes, it was just him and Crimson sitting here, alone, separated from the rest of the Night Guard. A pegasus exile, and a runt lamb. Prey thought it was kind of funny that he hadn't even realised how he was also in the same boat as Crimson.

Prey pushed the water glass to the side of his tray, "If you're asking me, then no. I don't feel left out. I was never a part of anything. It's always just been me, just Prey. Plus, you know, sheep don't have any sort of illustrious history of clans or anything. We've no strong bonds or long family trees. No nobles, no royalty, no ancestral lands or castles or historical deeds. No magic or flight or connection to nature. Sheep don't have an acclaim to anything, except quietly living."

"Oh. I see. I mean, living quietly is not a bad thing, I wasn't implying, I didn't mean-I meant, every race has its own culture, each just as important as every other race. It doesn't matter how humble." Crimson said.

Prey shrugged awkwardly, but not agreeing. It was easy for Crimson to say, he wasn't a runt sheep, "So, anyway, do you feel left out? If I can ask, that is?"

"You can ask anything Prey," Crimson said automatically, then considered the question, "Not... Not really, no. You know how they never accepted me from when I was born a pegasus, because of... some bad history with past throwbacks, so I was never a part of clan Myrrdon anyways. I mean, it is hard to miss what you've never really known."

Crimson shuffled one wing, stretching and refolding it as he hesitated over what he was going to say next, "If I can ask, that is...?" He echoed Prey's own words.

"You can ask anything Crimson." Prey echoed right back, trying to inject some levity.

"Well, so, you said you weren't part of anything either, but, I mean, that doesn't include your family, right?"

Prey's jaw worked, "Ah."

Truthfully, the question didn't really catch him off guard. With the heavy tone of the conversation he himself had started, perhaps a bit foolishly, he'd been prepared for it. Or thought he'd been prepared. But now Crimson had asked him, and the question was different when you actually heard it out in the open where it couldn't be taken back.

'I don't have any family. *Gossamer* had a family.' Prey told himself. Besides, they were all dead regardless.

"No. Family is family. You can choose your friends but not your family. No matter where they may go or what they might do, they'll always be family."

Crimson misinterpreted Prey's words as insecurity. "You speak the truth Prey, and when you finally go back, I'm sure they'll be waiting for you. I mean, I doubt it'll be easy, but you said it yourself. They are and always will be your family."

Gloom was still busy catching up with old comrades that weren't that old. In actual fact, Gloom had certainly known some of those thestrals before he was old enough to fly.

Prey ran the tip of his hoof around the rim of his cup, "I guess. In a sense."

Crimson frowned. He half motioned with one wing, then seemed to reconsider in indecision.

"What?" Prey asked, looking up.

Crimson looked troubled as he stared at Prey. He spoke slowly, "When you finally go back to your family's farm, whether because you're finished or just visiting, might I please go with you?"

'Well damn.' That wasn't what Prey wanted to hear. He didn't have a clue how he would fake that. Even thinking about family made him utterly miserable with guilt, and here Crimson was asking to visit a burnt out village sixty years long gone. But it was Crimson asking.

'No, this is a simple problem to solve. I just never go, and therefore, Crimson won't have any reason to try and go with me.'

Prey slowly nodded, "Sure. When I go, you can come."

"Thank you Prey. And, I don't mean to pressure you, but I think you should write to them more." Crimson said awkwardly.

"I do. I wrote to them just this Monday actually." Prey lied.

Crimson seemed satisfied with that, and went back to dutifully eating his way through his dinner, and Prey went back to thinking over his other concerns and problems. For example, the strange 'Other' magic he'd seen Luna use tonight. 'Alicorn Magic' he was calling it from now on.

Then there was Lemon Pink and her annoying coltfriend and worrying over if he'd made the right decision there. Whatever was happening with the mimics, he didn't know, but he hadn't seen anything since back in Mayflower, so Prey was tentatively putting that worry on the back burner for now.

But there was always the ever present worry over being discovered, the need to flush out any more of the crazy thief crusaders, finding a new lair and cleaning out the old collapsed one, maintaining a good rapport in the Night Guard, getting the ridiculous still ongoing therapy sessions over with, dealing with the mysterious annoyance Strange Happenstance, his enforced probation restrictions, the new thestral recruits and the changes they'd bring, looking out for and secretly guarding Crimson, the Solar Guard, his other ongoing projects and time investments, all wrapped up in the constant pressure of maintaining a perfect act at all times.

And there was the one which was always at the back of his head and never far from his thoughts. Freedom, and escape.

Prey morosely rested his chin on the table after pushing his dangling ears out of the way first, 'No rest for the wicked.'

It was inevitable though, that Prey would not get his wish to go unnoticed and undisturbed. For one thing, the newcomers were thestrals, so of course they took note of the strange lamb and pegasus duo sitting in the corner, and for another, Gloom brought his old-new friends over.

Prey heaved a sigh and sat himself back up straight as Gloom came back with a pair of thestrals in company. A stallion and a mare duo, looking to be of similar age to the Sargent himself. It only took the briefest glance up at their ears to confirm that yes, they were both clan Cilldara too.

Gloom wasted no time, "Crimson, Prey, I'd like you to meet Felled Grace and Sharp Edge."

Grace was the mare, and Sharp was the stallion. They were both rather average of most thestrals Prey had seen, the only strong characteristic defining with each being Grace having an ebony black coat, and Sharp one leathery wing which was a discoloured, plain white.

'Wonderful. More ponies I don't know or care about, but that I'll be expected to remember.' Prey thought.

Should he act the child? Put on a smiling mask like he did with the cook? Both Grace and Sharp were looking at him in particular in surprise.

Prey didn't get enough time to act on any decision he might've made, because Gloom wasn't finished, "Crimson and Prey are both in my division. There should be five of us actually, but two of our members-never mind. As I was saying, Princess Luna hoof picked them both to be in the ISND."

Grace and Sharp were both taken aback by Gloom's confirmation of Prey's position.

'-a filly's allowed to be in the Night Guard at that age?-'

'-Lady Luna chose them both. What a privilege-'

"Night watch over you." The ebony mare greeted them both formally, being exceptionally careful not to show any teeth when she smiled politely at Prey.

Prey wasn't impressed. He answered back anyway with his own polite, "Hello." But that was all he said, his crossed forelegs leaving no further avenue for conversation.

But obviously, both thestrals were still intrigued. There was a lamb in the military organization they'd just joined, how could they not be? But then they were distracted, eyes drawn to the ribbon as Prey absently twirled the blue silk.

And just like that, they forgot and everyone moved on.

"Night watch over you too," Crimson returned to their previous greeting, "Your name is Sharp Edge. Are you related to Vivid Edge?"

"Yes, I'm blessed to call her my mother. I won the stone toss, so she allowed me to fly here instead of my father to swear service to Lady Luna. He'll have to wait until next time." Sharp Edge said with serious joviality, a contrast that only a thestral could really pull off.

"How's he doing by the way?" Gloom asked, "Is your father well?"

"As well as anypony. I had to promise to serve twice as hard in his stead here in Canterlot before he'd even let me out the cave. I think it helped that Grace was coming along." Sharp said with a wing bump to the mare next to him, who shoved him right back good naturedly.

"After you swore to serve twice as hard, he came to me next and made me swear to keep you safe." Grace returned.

"He did not." Sharp protested.

Grace raised one dark brow, "No? You can go ask your mother. She was there."

"Hmph." Sharp groused. '-alright, it must be true then-'

Grace was still looking all around the mess hall, hers and Sharp's trays of breakfast still untouched, "This is still so strange. Is everywhere like this?"

"You'll get used to it, although part of the strangeness never wears off. But yes, most of the Palace is like this. Except bigger, and brighter." Gloom answered.

'-know what it's like. Still remember my first time here. It feels so long ago. So much has changed, but today I've gotten back my two friends-'

"If it's nothing secret, can I ask why you've outfitted in different armour to the rest of the Night Guard I've seen?" Sharp asked in interest.

"Sure, it's no secret. Take a seat. The reason is just that the ISND got some of the first new armour sets. You all and the rest of the Night Guard are going to be getting the same too. Eventually."

Sharp took a second look at Gloom and Crimson, "That's impressive. You bring honour to Princess Luna."

His thoughts explained his word choice, '-your squad must have done something exceptional to be chosen first-'

As a fellow thestral, Gloom got the context, "Err, it wasn't quite like that." He hedged.

"What did happen?" Grace asked.

Prey caught Crimson's wings tightening at his side, and Gloom's mood unexpectedly took a sharp nose dive, but Gloom told himself; '-Grace doesn't mean anything by it, she hasn't been here and doesn't know-'

"Trouble seems to find us. There was a griffin salt dealer, and then this dark magic incident over the border... I guess Captain Nighthawk just thought it best the ISND were properly armed against next time."

'-I don't want to tell them anymore than that. Why not? We all grew up together-', Gloom asked himself.

"You fought against griffins?" Sharp asked, ears perking.

"Griffin. Singular. Only the one." Crimson helpfully corrected.

"No, we didn't 'fight' per-say, more like..." Gloom vaguely waved his hoof and didn't look at Prey, "We were in the wrong place at the right time. Or wrong time. There was a big fire. It didn't end well."

Gloom was aware he was being overly evasive. Weren't Grace and Sharp both thestrals he'd known for years? And weren't they both here to become Night Guards on top of that? But even so, '-I trust them don't I? But I also don't want to tell them-'

Prey hid a snort. This was all an annoying waste of time. He didn't care if Gloom reconnected with his two childhood friends or never saw the two of them again outside of work. Just as long as it didn't involve him.

He watched the conversation unfold in front of him as the two thestrals continued to ask to politely but blithely ask Gloom uncomfortable questions. It occurred to Prey that although Grace and Sharp were both thestrals, and thus knew about the harsher realities of life and weren't afraid of hard work, both of them were still young.

They knew how to fight, but they hadn't killed anyone. Not that either would ever wanted to, they weren't mad, but it still meant they didn't *understand*.

They hadn't seen the cellar, or the kindersnatches, or the reaper king, or survived the Wolfing Wood.

Experience had driven a wedge between Gloom and his old friends, one which the Sargent hadn't even known existed until this very moment. Prey knew Gloom wrote letters back to his clan regularly, but meeting them here in person... It had shaken Gloom.

Gloom looked at his two childhood friends and tried to keep his smile even through the sinking feeling:

'-they're strangers. No, I'm the stranger. It isn't fair on them, but they're not my friends anymore-'

Still, Gloom tried for politeness sake and out of a hope that everything would click back into place. He talked, answered their questions as they ill-advisedly tried the mess hall food for the first time, tried to include Crimson and Prey both into the conversation to build common ground, but...

But it wasn't the same. It wasn't working, and Grace and Sharp were slowly both becoming aware something was wrong too. But they didn't know what to do about it any more than Gloom did, so they all kept playing along and hoping to trick themselves into connecting again.

And Prey? He refused to be drawn into conversation, not even when it finally occurred to Grace and Sharp he wasn't an ewe but a runt ram, and they apologized. He sat back on the bench as he looked at the two new thestrals and just thought:

'How boring.'

Felled Grace and Sharp Edge were just both so *boring*.

They didn't matter to him. Their actions wouldn't impact him in any way. They were just two new Night Guard Privates.

Prey didn't know their motivations, and he didn't need to know anything further than that they didn't mean him any harm. He didn't care about their goals or their personal reasons for coming to serve Luna, because he'd already figured them out. Family duty and tradition, and that was it.

Their lives and stories were utterly normal, as far as thestrals went. Unimportant. Unthreatening. *Boring*.

They were so boring, and Prey couldn't even pretend to care.

So he just sat there, a silent, mostly forgotten observer, and just waited until Gloom and Grace and Sharp had the excuse of breakfast finishing to split up.

'Finally.'

A day. A new day. A good day for many in the Night Guard. It was even a good day for those normal Guards who'd first been reassigned to the Night Guard when it started months ago now, and who would imminently be dismissed and replaced by the influx of new thestrals. None of those Guards had been happy about being in the Night Guard in the first place.

Well, now they'd be getting their wish to leave and go back to the Royal Guard, however, their return wouldn't be with any recommendation from Nighthawk for diligent service.

But it was still a good day, and one which would be bringing much change with it.

There would be both good and bad changes in the future to come, certainly, but Canterlot would just have to wait and see how the ratios balanced out. But just as surely as the seasons, change had come.

But the day wasn't over. Actually, calendar wise, it'd only just begun, since it was barely past nine in the morning. The night was over, the sun was up, the golden spires of Canterlot were shining. The ISND's day however, that was over. And while at some point Nighthawk was aiming for them to shuffle up their working hours all again, but right now that was neither here nor there. Their shift was officially over.

Their self imposed duties however, unfortunately weren't.

They stood on the sidewalk outside the door to Lilly Blossom's new apartment. The curtains were drawn in both windows. Gloom took a fortifying breath and knocked.

They waited.

Prey suspiciously watched everyone on the street who came past.

There were plenty passers by, both coming and going, and all of them were choosing to cross the street rather than walk by on the same side as Gloom and Crimson. The new Night Guard armour may be a strict upgrade, but 'friendly' and 'approachable' it was not.

Gloom knocked again. They waited some more.

'-I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. She's certainly just out visiting-', Gloom thought. But where would someone like Lilly possibly be going to visit?

"Sir?" Crimson asked, his question encompassing whether if they should be worried.

'-I'm sure it's nothing, but...-', Gloom pursed his lips, "It would be rude to just barge in."

Gloom knocked loudly a third time, "Lilly, if you're in there, it's us. Can we please come it?"

No answer. Gloom tried the door handle, but it was locked of course. Prey sighed, and reached under the lip of the doorstep where there was a point where the cement had fallen out, and a spare key had been slipped into this gap. 'Not quite as bad as under the doormat, but not much better.'

"Here." Prey tossed the key up rather than passing it physically over.

Gloom effortless caught it, "Oh, good job Prey."

'-this is definitely an invasion of privacy, but she's from my squad and I'm worried-', Gloom justified to himself.

'I swear if we're about to walk in on her suicide, I will not be amused.' Prey thought coldly as Gloom unlocked the door and pushed it open. Actually scratch that, he didn't want to walk in on *any* dead body, thank-you-very-much.

But there was no sign of Lilly inside. Her new house wasn't large by any means, only about twice as big as Crimson or Prey's flats, and it took less than thirty seconds to check the bedroom, kitchen,

bathroom, spare room, and living room to see that Lilly Blossom wasn't in.

It was an obvious worry off both Gloom and Crimson's shoulders. It's not that they'd really expected to find something wrong, but, well, it hadn't been that long ago that Lilly was expressing suicidal wishes. How could you not be worried after that? And while it was a disservice to the recovering individual to doubt their mental state all the time, still, you couldn't just forget that they'd once been suicidal. It was something of a dilemma.

"Well she's not here, so she really must be out." Gloom said, stating the obvious as they stood in the living room.

"We should try again tomorrow." Crimson said.

"Yes, now lets stop snooping around, it's not polite. We've seen she's not here, so lets get out." Gloom agreed, gesturing towards the door.

They trooped back out, making the ponies passing by outside on this sidewalk squawk and speed up. Gloom relocked and hid the spare key under the step again.

"We'll try and get here a bit earlier tomorrow." Gloom decided, shading his eyes to look up at the bright blue sky and squinting.

Crimson nodded in agreement, and Prey just nodded along because it was expected of him.

'Well at least that's one problem that's been forced on me that can wait until another day.' Prey thought, not feeling any responsibility towards Lilly. It was unfortunate that Crimson and Gloom, and by extension Nighthawk didn't think the same, but oh well.

There was a carriage coming quickly up the street. Actually, it was more of a covered rickshaw, built light with wood and canvas, no glass or metal, nothing fancy like a noble's carriage would have. It was one of those public ones you could hire if you were too lazy to walk like a normal person, and was being drawn by two swiftly cantering earth ponies wearing uniform caps. It was one of the other few jobs in Canterlot in which an earth pony might actually

find gainful employment.

Prey idly wondered if they found their job humiliating or degrading, since no unicorn would pull a carriage themselves, only travel inside of one, and pegasi had no need of one in the first place.

Except the hired carriage was slowing to a stop, both uniformed earth ponies pulling it looking with some alarm at the armoured forms of Gloom and Crimson, who were waiting on the doorstep to the exact house they were stopping in front of.

They were in the middle of a public street, in broad daylight, but still Crimson and Gloom both instinctively took a few guarded steps back as the two ponies drawing the carriage brought it to a halt.

The flimsy door opened, and out got Saffron Swirl. The dress, silk shawl, and veiled hat she wore as a disguise didn't fool any of them for even a second. She however was quite surprised to find the ISND here, blinked wide eyes at them, frozen halfway out the carriage:

"Oh, Sargent Gloom, this is a surprise. I didn't know you were coming to visit Lilly today."

'-oh dear. Now isn't a good time to meet-'

Gloom glanced over the mare's rather fashion conscious disguise, and so greeted her without using her name, "Good morning to you too. Are you here to check up on Lilly Blossom? I'm afraid she's out, we just checked. Did she say she was going to be expecting you at this time?"

'-if Lilly knew Saffron was coming by this morning, why did she go out?-', Gloom thought, a hint of worry creeping back.

Saffron Swirl was still standing half-in, half-out of the carriages door, "Ah, no, that's not quite it." She hesitated.

The mare was an excellent actor, she was a model after all, and she even kept masterful control over her ears which was usually the unconscious tell of all the pony race. But trying to think up a lie on

the spot was evidently not her forte. Plus, she wouldn't have been able to fool any of the three of them anyway.

Crimson took a silent sniff of the air, "You've brought Lilly back with you." He stated.

"You're escorting Lilly? That's very kind of you." Gloom said.

Saffron hesitated again, half glancing back into the confines of the carriage, "We've been out for a little trip. Unfortunately Lilly dear started feeling unwell, so I thought it best to get her back home as soon as possible. You see, well..."

'-how can I politely convince them to come back in a minutes time?-'

A muffled hoarse voice came from behind Saffron in the cab, " 'S fine. I jus' wanna' go in, I don' care."

"Are you sure Lilly dear?" Saffron asked over her shoulder gently, "I'm sure they don't mind leaving for a minute or two-"

"Said it's fine. Don' care, I just don' care."

Saffron sighed quietly, shooting a sad look to all of the ISND as she stepped down and turned to offer her hoof, "It's okay Lilly, it's going to be fine."

Out of the carriage Lilly awkwardly stumbled, her meld wood leg hidden in the sleeve of a pink shirt was stiff and difficult as Saffron helped her down the step. Lilly was a mess, but that assessment had nothing to do with the hideous root growing out of her face. Prey was used to seeing such deformities, not to mention he'd seen this one before. Lilly was wearing a hat and a scarf to hide as much of her affliction as she could, but it didn't hide her tangled mane, eyes red from crying, and the matted wet fur of her cheeks.

Lilly looked at the three of them, hiccupped once, then dashed passed them to her front door. Except she couldn't dash, not with a wooden leg. It was pitiful to watch, but she brushed off Gloom and Crimson's hooves as they moved to assist.

"Leave me alone." She choked out.

It was even more awkward as she fumbled, clumsily trying to get her key into the lock. For her whole life up until a month ago, it was an instinctual action she would've undertaken with magic. But not anymore.

Crimson stepped forwards to help again, but both Prey and Saffron signalled for him to stop. Lilly continued to fumble, hiccupping more steadily, sounding on the verge of bursting into tears once again as she couldn't get the door open. Gloom shot a worried look at Saffron, asking for answers. Sadly she shook her, heart shaped face full of sympathy.

'-life can be so cruel to some pony's at times-'

Lilly finally got the key to turn, and pushed the door open. She stumbled inside, making for where Prey knew her bedroom lay. She didn't even bother shutting the front door or removing the key from the lock, she just left it all as it was and made for her bedroom. Prey's ears caught the sound of she starting to sob messily from within.

"What happened?" Gloom asked, looking into the house after Lilly.

Saffron sighed, beginning to fish in her hoof bag for the carriage's fee, "Lilly's had... a rough day."

"What can we do to help?" Crimson immediatley asked.

"I'm sorry, but I think it would be best you don't try. It's not anything you've done," Saffron assured them as she counted out the fee from a purse full of bits, the earth pony nervously accepting the money while avoiding even looking at Gloom, "Please don't take this the wrong way, but I think I'm the better choice to help Lilly at the moment. I'm a mare who can sympathise and understand her feelings at the moment."

"You can say that with confidence?" Crimson asked carefully.

Snapping her purse shut, Saffron turned to face Crimson squarely as the two earth ponies hurriedly began to pull the carriage away. "I

can. Please, trust me to help."

Crimson straightened his wings at his side, "Alright then, I'll trust to your judgement. I don't know what's wrong, but Lilly is obviously in distress."

"I will do my absolute best, I promise."

Prey listened in as Saffron thought back on her own mistakes and self imposed misery, '-Lilly, my heart goes out to you. But by Celestia, I'm going to help you get through this-'

"What happened?" Gloom repeated in worry.

'-would it be wrong to tell them?-', Saffron wavered, '-well Lilly did say she didn't care-'

"Ahh... Lilly Blossom asked me to go with her today, as back up you could say. She wanted to see her parents for the first time." Saffron looked at the still open door, "The meeting, it, well... It didn't go how any of us wanted."

Gloom walked with them both back to their apartment block in silence rather than taking flight, despite his own apartment being ten minutes away from theirs.

The sun was annoyingly bright. Ponies on the street smiled, chatted, laughed, gossiped, and then nearly jumped out of their skin when they turned to see who was coming and found the grimly silent Gloom and Crimson just behind them, all plated up in their new intimidating Guard armour.

Gloom trotted up with them to the second floor, still brooding. It had been such a good night to start with, with amazing revelations and reunions, but it had all gone down hill since morning. Prey found that morbidly amusing.

"Do you have the address of Lilly's parents, Prey?" Gloom finally asked.

Prey gave him a level look, "Why?"

"That's the sort of thing you would've memorised. I'd bet you know where all Scenic Paint's family lives too."

Well, Gloom wasn't wrong. "And what do you intend to do with their address?" Prey asked.

"Pay them a visit. Have a talk and make them see how much they're hurting Lilly."

"And is that *all*?" Prey asked.

'-I don't know yet-', Gloom shrugged.

Crimson shifted, carefully refolded his wings, "Sir, you're making a mistake. I mean, I think you'll only make it worse if you do go and confront them."

Gloom grimaced. He'd been thinking the same himself. This was a family affair, and there were no good answers, '-but it's got to be better than doing nothing. Lilly needs their help, not their harm-'

Gloom let out his breath as they entered the ground floor of Prey and Crimson's apartment block, "You're right, of course. I know it's a bad idea. But even so-"

"-Just leave it. Lilly only asked Saffron for help for a reason. This was something she wanted to do on her own. Don't get us involved." Prey interrupted as they took the stairs. The last thing he wanted was to get dragged into this mess by Gloom's noble sense of duty.

"They're her family. They've had long enough to cool off already, now they need to step up and start doing their duty." Gloom stated.

"Yes sir. But I agree with Prey. It is... we'll only make it worse."

"I know, I know, however I can't help but think maybe it'd do some good. And it's just Gloom. We're not on duty." Gloom sighed as they ascended the stairs up to the apartment block's second floor.

'-what would Screech do if he were in my place?-'

"Fine. Their address is 23rd Skylon Place, Trotters Road. If you want to go, then you can go. It's your choice, but I'm going to sleep." Prey announced, apartment doors passing by on their left and the open air of the long balcony on their right.

Reaching up, Prey stuck his key in the front door lock and turned it, going inside without looking back. He went down the dim, short hallway to his own door, but there he waited, listening.

Outside in the open corridor, there was a short silence, then a few muffled words between Gloom and Crimson.

"You're sure?"

"Yes. You're both right. But I don't like it." Gloom sighed tiredly.

"Me neither. Nor Prey, I can tell. A family should never treat each other like this."

"I know. Let me know if you think of something though.

"I'll try. See you tonight on duty."

"Meet you both at the Palace. Night watch over you both."

"You too, Gloom."

"Ha, you finally remembered we're not on duty. Until tonight." There was a leathery *thwap* of wings opening, then a *swoosh* as Gloom jumped over the railing and took off.

Prey opened his flat's door and went inside to get some well deserved sleep.

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Author's Notes:

GreatSpaceBeaver helped out again with roughly editing this chapter, so thanks to him!

70.5 Mailing Feathers in the Post

Prey looked up and checked the position of the sun in the late evening sky, "Hey. There's something I'd like to ask for more details about."

Crimson didn't look away from the busy Canterlot street, watching for their target, "Is now really the best time?"

"We're not going to miss him, and there's only the one entrance. Besides, they're hardly going to try and sneak in. It's a public building, and open to everyone. And Gloom's already positioned inside, anyways." Prey said.

Both of them were standing in the shade of a the awning of a bespoke furniture shop. The shop was one of those which subscribed to the belief that putting up large, garishly coloured stands advertising their very own wares right outside their shop was a brilliant marketing ploy. And further, that by adding a few planter boxes of bushes, trimmed in the very rough shape of the rising sun, it would help counterbalance their lack of taste.

Not that Prey and Crimson were complaining. Said planter boxes and display stands made for some great cover if you stood off to the side and in the shade. For some reason, ponies never seemed to look too cloesly at the shadows.

The two of them were here waiting for a certain pony to come by and go into the post office. A certain beige unicorn stallion, going by the name of Lika Soil. Gloom was already stationed inside the post office, but not in his new Guard armour, instead wearing a scarf and a dusk pony amulet to blend in as a pegasus civilian.

Crimson shifted on his cloud steel shod hooves, but still kept his eyes on the door of the post office down the street, "Alright. What do you want to ask about, Prey?"

Prey himself was sitting down on the pavement, not standing. They'd been waiting for nearly an hour, and he saw no reason to add sore hooves to boredom, "The new thestrals. We haven't had much to do with them yet, but that night they arrived three days ago, Luna-"

"-Princess Luna." Crimson corrected without looking over.

"-Mentioned that there were some clan prophecies. Prophecies which would come true since the one about Harmony's Comet did." Prey hid his scepticism there, "I want to ask about these other prophecies."

Crimson's tufted ears swivelled towards him, "Why do you want to know? I mean, you don't even believe in them."

"I never said that." Prey protested, but only because he really *hadn't* said that. But he didn't actually believe in prophecies, and he and Crimson both knew it, so he answered anyway:

"Alright, I want to know because those prophecies might still be important. What thestrals *think* is going to happen and *expect* to happen could be just as important as what *really* happens. So, do you know any of them?"

Again, the obvious went unsaid that Prey wasn't a thestral, and that it wasn't strictly any of his business. However, with how deeply they were all integrated into the Night Guard, Prey had a good claim on knowing anyway. Besides, he and Crimson also both knew he could find out at any time if he so chose. The ISND had 'intelligence' and 'secrecy' in it's job title afterall. Prey was merely being polite by asking.

Crimson grunted, "I don't know many of the prophecies. It wasn't ever important to me or my father. There's been a whole load made by the elders over the centuries. Some have happened, and some have maybe happened. I mean, it depends on how you interpret them."

"You don't believe they're real yourself." Prey observed blandly.

"I didn't. Or I don't." Crimson freely admitted, not at all bothered about bluntly sharing the truth with Prey whereas he might've been a bit more hesitant with another believing thestral, "Although, maybe? I mean, the one about Harmony's Comet came true, so there might be something to the other prophecies, but maybe not too. I don't know."

Prey waited, unhurried. Crimson would get onto sharing the clans various prophecies in a moment once he'd collected his thoughts. Often, Prey and Crimson's interactions would have pauses like this.

One of them would say something, the other would respond, and then five minutes later the other would add a follow on observation out of the blue, and they'd pick up the conversation again as if there'd been no pause at all.

Sure enough, after a minute of silently watching the colourful various ponies passing by out on the street, Crimson spoke; "Two then one, then two into the triumphant three, forming the fourth, and finally fosters a fifth."

Prey scratched behind one ear, "What?"

"That's supposed to be a prophecy. It's one that stuck in my head because of how simple it is." Crimson shrugged with his wings.

"That's a nursery rhyme."

"Yes. I think that's why everypony in all three clans remember it. I mean, everybody."

"Okaaaay. And, what's this 'prophecy' supposed to be about?"

"No one's really sure. It's an old one from way back. Some elders have suggested it's about the lands of Equestria, or different races, or the first bit could be about the Princesses. I don't know, it just the one that sticks in every foals head when they're young. You know, because it rhymes."

"So no one knows if what it's supposed to mean," Prey summed up, "Alright, how about some of the other prophecies? What else is floating around out there in clan lore?"

"Don't be flippant about this, Prey. This is clan history."

"Alright, I'm sorry." Prey reigned in his scepticism. "But what are these other prophecies about?"

"I only remember a few, and not the exact wording. There's a prophecy about a relic from the crystal empire being dug upon a, "day of green", whatever that means, which will bring about great change. Doesn't say what change, just change. What else...? There's one saying a brood hydra and a sire of dragons will fight it out in a bay of raging water. The bay is either supposed to be the Bay of Unity, or Far Coast. Either or. But it's been over four centuries, so that fight may have happened already and nobody noticed."

These all sounded very dubious to Prey, but he kept quiet as Crimson went on.

"I don't think this ones true, but elder Farhaven... actually, you wouldn't know of him Prey, but he was famous. Or infamous. But he prophesied that a queen bee will land on a drawn blade in the presence of four enemies, signalling the anointing of the one as murderer and new king. Is that how it went? Yes, that was it."

"What's *that* one supposed to mean?" Prey asked, puzzled.

"I don't know. Other elders have stated he was speaking in a parable, that Farhaven wasn't speaking about a literal queen bee." Crimson explained.

"Okay, and has that one possibly happened already? Or are the clans looking out for a murder king? And king of what, exactly?" Prey asked cautiously. This was exactly the type he would have to be watching out for. Like if some clan Myrrdon fanatic tried to replicate this scenario with a queen bee and think themselves a king who went around murdering people.

"What? No, it's not about that, it's only important because... Never mind. I guess you wouldn't know the history at the time, but it was a very serious prediction with what was going on, and thestrals were sent out to tear down every bee hive they could find to try and prevent it from happening. For decades, the clans stopped keeping

bees or letting any nests start near them. Farhaven's prophecy has kind of faded, and no one really believes it, but everyone still watches out for it."

"That's... certainly something." Prey agreed.

Crimson thought for a moment, "There's only about one or two more prophecies I can recall."

"That's fine, I'm just looking for any more information. What are they?"

"I only remember this one because it's rather silly, and my father could never repeat it with a straight face." Crimson stopped. Prey shifted, but Crimson had already put away the sharp needle of grief he'd accidently pricked himself on:

"It went, 'Despair under a sweet tasting sky of pink, because up will be down and down will be up, and how shall the we fly away when we fly in reverse?' It goes on for a bit basically saying woe is me, give up, despair, and wait to die."

"That does sound a bit ridiculous and silly, but the bit about giving into despair doesn't." Prey decided.

Crimson lightly shrugged again, wings briefly rising and falling, "That's what makes it doubly silly. Only someone dumb enough to eat enough mushrooms to turn the sky pink and think they're flying back-to-front and upside down is also going to think it's the apocalypse."

"And the last one?" Prey asked.

"It's about the last..." Crimson straightened, yellow eyes focused, "Forget that for now, there's Lika Soil now."

Prey hurriedly rose to his hooves. He couldn't see the stallion Crimson had spotted for a moment, being too short to see over any of the trotting ponies heads. "Where?"

"There. On the left, just coming up to the lamp post by the red house." Crimson didn't point, pointing just might draw their target's

attention. People had a sixth sense for feeling someone's focus, although most ponies weren't in touch with this instinct.

Prey followed Crimson's directions with his eyes. He saw their target, Lika Soil, a beige unicorn wearing a shirt and light saddle bags, trotting merrily down the street and heading for the post office. Right as expected.

How do you catch a spy?

There is only one step, and it is the exact same thing that makes it so damnably difficult. You first have to find them. But how? How do you find someone who's whole purpose is to blend in, to be normal, to not do anything attention grabbing, to fade into society, and above all, to never get caught?

A spy is not someone with a cloak and dagger, who wears false glasses and uses illusion magic. Those spies only exist in exaggerated pony stories. A *real* spy really is just an ordinary person. Who has a family, who's an older brother, who likes to sing, alive, and plays on the local amateur hoofball team. They'll also have a certifiable background, like a collage diploma, known neighbours and friends, maybe a high school sweetheart, and a job, such as a nice safe position in the city council.

Ordinary things. Ordinary people. In short, a spy could be anyone.

How do you catch someone who is everyone and no one?

Well, in practice, a spy can't *actually* be anyone. It's about statistics and ruling people out.

For example, a foal isn't likely to be a spy for obvious reasons. Nor is a highly placed government official actually, despite all paranoid suspicions of the public to the contrary. Instead, you look at who could cause the most damage if they were indeed a spy. A public school janitor isn't likely to have any dangerous secrets they could report. A unicorn employed in one of the magi towers would be a better bet, but again, dubious, since mages vetted their own apprentices and who they hired. That was the thing, there were two extremes, but in all likelihood, it would still be neither. It would be

the self employed carpenter down the street.

Because you had to keep going back to the first rule. A spy is an ordinary person. They don't stand out.

So statistics couldn't help you find the spy, or could only vaguely narrow it down on an individual to individual basis. But reviewing every single person is completely impossible. Equestria was a nation. It had hundreds of thousands of ponies living in it, spread across cities and towns and villages, thousands of square miles, from coast to coast.

A needle in a hay stack was too small of an analogy. A leaf in a forest would be more accurate. A leaf in a forest where every leaf is different, and therefore, all the same.

In the face of all this, how does one catch a spy?

Prey did not know the answer to this question. So he'd instead got to brainstorming with Gloom and Crimson, (it was still mostly him), and thought up some possible methods.

How do you find a spy, and with only the three of them to hoof? With no previously built up information network of their own, or even a starting point to work from?

The short answer, as Crimson had put it was; "That's impossible."

So in that case, how do you narrow it down to instead look within certain sectors of the population, with all those limiting factors still in effect?

Gloom had emphatically shaken his head in denial, "It can't be done."

The unpleasant truth was, with no information or clue where to start looking, they were at the mercy of random tip-offs and reports of suspicious activity from people maybe noticing something odd about their neighbour. Which, because these people were ponies, varied in two extremes.

Ponies were overly trusting and naïve, and would give any potential

spy the benefit of the doubt.

On the opposite hoof, ponies were also skittish and leery of anything outside of their comfort zone, and could completely panic over the noise of a cat flap going in the middle of the night.

Therefore, relying on the general populace for anything helpful was a fool's choice. If the ISND wanted to find anything, they needed to do it themselves. So that's what they did. Or tried to do. There really was no guarantee that the approach they'd finally settled upon was anything more than grasping at straws. But Luna must be satisfied, and they had a job to do.

So after all the brainstorming, the chosen approach had resulted in them being here today, waiting for this Lika Soil to deliver his weekly letter, so Crimson could go in and commandeer it in the name of the Night Guard. It wasn't because Lika Soil was a spy, but rather because he was on a long list of people who might, possibly, maybe, feasibly, conceivably, perchance, be a spy. Although 'spy' was a strong word. Perhaps just 'informant' was better.

Three days ago, with next to no other ideas, the ISND had hit upon this plan. *If* there was a spy reporting in person to whomever had hired them, there wasn't much the ISND could do about it. But *if* this theoretical spy was sending written reports via the Equestrian mail service, then perhaps the ISND *might* have a chance of catching them.

So, three days ago, they'd gone around all fourteen post offices in Canterlot, and using their Guard authority, had demanded the records of outgoing letters, to which cities or towns, and on which days of the week.

And what do you know? The never ending paperwork and bureaucracy of Canterlot that Prey so hated actually came in useful for once.

The post offices recorded the address of where a letter was going to, the letter type, and on which date. But they didn't record who had posted it. It would've been so much easier if the post offices did, but no, Equestria unfortunately allowed you to send anonymous mail.

It had taken all of that night and most of yesterday looking through those ledger records to even find any sort of correlation. What they were looking for were outgoing letters addressed to the same place each time, going out on a regular basis. Because the employer would no doubt want regular, scheduled updates on whatever they'd hired someone to spy on. So that's what the ISND looked for, outbound letters going out on the same day to the same place each week, or two weeks, or monthly.

It had been soul crushing work. Hundreds of pages, with thousands of entries. Hour after hour of pouring over the pages, and then flicking backwards and forwards to cross reference. And even this was all conjecture not guaranteed to give them any leads.

Because if it were so simple, someone would've probably thought to do it before during the many long years of Canterlot's existence.

It was just as possible any spy would be clever enough to send their reports from a different post office and to a slightly different address each time, in which case the ISND was plumb out of luck. However they couldn't do anything about that possibility, so they were being forced to hope any spy would've become slightly complacent and sloppy after so long without getting caught. Plus, this theoretical person or persons probably didn't even really think of themselves as a spy, more like secret reporter, so hopefully they wouldn't feel the need to be as paranoid as Prey would've been in their place.

At the start, after the ISND were done cross referencing all that, they were still left with a freshly scribed list with over six hundred possible matches on it from the last three months alone.

They'd morosely looked over this 'narrowed down' list while Prey shook out his aching hoof, and tried to figure out how best to prune the six hundred entries down even further.

It was then that Prey'd had a stroke of inspiration.

"If you were employing a spy, you'd want them to send an additional report immediately if anything big or unexpected happened, wouldn't you? So when did that rainboom thing happen

again?"

With that additional filter added, they were able to narrow down the list of six hundred names to just under two hundred. They were well aware they could be cutting out real candidates by doing so, but there was nothing for it. They could always just revisit those names later if they needed to.

But still two hundred possibilities were still far too many. Investigating all of those with only the three of them wasn't going to achieve anything. They didn't have the time or the numbers for that.

Two-hundred addresses was an improvement over six-hundred, and a huge improvement over the thousands before that, but it still didn't get them any closer to catching any possible spies.

'This is soooooo stupid. This is the same ridiculously dumb thing all over again.' Prey had thought in frustration.

'And why are we suddenly expected to become expert spy catchers overnight in the first place? We've no sort of training, and it's not as if any of us have any actual experience in counter intelligence. None of the Night Guard knows how for that matter, but just because 'Luna commanded us', we're expected to do it. I hate Luna. I hate Nighthawk. I hate this.'

With nearly two hundred instances still left on the list, there was nothing for it but to think harder. How could they do this? What would work? What wouldn't work?

Which was all to say nothing of the fact that these two-hundred delivery addresses were in all likelihood just normal people or businesses, and *not* someone secretly employing spies. Because that's how real life worked.

Prey had stared at the list until the writing blurred and ran together as he considered and thought on how to proceed. "The most obviously suspicious ones are the addresses which aren't in the country. Let's check those first."

"How? The records department won't have any information on an address not even in Equestria."

Prey had tapped the column listing the different post office sites, "Simple. Go to the post office these letters are always getting sent from, and make the postal workers tell us who brings in the letter each week. Or each two weeks, or every month."

"How are they going to remember each and every pony who comes through the door?" Gloom had pointed out.

"And what if it's not always the same pony? I mean, the post office workers, what if there's a different one on the till each time this possible spy comes by?" Crimson had also put in.

"The postage needed to send a letter overseas is high, and they've got all these different kinds of special stamps. I'd bet they remember that sort of thing. And anyone sending a letter on a schedule like clockwork is obviously reporting something. It could be something perfectly legitimate, or illegal, but until we check, we won't know."

"And if it's a different postal worker working odd day shifts?"

"There's no way the postal workers don't gossip with each other non-stop. They're *ponies*. They'll have told each other about a customer who comes in to send an expensive special letter each week, I guarantee it."

So that's what they'd done yesterday, gone around to the post offices who were recording a regular letter dispatched out of the country to the same address over and over, and demanded to know who was posting these letters.

The postal workers had taken one look at Gloom and Crimson in their new Night Guard armour, and hadn't even considered making a fuss. They'd practically tripped over themselves to tell the ISND what they wanted to know before Gloom had even finished saying; "By the authority of Princess Luna invested in the Night Guard, I order you to answer my questions."

Thus, they'd found out the names and descriptions of everyone who came by, and also that one such postee, Lika Soil, came by every Wednesday in the afternoon to post his letter abroad. Which had been tomorrow yesterday, and was today today.

Gloom had sternly warned the postal worker not to give the game away when Lika Soil arrived. "You will hold onto the letter. We will come and collect it. Do not say a word to Lika Soil. This is a Night Guard investigation, and impeding us is a criminal offense. Am I clear?"

The nervous pony had nodded rapidly, miming drawing a zipper across their lips.

But the day Prey trusted a pony to keep their word without a contingency would be a cold day in the Bad Lands. (The nights in the Bad Lands were actually *freezing* cold, but the days were lethally hot), So he'd suggested that one of them wait inside the post office in disguise for when Lika Soil arrived, just to make sure the post worker didn't tip him off about what was happening.

After all, the new Night Guard were not liked or trusted by the citizens of Canterlot, so of course they'd trust a normal looking pony over a thestral.

Crimson could've been the one to go in, but between the red pegasus and Gloom, it was unanimously decided that even with the limitations of the Dusk Pony Amulet's glamour, Gloom could pull off 'normal' far better than Crimson could.

And Prey was a runt lamb, the only one in Canterlot. And while he might be very good at being sneaky and staying out of sight, that was beside the point.

---The Present---

And that left them here on the street, Gloom waiting out of sight inside, as the oblivious Lika Soil trotted through the post office's door.

Crimson and Prey waited, watching the door for Lika Soil to re-

emerge and leave. Chatting ponies trotted past on the street, the occasional foal being pushed in a pram or guided by hoof, most dressed in some form of orange, green, red, or brown, the early colours of fall. An energetic fiddler played from a booth to a small delighted crowd. Prey listened to and watched it all warily.

There was a newspaper hawker waving the Canterlot Express on the street corner, shouting something about Archduke Triton Fell having a brand new merchant fleet, and an upmarket cart rolled down the white cobbles past a chiselled statue of Celestia.

"What's the chance of Lika Soil really being a spy do you think?" Crimson asked, not looking away from the post office door down the street.

"Less than five percent. We're probably going to have to redo this little stakeout thing another fifty plus times." Prey answered unhappily.

"...Wonderful."

Lika Soil walked back out the post office door without a care in the world, and trotted off casually towards the newspaper seller. They watched as he bought one of the papers, smiling and chatting with the seller for a minute, then left in the crowd.

Only once he was gone did they move, stepping out of the awning's shadow and going straight for the post office, ponies quickly getting out of their way. Or rather, out of the armoured Crimson's way.

The post door 'dinged', the smell of paper and glue immediately filling the air. The five or so ponies waiting in line to either buy stamps or post their own letters stopped talking one by one as they noticed the sudden arrival of a Night Guard. It was almost comical how they all shuffled a little closer together without even meaning to.

Prey glanced sideways at the corner of the post office. Gloom was sitting on one of the provided stools in his disguise, pretending to be labouring over writing a difficult letter. Gloom made a quick double tap motion with his hoof.

That meant it had all gone as hoped, and the postal worker hadn't tipped Lika Soil off.

"Night Guard business." Crimson announced loudly into the stiff silence of staring ponies. They didn't move.

Crimson's wing gave a little flick of annoyance. After a moment he just started walking forwards, and the other ponies quickly vacated his path, meaning he reached the counter without having to wait. Prey remained standing to the side of the front door, watching the exit out of habit, and plus, Crimson hardly needed him for just getting one letter.

Crimson stopped in front of the olive green worker from yesterday on the other side of the counter, and waited expectantly. They should know what he was here for.

"The letter please." Crimson had to prompt when the other stallion kept just standing there.

"O-oh, right away."

The green furred worker hurriedly turned and retrieved a letter from the myriad of other letters occupying the cubical shelves behind the desk. The stacked letters were in nearly every size and colour, but the one the postal worker nervously clutched in their telekinesis was a thick, well sealed blue envelope.

"The letter. Now please." Crimson repeated calmly when the worker kept levitating it.

Shocked out of their reluctance, he dropped the letter onto the counter. Crimson swept it up and away under one wing, "Thank you for you assistance in this matter."

'He's gotten so much better at social interactions, but still, that was just... wow.' Prey thought, pushing and holding the front door open for them both as Crimson strode over, without so much as a backwards look at all the still slightly stunned ponies.

Gloom didn't re-join them straight away, obviously. He'd wait a few minutes until everyone inside moved from whispering like naughty

school children back to gossiping, and then slip out unnoticed. The pre-determined meeting point was a narrow side street a block over, one which Prey'd picked out because it didn't go anywhere and so was therefore unlikely to be attended.

The fiddler was still playing one last jaunty tune to a happy crowd before he packed up for the day, as Prey and Crimson passed.

"Let's have a look then." Gloom said, back with his normal thestral eyes and wings, dusk pony amulet put away. The long black scarf he'd worn to disguise the very noticeable jagged scar marring his chest was still present, though.

The side street was thankfully empty, just like Prey had estimated it would be. He'd memorised maps of Canterlot, and so had known there weren't any stores or shops on the narrow street which might've had ponies visiting, just houses. Although now was about the time people would start returning home from work in the afternoon, but nowhere was perfect.

Gloom grunted in annoyance over the letter. It was sealed quite thoroughly, and he didn't want to rip or damage the envelope.

'-chances are it's a perfectly innocent letter to a much loved aunt or uncle. Don't want to damage it if that's the case-'

"Prey, can you get into this without ripping it?" Gloom asked, offering Prey the thick blue envelope.

"Let me sir." Crimson said, snapping one wing out. With a *snick*, the wingblade gleamed.

"Oh, good idea." Gloom held the letter steady between his two wing claws as Crimson smoothly glided the blade under the letter's flap. He didn't even do it slowly, just with a single confident stroke. Prey closed his mouth. He'd been going to say something about a potential magical trap or poison on the letter, but it seemed a bit late now.

Gloom slid the folded letter out. It was several pages long, which

explained the envelope's thickness. He unfolded the letter with a crinkle of paper and looked it over.

Prey cleared his throat, "Down here, maybe?" He asked wryly.

"Ah, sorry." Gloom held the pages down lower so Prey could also read them upside-down from at his runt height, and Crimson just leaned over Gloom's shoulder.

They all read it.

Gloom let out a groan of frustrated disappointment at his fellow pony.

"There's no way." Prey said flatly.

"This is written in code? I mean, he is a spy then, right?" Crimson asked.

The letter wasn't written in Equestrian even if it used the same alphabet, nor was it simply a foreign language. Instead, it was purposeful gobbledygook.

"No way," Prey repeated, "There's no way this is so simple."

"It looks very simple to me. Lika Soil is sending coded messages to somepony he doesn't want anypony else to read." Gloom said, face set.

'-I was giving him the benefit of the doubt, but this is proof-', Gloom thought in disappointment.

"Hang on, no. I'm not buying this." Prey shook his head.

Crimson tilted one tufted ear in silent query where it poked through his helmet slit.

"It's way too simple," Prey elaborated, "There's just no way. I mean come on, the very first person's mail we intercept? With no previous leads or clues, and it just so happens our first suspect out of over fifty is the spy?"

Gloom raised a brow, giving the letter a shake in his wing claw, "Do you think this is a set up? A framing? Nopony even knew we were investigating Lika Soil. And he came and posted the letter himself, I saw it. Nopony switched it in the post office or anything."

"Nuh-uh. I'm not saying he's being framed, because obviously he is sending coded messages, but I don't buy it being this smooth." Prey shook his head, ears and ribbon swinging

"But...I mean, that looks like what it is though." Crimson pointed out, indicating the damning letter.

"In real life, usually the simplest explanation is the correct explanation. We just got lucky that it was the very first pony on the list we checked." Gloom said.

"Lucky. Us?" Prey challenged, "No way, no how. When has anything ever gone right for us? There's got to be more to it than this."

'-I can't disagree with that. Everything always goes wrong for the ISND-', Without meaning to, Gloom's free wing claw rose to rub at the scarred flesh under his eyes. He remembered rats in a cellar, a dark night, and bloody jaw bones lined up in the dirt.

Crimson obviously caught the glazed look coming over Gloom's eyes and recognised the signs. He knew them himself. Crimson quickly extended a wing and firmly nudged the Sargent's shoulder.

Gloom startled, almost going into a defensive crouch before he caught himself. "Oh."

That was all Gloom said. Prey and Crimson said nothing about it either.

"The evidence is showing it is Lika Soil, yes, but it' suspiciously simple." Prey said, continuing on as if nothing had happened.

Crimson nodded at the top page of the letter, "It could be that it's nothing bad written. I mean, we don't know what it says yet. He could just be paranoid."

Yeah, right. None of them believed that for a second.

"Well, we got something on our very first try. We should head back to the office and work out how to crack this code." Gloom said, but he was looking sideways at Prey.

"Give it here. Let me have a look at it first." Prey said impatiently. He really did think this was too easy. He couldn't think of how someone might've tried to intervene or sow false evidence, so it should be real, but even so, how could he not be suspicious?

Since they'd already inadvertently tested the letter and envelope for poison or magic before Prey could stop them, he may as well see if the code was a simple one.

Prey took the edge of the letter in his hoof cleft and stepped back to give himself some safe space out of reach. He read over the letter. It was all written in upper case, with no punctuation or line breaks, but even so.

Prey scoffed, "This is supposed to be a code? A Royal Guard greenie could crack this in less than a day by simply by substituting letters until they worked out a full sentence."

"Is that just an exaggeration?" Gloom asked.

"No, I'm serious. This is pathetic." Prey shook the pages.

"See this? It's like a child trying to be clever by inventing a secret code to write in their diary with, that's the level of bad this is. These are all letters of the same alphabet, the words are based off Equestrian too, and they've merely substituted letters with symbols on a one-to-one basis. They've still even used vowels in each word."

This didn't even count as a code. This was one of those logic word puzzles ponies were so fond of putting on the backs of their newspapers it was so simple.

'Too simple.' Prey couldn't help but think suspiciously again.

"Well, can you 'translate' what it says right now then? Or do you need something to write it down with?" Gloom asked, but not expecting to hear a negative after Prey's scathing review.

"No, I can do it now. Just give me five minutes of silence to read through it all and get the key worked out." Prey assured him.

Gloom and Crimson did just that, going quiet and moving over to the street curb to patiently let him work his way through Lika Soil's letter. No residents came by during that brief time, nor flew overhead in the balmy evening sky, although Canterlot was far from quiet. The capital city never was, there was always something going on.

The sound of hooves clopping on bricks and pavement always echoed all around Canterlot at all hours of the day. Ponies voices raised for whatever varied reasons. Carts, wagons, carriages, and cabs rolling down the streets. Gates opening, doors closing, crates being dropped, chain link clinking, the banging of hammers repairing walls, and gravel pathways crunching just to name a few. There was really no end to the myriad list of noises always occuring in the background.

'-you just can't get the solemn, empty silence of a full moon here like you can out there-', Gloom noted.

Finished, Prey rubbed his cheek, "Alright, I'm done."

"And what does it say? Give us a summarised run down."

Complied down into a basic summary, the letter was a weekly report about the mining of raw gems, for enchanting purposes, coming out from under Mount Halter, the smaller mountain next to Mount Canter itself.

The letter also included a small dose of the 'important' goings on of Canterlot on the side. The latter was mostly just things which anyone could read in the newspaper if they wanted to. But the bulk of Lika Soil's letter was distinctly about the former topic, the mining reports of the quantity and quality of raw gems coming from the mining operations happening under Mount Halter.

Some of what Lika Soil had was quite in depth and detailed stuff,

and there was no possibility of the recorded information having come from publicly available sources. It had actual tables of presented data, which could only have come off copied reports from the mining offices themselves.

Because where else would Lika Soil have ever come across exact extraction figures for lapis, onyx, carnelian, amazonite, jasper, tourmaline, selenite, garnet, moonstone, and more? It listed quantity, the grade of the stones, net weight, and the two week closure of shaft 5B because of concerns over increasing readings of water buildup.

Corporate espionage. While not containing national secrets or treasonous plans of revolt, the letter was still very much concrete proof of illegal activities.

Captain Nighthawk put down his transcribed and translated copy of the letter on his desk, "These reports have been going out of Canterlot every week?"

"Yes sir." Gloom nodded, standing at ease. Prey and Crimson were both lined up behind him in the dim office.

"Where has this Lika Soil been sending them to again?"

"We don't know exactly. There is no recipient name listed, just a post box within Griffonia, sir."

Nighthawk dispassionately flicked the translated copy with a hoof tip, "And how did he manage to get this information from the mining companies? Or is it just one company?"

"We don't know that yet either. We can either arrest him and interrogate him, or continue to investigate him to see what else we can find first." Gloom answered, not wasting time and skipping straight to the reason for seeking out the Captain. Not that the ISND weren't capable of making the call themselves, but Gloom just wanted to check first.

Nighthawk's hoof began to tap on the desk as he considered the two

options Gloom had just put forward, face set in its usual hard scowl.

'-put a halt to this criminal immediately, or see if we can drag any more worms out of the woodwork first. That's the question-'

Nighthawk was not the only officer of the Night Guard leadership in the dimly lit office. Vivid Edge, the one who'd led the new thestral recruits here four nights ago, was the newest 2nd Lieutenant, and was present along with Starry Wing. Nighthawk had purposefully called them both in for this meeting, Prey picked up from their thoughts. He wished in annoyance Nighthawk hadn't.

Although Prey supposed it was an inevitability he would've met the new thestral Vivid Edge at some point regardless. As an officer, she and the ISND were bound to run across each other during the course of their duties.

It didn't stop Prey from still wishing they hadn't met at all.

Starry Wing had been tutoring the one eyed mare in her new role before they'd both been called in by Nighthawk. The Night Guard was too understaffed for anything but throwing all the new recruits in at the deep end. Sink or swim, there was no time for slow easing in.

Now, Vivid Edge was standing up straight next to the other Lieutenant, although she was still shorter than Starry Wing. Prey had of course already seen the mare on the parade ground during their dramatic arrival, but now he got another look close up.

Vivid Edge wasn't small despite being nearly a head shorter than Starry Wing, just compact, with the sort of hard wiry muscles which came from a life of hard work, tail cropped short, but mane kept long in the warriors braid of thestrals. She was of course kitted out in the familiar grey repurposed Royal Guard armour, and she was eyeing the ISND with her one good eye, the other covered under a faded eyepatch. It looked made from actual animal hide, too.

She wasn't doing something childish like trying to hide her scrutiny either, just openly inspecting the ISND, Crimson and Prey in particular.

It seemed she'd heard something about Crimson's situation, '-the only loyal pony of clan Myrrdon, but he wasn't exiled for that. A gauntlet, wasn't it?-'

But whereas she had an idea about Crimson's presence, Prey was a complete surprise, '-heard something about a sheep, but she's a lamb, not an adult. There must be a good reason a foal is in Her Majesty's Guard, but still, why?-'

Prey didn't look at Vivid Edge and pretended not to notice her one eyed scrutiny.

Nighthawk paused in his tapping on the desk, as if just remembering Vivid Edge was new here as well, and looked sharply over.

"Lieutenant Vivid Edge. You know of Gloom already. This is Crimson, and Prey. Their unit is a specially designated and selected one by Princess Luna herself. You have not yet been informed about them, I take it?"

"No sir, I have not."

Nighthawk grunted, pausing for a long moment in consideration. "You will need to be brought up to speed later about their role and... previous cases. It is important that you understand some of the restricted... But that's not important right now, the details can wait until later. For now, I want your assessment of how best to proceed with this confirmed report of spying."

Vivid Edge of course didn't protest that she was completely new not only to the Night Guard but the whole of Canterlot, and thus hadn't a clue about procedure. Nighthawk was asking to give her a chance to learn for herself.

Thestrals believed the best way to learn is through experience, or through following the example of your elders. Vivid Edge wasn't some young, fresh faced warrior. She would never have been granted the rank of 2nd Lieutenant otherwise. Prey placed her age at at least fifty, her scars and stance showing her to be the recipient of a lot of hard learning.

'-I don't know enough about these gem mines. Since I don't know, then the only remedy is to learn-'

"Why are these gems important? How valuable are they, and how does this spy's report impact Canterlot?" Vivid Edge asked brusquely.

Nighthawk first looked over at Starry Wing to check if he knew any of those answers, but the thestral shrugged and looked to Gloom instead. Vivid Edge and Nighthawk copied him.

"I don't know beyond the basics myself yet ma'am," Gloom answered, "We haven't had time to do any in-depth research, but I'm sure Prey can better answer your question."

There was a silence.

"Prey?" Gloom prompted.

Prey stopped himself from scowling in displeasure as he was put in the spotlight, Vivid Edge seemingly nonplussed by the question being turned over to the child for answers.

'-why should that be? Why would the filly know where her Sargent doesn't?-'

'Oh look, another pony who doesn't know an ewe from a ram. Who would've guessed?'

Prey was momentarily tempted to favour her with one of his sweetest and most saccharine smiles, but by now even Nighthawk and Starry Wing would know it was utterly fake and actually mockery. Because what did he have to smile about? So he just resignedly answered the question.

"Raw gems by themselves are of indeterminate value. To my understanding, the mines merely extract them en-masse, and are then only valued once they've been processed and refined. So while Lika Soil's illicit report doesn't have information about the exact value in bits, it can be used to make an estimate."

"You know the value of the different types of gemstones when in

raw bulk?" Starry Wing asked in some surprise, "Oh, pardon me for interrupting."

"Nope. But these gemstones are specifically for enchanting, remember? That means their value wildly varies, unlike with crystals." Prey answered.

'-is she making this up? No, a pony like Nighthawk would not listen to a filly spinning tall tales-', Vivid Edge reasoned, mentally shifting her evaluation of the lamb. Also, wrong on the ewe and ram front yet again.

"I don't follow. What's the difference between crystals and gems? And what do you mean about the value?" Vivid questioned.

Prey resigned himself to explaining. The Night Guard were not unicorns, (thank goodness), and so they wouldn't know much about magical theory. That was a mark against Nighthawk in Prey's book. He was in the city of New Unicornia, surrounded by the dangers of magic every single day. He should know better.

"Okay, the first important thing to understand is that gems and crystals are different when it comes to holding magical enchantments. Both have properties which can store or transmute magical energy. The big difference is in the scale. Some gemstones can hold incredible amounts of magic, while others nearly nothing. Whereas crystals all work at basically the same consistent and reliable level. But it's a low level."

"But gemstones can take more magic is what you're saying." Nighthawk bluntly stated.

"Yes, but mostly no. Alright, to put it in perspective, nearly every single crystal the size of say, a pencil, could hold ten units of magic."

"How much is one unit of magic? And what is a unit of magic?" Vivid Edge felt she needed to ask.

"I don't know, that's not how magic is measured, I'm just making up a number to show you the difference." Prey answered.

"I see. Continue on."

"So every crystal could hold ten units. But an average gemstone will most likely hold less than that, say only one or two units."

Nighthawk frowned, "Why are gemstones so much more valuable than crystals then?"

"I wasn't finished. Crystals are reliable. That's why they're used to hold light enchantments, heating, cooling, and basically all magically mundane appliances use crystals. *Most* gemstones are worse. They're shiny and pretty, but magically worthless. But then there's the rare gemstone which can hold so much more. An *ignius* gemstone. It's to do with a difference with structure and age. The older and slower forming a gemstone, the better."

"How much more magic is more?" Vivid asked, everyone else interested to hear as well, having become engaged.

"If a crystal holds ten units, and the average grade gemstone holds perhaps two, then depending on the individual gemstone, an ignius stone could hold anywhere from ten, up to or beyond a thousand."

Everyone blinked. "That's a big difference." Gloom observed.

"Very. Although there's also the difference in gemstones to consider. Rubies, lapiz, emeralds, carbuncles, as far as I understand, each is suited to hold certain types of magical affinities better as well. So even the same grade of gemstone can vary wildly between stone types." Prey added.

"And what could the value of these higher ignius gemstones be?" Nighthawk asked, getting back to the heart of the matter.

"Well a refined but unenchanted crystal would go for, say, twenty bits. A refined ignius gemstone, even without the enchantments which is another whole expense entirely, could range between roughly a hundred bits, to fifty-thousand bits plus."

"That's a lot of gold." Gloom observed again.

And it was. A hundred bits was hardly a piffling amount to casually

spend, but fifty-thousand really made you stop. From a month's rent, to buying the house and both your neighbours' houses too for good measure. Those kinds of prices for gemstones were something only wealthy magi towers could afford. The towers spent big and earned big, but even then, each stone would be evaluated on an individual basis by a skilled magus before any bid was placed. And while nearly all thestrals and Prey placed little stock in money or avarice, even Vivid Edge could still appreciate what such a large number meant.

Everyone looked again at Lika Soil's translated letter on Nighthawk's desk.

"With that kind of gold on the line, you'd think there'd be rules to stop somepony getting their hooves on such information and sending it out wherever they pleased." Starry Wing mused, but without actually being thoughtful in the slightest. It was as plain as day Lika Soil had broken laws to get this information.

"Whomever is employing Lika Soil, why not instead hire a spy to steal the information about the gemstones once they've been refined and sorted?" Crimson spoke up for the first time in the conversation.

They looked at him. The pegasus shuffled his wings against his sides, only a few of the deepest cuts remaining on his body by this point as a result of his training 'accident', as Crimson slowly worked through his thought process verbally:

"I mean, these high quality ignius gemstones sound rare. Surely they don't dig lots out everyday. Most of the gemstones sound like they're just dross. So surely it would be better to hire a spy to get the information once the gems have all been sorted out and you know if any of them are actually worth something."

"That's right. Getting this information before the gems have been refined and sorted won't help you know which ones to steal." Gloom agreed, "Providing of course, that your aim actually *is* to steal the ignius ones."

Nighthawk's already hard eyes narrowed fractionally in thought, '-something is missing from this picture-'

'-Dusky Gloom used to be friends with my Edge when they were foals. I barely recognise him now, he's grown into a leader of his own squad, being expected to deal with spies-', Vivid Edge thought to herself, apparently momentarily distracted from the query Crimson had raised.

'You'll change your opinion once Nighthawk's told you all about Mayflower and Lilly Blossom.' Prey thought.

He didn't really have an opinion on what should be done with Lika Soil. For a start, he hadn't expected to actually find a spy despite all their researching, and moreover, Prey didn't care about money or the mines getting ripped off by someone in Griffonia. Actually, that sounded like a plus to him, even if this person was just as greedy as the ponies he or she was defrauding.

Nighthawk gave a dissatisfied grunt as he failed to think up a possible reason why. "There is some key piece of information missing from what we have. Leave Lika Soil untouched for now."

Vivid Edge's short tail flicked in obvious surprise, not understanding, but she didn't even think to question Nighthawk's decision, merely trying to figure out what she'd missed.

Starry Wing saw and offered her an explanation anyways; "It's to our advantage to let him stay free for now. Arresting him will alert the pony receiving his letters on the other end that something has gone wrong. We can also now watch Lika Soil and find out if he's in contact with anypony else. Rest assured, Lika Soil will be charged for his crimes, and it is not as if he can flee without us being aware."

Nighthawk grunted and bluntly summarized Starry Wing's words, "Before we knew of no spy. Now we know of one. He's more useful to the Night Guard free than in a cell."

'-very different to the clans. Seems even I have much to learn about Canterlot-', Vivid thought, nodding once in understanding.

"If we're not going to immediately arrest Lika Soil, then we, the ISND I mean, will be observing and digging a bit deeper into his

recent history and see what we can find first." Gloom decided. The ISND were clearly expected to operate independently by now, and only when or if Nighthawk thought otherwise would he issue different orders.

"Very good." Nighthawk rasped. It was a dismissal, but before they could leave Starry Wing jumped in.

"Just checking, you have another copy of this letter, I take it?" The Lieutenant asked.

"Yes sir."

"Then I'll send somepony around to your office in a few minutes to collect the original one. They can go post it again so our 'friend' in Griffonia doesn't get suspicious."

"Will do sir."

Standing there, in the dimly lit Captain's office, Prey was struck by the tedium of all of... *this*. The repetitive cycle of being given a case, finding a suspect, reporting it to Nighthawk, and having some new Night Guard listen in while he held back to not overly draw their attention. It was the same thing over and over again, but at least there was little active danger. Not zero danger, because the moment you let your guard down is the moment you've given up your right to live. Still, it was so utterly tedious.

Except, it wasn't quite the same as it had been anymore.

Prey was different. All of the ISND were different for that matter, although they were ignorant of Prey's own secret war with the now deceased thieves. But they were all still changed. And Nighthawk and Starry Wing both knew it. The warlock had left his mark, both the marks everyone else knew of, but also that one night huddled in the dark had left it's own, *hidden*, marks.

Both Night Guard officers had privately thought about it multiple times during this meeting, Prey had heard them doing so. They saw it as part of their duty as leaders to consider their subordinates, but neither had said anything, no, not so much as even hinted to it. Of

course, they would not broach the topic again unless the ISND moved things in that direction first. The case was closed. The painful details did not need to be brought up over and over again. The damage it'd caused to any and all of the ISND members was not relevant to this case, and would be brought up until such time as it became relevant.

Prey thought he preferred it that way. Most probably. Or maybe he could've milked more sympathy and gotten to stay safely on leave for longer.

But it was too late to try that approach now, things had moved on. He was back and working in the ISND again, and so he needed to also return to fulfilling his role. That being the role of pleasing Luna and proving his continual usefulness. Uncovering a spy in only three days, even if it was mostly blind luck, had to count for at least something towards filling his 'quota'.

So yes, the same old tedious routine over and over again.

The ISND had returned to their office after being dismissed by Nighthawk. With the arrival of night, it was the beginning for most of the Night Guards' shifts, whereas the ISND were halfway through theirs already.

Somewhere outside, the magnificent Palace Gardens were being shrouded in the silent arrival of darkness. Birds were tucking their heads under their wings, and flowers were closing their petals until the bright light of morning came again.

Inside of the Palace walls, down in the Night Guard section and inside of their office, the ISND were taking a short break. Just three or four minutes to stretch, uncrink their necks from hunching over paperwork, and wake their legs back up.

Gloom had his helmet removed, head leant back, and was massaging his eyes. Crimson was standing in the middle of the floor, stretching his wings out to their limits, and properly re-tying his mane back. Prey had simply just sprawled himself over his stool,

legs dangling, and looking something like a flopped cat. He groaned. He was already fed up wtih reading all the publicly available material about the mining operation which they could get at such short notice. He reached a hoof up to rub his back. He knew he was doing his spine no favours flopped like this, but he couldn't be bothered to move until their break was over.

And then he had a thought.

He thought it through first, just to check he had it right, before getting the other two's attention.

"It just clicked. I know why Lika Soil's only been hired to get the raw information from the mines about the unprocessed gemstones."

Gloom's head jerked upright, "What? Where? What do you mean?" Crimson also stopped sliding his helmet back on over his now properly tied mane, and blinked yellowly at Prey.

"It's simple. Information about the processed gemstones, not the still raw ones, is by far the more valuable, specifically on the highest tier ignius gems. So because Lika Soil is only reporting information from the mine, when they haven't worked out which few of the vast majority are ignius, it means one of two things. Option one, this person in Griffonia isn't interested in the gems themselves, but something else. Possible, but it doesn't really fit. Option two, this Griffonian is instead getting additional information on the magical refiners from elsewhere."

"I think I'm following, but what precisely do you mean?" Gloom asked.

"For instance, say, this person had another spy besides Lika Soil. Two spies are better than one, and this way, they get all the information on the gemstone supply from the start of the process to the finish, not just one half of it. One spy for the raw gemstones in the mines, one spy for the refined ignius gems."

Both Crimson and Gloom did see what he was talking about, finding that it fitted.

"Wonderful. So there's at least one more traitorous pony out there we have to catch." Gloom groused, caught up in a moment of aggravation.

'-by the moon, does greed also rot pony's brains along with their conscience?-'

Crimson walked back over to the desk, "Then we had best get a move on. I mean, how will we catch them? We've no leads, unlike we had with Lika Soil."

"And let's not forget about him, either. We shouldn't split our focus too much. We still have a job to do investigating Lika Soil," Prey cut in, "We're letting him run free for now only so we can learn how he's getting his information, and who he's sending it too. If we can't pull either off, it's better just to arrest him and be done with it. Don't want any loose ends."

"So we've got Lika Soil, and at least one other unknown spy in on the gemstone mining operation." Gloom stated.

"Only most likely," Prey felt he needed to add, "I said it makes the most sense, and I'd estimate a ninety percent chance, but it's of course still possible we're completely off the mark. We should never assume we know everything."

"No, you're right Prey. But still, we've got to make a judgement call. And got to split our attention now unfortunately." Gloom sighed.

"So what's our plan?" Crimson bluntly asked, breaking down the issue to its core.

What were they going to do? The most obvious course of action was simply to arrest and interrogate Lika Soil for all he knew, but it'd already been decided to let Lika Soil remain free to see what else they could discover about him first. If there'd been lives at risk, Lika Soil would be in an interrogation cell right now, but there weren't, it was only money on the line. Not to mention, Lika Soil had been sending these reports in for at least three months already now, and no big gem heist or break in at the mines had happened.

Lika's employer was playing the long game, whatever game that was, so the ISND had some time to act on a plan of their own choosing.

"Anything from your special talent, sir?" Prey asked, personally very sceptical but you never knew unless you asked, and having more information never hurt.

"You know that's not how it works. I need a path I can follow before I get any hints about whether it's the wrong path or not.“

"Well in that case choose a plan. What are we going to do?"

"Break it down first. What do we want to get out of any plan we choose?" Gloom asked.

"How Lika Soil got his information, and who he's sending it to." Crimson said.

"Locate this second spy in the gem refinery, and then the same again as what Crimson said." Prey added on.

"We shouldn't forget all those other ponies on the list who are regularly posting suspect letters abroad." Gloom warned.

"But we don't have the numbers or time to work on more than one thing at a time." Prey said.

"I suppose you're right," Gloom admitted, scratching at his chest, "We'll have to come back to those ponies. Or hoof them over to another Night Guard squad."

"We have our goals to achieve. So how? I mean, how are we going to make them into a reality?"

Prey thought for a minute, rubbing the end of one ear, "If we can get Captain Nighthawk to place a watch on Lika Soil to secretly follow him next Tuesday to see where he goes and how he gets his information from the mining company. That'll answer one half of our goal with Lika Soil."

"Why next Tuesday? What about the rest of the week before that?"

Gloom frowned.

"Come on, it's simple. Lika Soil posts his letter every Wednesday. In his report, Lika Soil only had mining information up to that Monday, therefore, he must've gotten that information sometime during the Tuesday, in time to post it for Wednesday." Prey explained.

"Ah, right. And the second half? Finding out who the traitor is working for?"

Crimson beat Prey to answering, "He can tell us himself. I mean, we just arrest him after that point, and interrogate him. We have enough evidence to do so. He'll cave and tell us."

"I wouldn't bet on him actually knowing his employer's real name." Prey warned, "But if we can catch this second spy, and interrogate him or her too, perhaps we'll be able to cross reference between the two of them."

"That's a good idea, I'll ask Captain Nighthawk for a support squad. So that just leaves the question, how do we find the second spy at the refiners? Do we need to trawl through the whole postal list again?" Gloom asked, warily eyeing said list on the desk, filled with cramped lines of text.

'-actually, can we just see if there are two recipients in Griffonia with the same address? Can it really be that simple?-'

Prey paused at hearing Gloom's thoughts, 'No way. Could they really be that careless? Surely they'd be smart enough to use two different addresses. It *can't* be that simple, it just *can't*.'

But it was. It really was.

All three of them stared down at the list with its circled entry, the postal address matching the same one Lika Soil used. It was from a different post office, but still, how obvious could you get?

Gloom pushed his angular helmet back on his head to rub at his

brow, "Well. Would you look at that."

"Huh." Crimson grunted, almost thoughtfully shuffling his wings into closer alignment.

"They post every Friday. That's the day after tomorrow. Actually, just tomorrow, it's past midnight right now. So, same plan again? Just walk in after they've dropped the letter off, and demand it from the post office?" Prey asked, shifting on his stool.

"Yep. Same plan again. Why fix what's not broken?" Gloom said, still having trouble believing it could really be this simple.

'-now I'm starting to sound as paranoid as Prey-'

Gloom picked up the list, "Well, let's go see if we can't get another meeting with the Captain at such short notice."

The plan was all set, but that didn't mean Prey was all for it.

Their shift was finished, and the three ISND members had returned to their flats to rest so they could arise and do the exact same thing later tonight, over and over again until something gave. Gloom had wanted to try visiting Lilly again after the disaster of their last visit, but they just hadn't had time since then.

The ISND needed sleep, same as everyone else. And while *technically* the Night Guard left its soldiers enough time to rest for their next shift, but only if you went to sleep straight away. Which was one of the benefits of bunking in the Guard quarters, but those were currently now filled with the new Night Guard recruits anyway. But there just wasn't time to do anything personal. It was work work work seven days a week. But perhaps, with the fresh influx of thestrals, that might blessedly change to six days a week. One could only hope, however the relief wasn't here yet.

So Gloom had decided that instead of trying to visit Lilly after their shift, they should instead get up early this afternoon and meet outside her flat to try later in the day instead.

A waste of his valuable time, as far as Prey was concerned. He had his own overloaded work schedule outside of the Night Guard, stealing nearly all the waking hours of his day.

Sacrifices had to be made if he wanted to complete his runic work. Lemon Pink unfortunately couldn't do it all in his place. Some things you just gotta do yourself.

Prey kicked a small shard of rock off to the side of the rough tunnel, "How are things going with your colt friend?"

The both of them knew the real meaning behind Prey's question. Lemon Pink, of course being the only other person here, floated the silver ball of light a bit higher to illuminate their way down the tunnel:

"Randy Pickaxe does not know or suspect anything further. I performed the latest memory scan only two days ago."

"Hm. Continue checking his memories each week, or if he gives you a reason to be suspicious for any reason." Prey ordered, stepping over a dip in the uneven rock of the tunnel's floor.

"Yes, Prey."

Nothing was said about Prey's test of Lemon's continued loyalty. It didn't need to be mentioned, because Prey and Lemon never forgot.

They were down here underneath Canter Mountain, going to check the remains of Prey's one lair. The thieves had destroyed it by detonating whatever that sun cataract artifact had been down here. Prey still didn't like the artifact's name, and it was destroyed. This was the first time Prey and Lemon had gone down to look at the lair's remains, their goal being to see if anything could be salvaged.

Prey had invested hundreds of exhausting hours into building the runic defences of his crystal lair, but he hadn't finished them. If he'd just had another forty, no, even *thirty* more hours of work, then the disaster with the crusading thieves would never have happened. The thieves wouldn't have been an issue, because the runes would have taken care of them. Their memories of the lair's existence

would have been completely erased. Or probably erased. The thieves had been wearing mindlock enchantments, so perhaps the runes wouldn't have worked?

'I need to get a hold of one of those mindlocks to see how it works and how to break it.'

Prey made a mental note to do so. He was not happy about what had happened, and about how a few extra hours would've solved the whole problem.

If so, there wouldn't have been a need to kill all the diamond dogs, or to lose his veropede, or for the Sewer's Heart, the wickerwatch and the hex down there. The battle to the grisly end would never have taken place, nor the killing, the blood, and the horrible *horrible* fear. The thieves wouldn't have used Selenia's pincushion, and he wouldn't have almost died. *Did* die, technically.

However, the loss of his crystal lair was still a bitter one to bear. It was supposed to have been his secret place of safety.

The silver globe of light cast a dark shadow as they approached a bend in the tunnel, the stone roof low enough that Lemon had to duck and shuffle until they were around the corner. The echo of their hoof steps was quiet, both knowing how to walk quietly.

And then they were there. That was another reason it hadn't echoed, because the sound hadn't had far to travel.

The entrance into the crystal cave he'd repurposed as his lair was blocked. Chunks of jagged rock jammed the way, clean stone showing through where it'd been broken violently. The largest oblong chunk was half the width of the tunnel, the rest varying between every other size.

Prey looked at the chunks of rock. From memory, he knew there was at least another five yards of tunnel beyond this point before you arrived at the cave, or there had been at any rate. There was no way to tell if this blockage was just a screen, or if the whole tunnel was likewise filled in behind it, to say nothing of the cave itself. Prey had used runes to strengthen and support the cavern roof, but

it didn't look like it'd been enough.

"Huh."

Lemon strengthened the light spell, better showing even the minor details of the cave in and pushing away the dark shadows between the rock chunks. Prey looked closer at the gaps. Through some of them, there was only the same black of the tunnel down which he and Lemon Pink had just been trotting. Open space.

Lemon drew the same conclusion he did, "It seems to just be a screen blockage. It might just be a tiny pocket, but perhaps the cavern itself still stands. If we removed these rocks, we could possibly progress on."

"It doesn't seem to have become a structural part of the tunnel either." Prey observed, looking up at the ceiling. Which still left the problem of a tunnel blocked with rocks to get past before they could continue on. Lemon could levitate out a few of the medium and smaller sized chunks with the assistance of her electrite choker, but she was still no powerhouse. She was actually below average in anything but illusions and mind magic.

"I think it you might fit through over here, Prey." Lemon spoke.

Prey followed Lemon's gesture, and saw a gap near the top of the rock pile that he could crawl through with only a bit of effort. Prey supposed there was no harm in trying. If there was a second blockage behind this first one, he'd just turn around and crawl back through, but at least then they'd know.

"Alright, bring the light closer." He ordered as he began climbing his way cautiously up the sprawl of fallen rocks, testing his hoof hold at each step and avoiding the sharp edges.

Some of the broken grey chunks shifted under his hooves, but mostly it was stable. A pebble rattled down somewhere in the pile as he crouched in front of the opening. The grainy rock gave off a chill as he put his face up to the hole. It was dark beyond, the light globe floating at his back mostly blocked by his own head as he tried to look through, but it seemed to be open enough beyond to at

least turn around if he had to. Prey could feel the presence of his runes just a bit further down the tunnel.

'Here goes.'

He crouched, and crawled in. The stone pressed down on his head, but it wasn't so narrow as to make him crawl claustrophobically on his belly. He was more worried about cutting his legs on a broken edge of stone in the darkness as he shuffled his way through.

Prey poked his front half out into empty space and darkness, "Float the light spell through." He called back, laying down flat to provide space above him for the globe to come through.

The play of silver light shifted, and for a brief second he was blind as the spell passed right over his face. It was just a basic light spell, so it gave off no heat to worry about. Prey blinked, getting his vision back, and squinted to see what Lemon's light revealed.

The state of the tunnel beyond was not great. More jagged and freshly broken chunks of stone buried the previous tunnel floor, creating a treacherous new one and a lower ceiling. A very uneven ceiling too, since that's since that was where most of the rubble had come from, but looking around, Prey could see how the rubble had been blasted off of the walls too. But despite that, it could've been a lot worse.

For a start, it could've been blocked. And it wasn't. Prey had a clear view down the remaining three or so yards of broken and cracked tunnel and out into the cavern.

Prey metaphorically felt his heart lift inside its Jaw of Hearts. The crystal cavern wasn't just a giant collapsed molehill of hundreds of tonnes of stone rubble.

Silver light cast the stone into a slightly off-white hue, and as it did thousands of glittering stars reflected it back. Countless shards of broken quartz of every size lay everywhere, but the cavern itself was still a cavern, even if the light was only strong enough to illuminate the closest half of it.

All those reinforcement runes had actually done something in the end!

'*Finally*. A well deserved turn up for the books.'

However, even with his runes whatever that artifact the thief leader had detonated down here had still done damage. The cavern itself might still be standing, with the bottomless sinkhole pool sitting in the middle of it, but otherwise it didn't look like the same cave anymore.

Put simply, it looked like an enormous force had instantly scoured the cavern clean.

Where there'd been stalactites and stalagmites, there was now not a single one. Not even the snapped off stumps of what'd been the thickest ones, the width of trees, remained. The power that artifact had released in its self-destruction had been immense, but at least half of it must've just been heat, now long dissipated, or else even Prey's supporting runes wouldn't have kept the cavern roof up, but even so... Quartz formations were shattered, or reduced to a tenth of their size. And every surface which didn't have the correct runic arrays inlaid into them was missing. Scoured away, at least a hoof's depth of stone everywhere just pulverized and swept away.

It looked like the whole cavern had become a vast, pebbly beach, the entirety covered with pulped stone and glittering quartz chips. Humps and small dunes of the fine rubble had formed around or over the patches of cavern where, from memory, Prey knew he'd placed his arrays. Prey slowly stared around at all of it.

'I wonder how many tonnes of it fell into the sink hole?' The new grey 'beach' sloped sharply down into the still pool of water, showing this mat of sharp pebbles was nearly two hooves deep.

'Well, the entire cavern has changed, but at least I still have a cavern at all.' Prey thought, pulling himself from the hole and carefully climbing down the jagged rocks. It was easier to do with cloven hooves, but it also meant he couldn't benefit from horseshoes. The chill air was stale, and more pebbles rattled to the bottom of the pile as he got down.

"Good news and bad news," Prey spoke loudly for Lemon Pink's benefit still behind the cave-in, "It isn't a complete cave-in. However, walking in there at present is going to be perilous. We need to get a lot of boards to make some walkways."

"Yes, Prey. I understand." Lemon's muffled voice came from beyond the cave-in.

This was going to take a lot of clearing up, in fact it would be easier to just leave the new 'beach' where it was, but this was doable. The cavern was still standing, which was the only thing of real concern. Prey's runes were still here, most of them anyways. Destroying runes isn't usually a matter as simple as destroying the surface they were placed upon. Sometimes it was, like if the array was on a simple piece of wood, but not these runes. They went deep into the bedrock.

In the case of single use arrays, the runes would survive until the stored energy was burnt up. Better made and more complicated arrays would simply fall dormant until they recharged, but would almost never truly fade. Such was one of the few advantages runes held over normal magic.

"Can you float the light in further?" Prey called out.

"Yes, Prey. One moment."

There was a pause, and then Lemon standing at the gap in the cave-in, used her magic to direct the light spell up towards the domed roof of the scoured cavern.

The silvery light revealed more of the same. More torn apart rock and finely broken up rubble. The magical explosion must have taken the form of a vortex to create such finely chewed rubble, like the whole cavern was a giant mixing bowl beaten with a whisk.

"Stop. Take the light closer to the far tunnels." Prey ordered, frowning at the pair of far openings in the cavern. The first was the one tunnel through which the diamond dogs had guided the thieves in their quest for vengeance. The other passage led down into a maze of crystals beneath the mountain which Prey hadn't ventured

into, nor did he intend to. He'd gone crawling down the twists into the eternal darkness beneath the earth once before, and he'd learned his lesson.

Much like the tunnel behind him which joined up with the sewers, the two unknown tunnels had been broken down and filled with rock debris in the explosion. Except there was a gap in the rubble blocking off the second tunnel, much like the gap through which he'd just crawled.

Except... Prey squinted as best he could with his damaged eyesight, "Brighter. As bright as you can for five seconds."

The light globe flared, not white, but shining silver, too bright to look at. Prey wasn't looking at it though. He was looking at the hole in the cave-in.

It was just a hole, but it didn't look right. Rocks looked like they'd been pushed in from the outside. Like the hole had been forced open. It was big enough to allow an adult to crawl through, larger than Prey's own entrance behind him. It didn't look right, not like it had naturally formed like that in the explosion. It looked like someone had dug their way in. Prey sucked in his breath.

'The thieves. There were more of their pony supremacist order out there after all.' Prey's thoughts automatically jumped to that. But it was the wrong tunnel, not the one through which the diamond dogs had guided them, and all the diamond dogs were dead. Prey had seen the alpha's memories, there were no survivors left.

'Not the thieves then?'

In the few seconds before the light spell faded, Prey saw something he recognised, a blackened outline blasted across the stones around the whole. It was dispersed, not looking much like an outline what with how it was spread over multiple broken pieces of rock, but it was a type Prey recognised. He'd been the one to create the runic flare traps at those tunnel entrances after all, and those runes still worked just fine, rubble or no rubble. And that was definitely the scourched after effects of a flare trap having gone off.

"Lemon, start trying to dig your way through that pile. We have a problem."

Lemon and Prey stood over the scorch marks. It had been hard to tiptoe across the uneven skree and rubble to get to this side of the cavern, staying well clear of the sinkhole lest it start a small landslide in, but it'd been harder to tear down a hole big enough through the cave-in to get in without prompting a further collapse.

But they were here now, Lemon still casting the light spell, the globe floating in front of them so as to only cast their shadows away.

Prey bent, and poked gingerly at the hole. It was definitely made, not natural. He lifted his hoof and looked at the dark, dried residue. He knew this blood, he'd smelt the familiar acidic smell of burnt insect before too. The blood where something as large as a body had been dragged back into the hole, leaving thick smears of soot behind, had once been dark green. Not red.

Prey was remembering that time when he'd been setting up rune traps down in the tunnels, safe inside one of his runic array choke points, and he thought he'd seen something down the very end of the tunnel. Two blue pupilless orbs. Eyes, sickly pale and solid blue.

And now he saw the similarity between those of Shimmer's corpse, and the pair in the dark.

"The mimics then. More than one." Lemon said into the silence.

Prey nodded silently, still looking at his hoof.

So there were Mimics down there in the dark.

Why?

Had they tracked him all the way back from Mayflower too?

What did they want? Did they want anything from him, or just his permanent silence?

There were at least some of their number in the Border Guard. Was this about to become another war against just him?

'Please no.' Part of Prey begged.

'Let them come.' The other part of him hissed. Snake was unfeeling. Garrow was eager.

Why had Shimmer died distracting the reaper king for them? Prey didn't know.

Why?

Why this? Why here? Why now?

Prey groaned, he felt so tired suddenly. He sat down on the cold, uneven stone. Why couldn't the hunt have come to an end? Why didn't it ever stop? Prey hated it. He was tired of it. It hurt. He didn't want to hunt anymore. But he couldn't stop. To stop was to die. You can't deny hunger, it was simply nature. And Prey was hungry for life. He wasn't going to roll over and die.

Prey emptied his lungs in a long, *long* exhale. Then he breathed in, and repeated the action. He got up, brushing back the cool silk of the dangling ribbon.

There was work to do. He wasn't going to give in. He would do things differently this time. Fall was here and times really were a'changing.

Things had to be different this time, Prey would make sure of it. Let these mimics come, or let them stay in the shadows, Prey would be ready this time.

'Tired, weighed down, scarred, and just a runt lamb to hoof. They all laughed, but I'm the only one left to laugh now. You haven't won yet life, and until the day you do, I'm going to be here. Fighting. Surviving.'

"Right. Time to get to work. First, check if all the runic arrays survived. Second, it's time to finish that damned memory array."

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Author's Notes:

Again, the kind and helpful assistant editor this time around is **GreatSpaceBeaver** 🌲
So say thanks to him!

71.5 Eye Spy with my Kind Blue Eye

Prey stifled his yawn, as on the step in front of him, Gloom braced himself and knocked tentatively on Lilly Blossom's door.

It was afternoon, a few hours past midday, and they'd met up to try and visit Lilly before their shift started, as agreed. Or as Gloom and Crimson had agreed. Prey was just here because they'd brought him along. He would've much preferred to spend this time on something more productive. Like an extra forty-five minutes of rest.

Prey had spent far longer than he'd meant to down inside the remains of his lair, meaning he'd only gotten four hours of sleep. But after the evidence he and Lemon had found of mimics attempting to breach the cavern, he hadn't had a choice. There was work to do, defences to repair, runes to lay, and not enough time to do it in.

Why did enemies have to keep coming at him? Why was it when one threat ended, another immediately step up to take its place?

Prey didn't want to fight. He was tired of fighting. He just wanted to be left alone. Was that really so much to ask?

Prey twitched his head. He could hear the faint sound of hoofsteps on floorboards approaching from the other side of the blue painted door. It was mixed with the unmistakable **clump** of a heavy stick.

'Lilly herself, it seems.'

Gloom and Crimson both straightened as the door handle rattled, then the door slowly opened halfway.

Half of Lilly Blossom peered around the door, her good half. Although that in itself didn't look that great. Baggy marks under her visible eye, unbrushed fur, tangled mane, and weariness dragging her face down. She didn't look like she'd been out of bed for long

despite it being afternoon.

"Oh. Hello Sargent," Lilly said numbly, "Crimson, and... Prey."

"We're not on duty, it's just Gloom." Gloom automatically responded before he could stop himself. He winced, and hurriedly reached up to slide off his new, plumless helmet to prove it.

"We're not on duty," He repeated, "We just came by to... see you before our shift started."

Lilly looked over Crimson and Prey, both of them standing silently behind Gloom.

'-oh no, why'd they have to come? I don't want to see anypony. This must be Saffron's doing-', She was thinking.

"Why're you here? I'm fine. Thanks for checking though. You can go now." Lilly said tonelessly.

"I don't like lies." Crimson stated from next to Prey, beating Gloom in pointing out the obvious falsehood of Lilly's words.

The visible half of Lilly withdrew an inch further behind the door, "Yeah, well, it's not your problem. And you can't help. So you can go now."

'-why'd they have to come by? Everypony is. First Saffron, then Scenic and Carton, now them. I just want to be left alone-'

'Oh the feelings mutual. I have things I'd much rather be doing.' Prey thought. He didn't want to be around Lilly. He and her still hadn't actually spoken, he'd merely been present with either Gloom or Crimson every other time they'd met since the hospital. She hadn't said a word to him about his amputation of her leg and grafting in of the meld wood. And if that conversation never happened at all, it would be too soon.

"I..." Gloom sought for words, shifting from hoof to hoof before the doorstep, '-what can I say here?-'

"I, we want to help if there is anything we can help with Lilly. We

meant what we said in the hospital. You're part of our squad, even if you don't decide to resume active duty. We were all there in Mayflower, Scenic too even if he can't be here right now. We want to help."

"Thanks. But I don't need anything, so you can leave." Lilly quickly said.

This wasn't going anywhere. Lilly didn't want to see them, it was obvious. She just wanted to retreat into herself and be left alone. She would've already succeeded, if not for Saffron and Carton Juice's samaritan efforts. The three of them knew the two mares were coming round to see Lilly every day, and were actually getting in through the door, unlike them. Lilly had a harder time denying the two concerned, sincere mares than them it seemed.

Maybe precisely because those two *hadn't* been there, and *hadn't* seen the horrors the ISND had faced.

Lilly saw how she wasn't convincing anyone. "I don't need anything, really. Saffron's helped, is helping me in the house. You don't need to waste your time coming by all the time. Please go away."

Prey caught the lightning quick look Gloom and Crimson exchanged, making Gloom grimace, "If that's what you want, then we can leave. For now. But we'll be back, and the time after that, and the time after that too. We're not giving up on you Lilly, we didn't back then in the wilds, so we're definitely not going to now that we're back."

The old Lilly would've fumed until smoke came out of her ears if she'd been subjected to that patronizing statement, no matter how genuine the sentiments might've been. The Lilly of now barely narrowed her one visible eye, before the anger spluttered out like a snuffed candle.

"I don't need anything. You're just wasting your time. You should get going, I don't want to make you late. All Guards are supposed to report to their posts five minutes early."

"Prey, do something." Crimson muttered out of the corner of his

mouth.

"Do what?" Prey whispered back.

"Something. Just do your thing. Talk."

Damn it all, what was he supposed to do? How were you supposed to help someone who didn't want help escaping the grey grip of despair? Moreover, he didn't care to help. Lilly's situation was all of her own making. If not for Prey, she'd already be long dead. What more could he do?

Prey was tired and their day had only just begun. He didn't want to have to be dealing with this already, but it seemed he'd have to at least give it a try, for Gloom and Crimson's sakes.

He spoke up loudly; "Where's your anger gone, Lilly? Where's it gone, huh? Has it all burnt up already?"

They all paused, looking at him in confusion.

Prey jerked his chin at Lilly, half hidden behind her door, "Where's it gone? You were angry all the time when you were with us. Where's all that anger gone? Why're you hiding behind that door? You're not fooling anyone, least of all us."

Gloom hurriedly tried to motion Prey to cease, "Uh, I don't think this is helping-"

"Where's your anger, huh? Doesn't hot anger feel better than empty despair? You were all about how the world should be fair and just. Now you see it isn't, just like we told you over and over, but would you listen? No. Now your anger's gone because we were right and you were wrong." One side of Prey's mouth twisted up, and he smiled seemingly in lighthearted amusement at Lilly.

"Where's all that presumptuous rage against an unfair world now? So your magic's gone. Ha! So what? Welcome to being normal, just like everybody else not born with a horn. But I see that's not good enough for you."

Prey pretended to admire the street they stood on, looking at the

paved walkways, the clean gutters, the neat houses and trimmed hedges; "Still being alive, living a life of luxury in the capital city of Equestria, free medical care, clean running water, enough food, but obviously that's not good enough for the great Lilly Blossom. You know, I'm honestly surprised you haven't taken up Nighthawk's offer yet. Remember the one? About how he'd hold the knife for you, hmm?"

"Prey-"

"You cut off my leg." Lilly exclaimed, but her words were a merely reaction, with no force behind them.

"I *saved* your life. Crimson exhausted himself to the point of near death and a coma to get that meld wood so that you could live. And then because of you and the Wolfing Wood we nearly all got eaten when it-Nevermind that. So your family rejected you? Well stuff them. No family worth half a bit would ever abandon each other. Which means either they haven't really abandoned you, or they weren't worth caring about in the first place. But either way, be *angry* at them. They did you wrong, so feel *angry*."

"Y-you don't know what happened-"

"I don't care. They're not my family, so I literally couldn't care less even if you paid me to. Make up with them, don't make up with them, the only one who's going to win or lose is you." Prey jabbed his hoof at her, his smile gone, replaced with a sneer:

"But whatever the case, be angry about it. You think everything's unfair? Naïve, but okay. It's an understandable reaction. Be angry about it. Fight to get what you mistakenly think is 'fair'. And when you don't get it, be angry! Anger is just a crutch, but you know what a crutch does? It allows you to walk without falling flat on your face!"

Prey took a deep breath, making a show of collecting himself and smoothing a hoof down his ears, then turned without another word and walked away. He knew the way to the Palace just fine, he wasn't bound to either Gloom or Crimson.

There. He'd made his one attempt to jolt Lilly from her downwards spiral only on Crimson's request, so now he was washing his hooves of the stupid mare. Damn it, for all his talk of anger it was him who'd gotten angry.

He hadn't wanted to interact with Lilly at all in the first place, and just everything about her and her attitude annoyed him.

'If she gets it into her head to come after me in misguided revenge for amputating her leg and saving her life, I'm going to finish the job and kill her.' Prey thought. It didn't matter that if their positions had been reversed, he would've already killed her in revenge, because that was just a hypothetical and he wasn't the one it'd happened to. Lilly Blossom could go take a running jump. Metaphorically.

Gloom and Crimson caught up with him before he'd even gone down two streets, wordlessly falling into their usual positions, Gloom in the lead and Crimson to the right hoof side next to Prey.

"Focusing on her anger will not be good for her." Crimson eventually said as they trotted up the street.

"No, it won't." Prey agreed.

"...But it might be enough to get Lilly past this." Crimson admitted.

"That was the plan. Like I said, anger is a crutch."

"I don't like your plan." Gloom said.

Prey kept walking as he answered unhurriedly, "That's because it's not a good plan. Trying to survive off her anger as a substitute for the willpower to actually care about living isn't sustainable. She'll only just hurt herself in the long run by relying on this method."

"So why tell her to?" Gloom asked.

But Gloom wasn't really asking, because he already knew why. Gloom knew the reason, and Prey knew he knew. Gloom was just pointing out that it was wrong because he felt he had to.

The reason for why Prey had advised Lilly to anger was because it was easy. Anger is easy to spark, but hard to keep burning day after day. But since Lilly was already sinking while ignoring the lifelines she was being thrown, shoving her down deeper just so she'd struggle and fight back just to be contrary was as good a plan as any.

So what Prey said was; "You know why."

Gloom bobbed his head side to side as if he wanted to shake it, but couldn't honestly do so, "Ehhhh..."

Gloom gave up and just nodded, "I do know why. It's still wrong, though."

Nether Prey or Crimson were disagreeing on that point, but neither did Lilly have the mental fortitude the three of them did. She didn't have the experience of knowing how to heal around the cracks. This was the first real hardship she'd ever experienced. And it just so happened to be one of the real hard ones too.

"If this doesn't work for her though..." Gloom fretted.

"Then we will try again. And again." Crimson said simply. He nodded down at Prey, "Thank you for trying at least."

"Lilly'll be alright. Probably. She has Saffron Swirl and Carton Juice supporting and doting on her." Prey further reassured Gloom. He didn't really care, he just didn't want Gloom to blame him if it didn't work, so he was pre-emptively covering his back by apportioning blame to Saffron and Carton too.

'My back has enough scars already, thanks.'

'-yeah, Prey's probably right there. Lilly was kinda' shell shocked when we left, but at least she looked like she was back in the world. Better than nothing... Wonder how Scenic's doing too-'

Gloom's thoughts transitioned to thinking about the other absent member of the ISND as they approached the Palace. None of them had seen much of the earth pony in the last week, but it'd still been enough to learn Scenic was spending all his time with his

marefriend, and the two of them together were also getting to know Saffron too, the glamour model visiting them and Lilly whenever she could sneak away from her job and the paparazzi.

Scenic hadn't taken any hints from Lilly Blossom's disheartening family situation to try and fix his own either. But if Scenic could continue to stay off work and out of Prey's way, that'd be great.

Putting aside the positive and uplifting visit to Lilly's terraced flat, their day was only just beginning. There would be plenty of work to do once they got into office. First stop was the mess hall to have whatever Cookie deigned to serve as lunch for their breakfast, but then it was on to catching a spy.

After getting away from Cookie after catching the very tail end of lunch, (purposefully done to avoid being present in the mess hall with any Royal Guards), next came getting back down to work.

A good lesson in life was that if you want something done, it's best to do it yourself. Which included uncovering their second spy, who they had every reason to believe was reporting on Canterlot's gemstone refinery. The ignius gemstones to be precise, the ones worth obscene sums of gold.

One spy reporting on the gem mines, and one on the gem refinery.

They already knew about Lika Soil in the mines, and Nighthawk had agreed to setting a tail on him next week Tuesday, which was the day before he posted his reports to whoever it was in Griffiona employing him to be a spy on the Wednesday. While this wasn't quite the ISND 'doing it themselves', the Night Guards sent to follow Lika Soil would still be more than capable of finding out how Lika got his information. Maybe he bribed someone in the mining office, or maybe he snuck in himself, either way they'd catch him in the act.

But that came next week. Right now they still had their second spy sending reports to the same address in Griffonia every week to catch. Or rather, identify. Once they knew who the second spy was,

then they'd decide what to do with them; whether to leave them alone and secretly observe, or just straight up arrest them.

After brief discussion, (where Prey was outvoted), the method the three of them settled on was very simple. It was the exact same strategy they'd used with Lika Soil.

Simply march into the same post office the letters always went out from, and demand to know who was coming in each week to send them. Then wait until the person had come in, posted their weekly report, and left, before requisitioning the letter from the postal workers.

Prey didn't like using the same plan twice, (hence the need for a vote), because it never paid to get complacent, but at least word shouldn't have gotten around the post offices yet. Hopefully, at any rate.

That would come tomorrow though. Before that, seeing the refineries for themselves to get an idea of their security would be best, since the refineries were much more compact and strictly controlled than the mines where the raw gemstones came from.

They arrived at the factory at six o'clock sharp in the evening, just as the work day was finishing. 'Factory' was perhaps an overly grand word. It was nothing like the scale of one of the warehouses or factories at the lumber yard, (before the unfortunate incident and fire with Garrow), with no long production lines, or towering cranes and machinery. But for all that, this refinery which was a tenth of the size one of those lumberyard buildings probably cost ten times as much.

The refinery wasn't some huge smelting furnace like you would've found in a metal refinery. The gem refinery wasn't trying to melt its stones, it was trying to sort them, clean them, and then most importantly, get them ready for enchanting.

The building itself was colourful, like a rainbow. Because of course it was. The different sections of the compact factory seemed to be

colour coded towards the specific type of gemstone refined in each section.

The refinery didn't have a front desk, since it wasn't open to the general public. Gloom pulled on the bell and then they had to wait outside the barred security door for a clerk to come out from her side office to let them in.

She nervously blinked at Gloom and Crimson, not even noticing Prey for the moment as she stared at the two stallions in armour, "Hello? Can I help you?"

'-oh ponyfeathers, what're the Nightmare Guards doing at the door?!-'

"We need to speak to somepony in charge." Gloom informed her.

"I'm sorry but the director isn't in Canterlot this week, and if you don't have an appointment-"

"Somepony in charge of the actual running of the refinery. A factory manager, not necessarily a director. Somepony who can answer detailed questions about your gemstone refining processes."

"I'm not sure I can just let you in." The mare tried, but it was a weak attempt.

Gloom was utterly unmoved, "Miss, we're here representing the Night Guard. This isn't a search of the premises or an arrest, but your cooperation in this matter is still required."

She looked between Gloom and Crimson standing in there their new intimidating armour, "If you'll please just give me two minutes. I've got to talk to somepony." She hurried away.

'-I don't like this, I don't like this, I don't like this at all-', Her departing thoughts read.

Through the door, Prey could see in onto the factory floor. The compact factory's workforce here were exclusively unicorns, and almost all their processes heavily involved magic or specialist enchanted equipment. For example, Prey could make out some sort

of metal cabinet filled with different compartments, which you fed a gemstone in from the top and then it came out one of the slots. What each slot meant wasn't really clear though.

Prey bet you needed some kind of precious stone based qualification to even apply to work here. Or maybe just a cutie mark which gave you the same thing for free.

One minute later the receptionist was back, with a rather well groomed but overweight sky-blue stallion in tow. She pointed towards the ISND, still waiting at the security door, and then made her retreat, leaving the manager of some sort to deal with the Night Guards on their doorstep.

The portly stallion smoothed a hoof down his uniform jacket, the refinery's badge stitched on the pocket, visibly took a deep breath, and opened the security door.

"Cobalt Ursine, I'm the floor manager here at Gemlots. What can we do for the Night Guard?" He asked trying to project confidence. He wasn't able to meet Gloom's yellow slit eyes for more than a second, though.

"I'm First Sargent Dusky Gloom of the Night Guard. These are Crimson, and Prey. Because of a related side investigation, we need you to provide us with a detailed run down of the day to day processes of how your refinery operates. A tour would be best."

Cobalt had missed the second half of Gloom's sentence, still blinking stupidly down at Prey.

'-it's really a sheep. By Celestia's mane, what is Canterlot coming to?-'

Gloom cleared his throat loudly, "Cobalt Ursine."

"I, forgive me, what?" Cobalt jumped, ears flicking in momentary fright.

"We need to see how this refinery operates. A tour would be best." Gloom repeated testily, while Prey smiled innocently up at the pudgy blue stallion.

'-what? Forget the woolly filly, this sounds much more serious-', Cobalt thought.

"What's the reason for this inspection, officer? Has something happened?"

"This isn't an inspection. We're just here to find some information to help with another case." Gloom said.

'-not an inspection? Right, and I'm Lord Triton Fell himself-', Cobalt internally disagreed, but he could hardly say no to a Guard.

"Our work day was just finishing and everypony is packing up to go home..." Cobalt trailed off as none of their expressions changed.

"Your day may be over, but there are plenty of hours in the night," Gloom told him, "Now, about that tour..."

The factory wasn't that noisy as Cobalt guided them around it, explaining what happened in each section, although that might've been because all the unicorn workers were finishing up for the day. Their greetings and goodbyes to Cobalt as he came around died on their lips as they saw the ISND behind him. They stopped pulling on coats or packing away tools and stared.

Cobalt assured them all that everything was fine, and to carry on as usual. Prey warily watched all of them, trying to keep as many of the unicorns in his field of view at all times. The wool on the back of his neck was itchy with tension, and he could constantly feel a slight, stinging buzz in his hooves from being around so many passive enchantments on machinery in the refinery. He didn't like not knowing what those enchantments might be.

"So what happens when raw gemstones come in from the mines? Take us through from the beginning. What happens first?" Gloom asked or rather ordered the blue stallion.

Annoyed and put out, but hiding it with what he no doubt thought was great skill, Cobalt lead them to the first and largest work room. On the short walk they passed by an abundance of overladen

workbenches, all loaded down with arcane and unidentified paraphernalia.

Tiny bronze spanners the size of tooth picks, a massive array of different coloured lenses, hugely complicated work vices with a dozen adjustable wheels each, specialized crystal lanterns shining with certain coloured light, and wooden racks with brightly polished gemstones of every size and type set in carefully labelled brackets to name just a few. The whole factory looked like something out of a pony fairy tale, with all the shining colours and glittering tools.

'I wouldn't mind stealing the memories of one of the workers here, I'm sure there's lots of things in here which would be useful to me.' Prey thought, turning his attention back forwards as Cobalt brought them to a stop.

"So, this is our sorting room," The pudgy stallion waved with a plump foreleg around the room. There was a wide, low metal table with raised edges taking up half the space, with the rest taken up by stacks of small metal barrels:

"Our unrefined gemstones come in those barrels from the mine, and we separate them here. As in, the ignius from the commons as we call them. Like the wheat from the chaff. Then, in the next room-"

"How do you separate the gemstones?" Gloom stopped Cobalt from hurrying them along.

Cobalt ineffectively hid a grimace. He probably would've glared, if he could've held Gloom or Crimson's yellow eyes for more than half a second. Prey managed to go ignored, fading into the background, just like he preferred.

'-blast it, I guess I'm going to have to show them every single little step-'

"We do it like this." Cobalt approached one of the metal barrels and twisted off the lid with his magic, then picked up a metal scoop which was lying to the side. Prey was too short to see inside, but Cobalt scooped up a hoofful of rough stones, unformed and still

dirty, but each with a gleam of colour which hinted at the gem under the dirt.

Cobalt turned to the table and spilled the stones from the levitating scoop across it, "Alright, so first we get the raw stones. Then, we check for any high resonance ones."

Here Cobalt reached out with his magic and plucked a cleaned red gemstone from a rack across the room. He dropped the ruby onto the table along with the uncleaned stones, "There's a spell we use, it's called Arcan's Pointer, and it lets us see which gemstones can retain magic best. This'll take a minute."

The unicorn pointed his horn at the scattered stones on the table top, and his horn started to glow, the blue magical sparks slowly changing to a light green. After about thirty seconds of correctly building up the spell Cobalt's horn flashed. He let out a puff of air, and grabbed a thick pair of metal rimmed goggles.

"First we cast that spell, then we look through these. These show if the gems are holding any Arcan resonance charge from that spell. See for yourself."

Gloom took the goggles, taking a quick look at the table, before passing them to Crimson, "Only the ruby you added is glowing. The rest are fading."

"Of course. What did you expect?" Cobalt huffed, "Mostly every stone is just common. Only about one in fifty is a proper ignius gem. This is just to find which are, and which aren't, and it's the easiest bit. Discovering what level an ignius gemstone is comes later."

Crimson finished looking through the goggles and passed them down to Prey. They were too big for him, so he angled them and peered through just one of the thick glass lenses instead. On the table top, all of the stones bar the ruby had dim, whiteish green outlines of uneven brightness but all still very faint. Even as he watched, the faint glow rough gemstones faded even further. But the ruby on the other hoof held its glow, maintaining the same level of brightness. Prey lowered the goggles, 'This all seems fairly self

explanatory.'

Cobalt picked up the ruby again in his aura, floating it back across to its shelf, "So that's how we identify any ignius gems in a batch. Once we do, they get taken to be polished and cut through here-"

"What about these? The rest of the unwanted common gemstones, I mean." Crimson interrupted, twitching a wing towards the table top.

"What about them?" Cobalt asked, non-plused, "Jonas will clear them away tomorrow when he starts his shift."

"No, I meant, what do you do with the common gemstones? The ones you can't use?"

"Oh, we do use those too. They go to our various jeweller clients instead. We don't bother cutting them, that's up to the jewellers, but we do clean and polish them first before we sell them on. There's always a good market for common gemstones. Amber, garnet, and yellow sapphires for example always sell well."

Those Cobalt just listed had one thing in common, Prey noted. They were yellow, or the colour of the sun. In Canterlot, the most popular colour scheme was white and gold, just like their beloved Sun Tyrant.

"So if you'll all follow me through here...?" Cobalt tried hopefully, sighing in relief when they didn't find another reason to stay.

'-this is wasting so much of my time. I need to get home in time for dinner-'

"So here's where we cut and polish the ignius gemstones. We use those grinders to smooth off any rough edges, and then we use that wet wheel along with rock polish to get them ready." Cobalt pointed out the various heavy looking grey stone wheels, starting from the size of a cart wheel and going down to one smaller than a tea coaster. There were a large number of different wire brushes and scourers on a bench, seemingly made from different metals. A chemical smell hung in the air.

"The rock polish is acidic, so I hope you understand why I can't show you how that works. And cutting a gemstone to the right shape is a fine balance. It's very important the shape is gotten just right."

"Why's that?" Gloom asked.

"Symmetrical shapes can better store magic, it's to do with how the magic reflects off opposite sides inside the gem if they're properly angled and aligned. Also the greater the number of cut faces you can get perfectly facing each other, the more complex of an enchantment the buyer can put on it later. But the more faces you cut, the more precise you need to work, since more faces also means smaller faces. Those machines there help you get it right, and work out the optimal shape number of faces to use. Each ignius gem varies, and each different type of stone differs too."

Cobalt pointed to a number of brass and copper looking boxes, each stuffed full of little grippers, small mirrors, and other unidentifiable bits. Prey hadn't a clue how the machines were supposed to achieve what Cobalt had said, but obviously they did. Nor was Cobalt lying. The ISND hadn't let on, but they were watching Cobalt carefully to see if he was trying to hide or skip over something. It was always possible that the floor manager himself was the person they were after, but so far he seemed to be innocent of the breach in the refinery's security.

"Do you get custom orders?" Prey asked.

"Ah, could you please repeat that?" Cobalt asked, bending down closer to Prey, who conversely backed up.

"Do people ask for custom ordered gems?" Prey repeated.

"It's ponies, dear girl. And yes actually, we do." Cobalt answered incorrectly, but addressing his answer mostly to Gloom, "At least half our business is to the mage towers. The head mage will often specify if they're after a special grade, cut, and type of ignius gemstones. We've got a board with all their orders pinned up on. We got one just this morning, Tower Sunset, ordering a grade nine fire opal. So when next we get a grade nine fire opal, we'll prepare

it to their specifications before hoofing it over to the auction team. They'll contact Tower Sunset and discuss the price."

"How quickly are custom orders fulfilled? Usually, I mean." Crimson asked.

"Sometimes we're lucky and we have whatever a buyer wants right away-"

"-Buyer? Not just the mage towers?"

"No, not just the mage towers," Cobalt huffed at the interruption, "It's *mainly* the mage towers yes, but Lords or independent research labs sometimes get in contact too. Usually an order is fulfilled within a month. Sometimes two. Rarely three, unless it's a very high grade ignius they're after. Like a grade fifteen sun diamond, if you wanted one of those, it'd probably take half a year at the least, unless you got lucky."

All those gemstones coming out of the Canterlot mines every day, with thousands and thousands of bits on the line, but it could still take months to get the specific gem you needed? That showed how selective and rare the ignius gem market was. There just wasn't a supply available, and it had little to do with money. And make no mistake, there was *a lot* of money behind the gem refinery, Prey could see that.

It made him think. For all Cobalt's talk of supply and selling to Mage Towers, he wasn't speaking from personal experience. The refinery didn't often deal with the client themselves, they weren't the ones to haggle over the price and entertain potential customers. Because Prey knew the big and important mages and Lords would want to be pandered to and made to feel like they were valued and respected customers. Because if not, they might withhold their patronage.

It brought a flash of deeper insight to Prey. It highlighted the split contrast to Prey on what information their spy could be after. 'Is this about the money involved, or the ignius gemstones themselves? Which is their spy master really interested in?'

Prey pondered on that, silently following along behind Cobalt as the blue stallion continued giving the ISND the tour.

Was this person in Griffonia keeping an eye on the refinery because of all the gold it attracted, or were they perhaps looking out for a very specific gemstone, just like the sun stone Cobalt had mentioned? And what would they do with that information? The second option would definitely make the most sense with how they were keeping an eye on the refinery from across the border. But what would they do if the specific gemstone they were so patiently waiting for came around?

The most harmless outcome was that they'd simply try to buy the gemstone when it went onto the market. The second and most obvious option was that they'd try to steal instead, either through one method or another.

What specific ignius gemstone could they be waiting for, though? If indeed that was what they were waiting for. It had to be something rare. Something rare and powerful. But what?

'I don't know enough about ignius gemstones and enchanting to make an informed hypothesis.' Prey decided. He'd make sure to share his thinking just now with Gloom and Crimson later in private once they were done in here.

Cobalt was showing them around the rest of the now mostly empty refinery, only another five staff left in the building by this point, giving the ISND a brief explanation on the rest of the factory's processes.

For example, the colour coded painted rooms indicated where different types of gemstone were worked on. Agate, carbuncle, ruby, emerald, sapphire, diamond, amber, jasper, and topaz to name a few, plus all the different iterations of each gem too. For example, a fire ruby, a smoked ruby, a pure ruby, a hued ruby, a rainbow ruby, a veined ruby, a pink ruby, or a quartered ruby. Each type apparently required a slightly different touch when refining.

It was only once Cobalt had come to an end of their little enforced tour, having come full circle around the rather fantastical factory,

that Gloom began asking the really searching questions.

The pudgy floor manager had almost half forgotten who the ISND were, treating them more like annoying but intimidating inspectors and not Night Guards. Cobalt was caught off balance when Gloom suddenly changed tact.

"How do you ensure your records aren't tampered with?"

"Pardon? Records? What do you mean?"

"Your records. How many gems you have, which type, what grade, your incomings and outgoings, and the date. How do you ensure no mistakes are made?" Gloom asked. This was a question the three of them had discussed before arriving at the refinery, Gloom was just acting as the groups spokesperson.

Cobalt's hoof went up to his chest, like he was shielding himself, "Wha-? Are you suggesting we're being dishonest?"

"That's not what I asked, but good point. How do you prevent dishonesty? We'll come back to my other question in a moment." Gloom asked.

"Nopony would never do that. We all trust everypony else in here, we're a close knit hard working team." Cobalt defended.

All of the ISND gave him the same flat look. One thing they'd learnt about Canterlot was that the ponies in it *loved* money. Just look at all the nobles and lords who lived here. Canterlot was the capital city, where dreams were made, and quite a lot of those dreams included fabulous wealth. Greed was a powerful motivator which could tempt even the most honest if the prize was large enough.

"This is a gem refinery," Gloom stated bluntly, "You get orders worth thousands of bits from lords and mages. Are you really telling me you have no safe guards in place?"

"Well, it's not like-nopony would-that'd never happen. It hasn't happened." Cobalt blustered.

Gloom eloquently raised one eyebrow under his helm.

"Well, not that it would ever happen, but everypony is always working in the same room as somepony else. It's a requirement, like in the sorting room. One pony to cast the spell, and the other to double check and log the findings. And we do a stock count every week and check it against our records. I mean, once or twice an ignius gem has been misplaced, but it's always turned up on the wrong shelf or under a stool or something."

"So you carefully monitor all the ignius gemstones is what you're saying."

"Yes. Nopony is stealing anything."

'-how dare he even suggest that?-'

Gloom nodded in acceptance, "Alright. But what about the common gemstones?"

"What about them?" Cobalt returned rather mulishly.

Next to Gloom, Crimson fractionally narrowed his eyes at the unicorn. It wasn't much, but Crimson did it just right and Cobalt swallowed, going back to being polite.

"It was a valid question. What about them? They're just commons. We don't monitor them as closely, but they're still logged after they're cleaned up. But, really? Those aren't worth that much. Hay, if one of the staff wants a common, they could just ask and we'd probably say yes. We're a team here." Cobalt shrugged.

So Cobalt couldn't think of a way any ignius stone could go missing. That didn't mean he was right, but he didn't seem willing to even entertain the idea that one of his fellow colleagues could be being dishonest.

'-best move on then-', Gloom thought, mirroring Prey's own thoughts.

"So back to my first question; how do you stop your records from being tampered with?"

Cobalt didn't dare say what he wanted to say, which was; '-I already

told you nopony here would steal! Get off my back already-'

Instead he answered saying; "We've got two separate accountants. They both work on all the books, so each one double checks the others work."

'That doesn't prevent the chance that they're both corrupt and both working together.' Prey noted, although the chance was admittedly small.

If Prey could meet the people they were discussing and ask them some leading questions, he'd be able to read their thoughts and easily learn the answer. But unfortunately, the two accountants had already gone home for the day. Too bad. And Prey couldn't exactly suggest they return tomorrow just so he could meet everyone in the factory one by one to read their minds for guilty thoughts.

'Never mind. We're stealing the second spies report tomorrow anyway from the post office. That'll answer a bunch of our questions I'm sure.' Prey thought.

And then depending on what that report said, they'd either arrest both spies immediately, or let them alone to continue secretly watching them.

Prey rubbed at the unevenly regrown fur under his eyes, 'This is all such a massive drag.'

"Well today was a total waste." Prey said, checking the water coming to a boil in the pot.

Gloom looked over from his seat on the floor, "How so? I don't think it was."

"There was nothing at the refinery. Yes, I know, we still had to check, but it was still a waste in the end." Prey said in annoyance. This whole 'spy catching' initiative annoyed him to no end. Why should he care if some griffins were spying on ponies? In fact he applauded the griffins for their good sense, however because of the side he'd been forcibly assigned to, he now had to catch their spy.

"Not true. We learnt how the gem refinery works. That knowledge is bound to come in useful at some point during this case." Crimson disagreed.

"Hrm." Prey judged the water in the pot to be properly boiling, and went to pick some mint and kreno leaves from the plants on his windowsill.

Somehow, they'd ended up back here in Prey's flat after their day finished. Or night. But now it was day again, with the morning sun having been raised less than an hour ago. And now the three of them had ended up back here in his flat for tea. Or not tea. Or rather not tea by pony standards, since it involved no actual tea leaves, just herbs from Prey's collection of pot plants.

It was kind of funny. Here he was, offering around tea like some sort of gracious host to his distinguished guests while they gossiped and giggled behind their forehooves.

Well there was none of that here. For a start, their was no tea set, just three mugs. No kettle, but a pot served just as well. Prey hadn't gotten any of those floor cushions either, so they were sitting on the hard floor boards. He *did* have a low table though. Well, low for everyone else. It was the perfect height for him, and this was his flat.

Still, it was a bit out of the usual for what they normally did. Normally it was straight back to their own apartments to sleep.

But, well, Prey was past the point of questioning their strange interactions by now. This was the ISND. They were odd by default. At least they weren't making him go along to visit Lilly or Scenic again.

Gloom and Crimson just sat there in patient silence, waiting for Prey to finish. Prey trotted back to the stove, propping himself up on his front hooves so he could reach to drop the collected leaves in. Near immediately, the smell of mint mingled into the steam.

All in all, it was rather a novel experience. Definitely a pleasant change to fighting, screaming, running, bleeding, crying, and nearly

dying.

'-life is what happens in the quiet times of peace-', Gloom thought, echoing the reflective sentiment in the air.

Prey rolled his eyes to himself as he lined up the three mugs, 'And surviving to live that life is all about avoiding those breaths of incredible danger *between* those quiet times.'

Crimson straightened a stubborn pinion feather with fastidious precision. Gloom unconsciously scratched at his chest scar every now and then, armour removed, as Prey pulled the pot off the stove, carefully balancing the boiling water. Neither Gloom nor Crimson insulted him by trying to do it for him. Carton Juice would've certainly have been horrified to see a child precariously carrying boiling water, or Saffron too. Neither would ever come into Prey's flat if he had any say in the matter. this was his space, and outsiders were not welcome. Hell, even Gloom wasn't that welcome.

Minty steam wafted as Prey pushed the two mugs across his low table to Gloom and Crimson, "Here."

"Is this something you used to do back home in your village?" Gloom asked, eyeing the green tinted water in his mug.

"No. But apparently it's the thing to do in Canterlot, so here we are." Prey shrugged, taking his seat.

Crimson took a cautious sip, and still ended up burning his tongue. He put his mug down, removing his hoof from the clay hoof-loop, "Ow. Watch out. It's hot."

Gloom grinned, fangs unconsciously flashing, and took a sip anyways, "Hm. This kind of reminds me of waking up in the winter back at the caves. You needed some way to warm yourself up quick at the start the night. What's the other thing you put in here besides that mint?"

"Kreno." The tea was by no means amazing. It was quite similar to pine needle tea, or in other words, a paupers tea. This is what they

used to drink on the border, aside from plain water. Prey swallowed his sip and lowered the mug, it really was still too hot, "Since you didn't recognise it, obviously it's not what your clan used. What herbs did you use instead?"

"Lemon grass and wild mint, that's what we used. They're hardy plants, and you can grow them even out of a crack in rock."

"Sounds like an acquired taste." Prey commented.

"You're one to talk. You don't care what it tastes like so long as you can eat it." Gloom returned.

"Wrong. You missed the key word, *eat*. You *drink* tea, not eat, it isn't a food."

"Unless you freeze it," Crimson interjected, waiting for his drink to cool down, "But then it's just ice and not tea. So that doesn't count either."

"Actually, there's a thing called iced tea. It's a Canterlot thing." Gloom told them.

Prey rolled his eyes, "That definitely sounds like something Canterlot would do. Take the whole point of having a hot drink and turn it on its head and call it 'fashionable'."

"I don't think iced tea it's quite like that, as in, they don't actually freeze it. I think." Gloom offered, but he wasn't actually certain and didn't really care to know either.

"Hn." Crimson grunted.

"Meh." Prey shrugged.

Gloom was right. Who cared? It was knowledge utterly unimportant to their lives.

They sat and finished off the weak herb tea. Prey considered how useful ignius gemstones would be to him in his rune work. The answer was not very. Gems by nature are small, too small to hold more than a rune or two.

Gloom finished his mug first, but he didn't rise to leave. He was contemplating something.

"Prey, Crimson. At some point in the near future, say, three or four months, I need to return to my clan. I'd like to invite both of you to come with me."

Crimson halted, mug half raised.

Prey tilted his head, cautious. This had come out of the blue. He knew enough about thestrals to know this wasn't something Gloom offered lightly, "This is a bit sudden. Can I ask why?"

"Because I'll be going back regardless, I have an obligation to meet. My grandfather is old, and I'm his only living relative left. He's an clan elder, and he's asked me to come back. Said there's things he wants to talk about before he passes on or gets too old to remember. But I want the both of you to come with me."

'-they deserve to see clan Cilldara, if they want to. I want to show them my home-'

Prey flicked a glance at Crimson. He was staring at Gloom in open surprise.

"So, will you come? Or do you need to think about it?" Gloom asked, with just a touch of nervousness.

"Nopon-no one visits a clan's cave. I don't think an outsider has been allowed into another clan's home caves in over four centuries. You would invite us?" Crimson said in disbelief.

"It's closer to five centuries I think, but yes. Times have changed. Princess Luna has returned for one, and we're no longer trying to hide our existence. Anyway, you're hardly an outsider Crimson, you're clan born and just as much a thestral as anypony else. It's only Prey who really counts." Gloom nodded at the lamb.

"I'm an exile. The laws are clear." Crimson disagreed flatly.

"That hardly counts Crimson. A thestral's duty is to his clan, but a clans duty is also to it's thestrals. Clan Myrrdon cannot pretend that

they even tried." Gloom scoffed.

"Still..." Crimson trailed off, unable to refute that fact.

Gloom smiled, "You see? You'd both be welcome, I'd make sure of it. What do you say?"

"This all sounds more serious than you're letting on. What would be expected of us? What would we be obligated to do? Or not do?" Prey cautiously asked.

"There would be... some rules," Gloom admitted, "But nothing unreasonable. You'll be guests of clan Cilldara."

"Okay let me ask this. Why do you personally want us to go with you?" Prey asked.

Gloom's hoof unconsciously rose to rub at his chest scar, "Well, because I want you to. I want to show you where I come from, I guess. And I think you'll appreciate it there Prey. It's not like Canterlot, it's... Quiet. Safe. Home."

'-my home. although it's going to be a bit difficult getting Prey through all the caves without flight. He'll manage. We'll work something out-'

"I will go with you, thank you." Crimson told Gloom seriously. He turned to Prey, "I would like to go."

Prey hesitated on answering Crimson's unvoiced query about his own choice. Did he want to go? No, not really, he just wanted to be left alone, but his preference of choice had been removed from his life. So that left him back at the same question. Yes or no?

"Provisionally, yes. I'll accept your invitation."

"I look forward to it." Gloom smiled. Crimson did too, the unpractised expression out of place on his stoic face and distinctly off-putting. Gloom snorted into his mug, and a snerk escaped Prey.

"What?" Crimson asked blankly.

"Nothing. Just keep practicing that."

The morning had come and gone, rolling into afternoon, and now the ISND were rested and awake for another round.

The sun was shining over Canterlot, the rain showers scheduled for earlier having already finished up and been cleared away, and now the street had that fresh, after rain smell to it. It was the exact same set up as before. Crimson had gone into the post office, and used his authority to demand to know who came in to post a letter out to Griffonia each and every week. Then Gloom had gone inside the post office under the illusion of a Dusk Pony amulet, to wait and make sure the postal worker didn't tip off their target when they arrived to post their letter.

Prey wouldn't put it past the postal worker to feel righteously obligated to warn a fellow pony against the 'bat-pony-freaks', invoked Guard authority or no invoked Guard authority. It didn't even have to be intentional, the workers could simply let something slip out of nerves or poor acting skills.

Their spy suspect this time, as they'd learned from the stammering postal worker, was a green unicorn mare by the name of Shamrock.

"De'ja vu much?" Prey dryly joked as he and Crimson stood in the shadow of a clocktower and waited.

"That's because we *have* done this before, it's not just a feeling." Crimson pointed out, watching the ponies passing down the street for any green mare heading for the post office. They were only ten minutes trot away from the refinery they'd visited yesterday, actually. They were hidden in plain sight, this side of the clock tower being pressed up close to the wall of a three story house. It made for an almost alleyway, nicely steeped in deep shadow.

And also incidentally a place where ponies avoided. Prey couldn't imagine why.

"Hold that thought, because here we go again." Prey said, pushing

off from against the wall.

Coming down the street and angling directly towards the post office was a green mare who fit their gathered profile, wearing a prim, business dress with a purse at her side. Prey squinted, eyeing the purse which no doubt held her spy report, and also the mare's short horn neatly poking through her parted mane.

Shamrock stepped into the revolving door to the post office and went inside. Same as last time, Prey and Crimson were left to wait, patiently watching the door. Every so often, Crimson flexed his wings restlessly at his armoured sides.

The revolving door was abruptly shoved up from the inside and Shamrock emerged almost stumbling.

Her ears were laid back, and she twisted her head jerkily about, obviously trying to watch everybody passing her on the street. Prey opened his mouth, but the green mare had already picked a direction and taken off. It wasn't much of a gallop, but it was definitely a run.

"Look's like the postal workers were incapable of keeping their mouths shut." Prey said instead.

The revolving door was shoved open again, and out dashed Gloom, disguised as a grey pegasus and wearing his long scarf. Gloom looked right at their hiding place, and jabbed a hoof after the fleeing figure of Shamrock. The message was loud and clear; 'Get her', and Gloom's reasoning was instantly obvious. Crimson was in his armour, Gloom was not.

Crimson had the authority of a Night Guard on duty, while Gloom was using a magical amulet that was supposed to remain a secret.

Crimson's large wings snapped open, a gust of air expelled as he crouched for immediate take off, "Catch me up."

"Wait, watch out for her magic-!"

Too slow, not that Prey tried to reach out to stop Crimson. The powerful **Thwap** of Crimson's take off dried his eyes with the rush

of air, dancing ribbon catching on his hoof as he raised his leg to shield his face.

Prey blinked and looked. Crimson was powering through the air, wings beating hard for speed. He was already halfway down the street towards the fleeing Shamrock. Pedestrians were in the process turning to stare or ducking in sudden fright.

Prey had a moment to feel a flash of pride that the electrite feather he'd created was adding to Crimson's performance, before Crimson dived out of the air and landed in front of the running Shamrock. As in, it literally looked like a dive.

Crimson's wings came in, head and body formed one flowing line, and coming down at a steep angle front hooves out.
If an average or even a merely good flier had tried for such a fast transition like that, they would've broken their muzzle as they hit the pavement. But Crimson was more than merely 'good'.

"Halt."

Unfortunately, most people didn't have the reaction speed of a cat. Prey didn't see what expression was on Shamrock's face as she failed to stop and ran headlong into the Night Guard who'd seemingly appeared out of thin air, but he imagined it was one of frozen surprise.

Crimson was a warrior, and one in armour too. He knew how to absorb a hit, which was more than could be said for Shamrock. Crimson moved as the out of control mare ran into him, turning sideways and rolling her with her own momentum.

While instead of smashing herself into the unyielding metal of Crimson's armour, it still meant she hit the pavement hard.

Surrounding pedestrians whinnied and neighed in alarm, not knowing what was going on. Prey even saw one particularly pathetic and fat red mare take one look and swoon dead away.

Shamrock wheezed noisily on the ground, stunned and winded.

Crimson ignored all the staring ponies as he swiftly pulled out his

pair of hoof cuffs. He pulled the weakly struggling Shamrock's forehooves together and locked the cuffs on.

"Shamrock, you're under arrest." Crimson calmly announced, almost sounding bored, "You will be accompanying me back to the Guard Compound and holding cells. You have the right to remain silent. Now, are you willing to cooperate, or will try to resist-?"

Sharmock's horn briefly tried to light up, maybe just instinctually, but Crimson didn't wait to find out. His right wing, the one holding the electrite feather, firmly whacked Shamrock's horn. The magic winked out accompanied by a pitiful whimper.

"That is your only warning," Crimson informed Shamrock, ignoring the outcry of the watching unicorns, "A second attempt will count as resisting arrest and I will be authorised to subdue you with force if necessary."

Crimson paused, helmeted head cocked as he peered down at Shamrock, yellow eyes calmly evaluating, "I'll ask again, are you willing to cooperate, or try to resist arrest?"

Starry Wing sighed tiredly, despite Prey knowing full well the Lieutenant's shift had only started ten minutes ago; "Next time, I don't suppose you could arrest her someplace other than in the middle of a crowded street?"

"I'll do my best, sir." Crimson answered blandly.

"There wasn't much of a choice. She tried to run. It wouldn't even have been a problem in the first place, she was *supposed* to remain free and unawares. If that post worker at the desk had followed instructions and hadn't purposefully warned her." Gloom fumed, back in armour and Dusk Pony amulet removed.

'-and that post pony is going to be getting a very heavy fine for that-'

"Oh, I'm not reprimanding you. I'm not complaining that you caught her, but I've no doubt there's going to be a twisted and

misinterpreted version of it in the papers tomorrow denouncing 'Night Guard brutality'." Starry Wing complained, already thinking about how this was going to sink the low public perception of the Night Guard even lower.

'He'd be better served just giving it up. There's no chance of winning the public's heart in the first place, not when you're thestrals and they're xenophobic racists.' Prey thought to himself.

Vivid Edge was present here too, still shadowing Starry Wing and Screech in turns to learn the job. She flexed her wings, stubby wing claws twitching in dissatisfaction at what she was hearing.

"Am I understanding this correctly? These various newspapers can write slander, yet we are not permitted to put a stop to the lies of these ponies?"

Starry Wing rolled his neck, getting it to pop, "I'm afraid so, Lieutenant. The newspapers don't outright lie, but they will do everything short of that while also blowing events way out of proportion. There's a writer, Yellow Pages, who's especially against thestrals and the Night Guard, but because he never outright says it, merely implies it, he's protected by law. We've been keeping a copy of the articles he writes, just waiting for him to cross the legal line. Freedom of speech is a right Her Majesty grants to all, but sometimes ponies abuse Her Majesty's graces."

'-you're going to get overconfident eventually Yellow Pages, and I'll be waiting-'

Both Lieutenants and the ISND stood inside the Guard Compound, just outside the holding cell block. The sun had set, and the hallway was lit only by lantern light. Once again, only a problem for Prey.

Shamrock wouldn't get a lawyer until tomorrow, and was being detained overnight. She was sitting inside one of the cells just behind the door, actually. Her hoof cuffs had been removed, but Prey was relieved that they'd locked an inhibitor ring over her horn instead. He hadn't even had to suggest it, they'd simply been sensible for once. It was a nice change.

"So how are we proceeding sir?" Gloom asked, jerking his head to indicate the locked and reinforced door, behind which lay the cell block.

Typically, these public cells didn't see much use outside of when drunk ponies got rowdy on occasion and needed to be detained overnight. Tonight, Shamrock was the only person locked in there.

"As in?" Starry Wing asked, looking for clarification.

"I mean, are we waiting until morning until she can get a representative, or are we just going to interrogate her anyways like with Copper Pot?"

Starry Wing considered. It was the law that a person couldn't be interviewed without a legal representative present, however... '-she's definitely a criminal and a spy-'

They'd looked at the report Shamrock had been trying to post to Griffonia. They hadn't been able to read it, because like Lika Soil's report, it had been written in code. The cypher was a different one too, so Prey hadn't been able to immediately translate, but he didn't need to. It already proved beyond a doubt that Shamrock was up to no good and had something to hide.

"She hasn't said anything yet?" Starry Wing asked.

"She wanted to be let go, and demanded to know what was going on, but otherwise, no." Gloom said.

"Has she even given her name?" Vivid Edge asked, one eye balefully shifting to the door.

"We already have her name, ma'am." Gloom said.

"But does she know that? Does she realise *why* we've brought her in?" Vivid elaborated.

"I can't imagine she doesn't, not after what Sargent Gloom said happened at the post office." Starry Wing answered.

"Hrm. Never mind then, my idea won't work. I don't think I'm

experienced enough yet to be offering any advice on this." Vivid shook her head.

'-unfortunately, that was my only idea too. That old bluff always worked in tricking guilty teenagers into confessing-'

Prey spoke up, "Well we do know who she is. Shamrock Leaf is, or *was* now I suppose, one of the two accountants employed at the gem refinery."

"How'd you figure that out?" Starry Wing asked, not in doubt, just mild surprise.

'-Prey's a smart cookie. Too smart for his own good sometimes, but that's why he's in the ISND-'

"I saw her name and job title on their sign-in board. I thought it might be a different Shamrock, but she had identification in her purse which confirmed it. Seems Cobalt was both right and wrong about their accountants. Yes the records weren't getting fiddled with, but instead Shamrock was exposing them all to an outsider." Prey shrugged.

"Ah, so that's how you worked it out."

'-should've thought of that. I'll remember it in the future-', Vivid Edge thought, not used to wide spread practice of identification badges and papers, having come from the clans.

Starry Wing considered what this new information meant. "And what do you think would be the best approach?" He asked, addressing the question to the ISND as a whole.

Gloom glanced at Prey and Crimson, raising an eyebrow which clearly said; 'Your thoughts?'

Prey flicked a strand of green mane from off his leg that he'd previously missed, and shrugged. He'd been the one to carry Shamrock's confiscated purse with it's report and various other junk in from the post office, "I could crack the code on her report first, and then we could see what it says before we confront her. Plus, we can then decide if we want to post the report out to Griffonia

anyways if we want to buy ourselves another week before Shamrock's and Lika's employer realises something is wrong."

Vivid Edge's one eye blinked in surprise, '-just Prey translating alone? I thought they'd all worked to decode that last report together-'

"Prey's idea is not bad," Crimson added his own opinion, "And Shamrock will be more cooperative in the morning. I mean, I doubt she will be getting any sleep tonight."

"Let her stew for a night. That sounds smart." Gloom agreed.

"Alright, we'll go with that unless Captain Nighthawk says otherwise." Starry Wing nodded, "I want you to bring that report to him the moment you've cracked it, okay? We need to decide how to handle this, since the original idea was to leave both spies free to see what else we could learn first. We need a new plan."

"Yes sir, we'll get right on it." Gloom saluted.

It wasn't hard to crack the code on the letter. It may not have been the same one as Lika Soil had used, but it was just as simply made. Based on the normal alphabet, still using vowels, and replacing symbols on a one to one basis. Almost too easy.

Prey already knew what he was going to find though, and he wasn't surprised when he was proved correct. The letter contained the weekly stock figures of the ignius gemstones found by the refinery. Unsurprising, seeing as Shamrock was one of the two accountants working there.

'Wonder if Cobalt will be smart enough to draw the connection when Shamrock doesn't arrive at work in the morning?' Prey smirked as he finished copying out the translated report and put the quill back, thinking about the fat floor manager.

This whole situation seemed very reminisce of the one which had occurred before, with the Crop Sharer's and Holder's, with Copper Pot stirring up those riots in the background.

Prey blew on the page to dry the ink, and then they were off again to Nighthawk's office. Tonight promised to be a busy night.

"The lightning's out of the cloud now. There's no point left in waiting any more. We're bringing in Lika Soil straight away and interrogating them both. We'll compare what secrets they both spill and uncover the truth." Nighthawk decided swiftly, in his usual gruff, uncompromising way.

The Captain twitched his hoof towards Vivid Edge, "Take a partner, Bramble will do, and fly to his house. There's two Night Guards on stake out watching him. Take them in with you and arrest Lika Soil on charges of theft, bribes, and suspicion of collusion to treason. Somepony stay behind to search his house too, but I want him back here in a cell within an hour."

"Yes sir." Vivid Edge said, making for the door straight away in her slightly hobbled gait. But a limp didn't distract her from her steely focus, as Prey heard when she passed:

'-*this* is the reason we came back. To serve as Princess Luna's soldiers of the Night-'

Prey privately thought it'd be funny if Vivid forgot Lika Soil's address halfway there. How silly would she feel then? Canterlot was a city, not like the wilds like she knew. It was easier than you thought to misplace a house.

The door was still shutting behind Vivid Edge as Nighthawk turned his piercing yellow gaze back to the three of them; "Princess Luna was appraised of the situation as of last night. However our plans have to change now, and since Her Majesty is busy tonight with Princess Celestia and not to be disturbed, informing her will have to wait until tomorrow morning."

Nighthawk shifted to look over his desk and down at Prey, "What did the coded report say? Summarize."

"Essentially, just the weekly intake and outgoings of ignius

gemstones from the refinery. The details were all about the weight, grade, stone type, cut, and estimated value of said gems."

Nighthawk began tapping his hoof on his desk, "Was there no message attached with the report? Nopony it was addressed to?"

Prey shook his head, "Shamrock didn't even sign it. She was just sending the reports and offering no interpretation of them at all. Her employer in Griffonia must be interpreting the weekly report themselves, which means they obviously know something about ignius gemstones and enchanting."

"How so?"

"Well obviously because they employed somebody-"

'-somepony-', Gloom mentally corrected but didn't interrupt in front of the Captain.

"-to gather information on this. They wouldn't do so just for the sake of it, they must be interested in something about ignius gemstones. Sir." Prey added.

'-so it's the actual ignius gemstones themselves they're interested in. Not the mines or refinery themselves-', Nighthawk thought. That's what they'd theorised before, but this more or less proved it was all about the gemstones and not the factory or people involved which were the target.

Nighthawk's hoof was tapping out a pondering rhythm, "Any thoughts or theories? Anypony?" He asked around.

"We've discussed it briefly sir, but none of them seem likely." Gloom answered, as Crimson and Prey shook their heads in agreement.

"It doesn't really matter," Nighthawk decided with a careless shrug of his wings, "We'll be finding out from the pony's mouth ourselves come the morning once Lika Soil and Shamrock have sweated for a bit."

"Yes sir." Gloom agreed.

"Good. That only leaves the question; do you want the ISND to do both interrogations or just the one, Sargent? Or neither even?" Nighthawk asked.

They were the ones who'd uncovered both the spies, even if Lika Soil was getting arrested by Vivid, it was them who'd done the work. They'd been successful, therefore their methods obviously worked, and results speak for themselves. It made no sense for the ISND not to do both interrogations, but Nighthawk was deferring to them to make the judgement call just in case they had a better idea.

"No sir. We'll do them both if that's fine?"

"Go right ahead."

"We'll get right to it then. Shamrock now, and Lika Soil afterwards once Lieutenant Vivid brings him back." Gloom nodded.

"Very good. Dismissed."

'*Finally*,' Prey thought, stretching his stiff neck, 'I'm sick of wasting my time on these pathetic cases. Let's get these jokes of interviews over with.'

Nighthawk was already picking up a different sheaf of paperwork by the time they reached the door. A Captain's work is never done, but he still spared another thought for the whole situation which Prey overheard; '-all this in less than a week since return, but evil never rests. Will provide some good training experience for Vivid at least-'

Prey idly wondered how many of the new thestral recruits were regretting their choice to leave their cave homes and coming here for a life in servitude to their Moon Goddess. Probably none, since they were thestrals and had an unhealthy fixation with duty.

In fact the only thestrals who seemed to have had the right idea were clan Myrrdon, fleeing rather than live a life in servitude to Luna, along with each generation of their children who were to come. But no matter how much Prey would normally support their motives, he could never agree with them. While there may always

be two sides to every story, none of that mattered. They were Crimson's enemies, and for that, they were forever lost in Prey's eyes.

Prey, Gloom, and Crimson discussed how they wanted their double interrogations to go before they went in. They weren't even going to be taking Shamrock or Lika Soil into the proper interview room, they were just going to interrogate them in their cells for added pressure.

Shamrock had been left in the dark, quite literally. When they pushed the door open, Crimson carrying a lantern, the green mare, who'd been huddling on the cell's bunk almost gravitated towards the light before she realised who was carrying it. Prey saw how her previously neatly combed mane and coat were already in disarray. It'd only been six hours, and already Shamrock looked to be in a state on the edge of a breakdown.

'Having her magic blocked by that inhibitor has really eroded her spirit that much already?' Prey noted with scorn, 'How pathetically reliant she is on her natural gifts.'

That, or perhaps it was just because she was a soft, sheltered, privileged Canterlot pony who was racist and scared of thestrals.

Prey knew the type. Shamrock was the sort who'd spill her guts in a sobbing, snotty mess at the merest hint of spilling her guts. He bet Torment would've only needed to poke a single claw around the doorframe for Shamrock to see, and she'd be begging for mercy.

'This is going to be easy.'

The ring of keys rattled loudly in the silence as Gloom turned them in the cell door and pushed it open. Shamrock's puffy eyes went wider and she hurriedly scrambled off the bunk, putting her back to the back wall. The inhibitor ring was still plainly locked around her horn, so Prey wasn't afraid of her as they marched inside. Crimson swung the cell door shut behind them with a metal clang.

Prey had a quick listen in on the mare's thoughts:

'-oh bugger, oh sugar, oh buck-'

Not *quite* the impressionable and compliant mood Prey would prefer, but it was more than good enough for getting answers to the questions they'd decided upon.

"Shamrock Leaf. Take a seat." Gloom ordered, as Crimson moved to his left and Prey situated himself in the corner.

Shamrock gulped. Her mouth worked, but nothing came out. She swallowed and tried a second time, voice dry, "This is all some mistake-"

"Take a seat." Gloom repeated, voice as chilly as the expression on his face.

Shamrock shuffled back over to the bunk without looking away and perched on the edge. It was a minor physiological tactic, making her sit lower than them while they stood. Childish, but it didn't make the tactic any less effective on the afraid.

'-oh no, oh no, oh no, why'd I ever accept that job? Prisoner of the Nightmare Guards. They won't hurt me, right? Oh please help me Celestia-'

"Shamrock Leaf," Gloom spoke coldly, making the mare jump, "I'm are going to keep this simple. I only have eights questions. When I ask, you answer. Is that simple enough for you?"

Shamrock stared at them, at Prey standing in the corner smiling inanely at her, at the armoured thestral demanding her compliance backed up by an armed pegasus warrior.

Gloom looked down at her, "That was question one. You're already failing. I want a yes or no."

"But I don't want-"

"Yes or no?" Crimson snapped while Gloom didn't move a muscle, just like they'd discussed.

Shamrock flinched at the harsh rebuke, "I-ImeanYes."

"Not so hard is it? Second question; how long have you been posting your encoded reports out to Griffonia?"

Shamrock suddenly looked very faint. Or perhaps she was on the verge of bursting into tears as her guilty fears were confirmed. She'd obviously known what they had arrested her for, but she must've convinced herself otherwise.

'-they found out, no no no, what're they going to do to me?-'

"B...B...O-only once. I, it was only letters before that, I only sent the one report."

"Lie." Prey chimed.

"Lie." Crimson echoed.

Shamrock stared at Prey in a sort of self inflicted terrified stupor as she finally properly registered the lamb in the room. Shamrock didn't even react properly, just blinking glassily as the situation deteriorated around her and couldn't keep up.

'-wh-why've they brought a filly? What? Why a ribbon?-'

Prey gave her a mocking smile, tilting his head to more proudly display the blue ribbon behind his ear.

"How long?" Crimson snapped again. He wasn't naturally good at doing intimidation, but the blank, unchanging stare which accompanied his words was a sort of intimidation all by itself.

"B-but it really was only o-once." Shamrock stuttered.

Gloom made a show of sighing.

"Lie." Prey chimed in again.

"Lie." Crimson repeated.

"I-B-but I, I, I-"

Crimson took one step forwards, moving just past the invisible line where Gloom stood, "How long?"

'-what's the point? I'm lost, they already know-', Shamrock despaired. She blinked hard, staring resolutely at the cell floor and hunkering lower on the bunk.

Crimson took another deliberate step forwards, bringing his hoof down purposefully hard so the cloud steel horseshoe rang out. Prey was pleased Crimson had remembered his basic pointers on how to intimidate. It certainly seemed to be enough for Shamrock Leaf. With that last step, the green furred mare cracked.

"It's been t-three moths. Three months, and two weeks." Shamrock mumbled, thoughts a stew of self pity but Prey was hearing very little actual remorse in there, just for getting caught, but not for being a spy.

'-why wasn't I more careful? I should've-I could've-And now the Nightmare Guards have me, oh please oh please don't let them hurt me-'

Gloom motioned, and Crimson stepped back into place just behind him, but still very much there in Shamrock's field of view; "Question three; did your weekly reports include an additional pass phrase within the code to prove it really was you sending the report?"

Shamrock's ears and head sunk even further towards the floor, "N-no."

'-not getting anything from my special talent this, not that it proves anything...-', Gloom thought, '-...however,Prey hasn't called out either, so she's probably being truthful-'

Gloom decided it was good enough to continue with. They'd be asking the same question of Lika Soil later to see if the two spies answers matched, "Question four then. Are any of your friends, family, or co-workers aware or complicit your crimes?"

Shamrock hunched lower, mane a mess, "No." She almost whispered.

"Question five; When were you approached and offered this job?"

Shamrock somehow managed to find a moment to be confused through her self-pity, "It was the same time. A-also three months ago."

That'd put pay to the idea of Shamrock being something of a sleeper agent who'd been recruited years ago. It seemed she'd been more of an opportunistic recruitment, which unfortunately cut down on the likelihood of her knowing anything very useful.

"Question seven; What made you accept this offer to be a spy?"

"I'm not a spy, I just-"

"Lie." Prey cheerily announced.

"Lie." Crimson pronounced.

"I, they, he offered me a wage. A good wage. I, I needed it."

"Needed it?" Gloom shook his head coolly, "No you didn't. You have no outstanding debts or dependant family. We checked. No you did not 'need' the money. You were simply greedy."

Shamrock couldn't say anything to that. Or rather, she was too stressed and frightened to think of a defence for her actions. So instead she just huddled further into herself, tail tucking between her legs like a dog.

'-not a spy. I'm not a spy. I was just doing a job. They can't charge me for being a spy can they?-'

"Last question, question eight; who was it that first approached you and convinced you to turn traitor?"

"No, I never! I'm not a traitor." Shamrock jerked out of her shell, starting to incoherently panic at the word 'traitor' as thoughts of banishment ran through her head, "Not, no! I don't-Not a-Never, was never a traitor! Can't do this, you can't do this to me."

"You are a traitor," Crimson stated unfeelingly from his place at

Gloom's shoulder, "You can hide from the truth, but it won't change the facts. You have been caught supplying information to someone in a different nation. You are a traitor to the crown and will be prosecuted as such."

"I'm not a traitor!" Shamrock cried shrilly, uselessly trying to light up her horn instinctively.

"You're not a traitor?" Gloom cocked one eyebrow.

"Yes, I'm not, not a traitor! I'm not!"

"If you're not working for a foreign power, then you must prove it. Who hired you?"

Shamrock froze, mouth open and eyes wide. The ISND waited, faces unmoving in the lantern light and shadow.

'-oh Celestia please help me-'

Shamrock took a shuddering breath, gulped, and finally managed to answer.

Nighthawk, Starry Wing, Screech, and Vivid Edge were all present in the Captain's dimly lit office. What was going to be said was too important for anyone to miss, so they were all squashed in around the piles of Night Guard gear which *still* hadn't found another home yet.

It felt like someone had effectively padlocked them inside the room. No one was leaving until this was done. This was serious.

Six pairs of reflective yellow eyes and one pair of soft blue all looked between each other.

"The griffin ambassador." Nighthawk said heavily.

"Yes. Well, maybe not. It was one of his aides, somepo-some griffin named Hafflow, so the ambassador may not have any knowledge of his actions, but also yes sir." Gloom answered.

Screech tapped his hoof once, the thestral way of gathering their attention to ask a question.

Nighthawk turned his head, "Yes Lieutenant?"

"Are we able to just go straight in and arrest this aide for his crimes?"

"I'm afraid we can't, sir." Crimson shook his head.

"Is this not a clear case of law breaking, though? Diplomatic immunity doesn't extend to sowing sedition, surely?" Screech asked.

"Ah, pardon me, I didn't explain that clearly. I mean he's gone, sir. Hafflow was replaced by a new aide and returned to Griffonia a month and a half ago. Prey and Crimson already checked." Gloom explained.

Starry Wing tail swished angrily, "That doesn't suddenly excuse the ambassador of all his underling's wrongdoing. Hafflow was one of his aides. Even if he didn't know of Hafflow's actions, which I seriously doubt, he is still responsible for his aides actions."

Nighthawk's jaw tightened, "Unfortunately, he's one of the griffin ambassador's aides. There are strict guidelines on how to deal with anything related to ambassadors, and none of them are straight forward."

Nighthawk's reluctant words got a collection of dark scowls and irritated wing flicks all around.

'-moon blight-'
'-cowardly actions-'
'-won't stand for this-'

'Ponies and their rules.' Prey thought condescending. If you had an enemy, you *dealt* with your enemy.

Prey hadn't been aware a Griffonian embassy even existed in Canterlot, but apparently there was, along with Minotaur and Zebrican one's too. Along with the griffins, all three embassies were situated together on a business street in Upper Canterlot. Prey didn't

imagine the ambassadors and their aides had a very nice life here in Canterlot surrounded by ponies. They no doubt felt like prisoners in their own embassy most of the time, only leaving when they had official business to conduct.

Or also when they had illicit business it seemed.

Both Lika Soil and Shamrock had both confirmed it had been the same griffin who'd contacted them with an offer a week after Luna's return, while Canterlot was still abuzz and uncertain. Both unicorns had individually been leery of the griffin at first, Shamrock especially hadn't trusted the foreigner, but both had said that Hafflow had been very personable and friendly.

The griffin aide had come to both of their houses personally, bringing his offer of a; 'unique job opportunity' along with 'generous recompense'. Hafflow had been very convincing and persuasive by the sound of it, and had been willing to make their first payment in advance. 200 bits for each report, every week.

Neither Lika Soil or Shamrock had any idea about the other's existence. All they knew was that they posted off their reports and in the code Hafflow had given them to a PO box address he'd provided, and 200 anonymous bits turned up in their bank account each week from overseas.

'-this is a huge bucking mess-', Vivid Edge thought.

All of the Lieutenants and the Captain were thinking along similar lines to her, and coming to the same unhappy conclusions as the ISND had reached when conducting the two interrogations.

'-Hafflow's flown off and we can't arrest him-'
'-we have no evidence against the ambassador, and they'll just deny all knowledge-'
'-what's more, Luna only knows what other damage that griffin did before he fled-'
'-how many other spies and traitors might he have left behind?-'

"This will become a diplomatic incident unless we handle it right," Nighthawk slowly looked around the room, "We cannot have that

reflect badly on Her Majesty."

'Her Majesty', meaning Princess Luna exclusively. Not that any of the Night Guard command wanted to make any issues for Princess Celestia either, it just didn't occur to them that it even could be an issue for the beloved sun alicorn.

This was not a small problem. It had the potential to be huge. Griffonia was a national power. It may have been less prosperous than Equestria, but it was still an entire nation with its own laws, culture, languages, history, army, lands, and economy. Even if you ignored everything else and only looked at it from the trade perspective of Equestria, Griffonia represented hundreds of thousands, spilling over into millions of bits every annum.

The right thing to do was clear and simple.

The correct choice was not so clear.

Right is always right, and wrong is always wrong. It doesn't matter how you try to dress it up or define it, scale can't change bad into good. If a sole griffin had done what Hafflow had, there would be no hesitation. But because Hafflow wasn't a nobody, he was forcing the Night Guard to give him special consideration. It was the same problem all over again that Equestria had with its own nobility. Money and power are a shield against justice.

This was all a huge pile of rotting hydra dung as far as Prey was concerned.

Screech looked like he'd bitten into something sour as he spoke, "So we can't just walk in and detain the ambassador?"

"No, not inside the embassy. Yes, we physically could, but no, there are laws." Nighthawk's tone grated.

Vivid Edge turned her head so she could properly look at the Captain out of her one remaining eye, "I need to ask sir. Sargent Gloom and Prey and Crimson have already gotten confessions out of both spies. Hafflow was the griffin ambassador's aid. Is that not proof enough to at least arrest and interrogate the ambassador?"

Nighthawk's yellow eyes narrowed, "Legally an emissary can only be tried in their own country's court. We'd have to hoof over the investigation to the griffins and let them sentence the ambassador. Before I wouldn't have cared, but Hafflow was the ambassador's aid. What are the chances the Griffon Empire really were ignorant?"

"That's the problem though, isn't it?" Starry Wing said, "He might be and he might not be, but we can't prove it either way, and nor can we bring him in for questioning to find out the truth."

"Not... necessarily." Everyone paused and looked at Crimson. Prey wished yet again he could hear his friend's thoughts. Crimson blinked at them, "I mean, you said we can't bring the ambassador in sir. So what if we went to the ambassador instead?"

"You mean arrange a meeting and then ask him the questions anyway?" Starry Wing's ears tilted thoughtfully, "I don't suppose there's a reason why that couldn't work."

Screech and Vivid Edge each considered the unexpectedly simple approach and also nodded.

"Not yet," Nighthawk stated, "The moment we start asking questions about Hafflow, the griffin ambassador will know that we know. If he *is* guilty, that is."

Nighthawk almost reluctantly tacked that on the end. Evidently, the Captain already believed the ambassador was. Without meeting and listening in on this griffin thoughts himself, Prey personally didn't know what to think either way.

Vivid Edge tapped her hoof on the floor to ask a question, and got a nod from Nighthawk to go on, "I need to ask, but isn't that a moot point? When his two little spies both don't send in their reports next week, the griffins will know we're onto them."

"Not if we don't want them to know, ma'am," Gloom answered, "That's the one bit of good news. Since Prey's cracked the code, and we already checked that there's no additional secret passphrase needed, we could continue posting dummy reports each week in Shamrock's and Lika Soil's places. Eventually we'll get found out, it's

inevitable, but we have some time."

They all considered that, Prey listening in on the ideas and possible plans his commanders came up with.

Prey hoped they let it drop soon and slept on the issue for tomorrow. Or rather the coming night. It was late, (or early rather), and he'd much rather be asleep than wasting his time being forced to attend a meeting for the purpose of guarding a city he didn't care about. Sunrise was only an hour away, and he literally didn't care if the griffins ripped Equestria off for thousands of ignius gemstones.

Griffins had very little magical knowledge or power, not getting to enjoy the advantage of having one third of their population being born with horns, so what would they do with ignius gemstones anyway? Those were only good for enchanting.

'It might just be about preventing Equestria from having them instead,' Prey admitted, 'I still don't care though.'

"So we can keep up the façade if we so choose. That leaves the dilemma over the ambassador." Screech mused, scratching the back of his neck with a wing claw.

"Yes, but this is not up to us. There is somepony with higher seniority and experience to make the call," Nighthawk pushed his chair away, "We must inform Princess Luna of our discovery. Immediately."

'*What*?' All traces of sleepiness fled Prey like a downpour of freezing water, 'Nononono, no that's not needed!'

But everyone else in the dim room stood to leave immediately, tension leaving their shoulders. Prey's suddenly panicked gaze darted around the room. But all those yellow eyes were looking forwards in anticipation to once again meet their beloved liege lord. They trusted in Luna to know what to do. After all, she was the princess. Ambassadors, embassies, and matters of state were obviously her remit.

'Zoma'Grika.'

What Nighthawk and the other Lieutenants probably hadn't considered was that Luna had been locked away in freezing dark madness on the moon for the last millennia. She was still probably just a tincy-wincey bit out of touch. Or maybe they just didn't think it was a problem, since Luna was an all powerful alicorn who could effortlessly laugh off the biggest killer of all; time.

But here they were regardless, waiting outside the Night Court's doors, momentarily to be let in once Princess Luna had finished her sacred duty of lowering the moon.

Personally, Prey was fervently swearing up a storm within the privacy of his own head in Zebrican, as they stood in the corridor.

Last time he'd been forced to see Luna, he'd gotten to witness first hoof the celestial body controlling magic he was for now dubbing 'alicorn magic'. And so far the only thing he knew about it was that it was completely separate to unicorn magic. A completely different plane of power. Luna had both unicorn magic and alicorn magic, but they were not one and the same.

Normal magic was using a key to unlock a door. Alicorn magic was crushing the door with a mountain. Prey's working theory was that the mountain couldn't be scaled down either.

After seeing such terrifying power and having experienced Luna's carelessness before himself, Prey would much prefer not getting any more firsthoof data to improve on his theory with.

Simply put, Prey was scared of this coming meeting. Same as last time, and every time before that. The moon wolf was only slightly better than the sun wolf.

At the end of the long marble corridor they waited in, the light through vaulted arched window faded from deep grey to the blushing orange bloom of dawn. Cold grey marble started the transition back to glistening white, royal red carpets and tapestries slowly gaining tone and depth of vividness. And of course, the omnipresent gold of the Palace now became unmistakable as any

other metal.

That meant it was time. The two Night Guard sentries on the door, who must've been just about to end their twelve plus hour shift, nodded in respect to Nighthawk and the Lieutenants, shifted their spears across to their opposite hooves, and pushed open the doors.

Prey trailed right at the back as they marched swiftly in, Nighthawk obviously taking the lead as the Captain. The Night Court was a hall sized room, and darker than one would've expected with the new dawn rising outside. The room *had* lanterns and torches, it was just that only a few were lit. Prey's eyes flitted around, warily checking everything was as he always did.

Luna was not seated on the low-key throne at the head of the room as Prey might've expected. The alicorn instead stood in front of one of the floor to ceiling windows at the side of the hall in her heavy silver regalia, looking out as her sister's the sun rose.

They waited. Nighthawk did not announce themselves like some puffed up noble. Luna may not have turned around, but she knew who was here. They'd waited outside at her behest until she had finished lowering the moon after all. Waiting was no imposition to a thestral. They were patient warriors.

Prey kept up the silent stream of cursing and worry inside his head. The silence waited.

Finally Luna shifted, a statue breaking its bound form. Her drifting mane trailed in a lazy after image as she turned around. Prey carefully avoided direct eye contact as Luna's gaze panned across them.

"Our good Captain Nighthawk. What pray tell brings the entirety of my Night Guard command to us so late in the night?"

Luna's volume, as always, was gratingly loud on Prey's ears, and it wasn't just because of his superior hearing. Yet even so, was she finally toning down her volume just a bit?

Nighthawk, now directly addressed, bowed, everyone else following

suit; "Your Majesty. May I speak bluntly?"

Luna nodded down at them, speaking as she languidly strolled like some great cat back towards her moon themed throne, "Rise. And if our Captain believes it best to do so, we would be wise to listen."

"The ISND have found another spy. Both were secretly observing the gem trade and reporting back. As Sargent Gloom predicted, it was about the ignius gemstones indeed. We have both spies in the cells and the ISND have interrogated them both. They gave us some worrying answers." Nighthawk paused in his summation of events.

Luna's starry mane had drifted across one deep blue eye, but the visible one glittered with sharp interest. Now seated, she sat unnaturally still. Perhaps no one else noticed, the ceaseless motion of her ethereal mane tricking them, but Prey saw how Luna herself barely moved.

"Their goal was the true gemstones, ignius gems. A thousand years and the value to a magus in the art of enchantment has only risen loftier. What did these two traitorous cretins plan to do with such precious stones?"

"As far as we can tell, nothing, Your Majesty. They were merely lackies reporting back their observations. And that's where the problem lies." Nighthawk drew in a breath over his fangs.

"Ah. Which pony is their spy master?" Luna asked with sharp insight.

"We don't have any proof of a link, but the one who recruited them was one of the ex-aides of the griffin ambassador, Your Majesty."

Everyone breathed in, waiting to see how the alicorn would take Nighthawk's news.

Luna's head tilted in painfully slow motion, "We art in alliance with the nation of Griffonia for some eight centuries past. Our sister has informed us of such, yet though barest us news that they are false and the ambassador has been playing us for fools."

Nighthawk dipped his head, "Quite possibly. But it's not certain

beyond a doubt."

"The griffins would do well to remember the lessons their ancestors learned, that we are Princess Luna, Ruler of the Night. Explain Captain Nighthawk, what hast thy command discovered?" Luna demanded.

Prey kept his eyes firmly fixed at Luna's silver shod hooves, trying to keep his nervous breathing even lest he give himself away as Nighthawk ran through the explanation. Unfortunately he knew he was the only one feeling so. The thoughts of those around him held nothing but expectant anticipation for Luna's solution, and annoyed disgust over the two spies and the griffins. Of course he couldn't know for certain with Crimson, but Prey guessed his friend was probably much the same.

There was just the faintest smirk of pride curling Luna's lips when Nighthawk finished. She looked down at the ISND, making Prey hastily drop his gaze:

"First Sargent Gloom. Yet again, thou proves thyself and thy unit. Rarely have we had a unit in our service whom we have cause to praise so often. Thou hast a knack for rooting out infection within our nation of little ponies."

Gloom bowed, "Thank you Princess. It is our sworn duty."

"Nay, it is still well done. At thy present rate, we shall have cause to present thee two medals at the coming ceremony. And nay, we have not forgotten that, tis' only delayed by one foolish problem or another. Nor have we forgotten thy contributions in this, Crimson and Prey. Thy Sargent's well deserved praise is for thee both too."

Prey was being used. He was enslaved to Luna's will, nothing more than one of her possessions, and he was being used. He hated it, he hated her, and he hated being powerless to change his situation.

"Thank you, Princess Luna." He murmured, eyes lowered.

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Crimson echoed, briefly bowing his head.

"But now we must return to the matter of our duplicitous griffin ambassador," Luna's voice turned to booming scorn, "Whether he knew of his aides actions matters little. This Hafflow was his aide under his authority. A commander is responsible for the ponies they lead. Knowingly or not, he has betrayed our hospitality and trust. We would do well to throw him from our borders forthwith, one does not clasp an asp to their breast but casts it from them immediately. However..."

For a moment Prey's mind went blank, and he saw war being declared. Death, famine, suffering, all because an alicorn overreacted.

"Punishment must fit the severity of the crime. T'would not do for this knave Hafflow to escape justice, as he so surely would if we were to announce his crimes to the world. He would go into hiding, like a sewer rat, and the chance for justice would be lost. This we will not stand for. This is our nation, and we will not have it corrupted by outsiders. We will not allow our sisters hard work to be undermined."

Luna stood from her throne, voice rising and mane starting to twist and billow faster. Prey flinched, wanting to cover his ears from the booming ringing but not daring to in case it offended Luna. He was just a powerless observer here. He couldn't say or do anything to affect whatever outcome the alicorn had already chosen.

"The griffin Hafflow will not escape our justice, *Equestrian* justice. We shall not allow him to hide behind the soft feathers of his king. He shall be brought to stand before our courts to answer for his crimes. And you, our faithful Night Guard, shall be the instruments of his retrieval and arrest."

Arrest Hafflow? In another country? Hundreds of miles away? Did she expect them to somehow-? She did, didn't she?

Insanity, that's what Prey was hearing. Not madness, but insanity nonetheless, with no consideration given to consequence.

"Princess Luna..."

For once, Nighthawk showed a moment of hesitance. He looked between his three Lieutenants, who were exchanging silent communication as well. They looked back, ready to follow. The ISND held their breath, looking on. In the end though, there was no doubt. For Luna, had the clans returned from hiding. For her and her alone did the Night Guard even exist. They were standing in her court, before her hooves, in her Palace. She was not infallible, and perhaps she might miss the smaller details, but it was still their duty to serve.

"...As you command."

'-Princess Luna has seen and known more than we can imagine. Our duty is to figure out the best way to do her will-'

But Luna was not done however; "In times past, this matter should have been dealt with openly for all to see the griffins shame. Alas, as our sister reminds us, times are not what they once were. Instead, tis' best to pursue the art of secrecy until Hafflow is safely remanded within our custody and he cannot slip away. Only then shall all ponies know of his acts. Then, we shall announce it in the halls, in the courts, on the streets, and from the rooftops."

"Princess Luna?" Nighthawk asked, seeking clarification.

Luna grandly swept her hoof to the side, "Why, thou shalt fly to Griffonia tonight, infiltrate their borders as they have so brazenly done with ours, and arrest Hafflow in the secrecy of his own home. Then thou shalt return with the criminal to stand trial. Tis' three nights hard flight to the griffin border, and another one beyond, so by all means, prepare your retinue for the journey. We have every confidence in your success."

What? Just what?

Just sneak into a foreign land and snatch a griffin? Without getting spotted once? And if they were spotted, were they supposed to silence the unlucky griffin farmer? What about border patrols and checks? Luna was sending thestrals, there was no chance of them getting past unnoticed in a land of griffins. To say nothing of how Hafflow might not even be in Griffin Stone, the capital of Griffonia.

Its rugged lands were vast, split between the Low and High kingdoms.

But Luna was commanding it. Prey stared, heart thumping. This was brainless. Why? Why were they all just going along with it?

"How many ponies am I permitted to take, Princess?" Nighthawk asked, completely accepting and already planning which Lieutenant to leave in charge while he was gone.

'-either Screech or Starry Wing. Vivid will fly with us-'

"We leave that up to thy discretion and good judgement, Captain. We only insist that our ISND shall fly with you."

What? But... Prey couldn't fly. There were trains to Griffonia sure, but the whole purpose of this scheme was to avoid any chance of detection.

Prey caught Crimson looking over at him, eyes wide. Gloom shifted on his hooves uncomfortably, "Forgive me for interrupting Princess Luna. I don't mean to question your judgement, it's just that I don't see how we could take Prey with us. We'll be travelling fast and light. A sky chariot is out."

"Ah! But of course, we did forget. Ti's simple problem. Prey shall remain in Canterlot during your absence." Luna decreed, causally committing to breaking up the ISND, "But thee and Crimson must surely go. This matter requires your skills Sargent. T'was your unit who uncovered the traitors in our midst the first time, and now thou hast done it a second time. We foresee thy expertise being needed to apprehend this Hafflow."

Then Luna's eyes turned to Prey. He felt their heavy weight bearing down on him, even if he was staring at the ground, "Worry not, Sargent Gloom. Young Prey shall be safe in our care. The Night Guard would sorely miss his expertise in the field of paperwork if he were to go with you, I'm told. Mayhaps this shall be a vacation of sorts for all parties concerned. You in visiting abroad, and he in acquiring a role more suited to his age. But fret not, when you return successful, he will be here waiting."

What else was Gloom going to say in response to having his worries answered by his sovereign but; "Yes, Princess."

'-a good point, and it's not like Prey could've come along. Stealthy and speedy flight are the key to success here-'

Prey wasn't nearly as accepting of all this. Except... he had no choice but to accept it. He had no say in the matter. As far as Luna was concerned, he was her property. She probably didn't even see anything wrong with that. When he'd been in prison, she'd pulled him out because he was useful. If he wasn't useful, what further use was he to her? Luna was an immortal alicorn, co-ruler of an entire nation, and until very recently, utterly mad. Who was going to contradict her decisions?

No one, that's who.

'Why does it always go like this? Luna spitting out some ridiculous order and we just have to follow it? Hasn't it gotten old yet? How haven't they learnt yet?' Prey thought, helpless resentment whipping up his mind into a froth. But really? He really wasn't even slightly surprised.

Was it... sad that this was what Prey had come to expect? That this was the norm? He should be angrier about how they were being used, but it was hard when he'd never expected any better.

Luna brought down one shod hoof precisely on the marble floor, and a sharp, almost bell-like *_Tink_* resounded around the empty court hall. It was an overly dramatic gesture, but no less effective in the moment for all that. The sharp peel of sound bounced in their ears and riveted their attention. Luna stood tall:

"We have spoken. The griffins shall not escape justice for their offence. First Hafflow the coward, then the deceiving ambassador. Go forth, tonight you fly under the light of the moon to your task. So we have spoken!"

---One Hour Later---

And thus they were committed to this reckless course of action. Just

like that. Simply because Luna said so. How many better ways could there be to solve this? And yet Luna had eliminated all other better options with her snap decision. Better options which didn't have the possible potential to escalate into war.

Luna was sending an undercover Guard force to infiltrate the Griffins lands with express instructions to kidnap one of their citizens. How else were the Griffins supposed to interpret that? That the Hafflow was guilty of a crime didn't matter, it was a foreign nation exercising laws on their land.

Prey's suggested plan of keeping Lika and Shamrock's spymaster in the dark by sending false reports in code was now null and void, all because Luna did not want to wait. They could've gathered more information first, but no, Luna was sending in her Night Guard essentially blind.

Information was priceless and could save lives, so why wasn't Luna content to wait? Was she that confident in Nighthawk finding one griffin among the thousands in Griffon Stone? Or did she just not care if she had to sacrifice a few lives? To say nothing of the logistics.

Three days hard flight to the border, probably another two beyond, all while remaining undetected and subsisting only off the light supplies they could carry if they wanted to fly at full speed. But if not, the trip would take even longer, increasing the risk once again. What about places to sleep? To shelter against bad weather? Hide during the day?

It wouldn't work. This plan just flat out wouldn't work.

They were going into the capital in the Griffonian Low Kingdom. Someone, anyone of the thousands of residents would see them, without a shadow of a doubt.

Luna's scheme was fundamentally flawed. It would not work, not without magic. And magic was something they sorely lacked.

None of the thestrals ever liked contradicting their beloved Princess, but once they'd left the Night Court and actually had a

chance to think about the logistics of it all with cooler heads, even they had to admit this wouldn't work.

"So we adjust. Change the plan so it will work." Nighthawk ordered simply.

Prey was not going, Luna had said so, but he was still present with the rest of the ISND to give his input. He didn't like this sudden decision in the slightest, but since it was happening and he had no say in the matter, he was going to try his best to give Gloom and Crimson the best chance of success.

"No one's got any idea where Hafflow might be, and a bunch of thestral Warriors asking will be rather suspicious. When you get there, try looking up the address of the PO box which Lika Soil and Shamrock were sending their reports too."

"Excellent point, Prey. While we are gone, it will be your job to post a set of fake reports to the address on the appropriate days. We don't know how long we'll be staked out in Griffonia. Best not to tip Hafflow off."

It was rather quickly decided that despite Luna's instructions, it was simply not feasible to fly all the way to Griffonia. At least, not if they intended to then stay there for any length of time without arousing suspicions.

It would be better to enter via the train lines and simply present their papers so the authorities wouldn't have any cause to suspect them. It would actually faster to go by train, since they could switch trains and travel day and night.

"False papers and names," Prey put in, "You'll need false papers and a reason to be in Griffonia."

Nighthawk considered that and nodded sharply, "Consult Taffy Hopes the moment we're done here. I want travel permits and a believable reason prepared by the time we leave tonight. Get it done."

"If we are not flying in, how about going in under Dusk Pony

amulet disguises?" Starry Wing suggested. He half lifted one wing, "We're... rather conspicuous as Night Guards."

An excellent point. All known thestrals were Night Guards in service to Luna. It would be beyond obvious who they really were.

"Have Taffy prepare the false identification for pegasi, then. We will disembark in groups of two to three to better hide our presence, then regroup later." Nighthawk decided.

"That brings us to the next point, how many ponies are going?" Screech asked looking round.

"I, Crimson, and Gloom are going. Princess Luna has ordered it." Nighthawk stated, brooking no argument. He got none. "Vivid Edge, you will be coming. Screech or Starry Wing, decide between you who will remain to manage the Night Guard in our absence. Three others, Bramble Weft, Umbra, and Nimbus Hoof."

Nighthawk rattled the names off without hesitation, and everyone nodded. Luna had said the size of the task force was up to him, so it was his call. Why was Nighthawk even going, along with two thirds of the rest of the Night Guard command structure? Since when did they suddenly develop spy catching experience? Although thestrals selected their leaders based upon ability, that didn't equate to relevant experience. While Prey did not like him at all, Nighthawk was still a competent leader and warrior. However that didn't mean he was a good infiltrator!

Prey listened to the plans being made, pulling on his ribbon in helpless frustration that it had to be this way. While they may be coming up with a way to make it less insane than Luna's original ill conceived scheme, that only made it *slightly* better.

"We only need to keep up our disguise until we can find and snatch Hafflow. Once we have the traitor, we'll be cutting loose and flying out across the border under the cover of night."

"There'll be no connection to the Night Guard and Princess Luna, and the pegasi who were visiting."

"We can't go in armour though, and only lightly armed. We want to just be average travellers. Although, maybe we could put one 'hired guard' in each group. It would look overly paranoid, but it would be a good excuse to have at least a couple of us fully armed and armoured."

"We're lucky the address is in Griffon Stone. The griffin capital is the only griffin city which regularly has any pony diversity, what with business and trading."

"We could take a pony guide with us. Or hire one on arrival. A local perhaps? Obviously only use our false identities, but it might be a great help in dealing with the griffin beurocracy there."

Prey stood there in Nighthawk's cramped office, not as unpleasantly dim as always what with the daylight coming through the one window, and listened to all the plans being made. False papers, pegasi disguises, traveling by train instead, a get out route, multiple emergency message in a bottle spells, and actual rough idea of how to proceed...

'And I won't be there. For once, I won't have to be there. But...'

Gloom wasn't thrilled about splitting up his squad. In fact he was already worried. Not that Prey couldn't take care of himself, but rather that something would go horribly wrong.

'-something always goes wrong. At least Scenic and Lilly wouldn't be here to see it this time-'

But all Gloom could do as the Night Guard command hurriedly put their heads together to plan, was give Prey a helpless look and a shrug, as if to say, 'what can you do?'

Prey couldn't even be angry at Gloom, it was out of the Sargent's control. Still he muttered; "I don't like it."

"We'll be okay Prey." Gloom mouthed back.

Prey didn't believe that. Gloom himself had thought it; 'Something always goes wrong.' For once, Gloom seemed to be the one to read his thoughts instead of the other way around.

"We'll be okay." Gloom repeated in an undertone for Prey to hear, "We'll be fine, I promise."

Crimson stood next to Prey as the discussion continued in Nighthawk's office, all of them tired from the long night but with too much to do before the sun set and they had to be off. There wasn't much either of them could've said, and neither of them were the talkative type either, even if they hadn't been in the middle of a secretive logistics meeting.

Crimson looked down at Prey. Prey looked up at Crimson, and wished he had something to say. Something important. Life doesn't work that way, though.

The moment's there, but you have nothing to fill it with and it slips away, and just becomes another unnoticed moment on the pages.

Those were precisely the sort of moments you regretted not filling the most only later, when it was too late. 'No, I'm being dramatic and silly. It's just a moment, not one of those moments.'

Crimson was leaving with Gloom, but they'd be back in a week and a half, maybe two. It wasn't that long, and they'd be back. It wasn't like Prey didn't have other worries he could be getting on with, like the mimics and securing his secrecy, but they were leaving him behind.

That was a good thing, he wasn't getting dragged into danger for once, but even so... They were leaving him behind.

'Bah. Get over it you crybaby.' Prey berated himself, 'It doesn't mean anything. They'll be back all too soon and it'll be back to work in the ISND as normal, you'll see.'

Prey glanced sideways at Crimson again. The lanky Pegasus had a long strand of black mane hanging out the back of his helmet where it'd escaped his warriors braid.

Prey leaded closer, "Hey..."

Familiar yellow eyes shifted to blink him, and the closest tufted ear cocked in his direction. Prey could've accurately drawn on a blank

page exactly where all of Crimson's little nicks and facial scars resided from memory. Or scrawled. For all his talents, Prey was rather mediocre at sketching.

"...Never mind. See you when you both get back."

---Before---

But before this happened, before all the logistics were sorted out, before they corrected Luna's overly ambitious plan, Luna called them back into the Night Court. Or rather, she called the ISND back.

It was right as they were about to walk out the moon inscribed doors, off to go hastily prepare for their coming departure tonight, Luna called out:

"Sargent Gloom, refrain for a minute."

Gloom immediately turned back around, "Yes Your Majesty?"

Nighthawk and the three Lieutenants, who'd immediately paused on hearing their Princess start to speak, or rather shout, continued on through the silver plated doors and on to their tasks. Luna hadn't said for any of them to wait, so obviously they weren't meant to. And whatever Luna wanted, she got.

Prey looked longingly towards the thick doors as the two Night Guard sentries, now definitely serving overtime, swung them shut. The back of his neck prickling under his wool, Prey turned around next to Crimson and Gloom to see what Luna wanted.

Prey found the alicorn looking right at him. His mouth was dry. He suddenly couldn't remember last swallowing.

---I---

Author's Notes:

Another chapter is here! 😳 Unfortunately, at the time of writing this, it has not been edited. 😬

Therefore, if any of you see any mistakes, (And it's a *long* chapter so there's bound to be ones), please help me by pointing them out so I can fix them.

Much appreciated. 👍

72.5 Ours is Not to Question Why

Luna had raised a half moon tonight. Its shadowed face hung in the clear night sky. The lack of cloud cover meant it was going to be the first properly chill night of Autumn. And not just cool, but actually chill. Change had truly come and was now well set in.

But for now, the moon's pale light was unneeded, as it fell upon the well lit bubble of Canterlot's train station.

A group of four grey, drab looking, and strangely uniformly yellow eyed pegasi had already boarded the overnight carriage. There was a second matching group, who were also stood on the platform, waiting. There was yet still five more minutes before the train would depart. Down at the other end of this platform, overnight porters hastily loading a last trolley of cases and boxes was proof of that.

This second group of yellow eyed pegasi had also not given over their luggage to the porters. They'd firmly insisted on carrying it themselves, same as the first group, although there wasn't much of it to give even if they had.

Nondescript saddlebags, well worn and used travel cloaks, and little else. Their gear had specifically been chosen that way so as to not stand out. Also, all were armed although it wasn't obvious at first glance. Or even second glance, which was sort of the point.

A griffin claw boot packed away, a long hoof knife strapped under a cloak, a wingblade wrapped up and stowed in a saddlebag, all were the smaller sort of weaponry which could be reasonably concealed.

This second group still on the platform was made up of Gloom, Lieutenant Vivid Edge, and a thestral by the name of Bramble Weft, all wearing a dusk pony amulet. Crimson was the fourth member, but he obviously didn't have the need for an amulet.

Lieutenant Vivid Edge, code name Poppy Seed for this trip, was quietly checking with Bramble Weft about the 'clan wine' they each carried. Everyone in both groups who had needed it had already 'topped up' earlier this evening. Bramble Weft, or Cumulus Breeze for now, was replying to his undercover superior in an undertone. Both kept their eyes, or *eye* in Vivid's case, roving around the train station.

Gloom and Crimson were standing off to the side, next to one of the wooden pillars supporting the platform shelter. Every second support pillar had a lantern shining down from it.

This was one of the odd numbered pillars, without a lantern, and so had a moderate amount of more shadow.

At this pillar's base, Crimson, Gloom, and Prey were having one last discussion before the two ponies boarded the train and left on Luna's mission. Then they would have another two days of switching trains and boredom ahead of them before hopefully arriving in Griffin Stone.

"They'll be done loading in a few minutes looks like." Prey said, looking towards the porters still loading the baggage.

"About time for us to leave, then." Crimson commented, stating the obvious.

Gloom scratched at the long scarf draped down his chest, "So it seems. Your false papers safe?"

Crimson nodded wordlessly, touching a wing tip to a side pocket on his worn but deceptively sturdy saddlebags.

No silly jokes or requests to send a postcard were voiced. The atmosphere wasn't appropriate. It was unnecessarily tense. There was no reason it should be, Gloom and Crimson were not going off to war. They'd be back in a week and a half. Hopefully.

"Keep looking at that list Prey. See if you can identify any more potential spies for us to check when we return. You're good at that." Gloom said. He spoke of work, not addressing the undercurrent

they all felt.

Nothing should go wrong, not after investing in a real plan and back up plan rather than Luna's. They weren't heading into the wilds, but a national city. They weren't being sent off to investigate mysterious disappearances on the border to the wilds, but something far more urban and known, capturing a griffin. Plus, they had skilled Night Guards with them this time, Captain Nighthawk even. Nothing should go wrong. There was no *reason* for anything to go wrong. This time would be different.

'But expect the worst, and then you'll be halfway there.' Prey thought.

Everything always turned out so much worse than you thought it would be. Captain Valour and the Solar Guard had been worse than he'd predicted. So had the simple disturbance call out which had resulted in the cellar filled with rats and rotting bodies. Then after tracking down Oyster Pinion, which should've been simple, the pegasus had been shot through the window while they were in the very same room.

Searching the Lumber Yard had resulted in it going up in flames, Prey being forced to endure the agony of absorbing Garrow's mind, and then nearly falling to his fiery death anyways.

The simple matter of rooting out the traitors in the Royal Guard had resulted in hostility, dislike, and a retaliatory full blown investigation by the Royal Inspectors in return, resulting in the ISND getting saddled with Scenic and Lilly and getting sent out to Mayflower in what was supposed to be a dead two weeks doing nothing. And what had that resulted in?

Kindersnatches, scarecrows, Mama'dukes, and a Wolfing Wood.

And then, when Prey had survived and gotten back, what had happened next? Instead of spending the time recuperating, Lord Vanish strolled in and stole Crimson's jade necklace, got it stolen off himself in return, and so blamed Crimson and got him arrested. Then after Prey interfered to clear Crimson's name, those same self righteous thieves came after him next.

He'd lost both veropedes, and just when he thought he'd finally won and trapped the thieves after much sacrifice, it had gone wrong and they'd pulled out Selenia's pincushion out of nowhere and the end result was that he'd technically died.

So Prey was justifiably leery about this mission being anything but another hidden disaster packaged in a can. Always expect the worst, and you'll be at least half prepared for what actually happens.

And now Gloom and Crimson were about to depart on the train. How could Prey not have traitorous thoughts of worry that this might be their last time ever speaking?

'No, it won't be. Crimson will come back. He's got the electrite feather on him too, so if anything happens, I'll know.' Prey told himself, scuffing his hoof over the hard, slightly dusty concrete of the platform.

Concrete, Prey distractedly decided, felt weird when it got cold, not like normal chill stone at all.

'No, pay attention! They're about to leave.' Prey drew a deep breath of the chilly night air.

"So, I guess I'll see you when I see you. You've got a bunch of those message-in-a-bottles anyway if something big happens."

'-I would go for a hug, but Prey wouldn't-', Gloom thought, rolling his shoulders, "Yes, until then Prey. It won't actually be that long, two weeks at the absolute most."

Prey refrained from pointing out a lot could happen in two days, let alone two weeks. They all already knew that. Crimson shuffled and refolded his wings under the travel cloak, "Please try and look in on Scenic and Lilly at some point while we are gone. They are both still in need of help. And goodbye."

"Yes, bye Prey. See you soon." Gloom echoed, stepping away as the conductor shouted; "*Last Call!*"

"Night watch over you both." Prey said, trying out the thestral farewell as the two of them moved for the train.

Gloom's face showed mildly pleased surprise as he looked back, raising a hoof, "No worries there, Luna is already smiling on this mission."

Prey kept his thoughts to himself about that being *exactly* his worry, and simply settled for raising a hoof in return.

Crimson looked back and gave him one final solemn nod as he stepped aboard the train.

Barely ten seconds later, the whistle blew, and with a huge hiss and chuff of steam, the train began pulling out of the station, gathering momentum into the night. On board the warm train, Prey imagined Gloom and Crimson would be pushing through the isles to their seats, the train brightly lit against the blackness of the windows, ponies trying to find the least uncomfortable position to doze the night away in against the constant rocking and *clack-ca-clack* of the tracks.

Prey remained standing in his half shadowed spot, watching the last carriages rear lantern until it was lost in the dark, descending around the curve of Mount Canter.

Prey turned and started walking off, avoiding the well illuminated middle path of the platform without even needing to think about it. He was expected back at the Palace to continue with what ISND work he could get on with, meaning for now, stacks and stacks of paperwork, filing, report sorting, and submitting written requests to the records department to pull further files. Technically, he was on duty right now, but Screech had been keen for him to go see Gloom and Crimson off.

It wasn't like the now in command Lieutenant had left a child to walk back through Canterlot in the middle of the night either, even though it was only Canterlot.

They were hard to spot, but two Night Guards had accompanied the disguised thestrals to the station at a distance. To anyone who noticed the pair enough to observe them, it would just seem like they were on a night patrol. Perfectly reasonable for 'Night' Guards, after all.

The duo patrol would maintain their distance, but they and Prey would be making their way back to the Palace at the same time. There were few ponies in the train station at this time, but there would always be a number of late night travellers, either leaving, arriving, picking up someone, or simply working at the station.

Prey weaved behind the periodically set metal benches on which some of these ponies sat resting, warm coats bundled on against the nights chill and saddlebags propped at their hooves.

Passing behind one such bench to avoid the notice of the pony sitting upon it, Prey halted for a minute. He sat down on the cold concrete, dipping his head to pull off his ribbon and began retying it on securely.

"Enjoyed your evening with your coltfriend?" Prey murmured, not moving his lips.

"I did Prey, thank you. Or I believe I did. Randy was happy at dinner, so I think I am happy." The yellow unicorn mare leaning back on the bench replied, her eyes closed. Or seemingly closed. Illusions were purposefully misleading like that.

"Silence bubble?" Prey asked, making a show of slowly looping the ribbon behind his ear for anyone who might've been watching.

An unpleasant, sharp tingle stung Prey's hooves. "It is now in effect." Lemon answered, to all outside observers asleep.

An illusionary disguise plus a simultaneous silence bubble. Lemon Pink couldn't keep up both spells without effort for long, but this wouldn't take long. Two minutes at most.

"Let's not waste time. Crimson is gone for now, Gloom too. I'll be able to get off work earlier each morning, meaning a few extra hours each day for real work. The mimics must be prepared for."

"Yes, Prey. How shall we proceed?" Lemon asked.

Prey still didn't have any real information on what the mimics were, their goals, numbers, organisation, motives, or plans. All he knew was that they knew about his secret lair, and had attempted to

breach it. All evidence pointed to it being an opportunistic attempt, and not a full-on assault. After all, they'd given up after the death of only one mimic to his rune flare traps.

'Probably cautiously trying to check if the bomb those thieves set off had destroyed my defences, and if they could now get in.'

Not cautious enough, obviously. It had still cost at least one mimic its life. The mimics were Prey's most immediate and pressing concern, but that unfortunately did not mean he didn't have the host of other ongoing concerns hanging on his neck like a millstone.

Staying undetected, cementing his wickerwatch hold on the sewer tunnel network, building up more runic defences on his lair, (like that very important memory based one), rebuilding the scoured lair itself, working on The List, and finally figuring out how to slip out of these accursed gold tracer bands. He still didn't feel he was getting anywhere closer with that. After witnessing Luna's display of alicorn magic first hoof raising the moon, he had a terrible feeling in his gut that the gold tracer bands were made from the same magic. He tried not to think too hard about what he had wrapped around his forelegs if he could at all help it.

So in essence, his worries were the same old, same old.

Prey had given much long, drawn out, and often unhappy thought as to what to do about it all. His own safety was paramount to everything else. That meant defences, proper runic defences. Next, came replacing the veropedes. Weapons.

The veropedes had been his field leveller against mages and numbers, performing way beyond what he had ever expected. If the thieves hadn't just so happened to have Selenia's weird pincushion, (which had been utterly inert ever since), to take him hostage with, then all the runes he'd poured into his veropede plus the element of surprise would've probably been enough to kill all the unicorn thieves.

So he needed a weapon, or weapons. But unfortunately, to Prey's bitter disappointment, there were no more veropede eggs. Lemon was watching the underground market, but that first time had been

a total fluke. The unicorn gardener had thought the two eggs were plant bulbs. If he'd truly known the monsters sleeping dormant within, he probably would've turned them over to the Guard himself. The underground pony market was 'tame' like that.

What Prey had in mind was not 'tame'. It was dark, specifically dark magic. And this particular branch of the foul craft had some of the worst stigma and fear attached to it. And not without good reason.

Prey took a deep breath, but he wasn't about to back out of doing this, "The morgue. I need bodies. Only a few, any will do, even if they're a bit old. But for the rituals..."

"Yes, Prey. How many and when?"

"However many I can safely get away with. But only dead bodies destined for cremation, and only those who don't have any family coming to attend and can be safely erased from the morgue workers memories. Most likely they'll all be elderly ponies who died in care homes of natural causes. I *hope* they're all only elderly ponies."

Prey hated ponies for their endless wealth and privilege, unicorns especially so. However, although he was no stranger to desecrating the dead, he didn't wish random civilians would drop dead just so he could have their corpse, whose only wrong doings were limited to the usual pony racist supremacy. Or at least, he kept those wishes carefully contained. Those had been the Resistance's wishes. And he didn't want to be Prey, the last Resistance member any more. So he continued:

"The actual acquisition and transport shouldn't be difficult. It'll take a week to set up. A daily visit to read their memories and find bodies which won't be missed. We'll mind control them to change the paperwork so the chosen deceased are cremated last thing in the day. We'll leave a mental compulsion for them to open the back door and let us take the bodies away. Wipe their memories, implant false ones, leave a urn of wood ash behind each time, no one will be any the wiser."

And yes, Prey really did have reason to believe it would be *that* simple.

"I'll refine the plan later when we have the morgue's actual schedule, but that'll be our approach." Prey added. He'd finished retying his ribbon, so their time was up. He stood:

"Meeting point D tomorrow morning, so we can make a start. See you there."

"Yes, Prey. I will be there."

Prey hesitated for a brief half-second, but he'd already made the decision inside, "Also, targets four and seven on The List. It's time to finally do this. I want to deal with them both before Gloom and Crimson's return. Possibly even on the same night."

Prey heard Lemon's last words just before he stepped past the intangible confines of the silence bubble, "Yes, Prey. Our revenge will be had."

It was quiet, very quiet in the ISND's office. The half stacked wooden shelves pushed against the walls and the three alcoves seemed to reflect every tiny noise Prey made back at him. The scratch of the quill on yet another form, the ruffle of pages as he moved it to the complete pile and pulled over the next one, even the occasional flicker of the candle seemed to make its own noise.

It was quiet in the ISND's office, and very empty.

Prey sat on the rickety stool at the desk, (Gloom's chair was too low for him), in the middle of the empty office and filled in forms and paperwork long into the night. He periodically rubbed at his eyes. Yellow candle light reflected off old, polished wood. He finished writing the summary on an old, closed case for periodic review, and started the next one.

His stool creaked as he shifted. There was very little else of note. The hours of the night passed as Prey completed his assigned work. Alone.

Prey was used to being alone, very used to it. He'd spent fifty-seven years in a cell in Dreverton being just that; alone. He was used to it.

And Prey could appreciate the peace and quiet. He had two weeks of normal, boring work during which he could get his own projects done, and then Gloom and Crimson would be back. This was actually a great opportunity. Most of the Night Guard command were gone, so there were even less people to keep an eye on him. Plus, conveniently, because they were thestrals and he was Prey, no one felt the constant need to keep track of him like a normal pony adult would've been compelled to do.

As long as he came and went each day to the Palace and showed willing to 'do his duty and serve Luna', no one seemed to think there was anything wrong with leaving a child unattended.

Which sort of made sense, since it would've been silly for them to only start caring now.

Yes, this was an opportunity. He was used to being alone. This was good even.

Still... He was alone now, for the first time in what felt like a long time. It wasn't that long in reality, but *how* you experience time relates to what you *did* during that time. And now he was alone for nearly two weeks.

Prey kept working through the night shift, and just before morning came, was the first in the mess hall for breakfast. Free food is free food after all. He fended off Cookie with a smile, distracting her from the reasoning he was eating alone, and once finished walked out of the Guard Entrance.

The sun was rising of Canterlot's golden spires, making them glitter almost blindingly. Prey squinted, a hoof shading his eyes. The chill of the night was already fading to merely brisk morning air. Prey had his wool, so he'd be fine up until winter arrived proper.

Prey sighed and clonked himself lightly on the head with a hoof, 'What am I, an abandoned dog pining for its master? It's been one night, one. When did I get so weak?'

He wrapped up the feeling and shoved it away, and started trotting towards Meeting point D, an old out-of-use lamppost in Lower

Canterlot and overgrown with ivy. It was out of the way, unobserved, and few people walked the back alley paths required if you wanted to get there. Few people aside from Lemon and Prey that is, and Prey did know the way. Done with his Night Guard work, now his *real* work for the day could start.

A white runt lamb wound off into the early morning streets and was swiftly lost from the view of the yawning Guards on the gate.

---Before---

Luna had wanted to speak. Before, back at the Palace. And what an alicorn wanted, an alicorn got. And so at her word, the ISND had remained behind in the night court.

Prey had to force himself not to hold his breath as the moon inscribed double doors of the court had swung shut behind them, leaving the three of them alone in the room with Luna. She was looking at them, her face and posture a closed mystery. Prey's mouth was dry.

The dim hall of the night court felt so empty, and yet also not big enough to Prey.

"Yes Princess?" Gloom had asked, standing straight.

Luna's mane drifted across one eye. The other didn't even flicker from its piercing gaze resting on the three of them, "Sargent Gloom, thy command has served us well yet again. We have not forgotten thy previous services neither. Once again, thy prove thy great worth to our nation."

"Thank you, Princess Luna. It's our duty." Gloom replied, the correct and formal answer. Prey kept his mouth firmly shut.

Gloom had given the correct answer, but this time for some unfathomable reason, Luna did not just accept it as her due. Her dark mane continued to drift and billow across her face, occasionally covering her indigo eye, occasionally not. But her visage did not change either way. She seemed to ponder Gloom's words for a long, long moment.

"Aye. Duty. Tis' always been so that those who uphold theirs must pay the price for the rest." For once, Luna had not almost shout, leading Prey to believe it was her version of speaking to herself.

Not being able to hear the alicorn's thoughts, Prey had no idea if he was right or not, or where this conversation was going. 'But it's going to be bad isn't it? Of course it is, it's always bad.'

Luna's volume returned to normal, "Sacrifice need not always be the prize for diligence though. We had wished to hold thy medal ceremony before this mess with the traitorous griffins, but now it must needs wait we see. Ti's a shame, but needs must, and duty first. Our Sister and Captain Shining Armour-Nay, it matters not now. Sufficed to say, thy just rewards and acclaim have not and will not be forgotten in shadows, merely delayed. It shall be held when thou return successful once more."

Prey didn't want a stupid medal, and he knew for a fact that neither did Gloom or Crimson. A medal for what? Surviving when so many others hadn't? But you don't say no to an alicorn, especially when they think they're doing you a favour.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Luna continued staring at the three of them. It felt like she was staring down into their bones. Finally, after what felt like far too long to be natural to Prey, she blinked. "Yes indeed. Thou have all come far since first we gave thee this chance, but do not rest on thy laurels. Thou art clay and we the potter, and we have not finished shaping you all yet. Prey and Crimson, by our grace we gave thee a second chance. Well done."

What did you say to that? What were they supposed to say to that? What could any of them say? It hadn't even been a question.

Then, almost as an after thought, "Thou shalt succeed in thy mission, Sargent Gloom and Private Crimson. We have confidence in our Night Guard."

'Our' Night Guard. Hers, possessive.

"And Prey."

Prey'd had to stop himself from flinching at that, "Yes? Your Majesty?"

"At thy last review, we told thee plainly of thy need to improve. It pleases us to see that thou understood our sage words and have followed them, for this time we art reasonably pleased with thy progress. Continue to do so."

Luna was appointing herself as the judge of him? After everything, after this latest madness of throwing Crimson and the rest of the Night Guard command at Griffonia in a harebrained scheme? That she somehow had the right and was also somehow qualified to after conscripting him against his will?

Prey smothered his anger, twisting the noose on it until it stopped struggling. Luna was an alicorn. The strong take, and the weak give. So he'd bowed his head, ribbon brushing against the side of his face as he looked at nothing but the marble floor, "I understand."

Was he supposed to be proud or grateful that he'd somehow satisfied her? Worse, it was actually a weight off his shoulders, even if he hadn't known he was going to be judged today. Because Luna was satisfied with his progress into becoming whatever loyal servant it was she'd envisioned, it meant he'd be left alone.

He'd earned himself some breathing room, even if it sat bitter in his stomach.

As they had left the Night Court, the silver double doors closing behind them, the unpleasant thought had wormed it's way into Prey's head and refused to leave, and making tiny uncontrollable tremors run up and down his legs.

'I didn't know I was also on probation from Luna's point of view. What would she have done to me if I hadn't met her standards this time around?'

And what about the next time?

But at least, for now, he was okay. For now. Crimson was about to

leave him behind, but he was still alive. He was okay. 'Live to escape another day.'

You never knew how much time was left in your hourglass, after all.

---Now---

"Raven magpie, fly away, Scarecrow, keep at bay~", Prey hummed under his breath, reaching over to adjust the crystal lantern's white light. He'd been absently repeating the silly children's rhyme for the past hour now, and it seemed like he was going to go on repeating it, because he was no closer to discovering anything further about the subject of his intent focus.

Lying on top of the makeshift crate table set on his lair's new gravel flooring, Selenia's pincushion rested in the bright lantern light.

All three pins were pushed into the raggedy cloth ball up to their heads. Prey didn't know how you were supposed to go about charging them up to remove them again. And no, simply pulling them out hadn't worked.

Yes, Prey was sitting amongst the gravel of his scoured lair, the same one the mimics he was preparing lethal defences against had tried to break into. 'Tried' being the key word. Above his head somewhere in the city, Lemon Pink was scouting out the city morgue, since he didn't need her right now. Then she'd go check the wickerwatch still hidden down in the Sewer's Heart. Prey's current work didn't require two people to carry out, and safety wise, the mimics couldn't get in here, despite their trying.

Trying and failing. Even the thieves had fallen back on simply trying to destroy his lair, unable to actually capture it.

The mimics, whoever they were, might attack at any moment while he was right here, but because of all the runes he'd prepared, this was actually the safest place in the whole of Canterlot. His flat, with all its own runes, came in second.

That said, it still made Prey's wool crawl to turn his back on the far

tunnel, despite that tunnel also still being blocked by fallen chunks of stone. Hence the humming. He'd heard it was a good way to distract oneself, so he was attempting to fill the silence of the cavern with the nursery rhyme from his childhood. To be honest, it wasn't really working.

"Wheat n' barley dance and sway, Harvest king, come to play~",
The pincushion was a source of frustration to Prey. He knew how incredibly dangerously powerful it was, and that it had belonged to the Great White Witch, Selenia, but that was about it.

This was not the first study session Prey had devoted to trying to learn even a sliver about the pincushion, and unfortunately, it certainly would not be the last session either.

Still, Prey didn't let himself become discouraged. He hadn't held out much hope of making a break through today anyways. The pincushion was an innocuous little thing, lying there on his hastily knocked together crate table. Visually, just a cloth rag ball and some old pins. Without being charged up, it wasn't even really dangerous.

Prey was treating it as he would a live Bone Rot mine. It was *not* innocent, it was *not* safe, and it was *not* harmless. At the moment the dark magical artifact may be inert, but he would never forget it was still a dark magic artifact.

Prey knew he should feel more threatened by what was lying before him. He'd seen what it could do, he'd *been* the victim. But now it was just utterly inert.

"Straw the barn n' reap the hay, Sickle slice, fell and dice~", Prey hummed tunelessly, slowly pushing the pincushion through another simple runic array. He was using a stick, because caution never hurt, despite knowing if something went wrong the magical consequences would probably reach a lot further than just a stick.

Then again, poking something with a stick instead of using his hoof like a moron had saved his life many times in the Deeper Green. It sounded funny, but it really wasn't when a Spitting Nessian shot out of the undergrowth and bit the stick instead of leaving you

screaming in agony for five hours before you finally died of catastrophic organ failure. Then it wasn't funny at all.

Nothing happened to the pincushion, and the feedback from the scan revealed nothing either. 'Okay, I can cross that test off the list. Next one.'

Prey used his trusty stick to position Selenia's pincushion over another basic array. "For winter's bite comes cold as fright, Hungry wolves, in the night~"

Nothing happened again, which was the norm by now. The runic array would only provide a result if there was a dead match on the correct type and attribute of magic it was attuned to. It might not respond at all even if it was normal attuned since it was inert. Having nothing to go on, Prey was essentially relegated to going down the list of tests one at a time and seeing what, if anything, worked.

'Another non-result and another test off the list. Next one.'

"For farmer knows to plant and grow, Fallow fields, barren rows~" Prey sat back on his haunches for a moment on a plank on the gravel, critically examining the pincushion yet again, propping his chin on a hoof. He was using scavenged planks and crate tops as walkways across the shifting gravel covering the cavern.

"Summer passes at its height, Reaper king, laughs delight~", While you *could* walk in the gravel if you really wanted to, you couldn't however tell if there was a hidden pocket or dip beneath it. That was an excellent way to break a leg. And Prey was keeping well away from the sinkhole in the middle of his lair. He didn't like looking down into the black depths of the sinkhole. You never knew what might be down there.

Prey finished humming the last line of the nursery rhyme in this rotation, making it the twenty third time, "Raven magpie, fly away, Scarecrow, keep at bay~"

Selenia's still pincushion sat there on the crate top. But Prey couldn't help the illogical feeling that the little rag bundle was

staring at him. Prey didn't feel as leery of that sensation as he should've been.

That in and of itself worried him, and yet it also didn't, but it honestly should. He knew that. But internally, he was already viewing the pincushion as his property.

If that wasn't a sign of dark magic, even if his scans hadn't picked anything up, then Prey didn't know what was.

He'd seen, he'd experienced the danger the pincushion represented. So why then did the Selenia's pincushion feel so... familiar?

'Because it's subtly affecting your unconscious mind, that's why.' Prey bluntly told himself.

This thing was dangerous. Very dangerous. It was subtly affecting him, a mind leech, without him being able to spot the intrusion despite knowing it was happening.

'But I can't just get rid of it.' Someone else might find it if he did. And Prey didn't know if it was even possible to destroy it.

Dark artifacts had a way of reforming or finding their way into others' hooves. Somehow, someway, such otherwise inanimate objects possessed a will. They *wanted* to be used. That was how Prey had lost the Lich's mirror. He'd thought he'd found it, and it wasn't until later that he'd figured out it had found him. And then later when he lost the mirror, it was really because it had wanted to lose him.

Prey briskly shook his head, chasing away the old, habitual shiver. He shouldn't be thinking about such things while sitting alone, with only a lantern for light here under the mountain. He knew better than this.

He was safe here in his protected lair, but how 'safe' was safe really?

'No need to risk it more than strictly necessary.'

Prey started up humming for a twenty-fourth rendition, and picked up his useful pokey stick, "Wheat n' barley dance and sway, Harvest

king, come to play~"

Gloom had asked Prey to visit Lilly and Scenic, to check up on them. Not something Prey wanted to have to do, but would probably have to muster the effort to try at least once just to say he had by the time the Night Guard returned. *When*. Not *if* they returned, but *when*. It would be a *when*.

Nothing was going to go wrong.

But the point was, Prey had been going to plan in a visit to go see them to fulfil his obligations. He was not expecting to have either of them come to visit him at his flat instead. Least of all Lilly Blossom.

But twenty-five minutes before Prey had to leave to arrive at the Palace on time, he found himself instead looking up at Lilly from his own doorstep. Saffron was accompanying her again. Both wore what amounted to civilian disguises. Meaning hats, long sleeved coats, large sunglasses, and loose scarfs. And in Lilly's case, a gauze veil too.

Saffron pulled off the outfit like, well, a model. Lilly decidedly less so. Saffron really was taking her self imposed duty of facilitating Lilly's recovery seriously.

Both parties stood examining the other across the portal of the open door frame in silence.

Behind the two mares, the framed sun sent late evening light streaming in over the balcony, and street sounds drifted up from the ground.

'You know what Gloom?' Prey thought to his absent thestral Sargent, 'I may have to deal with this, but I won't have to deal with it for long.'

"I need to leave for work in ten minutes." Prey said, laying his groundwork right from the get go.

"Oh. You're a worker at the Palace with Gloom and Crimson, unless

I've got that wrong?" Saffron asked, glancing quickly back at the late evening sun, which would soon be on its way to setting.

Prey heard her pained sounding thoughts; '-foals aren't supposed to be workers, or work night shifts. But foals aren't supposed to be Guards either-'

"That's right, I've got work." Prey stated, smiling pleasantly.

It was none of Saffron's damned business, but evidently someone had finally gotten around to explaining to her what Prey actually did. Or at least some of the basic details anyways. And surprise, surprise, she was disturbed by this. If Prey were just a normal foal he would've missed her upset, because Saffron was a model, who made a career out of acting her part. Her mask was good, especially for a pony, but Prey's was better.

He didn't care in the slightest about her discomfort though, and just kept smiling pleasantly.

Saffron tried to match his smile with a warm one of her own, "Ah, you're a... Night Guard, or something, is that right Prey?"

"Yep. That's what I was doing in the Palace the first time we met. You know, when you were sitting on that bench." Prey replied.

'Contemplating suicide.' He silently added in his head.

The cheap shot hit Saffron like a kick to the gut because she hadn't been on guard, and it was doubly effective because she didn't know Prey was doing it on purpose. Her ears trembled for just the briefest moment before she mastered her mask again. If you weren't looking, you wouldn't have caught it. Lilly certainly didn't catch her friends brief flash of pain:

"That's right Prey, we got to sit and share the sunshine together. It was quite lovely. It would be nice to do it again sometime soon."

'-that was a bad time, I'm still so ashamed of myself. But Prey didn't mean anything by it-'

"Hmm, doubtful. But I've got to go soon. What brings you here?"

Prey asked the both of them although he was looking solely at Lilly Blossom. It couldn't have been easy for her to climb the two flights of stairs necessary to get to Prey's flat with her meldwood leg. What did she want?

'I'd thought she'd still be seething and wallowing in anger and self pity respectively after our last little 'chat'. What's gotten her to pull herself together so early? I was expecting at least another fortnight of that first.'

Yet here Lilly stood. All dressed up to hide her shame, but still she stood in the late sunlight.

Lilly reached up with her good hoof, awkwardly balancing on her meld wood leg, and clumsily pulled off the hat and veil without the use of magic. Her disfigured face, with the meld wood root growing out of her face and up to wrap around her horn, clearly revealed to Prey.

He looked steadily back up into her face, easily seeing the brittle courage and suppressed anger there; "Hello Lilly Blossom. I can't say I was expecting a visit, but what can I do for you?"

"I needed to speak with you." Lilly's words came out in a suppressed rush. Prey could easily tell she was trying to control her breathing.

"We're speaking right now."

Lilly inhaled sharply, jaw tense, "I came because I had to. Both because the doctor said to, and because it was the right thing to do."

Prey raised one woolly eyebrow, "Yes?"

Her nostrils flared, "I came because I needed to say..."

'-Celestia, this is all so bucked up, I hate this. Gotta' do it, gotta' do it, can't keep hiding forever. It's all horseapples, but I'm going to survive and stick it to them!-'

"...To say...Ttttthank you. I'm alive. So thanks. I didn't say that yet. I could be dead. But I'm alive. I don't, it's not, not always but-rrrr,

just thank you. That's it."

The 'Them' in Lilly's thoughts just now being her family, Prey was pretty sure. Well if they were going to abandon her, then they weren't qualified for the title in the first place. Not that Prey actually cared, but he supposed he was going to have to pretend to care.

"And because I needed to ask you...Ask you..." Lilly clammed up for a moment. Saffron made an encouraging noise next to her.

"Yessss? Ask me what?" Prey drawled.

Lilly inhaled sharply again, the meld wood root growing up over the corner of her eye making it look like she was glaring, even if Prey knew in this instance it was unintentional, "To ask you why? And how?"

Saffron leaned over and rubbed shoulder's with Lilly, "Perhaps you should elaborate on what you're asking a bit Lilly?" She murmured.

Lily exhaled, "Yeah. Yeah I should. What I'm asking is, why'd you say what you did? Why'd you make me angry and tell me to be angry? No pony else has."

'-everypony else is saying it's okay, stay strong, it'll get better, I believe in you, don't give up instead. Don't those idiots know it's not okay?-'

"Well I'm not every*pony* else am I? I'm a sheep. You'd be surprised how often you get non-pony ideas from nonponies. And you already know why I told you to get angry, right?" Prey shrugged lightly, "It's what you needed. Tell me being angry and functioning isn't better than being depressed and listless, I dare you."

Lilly couldn't deny that, '-it does feel better, damn him. I know who's fault all of this is now, and it's not mine-', She shifted, raising her chin.

"So what? I can be angry if I want to. They should've helped me, and those buckers abandoned me instead. I got into the Guard by myself, even after they told me to give up trying. They never

believed in me." Lilly said, while also internally justifying her anger to herself for what was no doubt the hundredth time.

She fully believed her own justifications too, Prey could see. Even if that belief was often weak and rusted. But as long she remind herself every now and then, she could continue to believe it.

Prey smiled politely again, and bobbed his head in a nod, "As you say, Lilly."

Saffron herself was saddened by what she was hearing, but this wasn't about her so she was staying quiet, '-mother always used to lecture anger only leads to hurting yourself, but this is Lilly's decision, so I'll support her-'

"Yeah. I do say so." Lilly asserted. In truth though, there were easily visible cracks of uncertainty in her mask of bravado. Was the uncertainty only because it was Prey who'd spoken? Would she second guess everything that was said by him from now on?

'So she's still unsure how to act around me and trying to settle on one feeling. Understandable. I've completely shattered her world view multiple times now.' Prey thought.

"And the how?" Lilly asked, "I still want to know how."

Prey made a show of huffing, wishing she'd just get on with it, "How *what*? You're going to have to be more specific. Use your words."

Lilly gestured around sharply, long sleeved coat flapping on her good leg as she waved it around at everything, "This. That. Everything. I mean, how? You just go through the day, like nothing happened. Or like it did happen, but you don't care. How do you do that? How can I do that? Back at, at Mayflower, and all that stuff, how can I do all that too?"

Prey's eyes didn't shift over to Saffron, but he was aware of the heart faced model holding her breath, anxiously waiting to hear what he answered Lilly:

'-nopony will tell me what happened at this Mayflower. Just what I

already know, but Celestia, if that's what happened to poor Lilly...-'

Prey thoughtfully stroked the cool silken length of his ribbon, "I've got some bad news I'm afraid. It's not going to get any easier."

"But it's *got* to get easier. This feeling can't keep going forever."

"I didn't say your anger wouldn't end. I meant the weight on your shoulders won't ever go away. Some days you'll feel strong enough to carry it. Others you won't, but that yoke is now permanently on your shoulders from here on out. What do you think Gloom, Crimson, and Scenic deal with every day too? It's the exact same for them. Get used to it."

"That!" Lilly jabbed her hoof, "I want to be able to do that. To just say, 'get over it' and mean it. How do I do that?" She demanded.

Prey blinked, 'Hasn't it occurred to her that I could just be saying that to get her to shut up and go away? Is she really taking everything at face value? What an idiot.'

"I'm not some fortune cookie. I don't have one liner's filled with mystic wisdom," Prey snapped, "How about you try figuring out your own method for coping? Since you've already worked past first your self-loathing and despair in hospital, then your apathy once you were out, you're perfectly capable of figuring out how to handle your anger yourself."

Lilly Blossom stared at him. Her jaw flapped, "I... what was that?"

Prey repeated himself, "I said, you can figure out how to handle your anger yourself. It's not my job to solve for you."

Lilly looked stunned, "What? You're saying, you're saying I'm capable of doing it myself?"

"*Yes*. That's exactly what I've saying." But from her tone, Prey got the feeling she was missing what he was saying here. Seems Lilly was still as blindly oblivious as she'd been on their very first day. He didn't like the intent way Lilly was looking at him, either.

'Kindly take the hint and get lost, and take your failed unicorn

partner duo with you.'

"So..." Lilly began, "If it was you, in my place I mean Prey, you'd do it all yourself?"

What a stupid thing to ask. Was she even thinking before she spoke?

"First, I'm not you. Second, if I was, who else would solve my problems for me if not me? Literally, *who else* is going to fix my mind for me? No one, that's who. You can have a thousand supportive people lining up to help you every single day, but unless you want to live, there's nothing they can do to fix you. Literally nothing."

Not technically true. Prey was a mind leech. He was well versed in how easy it would be to 'fix' Lilly's mind if he wanted to, all for the light cost of the sanctity of her mind and free will.

Lilly's face, behind the meldwood roots disfiguring it, went blank as if she was experiencing an epiphany, "Yeah... Yeah. Yeah I can do it myself. Yeah! I mean, you're just a little foal, aren't you right?"

Prey and Saffron both gave Lilly a look, him out of flat disbelief and her out of concern.

"I'm assuming you're not seriously asking me that question when I'm standing right in front of you."

Lilly waved his words away, getting more excited, "You're just a foal, and yet you did Mayflower and fought the warlock just fine. If a foal can do it, then so can I!"

Saffron looked rapidly back and forth between Prey and Lilly in alarm, heavy gold curls bouncing, '-warlock? A warlock?-'

Lilly was still going on excitedly, oblivious to Saffron's very justifiable concern; "I mean, buck it, Prey. You've got it all sorted out, you didn't break, you're still standing there what with a girly ribbon and everything ready to take on the world again. You're a foal and you managed all that, so I can definitely copy you. Yeah, I can do this, I can totally do this!"

Saffron looked like she was making an effort to put aside the 'warlock' word for now in favour of weakly smiling at what she was hearing; '-seems all she needed was some encouragement from Prey, just like I once did. Oh I do hope this motivation sticks with her and she doesn't slip back-'

'Seriously? That's all it took? No way, she's definitely going to relapse before the end of the day.' Prey thought, rather uncomfortable and nonplussed by Lilly's strange bout of fixation on his words. He decided to try moving this unfortunate meeting on his doorstep along:

"I'm glad to hear you're suddenly so... 'certain'. Really. However I need to leave in a minute, so if you could just-"

Lilly interrupted him, not seeming to have heard, "Do you think I should try starting back up as a Guard? I mean, I'm gonna' have to return at some point, I'm not letting anypony tell me I can't, because that's what you and Crimson would do. And you're all bat ponies in the Night Guard anyways, they won't care if they've got another freak working with them like me."

Lilly's tried for a smile at the forced self-depreciating humour around the root growing out of her face. The smile attempted to be brave, but was still uncertain and bitter around the edges. Saffron winced when Lilly said 'freak', but Lilly mumbled a quick apology and hurriedly went on:

"But should I, like, restart straight away? Or wait? Captain Nighthawk said he'd definitely have a place for me in the Night Guard if I wanted to re-join. Should I Prey?" Lilly asked, shuffling a step closer. Prey stepped back to maintain the same safe distance.

Prey let the annoyance go, or tried to, "You obviously haven't heard then. Nighthawk is out of Canterlot until the end of next week probably. So you're going to need to wait until he gets back." He informed them both.

"Aw, okay. If you think I should wait then I probably should. Plus I might need to, er, get back into shape. If I can."

"Good idea." Prey said neutrally.

"And, uh, maybe you could give me some pointers about being a good Guard? Not fighting stuff, because, because...Yeah." Lilly grimaced at her meld wood leg, where it stood hidden beneath her coat sleeve, "But like other important stuff instead, like all that tracking stuff you knew and how to react to threats. If I knew how to do *that* stuff-"

And Prey's patience for this had officially run out.

"Alright, ten minutes are up. I've got to go and get ready before I leave, so have a goodnight and all that. I'm already going to be a bit late as it is." Prey lied, making a shooing motion with his hoof and going to close the door.

Lilly jerked, blinking as she returned from her imagination to reality, "Ah, wait. What about Crimson? Where's he? I haven't seen him yet." She asked, peering over Prey's head and up the short corridor.

"You know where Captain Nighthawk went? Well, Crimson and Gloom have both gone along with him." Prey said as he turned to go back to his flat.

"No? Where has the Captain gone?"

"Sorry, can't tell you. Restricted information. You'll just have to wait until they all return." Prey called back.

'-wait, if they went but Prey stayed-Aha! Must be back to their thestral clan-'

"Got it. My lips are sealed, don't worry Prey." Lilly called after him, so much more upbeat than she had been when she arrived.

Prey didn't bother to respond. As he pushed open his flat door he heard Lilly thanking Saffron for bringing her; "Really, thanks. Getting up the stairs... gotta' get down them too I guess. Thanks for coming with me."

"Oh it was nothing." He heard Saffron warmly brushed off.

"Yeah, no. I've seen the schedule your manager guy has you on. It wasn't nothing."

"Thank you, but a few hours really isn't much. I'm truly glad just to help. What are friends for after all?"

Prey firmly shut the flat door behind him and leaned against it, letting out the loud sigh of frustration he'd been holding. He hadn't bothered shutting the front door on Saffron and Lilly, he'd be back out shortly, *once* they'd both left, he'd just give them a few minutes to get out of the apartment building first.

'*Seriously*. They'd better not still be on the doorstep when I go back out, or else.'

They weren't, which was fortunate for them, and Prey managed to get out of the apartment block and through the darkening streets to the Palace without having to catch sight of hide nor hair of the pair. Street by street, the lamps lit up, brightly lighting the way for the hurrying ponies still going about.

Prey paused at the entrance to the Guard Compound, and craned his head back to look up at the Palace.

It rose tier above golden tier. He vaguely wondered again how many millions of bits had gone into the massive, grandeous architecture? How many tonnes of gold, metal, rare woods, gems, resources, and just pure time had been wasted on this seat of pride for Celestia? And how much again had been wasted on Canterlot itself? Just as one example, there was a fountain in the Palace Gardens with a mural laid under the spouting crystal clear water of Celestia's phoenix, the same one which had been briefly stolen, made out of *rubies*.

It was not a small mural either, and while Prey now knew much more about gemstones and knew there was no way those rubies were ignius ones, he also now knew the going rate of a small, twelve karat ruby had a going rate of forty-five, to fifty bits. At a rough guess, that fountain in the Gardens, only one of many such

fountains, was probably made up of six-hundred such rubies.

Maybe rubies cost less back when the fountain was made, easily at least few centuries ago, but even so? And the fountain was just one such example of what he was talking about.

Prey put away all of that pointless consideration and disgust at pony wastage, and walked through the gate. He had to clock on for his shift. He was still getting disbelieving stares from the Guards on duty at the gate every single time, and although they'd obviously heard of a sheep in the Night Guard by this point, Prey didn't suppose their incredulity would ever fade.

'-those bat-buckers had to resort to hiring foals. How can they call themselves Guards?-'

Or, and this was just a wild possibility, maybe their disbelief had some basis on that he was a runt lamb, and wearing a blue ribbon.

'Well Zoma'Grika to them, and a goodnight too.'

Prey passed inside, and progressed through the Night Guard section, and when he reached the ISND office, he climbed up onto the stool and sat himself down. He took a moment to shift through the piles of paper, and made sure, yes, nothing was missing and everything was exactly where he'd left it. Although he did wish, for probably the hundredth time, that the room had a decent light source. He resigned himself to another long silent night slaving away over paperwork while straining his eyes.

Somehow, Prey also doubted he'd be benefiting from the one day off a week the ISND were supposed to get this week, not with the large number of the Night Guard command currently being absent.

However Prey had barely unstoppered the inkwell and spread out the first triplicate form of the night, when he was interrupted.

The door creaked ominously open, and the fizzy orange maned head of the liaison's officer, trapped ineffectually under her peaked cap, poked in.

"Hey'a Prey. How're ya doing?" Taffy chirped.

Prey stopped stretching over the desk to reach the quill, leaving it where it was, "Taffy. Hello."

Taffy Hopes pushed the door fully open and jauntily sauntered in, "I know, it's great to see me. I'm about to clock off, but I thought I'd take five minutes to come say hi to my favourite lamb in the whole Night Guard. Since, you know, gloomy Gloom and Crimson are off galivanting."

Prey dredged up a small, polite smile, "That's very kind of you, ma'am."

Meanwhile he was internally yelling; 'Wasn't Saffron and Lilly enough of an annoyance? Why've I got to deal with Taffy too tonight?'

Life really wasn't fair.

"It's no trouble Prey. I'm sure they'll be back in a jiffy. Probably the end of this week. Too bad, Griffon Stone has some great views and hikes for tourists. I went there backpacking once, you know? Before I signed up, of course. Hey, why're they all going to Griffonia anyways?" Taffy inquired brightly.

That was right. Taffy had been the one to sort out all of the fake paperwork on last minute notice, so of course she knew their destination. Just not their mission was in Griffonia or for how long it was intended to take.

Prey shrugged, "Captain Nighthawk's got an undercover mission there."

"Yeah, duh, but why?" Taffy asked, tilting her head in confusion. Her peaked cap slowly began to slip.

"Not too sure, it's supposed to be restricted information. But I'm fairly sure they're finally going to track down the ponies who were secretly shipping out salt to that griffon Garrow, remember him?" Prey lied, since it was indeed supposed to be restricted information.

"Ah, right, yeah, that." Taffy hid a wince, quickly catching her hat.

'-that murderer, and poor Prey had to commit self defence. What a horrible mess that was-'

"You deserve some toffee Prey. You want some toffee?" Taffy asked with badly concealed guilt, horn lighting up and the clasp of her saddlebag lighting up in a corresponding sparkly orange aura.

"Why?" Prey asked.

"No reason," Taffy said quickly, "You just look like you deserve some toffee. Everypony deserves some toffee. I've got choc-chip or minty marigold. Here, have a piece."

"Thanks, but no thanks. I'm fine." Prey pulled back as Taffy levitated out a bulging paper bag and opened it, revealing thick, sticky squares of sugary goodness.

While Prey would definitely have liked some toffee, he'd only accept toffee he'd checked for poison first.

"Aw come on, it's fine."

"Really, there's no need."

"C'mon you know you want it." Taffy blithely floated the toffee bag closer, Prey sharply drawing back from the magical aura, "Give into peer pressure. All the cool kids are doing it."

"I said it's fine. Speaking of which, when are you finally going to come collect those boxes you dumped in here?" Prey quickly tried to change the subject.

Taffy turned to look at the indicated pile of file filled boxes, successfully distracted, "Oh. Yeah. Right. Those. Oops. I kind of forgot I stashed those in here."

"I figured as much. So when are you going to collect them?"

"Don't worry. I'll find somepony to do it tomorrow when I get back in. Thanks for looking after my files though. They get lonely. You haven't disturbed them from their dusty rest of their cardboard coffins, have you now Prey?" Taffy joked.

"Nope. Why'd you stash them all in here anyway?" Prey asked off-hoofedly.

"We've got a new filing system. Those Royal Inspectors came in and made a bunch of changes, so now everypony's got to follow the new filing system. It's a pain in the-" Taffy paused mid pout, looking at Prey, "-In the, uh, the rump."

"Well, if you could send some people around tomorrow to pick them up, that would be great. Thanks for coming by, but I've wasted enough of your time already and it's late."

"No problem at all Prey." Taffy grinned, absentmindedly floating the toffee bag away without even noticing, "Hey, I'm just checking, but you and the guys are still up for coming to the Nightmare Night party, right?"

"That's still a bit of a ways away, but yes, I believe so. It sounds like it should be great." Prey answered.

'A great waste of my time, that is.'

"Great! I'll try and catch you again tomorrow Prey. And I'll send somepony by to fetch those files. Have a nice night Prey." Taffy waved goodbye, trotting out the door just as jauntily as when she'd walked in.

'And good riddance.' Prey thought, stretching for the quill again. He thought about Gloom and Crimson. The two Night Guard squads should be arriving in Griffin Stone some time later tonight by his reckoning. He wondered how they were doing, and what might've already gone wrong before the train even pulled into the station.

Prey unhappily bet that at least three separate things would've gone wrong by now.

Prey yawned hugely, unable to help himself. He paused in the corridor on the way to the mess hall and vigorously rubbed his droopy ears and his face.

There was no reason to be this tired, he'd only been doing paperwork. And it wasn't even like he'd been awake for twenty-four hours in a row. It was just that he'd been working in the office alone. He was used to working alone, but now somehow the long silent hours of the night, with only lamp light and the scratching of the quill for company, felt like they'd been longer.

He just needed to readjust back to this, and he'd be fine. That said, his hoof was still sore from all the writing he'd done, and his neck hurt from hunching over the desk.

Whatever. It wasn't whip scar cramp, so he'd take it. That, and lunch, or in other words, what the mess hall was serving for breakfast, he'd take that too. He should be able to avoid most of the other Night Guards if he got there early enough.

Prey rolled his sore neck and groaned at the thought of having to pacify and play the little lamb for Cookie, but needs must. He'd smile cheerily just the way she liked, pretend to be bubbly and chirpy, deflect her suspicious queries about the absence of Gloom and Crimson with a childish show of guilelessness, and leave her satisfied and ignorant. Just like he always did.

'If I ever need to kill a whole lot of Guards at once, it really would be too easy to slip poison into whatever she's cooking on the day. No one would even notice the difference in taste until it was too late.' Prey idly thought, picking up his pace towards the mess hall, so as to be one of the first in for breakfast, and thus, one of the first out too.

Except over half the Guard knew better than to eat in the mess hall by now, so all of those would escape his attempt unscathed. Still, it was an idea...

No one ever really takes the threat of mass poisoning seriously, not until the first time it happens.

And that, after five more hours filling out paperwork and filing, was that for Prey's working day. Tedious, boring, and lonely by the

standards of almost anyone. But once Prey's work shift was over, then came his real work shift and the start of his real day.

When someone commits a crime, how do they do it?

Logically, they do so secretly, covertly, and while trying not to be spotted. Why? Because they're afraid of the consequences of being caught, or ashamed of their weakness, or because of the guilt. They're scared of how others will view them if they're correctly associated with their crime.

As an over simplicity, they're motivated by guilt and fear.

The reason a person might've felt forced or sometimes even justified in committing a crime vary widely, but the guilt is the end consequence no matter what, except in the rare circumstance where the criminal genuinely doesn't care. Like the brazen, the insane, a sociopath, a psychopath, or just a child.

Children do not know better, and have to be taught. A child does not know they mustn't pull the dogs tail to make it yelp. Until a child knows doing something is wrong, they will cheerfully do it without an once of guilt. Like the foal who dug up their mothers prized tulips and proudly shows the mushed up flower bed to their parents. Only after the shouting, the scolding, and the disappointed anger does the child know any guilt.

It had been a long time since Prey was a child, and he knew beyond a doubt what he was doing was wrong. But guilt wasn't enough to stop him. He and guilt were well acquainted. Guilt had squatted on his shoulders and in his spiked heart for decades like an unwanted guest. Prey was used to the weight of his guilt and knew how to carry it.

So while he completely understood the crime he was committing was wrong, and doing it still caused him to feel guilt, it was no where near enough to stop him.

And also contrary to the usual caution with which someone

committing a crime, and would sneak around with after dark, that wasn't what Prey had done.

With Lemon Pink in tow, he'd gone right in through the back entrance of Canterlot's morgue, the pre-prepared basic runic array on the door unlocking it without a fuss, and walked in out of the warm evening sun. They'd brought a cart, one of the simple one pony carts you could hire for a week. It was currently parked out the back, drawn up as neat as you please.

Why commit a crime at night? That's when everybody was stereotypically expecting you to commit a crime after all, so wouldn't they be more on guard? Well, the obvious reason was that night held the advantage of the cover of darkness, and there were far less witnesses awake at that hour.

However if you had the ability to get away with anything, say, such as mind magic, then doing so during day light hours when you could see and move freely and were less likely to be suspected was much more preferable.

So leaving the small cart outside, Prey and Lemon had walked right in through the back door, having visited and looked around the city morgue the previous night. From the outside, the single story building was sombre, and seen from the inside it wasn't much different, which was fitting and how it should be.

Grey walls, white tile floors, and subdued internal architecture. Rather out of characteristic for ponies overall, but then, they did despise the idea of death as vividly as they adored the concept of harmony.

So far, Prey had found basically every single pony he'd had the misfortune of encountering over these last five months misunderstood the word 'harmony'. They thought it meant balance. Except, they all forgot what the word 'balance' really meant.

This misconception, in essence, could be boiled down to how ponies loved the idea of nature, but conveniently forgot that nature was cruel. They adored the nest of cute little baby rabbits, but forgot that the fox would be eating well tonight. No, their version of

Harmony wasn't balance, it was *control*. Every time one of the self righteous bigots said 'Harmony', you could substitute it for the word 'Order'.

Prey had heard it all before, ponies brought it up in everyday conversation. Laughter, kindness, generosity, loyalty, honesty, and of course, magic. Always magic. Why, it practically *belonged* to unicorns, a full third of the pony race, so *of course* magic was *theirs* because they so deserved to have the gods given right to magic. How could anypony forget about magic?

It was all bigoted and racially superior prejudice. And anyway, 'Magic'? That wasn't even a *virtue*. It was a physical energy, not a positive concept. Laughter could half be argued not to be a virtue either, actually.

But all of that was neither here nor there for Prey's mission in venturing into the city morgue. The back entrance was a storage room. One full of boxes, old brooms and mops, rolled up canvas banners, paint tins, spare wagon wheels, and yes, rows and rows of neatly stacked empty coffins, silently waiting for their single turn use in life to come around.

As Prey had discovered, the morgue also doubled as the place where you went to buy coffins and caskets.

'What's that old riddle? 'The person who made it doesn't want it, the person who bought it doesn't use it, and the person who needs it doesn't know it'.'

Prey and Lemon walked swiftly through the back room and rows of empty caskets, already knowing exactly where they were heading, pushing open the swinging door into the empty corridor which lead down to the freezer bay. The front entrance of Canterlot's morgue may have been ostentatious, if solemn, but that was only due to the front being where the reception was, and was the face grieving members of the public saw. But inside the morgue, the corridor could've been almost any corridor in any office building.

Thirty seconds since they'd entered the building, and the pair of them came to a set of sealed doors with the sign 'Fridge Bay 1'

above them.

Lemon telekinetically pulled open the thick door to their destination and also Prey's morbid goal. Cold, dry air washed into Prey's face.

There were two workers inside the long room, both wearing warm coats. They both automatically turned to see who had walked in.

"Don't mind us. We're just here browsing for a fridge ornament today." Prey quickly enunciated loudly and clearly.

The two workers clearly saw the intruders into their freezer bay and... did nothing. A mare and a stallion, both unicorns, since this wasn't the type of job you wanted to do with hooves if you could do it with magic instead.

Their eyes glazed, not acknowledging Prey and Lemon Pink's existence at all. After a moment, both unicorns jerkily turned back to their task as if the last five seconds hadn't registered in their consciousness at all. Which was exactly what had, or rather *hadn't*, happened. Prey had left behind a mental compulsion and trigger phrase in both workers minds when he and Lemon had broken in yesterday.

The stallion was called Loadstone and the mare Nova Shower, not that their names were important. They were just two unfortunate workers who were in the wrong place at the wrong time yesterday. Neither of them were going to remember this, so it could be argued they weren't even victims really, except for the unchangeable fact that they were.

Prey didn't try to tiptoe around the truth of it. They were victims. Here and now, the two ponies were getting used by him simply because they were convenient.

Nova Shower was a quiet mare, satisfied but not happy about her station in life, with a cutie mark of a fading outline of a star, and was still broken up by the doctors diagnoses four years ago that she could probably never have foals.

As for Loadstone, Prey had convinced the stallion to kindly cover for one of his colleagues instead of taking today off. Loadstone wasn't particularly happy with his lot in life either, but had been taught not to complain by his dad. His cutie mark was a tombstone wrapped around with a rose, which he preferred to keep covered in polite company for all the obvious reasons.

It took a certain kind of individual for a pony to want to work in a morgue, Prey supposed.

Lemon let the door swing shut and seal behind them, leaving them in the cold dry air of the freezer bay. The long room was taken up by racks of cold metal hatches. Each hatch had a slot in the front for a slip card. Some had a hoof written slip inserted, and some were empty, just like the tray behind those hatches.

One of those hatches was currently open, and the long metal tray pulled out. That's what the two workers were doing at that moment, carefully removing the sheet covered figure. Cold air, quite a bit colder than the room temperature, wafted from the open hatch as Prey and Lemon wandered over. Prey had learned in passing yesterday that it was a combination of the cold and also passive preservative enchantments which kept the bodies fresh until such time as it was to bury or cremate them.

He stepped up to peer closer as Loadstone folded back the sheet with a practiced flick of his aura. The stallion wasn't thinking much as he worked, just; '-Abacas still needs to get some replacement body sheets, like I keep reminding him to-'

An old, green furred unicorn mare lay under the body sheet. Her eyes had been closed and her bony forehooves crossed on her chest. It was obvious from the wrinkles and thin mane that age had been the deciding factor here. Prey felt nothing looking at the corpse. She was just a future component in his plans. Her name had been Constellation, ninety-two years old, husband already deceased, with only distant living relatives. Perfect for Prey's purposes in other words. The body was only going to go to waste if it was cremated anyways.

"Ready Load?" Nova Shower asked Loadstone, completely oblivious

to how Lemon Pink was standing there literally looking over her shoulder.

"Yup. Three, two, one." Together, both unicorns levitated up the old pony off the tray on a flat plane of magic, a fair bit trickier than normal telekinesis Prey was lead to believe, but it kept the dead mare's body respectfully undisturbed. From there, they lowered her into a pre-selected woven willow casket on the cart. Just like Nova, Loadstone too was completely unawares of his audience.

Once they were done here though, Prey was still going to make damned sure both morgue workers memories were properly edited. This compulsion to ignore him and Lemon? It was a very complicated bit of mind magic that would rapidly fade if not kept fresh, with no lingering side effects. And while 'rapidly' should mean a week or even possibly two, Prey wasn't the sort to take chances.

However, if the effects unexpectedly somehow wore off right now? Well, Prey hadn't just brought along Lemon to pull the cart. As he well knew, the best way to counter a unicorn was to bring your own unicorn, and/or take them by surprise.

Loadstone scribbled something on a clip board with his magic, while Nova swung closed the metal hatch and slipped the tag off it. Then she began to push the cart towards the door, her magic reaching out ahead of her to open said door. Loadstone followed with the clipboard, and behind him, Lemon and Prey came along.

From the visit yesterday, Prey knew the incinerator was to the left out of the door. Nova hesitated, then jerkily turned and went right.

Two minutes later, Loadstone and Nova trotted back past Freezer Bay 1 and down to the incinerator room. Once there, a closed and empty willow casket was solemnly rolled into the magical incinerator, and the heavy kiln door shut. Loadstone and Nova both signed a paper stating the time and date, and then Loadstone turned a dial on the kiln's side and pushed the button. Magically charged crystals lit up inside the kiln, and a dull orange glow began to spill around the edges of the kiln door.

The two unicorn workers stood and watched, quietly discussing work as they watched. Boring, office talk, and while there was no one else there by their perspective, but they kept their voices hushed and respectful:

"How many holidays you got left?"
"Five this year. I'm saving them for Hearthswarming."
"It was kind of you to fill in for Elphy today."
"She always fills her quota, it was nothing."
"What was the crystal charge level when last you did the checks?"
"Still thirty, I think. That was yesterday, so probably twenty-seven? Yep, twenty-seven."

In short, Prey sensed nothing off about their actions. They were completely oblivious to their own actions a few minutes ago where they'd stood like blank statues as Lemon loaded the corpse of Constellation onto the cart, covering her with a sheet and adding a few boxes to break up the body's outline. Still, it always paid to make sure.

He looked to Lemon, "Alright, we're basically done here. We'll be back tomorrow for another corpse. Just check their memories. Him or her?"

"I will review Nova's memories, Prey."

That left Prey with Loadstone. Not wanting to waste any time, he stepped up to the stallion's side and laid a hoof against his fetlock, where it emerged from under the coat sleeve.

A quick trawl through Loadstone's memories since yesterday, while trying to be as gentle with his mental touch as possible, revealed nothing worrying to Prey. Since he wasn't reviewing a long period of time, less than twenty-four hours worth, (and even less when taking into account the time spent asleep), it only took Prey thirty or so seconds. Doing things was so much faster at the speed of thought, and Prey had already seen both Loadstone's and Nova Shower's memories yesterday.

Not that Prey had dug around or gone looking deeply, he knew his mental touch in particular was damaging, but you still couldn't help

getting flashes of irrelevant details which he didn't care about.

A pet dog called Yappy who ran away. A never-sent card on Hearts and Hooves day. A square of uneven carpet back home that Loadstone always tripped on. All of them were irrelevant details which made up part of someone's life but that out of context meant very little to Prey.

Prey opened his eyes, and was back in the cremation room. He rolled his tongue around his mouth and looked up at Lemon, "Nothing amiss?" He checked.

"Nothing, Prey. I am ready to leave whenever you are." She answered, the faint red glow of her own mind magic dissipating off her horn like tendrils of mist.

"Then there's nothing further to stay for. We'll leave immediately."

Prey didn't focus on how he was stealing a body to perform a type of necromancy with. In the Deeper Green, he'd retrieved body parts on Snake's orders before. Sometimes, those people hadn't even been dead yet. Doing it this way was much better. There had been no violence involved, only old age, and no one would know. It was a hundred times better this way.

But he was still stealing dead bodies, and that was so much worse than it sounded. That cost you something, even if you didn't know you were paying it at the time, until one day you looked back and found out what the price had been. Like looking in the Lich's Mirror had done.

Everything has a price. Now or later, steep or cheap, sooner or later, you had to pay it.

There was a brisk knock at the door to the ISND's office. Prey turned from pulling a file off one of the lower shelves they'd installed, (he needed to use the stool to reach the higher ones), and sent the door a scowl.

'I really do hope that isn't Taffy coming by again.' Although the

liaison's officer really should be home by this time of night...

"Yes? Who is it?"

The door opened, "Me." Screech said, stepping into the dim office. He, like the rest of the Night guard, were still having to go clad in the simply recoloured Royal Guard armour as opposed to what Gloom and Crimson had. Or *had* had before they left.

Screech's normal armour was still, of course, perfectly maintained, (Screech being a proud thestral warrior after all), but it wasn't buffed into blinding shininess in the lamp light.

"Lieutenant Screech." Prey acknowledged with a show of politeness.

Screech glanced over the otherwise empty office, assessing everything with a practiced eye, and paused for a long few seconds in thought.

'-after everything, perhaps it's not best to leave Prey all alone. It feels too much like a punishment-'

The acting Night Guard commander looked Prey in the eye, which was rather more of an abrupt shift from mere concerned politeness to invasive concern than Prey would've liked. They'd barely even said a word yet. "Do you prefer working alone Prey, or would you like to work with somepony else until everypony else returns?"

"Thank you sir, but I don't want to be a bother."

"It won't be a problem. You're skilled and capable enough to work well with any Guard."

"In that case, no thank you. I'd prefer to continue working solo."

Screech nodded his helmeted head brusquely. He'd asked, and now he had his answer, so it was time to move on, "Alright for now. I didn't drop in for that, though. Simply for this; The first communication has come back from Captain Nighthawk."

Prey immedidetly perked up in interest, "Yes?"

"Both teams have arrived in Griffinstone and found quiet lodging. They've hired local guides for each squad, one a griffin, and the others a pony. They aim to investigate the address our two prisoners were sending their spy reports to. The other team will be circumspectly looking into the embassy and searching around for anypony who might know Hafflow. That's all so far, but you've a right to know." Screech said.

"Thank you for taking the time to let me know, sir." Prey thought it best to politely thank him.

"I was simply passing the office." Screech shrugged his folded wings slightly.

"Before you go, can I ask how the communication came though?" Prey asked, half glancing towards the desk.

On the desk, amid the other files and paperwork, stood a corked green glass bottle, a single sourceless flame flickering inside. A message-in-a-bottle spell. Nighthawk and the others had taken a number of these very expensive communication methods with them, but that particular bottle was twined with the one Crimson carried. It would only be used if there was an emergency on Gloom and Crimson's end.

Naturally, Prey was hoping he wouldn't be getting a message from that green bottle at all.

Obviously, however the communication had come, it hadn't been through the post. First, that would leave a trail, and second, a first class letter from Griffonia would still take about two days to get here.

Screech's lips quirked up, not a full smile, but close, "I learned of this through Her Majesty. Princess Luna watches over her Night Guard when they sleep. The mission they're undertaking is one of great importance, one which might have consequences on Equestia's future with Griffonia. She has had them report to her through the dream realm."

What would've happened if Luna had bothered to do the same when

they were in Mayflower when they most needed help?
Prey had held an unconfirmed suspicion since then, one which he hadn't had a good way to ask anyone in the know about. Now he grabbed the excuse with both hooves.

He blinked and tilted his had in a show of mild surprise, "Oh, Princess Luna protects the dreams of griffins against nightmares too? I didn't know that."

What Prey was really searching for was the answer to Luna's range. Did she have a range at all, or could she reach out to any person anywhere in the world at any time?

"She doesn't, no. The griffins are not citizens of Equestria. If they were then of course Her Majesty would extend her protection, but she will not offer it where it wouldn't be appreciated." Screech answered.

'-not that I can see Griffonia ever joining our borders, but if anypony will live to see it, it'll be Princess Luna-'

Prey blinked again in real surprise, and not least a little fear. Did Luna have the ambition to rule the lands of Griffonia too? He had thought, what with everything he knew of ponies and Celestia's rule over an entire millennia, that Luna wouldn't care to rule a non-pony race. Prey well knew how most ponies privately viewed griffins as something of a heathen and barbaric people for not being herbivores nor having magic, immortal rulers, or cutie marks.

But was that Luna's goal? To conquer Griffonia? Prey knew of no Equestrian army fit for conquest, but maybe that's not how Luna meant to take over?

'But then, she's an alicorn. She can scheme for hundreds of years in the future. Maybe she's even now laying the groundwork for a gradual build up and change of attitude towards the griffins in future pony generations.' Prey thought in disgust.

Prey decided it wasn't actually important, though. If that was the case, it would be hundreds of years in the future, and had no impact on Prey's own situation. All that really mattered to Prey

right now was trying to get answer out of Screech about Luna's reach.

"But could Her Majesty do that? For all the griffins all the way over in Griffonia? Sir." Prey added.

Screech paused, one tufted ear cocking, '-could she?-'

"I can't answer for Her Majesty, but I don't see why she couldn't. I've heard Princess Luna say the dream realm is not a physical place with physical limits, but something else, and she has been the Lady of the Night and Watcher of Dreams long before either of us. So yes, I think she could." Screech said.

'Well zoma'Grika, isn't that just *wonderful*.' That was not the answer Prey had been hoping for, even if he'd all but known it would be the one he'd get.

'So just running far, far away won't be enough when I finally figure out how to get these damned tracer bands off. I need to find some method of blocking an alicorn's dream reach.' Another impossible sounding task, but one Prey would have to somehow find a way to accomplish, along with everything else on his plate.

"Well thank you for coming by and letting me know sir. I appreciate it." Prey smiled on the outside.

"I'll leave you to it. If you change your mind about sharing an office, let me or one of the others officers know and we'll put you in with somepony." Screech said, bidding Prey farewell.

Prey watched until the thestral's tail, noticeably a fair bit longer than an average Canterlot citizen would wear, but also more ragged than average too, had disappeared out the door. Only once he'd given Screech long enough to get out of ear shot did Prey grown and let his forehead **thunk** against the bookshelf.

'So I finally got my answer. And it's the exact one I feared it would be.' Well there was nothing else to do but continue on, and figure out a way later to work around it.

Prey repeated the old mantra and promise to himself for the

hundredth time, 'I won't be a prisoner here forever. One day I'll be free of your leash, Luna.'

Improving his existing runic defences.

Adding on and building more of them down in the Sewer's Heart.

Keeping an eye on the wickerwatch.

Starting a full magic null zone down in his lair.

Continuing to try and find a way around the golden tracer bands on his ankles.

Sending Lemon Pink to dig through the Canterlot Royal library to search for any mention of alicorn specific magic, even if he didn't hold out any hope.

Trying to fit in time to go visit the wonderful deposit of books and knowledge for himself.

Having Lemon keep an eye on the underground market for anything useful which might come up.

Slowly keeping the items and goals on The List ticking away to completion some time in the distant future. And some of them which were startlingly close and not so distant anymore. Prey would need to go on a little trip soon.

There was also keeping up his work in the Night Guard to the required standard.

Keeping everyone he interacted with happy and ignorant was important, as well as keeping a watchful eye out for that annoyance, Strange Happenstance, who'd been suspiciously quiet and absent recently.

And also, under the workload of all this, Prey was performing the same dark work and experiments which gave him the reason to hide. He kept to the edges of it, because he well knew the

reputation of fear and hate for these things was completely deserved:

Black magic. Blood magic. Voodoo magic. Dark magic. Necromancy. They were not things you did lightly.

Prey was very careful, and did all his related work within secured runic arrays, but every practitioner before Prey had no doubt thought they were being careful too. Were his precautions enough? Only time would tell.

Prey considered himself better than Hard Baked, since he wasn't murdering people purely for black magic components, but in the past... No, Prey couldn't claim innocence. And he also knew that his planned work was going to be so much more than the warlock's had been. And therefore, his crime was worse.

The point of all this was, Prey was busy. Many things demanded an allotment of his precious time.

Busy busy busy, always there was something to be busy with.

Unfortunately, much like his Night Guard shifts, Prey's precious time was also taken up by unwanted commitments which other's forced upon him.

In this instance, that meant attending his therapy sessions with Clear Mind until the doctor was satisfied, and signed him off as 'safe and stable'.

Well, Prey could've 'convinced' the irritating unicorn at any time with some judicious use of mind magic, however he unfortunately still needed the result to look natural to Clear Mind's colleagues, which meant attending a reasonable number of the sessions before he let himself be 'cured'.

Prey had firmly decided though that this would be the last session. No more questions asked. Everything about the eager, confident, and self assured doctor irritated Prey, not least of which was that the doctor didn't see him as a person. Just a patient, and one whom

Clear Mind thought he knew more about than Prey himself did, simply because the doctor had gone to 'university', and had a 'diploma'. Clear Mind thought since he'd learnt all about how people think, that he somehow knew better than those people themselves. Not in a malicious way, but still in an incredibly condescending way.

Prey was sitting on a beanbag in Clear Mind's office. The doctor himself was sitting on one opposite.

Bright afternoon sun was filtering in through the blinds on the offices wall length windows. The good doctor had offered Prey a cookie at the start of the session. The sheer audacity of that was something else, and Prey'd had to reign himself in and remind himself Clear Mind was only following the script as if he really were a child.

'I really shan't regret washing my hooves of him after today for good.'

Like the other sessions previously, Clear Mind was trying to get him to be positive and open up, while Prey pretended to listen, or when he really couldn't be bothered, just flat out lied. Clear Mind wasn't completely stupid, and knew something was off, but he just assumed that was part of *why* Prey was in these sessions.

After that one time where Prey had really told Clear Mind what had happened in Mayflower and even *given* the doctor a piece of the experience and had to wipe his memories afterwards, this seemed rather tame and underwhelming in comparison.

Prey was still angry at himself for being so careless as to have done that.

The telling bit, not the mind wiping bit to cover up afterwards.

Because it had turned out Strange Happenstance had been hiding out in the reception that very day.

'I need to make a final decision about what to do with that private detective.' Prey made a note to himself, giving Clear Mind a

distracted answer out loud. The problem was, Prey still didn't know for certain if Strange Happenstance was a mimic, or working for the person who knew about mimics.

"I'm glad you can agree Prey. If your guardian can take you out of school for a week and take you on a vacation, it would be a great benefit to you all. Won't that be great? You get to skip school and go on a holiday." Clear Mind announced, smiling confidently.

Prey blinked, and refocused on the last minute of the one sided conversation he'd been upholding.

"Holiday?"

"Yes, a nice holiday."

Prey looked at the still happily smiling unicorn, "Holiday where?"

"Oh, anywhere away from town in a low pressure environment will work. But it's important to get away for a time, to finish up this chapter of your life. So that way, when you come back, you can start a brand new chapter and put all of this behind you."

'-did I use too many big words there? Never mind, Prey's a smart foal, I'm sure he's got the general idea-', Clear Mind thought to himself.

Prey refrained from massaging his face. Who knew those poison burn scars hurt when in the presence of stupid? Or maybe it was from keeping his face locked into a smiling, childish mask. Whatever the reason, he'd had enough of Clear Mind. There was still a quarter of an hour left in todays session, but enough was enough.

Prey hummed thoughtfully before turning it into a question, "Mmm'octor Clear Mind?"

"Yes?" Clear Mind smiled, leaning forwards in a show of earnestness.

"There's just, well, there's just this one tiny worry I've got." Prey looked at the floor.

The doctor made an encouraging noise, "Go on, you can say whatever it is. These sessions are for your benefit."

"Nmph want mph." Prey mumbled to the floor.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch all of that." Clear Mind leaned in even closer.

"Not mph a nmph."

"Sorry, one more time for me please?"

Prey reached a hoof up. He didn't lunge or move quickly, he reached up as if he were merely going to brush something off Clear Mind's face. The action was so normal, so completely innocent that Clear Mind didn't even properly register the movement as Prey touched him on the jaw.

Even if the unicorn had been an exceptionally powerful mind mage, (which Prey already knew Clear Mind wasn't after having already done this once), that moment of being caught off guard followed by another moment of disorientation would've certainly lost him the mental fight anyway.

A touch was all it took. Prey was ready. He slammed into Clear Mind's mindscape like a wave, overflowing in a rush.

Ashen grey land, burnt out tree husks, a soot filled purple sky.

Back when Lemon Pink was masquerading around as Night Watcher, Prey had been unable to beat the cultist within her own mindscape. He'd actually been beaten back and driven out. But then she'd made the mistake of growing over confident and pursuing him back into his.

Prey's mindscape was not one layer as was usual for a mindscape, it was two, or maybe three, but the third was only really a theoretical subconscious understanding of 'self'. But the point was, Prey's mind was not a safe place to be, and it had little to do with the traumatising memories he buried there under the ash.

The plane of the mindscape weren't anything physical or real, and

as much of it was the individuals own personal interpretation as anything concrete. It was an illusion, the mind conjuring up something you could understand, very much like how dreams might pull random items from the previous day to make sense of. Unreal, in a word. Which didn't mean it couldn't still kill you.

And what all that meant was, Prey didn't let himself get overconfident.

Last time he'd invaded Clear Mind's head, the doctor had first been weakened by holding the ribbon Prey had given him. Prey always preferred to only enter a mind once the victim was unconscious, since an unconscious mind couldn't defend itself and so was much safer and easier to invade. But Prey hadn't opted to go the route of tricking Clear Mind into holding onto his ribbon again. That had been... Distinctly unhealthy for the doctor's mind, and it would be a bit hard for Prey to explain why when he came out of his session the good doctor was brain dead. Or worse.

So that left straight up mind invasion, a head on clash, pitching his strength against Clear Mind's. Which was why Prey'd gone for a surprise attack despite all advantages he already held in mind magic.

Fighting fair is a good way to die, and Prey wasn't going to completely rule out the low possibility that perhaps Clear Mind might somehow have a huge surge of mental willpower and instinctively repel the mind invasion if Prey went at it half-heartedly.

All that said however, the contest had never been in any doubt.

Prey rushed into Clear Mind's head and grabbed control before the unicorn's mind could even begin to revolt, ignoring the doctor's mental screams. Back when Prey had faced Night Watcher, one of the reasons why he'd lost was because his own mind magic had been bound under an inhibitor collar. He'd had to trick her into forming and then coming across the mind bridge first.

'Right. Let's see about fixing your mind up. Today was my last session. You're happy with my progress. What do I need to do to get

that signed off?'

Prey picked through the memories his drag net had trawled up from Clear Mind, searching out for the relevant ones pertaining to patient confidentiality and treatment policy. He asked, and Clear Mind offered up the full answer in excruciating detail. The doctor didn't have a choice in the matter.

Prey reviewed what he'd found, 'Let me check; today at five thirty before he leaves, he'll sign off my case, submit the bill to the Night Guard along with his completion report. Nighthawk will see it when he and everyone else gets back. Clear Mind will also find a way to casually mention in conversation to his colleagues at least three times how I am now finished.'

That should about do it Prey decided, having reviewed how Clear Mind had worked with patients in the past.

Prey double checked his implanted compulsions and memory edits once, and then twice just to be certain although he was already sure, and disengaged back from Clear Mind's mindscape. Prey blinked dry eyes, back in the office with the light peaking through the white curtain blinds, and laying on the shifting surface of the beanbag.

It took a few seconds longer before the light came back on in Clear Mind's glazed eyes. The doctor drew in a deep breath, and then his hoof shot up to his horn and brow.

'-oooh my head, this headache suddenly got so much worse. Ow ow ow, seriously-'

"Is something the matter?" Prey asked innocently.

Clear Mind rubbed his head gingerly, blinking and trying to reorientate himself, "Ah, no Prey, it's ah, nothing."

'-I knew I should've taken a sick day when I woke up this morning. Argh, it crept up on me-'

"Oh, okay then." Prey smiled. Of course, he'd also added in a false memory to Clear Mind's head of having this headache all day. As far

as the doctor knew, he'd woken up with the headache, but decided to simply take some pills and come in to work anyway hoping it'd get better.

Prey knew to cover his tracks, and really, what better way than convince the victim that those tracks had been there all along?

'-by Celestia's holy mane, my head. I feel sick. Arhh, my head-', Clear Mind tried to stifle a groan on account of being in the presence of a patient.

Prey knew Clear Mind was going to be stuck with this headache for the next day or even two, and he pitilessly dismissed the doctor's coming miserable discomfort. It wasn't a case of the unicorn simply being sick or any other physical symptoms, medicine wouldn't help, it was literally his mind hurting.

While Prey hadn't done anything permanently damaging, (hopefully), the mind was still a desperately fragile and delicate thing at times. Prey had brute forced his way into Clear Mind's head with his first crushing attack, which was a lot less subtle and smooth than operating when the victim was already unconscious.

That, and as Prey well knew, even when trying to be, his mental touch was not as gentle as Lemon Pink's.

'-but I'm glad I did come in today. Prey's finally ready to graduate and he doesn't need our services anymore-'

Clear Mind tried for a smile, although Prey knew his skull must be pounding, "Thank you Prey for coming today. Really, thank you and congratulations. I believe in you, and remember, everypony else believes in you too. And what better way to celebrate than a holiday? And once you get back, you'll be ready to face the world."

'Still going on about that holiday angle?' Prey thought in annoyance.

"Thank you Mr. Clear Mind. And I'll definitely 'ask' about it."

Clear Mind forced aside his thumping headache for a minute so he could look Prey in the eye, trying to make sure his next words were

remembered:

"You've earned it Prey. You've worked hard and I'm really proud that you've made it this far. Sometimes you need to stop and remember how special you are, don't forget that. And remember, all your friends will be there for you in the future. Not just today, or tomorrow, but next year, and the year after that. Remember, where you have Harmony and friendship, there is nothing you can't do Prey."

'Except bring back the dead. Or stop a charging hydra. Or turn back time. Or defeat an alicorn. Or escape her golden leash. Or any number of other things.' Prey thought with hidden snort of derision.

"...Thank you. I'll make sure to remember your kind words."

Clear Mind smiled, then winced, hoof going back up to his head, blinking rapidly and breathing shallowly, '-arrh buck, this headache. Never had one this bad before. Is this what a migraine is?-'

"I'm sure you'll do fine Prey, and I hope you have fun on your holiday, where ever you go. Relax and have fun." Clear Mind got out, although it was obvious to any observer that only half his attention was on his words.

Prey considered just point blank telling the therapist he wasn't going on any sort of damned holiday, not that it would do any good.

'And seriously? How would I get away with that? No way Nighthawk would approve the request. And where would I even go on a holiday? I hate Canterlot, I hate pony lands, and I hate Equestria at large.'

Prey? On holiday? Now *that* was a laughable idea.

Now that was an idea... An idea.

'That's... an idea?' Prey paused.

'That's an idea. One which isn't completely baseless. It's an actual

idea.'

Not the pony version of a holiday, where you took time off an did nothing productive. When would Prey have time for that when he needed to be making preparations and backups to help save his life at some future date? Prey was not lazy, and he didn't have time for that sort of holiday.

But Prey had been planning to eventually go out of town, so to speak, to take care of one of the items on The List which was finally coming to fruition. However he'd merely been planning to go on his one day off coming up at the end of this week, or failing that simply skipping on sleep and going after his shift at the Palace one day.

However there were *other* things on The List, important things which had been on there since the list's creation, which he could finally do if he had longer than a day's leave from Canterlot.

'If I had the time, and if I somehow did get permission for a holiday...'

Nighthawk wasn't here, Screech was in charge instead. Prey could probably convince the Lieutenant. He wasn't doing much active case work while Gloom and Crimson were undertaking their much more important mission in Griffonia. And while there was Prey's probation and restrictions to consider, Prey knew he could spin that and get Screech to see it the same way. Thestrals cared strongly about fairness and justice, and the rules restricting Prey weren't 'fair'.

That, and to Screech, the ISND had already proven themselves trustworthy many times over. So it wasn't outside the realm of possibility that Screech would say yes to a few days holiday even without Prey 'persuading' him.

'I hadn't considered this before. I could actually go on a holiday.'

There was of course the danger to consider. Any time spent outside of Canterlot was time not spent on preparing runic defences against the mimics or whoever else decided they wanted a piece of lamb. And, as disgusting as it was to even think, he was currently safer in

Canterlot than he was outside of it.

But the things Prey needed to do were important. They'd waited for fifty-seven years while he'd been locked in Dreverton, and while they'd keep, he'd still have to leave to complete them at some point. Assuming Screech said yes. Which he would, because Prey would convince him. As long as he didn't pass it up the chain of command to Luna for some strange reason, the Lieutenant's positive answer was basically guaranteed.

The idea honestly scared Prey. He'd had so many years to do nothing but think and brood on what he could've done, what he did do, and what he might do, that suddenly facing the possibility of going back to do them as soon as the end of this week perhaps frightened him. But he had to do this at some point, either now or later. The List had objectives on it which were non-negotiable, even to himself.

And honestly... deep down he wanted to go. Part of him anyway. Even if he was scared.

'A holiday... I guess I really am going on a holiday. I didn't see that coming.'

Seems the quack Clear Mind had been right about at least one thing. Galling, but even a broken clock will be right twice a day, Prey supposed.

'I'm going on a holiday.'

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Author's Notes:

GreatSpaceBeaver Was the one to help with some of the editing here on this Chapter, so thanks to him. [image]

73.5 Home is Where the Broken Heart Sits

An extract taken from a government recruitment drive pamphlet-

The civil service industry of Equestria is filled with many unique and fantastic opportunities for everypony.

Are you a proud pegasus? Then the wide ranging industry of Weather Control might be right for you. There is always room for weather pegasi at all entry levels, both new and aspiring, and experienced and returning. Everypony from farming towns to our great cities needs our vital service.

Whether that be working on the National Weather Plan, delivering exotic weather effects from Cloudsdale, fending off wild weather on the borders, clearing the skies, delivering rain to farms, mapping wind routes, or recording and predicting new weather pattern shifts, Weather Teams are an important part of what keeps our great nation running.

If you don't think you're quite ready to take on any of those jobs, don't worry and believe in yourself. Even if you're approaching retirement, or are after the quiet life in a more rural setting, Equestria's Weather Towers are always in need of experienced hooves to monitor vital changes. Don't delay and please contact your local Weather Team branch for additional information and opportunities.

-Extract end.

It is a bit of a misguided assumption of the ground bound folk that all of Equestrian weather comes from the Cloudsdale's Weather Factories. Most don't stop to think to consider it, but it only takes a moments thought to spot the logistical blunder that would be.

Cloudsdale is always kept within commuting distance of Canterlot.

Why would a local Weather Team working at a small town, days away from Cloudsdale, fly all the way there just to fetch a shower or cloud cover, and then fly all the way back? Doing so would take days on a round trip, and nothing would get done in anything resembling a reasonable time frame.

Well, the largest weather phenomena usually do still need to come from Cloudsdale, and are planned and organized in advance. But for smaller, everyday requirements, either the local Weather Team scavenges up what they can locally, or go to the closest Weather Tower. And while there aren't as many Weather Towers as would be convenient, (only twenty-five built so far in Equestria), they have been strategically spaced so as to offer coverage to the more far out villages and towns who otherwise couldn't enjoy the safety of tamed weather.

A Weather Tower is a land based spire, unlike the airborne factories of Cloudsdale, and usually only needs a small hoofful of ponies to run. A few Weather Towers, which weren't placed with perhaps quite as much foresight as might've been hoped, only actually need two or three pegasi, rotating in on fortnightly shifts, to meet the low level weather production requirements of the sparsely populated countryside.

Hence the recruitment offer for older or soon to be retiring pegasi, or those who enjoy quiet solitude. And while everypony except Their Royal Majesties get old, the latter reason of solitude is a less usual one for the social pony species to seek out employment on a Weather Tower.

Prey was going on holiday.

That sentence still didn't sound right, even in his own head.

Well, it wasn't going to be a 'holiday' by any definition of the pony version of the word. Prey wasn't going anywhere to relax, he was travelling outside of Canterlot to work, to finally cross off the third item on The List. Or rather, *try* to cross the third item off. The task involved wasn't an easy one. Prey didn't honestly know if he could do it, even though it wasn't the risky sort of task which threatened

his life.

That was number two on The List; survival. No amendments or sub points to it, just that one word, survival. There was no need to attach anything else to that goal, much like the third task he aimed to complete really.

The first thing on The List, number one, the thing which had been the very reason Prey *created* The List, was actually a placeholder, since it was never going to happen because it was an impossibility. But it still held first spot on his list, and it would stay that way until the mountains ground to dust and the oceans dried up.

But that first wasn't something Prey could do anything about. But he could try to do something about the *third* item. And for that, Prey needed to get out of Canterlot and catch a train. Which meant going on holiday.

Prey had predicted Screech wouldn't have a problem with him requesting two days holiday for the first time ever, which combined with the one free day he was getting this weekend making it three days off in a row. Gloom and Crimson were in Griffonia, so it wasn't like Prey was doing much of anything important while they were gone.

The latest news on the two absent ISND members and Nighthawk's mission was that through local sources they'd succeeded in secretly tracking down the ex-ambassadorial aide Hafflow last night. The bad news was, the griffin was still working for the embassy. Snatching him was going to be a lot harder than they'd been hoping for, but not than they'd been expecting.

The verdict was still out on whether Griffonia knew about Hafflow's duplicity or not. Either way, the two undercover Night Guard squads needed more time to observe and think up a workable plan, which was going to further add another couple of days to their original time frame of a week-and-a-half.

It was still so strangely disconnected to Prey. Gloom and Crimson

were out there, while he was back here, only getting second hoof reports through Lieutenant Screech.

Prey didn't like danger, it was often terrifying, but he was not used to not being forced to face it anyway. It felt... disrespectful. That Gloom and Crimson's efforts could so simply be summarized into one paragraph of a report, it was wrong. Words on a page completely disassociated the very real threat and constant tension of what they were facing out there. Prey knew it from the other side, he knew what it was like to be the one on the ground, but now he was on this side of it instead.

Gloom and Crimson were on the ground out there in Griffonia, wearing disguises, trekking around Griffon Stone, getting translations through their hired local pony guide, seeing griffins and foreign architecture everywhere, with sprinklings of snow already falling at night this time of year, the rugged terrain of the highlands, and finding clues by themselves. And here he was, stuck in Canterlot.

It wasn't a complaint, just an observation of the juxtaposition.

Prey wasn't arrogant enough to think he could've solved everything if he'd been taken along, but he might've been able to help at least. But he'd never know now, because he was just a passive observer back here in Canterlot getting second hoof reports.

Anyway, that was all beside the point, and that point was; there really wasn't much chance of them returning from Griffonia before Prey would finish his requested three days of holiday.

Prey had thought Screech wouldn't have any issue with his request despite it infringing on the terms of his unwilling probationary restrictions. Screech was a thestral, and Prey was one of his Night Guards.

Turned out, Prey had thought wrong. Screech *did* care about the restrictions.

Not because he thought Prey was going to go out to some village and murder everyone with bone rot mines, he already knew Prey

had the knowledge to be dangerous, that wasn't the issue to the slit eyed thestral Lieutenant. The issue was that it was against the rules. Screech acknowledged some rules were stupid, but Prey was a Night Guard, and so he needed to hold himself up to the highest standard as a representative of Princess Luna.

"Sorry Prey, but for now, this is best. Maybe Captain Nighthawk will think differently, so ask again once he returns." Screech had said, not bothered at all about expressing the notion that he might be wrong and that Nighthawk might know better than him as the Captain.

"I hope you understand my decision Prey."

Prey liked Screech more than he liked Starry Wing. Which didn't mean much. "Yes sir, I understand sir."

'I just don't agree. But you *will* agree with *me*.'

And Screech did agree, changing his mind after Prey spent five minutes explaining to him why it was a good idea. The conversation didn't actually involve the use of mind magic on the Lieutenant at all. It did however involve Prey reading Screech's surface thoughts and tailoring his words to convince him, all the while absently twining his blue ribbon round and around his hoof.

Now convinced that Prey's argument was right, Screech signed off the request form Prey had gotten from Taffy.

A good friend would've thought to at least inform Scenic and Lilly about his suddenly granted respite, but they weren't his friends, so he didn't. They were acquaintances which he didn't hate quite as much as the rest of ponykind. Scenic and co would come by at some point no doubt, and wonder where he was, but that was their problem, not Prey's. He was under no obligation to keep them updated on what he was doing with his own life, and while they'd probably panic a bit, Prey didn't particularly care.

---O---

Prey jolted out of his meditative doze as his head bumped into the

train window just hard enough to hurt. He sat up too quickly, blinking and righting himself against the rocking of the train carriage.

Ca-Clack, Ca-Clack

Prey rubbed at his bruised ear as he absently glanced out the window. Trees were speeding past, a living green tunnel just a few paces beyond the glass. They were somewhere in the countryside then, but it was still at least another four hours to the end of the line, and then from there, he and Lemon needed to catch the overnight train.

Lemon Pink was laid out on the opposite train bench, floppy sunhat tilted over her eyes and travel cloak folded up as a pillow. Their luggage, two light and utterly plain looking backpacks, were stowed under her seat. They hadn't needed to actually pack the backpacks, merely picked them up before leaving. Prey had a number of identical backpacks hidden in various locations packed and ready to go. Dried food, water, a medical kit, a travel cloak, flint and tinder, a very sharp knife, rope, and a number of small but carefully folded packages. Oh, and some poison, and blinding powders included.

Ca-Clack, Ca-Clack

That clack of the train on the tracks was like the ticking of a clock it was so regular; tick-tock, tick-tock. If he thought on it too long, it got on his nerves.

Prey settled back into the crook of the train bench, leaning the back of his skull against the window. There were few other passengers in the carriage, only another seven. Prey checked none of those seven had moved seats or were looking suspicious. They hadn't.

None of them knew who he was, or had any immediate nefarious schemes which might involve him either, (he'd checked their surface thoughts when walking past to his seat). As to the seats, of course they were the farthest at the back.

Ca-Clack, Ca-Clack

Prey absently looked up at the carriage ceiling, unseeing. He hadn't even waited one day after getting permission from Screech to leave. He wasn't sure if he waited that he wouldn't change his mind. And Prey didn't want to change his mind right now, although he probably would later, so he was committing now and trying to force himself to go through with it later.

Prey wasn't honestly sure if his self imposed strategy would work, or if he would still end up turning tail right as he was about to get there.

Hopefully, Lemon would help him with the committing bit. It's why he'd brought her along. She didn't need to be here, at least not for any practical reason. Prey was perfectly capable in theory of doing this himself. In *theory*. So on his orders, she'd cancelled her dinner out with Randy Pickaxe, and met him at the train station within the hour.

Prey let himself be distracted for a minute with scornfully scoffing at Randy inside his head, but that didn't last and then it was back to the rocking of the train carriage and staring up at the wooden celling boards. The varnish was starting to peel on some of them in places.

Ca-Clack, Ca-Clack

Tick-tock, tick-tock. Tick-tick, tock-tock. Minute by minute, they were steadily getting closer, the train tracks unswervingly leading to one destination.

'This is it. I'm finally going to go finish it and cross number three off The List. It's taken sixty-one years, ten months, and sixteen days, give or take a few.' He *thought* he'd kept pretty good track of the days in Dreverton, but it was always possible he'd missed a few. There had been some dark, insane patches where it was hard to stay focused in the *now* of his cell.

Ca-Clack, Ca-Clack

'Well, better late than never. I can do it.' Prey fidgeted, tugging at his ribbon, 'I, maybe I can't do it. This was a bad idea-No. Cut that

out. Commit. You're going to do this.'

Prey angrily slapped himself, hard enough to make his cheek sting. He was having doubts already? Literally in the same line of thought after telling himself he could do it? How pathetically weak was that? He couldn't even stay resolute for fifteen seconds. That was not acceptable. His cheek hurt quite a bit more than he'd intended from his hoof.

'Serves you right crybaby.'

Right, from now on, he was going to stay firm. When next the doubts came, and they would, he'd push them out of his head. Prey fixed that in his forethoughts. He was on the train, he'd gotten the holidays signed off, Gloom and Crimson were on a mission and he'd never get another chance like this. It was too late to back out now, he was doing this, and that was that.

Ca-Clack, Ca-Clack

Tick-tock, tick-tock. Prey let out the sigh he was holding, scowled at the ceiling from his bench, and tried not to count the seconds.

"Raven, magpie fly away, Scarecrow, keep at bay~", He hummed without thinking about it, then caught himself.

On instinct, Prey hurriedly glanced around the carriage, as if the scarecrow golem could've crawled out from under one of the benches. But of course it hadn't, he was in a train carriage, one he and Lemon had already checked for danger and traps.

'Enough of this, get a grip already! Just think about something else. The bodies from the morgue, how can I best utilize the horns of the deceased unicorns? Use them to test the defence arrays? How about replacing an external channel component of a machine? What would that do?'

Prey made himself focus on thinking about his ongoing plans and experiments instead. He was stuck on this train, so he would use the time productively. Time was his most precious resource after all.

Usually Prey didn't have to tell himself twice. Usually he crammed

every second into every minute. Usually he cared much more about his precious time.

Usually. This was not something usual he was travelling to do. It was not usual at all.

Ca-Clack, Ca-Clack

---<O>---

Humpty dumpty sat on a wall,
When something inside started to stir,
Down humpty fell, down to his death,
And from within, all the yoke and the mess,
That little something, took its first breath.

---<O>---

Where could Prey said to have been born? Where had he taken his first breath? The rotting bowels of the Deeper Green maybe? When had he finished fully crawling out of the shattered eggshell of what had once been Gossamer, the lamb his mother had raised? Gossamer had fallen, and broken, and died, and the twisted little pieces left had been cobbled together and made...

Prey.

He was Prey. That was all he was, all he ever had been, and all he didn't want to be. Prey was Prey.

A rose by any other name is still a rose. A killer is a killer. A murderer is a murderer. A failure is a failure.

Prey was Prey. The little lamb who still wished he were Gossamer, and Gossamer who's only want had been for things to go back to being just a little cabin on a failing farm, built on the edge of the wilds. To have things go back to that way for forever, or a week, a day, or even for only a single hour.

But life is uncaringly cruel, and it has never given back one inch of what it takes. The greatest triumphs to the most wretched grief strewn tragedies, life just doesn't care. All is dust, time never goes

back, and life rolls uncaringly on.

Gossamer died where monsters are born, Prey was born where monsters die, and it was time for Prey to return to the place of his birth.

Prey was going home.

They had arrived.

Twenty-one hours spent onboard trains. It would take another twenty-one hours to return to Canterlot too. The train would be departing the small rural station at six-fifteen this afternoon. That gave him just under ten hours to do what he had to here.

The morning sun played in shifting swathes across the land as the thick clouds blew by high overhead. Wind, with sun and shade in equal measure. The air wasn't warm, but it still held a restless humidity to it.

Prey stood on the rough cut plank platform, and breathed in the air. His eyes were closed. He felt the Longridge at his back despite the closest peak's base still being a mile distant. He smelt of grass, the last of the seasons dying flowers, dirt, and of course, farming. This was a border town outside of Equestria. Their livelihood was farming the tough and uncooperative wild lands. This train station was the last on the line, the train tracks terminating here in the border town of Straperdale.

Straperdale. The only border town to survive the Resistance War which had officially ended sixty-one years ago, although in Equestria they didn't call it a 'war'. And except it also hadn't really ended then either. The war had really ended fifty-seven years ago.

Prey heard the buzzing of insects somewhere. Flies, or some of the numerous stinging insects which weren't helpful and productive bees.

Prey opened his eyes. Lemon stood silently to the side and waited, cloak, sunhat, and saddlebags on. Only one other passenger had

been left on the carriage when they'd disembarked. A grey donkey, who'd boarded only two stops back.

Slowly, Prey let his eyes pan across the border town, and beyond, he saw a vivid green fuzzy blanket laid across the land in the distance. Trees. He didn't hurry, he didn't rush, and he kept his breathing even. Straperdale was not as he remembered it. In structure it was similar to Alfalfa Dale had been, but conversely that meant it also wasn't like how he'd last seen it. It wasn't the Straperdale he'd known. This Straperdale might as well be a completely different location.

This border town had walls; uneven in direction, height, and repair, but those were still walls. Only about the height of the house roofs, but walls nonetheless. A barrier of wood, with stretches of uncut stone foundations, rough and ready wooden pegs visible in place of nails, and clearly built and added to by many different sets of hooves.

On the border, you were always fighting against nature and had to use what you could get. A dusty hard packed dirt road wound between the houses. Wood and dry thatch buildings, all simple and built without any kind of helpful magic. Stubborn grass tussocks sprouted in places where people didn't step, the level of the dirt path worn down slightly lower where it skirted these tussocks. And towards the middle of the miss-matched town walls, a broken watch tower stood craning above all other roof tops.

The tower wasn't anything special, indeed it wasn't even solid, just a timber framework you could see into from all directions, with a couple of ladders to climb up to the crow nest at the top. Which was broken and burnt. A lightning strike, if Prey had to guess. How incredibly unlucky. The rickety structure looked years old. Evidently, it wasn't ever needed if no one had gotten around to repairing it.

If Prey had to bet, the watch tower had been built when the townsfolk had first returned. But it hadn't ever been needed, and over the years, its importance had waned until it vanished altogether.

Prey breathed, making himself keep it steady and rhythmic. In and out.

He kept it up until it came easily and the trembling in his hooves stopped. He couldn't back out now. There was only going forwards. He was finally here. Well, it wasn't exactly *here* he was aiming for, he and Lemon still had a long three hour trot ahead of them, but this was still *almost* here.

Then a goat kid ran passed with two lambs bigger than Prey in tow, all raucously shouting in pre-adolescent voices. Prey's careful breathing hitched in his throat for a second. The rear most lamb, a scruffy ewe with brown wool, skidded and blinked back at him.

"Hey, who're you? I don't know you." She accused in curiosity.

Prey didn't say a word as he stared at her. Children. Non-ponies. Children living normal childhoods. They all looked physically older than him. Prey wished he was wearing the sunhat, and not Lemon Pink, but she was the pink unicorn in a town with only a couple of other earth ponies, and he'd thought she would stand out the most.

"Whose that Tuffy?"

"Dunno', she hasn't said yet. She's got a nice ribbon though."

"C'mo*ooon*! You're supposed to chase."

"Yeah Tuffy, chase! Chase!"

And like that, the three children decided he was boring and off they went again in their game, no doubt getting in as much fun as they could before it was time to do their big list of daily farm chores.

Prey swallowed dryly. He looked at the townsfolk out and about in Straperdale, contributing to packing the dusty dirt of the road down even firmer, and every single one of them busy with tasks relating to farming and making a living. There was no slacking off if you wanted a harvest to eat next month, and little leisure available.

Prey saw a cart of straw being pulled, a stack of planks carried across two donkeys' backs, a basin of balanced water, rakes and

spades carried over shoulders, and more. No doubt they'd all been up since the dawn.

All normal people. Sheep, goats, cows, donkeys, all those who rarely, if ever, lived in Equestria. Here, Prey wasn't the odd one out. He didn't receive the disbelieving looks. Only mild surprise because he wasn't recognisable as anyone's child. In a small close packed community such as this, everyone at least vaguely knew everyone else.

Here, Prey was a nobody and a somebody. He fitted in instead of standing out for being born a sheep instead of a pony. And while Prey didn't care about what the arrogant privileged in Canterlot thought whenever one of them deigned to even notice him, his still couldn't help but notice.

Prey could fit in here, but it wouldn't be real. He wasn't from here. This border town was new to him. Hell, he'd been alive before it had been restored. He could go around the town for a day and not stand out, but he couldn't ever be part of them. He'd know, even if no one else did.

Prey shoved the idea from him, stomach squirming. The thought of pretending, here and now, nauseated him. Fake fake *fake*.

Standing here with the uneven platform beneath his hooves, dust in his nostrils, having returned, and looking at it all-Just no. Prey hadn't come here to fake it.

"Come on Lemon," Prey's voice was reedy in his own ears, "There's a long walk ahead of us yet."

The familiar wall of the Longridge loomed at Prey's back as they walked over rocky grass. The peaks weren't as tall, nor snow capped as those of the Ridgeback had been, which was a continuation of the huge mountain chain forming the thousand mile long wall effectively making up the West border of Equestria. The Ridgeback was further North up the mountain chain, where the land grew colder and the trees turned into pines.

It was entirely due to the randomness of nature, which had formed these mountains in eons past, that the land here was comparatively warmer and drier than the land up North beside the Ridgeback. The downside was, it was drier.

You could live through the winters here without much fear of freezing, but in turn, your fears were about drought instead. There were no weather teams or towers here on the border, you'd have to cross the mountain range back into Equestria to get that benefit.

In the distant past, Prey remembered the village of Rushweed begging their earth pony landlord, Green Fields, to try convincing Equestria to send rain in times of hardship. Prey could only remember Equestria ever listening once, back when Prey was four years old, even though Green Fields was one of their own, a pony. Or perhaps Green Fields had never tried that hard to be convincing. After all, the villagers had only ever known what he'd told them.

People had slowly starved. Prey remembered so clearly what it was like, the constant sore gnawing gurgling hole in your insides. And what was more, you *saw* it.

You saw it in the faces of villagers, cheeks slowly turning sallow, work cloaks hanging looser everyday, the father and the mother goat going hungry to feed their five kids. At those times, everyone was just trying to make it to the next crop, each day trying to scavenge what additional food you could from the also struggling land around you, while everyone else was doing the same. You couldn't live solely on grass, not for long. Assuming there was even any left with a drought going on.

Those had been tense times of slow building hunger. It was always *there*.

When you woke, when you went to sleep, when you were digging at the hard dirt of your failing fields, legs weak, the sun cooking you in your wool, the edge of the hunger getting hungrier was always there. Prey knew hunger, and he also knew of *hunger*. Hunger can never be defeated. It can only ever be driven away for a time. But it'll always be back.

And it was all so achingly, disgustingly, terrifyingly familiar. The constant rocks strewn in the patchy grass as you placed your hooves down, those little hook briar weeds which always got stuck in your wool, the expansive floppy leaves of hogsweed bushes covered in vicious stinging hairs, the way the uneven rising and falling of the land hid what was right around the next bend from you, but not what was *three* bends ahead, and the scent of the reddish dusty earth.

So familiar. Yet so... *not* familiar. Prey realised he was slowing, and made himself pick up the pace again.

'Breathe. Stay focused. There's no backing out now. Just keep walking, one hoof after another.'

At his side, Lemon Pink said nothing as she matched his pace, eyes ahead on their path and watchful for snakes. Not that there was a real path, or at least nothing trodden. But in Prey's head their path, with all its misleading windings and rocky overgrown dips, lay as clear as if it had been scorched into the earth.

Prey caught himself breathing too fast, and involuntarily slowing down again. 'No, keep going. You can't stop. There's no backing out now coward.'

Angrily burying the ridiculous fear, Prey made himself walk even faster, head raised and eyes forward.

It wasn't nearly long enough before he realised he was slowing again. There were caterpillars crawling in his stomach, and he'd lost control of his breathing again. Prey buried his weakness under more anger again, and continued leading the way, Lemon treading along easily next to him in silence.

There seemed to be a lot of bees around here somewhere. Except Prey didn't remember there ever being any fields of bees. Wasps, flies, and other nasties, but nothing as helpful as bee hives. Wait a moment, was the droning buzz just in his head?!

Prey blinked out of the buzzing hum, and realised he'd yet again begun to falter. And worse, the caterpillars wouldn't go away.

'Coward! Zoma'Grika useless coward. Move! No more excuses, keeping moving.'

When next Prey caught himself the time after that, he realised he'd stopped completely. Just standing there, in the middle of the path while Lemon Pink waited.

And the time after that, it was because he'd started crying.

It was hot. The sun was directly overhead. The clouds had been burnt off. Humidity squatted in the air.

The thick blanket of trees spread in a layer over the horizon wasn't so distant anymore. They appeared so vividly green and dense in the light. The sun shouldn't be shining. This wasn't the time for sunshine. But still Celestia's uncaring sun shone down. There was no rain or gentle shadows to hide the details. It was just like it had been sixty-one years ago, a repeat, laid bare under the harsh shining sun.

Prey sniffed messily and rubbed his eyes. The scars on his cheeks felt hot, but there would be no more tears. No more time to be a crybaby, because he was here. Finally here.

Prey stood on a slight rise, thick with weeds, and looked around from his vantage point. At a first glance, it could've been overlooked. Just another stretch of uneven land like the rest, with rocks, reddish dirt, scrubby trees and bushes, with a hill there, and a dip here.

It looked like any other piece nature, wild and messy and untamed. That blocky shape covered in weeds was simply an oddly shaped outcrop of rock, that rotting clump of small stumps covered in mould simply a cluster of dead saplings-

-And then no, you looked twice and saw the subtle differences.

That was a crumbled wall under the weeds, those stumps half burnt

posts. And once you spotted those, the rest of what you were looking snapped into sharp focus.

The ruins of a small village, razed and burnt decades ago, and now the ruins mostly overtaken by nature. There were no walls more than half a hoof in height left upright, old foundations merely creating a suggested outline beneath grass and creepers of buildings which had once stood. There really wasn't much, but it was like an optical illusion. Once you'd seen it, you couldn't unsee it.

Prey's eyes tracked over where the village of Rushweed had once stood. His memory filled in all the details that simply weren't there.

Over there had once been the village's mill, now nothing. And that open weed strewn space had been the square which'd doubled as the market every second week. That angular clump of stone under brambles had been the corner of old Merry's house with its badly fitted door that was askew, and that round impression there in the dirt was the wheel off Mrs. Barely's cart, right where she'd always parked it beside where her house used to stand.

It was all so clear, so solid, but yet also so stilted to Prey. It felt like he was walking through water as he started down the rise, but he wasn't, everything was solid and real. He didn't know what to call the sensation as he began to pick his way through the low scattered village ruins. He was vaguely and yet also acutely aware of Lemon Pink staying one step behind him as he led.

But Rushweed itself wasn't his final destination, no, that lay beyond, another half-hour's trot. The invisible buzzing bees were back, but the caterpillars in his stomach had gone still. They'd gone into cocoons, and were now waiting to hatch.

It wasn't far. Prey's hooves knew the way. They carried his body there without his input, as if he'd walked it a hundred times, and not only that once.

"Oh..."

The exhale left Prey, and his strength went with it.

He sat on the dry dirt, legs shaking, just within the border of Rushweed's ruins. He stared at a bare patch of dirt and tough grass, just like any other around it. There was nothing there, nothing there to indicate how wrong it was. There should've been something, *anything* there to indicate where a shrine, a grave, a marker, even just a lump should be.

There wasn't a single thing in the world to show where a ewe with cream wool had lain down and never gotten up. There was no fire now, no smoke, just the sun beating down against his wool. All it takes is one or two breaths. But there was nothing here. Not even a single old bone. Nature had long ago reclaimed what belonged to it, the cycle of life and death rolling unceasingly on.

"Oh..."

Oh indeed.

A long time later, Prey wiped his stinging eyes clear with the back of an ear. It didn't seem to help. Everything still had a blurred visage of water to it.

He hurt, wrung out like limp string but also brittle. He kept having to swallow, but the lump in his throat had stayed firm throughout.

The sun pounded on his aching head. Prey didn't deserve the right to mourn, it had been Gossamer's mother who'd died, not his. Prey didn't have a mother.

He swallowed a hiccup, ineffectually wiped his stinging eyes again, and pushed himself onto shaky hooves. Tough grass stems rasped together briefly as a waning breeze briefly stirred the hot air.

Prey shakily turned himself towards the far off trees. It wasn't far to go, and he was almost there. He took one step, glanced back, and broke down crying again.

---O---

His chest hurt, and it wasn't just his heart. His lungs were physically

sore from crying. His eyes were stinging even worse now, and gummy eyelashes kept getting stuck in his eye. He couldn't keep doing this, he needed to keep moving, otherwise he'd pine away on this spot and never move again. He was such a pathetic crybaby.

Prey tired wiping his eyes yet again for the hundredth time, the lump still clogging up his throat. He heaved in a deep breath, and then and only then, happened to finally catch sight of Lemon Pink.

Beneath the shade cast by the sunhat, Prey saw wet tear tracks down the pink fur of her cheeks, and she was breathing heavily. For a moment, Prey could only feel confusion.

Why was Lemon Pink crying? What did she have to grieve over?

Then, blistering fury. How dare Lemon Pink cry! How dare she pretend!

"False, lying, faithless, treacherous, d-disloyal, Grhaaar!" Prey spat, inarticulate. How *dare* she cry? She hadn't even been alive back then, she knew nothing! How dare she act like she had a right to cry?

Lemon started, blinking wet eyes, "I, what? I don't, I don't-" She rasped.

"She wasn't your mother, she was Gossamer's! You, you, you filthy lying scum! Fake! You're a faker, a mimic!"

In his near blind moment of rage, Prey reached out for the kill rune on Lemon's neck. Almost. He crest the wave of blind emotion and there, teetering on the peak, realised his irrational instability. The wave turned to ice water and washed down his spine, drowning the worms squirming in his stomach.

Prey stumbled back, while Lemon still continued to suck in heaving lungful's of air. She looked lost, uncertain, her face blank and confused beneath the sun hat.

"I don't-I didn't ever, but I remember. I remember it. Yes, no not mine, yours, but also mine. I remember." She stuttered blankly, more tears dripping off the curve of her cheeks. "It hurts."

Prey tried to swallow past the damned lump. it didn't work this time either, but still he persevered and got out the words; "Those are my memories, not yours. Those weren't ever, they're *not*... you're just projecting. It never happened to you."

"But I remember."

Prey rapidly blinked stinging eyes, the sun and headache making everything hazy. He searched for more words. None came, because Lemon's plaintive words were true.

She remembered. She hadn't been there, but Lemon had Prey's memories of when he had been there. Prey had created her mind from a blend of his own memories and the few left intact of her own. Lemon intellectually knew the memories of the event hadn't happened to her, and that she was only remembering it from Prey's perspective, but what is a person if not a cumulation of memory?

Her words were the truth. She remembered. She'd grown up in an orphanage as Night Watcher, and now standing here on this spot, with the ruins of Rushweed behind here, she remembered the death of a mother that had never been hers.

It wasn't the same, but it wasn't completely different either. Whatever Prey said or did, he knew at the end of the day, Lemon Pink would still remember it all.

Prey swung his head away, half over balancing as he stumbled. The real world of humid air, sun, hard dirt, and weed covered ruins felt disconnected. It was so surreal that Prey almost laughed without knowing why. It was just that, this, *everything*, it was all so textbook dramatic and tragic that it had to be a joke. A bad joke. But no, it wasn't a play or an act, it was happening.

'It's all just like breezie dust in the wind. Everything's a thread about to snap with the stitches falling apart. Heh.'

Prey focused on just breathing and getting his headache under control.

Five minutes... ten minutes... more? Something like that, but he

wasn't sure with any certainty. He just stood and breathed and gulped and tried not to cry again until he could talk and think.

"I'm, we're not s-stopping here..." His voice came out warbled, "...Not arrived yet. Still need to go o-on to the f-farm. Just that bit f-f-further. C'mon."

---{O}---

Many say what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. The only ones who believe that are those who have never experienced all the horrific ways life can break a person.

Ponies advocate that by being brave and facing your fears, you'll come out the other side better for it. Such advice only held true for mundane fears, and sometimes, not even then.

Facing a phobia of wasps, and facing one of basilisks were two very different things. However, sometimes, the sentiment behind the words could still hold true.

The problem though was simple; what if facing you fear doesn't work? What if it's the thing that breaks you instead? Because the truth everyone always seemed to overlook was that life will always win in the end. *Always*. It's inevitable. So before you face your fears, assuming you have a choice in the matter, you need to ask yourself: 'Am I prepared to risk finding out if today is the day life takes the final win?'

---{O}---

'It's not today.' Prey thought in a kind of dreadful relief as he placed the third and final engraved stone down.

He was wrung out and emotionally spent, but it was at least that one weight was off his shoulders. He hadn't broken today.

Cracked and twisted, deformed and bent maybe, but he hadn't shattered. Returning here to Rushweed had cost him, and it wasn't a price he'd been willing to pay, but he'd paid it anyway and he was still standing.

'Not today. I can keep going.' Prey brushed dry dirt from his legs and pushed himself back upright from placing the last stone.

The first thing Prey had recognised, stepping around the head high thorny bushes, was the old well. There was precious little else remaining which he could've spotted. Completely covered in weeds and overgrown, but the well was still the only structure which had been made of stone on the farm. Prey's heart ached when he saw it, but that was it. It didn't break.

There was nothing left of the cabin, not even rusted nails since the logs had been joined with wooden pegs instead.

Prey sifted through where the one room wooden cabin had once stood, turning over the dirt and picking through the stones and weeds to see if he couldn't find anything which might've somehow miraculously survived.

His digging unearthed a few chips of dirt encrusted broken pottery, a little bit of rusted something even he couldn't identify, and an old dull sewing needle. And that was it, even though he continued searching.

The fields which the three of them had slaved for so long over were gone though, not even recognisable as fields any longer. It was just land now. Nature had reclaimed it all. There was no farm left, but that was okay, after Rushweed Prey hadn't expected anything more. So he didn't break down again.

He had ignored the hatched butterflies in his stomach. He had walked without his runt legs betraying him again. And he had successfully stood in the middle of it, and looked, and seen, and been able to carefully immortalize everything in his memory for later. Prey knew he'd want to torture himself with this again in the future.

'I never learn my lesson.'

But he'd still come here today knowing this, because he needed to

cross it off The List. For his own good.

'For my own good.' Prey repeated to himself, and even half believed it.

Prey lifted the three-quaters full water skin Lemon Pink had hoofed him, and gulped deeply. The sun beat down on his face until he finished and lowered his head with an exhale. He absently wiped his mouth on the wool of his shoulder, looking at the ground before him.

Imbedded in the hard earth were the three flattish stones which Lemon had used her magic to carve words into. Simply put, gravestones, but graves without anything buried beneath them. Because, putting it simply once again, there was nothing left in the world left to bury.

The carved words were crude and capitalized, and even that hadn't been easy for Lemon to manage, but it wasn't like anyone would ever see these stones. Prey had seen no signs on the trail of anyone from Straperdale venturing into the remains of Rushweed, let alone out to here and closer to the trees. Here, the land undisturbed by sentient hooves. Inside a year or two, these grave markers would be buried under wind and dirt, and forgotten from history. So in other words, this was meaningless.

Prey had Lemon make them anyways.

Three badly engraved stones. Nowhere near enough for what they represented, but few gravestones ever were. Three names; Fleece, Gossamer, and the name of their mother. Their father wasn't worthy of any remembrance. The name Yarn was worthless.

Prey sat down with his back to the well. The stones were so thickly overgrown he could rest against it without discomfort. With the sun directly overhead, it didn't provide any shade, but even that was fine by Prey. He wasn't going anywhere. Not just yet.

Lemon had pushed aside some of the thorny vines trailing over the

edge and down into the well, but decided it wasn't worth the effort for the no doubt dirty water. The water skins held enough for their return. She was standing off under one of the scrubby trees which had grown in the last sixty-one years, looking off into the distance, doing her own thing.

A monster or predator might come along right now. If so, it would die. Or Lemon and him would simply leave. The tree line was closer here, but still far enough away. It didn't concern Prey, because it wasn't the start of the Deeper Green. No, that was much further in. Those trees were just the outliers. The Deeper Green didn't start until the sun no longer touched the forest floor, and you looked back and couldn't see the way out.

Prey untied his ribbon, closed his eyes, and waited. Just... for however long it took. He didn't know what he was waiting for, he was just a little runt who should be long dead, but he'd know it once it arrived. He'd finally come back, and he could cross this from The List. He could try to move on.

Prey breathed out, let it go, and took a new breath.

'Humpty dumpty sat on a wall,
When something inside started to stir,
Down fell humpty, down to his death,
And from within all the yoke and the mess,
That little something took its first breath.'

The only thing Prey took with him when the left, after re-tying his ribbon, was the old sewing needle. The metal had somehow survived this long, so he wasn't leaving it behind. He'd find somewhere to store it once he got back. Prey knew he shouldn't be taking a reminder, he'd come back so he could move on, but it was just the one thing. Besides, he didn't want to forget, even if he could. He only wanted to move on.

Prey didn't say anything to Lemon despite the hours the return trot took, and she didn't say anything to him. They just walked, each attending to their own thoughts. Prey's hooves hurt mildly, and the

beginnings of afternoon shade had begun to pool behind bushes and scraggly trees by the time the first outlaying farms around Straperdale came back into their sight, followed by the ramshackle barricade walls around the border town itself.

There wasn't a road to follow, but there was a simple track in the weeds around the closest farm's most Southern field, (filled with half-grown potato plants), so they followed that instead around of simply trampling across the farmer's crops.

Looking out over it, the ploughed fields were more a selection of rectangles and oblongs fitted together than the picture postcard patchwork you saw in Equestria. Out here you planted where the ground was flat, meaning humps and dips often cut into the fields, meaning the ploughed furrows had to go around.

Neither did the fields have fences, since there wasn't a point, just shallow ditches dug in the hard earth to help catch any rain when it finally fell. When you live out here, there isn't really a fence you could build which might stop any boar which came all the way from the forest foraging. You had to be alert and chase them off instead. Birds didn't care about fences either. And any monsters which came wouldn't be looking for potatoes.

For these farms, a solid door you could bar was much more important than a fence.

Or if you were lucky enough to live inside Straperdale itself, you got the additional protection of those homemade town walls Prey supposed.

Lemon slowed a step next to him. Prey glanced up, following her eyeline. She was looking towards the closest thatched farm house. Prey saw movement, it looked like someone going back inside, but his damaged eyesight couldn't quite make out the fine details at that distance.

He slowed down, "What is it?"

"I think someone, a child, was keeping watching for us, and has gone back inside to inform whoever it was that set them to watch,

Prey." She answered.

Prey was so utterly drained that this information didn't even worry him. He'd spent everything and now all that was left was a mild; "Oh. Okay. That's probably not good."

Who would be watching for Prey? Also, since Lemon was still wearing the notice-me-not sunhat, it was unlikely they'd been waiting for Lemon Pink's return, because they should've just dismissed her when they'd first seen her in town. But someone had still noticed, and someone had seen them leave town and in which direction, and that same someone had set a lookout.

Lemon Pink subtly used her magic to undo a side pocket on one of the saddle bags, and while using her body to block the view from the house, floated out a sheathed dagger. She also had the one hidden in the collar of her loose travel cloak, hood back because of the heat, but that would not impede her draw. With the advantage of magic, why only use one knife at a time if you had the skill to manage joint levitation? Plus, she also wore the plain looking electrite choker at her throat, boosting her magic.

Prey? There wasn't much he could do head on. He was a runt and a lamb. Once again, runes were only good if you'd had time to prepare the ground ahead of time. He could've made a runed knife, but that meant risking getting close enough to use it. He was a runt, with weak and short legs. He was good at sneaking, but they'd already been spotted.

But all of this was moot. You never willingly walked into a potential fight if you could avoid it.

The best choice right now was to turn around and walk away. Use cover, and circle around and return to Straperdale from another direction. And while Prey wanted to know who had been waiting for him and what they knew, he wasn't going to risk a conflict with an unknown when he could simply avoid it.

"We're going around." Prey said. He was just turning around to retrace their path between the fields when there was another movement at the farmhouse door. It opened, and someone came out

with a child in tow. He saw a mix of brown and whiteish fur.

Prey squinted. The details were blurry to his eyes. "Who?"

"Adult goat, female, not armed I think, and a kid-"

"Hoy there!" The mother goat raised her voice to bleat out across the field. She didn't sound hostile or upset.

'What *now*?'

Prey motioned to Lemon. She raised her hoof and waved back to the brown and white goat, but didn't call out. They stayed where they were on the edge of the field, forcing the goat to choose. Either come to them if she wanted to talk, or stay where she was.

It seemed she chose the former, because she started trundling across the potato field, easily picking her way through the plant rows with what was nearly certainly her child following. As the details come into focus, it looked even more certain. Their coats obviously shared a heritage. Prey made another motion to Lemon. It meant 'wait and see'.

The mother goat's horns were short and snub, and Prey spotted a ring on one horn. Just plain tin, but it proved she wasn't a widow, so her husband was obviously just out working at the moment. She wore an old work belt across her chest, with loops for tools. There was a large wooden mixing spoon in one.

The kid was a gangly youth, who waved to them as he and his mother walked up.

Prey zeroed in on the mother's thoughts the moment she trotted into range: '-what were they looking for out there? S'nothing out that a'ways-'

"A'hey there. Saw you pass by the farm tis' morning. Where might you have been off to? There's nothing much out that way." She asked, eyes sliding off Lemon Pink, meaning by elimination she was addressing Prey.

'-she's looking a might rough. She? No wait, he's a little ram, not an

ewe-'

Prey blinked tired eyes at her. Despite the time it had taken to walk back, Prey knew he hadn't cleaned himself up sufficiently to look great. It was a pleasant surprise to find someone who correctly identified him for once, even if she was raising one sceptical eyebrow at his ribbon for not matching.

"You're right about there not being much out that way, so we've come back." Prey said, not answering her real question.

"Yah, there's nothing out there and you're not supposed to go near the trees anyways." The kid butted in with all the tact of a child to importantly inform Prey, another child to his eyes.

His mother absently raised a hoof and rubbed his head between the nubs of his growing horns, "That's right Jerry, and don't you be letting me catch you forgetting it again. Oh, this one here's my Jerico, and I'm Cally, nice to meet you both."

"Nice to meet you both Jerico and Mrs. Cally." Prey lied. He didn't care who they were, and would never see either of them again after five minutes time. Nor did he introduce himself, and Lemon stayed silent. As long as she didn't do anything to make either goat focus on her, such as talking, they'd continue to keep dismissing her in favour of Prey.

"Well if'n you didn't find what you came to town for out there, you probably weren't looking for Redwood either were you?" Cally asked.

"Redwood?" Prey prompted to get her to think about whomever that was.

'-don't know him? Then they're not here in town to see the foul grumps moldy display then-'

"Thought you might'n be looking for him since you went out that way, but no worries it seems. You're not missing much, take it from me, the museum isn't worth the time."

The kid Jericho actually echoed his mother's previous thoughts, '-I

don't like Mr. Redwood he shouted at us-'

"Sorry, museum? And why would us going out that way indicate we were looking for this Redwood?" Prey asked.

'-he speaks very nicely for a lamb-', Cally thought, raising one bushy brow:

"You didn't know? Only thing out that way is'n an old village from that war. Just ruins now. Thought you might've gotten the wrong message, being from out of town an' all, and gone looking for the museum out there. It's back in town, an' Redwood owns it. He doesn't like showing it to people though. He doesn't like much of anything at all."

Cally bleated a quick laugh there, "Nothing new there, he wouldn't like his own hooves if'n they didn't get him places."

A museum, and she'd indicated it was about the war. But a museum, here? On the border? That didn't seem likely.

"Well I wasn't here for that, but perhaps this museum might be worth a look anyways. Where did you say it was?" Prey asked.

"You sure you want to go there? It's not really worth it, an' I'm sure Redwood'll try to charge you an admission. He never lets anyone in otherwise." Cally's eyes traced down to the golden tracer bands on Prey's forelegs:

'-perhaps that's fine for them though. That there's real gold unless I miss my guess-'

"But if'n you're set anyways to have a looks anyways, Jericho can show you the way." She offered.

"Awww but mom-"

"None of that. You're not doing anything useful and you can go off ta' play with Itty and Vello afterwards." Cally interrupted Jericho's whine, tone that of a no-nonsense mother.

'They didn't even know about the war back in Equestria. For some

reason, I'd expected they would've forgotten about it here too because this isn't the original Straperdale.' Prey thought.

Did he really want to attend this museum, though? After what had just happened back at the remains of the farm or should he just leave, consider his duty fulfilled, and never return. But the reasoning could work the other way too, since he was never going to return.

He rubbed his fetlock across his face, "Thank you very much Mrs. Cally, that would be... 'appreciated'."

The goat gave him a second look, but he mustered up a bland smile and she dismissed it, "You're welcome. I hope you find whatever you's looking for."

"Thank you again, and I hope your crops prosper."

"The rain will come eventually." Cally answered philosophically, nodding farewell to Prey. She still didn't more than subconsciously register Lemon Pink as being there, but not as a part of the conversation.

"Right this way. Just follow me." Jericho chirped, already thinking of finding his friends Itty and Vello after he'd discharged his duty.

Redwood was an earth pony, and he glared at them when Jericho pointed him out, before the kid quickly scampered away. Redwood's fur and mane were rough, there were bags under his eyes, and Prey faintly smelled home brewed cider coming off of him. He looked to probably be forty or fifty.

An earth pony. The only pony race you ever found in border towns like these. Pegasi and unicorns wouldn't deign to descend to the level of the locals. But even so, as an earth pony, Redwood seemed to be well off. Or well off by the level of the locals.

After having seen the opulence of Canterlot first hoof and the wastage that went on there, Prey doubted he would ever judge anywhere he went by any other level from now on. But still,

Redwood was well off, evidenced in no small part by the fact that they'd found him sitting on his porch, instead of out working. If you had the time to sit at home during the middle of the day instead of labouring over your fields, then you were well off.

Plus, nearly nowhere else in Straperdale had a porch. What actual practical use was a porch on a house? Add to that the faint scent of alcohol, ait affirmed Prey's assessment.

Redwood glared down at Prey from his seat on the porch, dismissing Lemon Pink as just a nobody because of the runed sunhat once again. Prey didn't back off though, not when he had Lemon Pink next to him, a unicorn, ready against anything the earth pony might do.

Prey decided to try to polite approach, even though he was not feeling polite in the slightest; "Good afternoon Mr. Redwood. I'm visiting Straperdale today, I'm from a village close by. I'm told you have a museum here, and we'd very much like to see it please."

"Which village?" Redwood asked grouchily.

And there went Prey's patience right on the first words out of the Earth pony's mouth, "Oh, it doesn't really have a name, not anymore. Hardly anyone lives there but it's home."

Redwood's baggy eyes narrowed, and he leaned forwards, "Don't you try getting lippy with me, because I know how to deal with bloody rascals. I'll tan your tail five different colours. It might take a while, since I've only found four so far."

Prey smiled innocently in confusion, "Um, sorry? Aren't you Mr. Redwood with the museum I heard about?"

Redwood didn't see beyond the smile. The ungroomed earth pony decided to emphasise his glare by glaring some more. His eyes kept sliding over the pink unicorn standing literally in front of him:

'-who the bloody Tartaras decided to start telling everyone with ears about the dumb museum? Actually, nah, going to show them bugger all and they can sod off-'

"Museum's closed today. Try again next week. Or don't. S'nothing a lamb's brave enough to see anyways." Redwood snorted, leaning back in his seat, happy that that would be that.

"Why? What's so secret in the museum?" Prey asked, reigning in his temper.

"Beat it, before I start beating you." Redwood snapped, but of course his thoughts still flashed to what he'd been asked:

'-bloody dad, I never wanted your old Guard junk and to get stuck in this bloody town for bloody ever-'

"We'd like to see this museum please." Prey announced. A passing cow pulling a cart filled with earth shook her head as she overheard the conversation but didn't stop.

Redwood's eye twitched, "Are you deaf? I said it's closed. C-l-o-s-e-d."

"Oh, it's about an admission fee isn't it? Don't worry, we can pay."

A loud snort left the scruffy stallion, "Fine. Ten bits, five each for you and your, er, your guardian or whathaveyou."

'-there. That'll finally get the little sod to sod off and leave me in peace-'

"Alright, here's your ten bits." Prey announced almost before Redwood could finish his thoughts.

'-no you stupid little sod, I meant sod off!-', Redwood began rising in frustration, but stopped halfway when he saw the coin pouch Prey was holding up. He hadn't seriously expected someone to have any gold to waste, he'd just been trying to fob Prey off.

'-seriously? Really going to pay ten bits to see dad's stupid collection? Whatever, I'll take it. A fool and his money are soon parted-'

"Ten bits up front. No refunds."

Prey removed a few coins from the pouch and then tossed the rest of the pouch to Redwood. He had no desire to get into hoof range of the pony. "Here you go."

Redwood suspiciously checked the pouch to see that, yes, it did indeed contain exactly ten bits. He accepted to money with ill-grace, especially considering he was overcharging them. Here on the border ten bits were worth a lot more than they were in Canterlot.

"Fine. The museum is round the back. Go around and I'll open the door." Redwood said, turning to go in through his front door.

Prey looked at him, then put on another smile, "We'll be right there." Unless the pony spitefully changed his mind between here and the walk to open the back door, he did intend to actually let them in and wasn't just shutting the door in their faces. And if Redwood did, it would go poorly for him.

'Or I could be the one to walk away right now. Is this really a good idea?' Prey asked himself.

Redwood's deceased father had been one of the filthy, lying, traitorous Border Guard, one of those who'd been there during the Resistance war, and apparently had created something of a memorial. It was lucky for Redwood he wasn't a retired Border Guard himself, but did Prey really need to see this? He'd been the Border Guard's hated enemy, and he doubted there could be much of worth seeing in this homemade museum out here on the border in the back of a grumpy stallion's house.

"Prey?" Lemon prompted, asking for confirmation of what they were doing. Leave or stay.

'It'd be smarter to walk away. I've already done enough to cross this off The List. Do I really want to hurt myself some more today? Dumb question, I'm a crybaby who doesn't know how to let go of the broken glass instead of clutching it tighter.'

"Well, it'd be a shame to waste those ten bits. Let's go in and see what lies this Border Guard left to his son."

Redwood's house, (as were all houses out on the border), was not a big one. Partly because you really didn't need to stuff it full of all those useless knickknacks ponies in Canterlot insisted were the bare basics, and partly because building without easy access to bricks and cement was a pain. Still, when Redwood opened the back door to let Prey and Lemon inside, Prey immediately gave the room a once over and saw that it was quite spacious for a house in a border town. Spacious, like you'd find in an attic. As in, wide but not high.

An attic may not have been the worst descriptor either. Prey's second glance after checking for any visible traps or ambushes showed him Redwood's father's 'museum'.

A strong smell of dry wood, old wax, and yellowed parchment permeated the air.

The room was split, with shelving going down each low wall, with tables set below each shelf and with space only to walk down the middle isle. There were no glass display cases, everything here was home made and wooden. On these tables and shelves were various objects and spread out on the tables were curling, yellowed papers pinned down with stones.

Prey saw an old khaki Border Guard uniform on display, looking like if you took it off its hook you could use it as a plank it was so stiff. There was a dull, scuffed helmet set on a shelf, a dented shin guard with a broken strap, some Guard badges, a rusted horseshoe, four crossbow bolts with their flights covered in dust, some twisted tree branch which was supposed to mean something, a canteen, tent pegs, a ripped hammock, and a blunted pocketknife among other things.

Prey continued to look around as the smell of age gathered around him. Redwood grunted, gesturing half-heartedly around at what his father had once thought was important but he himself obviously disliked:

"Welcome to the museum. You can look but don't touch anything. If you have any questions, don't ask."

It wasn't a hard story for Prey to piece together. A father who'd fought in the war and been scarred by what he'd seen, and had never been able to fully move on. He'd collected up this detritus and leftovers of a war which to Equestria had been nothing more than a silly skirmish beyond their borders, and built this memorial. An angry and distant father, unable to connect with his son or explain why he was the way he was, teenage rebellion, Redwood not living up to his fathers ideals and discipline, never reconciling before the old stallion died, and this here was the end result.

'And I'm indirectly responsible for a lot of that.' Prey thought, and felt a spark of vindictive satisfaction that at least one more Border Guard had suffered even if only a portion of what they deserved after the war.

"So what's this museum commemorating?" Prey asked as he walked up to a table, as if he didn't already know.

"I said no asking questions." Redwood repeated, voice rising, "And what does it look like? Look around. Or are ya' blind?"

Prey tilted his head, "Well, it *looks* like some old junk collected by a dead Border Guard after he betrayed all the villagers because they weren't born ponies, and then cried like a kitten when the Resistance absorbed the remains of those betrayed locals, followed by a year of pointless murder under the command of a unicorn Captain who should've been smothered at birth."

"I'm sorry what?" Redwood demanded, honestly stunned, and still in the process of transitioning into anger.

Prey peered over the top of a table, only just below his head height and looked at the yellowed page spread out on it, "I said that your father was a Border Guard."

The faded parchment was a letter, written by the mother of a Border Guard serving out here. On the bottom, a separate note had been tacked on, written in faded ink; '*A letter to the deceased Prv. Onyx Stronghoof. I knew him well. Never forget the real heroes.*'

Prey idly skimmed the letter written by a parent who obviously

hadn't a clue what life fighting against guerrilla strikes on the border actually meant. He didn't feel anything.

The scruffy stallion finally got his tongue to work, "You say what about my old dad?! I warned you, come'ere so I can tan your flank-"

Lemon Pink's toneless voice stopped Redwood on his first aggressive step forwards; "Please refrain from foolishly attempting violence."

'-bloody road apples, what the bloody Tartarus?!-'

Redwood stared at the unicorn standing there. Lemon Pink was literally *right there*, and somehow he'd tuned her out even though he'd known she was there all along. A unicorn wasn't someone you saw on the border. Immediate confusion and not a little fear shot through the stallion at the sudden situation.

Lemon Pink was still wearing the sunhat along with her travel cloak and the saddlebags, but now that she'd drawn attention to herself Redwood wouldn't be suddenly dismissing her again. She hadn't made any threatening moves to accompany her warning, she was just standing there, but Redwood still backed up.

'-what's going on? Why wasn't I noticing her? She's not doing anything though, but this here is my house-',

"What the buck do ya' think you're playing at?" He demanded, flipping from his initial scare back to anger.

The alacrity with which he could regain some of his previous aggression was almost impressive. But the stallion didn't forget all of his caution either. He stayed where he was, eyeing the two strangers he was only now realising he'd let into his house. Still though, Redwood was a stallion, one who was used to being angry and feeling he could enforce getting his own way.

"Well? I'm still waiting. You answer me before I beat both your flanks and kick you out my door." He barked.

Lemon blinked slowly at him, pushing up the brim of the sunhat, "We are looking at this museum, of course. We paid your admission fee, remember?"

Redwood stared at her some more, ears aggressively laid back, before an intelligent thought finally occurred to him; "*Why* is it you're so interested in my dad's old war stuff?" He asked Lemon Pink slowly.

"Part convenience. Part coincidence. Mostly though? Disappointment at historical accuracy." Lemon answered blandly.

"Historical accuracy my cutie mark. Tell me the real reason." Redwood loudly demanded. He was evidently one of those who thought raising your voice and shouting gave you additional power.

"She just did. You just don't believe it." Prey replied, having moved on to looking at a black and white map with lots of now ineligible pencil scribblings on it, and detailing one of the Resistance's four camps:

"Take this map for instance. Completely inaccurate. The camp wasn't set out like that, and was another mile West at the least through jungle, vines, thorns, snakes, poison patches, and basilisk's territory. Plus the estimates are way off. There were never that many fighters in any of the camps, you'd have needed to combine at least two to get those many."

"Right, that's it! I'm done with you crazies. Get you flanks outta' my house!"

Redwood tried to take a step forwards, tried to grab ahold of the rude lamb and shove both him and the weird mare out the door. Tried.

Redwood struggled, and then looked down. His hooves were stuck to the floor. Silver and red light leaked out from under the flat of his hooves and bubbled up around the edges, like he was standing in magical glue.

And as simply as that, right in the middle of his house, without any warning, the struggling stallion found himself trapped.

Redwood couldn't lift any one of his four legs, couldn't get any leverage. He was trapped there in the middle of the floor. There

was nothing for him to physically fight back against. Maybe if he had something to leverage himself against or grab... but he didn't. Lemon stood there, horn glowing silver, and held him helpless.

Just like that. Magic was so terribly unfair against those who had none.

Prey tilted his head back to address the taller Redwood, still smiling like he didn't have a care in the world, "Don't make me tie this ribbon onto you, because believe me, I am tempted. If you were a Border Guard, and not just the son of one, then... Well, you're not, so it doesn't matter. But please try to remain civil. We're both being civil, so you also try to be civil, understand? Because I can do uncivil too. Just relax, and be polite until we're done, and you can go back to being a bitter drunk failure after we're gone."

At no point there had Prey made a straight up threat, nor did he stop smiling, but now Redwood, trapped by Lemon Pink, took the words in a completely different light. This was his home. He'd thought he was safer, he'd thought he had at least some measure of control. It had never ever occurred to him that he might suddenly find himself being subjected to having his freedom stripped away under magical might.

"This here's my house. I can come and go as I please. Don't even try an' stop me." Redwood demanded, but he couldn't hide the undercurrent in his voice as he stood trapped there.

"Weren't you listening? When we're done. But seriously, you can relax, you're going to be fine. Seriously, stop worrying. Because if I lived each day like it was my last, my body count would be staggering." Prey lightly joked.

Redwood just stared at him bug eyed, ears pressed flat. '-a lamb, that's a lamb. Just a lamb, there's no way a lamb could actually mean any of that-'

Prey sighed tiredly, his false humour draining away. It had been a long, harrowing day, and this mask of unaffectness was weighing heavy:

"Or don't relax, it's not like it matters what you do. Very little matters. You won't be remembering this anyway." Prey turned away, going back to strolling along the shelves and tables, looking over the dusty, disused objects they held.

He kept on like that, disinterestedly skimming the shelves as he went around the room, until he got right to the center piece. There, hanging on the wall, were three wooden Resistance masks in a bundle. Masks of the blooded fighters. One had been painted a vicious staring red and black at one point, with a snaggle tooth, the other was cracked with pieces missing, only really half a mask really, and the last one at the back of the bundle was crude and unadorned, which was why it had been placed at the back, but it was...

"No way. No. Way. That's more than a coincidence, that shouldn't even-" Prey broke off, staring open mouthed up at the trio of masks. At his mask.

His mask. Prey didn't have enough left in him to feel honestly surprised. There it was on the wall, just like that. He jerked around to face Redwood. Somehow, Prey wasn't even surprised. He was too tired for that.

"Now where did your father get that?" Prey mused, "What did you say your father's name was?"

Redwood clenched his jaw, but Prey read his thoughts just as easily.

"Ironwood was it?" Prey hummed and thought back, but no, the name meant nothing. "Hmm, not getting anything. He must've just been one of the Guards dealing with the clean up after I got captured in that trap. Pure coincidence."

Prey should feel more angry thinking back on his capture, but it was so long ago and he'd been over it so many times before, plus, right now, he really didn't have it left in him. Redwood though, on hearing Prey's words, did.

The earth pony jerked backwards in shock, but Lemon's magic kept his hooves firmly rooted, "You what?" He breathed.

Prey reared up onto his back hooves so he could reach the trio of masks, "Those war stories your dad told you when he got drunk enough? They were true, more or less."

Prey got a hold of the mask bundle and jerked it off the hook. He tossed the other two masks aside carelessly, the sharp clatter of and crack of the broken one splintering further making Redwood flinch. Prey paid him no attention. He only had eyes for the mask in his hooves which lightly shook. His old mask. Prey's mask. A murderer's mask. A *Resistance* mask.

The untreated wood was dried and warped with the years, and the heft a bit lighter, but otherwise it was exactly how Prey remembered it.

The blank, empty eye holes gazed sightlessly up at him like a skull. It was plain, rough, and unadorned. He'd never personalised his mask to try and inspire fear like the other Resistance members had. There was the crack all the way down the left side, the little wedge missing from the top where a crossbow bolt had clipped, there were all the little grooves and imperfections in the wood he'd long ago memorized.

Slowly, Prey turned it around and fitted it to his face, the museum around him forgotten. His mask didn't fit perfectly, but it never had. There was a metaphor in there somewhere, but otherwise, it was exactly how he remembered it. The momentary blocked sight, and then the thin weight of wood on his face, and he was looking out at the world as a faceless killer.

"I wore this mask when I killed Captain Fire Strike." Prey commented out loud to nobody.

There was a sharp inhale of breath. Prey jerked his to face the wide eyed and pale faced Redwood. He narrowed his eyes unseen behind his reclaimed mask, "But I don't think you deserve to hear those private details."

"W-why not?" Redwood shakily asked.

"What do you mean, 'why not'?" Prey echoed incredulously,

"Because I don't want to tell you, because you don't have any right to know, because I said so. You're an idiot for even asking such a stupid question. Did you honestly really expect me to just, what? Tell you? Just like that?"

Redwood swallowed, licked his lips, flinched, glanced between Prey and Lemon, and hesitantly offered, "Yes?"

"Really? Huh. You really do. It's all mixed up with caution, anger, and fear, but you don't see why I wouldn't tell you." Prey pulled his old mask off, returning to being Prey. He rubbed at a spot behind one ear.

"You're the sort to honestly know better than to ask, too. You live on the border, you know what it's like to go to bed scared at night, because sometimes it's better not to know the answer. Your dad's old stories of the Deeper Green and all his friends deaths didn't come from out of nowhere." Prey was still smiling happily at Redwood, in fact the smile even reached his eyes, but all three of them knew it was false.

"Poisoned quills in your bedroll which made your flesh split like a plumb rotting from the inside out, true. A pitfall which skewered Pholio on barbed spines, and they had to run and leave him behind, screaming for aid, because a manticore was chasing their patrol, true. The griffin warriors clawing a hole in your stomach and pulling out your intestines and leaving you to die, true. The flesh crawler spiders the size of a plate that laid eggs under your skin while you slept, true. Brain maggots, the ones you were sure your father was making up, also true. Burning the Resistance fighters alive at that hill and finding the carbonized flesh afterwards, true. It was true, all true. All of it."

Redwood couldn't speak as Prey pulled the fears from his brain one by one and laid them out in the open. And still Prey smiled as innocently as a child, like it was his real mask and the wooden one he held was just a bad joke.

"Even now, even though you despised your dad Ironwood, you also still respect him for being a Border Guard because deep down, you don't think you ever could've been one. Well you're wrong, you

could *definitely* have been a Border Guard, Redwood. Know why? Because they were, and still are, racist, lying, cowardly betrayers, thinking they're better than any non-pony, and worshipping the Sun Tyrant. They self-importantly march onto your land, start a war putting your life at risk, force you to support them in their war, and abandon you the moment you're inconvenient. Yes, you'd fit right into the Border Guard, Redwood."

Prey took a breath, "Hear that? They were every bit as bad as the Resistance they were fighting back then. One snake trying to kill another snake. No matter which wins, you're still left with a venomous snake. Betrayers and traitors, all of them. They betrayed me, used me. Everyone was just a tool to further the violence. Resistance, and Border Guard alike. The strong take, the weak suffer. I'm weak, I was weak, just a runt, an acceptable sacrifice."

Prey looked down at the cracked face of his mask, upturned towards himself, "Even being Snake's only surviving apprentice wasn't enough, there weren't enough fighters left by that point. There were only one camp left, and it was strained, exhausted, wounded, and on the brink of collapse. The filthy Guard were going to find us by the next day, or the one after that at the latest. They were so close, always closing in, cutting off our escape routes one after the other. But Torment and the others thought if they could just buy some time..."

Prey had to stop and took a long, shaky breath. There was no reason to be retelling this. He'd been there when it happened. He already knew his own history, Lemon Pink knew it, and Redwood wasn't going to remember any of it. But today had been a strange day filled with laying bare painful history. So why stop now?

"Snake told me the camp was to be abandoned, and where we were shifting to somewhere else in the Deeper Green. The Resistance was very good at not leaving tracks. He said that the wounded would be forced to keep up, or silenced to stop them spilling our destination. They were breaking camp, taking what they could at that very moment too. He then sent me out to gather as much last minute Hellibore's End as I could, to lay a last minute poison mist trap for when the Guard found the abandoned camp. Told me I had one hour. That if I wasn't back in time, then I'd be left behind."

Prey's smile twitched, "I didn't have any reason not to believe him, that was exactly the sort of thing he would've normally said anyways. So I raced off, like the good little terrified apprentice I was, desperate to finish and get back in time. I'd spotted a patch of ripe Hellibore's End four days before. I knew where to go, and I ran right there. I only had an hour, I wasn't being as cautious as I should've been. Snake asked for Hellibore's End on purpose. I ran right into those Border Guards scouts who'd set up there. Right where the Resistance already knew that particular patrol was."

Prey stopped as his voice wavered, halting before it could fully crack. He turned his old wooden mask over and over in his hooves:

"They knew they were there. Snake filled me in with fake information and then sent me out to get caught. I was just a weak runt lamb. If I had been a griffin, they would've shot first and asked questions never. But I was just a lamb. Snake picked well, just like he always did. By all the dead, I hate that zebra. I hate him so much."

Prey looked down again at the mask in his hooves as he continued to near compulsively flip it over and over:

"This was back before... before I could defend myself. I'm just a lamb but I had on this mask, a blooded Resistance member mask. Just a lamb, but they knew what I was, and even though they only gave in for probably ten seconds, but those ten seconds were still... Afterwards, after they were... done, they dragged me back as swiftly as they could to their main camp to be interrogated. I lost my first ribbon there, it was just a stand of grimy string by then, but still. It was a bit hard to focus on anything other than breathing at that point, and I remember this eye was too swollen to see out of."

Prey reached up and touched at his left eye, "I was a prisoner, one who'd been taken alive and wasn't physically dangerous. A valuable source of information. Tied up on the floor of some tent, not knowing where I was or what was going to happen, this officer starts yelling at me and demanding I 'tell him everything'. Everything, he didn't even specify or ask. Just yelling and shouting and threatening. Scared, alone, and I hated them. Hated, hated, hated, hatedHatedHated! Hate them, hate them, hate them. I hate

them."

He could taste that old hate, even now. It tasted like blood and hot ash, "So I bit my lip and refused to say anything. Nothing, not a single peep. More of them came in. They were all shouting and screaming and threatening me, bound on the tent floor at their hooves. I was scared and alone, but I told them nothing!"

Prey stopped to breathe after near shout-squeaking that. His smile twitched and jerked, but he kept it up, unable to stop, "The smart thing would've just been to tell them. All the dead know the Resistance never did anything to garner my loyalty, but I didn't speak. The Guard say they don't torture. That's false. They do. They just... Weren't willing to bring themselves to do any of the things which would've made me scream and beg immediately."

I don't torture. That is what Prey had told the thieves. He didn't torture, never for the sake of torture. It was hardly any better, considering what he did do and had done. Worse even. But he didn't torture.

"No knives or fire. They didn't want to see blood. Didn't want to see legs bending the wrong way and bones popping. Just... hit me instead, you know, just kicking and stomping, not bucking, and avoiding the head. Everyone breaks under torture. Everyone. No one holds out forever. Everyone one breaks. It's just a matter of when, and what the torturer uses to make it happen faster."

Prey sat down on the floorboards quite suddenly, stopping flipping the mask over and over. Instead, he reached up to brush at the blue silk of his ribbon, his *second* ribbon:

"If they'd kept it up, even just the hitting me, I would've broken. Soon, or maybe later, I don't know. I was hurting and so certain I was going to die, but the bitter hate, you can't understand it. Fire Strike was there you know. Anyway, they weren't getting their answers out of me fast enough. They were so close to discovering our camp and they knew it, they so desperately wanted the war to be over with, but none wanted to be the one to 'do' it. So Captain Fire Strike, he steps in. They left the tent, he stayed. Just him and the tied up prisoner. His officers thought they knew what he was

going to do, thought he was making the hard choices for them."

Prey stopped moving. He sat there, abruptly still. He kept smiling placidly at nothing.

"Did you know Fire Strike was also a rudimentary mind mage? I don't know where he got his illegal knowledge, just the barest basics of the magic, but I didn't have any back then. I had potential as a mind leech, but no runes. That, and Fire Strike was a filthy, Zoma'Grika unicorn."

Prey shrugged helplessly, "Magic always trumps everything else. I didn't properly know how to resist. I still tried. I didn't know what was going on, I didn't know what a mindscape was, all I knew was that it was wrong and he was invading me and I couldn't keep him out. He trampled in and tried to take it all from me. So disgusting. He tried to see my secrets, to take it all, to read my mind. I didn't know how to resist, yet I did. In the end though, all I could manage back then, broken and in pain and only half conscious, was to give him one false piece of information."

Prey held up his hooves, just a tiny gap between them, "It was so close. I gritted my mind, I steeled everything I hadn't known I had, I mentally screamed and thrashed. I gave it everything. And when he dug in deeper despite all my efforts, I tried again. And then again. I fought. I didn't give in. But when I saw I wasn't going to win, I fixed one concept in my mind and I held onto it even if it killed me. Captain Fire Strike snatched it from me like it was the Sun Wolf's own crown. He thought he had the direction the Resistance were fleeing in. But I'd given him the exact opposite direction Snake had told me."

Prey giggled, light and high, exactly like a real child might, "Oh what a stupid, foolish, misguided child I was. I still hadn't worked it out I was supposed to get captured, that I was just a disposable sacrifice. I gave him the opposite direction Snake gave me, but it turned out to be the real destination the Resistance were fleeing in. He-khe-khe! It's so ironic! So because I didn't break, because I had that one moment of clever resistance in the face of Fire Strike, he inadvertently got what he really needed."

Lemon Pink didn't give any sign as she listened. She knew all of this already. She just listened to a retelling of what was, in a twisted way, half her own past.

"And just like that, the Resistance was finally broken. It had been breaking for a long time, but the Captain gathered up all the Border Guards and broke them for good. There were less than ten survivors who scattered into the trees. Snake was one of them, of course. I don't think Fire Strike expected me to recover, he was an amateur and wasn't gentle. If I hadn't had a mind magic aptitude, then who knows? I escaped, the how's a different story, but I did and I crawled back through the Deeper Green to where the new camp was supposed to have been moved to. And guess what I found after my clever deception?"

Prey shrugged apathetically, "That's right, nothing. They weren't where they'd said they were going. And then I knew, and when I met up with those few last survivors, guess who they blamed for the Resistance's final destruction? Me. They blamed me for not breaking when I was supposed to, for being a traitor."

"And that's more or less it. The official end of the Resistance war and victory of the Border Guard. They said we were gone, they said that they'd won. Most of them packed up and went home. Some other stuff happened too, stuff your dad didn't know or didn't tell you about. And me? Snake tried to dispose of me properly, said there was no more need for me and that he was leaving the land to go back to Zebrica, that cold unfeeling bastard. Some more stuff happened. Dark things were done. And then it was just me. Just Prey. The last of the Resistance. And then I let them know the war wasn't over. That it would never be over."

Prey clapped his forehooves sharply together, old mask set beside him, "So that's the story of the last days of the Resistance as it really happened, not what your lying old dad has mistakenly recorded in this pitiful excuse of a museum. Thanks for listening, and I hoped you learned something."

Redwood had looked rough when he was sitting on his front porch outside. It could safely be said he looked worse now. His face was pale under his ill kempt fur, his ears back and tail tucked away.

There was no defiance and angry confidence left. He was trapped and helpless, just like Prey had been all those years ago. Magic was unfair like that. The earth pony licked his dry lips almost compulsively:

"That, but that was a long time ago. You can't, you can't have been. But it doesn't matter, because you don't have to do this! Just let me go, I promise we can work somefing' out. Anything. Ah just, ah just don't want any trouble, please-"

"Too bad, and I don't care," Prey carelessly interrupted Redwood, "This story wasn't for you. It was for me. If you'd deal with him please Lemon? I'm... I'm too tired, and I don't really feel up to making a clean job of it."

"Yes, Prey. We, I, also remember. I wasn't there. But I am here now, and I remember it too." Lemon Pink said, only looking at him, not her captive, as her sharp horn flashed silver.

"No no *no!* You don't have to do this I won't ever tell-!"

"Be quiet." Lemon said, and stunned him.

Prey let Redwood slide from his attention. The earth pony had never been important here, it was only what he represented. Prey slowly picked up his old crude mask. The odds of him finding it again after all this time really were astonishing. He lifted it up above his head, studying it. He could put it back on. It was just a mask, there were no runes or anything on it. It was just old, unpainted wood.

'I could put it on again. Start the madness afresh. The war never ended, the battlefield just changed.'

Be the last of the Resistance again. Except there was Lemon Pink now too. They could become the Resistance again. They both knew how, they both remembered doing it before. Start the madness anew.

Prey gently placed the mask back down, and aligned it to sit straight. He brushed the last of the dust off its rough edges, before

placing his cloven hoof directly in the middle of the wood.

'*Tjak*', *Meph'la*, '*Kran*', '*Phelp*', just four basic runes. It took about five minutes while Lemon quietly finished up with Redwood, and while he could've just gotten the flint and steel out of her saddlebags, he wanted to do it with runes.

When he was done, the mask caught fire like the bone dry wood it was, merrily blackening and curling in the orange flame.

The worn floorboards underneath also blackened, but didn't catch like the mask did. Lemon fetched the other half broken mask from its wall hook, splintering it into smaller pieces with her magic and fed them into the small fire as well. They both stood and watched in silence for ten minutes until the mask was just a crumbled mess of charcoal.

Prey wiped one eye, "So."

"So."

"Let's be on our way."

"Yes, Prey. I don't wish to ever come back here."

"A personal wish, not a tools wish." Prey noted, standing up.

"Yes. I, yes, Prey."

"Fair enough."

A quiet, if long and generally uncomfortable, train ride back was all that Prey wanted.

He'd been emotionally exhausted beyond what he had ever expected. He'd known going in that this visit was going to be hard, but not *how* hard. He was tired, and just wanted to be left alone to sit and think in peace. So a quiet ride back on the twenty plus hour train trip was all he was really after.

The train carriage was dark, the endless rocking motion making a hypnotic rhythm. Lemon Pink had taken over one of the train benches all to herself, stretching out on top of her travel cloak. Prey had removed one of the blankets from their packs and also made himself comfortable on his own bench.

Prey just wanted to drift off into the deep, dreamless depths of his inner mindscape, to sleep under the endless ocean until he was ready to face the world again.

And that's what he was doing, right up until he wasn't any longer.

There was a pull, a tug from outside of the ocean even though there was nothing but ocean in Prey's inner mindscape. He tasted the cold air of emptiness and distant starlight, indigo blue swirling everywhere. The tugging presence reached out to pull him up, and Prey was abruptly in his outer mindscape, grey ash and burnt trees everywhere.

"Aha, there thou art. We could not find thee in this drab and empty landscape for a moment. We thought we might even have the wrong dream. Thou wast not where thou should have been, but no matter. Lieutenant Screech has told us that thou were using thy vacation days to visit thy family."

What? Who was speaking-

Luna. Of course it was Luna. Who else could it be but Luna?

Panic. The grey-purple skies of his mindscape roiled, collapsing in on himself as Prey rushed to wake up. Luna was here.

'Get out get out get out-!'

"Fear not Prey, for it is us, Luna! Thy Princess." The alicorn's dream magic hooked Prey out from somewhere and halted his escape.

But she'd promised! She'd promised not to touch his dreams unless she thought he was having a nightmare, and this wasn't one.

'You promised-!'

"Fear not, thou art merely confused. It will swiftly pass, thou will regain thy faculties now that we have brought you into our presence." More swirling indigo blue and star speckled night sky, and Prey felt the jarring sensation of being moved, like the rug he was standing on had suddenly been pulled with him still on top.

Prey felt abruptly cut off, like he had less senses than he should have. He felt small, like he was a person in one place, as opposed to being aware everywhere. Everywhere was night sky and stars, both above and below, just stars and night time.

'This, this isn't my mindscape anymore. This isn't my dream.'

Something grabbed Prey's perspective and shifted it. Stars shot past, although he had no sensation of movement, like the distance was being moved and not him.

"And here Prey is. Welcome Prey, to this shared dreamscape. Since we were hosting this meeting of the minds anyway, we felt that thou deserved this opportunity to speak. Thou art honoured." Luna boomed from nowhere and everywhere.

More presences, nothing like the overarching power of Luna permeating everything, but definite presences. A hooful, seven, eight? Smaller, like him. Small stars. Prey 'blinked', and everything sucked into focus. No, it wasn't everything coming into focus, it was him coming into everyone else's focus. Eight stars were gathered up, eight stars which were actually people.

"Prey? That's you, right?" The muffled voice of Gloom asked.

Gloom, Nighthawk, Starry Wing, Bramble Weft, Crimson, and those who had been sent on the infiltration mission to Griffon Stone. The stars were a lot less like stars and more like ponies. They had shape to them, equine, and they were still coming into focus, gaining more and more detail. Those stars were actually them.

'We're all asleep, and Luna's linked us all into one big dream.' Prey thought in shock. He hadn't even considered this might be possible,

this meeting of sleeping minds.

"Is that you Prey?" Gloom repeated, closer.

"Tis' him, worry not our good Sargent. The child is merely lacking a dream avatar. Tis' unusual, but nothing to be concerned about, it happens in the realm of dreams. But he is here, and as able to converse as thee all are."

"Ah, thank you, Your Majesty." Gloom said. He looked like Gloom now, but with certain features smudged, or too smooth. The other seven were the same, gaining features and distinctness.

The unmistakable gruff figure of Nighthawk grunted.

"Think nothing of it." Luna announced magnanimously. There was a huge figure above them, made out of the stars in the night above. A swirling mane and body created from stardust and tiny galaxies. Luna had depicted herself as immense and powerful, but the feeling of safety and warmth was projected throughout the shared dreamscape.

Prey recoiled from it, drawing his mind in tighter on itself. He cast about, feeling for an exit or escape and trying to make out which of the other six figures was Crimson's.

His silence and efforts went unnoticed by Luna, whose starry gaze swiftly shifted to Captain Nighthawk's avatar:

"Now come! Share with us thy nightly update so that all may hear. Thy squad is split in two to cover more ground, is it not? This is a grand opportunity to co-ordinate we offer to thee all. Information is how wars are won. Come! Tell us of they progress."

Luna's words brought the rest of the pony presences to something like attention. Nighthawk's presence looked like it was flying, or at least floating. All eight of them did. Blurry flashes which might've been wingbeats appeared around Nighthawk as he answered gruffly:

"There's been a development since last night. It's bad news I'm afraid."

---I---

Author's Notes:

So. That was that chatper. It was... What it was.

GreatSpaceBeaver ⬅Here helped with going over this chapter, but by all means, if any of you spot anything wrong, please let me know so I can fix it, thank you. 😊

HERE is a great picture also done by GreatSpaceBeaver, and is very much worth checking out and praising him for. *Wink wink, nudge nudge* 🎨🎭🖼️☆👍

74.5 It was long Fore-Sewn

The floating dream avatar of Nighthawk answered Luna gruffly, "There's been a development since last night. It's bad news I'm afraid."

A surreal night sky of impossibly vivid stars which made up Luna's shared dreamscape.

In every direction stars were strewn against vast distance and black velvet, with only the ten small suspended presences gathered under Luna's gaze. The ten dream presences floating here in the starry expanse were; the eight Night Guards who'd been sent to Griffon Stone after the traitor ambassador, Screech who had stayed behind to head the Guard in their absence, and Prey.

Prey did not want to be here. Prey did not want to be doing this. Prey did not want *anything* to do with Luna's magic.

What Prey *had* wanted was to be left alone on the train ride back after a long horrible day to get some sleep. But rarely does life give you what you want. So because Luna hadn't bothered to keep her promise to stay out of his dreams, (or she'd just forgotten), he'd been ripped from the safety of his own dream to this shared dreamscape against his will.

But then, the weak have always suffered at the whims of the strong, and there are none stronger than an alicorn.

'Just forget about me, I'm not important. Forget me, forget me, forget me.' Prey tried to make his featureless presence in the dream even smaller so as not to draw the celestial construct of Luna's avatar's attention.

"Speak, Captain Nighthawk. What is this foul news that thou speaks of?" The star constellation construct above them boomed, without booming. In the dream, the voice was loud but also not, since it wasn't actually sound, just how they as the dreamers 'heard'.

"Vivid Edge and Bramble Weft have uncovered circumstantial evidence that Hafflow may have been sent with orders to infiltrate the gemstone trade while he was in Canterlot." The dark, slightly blurry presence of Nighthawk swiftly answered his princess.

"Thou art saying the traitorous knave mightest have been acting on the orders of the Low Kingdom while within our borders?" Luna's avatar checked, seemingly angered as the glittering nebula cloud which made up her mane twisted and roiled.

"Precisely, your majesty."

"How know ye this?"

"That PO box address that Lika Soil and Shamrock where posting their reports to, it's inside the Griffonstone embassy. It took a day to verify, but it's definitely in the embassy."

"And this Hafflow is yet still now within the employ of his country, is he not?" Luna asked, vast star speckled mane writhing more.

"Yes, Gloom and Crimson were on stakeout and saw him entering the very same embassy."

"Hmm, we see. Sargent Gloom, show us all this scene if thou would."

The mostly equine forms of Gloom and Crimson, who seemed to have been 'drifting' closer towards Prey, emanated surprise, "Princess Luna? I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean."

"We wish to view the scene from thy memory. T'will make everything much simpler for all."

"As you say Princess, of course. But, uh, how do I...?"

"T'is simple, worry not. We shalt be doing all the required work, for we art Lady of Dreams and this is our domain. Merely think back on what thou saw, picture it as clearly as thou canst. Yes, that is correct. Hold it fixed and resolute in thy mind-"

Suddenly the dreamscape wasn't a starry expanse of velvety night.

Instead they were on a building, looking out from behind the perspective of someone's eyes, *Gloom's* eyes. The edges were fuzzy, details lost in the memory, but it was like looking at one of those colour photos.

Gloom was crouched low to a slanted roof. The roof seemed to be slate tiles, but Gloom's perspective wasn't focused on that. There were other squat, solidly built houses and bigger buildings all around him though, a city, Griffon Stone.

The mass of buildings and houses wound up the side of the mountain, vapour drifting from chimneys in what must've been chilly air hung frozen in the snapshot of memory. All the roof's seemed to be angled into the mountain, which must've been titled just so as to shed snow in a certain way although there wasn't any yet in Gloom's memory. A formless mass of grey cloud blanketed the sky, and it was either dusk or dawn, but the lower light didn't affect the scene taken from Gloom's eyesight.

Gloom had been looking at the large, official looking structure across and further down the street. It was still squat and solidly built like the rest of the city so as to be able to endure the winters, but was still large and tall, for all it was compact.

Prey saw in the displayed memory that all the windows on this building's upper floor either looked too small for a flying griffin to fit through, or were neatly barred. There were also flags flying outside of what was obviously the embassy building, and a tall watch tower stood inside the grounds to watch the skies. There were no stairs or ladder up the watchtower, meaning you had to be a flier and a griffin to use it.

The whole embassy was surrounded by a circular outer wall topped with spikes, and a single gate staffed by a griffin guard in what was... probably a warm cloak? Again, Gloom hadn't been looking specifically at that, so they only got a periphery sort of view of the guard.

What Gloom *was* focusing on was the small group of griffins entering at the gate, two of them, one brown one black, still in the attitude of landing outside to get checked in. Gloom's view was

centered and focused on the glossy black feathered one, his head feathers a swept back streak of russet, the matching colour of the tuft at the end of the griffin's tail and hind quarters splayed as he came into land.

The griffon also had on an official looking overcoat which with matched the other griffins in the group, the Low Kingdom's crest on all of their backs and shoulders.

Obviously, the black feathered griffin was supposed to be Hafflow, and this was the embassy.

Prey well knew this perspective. Not this actual scene of course, but rather the perspective. He'd experienced it so many times before after all, the feeling of viewing something as if from behind your own eyes.

'This is mind magic. Luna's casually abusing mind magic to pull out and display Gloom's memories. And no one's protesting, because she's a Princess.'

It was a bitter but unsurprising realisation. Although, this image wasn't *quite* as clear as the memories he got when delving into a victims mind.

Luna's magic was only sharing with them the memory from one of Gloom's senses; sight. When Prey took a memory, he got the persons memory of touch, sound, taste, and smell to go along with whatever they were thinking at the time. For example, when he was viewing a memory, rather than seeing the signs of wind blowing the Low Kingdom's flags outside the embassy, he'd instead feel the sharp wind, smell the scent of baking bread it carried, and taste the brisk cold in the air.

As long as the person had a memory of it, Prey could experience it second hoof.

There were sounds of impressed surprise from everyone else in the shared dreamscape at the scope of Luna's magic.

"Your majesty this is amazing. Can anything be shared like this?"

"With our assistance, and if the pony recalls the event clearly enough, then it is well within our power. We must congratulate you though Sargent Gloom. This is an unusually clear retelling." Luna said, sounding proud.

'*This* is what you consider an accurate memory?' Prey thought, noting all the missing details. He really didn't care though, he just wanted out of here.

The smudgy avatar of who was almost certainly Starry Wing spoke, "I don't want to presume on you Princess Luna, but could this be used to have multiple ponies study a scene or evidence from different angles? What might've been missed by one in the heat of the moment could well be spotted by many later."

"Nay, we fear not. This is a depiction from Gloom's memory only. Not only are most views not as detailed as the good Sargent's, but tis' still only a memory. What he hast not taken note of at the time, you will not see either."

There was a puzzled sensation which went around the group. Not in words or sounds, but the feeling was somehow transmitted by all of them.

Luna, the mistress of dreams, could hardly miss it. She elaborated, "Take for instance the griffin's surrounding the traitor Hafflow. What does thou notice about them? No not thee Gloom, thou needs must remain focused or the scene will be lost. But everypony else, look. What does't thou see?"

The others finally took note of what Prey had already spotted as they tried studying the other griffins who'd just landed with Hafflow outside the embassy. When you tried to look, they were... they were... Well there were *there*, and they had colour, but they lacked real life details.

While you could see they were griffins, with similar uniforms to Hafflow's, the fine details, such as a head crest, or shorter wing span, or what might've been a saddlebag, all of those details just didn't exist. However it wasn't until you realised this and tried to really look that you noticed the lack. Before, it had just seemed

normal and you didn't notice.

'Dream logic.' Prey deduced. Dream logic mixed with the natural blurring of memory most people experienced when looking back through their own memories. If they'd walked into a room, and hadn't specifically noted a penny lying under a chair and had instead glossed over it, then in their memory there wouldn't be a penny at all.

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry for wasting your time, Princess." Starry Wing's floating avatar apologised.

"Nay, t'was a good idea and you are not the first to suggest it. Unfortunately, this is all that can be managed." The vast astral figure of Luna in the sky waved aside his apology.

"So that's Hafflow then." Screech said, glaring at the black feathered griffin but without his avatar visibly actually having eyes.

"Beyond a doubt yes," Starry Wing said, seeming to have taken Screech's statement as a question, "We got it confirmed from two different locals. One which my team approached covertly, and one which Captain Nighthawk's talked to openly. So yes, that's Hafflow. We're not taking any chances of grabbing the wrong griffin when we pull out."

"When does't thou think that you can? We do not wish to tarry any longer than expedient in the griffin lands." Luna demanded, although she herself was still physically in Canterlot.

"That's the bad news. If it pleases you Your Majesty, could Vivid Edge explain? She was the pony in the air at the time." Nighthawk requested.

"Of course! Lieutenant Vivid, what hast thou to tell us?" Luna's vast avatar boomed down at them.

Vivid Edge's silvery and ink black mix of a body bowed, even though this was a dream, "Princess Luna. I was the one to track him back to his abode, but he doesn't have a flat or a house. He and the other embassy workers all live in a compound below the castle. It's

watched by guards at all hours, and all civilian traffic is banned within the compound. I couldn't even fly close at night without getting spotted."

"We do not like the thought of taking a pony in his own home, but this Hafflow is a traitor and not a pony. But thou sayest it is not possible regardless?"

"No Princess, there's next to no chance of us pulling it off without the guards being alerted. The guard barracks is in the castle, and the castle is right above the compound on the mountainside. It literally looks down on the compound. I'm not even sure which room is Hafflow's, since I couldn't get close."

"We feel it would be better to all see for ourselves, Vivid Edge. Please, hold the image in thy head as firmly as possible, and we shall do the rest."

"Of course Princess. I'm ready."

Abruptly, just like before, a new image was suddenly taking up all of Prey's vision. He nearly felt a moment of vertigo, Vivid had been in the air, but since it was an unmoving image there was no sensation, and the feeling passed. The image was also somehow narrower, with less of it than seemed normal. The cause was easy to guess, since Vivid only had one eye in the waking world, this was the view she'd seen.

Regardless, Prey still immediately saw what Vivid meant about the compound being directly below the castle. The compound was rather like a curving long house, shaped like a huge U, with the main entrance in the basin of the U. The building was also enclosed by a high wall to keep out intruders, but that's not what was posing an issue to the Night Guards.

This compound was quite literally the next building down the rugged highland mountainside from the grey stone castle. Prey could see flowing streaks of smudgy orange and yellow were the castle flew the Low Kingdom's flag every ten hooves or so along the heavy stone ramparts. From where armoured griffin Guards stood atop these walls, they had a perfect view straight down onto the

long house at all times, both night and day. The rest of the immediate city surroundings too, but especially the compound.

There was no possible chance that a guard wouldn't either A, see their approach, or B, be alerted by them kidnapping Hafflow even if they did manage to somehow sneak in, or C, immediately be in hot pursuit when they fled.

Prey didn't want to be here, wherever *here* was in the dream realm, but that didn't mean he was incapable of working out two plus two. 'So no grabbing him at the embassy, and no grabbing him from the compound, which leaves...'

"We're still trying to find out any other places in Griffonstone he may go. That's when we'll get our chance to strike. Also the most risky, but it's the best chance right now. He must have at least one day off a week if nothing else, so everypony is working in shifts to have eyes on Hafflow's location at all times." Nighthawk said.

"We see thy dilemma. What else is there?"

"Time will be getting tight, I'm afraid. Our presence in the city won't go ignored forever. We're obviously not tourists, and claiming to be looking for work will only last so long. We're not part of the local pony population, and the copper coats seem to keep a close eye on foreign and suspicious ponies in Griffonstone." Nighthawk added with displeasure, dream avatar flicking one shadowy maybe-wing.

Prey was caught between feeling zero sympathy whatsoever, and worry since Crimson was one of those stuck in Griffonstone. And Gloom too, to a lesser extent Prey supposed.

The memory being projected by Vivid Edge flickered and was suddenly replaced by that of two griffin guards in light armour. Vivid's avatar jerked, "I apologise, I thought of the copper coats and lost focus for a moment-"

"Nay, stay focused on this new memory, we wish to see. Thou refers to 'copper coats', this being the griffin Guards?" Luna asked.

"Yes your Majesty. The Guards are called copper coats by everypony

in Griffonstone. Overall, the copper coats seem to be trusted and liked. They're very active within Griffonstone, and patrol the skies frequently too." Vivid answered, inky outline shining silver for a moment. Probably embarrassment at her perceived failure to hold one image fixed in her thoughts.

Not that it was important, but even here in a dream where your subconscious helped shape your appearance, Vivid only had the impression of one eye star. It must've truly happened a long time ago for the change to be so deeply self internalised.

Distractedly, Prey studied the image of the two griffin guards which was being forced upon him, he'd been trying to unobtrusively draw closer to Gloom and Crimson's presences.

The griffins looked like most griffins. Yellow hooked beaks, fierce piercing eyes, sharp fore talons, and on the male griffin an impressive spiked feathered ruff, a small mane really, while she had a smoother lay to her plumage. Their armour was just light chainmail over a gambeson, an open helmet, and leg guards, but it was the short coppery coloured cloaks which hung over one shoulder which obviously gave the Guard their nickname.

These two Copper Coats hadn't been armed when Vivid had seen them, but you probably didn't have as much need for a weapon when you were born one, with talons, claws, and a tearing beak.

As nice as it was to have more information about what the local Guard looked like, looking at these two random 'copper coats' wasn't actually useful. They were trying to work out a plan to snatch Hafflow, a plan which didn't feature griffin Guards in it at all, unless you counted avoiding them. Because by the sound of it, the copper coats were a decently effective Guard force, thus it was foolish to make any plan which involved coming up against them. It was time to move on.

"Thou canst not simply find part time employment to use as cover until the opportunity to take the traitor presents itself?" Luna inquired.

"Not easily, sorry Princess. Our dusk pony amulet disguises, they

don't work well when in flight. Most jobs willing to even consider employing foreign pegasi definitely expect you to fly on the job. All griffins can, after all. And night time work when nopony can see the discrepancies is even harder to find." Nighthawk's gruff growl sounded unhappy over their joint failure to even be able to find a local job. He probably felt it shouldn't be so hard for undercover Night Guards to achieve something which sounded so simple in theory.

Prey continued subtly drawing closer to Gloom and Crimson's floating dream presences, and hoping Luna wouldn't care. If he got a chance to speak with Crimson, then at least this whole terrifyingly awful dream invasion experience would have had one point of merit.

"Aside from Crimson," Nighthawk added, making Prey freeze as the attention all shifted towards Crimson. "He doesn't have to wear a dusk pony amulet, so he's the only one of us who could get a job undercover."

Crimson's dream avatar was much like the rest of the thestrals, a smoky, starry equine shape that alternated between sharp and smudgy. The only real difference was, a bit ironically, that Crimson's had just a bit of a red tint to it. That, and where one of his feathers would be on his right wing, there was a particularly bright star. But as everyone turned to him, Crimson floated a bit straighter:

"If that is what the mission requires to maintain our cover, I will do so."

"That is well, but what have thee and thy Sargent been doing throughout this undertaking? Thy work has always been exemplary, as it is unexpected. What surprises have thee for us this time?" Luna's vast dream body asked from the heavens.

Gloom was the one who stepped up, or floated up, to answer his Princess's question, "Our squad has been looking into the Griffin's own gemstone trade and mines, since that's what Hafflow and his superiors seem to be interested in. Unfortunately, we haven't gotten much. And frankly it's worrying, Princess."

"Tis' so? Please elaborate."

"Of course Princess. I'm worried because there is so little to find. Sure, some of it can be contributed to us being foreigners and perhaps not knowing where to look, but where we have, we've gotten next to no information. Because there is next to nothing to find. The griffin's don't have an industrial gem trade, and what there is, is all private, small businesses. The griffins just don't seem to have a large enough gem trade to be worried enough to try to meddle in ours. It doesn't make sense. They only have two mines, total, and those aren't focused on gems but rather ores if I understand right. We're missing something, Princess." Gloom finished in frustration.

"To say nothing of how the griffins simply lack the same magical capabilities to use or even properly identify ignius gemstones anyway." Starry Wing quietly added.

It was a good point. Outside of weather magic, which pegasi naturally got to be more gifted in for some reason, griffins didn't have any natural magic. The only way Prey knew of that griffins had access to magic was through either ritual magic or witchcraft, which was certainly not a common thing. That, or dark magic, but such magic was illegal and feared for a reason, and was even rarer to encounter outside of Equestria too. Despite the bigoted view most ponies held of griffins, the winged lions weren't actually barbarous savages who loved violence.

"What you have brought to our attention is concerning. For if the griffins lack the means wherewith to contest our precious stone market, then why have they so cravenly gone behind our backs to spy on our gem mines?" Luna asked, loudly voicing the main issue.

Gloom and Crimson could only shake their smoky, undefined heads, "We don't know yet Princess, but that just means its something that isn't publicly available. The Low Kingdom is being careful to keep whatever it is a secret." Gloom said.

Crimson shifted, hinted at wing feathers melding and reforming, "Forgive me, but, to go with what Sargent Gloom said, there was one thing. We heard a single mention of a minister in the Low

King's court hiring a private mining team for two weeks some months ago. I haven't been able to ask more than a few locals, and so can't confirm it for definite, but it sounded like the miners didn't say what they were hired for either. I mean, that sounds suspicious, but I don't know anymore than that, Your Majesty."

"We're trying to get a solid confirmation on that one way or another still. It shouldn't in theory be linked, but I can't see anyway it wouldn't end up being linked somehow since it's the Low Kingdom officials." Starry Wing's floating avatar was quick to add.

The figure of Luna interposed against the night sky was silent for a long moment in contemplation while all of them below stopped to wait. A small part of Prey wondered why she chose to appear like that. Was it an ingrained as an alicorn to constantly have to remind everyone else how small they were with these gestures of superiority? He hated that it worked, too.

Presently, the mix of stars and night making up Luna's avatar came to her decision:

"Thou hast told us that, for the present, the rogue Hafflow is beyond the reach of our justice, and that we must be patient. Tis' frustrating to hear that justice must be delayed, but the rulers of the griffin Kingdoms have ever been cunning as they were greedy in centuries past. Now we see that time hast not changed their feathered race. So be it. Thou hast thy mission, thou knows the stakes, and we feel no need to belabour the point when thou art all well aware. In this we shall be patient, and trust to Captain Nighthawk's best judgement on the ground."

So in other words, Luna was just announcing that she was frustrated by the night guards lack of progress, but was willing to be patient and wait for now. Prey quietly wondered what she'd do to the black feathered griffin when they actually kidnapped Hafflow, but not too loudly. This was a dream in Luna's domain, if he wasn't careful, she might 'overhear' him.

The other nine Night Guard presences were all nodding or giving signs of understanding of Luna's summation, so Prey hurriedly added his own feeling of 'yes'. He'd been brought to this shared

dream as a tag along, an after thought really. Perhaps Gloom or Crimson had asked for him, as the only absent member of the remaining ISND, but in the end, no one had asked him for any contributions or ideas. He'd been snatched from his own mind and forcibly brought here to do exactly nothing.

"Prey? Prey where are you?"

Prey jumped, Crimson was calling him, smoky head turning to cast about the dreamscape. So he *hadn't* been forgotten after all.

"Yes I'm still here." Prey sent back, trying to focus on making the message private, so that only Crimson could hear it. He didn't know if it was working or not. He hurriedly turned his attention to the Night Guards and Luna. They didn't seem to be interested in him, but he shifted to draw closer to Crimson.

"Why don't you have a body Prey?" Crimson asked, sounding puzzled.

"I'm not certain. Maybe just because I'm me?" Prey answered in what he hoped was a private communication. 'Or maybe because I don't want to be here and was trying to hide my presence from Luna.'

"Can you make one? An avatar like Princess Luna said, I mean." Crimson asked.

"I don't know how. Look, I don't know how much time we have before she cuts off this shared dream. Quickly, are you and Gloom alright?"

"I've caught a cold, but otherwise we're fine, although I won't deny that this mission isn't without danger. We can't afford to get caught." Crimson answered, smoky red dream wings rising in what was probably a fatalistic shrug.

Prey would've bitten his lip if he had them in this dream. He couldn't do anything physically to help Gloom and Crimson, they were many miles apart, all he could do was worry, and he was finding out how much he disliked the feeling.

"I guess... Just try to stay out of the griffin Guards sight. They can't catch you if they don't know you're there." Prey said, the advice feeling very inadequate. But what could more he offer?

Crimson's face sharpened for a moment and Prey could see pseudo-features, "We'll be fine. I'll be fine. We're not going to make any sudden rash-"

"Prey?" Gloom's avatar interrupted them, floating or perhaps flapping closer, "I can't see you but I think I can feel you. Is that you?"

"Yes it's me, I just don't have a dream avatar." Prey answered distractedly.

"It's... unsettling to talk to you without a body, but then this whole dream is surreal. I had no clue Her Majesty could do this, but it's amazing. Listen, Lieutenant Screech just told me you've gone to see your family." Gloom paused, obviously waiting to first see how he took that.

Just being a disembodied presence, Prey didn't have to worry about masking his expression, "That's right."

"You did? I'm sorry I could not go with you like I promised I would." Crimson said.

That's right, Crimson had promised that. Prey was silent for a dream moment, "... Sorry. You weren't here. Next time."

"Next time for certain." Crimson's smoky head gave a firm nod, "If we are going to be going to visit Gloom's clan caves, then it's only fair we meet your family too."

"I'll second that," Gloom echoed, "I would... very much like to meet your mother, Prey."

Prey really missed being able to hear peoples thoughts right now, because he couldn't tell what Gloom wasn't saying, and what the thestral really meant by that.

"Did you... I mean, what did they say? Did everything go okay when

you met? Prey, are you alright?" Crimson asked cautiously.

Prey coiled in defensively on himself. Why did Crimson have to go and ask? Why was he forcing Prey to invent a fictitious story of how he'd met his family again when he wished for nothing more than if it were the truth? After the terrible, emotionally exhausting day Prey had just survived, the last thing he wanted was to be answering these questions all over again, while inside a dream controlled by Luna, who might or might not be listening in.

"I, we didn't, I mean it was..."

Gloom and Crimson waited.

Prey forced himself to try again, throwing together a believable story, "So I went back, and I, when I got there-"

Luna cut across everything. Literally, the words Prey was trying to say stopped as Luna exerted her power over the shared dreamscape to silence everyone but herself:

"We shall now take our leave. Thou shalt all be returned to the dreams from whence you came. Dream, sleep safe under the stars, for Night most surely does watch over you all."

Luna's vast form was swirling in like a giant nebula whirlpool, drawing everything night sky of the dreamscape to them into it. It happened so fast, again the feeling of vast distance rushing up to meet you instead of you moving.

"Wait! Gloom, Crimson, watch out for-"

A displacement of stars, the cool feeling of night air, Gloom and Crimson's presences vanishing, and then Prey was roughly dumped back into his own ashen grey dreamscape. Or outer mindscape. Both were more or less one and the same for Prey.

Prey seethed in the near featureless burnt grey forest of his mindscape, 'Snatched from my own mind, and then thrown out again just as suddenly, neither with any thought or care!'

But he was away from Luna now. He was safe. He'd gotten out of

the shared dreamscape unscathed, and without doing anything further to draw her attention. Or ire. But Prey always remembered, and he wouldn't forget how casually Luna had violated this sanctuary yet again. How the others didn't seem to have been bothered in the slightest by being snatched up when they were supposed to be safely sleeping in another country entirely, Prey didn't know.

'Oh wait, I *do* know, it's because she's an alicorn Princess. She can never do any wrong in their books.' Dream magic was only one step away from mind magic, and yet they viewed the first as a blessed opportunity when Luna used it on them, but if they ever knew Prey used the latter they'd lock him up and throw away the key.

It was just another scary reminder in a long chain of evidence that he was next to powerless before the dark alicorn. He was getting used to the constant reminders, but his heart still squeezed in fear each and every time it happened. Because one day, eventaully, it was going to be a reminder he didn't walk away from.

Like that first night Prey had been brought before Luna, she'd shouted so loud she'd burst his ear drum *by accident*. What if she accidently electrocuted or crushed him in her magic next time?

Something just then occurred to Prey. Why didn't Luna just go into Hafflow's dreams for herself? Although there would've been no point if she were just trying to determine if the griffin was guilty, since they already knew he was. And while it wasn't like capturing Hafflow in a dream would have any impact on the physical world, Prey was certain beyond a doubt Luna could've still interrogated the griffin.

If she just kept Hafflow in a confused dream state, like she obviously could, she could still find out the griffin's schedule, plant suggestions in his subconsciousness, and maybe even view memories like she'd gotten Gloom and Vivid Edge to do.

So why didn't she just do that? Prey focused, this could be vitally important. Why *didn't* she just do that?

Did it not work on griffins for some reason? If so, why could she

visit his own dreams just fine then, he wasn't a pony, so that didn't seem to be it. Could she not find Hafflow's dreams, then? It didn't seem to be distance, since she could reach Nighthawk and the others in Griffonia just fine.

Or maybe there actually *was* a distance factor, and Luna could only touch the dreams of people she already knew. Did she need some way to pick through all the sleeping consciousnesses to identify the right one? Perhaps that far out, she needed to have met them in real life?

Or was it nothing like that, and Luna just didn't deign to lower herself to infiltrate the dreams of a lying traitor. In other words, could the reason just be pride? Did she think Nighthawk and the rest would be successful beyond a doubt, so there was no point in wasting her time?

Prey didn't know the answer to any of his questions, he didn't have enough information, he *never* had enough information. But that was a dead end he was tired of going down, because he already well knew it led nowhere. He didn't know, and he had no way of finding out. Before, he'd held the vague hope that distance could limit Luna's reach, but after tonight, that hope was gone.

Who knows? Perhaps his guess about Luna having needed to have met the person in real life to be able to touch their dreams beyond a certain distance was even right. Unfortunately, that didn't help him one bit.

'So I'm out of ideas again, aside from building a dream blocking runic array, which I won't have any way of stress testing until the next time Luna decides she wants to trample into my mind. And even if it does work, that'll just alert Luna, so I can't even try the array until I've already figured out a way to get these vile tracer bands off and have already escaped. And if the dream blocking array doesn't work correctly the very first time, then I'm still dead.' Prey thought, bitterly resigned.

And all of this was assuming he ever found a way to slip under the vast power of alicorn magic, a magic which he'd only glimpsed that once, but which was so much more vast than normal unicorn spell

casting.

Cold grey ash drifted though Prey's mindscape, kicking up in eddies at his frustration across the burnt purple sky. The blunt charcoal stubs of old trees poked through the heavy ash layer, just like his past failures, and there they squatted. Dead, unresponsive, and to never grow anew.

'Round and round in the burning maze I go, but where the rat will end up, no one knows~'

'No.' Prey stopped himself before he could simply spiral. Prey was a new person, even if only one thing had changed after yesterday, he was still a new person. He wanted to be better, he was going to be better.

'Look for the silver lining. At least I know more than I did before this.' He had more information now, even if it was only to expand upon what he didn't know, at least he now knew what he didn't know. That was worth something.

Prey mentally sighed, floating in the grey ash of his outer mindscape. Today had been a horrible day, but it had also been a necessary day. As a result, he'd finally crossed one of the big things of his list. That was also worth something.

'One day, I'll be free. Not today, not tomorrow, not even the next. But one day. Someday.'

Freedom. The wish to one day be free. Prey had crossed one of the things off his list, leaving him that tiny bit closer to his goal.

Everything has a price, though. Freedom to choose your path in life also means the freedom to suffer the consequences of those choices. If you make bad decisions, you'll get bad results.

Many people, especially ponies, preach about the wonders of harmony and freedom, but what they mean when they say 'free' also means 'free from consequences for my actions'. That's like wanting to poke the hydra and not get eaten for it.

While you are free to make your own choices, you are also free to suffer the consequences. An equal and opposite reaction.

Nevertheless, ponies always seem so surprised when their choices catch up with them. Perhaps because at the time they honestly thought there wouldn't be a consequence, or they thought the consequences had already happened, or that they'd be small, or maybe they genuinely believed they were doing something good so nothing bad could possibly come of it.

And yes, sometimes, it was because they thought they could get away with it.

Sometimes the consequences takes years to come around. Sometimes it's much more immediate.

Prey had finally crossed out number three on his list. One task closer to freedom, much like in that story of the twelve labours of Hayculues. However it wasn't just tasks on The List. There were also names waiting to be crossed off.

It was over twenty hours riding aboard various trains to get back to the mountainside city of Canterlot, and that wasn't even counting the time you needed to spend waiting around at the stations, which steadily increased in size as you travelled away from the border and back into the heart of pony tamed lands.

But who said you had to spend all twenty hours travelling straight back?

While Screech at his post back in the Night Guard may have been waiting for their wayward lamb's return, there was nothing physically stopping Prey and Lemon from taking a little detour after exiting at one station. It was just a quick break, since they were almost back to Canterlot anyway. Indeed, if you continued straight on from here, you only needed another hour on a train to reach the golden capital.

Correspondingly, the busy train station was bustling this close to

the capital. More trains were pulling in and leaving in chuffs of steam and deafening whistles all the time, newspaper stands crying their next issues for all to hear, the scent of hay, and of course everywhere, the pastel rainbow mix of ponies.

Lemon casting simple illusionary disguises over them both, just changing some basic details, much easier than a veil of invisibility for example. And if you didn't stick out, no one would remember you in a crowd. Certainly, no one would be remembering the sunflower yellow mare in the floppy sunhat, and her young white foal, who disembarked onto the busy platform.

It was afternoon, verging on evening, and shortly the chill of dusk would start to approach in earnest. For now, it was merely presently cool in the busy train station. Prey was going to be sticking around long enough to experience the change in temperature himself today.

For a long moment, Prey considered just getting back on the train and continuing on back to Canterlot. He couldn't run from his alicorn enforced responsibilities, and he'd already done so much over the course of these three days off, and what with Luna's sudden night time visit, he was still a little spooked.

Get back on the train, continue on, put this off for another time...

In the end it wasn't Prey who actually made the decision. It was the train conductor, going along the carriages and shutting the doors as the train whistle shrieked. The cheery conductor with his funny hat and ticket puncher would forever be none the wiser as to the decision he'd enabled that day.

The white filly and yellow mare turned and trotted off into the crowd.

The stallion slept in a rather plain bed, in a rather plain room. There really wasn't anything eye catching in the room. There were just two framed pictures on the wall, but everything else was almost militarily bare. The sparseness didn't fit the sleeper, even in the dark.

The stallion woke without moving. He went from sleep to near perfect awareness in a moment.

'-something's wrong-'

He hurled himself upright, the bed covers ripped off. His horn sparked, reaching out to bend prodigious magical force to his will.

'-flare and blind!-'

It didn't work. Blinding white light failed to fill the room. His magic flailed about, venting formlessly as it was unable to shape into a spell matrix. The feeling of wrongness gripped the stallion's chest and his horn throbbed in pain.

'-inhibitor ring?-'

He dived off the bed in a roll, seeking for any cover even as his hooves flashed up to his horn to try and drag the ring off, to see if it was one of the types which could be non-magically removed. But his hooves encountered no foreign loop of metal in the dark.

'-What? But then, how?!-'

He rolled upright in a single bound, braced to attack. He heard a scuffle, somepony jerking backwards from his sudden leap.

"Zoma'Grika he scared me!" Somepony cursed, a filly, or just high pitched.

'-in the corner! Hit her first, get in close, eliminate the disadvantage of having no magic-'

He ducked and charged forwards across the distance, it was only five yards. The red flash of magic, some type of spell-

A wall hit him in the chest, right in the center mass out of nowhere.

Thump He was on the floor, ears ringing. He'd been caught mid breath, and now he was struggling to refill his lungs. His chest and face hurt, and he thought that was the dark ceiling above him, but for that second, he honestly couldn't tell. Trained instinct took over.

He reached for his magic again, forgetting for an instant in his disorientation.

'-shield first, then go on the atta-!'

His horn throbbed in a flash of pain again as all his magic went awry, refusing to be shaped and remaining as inert mana.

Red flash-**Whack** He was blasted again. He brought up his forelegs to guard his head, the pain from the hit still yet to register.

"Quick, again!"

Red light flashed viciously across his room. The stallion lost his air again to the force of the blow. He gasped, lungs empty. The wall was pressing into his back, he'd been driven all the way back across the floorboards. He kept his legs raised to protect his head.

He was hurting now, his chest and barrel were filling up with a numbing fire.

The beaten stallion tried to spring upright, tried to barrel through the pain and attack again, but instead his body betrayed him and just wheezed loudly. His lungs still hadn't recovered from spasming, and he didn't have enough air.

'-the Nightmare take it, not now!-', But in that second, struggling for air, he couldn't get up.

The enchanted crystal light set into the ceiling abruptly flicked on. It was blinding for those few seconds, until his eyes adjusted.

There, in the corner of his plain room. His attacker was a unicorn mare, pink, wearing a travel cloak, heretically curved and sharp horn glowing with that red light and ready to cast whatever that attack spell had been again. The stallion furiously met her eyes, glaring right back into those focused orbs of narrowed indigo without backing down an inch.

Then he noticed she had somepony else with her, no, not a pony, a foal, no, not even a foal, a young sheep. A white woolled lamb, big blue eyes staring at him, and, was that a ribbon held ready in her

hoof?

What?

The little lamb kept staring fixedly at him even as she lowered her ribbon wielding hoof, "Well, I wasn't quite ready to wake you up yet, but no plan ever works perfectly I guess."

She mumbled, but the unblinking stare of her soft blue eyes at a second look really didn't match that softness at all:

"Hello. It's been a while. You probably don't remember me, Captain Valour."

---{O}---

Captain Valour. *Of course* Prey hadn't forgotten about him.

Prey never forgave, and he never forgot.

So here they were, in the second of Valour's two private residents. One house here, and one in Canterlot. Both had been a pain to track down, but Captain Nighthawk had some really interesting things in that oh-so-very-secure magical safe in his office, that was only supposed to open to someone wearing a magically attuned Captain rank badge.

One such interesting thing inside the Night Captain's safe? A high-ranking officers and officials directory.

This house really didn't look like it belonged to a Captain of the Solar Guard, Celestria's elite force, when viewed from the outside. That was probably the point. It was just one plain house on a street of other houses. Although there had been two powerful magical defence enchantments laid on the entrances into the house, which weren't the sort an average pony citizen was supposed to have access to.

The problem with magical defences, was that if you knew they were there, and also knew what you were doing, it was possible to subvert their power and drain them into nothing, or sometimes bypass them outright.

Prey very much *did* know what he was doing. Pony magic was powerful and instant. Runes were slow, but inevitable.

And now here he was, standing in Valour's own pristine bedroom which smelled faintly of wild mint, and staring at the hated unicorn where he lay crumpled against the wall.

Valour wasn't defeated though, the fire was burning strong in his eyes, he was merely getting his breath back. The stallion was an example of peak fitness, as proved by Lemon needing three blasts to put him down even temporarily. His legs were nearly as thickly corded with muscle as a strong earth pony's were, and Valour's stature was just as large as one's too.

'Didn't do you much good, did it? It's not so funny when you're the one facing a unicorn without magic of your own.' Prey internally sneered. He, Prey, the runt, was the one still standing while Valour lay wheezing on the freshly polished floorboards. It pleased Prey.

"No questions? No, 'how did you get in here'? Or, 'who are you'?" Prey cheerily asked into the silence.

Valour just kept glaring darkly, face all but stone. Prey knew the stallion was just waiting for Lemon's attention to falter so he could attack again. Too bad. He'd had his chance when he'd woken up unexpected just now, before Lemon and Prey could take their positions. Lemon was now ready, Valour wouldn't be getting a second one.

Prey slowly began retying the silk ribbon behind his ear, now that it wouldn't be needed, "No? You are wondering who we are though, I can tell."

Valour's face remained carved from stone as he took deep, even breathes.

'-who cares? Criminals and scum are the same everywhere in Equestria-'

"Well I'm going to tell you who we are anyways. And no, not because I'm stupid enough to monologue," Prey said, still tying his

ribbon back on, "No, I'm going to tell you because I need to confirm something. See, I could've just cut your throat without ever waking you up, but I need to test something. I need to see, when confronted with me face to face for an extended period of time, whether you start to remember anything. I encountered Sunshine a while ago, you know, one of your precious Solar Guard, and he made me nervous. So here I am. Do you remember me yet, Valour? Even a little bit?"

'-what in Celestria's name is this crazy filly on about? Why's the mare letting her do all the talking? She's the real threat here, if I can just take her out-'

"I'm not a filly, or a ewe, I'm a ram." Prey interrupted Valour's thoughts.

Again, Valour didn't even blink, not letting anything past his façade of stone.

"Yes, I can hear your thoughts. Yes, I'm a filthy mind leech, I'm repulsive and disgusting and, huh, actually I haven't been called a heretic in that context before. And yes, I definitely have something to do with that spate of thefts and mind wipes in Vanhoover. Know why? Because I was there. Know why I was there? Because you brought me there. Know where I was before you fetched me? Rotting in a cell in Dreverton."

Ah, *there*. That was finally enough to get the Solar Guard Captain's stone mask to slip. Even the name of the high security prison was supposed to be a state secret.

His eyes widened, and his ears twitched for a second, '-no, stay focused. Is still possible this is all an elaborate bluff. Remember the training, give them nothing-'

"It's not a bluff, and what I want you're already giving to me, by *not* giving it to me. All this is proving is that, so far, you can't remember anything. So let's add some more stimuli." Prey finished retying on his ribbon and let his ear drop back. He leaned slightly forwards:

"Does any of this ring any bells? Prisoner 452. Having me interrogate the noble Cedar Fields inside his mansion when he lost control and attacked me. A specially prepared cell in the Vanhoover City Guard station. Hitting me in the stomach straight after meeting me just so I'd know my place. Gold Bit and Sunshine guarding a certain prisoner. Gold Bit later getting his mind shredded later that night on top of a building beside the river."

Red hot anger blazed up in Valour's mind, '-how dare they try and degrade the name of my Solar Guards?! Gold Bit gave more than these cravens will ever know!-'

Valour's roaring spike of burning anger was so strong it was frightening. Beaten, magicless, and on the floor, Valour's anger was still legendary. It certainly frightened Prey for that split moment before he caught himself and then he got angry in turn:

'No! He doesn't get to frighten me any more. This is why I'm here, to cross him off The List so I don't have to be afraid of him any longer.'

"Gold Bit was a racist, bigoted, filthy liar, the epitome of everything that's despicable about ponies!" Prey spat back at Valour, "He didn't deserve to be born a unicorn, he didn't deserve to have magic! He abused his power over me just because I was weaker. Well he got what he deserved and so will you!"

Valour couldn't just let that past, throwing aside his vow of silence because; '-he really is one of them mind leeches, so there's no point in holding out-'

"Enough!" Valour bellowed in the deafening voice of a Guard Captain, all but rattling the glass in the two lone picture frames.

"Enough! I will not stand for this. Gold Bit gave his sanity to stop evils exactly like you! He gave it willingly serving the land you stain with your bloody hooves. There is not one Solar Guard who would not gladly do the same to uphold their oath! We have sworn to Celestia, and that is why you will be stopped. You will be caught and be returned to rot in Dreverton. A criminal cannot escape, cannot change, cannot stop justice, You! Will! Go! Down!" Valour *roared.*

Prey's ears rang in the enclosed space of the bedroom. If not for the silence bubble encapsulating the room, Prey would've been worried about a neighbour overhearing. As it was, it just made his ears and superior hearing hurt. His face twisted into something ugly as he glared back at Valour:

"And *there's* the temper I remember. You're one of those who always thinks if they're getting angry then they must be in the right-"

"I already said enough! I will not waste my time being subjected to this hateful rhetoric!"

Again, Prey's ears were left ringing. "Don't do that again-"

"Do you think I care what a mind leech criminal wants?!" Prey flinched from the noise, not able to help himself, "Criminals don't get to want, they gave away their agency when they chose to commit crime. Enough is enough! I am not afraid of you, *criminal*, and I never will be. There is no higher calling for a Solar Guard than to give his life for his Princess. So be done with this and stop wasting my time."

This was not going how Prey had wanted. He didn't rightly know what he had wanted, but it wasn't this.

He barely noticed the audible grinding of Lemon Pink's teeth next to him, her own cold hate of the Solar Guard Captain for his role in her own downfall all but lost on Prey. They were *both* here this night for revenge, but Prey could only feel the bitter burning of his own hate, not Lemon's, just like she only felt hers. Staring into the face of the unicorn who'd been at the start of all this, Prey couldn't. He just couldn't.

Valour was glaring back with that infuriating self righteous pride, and as Prey saw the stallion's complete certainness in his own righteousness, the lamb just... couldn't.

Valour didn't regret a single thing, even now when the tables had been turned, and he was the one overpowered just like he'd overpowered Prey, he wasn't afraid like Prey had been. All Valour felt was contempt from him, contempt for *him*, Prey. Even now,

Valour didn't believe himself to be defeated.

Valour had been taken off-guard and beaten, but there was no defeat in his posture or handsome face. Even as he mocked them and demanded they kill him, Valour believed good would triumph over evil, and that they were the evil. Valour saw himself as a martyr.

Prey hated that. He hated Valour's arrogance. The unicorn was a Sun Wolf worshipping zealot, and Prey hated it.

"You blind, deluded-! Of all the arrogance!" Prey broke off as his voice went into a high pitched warble without him meaning too. '*Damn* this stupid runt voice!'

His voice break was so at odds with the situation that even Valour was too nonplussed for a single moment to try to interrupt again. '-not supposed to... what?-'

Prey made himself breathe and get the words out, "People like you think everything's black and white, if its not good, then it must be evil. Well it's not-!"

"Oh Get Over Yourself and Stop LYING!" Valour bellowed over Prey again, "Harmony is made of honesty, not lying mind raping traitors who-"

Valour launched himself forwards mid sentence, trying to catch them off guard, springing off the floorboards in a dead gallop.

'-*now*!-'

The Captain had been trying to not think about his moment to prevent them catching on, attacking on the spur of the moment. Except, he only *thought* he'd decided in that split second. Prey and Lemon's whole beings were focused in this moment, and there had still been that half a moment between deciding to attack and attacking. If it was an instinctive reaction, like lashing out in defence, it would've worked. But deciding to attack was still a conscious decision on Valour's part, so it was still something Prey could hear.

Prey's hoof jerked in a slash. Lemon cast, magic empowered by the electrite choker. And she could cast faster than Valour could close the distance. The stallion's legs went out from under him as the spell hit him below his center of gravity.

"*Again*!" Prey ordered as Valour went to rise up. Lemon fired another red blast of stunning magic into Valour. *Cr-Whack*

"Again!" *Cr-Whack*

"Again." *Cr-Whack*

"Again." Prey ordered for the last time as Valour finally stopped attempting to rise up. Prey heard from the pained buzz of the Captain's thoughts that he'd given up on a straight, frontal attack. There was blood coming out of Valour's nostrils, one of the blasts having caught him right in the face.

Prey and Lemon coldly watched Valour as he turned his head, contemptuously licking the blood off his upper lip and spat. Still there was no defeat in Valour's eyes, just angry defiance.

'-how like the criminal scum they are, falling back on force to subdue anypony who stands up to them-'

Prey gritted his teeth and continued from where he'd been interrupted; "Well it's not black and white. That's all you believe in, because that's all your precious Celestia-"

"-Princess Celestia."

Prey could scarcely believe the unicorn had interrupted to correct him even now.

"Again." Prey growled.

"Gladly." *Cr-Whack*

Valour jerked, but he didn't make a sound. It was like beating on a stubborn fence post. Either you beat it until it broke and was left useless, or you gave up and it won.

"The Sun Wolf is not *my* ruler," Prey stressed, matching Valour's contempt with his own, "She's never done anything for me. Ever. Her precious Harmony is reserved only for her 'little ponies'. Everyone else is a second class nobody. Everything about your foul country is all about you ponies! Your magic, your cutie marks, your farms, your cities. You hate and fear anything which doesn't obey all your rules! It's always your way, or no way. It's all, 'Obey-our-version-of-Harmony-or-be-destroyed'. You all think its good versus bad, and that it's impossible for anyone but ponies to know what 'good' is."

Valour's lips curled, handsome face distorted by utter disgust and his bleeding nose. '-pathetic. I've heard this a hundred times from a hundred criminals. They all try to justify the evil crimes-'

Prey jabbed a trembling hoof at the glowering Valour. His chest felt hot and filled with cold fire, "There you go again! You don't even consider that you might be wrong because you've been so, so, so *brainwashed* into believing you're the embodiment of righteousness, and that everyone who doesn't agree is evil. All you stupidly believe in are the extremes of good and evil! As if there's no one good who can't do horrible things, and that there's no one bad who can't regret and want to do good."

'-as *if*. False regret does not make up for your evil and you will be caught and stopped. A criminal does not change, and good will always win in the end-'

"No you're not even listening! Do you even listen to yourself, for that matter? Can you hear your own hypocrisy?! And you're still not even listening- Rrrrgnn."

Prey broke off in helpless aggravation. He glared long and hard at Valour, while next to him, Lemon did the same, her stance leaning her forwards, sharp horn lowered for a better casting angle, just waiting for the other unicorn to try again.

Because Valour *would* try again. And again, and again, and again. Because good would always win, good *must* always win, and because he, Valour, was good, he would never give up.

Prey fell quiet, working his jaw and breathing hard. Across the small divide of empty floorboards, both sides glared at their opposites.

"That's it then, isn't it?" Prey said simply, "No matter what I say, you'll never ever even listen, because I'm the one saying it."

Prey's hoof twitched up towards to his ribbon, but he caught himself, "Your ideological dogma is opposed to everything that doesn't completely agree with it. It's your key belief, upon which everything else is founded with circular reasoning. You're one of *them*."

Prey's hoof reached up again for his ribbon, a nervous twitch, and he had to divert it to stroking down the back of his ear as he spoke; "Everyone holds a deepest belief, that one thing they believe before all others, and that shapes how they view the world. It's the same everywhere. In every village, every town, every city. Everyone has that one belief. And you know, most of them believe the exact same damned thing."

Prey got his voice to return to calm. The repetitive, familiar motion helping. He wasn't angry about this bit, because it was the truth:

"Everyone believes in what they think is the truth. When you get down to it, when you *reeeeally* get down to it, most people like you, no, not like you Valour, people far *better* than you! People believe in the old fight of good and evil. Except it's even simpler than even that. They believe it's actually light versus dark. Ha. That's why ponies hated Luna, their own goddess, so much. They hated her because Celestia existed. Because they decided two sisters must be opposites. Because one symbolised the light, and the other the dark. Day and night."

The side of Prey's mouth twitched up in a single moment of amusement, but it was fleeting and already passed; "Everyone believes in the oldest battle of all, light against the dark. Fire against the night. Some people believe that the dark is winning, some believe it's the light.

Unbidden, Lemon contemptuously made as if she was carelessly

balancing something across the flat of her hoof, adding her silent agreement to Prey's words:

"Some believe that they're two sides of the same coin, that darkness only exists because there is an absence of light, and that light is only the brief absence of darkness. Some despair that the dark is always pressing at the edge of the light, others know that even the tiniest light drives back the dark. So yes, it's back to the oldest fight of all. Dark and light. Light and dark."

Prey shook his head, tsk'ing, "Well that's their belief. Their deep, subconscious, ideological belief. Their one fundamental truth. And perhaps it is the truth... But their truth is still wrong. I reject their truth, because it's not *my* truth, and I know what *I* believe."

"I believe that beneath everything, it's much simpler than that. Before the old fight, before light and dark, there is one thing which everyone forgets. Beyond the deepest, darkest, emptiest ocean depths, there was first hunger. Good versus evil? Or rather, light versus the dark? All of that? No. Just hunger."

"You're mad." Valour stated firmly in disdain, but there was a certain watchfulness in his eyes now as he looked at Prey, and no longer just at Lemon Pink.

"How insightful of you Captain!" Prey choked on a spluttering laugh, "You correctly said madness, and not crazy or insane. Madness is the dangerous one."

Prey abruptly sobered, "Madness is catching, did anyone ever warn you? And I could do it, you know. One touch, just one touch and you'd be gone. That's all it would take. I can break people's minds just like that, one touch, but I never do because it'll never work out. There's always something in the way or I'll get caught or I still need them sane. But I could do it. I could."

Prey held up his hoof, twisting it about to examine it. The golden tracer bands dully reflected the light. "But still, I could." He muttered to himself.

Valour warily watched the lamb's hoof as he held it up.

Surreptitiously the Captain was tensing his muscles up, getting ready to attack again even though it was going to end the same way, because even if it was a hopeless effort Valour wasn't about to just lay there and let it happen. He might break, but he'd never bend.

Prey shook his head, "But no, you're the Solar Guard Captain. Your death with be a cause of frantic investigation. There are going to be unicorns scanning the house, the area, following up on every single person you've met in the last month, everything. Your death will be of completely natural causes."

Valour couldn't help it, he had to ask, "What're you blathering about, mind leech?"

"You got drunk and left a candle burning beside your bed." Prey explained simply, "Who knew Captain Valour of the Solar Guard had a secret drinking habit? All those bottles in the pantry will clearly show a long time habit, as will the empty bottles in the trash. Of course, they'll be picking this all out from the charred embers of the house, but I'm sure they'll out two and two together. In fact, those defence and alarm enchantments you have on this house will make it even better, since that'll help prove it really wasn't an attack from the outside but a mistake from the inside."

Prey paused, "...Unless, that is, you can convince me not to follow through. And it'll have to be a good argument. A really, really good one."

Prey couldn't help how churlish his next words came out, despised them for making himself sound like a childish victim, but the words also wanted to get out, to be said, to accuse the Solar Captain who didn't care:

"You hurt me. You took my freedom. I want to kill you. I do, I really do. I *so* do. But the point of this whole trip was to change myself to become... But that's none of your damned business. So talk fast, Valour. I'll give you a chance. Convince me why I shouldn't kill you."

"You think I fear death?! I will never betray my oath to a filthy

criminal! My faith is in Celestia and none other, and if you kill me then I go to my death a martyr. I made the choice to forever choose the harder right rather than the easier wrong. I will not compromise for something as low and filthy as you!" Valour shouted back at him without a moments hesitation.

"My name is Prey. Not criminal, not mind leech, and not prisoner 452. It's Prey. Say it. Say my name."

Valour looked down at Prey, despite him being the one prone on the floor. He spoke with clipped disdain dripping from every word as he drew it out; "Your name is *criminal*. Your life is criminal. Your existence is criminal. You are a criminal."

"I'm not asking much. Say my name. You're Valour, I'm Prey. Easy, see? Say it."

"Criminal." Valour repeated.

"This is your chance. I hate you, but I'm going to be a better person. I promised. So just do it. It isn't hard. I'm giving you a chance. Why is that so damn hard to understand?"

"*Criminal*."

'Even for a chance to save his own life when it's offered to him, he spits in my eye.' Prey seethed, but it was a cold, empty sort of anger now.

It was hard to so hotly hate someone who was already dead. Anger turns to resentful disappointment, revenge leaves you unfulfilled, and you're left forever unsatisfied with the outcome, always imagining what justice you might've rendered if done differently.

"You didn't have much of a chance of convincing me anyway," Prey admitted, "I was already almost sure, but... After Rushweed, and remembering Fire Strike, so similar to *you*... And yet for some reason I still offered you a chance. I don't know why I wasted my time."

Prey walked backwards without looking away from Valour until he was beside the bedside table. It was just another pointless pony

luxury, but in this case, the neat little table held one item of significance on it. Only the one. There was a box of tissues, a clock, and a small statue of Celestia. There had also been the Captain's polished helmet set there, so it would be the first thing Valour could reach when he awoke, but Lemon had levitated it away while Valour was asleep. Prey was going to be having a close look at the mindlock enchantment on the golden helmet, but that wasn't the important item, and neither were the other two.

No, it was the little metal plated figurine of the Sun alicorn placed there.

"Just for your information, *Captain* Valour, no one is coming. No one outside of this room has heard any of your shouting. And it isn't my companion who's casting the silence bubble on this room. I thought of that ahead of time, and I didn't want you possibly hearing us when breaking in. So it was all set up beforehoof."

Prey reached up and lifted off the figurine of the hated Sun Wolf, turning it in his grip so it faced Valour:

"I don't suppose you remember when you put this here do you-? No, you don't I see. You don't remember me even after I've done everything to jog your memory, so you wouldn't have realised this was odd either. Perfect, that means it works perfectly if you, as a filthy unicorn trained against dark magic, couldn't even notice your own fixation."

Valour's eyes fixed on the little statue that Prey was holding, and then his face went still as he worked out what Prey meant, '-I don't remember where that came from!-'

"Of course you don't remember, and of course you'd never think to suspect a replica of your beloved Goddess would you?" Prey mocked, trying to reclaim some of the vicious pleasure he'd been able to feel only moments ago before it all faded in the knowledge of Valour's impending death:

"The allure of the light is so bright and wonderful that the fish never suspects there might be an angler's jaws in the dark. You've had this sat in your house every hour of every day for half a month,

and never noticed a thing wrong. And guess what? Every time you used your unfair magic to solve every little problem in your life, it was slowly attuning itself to your magic. You exposed yourself for so long that when tonight came, all that magic, all your control, all that power you were born with, it meant *nothing*."

Valour surged forwards to attack again for the fourth time, just like Prey knew he would.

The stallion would never go quietly, especially not when Prey and Lemon meant to kill him. He could've tried to run, make a break for the open door, but that was not in the mindset of a Solar Guard.

'-evil stands before me! Never compromise!-'

But Valour failed again, just like Prey had known he would. It hadn't been in doubt.

To go from a prone position to standing, to accelerating from standing to running, and then to run across the distance, even for a stallion in his prime and pushed to the limit by adrenaline and desperation, all of that took longer than magic. It wasn't usually power, but actually distance and space which was magic's biggest advantage in a fight. It was both close range and long range, both defensive and offensive. It was like a loaded crossbow.

As long as you had the time to aim and fire, a crossbow would beat a sword every time. That was simply the unfair nature of magic all unicorns got to wield.

Valour had only just gotten his barrel off the floorboards, yet again rising in a lunge he meant to turn into a flying charge, when Lemon let loose with another red blast from her horn. A crossbow versus a sword. If it was loaded, and you could aim and fire in time, you'd would always win. And with the electrite choker and Lemon's own focused discipline, she was definitely loaded and ready.

The concussive spell hit Valour bodily back into the wall with a meaty smack. The stallion barely caught himself on his knees before his face hit the floor, where he stayed, wheezing nosily for air.

Everyone needs to breathe, and Lemon was not holding back. Against a lesser pony, excepting an earth pony, such repeated magical strikes would've rendered them unconscious with cracked or broken ribs. Lemon wasn't holding back, but she also couldn't hit much harder than she already was, not with only non-lethal concussive strike based spells.

The runed choker was helping her out, but Lemon's skill had always lain in more precise and focused spells. A needle thin force lance to go through flesh, deceiving illusion spells, and mind altering magic. And simplest of all was her telekinesis. A levitated dagger, no matter how crude, was a deadly force multiplier, and only a fool would overlook the simplicity telekenisis reliably offered.

But Valour needed to be alive to die in the coming fire. Prey didn't know how quickly the fire brigade and weather teams would get here when the time came, and if there was enough of Valour's body left to be examined, it needed to be absolutely clear what he'd died from and when. Already this had moved from revenge to the drudgery of a chore in Prey's heart. He was so disappointed and angry that it had gone like this, but now it was too late and all that was left was cleaning up and covering his tracks.

He looked down at the golden Celestia figurine in his hooves, turning it back over so it faced him again. It wasn't actual gold of course, it just looked like it. He scowled at it.

"Lemon." He addressed her without looking up.

"Yes, Prey?"

Prey took a long breath, 'I do not torture for the sake of torture. If Valour hadn't tried to keep attacking us, then we wouldn't have kept having to hit him. But by any and all dead gods, I still hate pain.'

"I'm not going to draw this out any longer. I shouldn't have drawn it out this long to begin with. I got what I needed, even under duress he doesn't remember me. Let's just get this done."

"Yes, Prey."

Valour looked up, jerkily rising on shaking legs, '-the Sun will always rise. Never give in-!'

And the stunning spell sank into his chest. Valour's battered body seized up for a moment, and then slumped onto the floorboards. But even then, he wasn't unconscious yet, mind though foggy and hazy still refusing to yield.

So Lemon stunned him again.

Prey stood back and watched as Lemon levitated Valour's unconscious form and put him back into his bed on his side, tucking his muscled legs up to his body one by one, like most ponies did when they slept. Next she lifted the crumpled blanket off the floor, giving it a good shake out to let it drift down atop Valour's broad frame.

She even took the time to tuck it in the blanket's bottom edge. There could be nothing left to create doubt that Valour had died due to smoke inhalation in his sleep. Even the mightiest of unicorns had to sleep and breathe in the end.

'All it takes is one or two breaths.'

"Go get the beer bottles and put them in the cool box Lemon, then fetch me a candle and get the rest of Valour's house set up," Prey said quietly, "I'll set up the room in here with the fire runic array."

"Yes, Prey. I will be back in ten minutes." Prey nodded vaguely as Lemon trotted out of the bedroom, the trailing end of her travel cloak the last thing to vanish.

He'd put the candle on the bedside table, where the runic lure used to sit. It would be easy to believe that it had simply fallen over in the night and Valour simply never woke up. He'd be setting up the array right here beside Valour's bed, where it would be most lethal. Prey paused just before he reached out to begin, looking at the blanket covered form of Captain Valour of the Solar Guard on the bed.

'Murder, murder, always the same. So much to lose, so much to

gain. But first...'

Prey stood on his hind legs, leaning up against the bed frame so he could reach, and lightly poked Valour on the cheek and-

A breaking stone, a splintering nothing, an endless mouth.

'There. Now even if a miracle happens and he survives, no one will ever know of my involvement.'

Just like that.

A single touch, a light poke, and Valour's mind was shattered. Just like that. So simple. So easy. Just a single touch and a person was mind dead. Prey had always been able to shatter a mind with just a touch, to shatter and rend a person irrevocably. It shouldn't only take a touch to kill someone, but yet that was all it took Prey to 'kill' Valour. Just. Like. That.

Mind magic was unexplored and feared for a reason. Prey had been bound in heavy suppression chains in Dreverton for a reason. When someone could kill you with a brush of the hoof, bump into you in a crowd, or simply walk up and pat you on the shoulder, what could you do about that?

Prey deeply hated being touched. And he also hated touching anyone else, and not a small part of it was for this reason: Prey could kill a mind with a touch.

It didn't come up often, and when you were in a life or death situation, sometimes there wasn't even an opportunity to get into hoof range. It was the crossbow and the sword all over again. Prey was a runt lamb, and even excluding unicorns, everyone was bigger, stronger, faster, and with longer reach than him. And against a burning building, a falling boulder, an undead scarecrow, what use was it anyway? But Prey could still kill with a touch.

Just like that.

He hadn't done it in over fifty-seven years, not since before Dreverton's cell. But that didn't mean he couldn't.

Prey idly twisted the dull golden band on his foreleg as he dropped back onto all fours. 'And just like that indeed.'

There was nothing further to do here, just ensuring that the death of Valour went through how it was supposed to. The simple runic array would go off sometime early in the morning at about four o'clock, which was at least three hours after the train would deliver Prey back to Canterlot. He'd keep the train ticket to prove it, just in case.

'Actually I'd better leave Valour's helmet behind too. They'll almost certainly notice it's missing if I bring it along to study that mind lock enchantment. Oh well, another time.' Prey thought, getting to work laying down the runes.

Killing someone really was this simple, and this hard.

Prey spared a glance for the three framed pictures on the wall. They were the only decoration Valour used to have in this room, everything else was a severe military, uniform grey. The three photos were hung in a triangle formation.

The largest picture at the top, exactly where it belonged, was one of Celestia on her golden throne. It was the first and last thing Valour would have seen everyday, and Prey bet the Captain's second house held a duplicate of the same picture again. The other two pictures were of normal, mortal ponies.

The one was of a group line up of a whole unit of Solar Guards, dressed in their famous armour, saluting the photographer, but the last photo was a bit more nebulous.

It showed a smaller, more normal looking group of ponies, dressed up in suits and dresses for the camera but not otherwise in a uniform. There were eight figures total in this photo. Two married couples side by side, one pair with two teenage children and the other pair with one, and in the middle of the two families was an older stallion who very much had the position of an obvious uncle.

Prey recognised three of the faces. The single child standing straight and proud was Valour, and obviously the mare and stallion behind

him were his parents.

The second face Prey only knew because of how often it was shown in the Financial Times and other Canterlot newspapers. The tall unicorn uncle with iron grey coat and eyes was Triton Fell, scion of the noble House widely acknowledged as the wealthiest in Equestria.

So Valour's uncle was Triton Fell, huh? No wonder Valour got the position of Captain of the Solar Guard then. It took talent yes, but to have the opportunity to develop that talent, there was nothing like money, power, and connections.

And then the last face Prey recognised when he looked closer was actually one of the two children of the second family. If a stranger had seen this photo, they'd probably look twice too. The second family, although obviously rich by their clothing, only one of them was a unicorn, a similar iron grey fur colour to Triton Fell's own. But the rest of the family, the wife and the two children, were Earth ponies.

And despite the photo being over a decade old, probably closer to two, Prey recognised the green earth pony colt. Because he'd been looking into the stallion recently.

That was Big Fields, the leader of the Crop Holder's, and the election winner. That was what nearly everyone knew him for.

He was also the son of May Fields, the daughter of Green Fields, who had been the earth pony land lord who'd owned all the farms of the villagers of Rushweed sixty years ago. And Green Fields was the one who'd bled the villagers dry in rent, and then abandoned the village and fled into the pony lands of Equestria when the Border Guard ordered the villagers to leave their lands so they didn't have to keep protecting them against the Resistance.

Traitors, both the Border Guard and Green Fields. The Guards had ordered the villagers to leave, without supplies or escort, with just the vague promise of; "If you get over the Longridge and into Equestria, then you'll be fine".

Leave? On the orders of a pony Guard force who they hated every bit as much as the Resistance? With no guarantees or supplies, and before the harvest? Some choice that was.

Leave and most likely starve to death, or stay on their farms and keep going as they had. It hadn't really been a choice at all. At least if they stayed, then they wouldn't starve.

So they'd stayed, and the Border Guard had abandoned their village, and when the Resistance came and burnt it to the ground as a taunt to the Border Guard, to test if their new Captain Fire Strike really meant what he'd said, they'd sat back and done nothing.

But before that, before the burning, Green Fields had taken his family, packed up his property, and fled. If it weren't for his tariffs and rent, if it weren't for that, then maybe the village would've had enough money and food to have considered making the trip instead. It would've been giving in, surrendering to be ground yet again under the hooves of ponies, and although Prey knew it likely wouldn't have changed the stubborn and hardened villagers minds, at least they would've had the choice!

But could a son be guilty for the crimes of his father? How about his grandfather?

Prey didn't know the answer, he didn't know if he was going to follow through on this revenge, but he was going to find out.

"Big Fields, son of May Fields, daughter of Green Fields. Maybe I'll do it. Maybe I won't. Either way, I know where I'm posting the lure totem to next."

When it was done, and the helmet returned to the bedside table and the candle lit, Prey and Lemon retraced their steps through the house and left under the cover of an illusionary veil, exactly like they'd arrived. Prey relocked the door, and then they returned to the station to catch the late night train back to Canterlot. The few runes he'd left behind were only on wooden floorboards, and would burn up, and a unicorn's magical signature, like Lemon's, only

lingered for a little while. No fuss, no bother, no evidence.

And there it should have ended.

Captain Valour Fallstar had been crossed off of The List, so that should've been that. But it wasn't.

The station platform still had a decent few ponies on it for this time of night, also waiting to catch the late night train to Canterlot. It was scheduled to pull into the station in five minutes. Lemon had her illusionary disguise of a sunflower yellow mare on, along with the sunhat, and was currently looking in the saddlebag's to get out her ticket. Prey was staring blankly out across the dark train tracks, mechanically smoothing out the fur down his ears.

The sound of Lemon breathing in suddenly snapped Prey sharply back to reality. It was the sort of sudden, instant focus you gave whether you wanted to or not when you heard the ice underhoof crack.

He didn't turn in case the sudden problem was that they were being watched, "What?" Prey muttered without moving his lips.

"Prey, I found-it was just like this already." Lemon said, shifting the saddlebag.

Prey turned to look, now that he knew it wasn't an external threat Lemon had spotted. He squinted in the lantern light.

Selenia's pin cushion. The roughly stitched rag ball sat at the top of the saddlebags contents. Outwardly, it looked drab or even ugly. It hadn't been there in the bag before. Prey stared at it, a nasty sinking feeling in his stomach. The rag ball had three pins stuck into it, pushed in up to their heads, and the fourth sticking out.

'*Four* pins? There were only three last time! Where did that one come from-wait, *that's* mine.'

That fourth pin was actually a sewing needle, that old dulled one Prey had found in the remains of Gossamer's once and only home. That belonged to Prey! It wasn't part of the raggedly pin cushion, it didn't fit! It didn't even match up with the other three! It was a

sewing needle, not a damn clothes pin!

But somehow, the pincushion was sitting here in front of him, and it had assimilated the needle as if it were a fourth pin.

"Give that back!" Prey exclaimed, heedless that he was talking to an inanimate object. That sewing needle was *his*, a memento, a reminder, a token, not part of the cloth artifact.

Of course, nothing happened. Prey grabbed at the needle, aiming to yank it out. He clenched his cleft hoof around the sliver of old metal and pulled-He wasn't pulling. Prey tried to pull, but his leg wasn't pulling. His muscles weren't obeying him. He tried to use his other hoof to push the pin cushion off the needle instead. It... It didn't work! Why weren't his legs obeying him?

'How?! There's nothing affecting my mind, I'd know! So how?'

"Pull it out with your aura." Prey ordered Lemon.

Lemon focused on the needle, her horn sparking silver.

"...Are you trying?" Prey asked. There was no corresponding silvery glow around the needle.

"I can't. I can't grab it. I know I can, but I also can't." Lemon said in frustration.

"Don't try and pull it out. Just try taking hold of it instead." Prey told her, staring intently at the pin cushion.

Lemon's silver aura appeared around the needle just fine. "Now try pulling-"

Prey broke off as the telekinetic aura immediately winked out. "Let me guess, you can't. The moment before you start, you can't." Prey stated, not surprised in the slightest.

"No, Prey." Lemon answered. The both warily looked at the pin cushion, both remembering what it had once done.

Prey licked his lips, "Those three pins were used to make a magical

wish of sorts. But they were all used up and the thieves didn't seem to know how to charge it back up. But now it's gone and assimilated a sewing needle. Does it matter if it's not a pin? Is this another wish? Or something else?"

"I think it happened in Valour's house. I didn't see it in my saddlebags before." Lemon said, continuing to add to their observation.

"But we don't know exactly when, or how, or why, or what it means. Does it require a life? Or is it specifically destroying someone's mind? Was it getting revenge? Did the needle only work because I prized it so highly?" Prey scowled, not liking the possible implications but equally disliking how little they knew.

'This thing almost got me killed once, and the way it worked it's magic... A ripped hole in the world...' Prey shivered like icy slime was being trailed down his neck, he couldn't help it. He shut away the memories and locked them away, now was not the time, especially not at night.

The pin cushion sat there, ugly made and inoffensive, just a thing. And what a terrifying thing it could represent.

Prey didn't know what he'd been going to do with the old sewing needle, a reminder of the farm. Find somewhere safe to hide it down in the crystal cavern probably, but now it wasn't his choice any longer.

'That was mine.' Prey silently told the pincushion. But the hard truth was, people could still steal from him.

The train tracks started to hum. Five minutes were up.

Prey could only shake his head in helpless frustration, "There's nothing to be done for now. There's nothing we can do. Put it back in the bag and we'll return it to the crystal lair first thing. I don't like it, and I certainly don't trust it." He grated, standing as the train pulled into the station.

He'd murdered yet another person this night, but it wasn't that

which Prey sat and worried over on the return train trip back.

---I---

Author's Notes:

You didn't all forget about Captain Valour now, did you? Because Prey sure didn't!

Help this time around was given by:
GreatSpaceBeaver

I still feel to thank the previous FiMfiction User, Sweetolebob18 for all the editing work they put in at the time with previous chapters.

That said, if anyone spots any mistakes, please do point them out so I can correct them, thanks.

75.5 For Want of a Teacher a Nail was Lost

The death of Captain Valour of the Solar Guard was not reported in the local newspaper the following day, nor the next, nor the one after that.

In fact, the stallion wasn't mentioned by name at all. While the tragic house fire which claimed the life of an upstanding citizen of society *was* mentioned, there was nothing about *who* the unfortunate citizen had been.

The Solar Guard was not mentioned, nor was any sort of investigation. Furthermore, even the burnt house's address wasn't included in the local newspaper when Lemon tracked down a copy. Prey didn't know whether this was because there really was no investigation, or if there was one, but it was being kept secret.

With how they hadn't named Valour, presumably to hide that the Solar Guard had just lost its Captain, either reason could be true. Or neither. To a suspicious and alert reader, the blanketing lack of details might've almost been enough to raise some suspicions, although probably not. It was just a local paper, and it was only read by ponies. Their species as a whole had an aversion to looking deeper into anything which they might not like the truth of.

Don't go looking for something you don't want to find, Prey believed the phrase was.

Prey wasn't surprised there was nothing in the newspapers, though. Valour was, or had been, related to nobility. Triton Fell himself had been Valour's half uncle. If the relatives and family didn't want a mention of his death in the papers, then his name would be kept out all together. They most assuredly wanted to grieve in private.

That, and the Solar Guard didn't want to present even the possibility to the public that they were anything less than super-equine and infallible. And the Solar Guard Captain accidently

burning himself to death after carelessly leaving a lit candle in his bedroom definitely clashed with that image.

Prey's holiday was over.

He'd spent nearly all three days of it, both day and night, on various trains travelling there and back. But he'd done what he set out to do. The old farm was behind him now, it was crossed off The List, and he never needed to go back if he didn't want to. The side trip to Redwood's sad little museum had been unexpected, and then Luna's sudden dream kidnapping had been both unexpected and unpleasant. And then of course Valour.

Prey felt like a different person, yet the same person. So many important things had happened over those three days. Important didn't mean 'good' though, it just meant important. He'd given Valour a chance Prey told himself, *more* than one chance, but instead, the arrogant unicorn had attacked him. Valour had used his chance.

But it was all done now, and Prey was back in the mountainside capital city of Equestria.

'Ahh, Canterlot. How I have not missed you. What a disgusting rose water cesspool of privilege and pony supremacy.'

Well, a holiday was supposed to take you to nicer places than where you actually lived. Unfortunately, once a holiday is over, you've got to go back to work.

Prey had arrived back after midnight on the train, exiting onto the platform in the hissing of engine steam, and gone straight back to his flat to sleep. He woke up late in the morning, ate, watered his potplants and tended to Crimson's blood fern, then snuck down through the tunnels to his lair. There, he ineffectively tried to figure out why and how Selenia's pin cushion had done what it did, made some more runes, checked on the wickerwatches growth and the witch curse it was spreading down in the sewers Heart, and by then it was evening and time for him to get right back to work in the

Night Guard.

Trotting in through the Guard's entrance into the Lower Palace, head down, Prey straight away took his path to Lieutenant Screech.

The thestral was currently using Nighthawk's office, since that was where all the Captain's paperwork was stored, and Screech was supposed to be covering for Nighthawk. Screech wasn't alone in the office when Prey arrived at the open door. First Lieutenant Swift Arrow of the Royal Guard was in there with him, as Prey stopped outside to listen in, remaining out of sight around the corner.

Prey knew the Screech could only just have started his shift, since Celestia hadn't lowered the sun below the horizon just yet, but already the thestral was sounding harried. Which was kind of understandable, being the only Night Guard Lieutenant currently left in Canterlot and entrusted with the running of the entire Night Guard. Which meant Swift Arrow had wanted to corner Screech first thing for a reason.

"When will Captain Nighthawk be back? It's been over a week, and still nothing." That was Swift Arrow's strident voice.

"The answer hasn't changed since last night. Captain Nighthawk is on a mission." Came Screech's flat reply.

"So when will he be back? Captain Shining Armour keeps asking you, how hard can it be to give a straight answer?"

"Captain Nighthawk is on a mission," Screech repeated, "If Princess Luna wants the Royal Guard to know the details, she will tell you herself, but until then I will not break mission secrecy."

There was the sound of a deeply aggravated snort, "Both Guard forces need both Captains to be able to coordinate effectively, and your Captain's not here. When will he finally be back?"

"That is also part of the mission secrecy. Princess Luna's orders." Screech told the other Lieutenant coolly.

"You said the same thing yesterday, and the day before that." Swift Arrow said, voice flat and accusing.

"That is because nothing has changed since yesterday. Or the day before that." Screech replied, matching Swift Arrow tone for tone.

There was a silence as both Lieutenants no doubt glared down the other. Or at least Prey thought they were, only listening and not actually looking in. Well, Swift Arrow had entered himself into a losing contest there if they really were having a glaring match. Screech had yellow slitted eyes made for glaring, plus, ponies really got the heebie-jeebies around anything 'unnatural'.

Prey was proven right as barely fifteen seconds later Swift Arrow snorted, stamped his hoof, and a last parting shot of; "My Captain wants to know the first thing when something changes."

Swift Arrow wore a fierce scowl on his helmet framed face as he marched past Prey, short cropped tail flicking angrily. '-tell Shining Armour the bat just keeps stalling. What could the ex-Nightmare possibly be having them do now?-'

Then he did a double take as he realised the lamb was even there. Prey offered him a big, but air-headed smile, head and ribbon tilted cutely to the side just so.

The unicorn stared for a second longer, then snorted again; '-whatever, I've work to do-', And marched off.

Prey watched to make sure the unicorn had gone around the corner, before turning back to the office door. He knocked lightly on the wood of the open door to announce himself.

Screech's tufted ears swivelled ahead of his head, "Come in-Oh, Prey, it's you."

Prey saw that Screech looked tired. Although it was a constant state for the understaffed Night Guard, this time Screech looked more tired than usual, "I'm back from my three days leave, sir."

Screech's yellow eyes flickered searchingly over him, "You went to see your family, right?"

"I went back to Rushweed and the family farm, yes."

"Did it go well?"

"No, and yes. Both. I'm glad I went though." Prey answered, while thinking:

'It's none of your damned business either way, so you'd better leave it alone.'

'-first time Prey's seen his family since jail where Princess Luna mercifully enlisted him. That's not an easy reunion, but blood is thicker than mud-'

Screech didn't leave it there however as Prey wanted him to. Despite knowing the ISND, and despite knowing Prey somewhat, as a senior thestral Screech still felt he needed to add a last piece of wisdom for the lamb; "It's good that you went back to them. Duty is not easy, that's why it is a duty, but it's always worth doing right."

Prey smiled, and nodded, and said nothing. It finally seemed to do the trick.

Screech turned back to Nighthawk's stacked desk and began searching over the piles of paperwork, "Well now that you're back, there's a job you're needed for. The rest of those old unsolved closed cases and paperwork can wait. Usually a Guard instructor would be needed, but until their 'mission' is over and the Night Guard command is back..."

Screech found the clipboard he was looking for and pulled it off the desk with a leathery wing, deftly flipping it around so it landed to rest cradled in his wing and facing towards Prey, "Until then, you'll do best Prey."

'-the new recruits from the clans are a massive boon, but nopony among them is experienced enough in the regulations of being Guards instead of warriors to instruct the rest. Needs an experienced hoof, and those *are* in short supply at the moment-', Screech thought with resigned annoyance, names and already stretched shift rotas running through his head.

Prey gingerly stretched out and took the very edge of the clipboard

in between his cleft hoof, careful not to touch or be touched by Screech's wing. Then he sat back on his haunches so he could both hold it and flip to the pages underneath.

Screech didn't start explaining what he wanted Prey to do, the Lieutenant just waited for him to have a read first while he himself got on with making a start on signing a bunch of requisition forms. Screech was always much more of the 'silent but effective' type, than say, someone like the other Lieutenant, Starry Wing.

It was very 'thestral' of Screech, simply hoof over the clipboard and let Prey form his own first impressions on whatever was written. First day back, (or rather, first night), and already Prey didn't like where this was going.

He scanned the top page, eyes flicking side to side. It was a list of forty Night Guard names, broken up into four lots of ten. The names were all new thestrals, Prey knew because he'd read the old Guard rosters, and since these didn't match they must be those who'd flown in with Vivid Edge little more than two weeks ago to oh-so-eagerly sign up and serve Luna.

When he lifted the top page to scan the one underneath, Prey saw that the second sheet held a list of Night Guard procedures from the rule book, specifically the ones which were actually used, as well as some less defined headings. 'Intelligence Work', and 'Undercover Investigating' to name two.

Prey let the top page fall back. Screech saw that he was done reading or had at least picked up the general gist of the task, "Our new thestrals, they need to get up to speed on how things work. The important things which don't come naturally, and the things nopony thinks about until they need them. *How* to investigate is important, like how you thought to go through all the post office registry history. We're used to caves, not cities."

"I'm just a lamb." Prey pointed out, although the excuse fell flat. Lamb he might physically be, but they both knew lamb on the inside he was not.

"They're thestrals from the clans. They will listen to you seriously."

Screech assured him, perhaps even a touch of offense in his gruff tone.

'-he's part of Princess Luna's Guard with all that entails. I thought he would've realised that by now. No, Prey must know by now, so perhaps he just needs reminders at times-'

"It isn't anything to worry over, Prey. You are a Night Guard. They are Night Guards. We all serve Luna in the way that best suits our ability to contribute." Screech told him, confident Prey would pick up on both the mild reproach and encouragement he meant to convey.

'-the ISND has proved to be the best at seeing beneath the beneath. And Prey isn't able to do much else of value by himself until Gloom and Crimson's return-'

"Permission to speak freely? Sir." Prey asked.

"Yes?"

"I don't think this is necessary. Bluntly put, I don't know how to teach people. I just do what I do, spotting patterns in things is just something I'm good at. I just do it. But I don't know how to teach it." Prey said.

He didn't want to have to interact with forty Night Guards, and he certainly didn't want them to interact back with him. It went solidly against his desire to remain as unnoticed as possible in the background. People were aware he existed in the Night Guard, but if he could stay out of sight he could also stay out of mind most of the time.

Screech unhelpfully interpreted that as him just needing a bit more encouraging; "You know yourself best Prey, but I guarantee the skills you have don't come naturally to most ponies. They'll learn it all in the long run by experience, but there isn't really time for that. Nopony's expecting perfect instruction, but even if you can only successfully teach some of it, it's still better than nothing."

Screech was being positive, but this wasn't really a discussion. He

thought he was assisting Prey by listening for a few minutes, but at the end of this, he still expected Prey to do it anyways despite what doubts the little lamb may feel. This was still an order, and Prey was still a Night Guard.

'You're not getting it. I just don't want to do it.' Prey thought, reaching up a hoof for his ribbon. Oh well, it would just take two minutes to change Screech's mind and make him forget this notion. Literally.

Prey caught himself, letting go of the smooth silk end of his ribbon in surprise.

Wasn't that a bit extreme? It would be simple thing to take Screech off guard and quickly rearrange his mind, but did he really need to? He couldn't afford to slip into the bad habit of doing this to fix all his problems, or eventually he'd slip up and someone would notice. And hadn't he committed to trying to become a better person? Was this really something important enough for him to invade another's mind over? Prey took a frank look and evaluated it.

'No, it's not. I'm already exposed and more well known than I wanted. After the lumberyard, and Mayflower, everyone in the Night Guard knows who the ISND is. I'd just be delaying the inevitable.' He thought unhappily.

"I'll give it my best effort then." Prey agreed, really meaning that he planned to only put in a slapdash effort.

"Good," Screech nodded, as if there had never been any other possible outcome, "The earlier you start instructing, the better. Later tonight actually. And it won't be a long term job, just until you've gone through everypony on the list."

"Yes sir." Prey hid a sigh of aggravation, brushing his ears back over his shoulder as he began to put together a quick lesson structure in his head. 'Four lots of ten Guards each. I'll need to repeat the lesson three additional times, so at least I'll have the excuse of keeping it short and to the point.'

Prey paused, "Sir, permission to speak freely again?"

Screech stopped in just starting on another pile of acquisition forms, looking up, "Yes?"

Prey looked Screech in his slit eyes, able to meet the yellow orbs unlike the Royal Guard Lieutenant who'd so recently exited; "Are you looking to try and integrate any of these thestrals into the ISND again, like with Lilly and Scenic?"

Screech was taken aback, tufted ears going straight up, '-was that actually what Prey was secretly worried about earlier?-'

"No Prey, absolutely not. No, Captain Nighthawk already made it clear, and after last time, just no." Screech shook his head emphatically:

'-no, hard no. That's not an experiment we're going to repeat any time soon-'

'Okay, good. That means I won't have to be extra unpleasant to them to convince them all not to join.' Prey thought, relieved.

He wasn't sure there was much he could've reasonably done anyway to dissuade thestrals from doing something they saw as their duty. Normal spoilt ponies were much easier, you just had to make them cry and they'd never want to come back. Whereas the thestral idea of a Night Guard initiation ceremony was to beat each other black and blue one-on-one inside a cage.

Prey felt his attention briefly drift over the green glass bottle Screech had placed on the Captain's desk, wedged between three competing stacks of paperwork. Only the top half of the green bottle was visible, but it was still enough to see the slowly flickering glow of the stabilized spell flame.

Nighthawk, all the way in Griffonia, had the twinned message-in-a-bottle. Prey himself had similarly placed his own message bottle on the ISND's own desk so he could see it while he worked.

In the back of his head, Prey still couldn't shake the conviction that something was going to go wrong out there. It wasn't a gut feeling for once, but an intellectual one, yet for that reason he just couldn't

get it out of his head.

"Princess Luna is keeping watch over them," Screech spoke, having of course seen where Prey's eyes lingered on the desk. The Lieutenant even smirked tiredly, "Literally. Every night they are reporting to her in the dream realm. They will not fail."

For the second time that night, Prey plastered a fake but very convincing smile onto his face, nodding along, "I'm sure, sir. I'll be going to start this, unless there was anything else...?" Prey trailed off.

"Actually, there is, unfortunately." Screech said before he could leave.

'Oh come on! Now what?'

"Yes, sir?"

Distaste flickered across Screech's features, the tips of his fangs unconsciously showing, "That private detective Strange Hazard-no, Strange Happenstance, has been poking around again. Or we're ninety percent sure it's him. Multiple Night Guards have reported a stallion unicorn confronting them while off duty and trying to ask them questions about the ISND, the lumberyard fire and what happened to Lilly Blossom."

A thrill of unpleasant worry went through Prey, "Why only ninety percent sure?"

"The stallion's height, build, and general appearance are the same, but he's a different colour each time, and always has his cutie marks covered so there's no way to confirm it. We're certain it's magic though, something like one of our Dusk Pony amulets." Screech answered.

Prey remembered that pocket watch device he'd seen Strange use himself to switch his coat colour. He was just about to suggest then they simply catch the stallion and forcibly check, but no, the Night Guard wouldn't do that. Strange Happenstance, and Prey was sure it *was* him, evidently wasn't actually breaking any laws. He was only

confronting off duty Night Guards too, so they had even less legal grounds to suspect him.

Although how a ground bound pony was managing to find opportunities, and regularly too by the sound of it, to confront flying thestrals, (even if non-violently), was alarming in and of itself.

'What's the bet that's actually his special talent?' Prey thought in disgust. Convenient meetings. Coincidences. Strange happenstances. That would just be so like Harmony, hoofing out supernatural talents to ponies who'd never done anything to deserve them, while every other race in the world got nothing.

Literally, ponies as a species did nothing. Just by being born, they were guaranteed that at some point while growing up, a random magically enhanced talent would be presented to them. And then they had the audacity to complain when it wasn't as powerful as the exceptionally privileged few ponies who lucked out. And all that just went doubly so for unicorns.

It struck Prey that these sightings of the private detective might actually be mimics with purposefully sloppy disguises, trying to throw suspicion on Strange Happenstance. No, why would they ever risk possible exposure like that? Or would they? A double bluff? Prey didn't know enough about their goals or methods to rule anything out.

'It's unlikely, but I still don't actually know enough to dismiss the possibility outright.' Prey ground his teeth.

As a matter of fact, he'd only ever seen the one, who'd been masquerading as the Border Guard Shimmer in Mayflower. That mimic who'd tried and failed to get into his damaged lair beneath the mountain didn't count. He hadn't even seen the body, meaning at least one more mimic had retrieved the body and was still lurking around out there somewhere.

Screech was speaking again. Prey had only half been listening and swiftly recalled his attention; "-So keep a careful eye out. It'll be no coincidence if he tries going after you, especially if he's somehow

discovered the rest of the ISND are away. If he does, don't answer anything and shout for the Guard."

Prey narrowed his eyes, "He hasn't done anything physical or violent, right? Or else you would've already arrested him."

"Correct," Screech allowed, "But there's only a thin line between 'pushy' and 'violence'. And he might see you as a perfect target to get away with this with."

The Lieutenant couldn't help but look Prey over, his gaze making his unspoken concern clear. Prey was a weak runt lamb, unable to even wear the armour of the Night Guard, while Strange was an adult unicorn. It wasn't about Prey's willingness to defend himself and avoid danger that Screech doubted, he vividly remembered the reports he'd read of the bone rot mines in Mayflower, no it was Prey's immediate physical ability to protect himself he was worried about:

"If you see him or suspect he might be watching you, find one of us immediately. Do not approach or confront him Prey."

"No fear of that. I don't like or trust him, and I'm sure he's up to something. Sir." Prey remembered to add.

"I'm sure too." Screech shrugged his wings. It was a very thestral shrug, successfully conveying 'I know it, you know it, but there's nothing we can do about it'.

'There's plenty you can do about it, but you're just not willing to do because it's against the law.' Prey thought but didn't say. What he said instead was:

"Thank you for the warning sir. I'll be keeping my ear to the ground. I don't have far to go to reach it, after all"

"Thank you all for coming," Prey chirped with bright, false cheeriness, "If you could please shut the door-yes, you who's closest-Ah, thank you. I'll get this little lesson started, then."

The ten new thestrals stood at ease in the ISND office, the place decently lit well enough for non-night vision users. The thestrals weren't necessarily young, just new to the Night Guard, wearing the recoloured armour of the Royal Guard. Prey spied ample evidence of hard living as he glanced over the ten winged ponies.

Little knots of scar tissue were common, wiry muscles, dull scuffed hooves, thick fur, one thestral's folded wing was peppered with little holes. The ten stood in a semi-circle with their backs to the shelves, facing the lone desk. Prey was sitting on his haunches on top of the desk. It was the only way he could be at everyone else's eye line height.

The gathered thestrals were the first group of ten that Prey was supposed to try and teach some of the subtler arts of intelligence and paperwork to, all within the hour.

When thestrals did something, they didn't delay or dither or procrastinate. They could be the very definition of patience when that's what the situation called for, but when it called for the opposite, decisiveness could equally be used as a descriptor. And since the Night Guard was now all made up of thestrals, the originally transferred Royal Guards now having been transferred back, Prey knew he was expected to do the same. There was no point putting off this work for another day. Or rather another night.

Prey hid the grimace he was feeling in favour of maintaining his cheery, carefree mask as he looked the ten over, "Oh, just to check, but Lieutenant Screech did say what you were coming here tonight for, right?"

Although just because he had to do something, didn't mean he had to be his true self while doing it.

Back at the beginning, when he'd first been pressganged by Luna, Prey had started his act of the 'little harmless lamb' around those he didn't actually have to work with on a day-to-day basis. Sure, by now the act was mostly redundant, and everyone of importance he actually had to interact with knew better, but it still helped muddy the waters for everyone else.

Half would know he was Prey of the ISND, and the other half would just think he was the lamb being looked after by the ISND.

And Prey was hoping that none of these new thestrals were going to become people he had to work closely with in the future. Or if he did, that Gloom and Crimson would be back by then and he could leave all the talking to them while he slipped into the background.

Prey's aim was to not make any of this more personal than it needed to be, and hopefully the forty odd thestrals he was supposed to teach something to wouldn't really think about him again as anything more than a bit weird, but mostly harmless, runt lamb.

Well he already had the weird part down, because as he stood there on top of the desk, he could hear so from just a few of their thoughts. A smattering even got his gender right first time:

'-is he all there mentally? That's not how everypony else has reacted to me. But this is the right room, so...-'

'-don't think a lamb should be in Her Majesties Guard. Foals do not fight, unless this is the lesson? That the Guard doesn't all fight?-'

'-so he really is our instructor tonight. I knew it couldn't be a poor jest, but still-'

'-think I saw her that first night on the court yard, right at the back behind Princess Luna and everypony else-'

"Okay!" Prey rapped his hoof loudly on the desk to signal a start, "Lieutenant Screech has asked me to share some insights into how Night Guard work is different from Royal Guard work, and also from being a clan warrior."

Ah, him even mentioning the thestral clans when he was an outsider made them stand up straighter and pay close attention. Okay, maybe he should be a bit more cautious, since there were still a lot of secrets around the clans he wasn't supposed to know. These thestrals weren't the old Night Guard, who all knew that he knew more than he should know, mainly because they kept letting things slip.

Prey swiftly re-evaluated and changed the phrases he was going to use, "The biggest difference you're going to notice here, working as a Night Guard in Canterlot, is paperwork. Lots and lots of paperwork. See all these stacks on the desk?"

Prey gestured around where he stood on the surface of the desk to the scrolls and files, "All of this? This is something you're going to have to fight against on a regular basis. You completed a patrol and saw something suspicious? Form 15A. You completed a patrol and nothing whatsoever happened? Form 12C. You worked late one night, which by the way is *every* night? Fill in form F2.1, get it signed by your immediate superior, and submit it to payroll, and on and on it goes. My point is, every single thing in Canterlot runs on paperwork. And the catch is, if you don't do the paperwork, then everything about your job just gets that much harder."

Prey beamed as all their faces subtly dropped, "Paperwork is your number one enemy, short of a homicidal unicorn. At least an hour every shift where you could be doing actual work, you'll have to sacrifice to the demands of paperwork. And if you don't do it on time, then the records department, the liaison's office, and the Quartermaster's storehouse are all going to go out of their way to make your life difficult. From their point of view, since we're all the greenies on the scene, we have to conform to their way of doing things, since obviously it's the best way, because it's what they've always been doing."

Prey's cheery pronouncement of cynicism was throwing them all off.

'-from what I've seen, that's unfortunately true so far-'
'-we're supposed to be here to serve Princess Luna, not write reports which'll never be read-'
'-that can't be right. If paperwork was completely redundant, somepony would've protested by now-'

One of the thestrals politely tapped his hoof on the floor signalling he wanted to speak. Prey pretended not to notice.

"So what you're going to want to do is obviously keep working and serving Princess Luna as much as possible instead of wasting that

same time doing paperwork, what I'm here to teach you tonight are the tricks for how to minimize and put off paperwork for as long as possible."

The same thestral, the one with the raggedy wing membrane, thinking Prey hadn't heard him, tapped on the floorboards again.

Again, Prey ignored him, "Since paperwork is inevitable, what you want to do is minimize it. You're going to have to do it, but you have up to twenty-four hours after a patrol to fill in the correct paperwork. So only do it once every two days. For that day, and the day before, and submit them both at the same time. Share and match submissions too, have one person take all of the squads paperwork at once. For truly pointless reports, you can get away every one-in-ten times saying the paperwork got lost. Keep a stack of all the most commonly used forms in the Guard barracks so you don't have to waste time getting fresh copies each time-"

For the third time, the stallion tapped his hoof, the others around him wondering why Prey hadn't noticed his polite thestral request to speak yet.

Prey snapped a hoof out to point at the thestral, who looked to be in his thirties, "There, that right there. What are you doing?"

They all blinked at Prey, tufted ears cocking. The stared. Wasn't it obvious? And then it clicked.

'-is a lamb, not a thestral. It *isn't* obvious to other ponies-'
'-Luna's mane, nopony in this city would know what I meant either!-'
'-this isn't the Clans. All the social cues are totally different here-'

"That's exactly right!" Prey announced, smiling like he really meant it, "Everyone else here are Canterlotians. There's tens of thousands of them in this city, not even counting Cloudsdale which is never far away, and less than two hundred thestrals. Things here aren't what you remember. Look and think twice about everything. Don't assume, or rather, assume you're missing something. And that's the second thing I'm supposed to teach you, but more on that later. What did you want to say, Dawn Light?"

The thestral was momentarily surprised that Prey knew his name, "I wish to ask... actually, pardon me, but what is your name?"

'-he didn't already say, did he? I thought I was paying close attention, but I might've missed it-'

No, the thestrals hadn't missed it. Prey hadn't introduced himself as an added tactic to hopefully minimize his impression in their memories in what ever small way he could. But never mind, it was not to be.

"My name is Prey."

'-Prey. As in, hunting prey. That is not a good name-'
'-I do not know sheep naming conventions, but still...-'
'-surely his parents did not honestly name him such?-'

"What did you want to ask, Dawn Light?" Prey repeated.

"Thank you. I wanted to ask, ah, how do we know which forms to use? There are so many. Hundreds. How do we know what to use?" Dawn Light asked glancing around at all the shelves filled with files and reports, frustration working its way into his voice at the steadily creeping feeling of being overwhelmed.

'-I am a warrior. I'm not even a fast reader. But he's saying there's going to be never ending paperwork to complete-'

"Trial, error, and bitter experience." Prey beamed happily. Then after a moment took pity, "Oh, and there's an index list of all the forms, with a description of what each one's for. Unofficially, you'll only ever need a tenth of those forms. See that pile by the door? Yes, those, that's the index list. Take one each and pass them around. Now see the ones on the list with little stars next to them? Those are the tenth part. You'll remember this all eventually, but the point of this whole session is that 'eventually' is too long. So keep your cheat sheets to hoof and your life will be much easier."

Prey listed out some of the more commonly required everyday forms as the pages were passed around, most of them looking at the long list filled with small print in resigned dismay. And these were

just the forms they'd actually end up using, he'd already trimmed the list down loads! Prey could practically feel the sentiment going around the room; 'Become a Night Guard they said. Perform a vital service for your Princess they said. It'll be fun they said.'

"So that's the help I was to give you on the paperwork front. Now, onto a much more nebulous and unmeasurable advice I'm supposed to give you all. How to be 'good' at investigating as a Night Guard." Prey said.

He paused, brushing back his ribbon as he took a moment to think how best to put this; "Think of Canterlot as a different environment. You come from out in the wilds somewhere, close to the border probably, but no ones actually told me where your guys clan caves are, but it's obviously not local."

There was a wash of subtle relief that went around the thestral audience. Prey was even telling the truth. No one had *told* him, he could just read minds.

"Think of it this way; you come from out there, from the wilds. Whenever you first venture into a new, uncharted environment, you're completely out of your depth. There's different plants, different animals, winds, foods, terrain, and dangers. A plant may look similar to one that's edible back home, but you don't actually know if its safe or poisonous because it's different. Treat Canterlot as a completely new environment, an urban terrain." Prey pointed a hoof down at the floor.

"The same principle is true here. Don't think you know what's going on in Canterlot just because you think you can draw the connection. Social interactions and norms, unspoken rules and expectations, the devil's in the details. Okay, half the time, your job is still going to be obvious and straight forwards. Just do the right thing. But it's the other half that you might miss and never even realise as you walk on by. Think twice and check thrice is going to be your motto until you're an old hoof at this."

The thestrals were listening closely, of course they were, but Prey didn't think they were quite getting it. Ten pairs of luminous yellow eyes were focused on him standing on the desk, but they weren't

giving any facial clues. They *still* weren't getting it. He'd just flat out told them to think twice about all social interactions and conversations from here on out, but they hadn't taken the hint. If they didn't quite understand, then they needed to ask, not keep quiet because they assumed since no one else was commenting on whatever it was, that it couldn't be important.

'They're still not getting it, even with an example staring them in the face.'

Without saying anything further, Prey plonked himself down on the desk and sorted through one of the paper stacks until he found a blank sheet. The thestrals patiently waited. Prey methodically began folding the paper, first in half, then adding crease lings and angled folds. Soon, he had a completed paper glider, looking rather large in his cloven hooves. Yellow slit eyes blinked at him, but still they waited.

Prey causally aimed the paper glider at the closest thestral, very obviously lining up his shot before tossing it. It swooped off target, did a loop and dived into the floor just short with a small *dunk*.

Prey fished around in another paper pile to his left until he found another spare page and set about folding it again. Prey was halfway through completing his second paper glider before a thestral mare with white ear tufts instead of the usual dark colouring finally asked:

"What is the purpose of doing that?"

Prey stopped and blinked at her as if he honestly hadn't noticed what his hooves was doing, "Oh? Oh that's a great question. Why am I doing this?"

He waited, blinking innocent blue eyes around at them one by one. But no simple sweet child would've been able to meet all those yellow eyes in fanged heads staring at them. Finally, it clicked.

'-what he just said-'
'-if I think something's off-'
'-and I don't understand why-'

'-then I am supposed to ask-'

"You're doing that because you want us to ask because it's strange and we don't know why you're doing it." The stallion realised.

"Exactly. If you feel something might be wrong, even if you don't know what it is or why, treat it as if it is wrong until you can double check with someone trustworthy who knows about how Canterlot works. This is the capital city of Equestria. Who here knows what it was called way back in the day before it was Canterlot?"

"The New Unicornia." The answer came from more than one mouth.

"That's right again. The New Unicornia, meaning unicorns. And what do unicorns have? Magic. What do all thestrals, as a society, not have? Unicorn magic, and other things, but in this case I'm talking about magic. You don't have any experience with magic, about how it is interwoven into the everyday lives of almost every single pony in this city. Their hot water is a result of magic, the trains are part magic, the printing presses which make the newspapers heavily integrate magic, magical crystal lights, magic to take photos, magical preservation fields for food, postal sorting systems, clockwork, sewing, repairs, trinkets, children's toys, and so much more. It all uses magic. So here's the third thing you need to know." Prey cleared his throat:

"With magic, its easy to get away with crime. Not even counting the obviously duplicit spells, like disguising yourself with illusions, making fake gold, and opening locks, there are nearly limitless illegal applications for the most simple and innocent spells. I will now talk about the most common one, and one that every unicorn can use. Telekinesis. With it, any unicorn could levitate stolen items out the gap in a window without ever entering."

He took a breath, "They can sneak actions past you, make a distraction, anything and everything all without appearing to have moved a hoof to the observers. You *need* to be aware of magic, and you *need* to be aware you don't know magic. So when you don't know, again, ask a senior Night Guard who's been in Canterlot long enough to have some idea, but even then be aware *they* don't know

magic either."

Prey took another breath, and repeated himself, "They don't know magic either. They have a better idea and more experience, but they still don't know magic in-depth. So think twice, check thrice."

He looked pointedly around at them all, "So, what *haven't* you double checked? While having this entire lecture, you've been overlooking something the entire time."

This time they were all much quicker on the uptake, but really, if they'd just had a bit more healthy paranoia, they would've spotted it already. Some of them swiftly scanned the office, checking the shadowy alcoves for something which was out of place. Some looked up, one ducked to check under the desk, and one thought to check the list of forms Prey had distributed with her neighbour.

"The lists. They're different." She stated.

Everyone stopped and looked at their given lists, and then checked their neighbours list. And just like she'd said, they didn't all match up.

'-wait, so was this the real test? Or just a second test?-'

Prey nodded, "Everything I said about the requirements of paperwork still holds true, but yes, not all those sheets are the same. There's one or two red herrings mixed in there with the rest. Those who got them, please put them back in the pile and take a proper cheat-sheet this time."

"But you listed all those forms out loud," One of them spoke up, frowning, "What you said matched up with both sheets-Oh, no, wait. You just spoke ones which matched on all the sheets, not the ones which didn't." He realised.

"Correct again, and you just took my word for it. Why? Because you didn't think I had any reason to deceive you because I had nothing to gain. That's exactly the type of thinking you need to get rid of. Just because you can't see why someone would do something, doesn't mean they don't. Don't measure your potato bushel by

someone else's wheat sheaf. And here in Canterlot, everyone out there has a very different view point to you. You come from a completely different background and way of life, so don't go measuring your barely sheaf by a potato bushel."

"So *think*," Prey tapped the side of his head, "Think, and then think again. Try and look at it from someone else's point of view. What are you missing? Is it something obvious that you can work out? If not, who can you ask? There's no way to cover all the possibilities you might run or fly into as a Guard, there'll always be some variation no one else has seen before but that is in front of you now. So think twice about everything."

So the ten new thestrals did just that, and Prey listened;

'-these are all good points. I must stay aware of all this as a Night Guard-'
'-I'm not sure how I'm going to do all of that correctly, but at least now I have some idea of what I don't know-'
'-asked Rift Wing at dinner about the ISND. He only said they were good at their job. I think I see why now-'

But there was still the one passing thought Prey caught in the back of their heads in one form or another. For some, it really was just a passing thought, the ones which everyone has but don't actually mean. In others, it was just a little bit of uncomfortableness, just mild, without anything solid behind it. Like fog, it would part if the owner turned to actually focus on it, but only if they thought to confront it. Prey still heard their thoughts though, like he heard everything that everyone thought was private, and he judged them just like he did everybody else.

'-blue ribbon is ridiculous. Looks like one of the pampered fillies here the parents play dress up on-', Thestrals did not believe in molly-coddling.

'-Rift Wing also said not to copy *all* of the ISND's habits-', Mayflower had still been a disaster, even if it wasn't his fault.

'-this lambs got a precocious attitude, even if she has a point-', And Prey was still physically a runt lamb. While age wasn't an indication

of ability with thestrals, there was a lower age limit they were subconsciously prepared to accept as reasonable.

Prey was used to it. He heard it all the time, and people thought things they didn't mean all the time. Sometimes they even caught themselves thinking it and corrected those same thoughts. It was nothing new.

But sometimes, although Prey's mind reading runes gave him safety and insurance he craved, he still longed for the controlled quiet walls of Crimson's head. Although Prey could admit to himself that was only because it was Crimson, and he knew he could trust Crimson. Anyone else with that ability such as, say, Strange Happenstance for example, and he'd immediately start making contingency plans to dispose of them if necessary. But he hadn't forgot the headaches being in a crowd gave him. Or how badly it had stretched his self-identity when first he'd recklessly inflicted these runes upon himself. But it was do or die in war.

Prey brought his thoughts to an abrupt end and sharply clapped his forehooves together, "Well, that about sums up the instruction I have to give you. Paperwork is a massive drag but must be done because it's the rules, and to treat everything new in Canterlot as an unknown and you won't do too badly when conducting any investigation."

He smiled warmly and pointed towards the office door, "Thank you all for coming, and I wish you the best of luck. Kindly tell Sargent Major Sharp Tang on your return that he can send in the next group, thanks."

'Kindly get out all of you annoyances.' Is of course what Prey really meant.

He still needed to get through this same presentation with another three groups of newer thestral recruits, after all.

Prey had just finished up his song and dance act for the fourth and last time, and his thestral audience were just filing out the door,

when the Sargent Major stuck his head in.

'Ah but of course. Of course it couldn't end there could it? The show's not over until the fat lady sings.' Prey thought in aggravation.

Although Sharp Tang was more 'big' rather than 'fat', and nor was he a lady. Prey also had his doubts that the stallion sang. "How may I help you sir?"

Sharp Tang glared around the office, although that was more just a byproduct of his face. His frowning brows and yellow slit eyes gave him the appearance of perpetually glaring all the time. His grumpy attitude though? That was all on the Sargent Major's own choice.

"You're done?" Sharp Tang demanded, referring to the last group who had just left.

"Yes, sir. That was the fourth and last group." Prey said, not adding; 'You're the one who was supposed to be rotating those groups, weren't you paying attention yourself?'

Whatever the Sargent was here for, Prey bet it was going to be another headache for him. He'd been going to go back to the never ending drudgery he'd been informing the thestral greenies about, which was the paperwork of reviewing yet more inactive cases which the ISND shelves were full of. Perhaps do more ground work for trying to uncover some more spies, although this time he intended to be a bit more circumspect in what he 'discovered'. After all, Gloom and Crimson were still stuck in Griffonia after his last discovery about the secret gem market surveillance.

Luna's ridiculous plan for a smash and grab of Hafflow was now well and truly completely derailed, while he was left stuck back here in Canterlot, on edge just waiting for the almost inevitable bad news.

Sharp Tang stepped in through the door, trotting towards the desk where Prey was still sitting on top of, which he also didn't comment on like a normal average pony would've. Prey frowned, sitting up straighter. If Sharp Tang was coming in, whatever he had to say

wasn't a drop off message but something more serious. 'Oh *wonderful*.'

'-the lamb shouldn't be in here working alone. Should be where somepony can keep a close watch on him since Gloom isn't around to do it-'

So was Sharp Tang just here to try and make Prey move to another room, one with other Night Guards in it? No thanks, this room was filled with runic arrays, (adding a rune here and there really added up over the weeks and months), and was consequently the safest place in the Palace for him. He'd gotten to sit here on the desk while facing down all those new thestrals, safe and comfortable in the knowledge he could stun them all with a flick of his hoof. No way was he moving offices.

The large stallion snorted softly to himself as he came to a stop in front of the desk. Sitting on top of the woodwork, Prey was better able to look people in the eyes, but Sharp Tang was still a full head above him, not even counting the helmet and indigo plume.

Prey politely tilted his head, ear dangling on that side, waiting for the Sargent Major to speak first. *Then* he'd go about correcting the thestrals assumption that he'd be moving offices-Wait.

'-Screech didn't say when Gloom and the Captain would be back though. This message's probably related to that-', Oh. So caring about Prey's mental wellbeing wasn't what Sharp Tang was here for after all.

"Lieutenant Screech told me to deliver this. He said it only came in tonight to him personally, less than an hour ago." Sharp Tang opened a wing, scooping up a folded note as it dropped and flicking it onto the desk right at Prey's hooves.

"Thank you." Prey said automatically, picking up the note and then remembering to add on the end; "Sir."

Sharp Tang was already turning around and leaving though, not here to take back a reply and his task done. Prey hastily unfolded the note and held it up to the light.

It was in the blocky scrawl of the Lieutenant's own hoof. That prickling feeling on the back of Prey's head was back, except now it was a gut feeling too.

What could've occurred between when Prey had seen the Lieutenant in person at the start of his shift and now, less than six hours later? Many things, few of them good if Screech thought he, Prey, only just back from his three days off and working alone here in this office, needed to be made aware.

Prey read; "Taken by Her Highness into shared dream again. Updates and new info were exchanged. Still no in on arresting the target and getting them out of the compound without being stopped. Progress into tracking down those private gem miners hired by their government. Team has scheduled to meet one of the miners next day."

That was the first short paragraph, a detatched summary made in as few words as possible. It was the second paragraph that Prey's eyes skipped down to. The first had just been information, but this second section Screech had addressed to him specifically, the ink of the letters thicker and darker, as Screech took longer to think about what words he wanted to come off his quill:

"Prey. Over the course of the discussion with our two undercover teams, I regret that it falls to me to inform you that Crimson has taken sick. Sargent Gloom has said it seems like it might be serious. The griffin doctor he brought in almost panicked for a moment when it looked like the beginnings of the Blood Feather plague, but he said it only is contagious to griffins. Thanks be to Luna it isn't that, but whatever afflicts Crimson, it isn't something he can just fly off. I don't tell you this to worry you Prey, but you should know. Luna will watch over them."

There was a moment where Prey felt stillness, a deep inner pause, like when you bark your shin on a brick step.

You see it happen, you feel it happen, but before the pain arrives at your brain, you have that one moment's grace to brace yourself. There's no getting out of the coming pain, you've already hurt yourself, there's nothing left to do but grit your teeth and mentally

prepare to receive it.

This was like that. Prey's mind rushed to provide himself with calming reassurance, to get in first before his feelings arrived:

'I already knew something bad was going to happen, this is just that happening. And it's not the real Blood Feather plague, he even said so. Crimson has the electrite feather, so he'll be fine. I'm stuck here, so there's nothing I could've done and worrying won't change that.'

Garrow's remnant jerked awake, raising it's cruel, beaked head, 'Blood Feather plague. Nazty nasty businez', yez'? No blood, no strength, gone all pale and white. First you can't get up. Then you can't breathe. Then you die.' Garrow's father had died to the plague.

The note in his hooves ripped. A shaking was rising up his spine, building in anger at the helplessness of it all.

'I knew, I knew! I knew this would happen!'

Death is a prophecy all of its own. And one that is always right.

'It'll be fine.' Prey told himself as he stood under the natural stone ceiling of his lair, down in the mountain.

'Really. It's not like it's *actually* the Blood feather plague, that's restricted to griffins only, it simply resembles it. Plus, Gloom and Nighthawk aren't about to abandon him when they leave. Crimson's just sick. Everyone gets seriously sick at two or three points in their life, it's inevitable. It's almost certainly just a local bug that Crimson's had a particularly bad reaction to. His immune system will be all the better for it once he recovers.'

Beneath the wooden board he was standing on the broken gravel, mixed with milky chips of shattered crystal, crunched faintly as Prey turned to reach for his box of tools. It crunched again as he turned back, having gotten the wedge of metal he'd already prepared with runes and a pair of pliers.

In fact, the cavern's new floor crunched and shifted every time you stepped anywhere on the walkway of laid out boards.

Prey turned back to the low, makeshift table he'd set up. On top of it, the dead body of an old unicorn stallion lay on his back, chest and belly split open like a pig's carcass. It gaped hollowly. The cadaver's fur was thinning, his eyes were closed, most of his mane had either fallen out long before death or had been cut off. The unicorn's horn he had sawn off though, just a bone stump now remaining.

For being a dead body, it was remarkably clean, with only a few smears of blood where Prey had cut the chest and belly open.

This was one of the bodies Prey had stolen from the city morgue. People really were like any other animal when you cut them open. The exposed ribs, the red flesh of the hollowed out body cavity, it looked exactly like the cleaned kill of any hunter. Lungs, spleen, kidneys, liver, all the organs looked exactly like any animals organs. Pigs especially. The slight scent of cloying iron which always came from being near cut meat was the same too. Prey could confidently make all those observations from experience.

But for all that it still wasn't the same as an animals. It was much the same, right up until the point where you knew they weren't pig organs, and that the carcass was a person, and then it all became different.

Once you knew, once you spotted the difference, it *all* became completely different. When your hooves were in someone's insides, the cold, clammy, slightly slimy feeling of the raw flesh touching your leg as you bumped the wound's open side? That feeling was one which could have you vomiting explosively at the literal second of realisation. You did *not* want to vomit inside the body you'd just scooped out.

Prey was used to it. He'd done all of this long before, multiple times under Snake's iron hoof. It was... Not routine, because a part of this could never ever become casual, it was still a dead person, but it was *almost* routine. He was used to it.

'Crimson'll get better, even if Gloom needs to stay behind, the second squad will bring back Hallfow once they finally manage to grab him, which should be enough to keep Luna satisfied. She was already impatient before they even arrived.'

A shiver of disgust went up his spine at that.

Prey could all too easily see Luna simply giving orders to toss Crimson aside and leave him behind in Griffonstone, so long as she got what she wanted. Prey remembered how she'd done just that, letting Lord Vanish steal the jade necklace from Crimson, simply because she was amusing herself by playing some court game. Prey could think of no other explanation for why else she would've sided with the arrogant noble.

Luna was an immortal alicorn. There was nothing anyone in the world could do, except her Sun Wolf sister, to force her into doing anything.

'But if they split up the two squads up, it'll be fine. Crimson *will* be fine.' Prey mentally repeated.

Crunch softly went the chips and gravel as he leaned over the cut open chest cavity for a better angle. Both of his ears were pulled back behind his head and bundled together with his ribbon, because he *really* didn't want them trailing into his work.

He ignored the smell, and took the piece of rune inscribed metal and shoved it into place on the exposed spine, sticking the sharp wedge end between the lumbar vertebra, right where there was that small opening where the shoulder blades began. He needed a pair of pliers, but he managed to squeeze open a gap in the bones to slot the metal into position. When he let go with the pliers, the vertebra pinched back shut, holding the metal wedge in place.

Prey waited, and when it didn't pop back out, he grunted to himself and withdrew. His hooves and forelegs felt disgusting, even though there was next to nothing to visibly see on them, but he knew what he'd been touching. The gold of the tracer bands dully gleamed, as clean as ever. He wasn't done rooting around in there yet, so no scouring his hooves clean just yet, however.

Set next to the low table was a basin filled with dark water and something which looked like slimy entrails for a moment in the lantern light, but no, it was actually rubbery cut-offs from his wickerwatch. Almost roughly, when compared to his earlier care in placing in the runic wedge, Prey began scooping out hooffuls of the cold slimy fronds and dumping them into the open body cavity. In they went, slop after slop of the cold, wet, slimy things.

Once Prey was done here, and he'd stitched up the corpse and placed the last remaining runes, he'd have Lemon Pink cart it off down to the Sewer's Heart, and there let it incubate beneath the rippling water.

This was the third body he'd prepared tonight. The city morgue was little more than a revolving door to him. As vile and reprehensible as mind magic was, it was nothing if not useful.

'It doesn't help me with Crimson. He's currently trapped in Griffonstone because of a stupid bid to relive her glory days by Luna.'

He started rinsing his forelegs in the half empty basin. It was just water with left over residue from waterweed in it. No different from pond water really, so while not clean, it was still much better than having 'dead body' on his hooves. He wasn't thinking about that though, in fact he hardly even noticed.

'What could Crimson be sick with? If it's not the Blood Feather plague, what could it be? The symptoms are pale flesh, anaemic, shortness of breath, almost no strength, chronic tiredness, no appetite, and eventually transitioning into inability to even drink fluids right at the end. In short, a wasting sickness.'

So while Crimson didn't have the actual plague, most of those symptoms must still be present for the griffin doctor to have momentarily panicked. Prey knew a long list of diseases and illnesses, some learnt under Snake's tutelage, and some learnt *from* Snake directly. The problem with diagnosing anything was there were just so many things you could overlook, with many other possible sicknesses it could actually be. Sometimes a patient didn't have all the symptoms, or sometimes they had conflicting

symptoms.

Prey chewed the inside of his cheek in worry while trying to console himself, 'I gave him the electrite feather though, that'll help a little bit. Most of it's benefits are passive and just improve the users own abilities a bit by absorbing ambient magic and redistributing it to the wearer. So that'll help some.'

Prey went and got a long needle and stiff thread, (something he always had plenty of to hoof down here), and got to work sewing up the now bulging corpse over it's new set of intestines. As he held up the large needle to the lantern to thread the eye, his attention couldn't help but flick briefly over to the lone pedestal like formation of crystal, a series of long planks the only linking connection between it and the rest of the walkway over the sharp gravel.

The crystal had once been a truly impressive specimen, one of the biggest crystals in the cavern. Now it was little more than a stump, much like a tree stump, but a broken stump nonetheless. That was what the explosion had reduced it to when it scoured the cavern nearly bare.

But it was what rested inconspicuously atop the hard milky rock that was important.

Selenia's pin cushion, the little sewn rag bundle no bigger than an apple sat there in the middle of the shattered stump. Prey had placed it out there on purpose. It wasn't visible to the naked eye, but the pincushion actually sat in the middle of a complicated runic array, both to monitor, and contain it.

"No more stealing pins or needles for you." He muttered. It didn't respond. Which was definitely a very good thing.

Down here in the cavern it was quiet, except for the subtle crunching and shifting of gravel under the walkways whenever he moved. Well, that, and if you listened really closely and at the right intervals, the tiny *plop* of water drops falling from the ceiling into the sinkhole one by one. Prey didn't consider washing his hooves in the freezing water or incubating the corpse in there for even a

moment. He didn't trust the sinkhole. He still hadn't discovered if it had a bottom or not.

The mimics had been quiet too.

The two tunnel entrances into the lair coming up from somewhere down in the mountain were both blocked, packed full of rubble, but that physical barrier wasn't what was really keeping the lair safe. Rather, it was all the runes which weren't physically present, or visible. But the mimics knew it too.

Even if those thieving unicorns from the Brotherhoof of Sol had still been alive, and had tried to storm his lair with all their artifacts right now, Prey was fairly confident they'd have failed. Prey had only abandoned his lair the first time because he hadn't had the necessary time to finish his very lengthy and complicated runic defences. But now he had, and he *had*. Short of an alicorn, Prey was ninety-nine percent certain no one was getting in here.

Anti-magic, null inertia, air, light, vibration, and temperature filters, memory erasing arrays, physical reinforcement, reflection and refraction, energy bleed and radiation, spell matrix disruption, anti-counter magic, backup arrays and self contained systems, closed runic arrays which could only be affected from within the cavern, anti-scry, additional scanning spell disruption to go with the crystals, and basically everything Prey could think of.

In fact, even if someone were to stand at the very entrance into his lair, they wouldn't be able to see anything, since it was covered under an illusion of rock. Even getting close enough to see the illusion would be a feat in and of itself, because approaching would trigger subtle mental suggestions to turn back, increasing in strength as you got closer.

Even inanimate objects, like say, a rolling stone, couldn't enter the cavern if it wasn't brought in by Prey or Lemon Pink. That was the only weakness Prey could see; entering and exiting of his lair. That was where an enemy would have to try to attack, when either of them were entering or exiting. Because once he or Lemon were safely inside the lair, they may as well have stepped out of the world. Mount Canter could collapse, and this cavern would still be

left, like an unbreakable seedpod amid the mountain's rubble.

So consequently of all this, Prey felt no fear of the mimics as he stood and did his grisly work in here. There was no place safer in the whole world for him than right here. He also had a sensor array extending down the pathway out into the sewers, so he should also even have some idea if anyone was lying in wait for him. That, and if they came down through the sewers, they'd have to survive the paranoia hex the wickerwatch was constantly spreading.

Prey was just distracting himself again, thinking about the certainties he had, instead of the poisonous uncertainty over what was happening in Griffonia with Crimson.

'I knew it was going to happen before they even got on the train, I knew something would have to go wrong. I knew it, but they didn't *listen*. 'Oh, let's leave Prey behind because Luna said so' and now I'm stuck back here unable to help. Why? Why didn't they listen? Haven't I always been proved right? Haven't I always known when something was going to go wrong? So why in the name of all that is unholy did they follow Luna's retarded plan?!'

In a fit of pique, Prey bent and snatched up a stone in his cleft hoof and hurled it at the cavern wall. It fell dissatisfying short with with a pathetic little *dock*. He closed his eyes and breathed in through his nose, trying to calm down.

'But what can I do about any of it? Nobody can say no to Luna if she refuses to be swayed, she's an alicorn. She joint rules this whole country. And it's not as if I could've prevented Crimson getting sick even if I was there. I might've been able to help, but I can't outright prevent a sickness just like that.'

Prey paused, head cocking to the side, eyes still closed as he thought that over again. 'Is there really nothing I can do? Or can I?'

He thought over Crimson's symptoms again. 'A wasting sickness...'

Obviously it wasn't the Blood Feather plague, but what if it wasn't exactly a sickness either? Prey's mind flashed over all the cures, treatments, and remedies he'd obtained from Snake, and the extra

few he'd discovered himself after the voodoo witch's long overdue death. Also he knew it wasn't the thestrals blood requirements, which Crimson had unfortunately inherited despite his lack of bat wings, fangs, and slit eyes. Although similar, there was no chance it was that. Crimson and all the others well knew how to manage themselves and prevent blood starvation.

'The list of potential diagnosis is still long, but if I start eliminating the causes I don't think it could reasonably be, then all that's left is one cause I might be able to do something about.'

He could still be wrong. In fact he could be way out, and Crimson's sickness really could be some obscure and highly unlikely sickness, but that was the risk. You couldn't ever be a hundred percent sure when making a diagnosis, and there wasn't room for mistakes or second tries. The body wasn't some puzzle where you could try fitting the pieces together, and then simply start again if you got it wrong. It could be, quite literally, life and death. It was terrifyingly easy to make things worse if you made a mistake.

Prey recalled what he knew of Crimson, his diet, his habits, and his secrets, and nodded once to himself.

'I can mix up a medicine, or rather cook it, I know how, and it won't cause Crimson any harm to ingest even if I'm wrong. But how to get it out to Griffonia quickly-? A courier, express delivery. Hm, that'll still take two days to arrive but-Wait, what about those teleportation vaults? Do they have one set up in Griffin Stone from here?'

A teleportation vault was used to send items over long distances to it's twin, after enough magic was pumped into it. Teleportation for a living being at those distances was basically all but impossible, not least because of all the leylines and bedrock criss-crossing the way, but because of the enchantments on the vault, the fixed destination, and magical relay points along the path, it was possible for small items. Usually this method was reserved for highly important messages, but if you had a lot of money, and Prey meant *a lot*, you could hire a slot to send an item yourself.

'But no, that would garner too much attention, there would also be

records kept, and not just anybody can walk in. Although I could have Lemon Pink send it, disguised as some noble or something.'

Lemon was on her lunch break, taking the two hours of free time Prey had granted her each day to go eat her lunch in the park with her coltfriend. Prey didn't know what Lemon Pink saw in Randy, he really didn't. The earth pony was a normal, boring, and slightly shy pony with no real goals, ambition, or ability. While every single person is unique and different with their own story, that didn't change the fact that Randy was still completely average. Maybe that's precisely why Lemon seemed so fascinated with the stallion, or fascinated for her at least.

'Or maybe it's because she's just emotionally stunted and latching onto the first person she's come across. No, ignore that, Lemon's choice of that pony aren't relevant: Sending a package to Crimson and which method to use?'

Courier or teleportation vault? That is, assuming the second was even an option. Griffonia didn't naturally have any unicorns of their own, just immigrants or employees. A courier would be slower, and Crimson was sick right now, but sending it by teleportation was flashy and attention grabbing, and sure to trip some flags.

And Crimson was undercover at the moment.

'But Crimson's sick right now, waiting two extra days for it to arrive...' Prey tugged at the end of his ribbon.

'No. He's undercover. For his sake, drawing attention would be bad, and if I blew their mission after how worked up Luna's gotten over it...'

With great reluctance, Prey realised there was little choice but to use a courier. He'd send the courier to the address of where Gloom was currently keeping the bed bound Crimson along with the fake names they were using. While a long distance courier was still a special delivery, there must still be ten or twenty of them arriving in Griffonstone from Equestria everyday. It was still attention grabbing, but in a mundane sort of way.

'Wasting sicknesses take time. Crimson has time.' Prey told himself to stop worrying. 'It's fine. It'll be fine. It's all fine.'

"Zoma'Grika Crimson, you'd better be fine or I'm going to kill you myself." Prey worried.

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Author's Notes:

Hello all, GreatSpaceBeaver was very kind enough to help me again this time around.

And also, he also made another picture (there are links to the fair number of them he's done dotted throughout the AN in previous chapters if you would like to appreciate what he has created). [image] But here is the newest one. I personally thought it was hilarious: HERE

Also! As of writing this, someone also made a quick sketch of Prey in his lair Here

EDIT 22/09/2021: and this one also came in HERE done by greenface [image]

76.5 Old Lies, New Opportunities

"The package going to Crimson is with a courier. I specified express delivery." Lemon Pink told him as she loaded up the third and last prepared body onto the cart.

A stronger unicorn wouldn't have even needed a cart, instead being able to levitate the heavy load along on a plane of force and more importantly, maintain it too, but Lemon wasn't one of those unicorns, even while wearing the electrite choker.

Lowering the cart down through the hole in the roof of the overflow pipe so they could access the sewers was a massive pain, but they'd built a simple pulley and crane system over the hole to help. Since Lemon's telekinesis was strong enough to levitate the cart for maybe a full minute if she strained, she was certainly strong enough to haul on the pulley's rope when assisted by physics.

"Which courier service?" Prey asked, just in case it might be important.

"EPF. Equestrian Parcel Force."

Prey didn't know of them, neither good or bad, so it meant they were probably just an average courier service, which was probably best for his purposes. He hooked the lantern up on one hoof, before rearing up against the cart so he could swing their light source up and onto the back of it. Lemon could cast a light spell, but however simple the spell was, a crystal glow lantern was simpler still.

"You also put the lure totem in the post for Big Fields at the same time, right?" Prey asked as he dropped back onto all fours, although it wasn't really a question, since he'd told Lemon to do so, so she must've done it.

He'd been holding back on sending it, still deciding if he wanted to pursue Big Fields for the sins of his grandfather, Green Fields. He

still didn't know yet if he was going to go through with punishing Big Fields. However by sending it, this way if he did decide to act, then the lure totem would be in place inside the leader of the Crop Holders' household. Prey was just keeping his revenge options open, as it were. He... didn't really think he was going to be following through on it any time soon, though.

"Yes, Prey." Lemon said, getting into position in front of the cart and magically picking up the tracers. The cart began to roll bumpily forwards, the loose walkway boards making the surface uneven as the gravel crunched. Prey followed along behind as they exited the lair, and also his greatest place of safety in the whole world.

"I visited the Underground Market." Lemon began as she pulled the cart.

"Were there any items of interest?" Prey pre-empted her, thinking of the small circular plaza in Lower Canterlot, with its run down storefronts and grumpy stall tenders in the middle. It, like most other shopping districts in Canterlot, chose to hold its market day on Thursday, which had been yesterday. Prey would kill to get ahold of another veropede egg. No, wait, only kill if they deserved it. He was supposed to be trying to do better than that.

It didn't matter though, because Lemon answered in the negative, "No, Prey. Nothing of actual value, simply more curios and trinkets."

She paused, "However, while in disguise, I discovered that someone has been asking around the Underground Market for anybody who might know how to contact my thief disguise, Average Accountant."

Average Accountant, the make believe thief Lemon had pretended to be when she stole the electrite, but also the same 'person' who had 'forced' Warm Hearth, one of Lord Vanish's maids, to steal the jade necklace from the Time mansion. Or at least, that was what the various guard forces believed.

The necklace had of course really been stolen by the Brotherhoof of Sol, who were all now dead, (hopefully), and when Lord Vanish had lashed out and gotten Crimson arrested, thinking the red pegasus

was responsible, Prey had hastily enacted a plan to frame that maid. As in, implanted false memories into Warm Hearth's head that Average Accountant had cornered her in her house, and threatened to burn it all down if she didn't steal the necklace.

As far as Warm Hearth was concerned, she'd then carried out the theft under duress, and hoofed it over to Average Accountant, who'd then disappeared and everyone was none the wiser. Except for Prey and Lemon, the ones who'd framed her. And the real thieves, but they were now all dead. Once again, hopefully.

Prey was still going to find some way to punish Vanish for stealing the necklace from Crimson in the first place. It was just that he was a notable figure who Prey had a traceable connection to, unlike with Captain Valour, where no one from his tour in Vanhoover remembered him. Vanish's punishment would have to be subtler and less lethal.

But back to the Underground Market and somebody searching for a way to get in contact with him, or rather one of Lemon Pink's disguises.

"Any idea or leads on who's doing the asking?"

Without halting in pulling the cart up the uneven rocky cave tunnel, Lemon merely shook her head, "Aside from that it was an intermediary asking, no, Prey."

So someone was asking questions on someone else's behalf? Lovely. Prey wasn't really worried about that, though. Average Accountant didn't exist, and if someone was being as blatant as to go around asking on the Underground Market to try and meet the mysterious thief, they weren't very smart. Or they were powerful or confident enough to try anyways.

Powerful and confident didn't mean capable and intelligent however, so Prey could probably just ignore them. They'd find nothing, and eventually give up.

'So it's probably not the mimics then, they're much more cunning and secretive than this. Unless they're going all in on a double-bluff,

but that's a stretch. They shouldn't have anything to draw a connection between Average Accountant and Lemon Pink, and even if they did know, then they'd already know Average Accountant isn't even real. So not the mimics.'

That made Prey feel a bit better about this. 'So, if not the mimics, then who else might want to get in contact with a successful thief and why?' Prey asked himself as he trotted up the tunnel, keeping up with the cart and the pool of travelling lantern light.

There were two obvious answers. There were evidently more possibilities than just those two, and while you should never assume you knew everything, those were still the two most probable answers.

One, that they were some kind of law or guard force looking to apprehend a thief.

Or two, that they were someone looking to use a skilled thief, either through hiring or coercion.

So the obvious follow up question was, which one was it? Prey considered it and the possible outcomes as the cart continued to roll over the stone.

Presently, he made his decision; "It's a low priority, but go back to the market and see if you can't dig up some more information on who's asking. Be discreet, if possible passive mind reading only. If it's people looking to capture Average Accountant, maybe we'll lay a false trail somewhere else, like another calling card in Fillydelphia. If it's someone looking to recruit, well, if it seems safe, set up a meeting in disguise and see what they're after."

"Yes, Prey. From the feel of it, I am leaning towards it being the latter result."

"Eh. Time will tell I suppose."

Prey was feeling a bit better about the whole 'Crimson's sick' situation now that he knew he'd done something to help. Not good, only better. The medicine package was on its way to Griffonstone,

and would be there in two days. It wasn't the normal sort of cure a pony would expect either. It wasn't any kind of pills, although it was something he'd cooked into a solid. It wasn't just herbs either, although it did contain *some* herbs... and other stuff it was probably best if no conscientious pony found out about.

'Crimson will be fine.' Prey repeated to himself for the hundredth time today. He stifled a yawn, pausing to rub at the uneven scarring under his eyes.

'Just need to drop off these bodies in the Sewer's Heart and attach them to the wickerwatch, and then I can go back to the flat and get some sleep.'

Sleeping during the day was incidentally a great way to avoid Luna dream kidnapping you again. Prey hadn't forgiven, or forgotten that.

There was a note under the front door when Prey got back to the flats. It was from Scenic, which meant it was actually really probably from Carton Juice, or at least she was the one behind getting her coltfriend to write it. It read:

'Hey Prey, do you want to come to lunch with us? Just found out that Gloom and Crimson are out of Canterlot and that you're alone. Feel free to join us. Going to Lilly's house then out to the park. No Saffron this time. See you one o'clock? -Scenic.'

Prey tossed aside the note. From the last clock tower he'd seen on the way back up through lower Canterlot, it was already half-one. So, too late. Not that he'd have had any interest or intention of attending, anyways. Well he had an honest excuse now if they asked; "I didn't get back to see your note in time."

Prey had been trying to get the message across to them that he didn't want anything to do with them. They were normal Equestrians, ponies each raised in the heart of Canterlot and ponydom. He wasn't like them. And to be fair, they at least somewhat understood that, but what they completely missed was

the scope in differences. They missed it so completely and utterly that if not for gravity, Prey doubted they could even hit the ground in this instance. Carton Juice especially. At least with Scenic, Saffron, and Lilly they had some idea of what the phrase, 'life isn't fair' really meant.

But it wasn't important, Prey didn't want to see them or try to connect, he was going to go to sleep before he had to get up for his next shift tonight. They'd probably just asked him because that's what ponies did; demand your friendship and companionship by shoving themselves into your life, and then get upset and offended when you told them to get out of your personal space.

They could all go be best friends with one another, so long as they did it somewhere else.

Ignoring the note, and the people who were trying to reach out and be sociable, Prey went inside and went to bed, pulling the blanket over his head not to just block the sunlight, but also because even in the middle of the day, it was now more pleasant to sleep with the blanket on rather than off.

Down in the silent purple ocean depths of his inner mindscape, Prey drifted and dreamed. He dreamed of worry, and he planned for a crimson pegasus. The world wasn't fair, it took and gave nothing back. If you wanted anything, you had to hold onto it, fight for it tooth and nail, claw and hoof.

Prey traced the harvest king rhyme scratched into the back of his flat's door before he left to travel to the Palace that night.

Out in the cool air, as the sun sank past the rim of Canterlot, it was just cool enough to see faint wisps of his breath if he exhaled hard enough. Prey knew that Canterlot got snow in winter, but only because the citizens thought it was fun and traditional around Hearth's Warming. If not for that, the weather teams would never have allowed any snow to fall.

'How easy life is, if you can look at snow as a fun indulgence, because you have the option of saying, 'no' to the weather.'

They hadn't gotten snow on the farm over the border, although it could get cold at night. There was snow on the dividing mountain range certainly, all year round on the peaks too, but the villagers had never been snowed in. Drought was usually their weather disaster of choice.

Garrow on the other hoof did know snow. Or *had* known. Griffonia was colder all year round, and especially in the High Kingdom, the winters could be bitter with blizzards and deep freezes. When the cold set in for endless months at a time and winter ran long, when the wood pile was empty and the cupboards lay bare, when the sky was a never ending drifting grey and the sun never shone, *those* were the times where snow wasn't 'fun'.

'But I don't have to worry about any of that here in the heart of Equestria.' Prey thought.

But Crimson and the others, they were still in Griffonia. There was no way they'd still be there when winter set in, right? That was still over a month away. Surely they'd be back by then, *surely*.

Prey made it a point, once he'd trotted in through the Guard Entrance, to go find Screech in his borrowed office as the Lieutenant's shift was beginning, and politely thank him for informing him about Crimson's sudden illness, along with the general update on the mission. If he was polite and obviously thankful, Screech would see fit to continue keeping Prey in the loop without him needing to prompt the Lieutenant again in the future.

The stand-in thestral captain was understandably still quite concerned about the ongoing mission in Griffonstone, although he only showed it in a restrained thestral sort of way. Prey's experienced eye spotted it beneath the steady confidence Screech was projecting that told; "Luna will watch over them all".

Prey personally felt that while Luna *might* watch over them, it would only be for her own entertainment.

Prey entered the ISND's office, checking the runes he'd set up in there for any signs of entry, as well as doing a customary physical check of the office just to be sure, like in the alcoves, the corners, behind the shelves and under the desk.

Then, satisfied at the absence of traps or the like, he climbed up onto the desk chair and looked at the night's work he had in front of him.

'Paperwork.'

Paperwork. It was always paperwork, in one form or another. Be it unsolved cases which had only just been moved to inactive yesterday, to filing requests for such-and-such records back from such-and-such a date from the Records Department. But either way, in one shape or form, it was paperwork.

Prey sighed, and dropped the brown paper bag he'd brought in with him on the desk. He reached for the quill and inkwell with one hoof, and nosed the brown paper bag open with the other. With a rustle, his hoof came out with a brightly swirled red and pink candy. Strawberry and cherry. The hard candy's surface shone when you held it up to the light. In Prey's small hoof, the treat was as big as a plum would've been to the hooves of a regular equine. Wonderfully sweet and sugary, too.

'Let's see,' Prey thought, rustling through the rest of the paper bag and weighing it up, 'If I eat them one at a time and make them last, I should be able to get through half the night. Tomorrow night, I think I'll try those yellow pineapple ones that were on the shelf.'

Prey was really getting bored of doing paperwork every night. It sure beat fighting for your life, though.

The breakfast queue. First thing in the mess hall early morning after it opened, and before even most of the Night Guard turned up was the time to get there.

People are people, no matter where you go. That is to say, never the

same. Every single person has a different story, has their own motivations, beliefs, and fears. Sure, most people were pretty similar to someone else out there. For example, in Canterlot, you could make a safe bet on one pony being very much like the very next brightly coloured pony you saw on the street. Coming from similar demographics, the same city, and relatable backgrounds, you could easily be forgiven for thinking that most spoilt, entitled ponies were the same.

But at the end of the day, people will still be people. Different, similar, strange, familiar. *Individuals*.

Take for example Cookie, the head cook of the Guard mess hall.

Gourmet chef the elderly mare was not. Perpetually annoyed and grumpy she was. Being a mind mage, Prey had of course picked up some additional but irrelevant details about the earth pony over his unwilling time in the Night Guard. She was married to someone called Domino, owned a tabby cat called Marge, would be retiring in only a few years, had an aversion to spiders, despised coffee, made a concession to tea being okay, and more privately, had a dried butterfly collection she'd been building on since she was a foal.

The details of someone's life, but ones which Prey didn't care about. But still, it was sometimes so much easier if you pretended to care about their life. Also playing up being a sweet young child certainly helped with the crotchety old cook.

"Thank you for the food, miss Cookie." Prey smiled up at the kitchen hatch as he stretched up to accept his tray back.

"How many times do I have to tell you dearie, just Cookie is fine." The mare smiled fondly back down at him, wrinkle lines in her smile.

"Oh, I'm sure I'll get it right tomorrow miss Cookie." Prey returned innocently.

"Ya' little rascal, you say that every time." Cookie mock waved the serving spoon at him, amused by how, from her perspective, a foal

thought they were being coy but also at the same time polite. She hadn't a clue why the big eyed, blue ribbon wearing lamb was really doing it.

'-but ahh, it always makes a nice start to my days in the kitchen-'

'Just give me my food so I can leave until lunch time.'

Cookie paused, leaning on the hatchs counter so she could look down at Prey. She hesitated, adjusting her apron, "Say, Prey dearie. I haven't been seeing Gloom and what'shisface coming by recently. They're supposed ta' be looking after you, no?"

Prey paused in balancing his tray of oatmeal on his back, "Why yes, that's absolutely right miss Cookie."

"Just Cookie," She automatically corrected without even paying attention, "But if'n that's so, where are they? Why're you always here by yourself every morning?"

"Oh, they said they were going on some super secret important mission." Prey answered, knowing Cookie would only believe his words were those of a child's, "It's like, really important too."

"That so?" Cookie frowned to herself. '-I smell a rat. Somepony's not living up to their obligations is what I'm hearing-'

"Y'know, Prey dearie, if you need help with anything, or are unhappy, or think something's going wrong, or if'n you just want to talk, you can come talk to miss Cookie any time. You know that, right?"

'You're right at the bottom of the list of people I would come to talk to, only above Luna, the Solar Guard, Strange Happenstance, and the Sun Wolf.' Prey thought as he smiled his 'happy mask smile' back up at her:

"Sure thing miss Cookie, I've got it."

'-but does he really get it though? Is he just saying the words thinking he isn't allowed to bother anypony?-', Cookie worried.

She put down her serving spoon to the side and leaned further out of the hatch to get closer to Prey's level. She lowered her voice too, trying to sound more motherly and kind, "I mean that. Anything at all, you can come to me. Who's looking after you tonight? Is one of Gloom's bat friends staying over to babysit you?"

"You mean a thestral?" Prey innocently corrected her, "No, but Scenic Paint and his special somepony come and have lunch all together."

Cookie still wasn't satisfied though, old motherly instincts coming to the forefront, "How about friends your own age? You got any nice foal friends?"

The last time Prey had any friends his own age was over sixty years ago. Well, not him, he'd never had any childhood friends, but rather Gossamer had. The name and the reminder didn't sting quite as much as it used to, not after the trip back to Rushweed and finally laying some of it to rest for good.

"Oh yes, lots of them." Prey flat out lied, just wanting to go eat his food in peace, "There's Turtle Dove, and Daisy Chain, and her brother Kudos, and their dog Tammy."

'-I still don't like it. I'm gonna' have to have words again with those ponies when they get back for leaving a foal behind-', The cook promised herself, mollified for now.

"You just be looking after yourself, ya' hear me?" Cookie told him firmly, pushing back off the counter.

'-seen too many good young foals go down bad paths and waste their special talent just because somepony who knew better wasn't there for them at the start-'

"Yes miss Cookie. Whatever you say miss Cookie. And stay warm!" Prey called back over his shoulder, "It's all too easy to catch pneumonia this time of year."

And with that, Prey was gone before Cookie could tense up at his words, catch herself, untense, and then respond.

Being a mind mage, there were many more little details Prey had picked up about the earth pony cook during his unwilling time spent in the Night Guard. And not just about her husband, her cat, or her interests and hobbies. As with anyone he spent any decent amount of time around, or was forced to spend time around, he also picked up their fears, their sadness, and their woes. The other day, with winter rolling around, Cookie had been fretting over a memory from back when she was a filly, which had evidently somewhat traumatised her for life if she was still remembering it.

Her dear grandmother had caught a cold which had swiftly developed into pneumonia before anyone was aware. One complication led to another, and her grandmother had died before anyone caught on. Even an earth pony with their robust and enhanced constitution weren't immune to sickness, and no one but an alicorn could fight off the greatest killer of all; time.

It was rather a cruel thing for Prey to have indirectly mentioned. He himself had been worrying over Crimson being sick in much the same fashion. But Prey could be a cruel person. And since he, Prey, was just a child, who had foal friends and had to be babysat, and couldn't possibly know about Cookie's grandmother, let alone understand the concept of death, he couldn't be blamed now could he?

Prey finished work for the day and left a little after seven in the morning, just as most citizens of this foul golden city were starting to stir under their warm bed covers.

Once again, Prey absently noted how he could faintly see his breath in the air if he puffed, although with his wool he himself was perfectly fine. As he slipped out through the Guard Compound's gate, the thestral Night Guard posted there about to finish her own shift nodded to the lamb, and even said his name as he left; "Prey."

At a second glance, Prey recognised her as one of the new thestrals from the other night who'd attended his little impromptu lesson or whatever Screech was calling it.

Luster her name was, Luster Dawn, another unique individual, and another person Prey didn't care about.

The glittering gold, white, and in places, *pink* Royal Palace rose up behind Prey as he left, its spires being the highest point in the city, they were also the first to be touched by the rising sun.

But as Prey was trotting through the marbled streets back towards the apartment block, avoiding the few early rising ponies already out and about, quite a few with colourful scarfs on, he started to get a feeling in the back of his head.

It was the sensation of not knowing what is going on just beyond your periphery, but getting the feeling that you should quickly turn your head to look even though you knew you wouldn't see anything.

Prey most certainly didn't intend to look back, though. He waited until he needed to cross the street before looking both ways to check. But as he'd expected, he saw nothing but Canterlot.

He continued walking on as if nothing was out of the ordinary, but he was focusing and listening hard. There was a very good chance it was nothing, that it was just his paranoia. It almost always was, but Prey had no way of knowing that for sure, both before and after the fact. This wasn't even the second or third time this had happened, but somewhere around the eighth. Prey really was paranoid.

That didn't mean he was imagining it this time, though.

'I'll be safe inside my flat if I can get back to it.' Prey thought, eyes flickering over the street, searching for any hint to the cause of his anxiety, 'But if I *am* being followed, that's almost certainly where they'll be expecting me to go.'

It was the same dilemma as with the runic protections covering his crystal lair. Once inside, he would be safe as he could be, but it was a stationary defence.

His runic arrays couldn't come to him, he had to go to them. They couldn't move, and once he stepped outside, he was vulnerable

again. If someone were to then lie in ambush outside the range of his runic defences, then there was nothing he could do about that. His flat and lair, if anyone knew about them, (or could even retain their memories of his underground retreat), then they'd have a big fat target to catch him entering or leaving at.

'Do I detour? Double back and slip down into the sewers instead and not go back to my flat today at all?'

Prey thought fast, the street junction was coming up and if he wanted to slip away he needed to jump into the alley just around this corner. The feeling of being watched, he couldn't tell if it was actually still there or if it really was only his continuing paranoia now.

'I need to decide.'

Prey continued straight on, not going left towards his apartment block or right towards the closest accessible sewer entrance. He went straight on for Scenic's place. Prey knew the earth pony would be too timid to deny him entry even at this time in the morning.

As predicted, Scenic didn't, although Prey didn't give him much choice when the still sleepy stallion opened his front door, the lamb slipped inside before Scenic could stop him.

"Alright alright, who's banging on my door at ridiculous o'clock- Wha-? Hey wait-! Prey?"

"Yes, me, Prey." Prey answered, already halfway down the painting hung hallway. The myriad paintings were of various sizes, some small, some large, some on canvas, some on paper, in various styles and a mix of watercolours and oil paints. They were all of landscapes in one form or another though.

Scenic blinked heavily, rubbing a fetlock over the scar tissue under his piebald eye, "I-Okay? I mean, why?"

Prey paused at seeing a small painting right at the end of the hallway. It was rough, only painted with shades of black, and was

of what looked like a ruined cottage laid before a towering pine forest. Prey recognised it without any effort. It looked fresh.

"Mayflower?" Prey asked the one word question, distracting Scenic.

Scenic stopped rubbing the sleep from his eyes, waking up a lot faster at the name and looked where Prey was looking. He drew a deep breath, "Yeah, it's Mayflower. I put it there so everypony can see it every day. So I can see it every day so I don't, don't forget. Um, not that I can forget, Celestia knows I can't, but, still, you know, if it's there I'm not risking it either, so... Yeah..."

'-not going to forget all those villagers who died, and I'm not going to let anypony else forget either-'

A sentiment with some nobility behind it, but a lot more selfishness, and mostly all misguided in any case. It was just a painting, so while Scenic, as a painter, might feel it meant something, to anyone else it was just a picture out of context. Plus, it was only on display within Scenic's house. So a noble sentiment yes, but also very dumb.

Still, Prey knew how guilt made the mind make irrational connections and undertake irrelevant actions, as if it would somehow help after the fact.

"I got the note you left the other day, inviting me to lunch. Unfortunately, I was out and by the time I got back it was already too late." Prey said, shifting off the topic of the disaster of Mayflower.

"Oh, out? Where'd you go?" Scenic asked, looking away from staring moodily at the painting.

'-didn't think Prey liked anything in Canterlot, and doesn't he work night shifts too?-'

"At the Royal Library, I stayed after work. It really is a wonderful place." Prey answered smoothly, knowing his like of the grand library was known to Scenic.

"Ah, I got you." Scenic walked into his own living room behind

Prey, then faltered a step as he realised he still didn't know why Prey was here in his house, and what's more, Scenic hadn't even realised how he'd missed that obvious fact up until now.

"So, uh, what did you say you were here for so early in the morning Prey?" Scenic asked, hiding his touch of nervousness. Or at least he thought he hid it.

"I didn't, and also, this is hardly early in the morning. It's, what, only just past half-seven?" Prey glanced at the clock on the mantlepiece, nestled beside a 'Get Well Soon' card.

"Half-seven is early." Scenic protested.

"No it's not. Early is before the sun rises, and it already rose at ten minutes to seven. Unless you have an excuse, such as working through the night..." Prey gave the earth pony a pointed look, "Then there's no excuse not to be up and doing once there's daylight enough to see."

Scenic missed how Prey still hadn't answered his original question, "Oh Celestia, I should've known. You're a *morning* person. I saw the signs, and how you like camping, and could sleep on a noisy moving train, you're one of *those*. Coffee isn't good for you at your age, you know."

"I've never even tasted the stuff. Don't need it anyways." Prey returned, affecting smugness, "Funnily enough, I seem to recall you having a coffee jar in your kitchen last time I checked. Don't you know coffee's not good for you at your age?"

"When did you even-? I'm not old. Seriously, I'm not old Prey, I'm barely twenty-six." Scenic protested. The banter was relaxing him, temporarily helping him forget his wariness of Prey and bad memories of what the lamb had done.

Prey refrained from mentioning that, technically, he was approaching three times Scenic's age. "Anyway, thank you for the invite even though it wasn't needed. What have you been up to in the meantime?" He asked.

When Gloom and Crimson got back, (and that would be soon Prey told himself), they'd want to know if he'd done what they asked and kept up with Scenic and Lilly. Well since he was here, he may as well fulfill his obligation now.

"Um, not much really? I've just sort of been taking each day as it comes, you know? I've been doing a fair bit of painting, and I get to see a lot of Carton when she's not working," A serene, and rather goofy, smile brightened Scenic's face, "They're all busy with the beehives at the moment getting ready for winter. We go by and try to see Lilly everyday."

The smile started to slip there, but Scenic caught himself and quickly rallied, "It's hard going for her still, even though she's so, uh, upbeat about it I guess? Lilly's really trying hard but it's tough on her. She's best friends with Saffron, although she's not always free because of, you know, her modelling career, but her and Lilly have really hit it off."

Prey knew all that already, Scenic was just reiterating the point. Still, he grunted and nodded to show his understanding, "Uh-hu, so nothing out of the ordinary then?"

Scenic paused, tail swishing nervously, "Uh, should there have been? Am I supposed to be watching out for something?"

'A group of shapeshifting insect ponies with unknown goals who are almost certainly mixed in with the citizens of this city, and who may or may not be following me and now know your address even if they didn't before.' Prey thought.

"Not really, I was just asking." Prey shrugged. He twitched a floppy ear towards the gear stacked behind Scenic's couch, "What's all that for?"

Prey recognised the objects as hoof weights, leg bars, a medicine ball, and stretch bands. The various weights weren't quite to the same size and level he'd seen ponies training with during T-Day, where quite often they were showing off or it was a competition between the mares and stallions, but rather these were the smaller kind of weights you could repetitively lift with one hoof.

"Those? Well, to be honest most of those are for Lilly actually." Scenic answered, going over and picking up the closest weight by the hoof loop.

There was a beat of silence as Prey waited for Scenic to expand on that, because some exposition was definitely needed. Scenic blinked as he caught up, "Oh, oh right! I guess you wouldn't know, Lilly's decided she wants to get fit for the Guard again. Except because of her, uh..."

Scenic made a vague motion to indicate his leg and face where the meldwood had taken root in Lilly, "...She needs a bit of help. The doctors didn't want to let her do it at all but they can't stop her, so they instead asked her to at least never do so alone and always have somepony to spot for her. So we've got the stuff here at my house, and Carton and me go fetch her once a day and then do this with her. We join in a bit so that, you know, she doesn't feel embarrassed and stuff."

'Lilly Blossom, fit for the Guard? Now there's a bad joke if ever I heard one. First, she's a cripple, so she can't be a front line Guard like she's so obviously pushing for, and second, she definitely doesn't have the mentality for it. I'd have thought she'd have gotten that through her thick skull by now after Mayflower and Alfalfa Dale.'

Well, at least he was only having to learn of this second hoof from Scenic rather than listening to Lilly proudly and aggressively proclaiming it herself.

"Any particular reason you don't leave all this stuff at Carton's house instead? Hers is closer to Lilly's own apartment." Prey observed.

"Yeah I thought so too, but she's got a guest staying over." Scenic's tail started twitching again, before he gave in and just told Prey.

'-it's not a secret and Prey'll always figure it out anyways somehow-'

"Actually, it's Carton's cousin, she's from outside of Canterlot. She's had, uh, family troubles, and just needs somewhere to stay for a little while, so of course Carton said she could stay until she gets

back on her hooves. She's got a part time night job at a bar or something, so she's asleep most of the day so, yeah, we thought it best to store this here so as to not disturb her." Scenic said, lifting the weight still looped over his hoof and giving it a little wave.

'How kind and considerate of Carton.' Prey thought, although it actually really was. Scenic's large marefriend seemed to have a problem with leaving people to fend for themselves.

'There's no need to be annoyed by someone else showing generosity to strangers.' Prey reminded himself. Carton Juice was a pony. If she saw another pony in need, she couldn't help but want to assist them. Key term there being 'pony'. He'd bet on it being a bit different if it were a diamond dog or a griffin, what with how she was still so nervous even now around thestrals, even if she did a good job of suppressing it.

'No, stop being annoyed. It has nothing to do with me, nor does her kindness cost me anything.' Prey reminded himself again. However it *would* be his problem if Nighthawk allowed Lilly Blossom back into the ISND again.

'No, not happening. I don't care how much she's improved, Lilly is not coming back onto my team. Ever.'

Scenic placed the weight back down with a soft thunk onto the carpet, "Prey, I... Do you think I should re-join the Night Guard Prey?" He abruptly asked, rushing to get the words out.

Prey turned to look Scenic dead in the eye, soft sky blue to chocolate brown, "No." Prey told him without pause.

Scenic's shoulders slumped, "Yeah, I kinda' figured. I don't think I could do it either... But can I ask why you think so?"

"Because you don't want to be a Night Guard anymore." Prey said simply.

'-that's... so simple. Huh. Why didn't I think about it like that before?-'

"You don't want to be a Night Guard," Prey repeated, turning back

away from the stallion to examine some of the stranger shaped weights more closely, "You have a life you knew before the Guard, a safe life. I think you're mad for having ever wanted to join up in the first place, but back then, I guess you didn't know any better."

Scenic winced at the note of condescension in Prey's tone, "That's... fair I guess."

"Think of Carton Juice. You have a life ahead of you, one which doesn't have to involve the possibility of facing something like the kindersnatches again. You still have good parents who love and care about you, why throw that away?"

"They're not good parents." Scenic reflexively scowled.

Prey stopped poking the heavy medicine ball to slowly look at Scenic. "They are your parents. You love them. And they love you."

Scenic flinched, ears falling as he looked away under the pressure of Prey's eyes. "But, we haven't, um, gotten on in forever. You saw them at the hospital, they don't even listen to me." He mumbled.

"I said love, not like. And you do love them, deep down, under all the petty conflict you've built up between you, *yes* petty! You love them. It's possible to love someone very very much, who you don't actually like at present. But when it comes down to it, when the wolf is howling and the moon is gone, when you're facing the ultimate truth of life and death, you know that you'd choose them in a heart beat over the lives of two complete strangers."

"That's...! That's horrible Prey! Of course I don't want them dead! I would never-! I don't want anypony dead."

Prey went quiet for a moment, then calmly asked, "You do remember what you told me, right? You're proud that you're not able to kill. And, I admit, that's not a bad thing. You're not a killer, you'd have even let that kindersnatch kill you rather than fight back. That's stupid, but that's still your choice. To put it bluntly, I don't want someone like that on my team."

'-is...? Is he saying he only wants killers in the ISND?-', Scenic

thought with a thrill of horror.

"Crimson and Gloom, they're good ponies, they're not... I mean, they don't want to kill anypony."

Prey snorted, "Of course they don't! I don't want to either. But we all have in self defence. But you're not willing to even if it were to save one of our lives. You're not even prepared to do it in the heat of the moment. That's why I don't want you in the ISND. But those are my personal reasons, think about all you stand to gain by not rejoining the Night Guard. Think of the safety and peace, think of Carton Juice and your parents. Who, by the way, you should really make up with. You never know when it might be too late."

"Too late...? Wait, is that some kind of warning? Do you know something Prey?" Scenic asked in alarm.

Prey rolled his eyes, tossing an ear back, "No you idiot, I'm just saying. Look, make up with them, or don't, I don't really care. I gave you my warning, so you can't ever come crying to me later that I didn't tell you. I would've made up with my parents by now if it were me, but that's your choice I guess."

"I'll, I'll think about it." Scenic muttered, looking away and scuffing at the carpet with a hoof.

'-mom and dad never listen though, so is there any point in even trying?-'

"Hey, didn't you go back to see your parents on that holiday you took? How'd that go?" Scenic asked, looking up.

Prey drew a hoof down the smooth silken length of his dangling ribbon, "Parent. Singular." He said, repeating the deception he'd first sold.

"Oh buck sorry Prey, I forgot-! No, I mean I didn't forget, I just, I misspoke. I swear I didn't forget, or at least not like that, it just slipped out. I didn't mean it like that."

"Then shut up and stop apologising." Prey said pleasantly.

Scenic shut up, ears back in embarrassment and shame. '-it was a slip, oh geeze. How much trouble am I in?-'

After a long, drawn out moment, Prey answered Scenic's silent question, still speaking pleasantly, "Yes, I took some time off to go back and visit. I won't say it was all good, but it was definitely good to do, thank you for asking."

Scenic relaxed in relief, "Oh, that's great to hear. And I, uh, hope you get another chance to go back again soon. Nighthawk should give you more time to visit your family, not just write letters."

"Thank you for the sentiment. However, it is a long journey both ways and out in the middle of nowhere. Not a trip to be undertaken too often." Prey deflected.

"Aw, that's too bad. I'm sorry to hear that." Scenic quickly apologised. '-ah ponyfeathers, I don't even have that excuse. Mom and dad both live right here in Canterlot-'

Quickly Scenic tried to think up a line of conversation to distract Prey from realising the same, followed inevitably by pointedly pointing out that point so that he'd have to acknowledge it. In his haste though, Scenic grabbed upon the first topic which came to mind without thinking it through first:

"So were your mother and brother all doing okay though? Did you manage to do anything fun? Or just talk about stuff, did you tell them what we've done in the ISND? About, about, er... Mayflower. And the other stuff..."

Scenic trailed off, eyes darting quickly to Prey's back and then away, but Prey still saw his hastily redirected glance. 'You just don't know when to stop digging, do you?'

Prey wasn't angry, or not as angry as he would've been before although he also would have hidden it before. So he was able to settle for simply saying, "Now that is none of your business. Don't ask me again."

"Oh. Oh right. Sorry, I won't bring it up again."

'-oops. Well done Scenic oh well done, I think I managed to get both hooves in my mouth just then-', Scenic berated himself, unconsciously rubbing at the poison scarring under his right eye.

With that parameter clearly established, and confident that Scenic wouldn't bring it up again, Prey stretched, stifling a yawn, "Thanks for letting me in, but I don't think I'm going to stay. I've been up all night, while you're just starting your own day."

"Oh yeah, it's nice to not be working nights. Luna... watch your dreams was it? No, Luna watch over you, that's what the saying is." Scenic corrected himself, nodding as he got it right.

'I'd strongly prefer she didn't.' Prey thought.

"Well you're obviously fine, you're helping out Lilly, Carton's fine, Saffron's fine too, and I've got places to be. Like my bed. Have a nice rest of the day, but I'm off." Prey called back as he trotted out of the living room and left. Just as Scenic was leaving his mental perception range, Prey heard the Earth pony think:

'-huh. Strange. Why's he going out my back door?-'

Prey got back to his flat fine, without his possible maybe non-existent mystery stalker jumping out to kill and/or torture him.

Whether this was because of the unscheduled detour he'd taken, or because there never had been any follower in the first place wasn't really the question. Nothing had happened to Prey, so his paranoid actions were justified. Always expect the worst, and then you'll be halfway prepared.

As it turned out, it wasn't limited to one person trying to contact the thief, Average Accountant, via the Underground Market.

"There are two of them, Prey." Lemon Pink said, having conducted her quiet investigation. The babble of street traffic went on in the background.

"Two interested parties, huh?" Prey commented thoughtfully. He hadn't foreseen that possibility, but alright. He motioned, signalling Lemon to go on.

Lemon began explaining, sitting forwards on the bench they were on, "There was only so many details I could discover, as both parties were trying to keep their inquiries discreet-"

Prey snorted at that, shaking his head. 'Discreet'. Ponies didn't know the meaning of the word.

"-But from what I can gather, one was acting through an intermediary. A unicorn stallion, roughly forty years of age, green and blue, cutie mark covered, didn't give a name, went in asking in each Underground Market store's dealing with anything relating to artifacts or trinkets about a thief with a calling card of 'A.A.' The stores of course denied knowing anyone, but the unicorn seemed more inclined to believe they were just maintaining plausible deniability, and simply just didn't want to tell a stranger."

Again, that just made sense. Of course the stores down in the Underground Market, (some of which were selling border line illegal products), weren't going to admit to knowing a thief, even if they did know. Which they didn't, because Lemon hadn't tried to fence anything off to anyone. The extremely valuable and rare electrite she'd stolen had all been used up by Prey, not sold.

"This unicorn asked each shopkeeper to contact Average Accountant with the message that they, 'want to speak'." Lemon added.

Both of them were passively keeping an eye on their surroundings and the ponies here in this square in case of possible threats. Although sitting here with a floppy sunhat on apiece, no one was giving them a second glance. Just a yellow mare sitting with her white filly, out enjoying some sunshine. What's that? What were their features aside from yellow and white? Why're you asking? It doesn't matter, they were completely average and normal. Nothing worth remembering.

"They're probably either a thief themselves looking to scope out the competition, or looking to hire an accomplice, or perhaps just to

buy the electrite, or simply looking to discover who has the electrite now." Prey reasoned, "And the second person, or persons?"

"Private law enforcement. Private Pony Protection. A team of two, they came through asking much the same. It was obvious they were simply here to catch Average Accountant." Lemon answered, shrugging apathetically at the idea of their efforts.

Private Pony Protection, or PPP. Their name was one which Prey had only heard in passing. Evidently, they weren't some amazing detective and law agency if they weren't famously known, but just vaguely known. If he remembered correctly though, they were rather an old agency, with some ties to the Royal Guard, and had been around for a while, so they were at least well established and successful, if low key. A business who'd established their reliability over the years, and plied a steady trade.

They weren't exclusive, but Prey recalled from investigating various law enforcement groups, just so as to know who he might have to dispose of one day, that PPP usually worked for upper-middle-class to upper-class ponies. They weren't expensive, but nor were they cheap.

Once again, the phrase 'established reliability' seemed to sum up Private Pony Protection. Not the best of the best, but still good and steady.

'Good and steady for a pony organized and run organisation anyway.' Prey thought dismissively. He tried never to underestimate a potential opponent, but having witnessed the Royal Guard in action, and that PPP was supposed to be a step under the golden clad nincompoops, he didn't have high expectations.

"Well, let's just ignore this triple P. There's next to nothing they can do or find, since Average Accountant doesn't exist, so they're not a threat. You don't know who hired them, though?" Prey asked, eyes tracking a group of five sporty looking pegasi flying over the square.

"No, Prey. A noble or lord is most likely though. Although it could be a mage tower. Electrite is a valuable magical component after

all. Either the person the electrite was going to go to, or the group who was selling it." Lemon absently reached up and ran her hoof along the silver metal choker. She was currently wearing a good portion of the obscenely expensive metal that everyone seemed to be after.

"Well, let's go meet this green mystery stallion and see if he's got anything I want. That's why we're here after all." Prey said, hopping down off the bench.

He and Lemon were in a square in Lower Canterlot. The square was a junction of four cobbled streets leading into it, or out of it, depending on how you wanted to look at it. And as long as you were looking, what was impossible to miss was the quietly looming tier of the upper city on one side of the square.

The curving stone wall wasn't exactly close, the square wasn't cast in its shadow for example, but everyone couldn't help but always see the massive upper tier of the city whenever they faced in that direction. Broad enough stairways went up the tier at regularly spaced intervals, meaning that access between the upper and lower tiers was free and readily available, and the wall's face had been colourfully decorated with many a rainbow mosaic, but still... you couldn't help but see the divide between the two.

Down here in Lower Canterlot, space was at a premium, meaning the buildings surrounding the square were all two stories or more, and although window plant boxes and hanging flower baskets were aplenty, there was no room for even tiny gardens. While ponies were entering and exiting the square, a wagon loaded with planks trundled past, but there was little in the way of stationary conversation happening anywhere in the square despite the four cardinal benches set out. Because of its proximity to the more 'unsavoury' part of Canterlot, meaning it was close to both the lower district and only a street out from the Underground Market, people were only here to pass through.

It made it a relatively safe place to sit and talk, both because of all the witnesses around, and because it was easy to notice if there was anyone else lingering in the area.

The green stallion was waiting at a little café table outside, right where Lemon's message had told him to wait for her.

It was a small, rather sad café which obviously didn't get many customers, but it was still on the street enough to be visible to the passing public, and therefore, a safe place to meet. The stallion matched with Lemon's description, a bit younger than middle aged, blue mane, average height, but a bit on the lanky side, his hooves looked polished and cared for, but rather unfortunately for him and his prospects, his most memorable feature was his thin face. He also wore a light cotton shirt and coat, keeping his flank and cutie mark hidden.

Here, just outside the Underground Market, his fashion choice of flank covering didn't stand out since nearly every other pony here was doing the same.

The stallion had ordered two cups of tea, sipping from the one while the other sat untouched on the other side of the table, again just as Lemon had instructed him to in the message she'd left with one of the shopkeepers'. Lemon had absolutely no intention of drinking the tea, not having seen it being prepared so it might be poisoned, and the instruction wasn't even so they could identify the stallion, although that was for the reason he no doubt believed. There was no reason for him to be made aware that Lemon already knew in detail what he looked like.

Really though, the reason for the simple instructions was to see if the pony could follow them. It was just a little power play by getting the other party to follow your orders, and then ignoring the tea to show you didn't care.

So focused was the thin faced unicorn on waiting, and looking out to try and spot Average Accountant without looking like he was being shifty, that he didn't actually notice Lemon Pink until she had walked right up and pulled out the other chair. Although the notice-me-not sunhat probably had something to do with it.

He jumped, tried to hide his reaction, nearly spilt his tea, and

finally asked, "Average Accountant, I presume?"

'That was a stupid question.' Prey thought, observing unnoticed from across the street. If it weren't 'Average Accountant', then the stallion had just given away who he was waiting for and Lemon could've faked it from here. Lemon, of course, was in disguise.

For this meeting, Lemon wore an illusion of a pretty blue mare, although her sharp waterfall mane was basically the same as Lemon's own, just with the tri-colour changed to a solid white. The glowing of Lemon's sharp horn was hidden both beneath the illusion and the broad sunhat.

"You may call me that." Lemon said coldly.

The stallion sat up a little straighter, for a second glancing at the teacup which Lemon, or Average Accountant, hadn't even glanced at since sitting down, "In that case, you can call me Diamon-No, Dandelion will do actually. Call me Dandelion."

"Dandelion." Lemon repeated, tone flat.

The self named Dandelion's ears twitched uncomfortably, but the stallion probably thought he did a good job of controlling his expression, "Yes, I'm here representing my employer for a, ah, potential job let's call it."

"Speak plainly. What do you want me for?"

The thin faced stallion paused, and took a sip of tea to cover the hesitation, "As I said, my employer is looking for somepony with the necessary experience and qualifications to undertake a one-off, commission based job."

"I said speak plainly. You're following somepony's orders, and that somepony wants me to steal something for them." Lemon stated, her illusionary face unmoving as she continued to stare Dandelion down.

The other unicorn flinched at the blunt acknowledgement, looking around hastily, "You might want to be a bit more circumspect. Perhaps keep it down?"

"I'm not interested in doublespeak or beating about the bush. If you have something to say or ask, just ask it. If you can't speak straight, I'm leaving."

Dandelion frowned at her, pursing his thin lips. A long second passed.

"Fine." Lemon said, making as if to rise and leave.

"Ah wait, there's no need to be hasty. I assure you this will be worth your while." Dandelion quickly stopped her.

Purposefully slowly, and with what Prey knew to be faked reluctance, Lemon lowered herself back into her seat.

"Speak." She ordered.

Prey caught Dandelion's tongue dart across his lips, "I hope you'll pardon me, but before we get to that, my employer has insisted on proof of your abilities first, a resume if you will. Not that I doubt, you understand, but he insisted."

'He'. Male. Prey didn't think Dandelion was even aware he'd slipped up there.

"What kind of proof?" Lemon asked.

Again Dandelion nervously licked his thin lips, "You were the one who blackmailed a maid into stealing a magical heirloom out of House Time's vaults, were you not?"

It was interesting that Dandelion mentioned that, and not the electrite. That could mean a lot or a little. Lemon just nodded once, gesturing impatiently with a hoof for Dandelion to hurry up.

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble, perhaps you might present the artifact? It was supposed to have been a magical stone necklace of some description."

"It would be too much trouble," Lemon said unapologetically, "It's gone. I've already sold it on. If buying the necklace was what you were really after, then we're already done here."

"No no, I was just trying to ascertain your credentials. But it seems... It seems the necklace is no longer an option. Perhaps something else?" He suggested, smoothing down the front of his cotton overcoat.

"Such as?" Lemon asked, projecting; 'clearly-not-amused'.

Dandelion considered, opened his mouth, closed it, before starting again, "Well, what evidence can you present? Is there something you can think of that would do as proof?"

Lemon didn't move for a minute, apparently thinking, before finally slipping off one of her horseshoes, "This."

"Ah, a removable horseshoe? I'm afraid I don't follow."

Wordlessly, Lemon shoved the horseshoe across the table top, forcing Dandelion to take it. "Alright, and what does....."

Dandelion didn't finish his sentence. He stopped speaking completely, and just sat there, holding the horseshoe unmovingly. He'd miscalculated. Dandelion hadn't considered that Average Accountant would attack the messenger. He'd thought simply because they were in a semi-public area, he was safe because there were witnesses about. How naïve. Ponies never thought the worst of another pony without evidence, and right here at this table, the passing ponies couldn't see anything wrong which would cause them to look twice.

There were simply two ponies sitting opposite each other over tea, a mare and a stallion, a tried and true recipe. Neither of them was doing much, just sitting there in silence, the stallion holding a horseshoe for some reason, but that was about it. Nothing which was worthy of a second glance, and by then the passerby had already moved on. Also, the mare was completely ordinary and not worth focusing on at all.

Dandelion, or whatever his real name was, had blindly assumed she would play by the same rules as him. You should never measure your potato bushel by someone else's wheat sheaf.

Prey sat where he was across the street, quite comfortable, and patiently waited.

The occasional pony or ponies came and went by. No one noticed there was anything wrong at the cafe's little out of the way table. Just a relaxed couple sitting and quietly enjoying their tea. There was no way for anyone to tell that the tea had long gone cold.

After five long minutes, Lemon finally stirred, blinking and reaching out to snatch back the horseshoe. A few seconds after he lost contact with the shoe, Dandelion too stirred back to life.

The thin stallion blinked hazily, looking visibly dazed.

"I trust that is good enough proof?" Lemon asked, grabbing his attention.

"What?" Dandelion continued to blink around, "Oh-yes of course, thank you very much. That more than proves it."

"So the job?" Lemon bluntly prompted, although she obviously already knew, having just rummaged through the other unicorn's head for that and all other relevant information.

Dandelion swiftly raised his cup and took a long drink of tea to help re-center himself. He grimaced as he found it suddenly cold, "Yes, right. Ah, my employer has decided to outsource for somepony with previous experience in obtaining certain, 'antiques', on their behalf. Specifically, convincing the current 'antiques' owner to consider 'selling' it. They are quite eager to obtain these antiques as soon as possible, they're part of an extremely rare 'collectable' set. Does that sound like an employment opportunity you would be interested in undertaking?"

"What, where, and from whom?" Lemon asked, her blue visage not moved in the slightest by Dandelion's flowery speech and idioms.

"I'm sorry, but even I don't know all the details," Dandelion apologised, politely shaking his head, "I'm only here to offer you the opportunity. If you're interested, then I'll go back and inform my employer. If not, the job information needs to remain strictly

confidential, I'm sure you understand."

"Why should I be interested if I don't even know what it's going to be? Convince me." Lemon told him coldly.

Dandelion hid a wince, and his horn lit up to levitate out a small envelope from inside the front pocket of his cotton coat. He shiftily pushed it across the table top to Lemon, instead of just passing it across like a normal person.

Lemon didn't make any move to take it. "Open it and read it aloud." She ordered.

"Ah, it's supposed to be a confidential offer to you only, I don't know what it says-"

"I don't care. If your boss wants me to take this job, then everything needs to be open and upfront. Read it."

With offended reluctance clear on his thin face, Dandelion took back the envolope, ripping it open and removing the small note. He cleared his throat, "It's, well, it's an offer of a payment amount for successfully undertaking the job and retrieving at least one of the antiques. Bonus payments for each antique delivered beyond the first."

"Does it say what these antiques are?"

"No, it does not. If you were to commit to signing on, then I'm sure you would be made aware of the objectives."

"That remains to be seen. How much?"

Again Dandelion cleared his throat, "It's, well, for a successful undertaking, it's, well, to put it bluntly, *eherm* Sixteen-thousand bits." He said in a quiet voice, but one that Prey's sharp ears nevertheless still heard.

Lemon's face, or rather Average Accountant's face, didn't even twitch at the listed amount, giving no indication if she thought that was a lot or a little amount of money. To Lemon and Prey though, money wasn't a great object of desire. It was only ever a means to

an end at best, and a dangerous liability at worst.

Dandelion went on, voice still hushed, "For each antique acquired beyond the first, there is a bonus of five thousand bits apiece, available either in cash, a bank transfer, or the equivalent in precious stones if you prefer."

'A bank transfer?' Prey's already low opinion of Dandelion's mysterious employer dropped even further.

First, they were assuming Lemon would be dumb enough to give them banking information, even if it was a disposable account. Second, once money entered a bank, a record would be made. Names, dates, amounts, and places would be recorded. Really, was this person trying to get caught? Actually, he just might be trying to get Average Accountant caught instead, a double cross at the end of the job to get her out of the picture once they had no more need for loose ends.

If it was intended as a trap though, then once again they were assuming Average Accountant would play by the same rules they did, believing she wouldn't resort to killing them in retaliation. Assuming, of course, it was intended as a double cross, and wasn't simply just plain incompetence.

Lemon in her role of Average Accountant was silent for a long minute in feigned thought. Finally she spoke, "I'm going to need time to decide if this is worth sticking my neck out over." Meaning Prey was going to make the call.

"How do I contact you if I decide I'm in?"

"Time is limited..." Dandelion ventured to say once more, but in the face of Average Accountant's uncaring stare, he quickly broke off that sentence.

"But of course. Please bare in mind that this offer won't be open indefinitely, but you can send a letter to this address in Canterlot."

Dandelion reached into his other jacket pocket and pulled out a little card with something scribbled down on it, "If you do use this

address though, please include the word Stormfront as both the first and last word of any letter you send. It's for security and identification, you understand."

Lemon swept up the card in her aura as she stood, pushing the café chair back. Without a word of goodbye she left, walking off down the street in the opposite direction from which she'd approached. Also, she hadn't paid for her untouched cup of tea.

Prey waited where he was a minute longer, and got to see Dandelion scowl after her. With a sour look on his thin face he placed some bits on the table and grumpily stomped off. Prey would've considered following him to see where he went and who he went to, but there was no need.

Lemon would have all the information fresh from the taking out of Dandelion's head, or whatever his real name was.

The sewers weren't what one would call an ideal meeting spot, in fact, most people would say it was the exact opposite of an ideal meeting spot.

Nevertheless, that's where Prey found Lemon Pink to discuss what she'd discovered from Dandelion's memories at the prearranged meeting point. The smell did leave something to be desired, even if they weren't actually near any of the raw sewage, (damp tunnels, stale air, and mould still made for an unpleasant combination), but it was a small price to pay for the cursed protection the wickerwatch spread throughout most of the inner sewer network. And Prey had endured far, *far* fouler environments while surviving in the Deeper Green.

Lemon had dropped the blue and white Average Accountant disguise. Right now the only magic she was using was a simple silvery light spell, the globe floating above their heads, nearly touching the low concrete roof of the small junction room. From left to right, three large parallel pipes, each sealed with grates and set lower than the floor, passed through this junction room, taking up most of the space.

Swift water flowed out of the grates, down the pipe channels in the floor, and just as swiftly disappeared out the next. Behind two of these metal grates, if you looked closely, it was just possible to sometimes make out dark slimy tendrils bobbing against the bars in the shadows.

Water gurgled around the metal grates as Prey asked, "What did you find out? Report."

"Dandelion, real name Milo Lime. Age forty-one, a number of minor law infractions on his record, and at least twice as many he hasn't been caught for. Mainly petty theft and tax avoidance. Moved from Detrot four years ago, and sees Canterlot society as a chance to make quick money, but has yet to achieve any real success. He isn't very intelligent in how he goes about it." The slightest curl in Lemon's lip there showed how damning Dandelion's, or Milo Lime's, incompetence was in her opinion.

Prey listened, although most of Lemon's information wasn't likely to be relevant. The thin faced unicorn evidently didn't have anything important hidden in his closet, and was just an accessory to the main focus of Prey's interest; the person who had reached out to Average Accountant through Dandelion, (his real name really didn't matter to Prey), and who was the one really calling the shots.

This was the important bit. Who was it that thought they were important enough to demand Average Accountant work for them? "And this employer's identity is...?"

The briefest flicker of maybe an amused smirk tugged at Lemon's mouth, "The person is Felyawn, the griffin ambassador."

Prey blinked. Then he started snickering.

"Khe-he-he-he." Oh this was too rich! After everything, of course it was the griffin ambassador, because why not?! And of course the one person he'd unknowingly reach out to was Lemon Pink, thinking he was so smart and clever. Oh if only Felyawn knew what he'd just done.

The more Prey thought about it, the more funny it got. "He, he's

trying to hire, khe-ke-he! He's trying to hire us? Me? The person who... heh-he-he, The one who discovered his spying attempt, and, khe-he-khe! And he doesn't even know! Ah ha ha ha ha."

'Seems Hafflow really was operating under the instructions of the griffin ambassador after all. Ha! Knew it.'

Prey shook his head, long ears flopping, "Aha. Ha ha. *Phew*. And he unknowingly came to us, heh. Let me guess, what he wants us to steal are ignius gemstones too? Just to bring this thing full circle?"

"Partially correct, Prey. He wants to hire Average Accountant to steal the Elements of Harmony. All six pieces of the artifact are purportedly kept by one of Celestia's former proteges in the small town of Ponyville. Those artifacts are what he wants stolen and delivered to him."

All traces of the smile faded from Prey's lips, "He's retarded then. Not only are the Elements of Harmony almost certainly fake and bait laid by the Sun Wolf, even if they are real, they certainly wouldn't be left unguarded in a tiny town instead of here locked away in Canterlot. The whole notion is utterly ridiculous. Whatever Felyawn thinks he's oh-so-cleverly uncovered in Ponyville is a trap at worst, or a fake at best. There's just no way..."

Prey trailed off in thought. Of course he'd done some research on the topic of the Elements of Harmony, the supposed magical superweapon which had been proclaimed in all the news to have defeated Nightmare Moon.

Even if he didn't believe it, (since five untrained random ponies plus one former personal pupil to maintain the illusion, couldn't have defeated an alicorn), Prey had still looked into it, if for no other reason to know what definitely *didn't* happen on the summer solstice. If these Elements were real, why would Celestia hoof them out to strangers if they were apparently strong enough to defeat an alicorn? The only possible answers were either they weren't strong enough and it was a bait, that the Elements in Ponyville were fake and it was a trap, or the Sun Wolf was hiding her real method of defeating Nightmare Moon.

That, or the sun goddess was playing some deeper, (or perhaps shallower), game than he could reasonably conceive of.

But he was digressing. Despite his brief research into the topic, he didn't know what the Elements were physically supposed to be or look like. Just that they were six separate artifacts.

"What are the Elements supposed to have been created of?" Prey asked, feeling he already knew the answer.

"They are supposed to be some type of either crystal, gem, or diamond, Prey." Lemon promptly supplied.

And just like that the whole spying case, Griffonstone, Hafflow, Felyawn's bid, it all connected and made sense.

The griffins believed the Elements of Harmony were real, even if he didn't. Maybe Felyawn and Hafflow were simply zealous patriots who were acting without the wider support of the High and Low Kingdoms, but it didn't really matter here and now.

You had to look at it from their point of view. To them, the Elements of Harmony had seemingly appeared out of nowhere this self same year. These six artifacts were apparently gems, and if they were powerful enough to take down Nightmare Moon, (supposedly), then that meant there had to be incredibly powerful enchantments on the artifacts too.

They also knew you needed ignius gemstones to hold an enchantment. The higher the gemstone grade, the more stable and powerful the enchantment was. Prey knew how beyond rare such perfect ignius gemstones were, quite literally one in a million he was sure for it to be capable of holding an enchantment that powerful. Hadn't Gloom mentioned something about the undercover Night Guard finding something out about gemstone miners specially hired in Griffonstone too? That made it seem more likely this scheme had royal backing behind it too.

That's also why the griffins had hired those two ponies, Shamrock and Lika Soil, to spy on the gem refinery and mines. They were looking for records of any such special ignius gemstones being

mined or refined. They were trying to find out if the Elements could be replicated, and if so, what the requirements were.

It was fairly obvious that they must've found nothing, and so had moved onto the next step; stealing the six artifacts for themselves, either to use them, or simply to prevent Equestria from having access to such a powerful weapon. That's probably why Felyawn was willing to pay Average Accountant for even one of the Elements, with a bonus beyond the first.

Although, now knowing the supposed importance of these Elements of Harmony, the griffin's offered price was ridiculously low.

It all made sense now, the piece of the puzzle that fitted everything together. The conspiracy and plot was laid bare before Prey's eyes.

So that only left one question, the same one which Felyawn had hired that prattling pony Dandelion to ask; Would Lemon Pink, and therefore Prey, steal the Elements of Harmony for him?

Prey snorted, "Hell no."

How stupid could you get? Walk into an obvious trap to steal an obvious fake and obviously get betrayed by Felyawn at the end of it? But worse than all that, which Prey knew he could work around or double cross in return, doing so posed the terrible risk of drawing the Sun Wolf's attention. Not just hell no, but hell the bucking Zoma'Grika tartarus no.

But... that didn't mean Felyawn would stop trying to nab these Elements of Harmony, if he couldn't hire Average Accountant, he'd obviously try again with someone else.

It *also* didn't change the fact that Crimson, currently sick, was still stuck in Griffonia with Gloom and the other six Night Guards, trying to secretly arrest and abduct Hafflow back to Equestria to stand trial before Luna. If Prey presented evidence that Felyawn was the griffin who'd given Hafflow his orders and was also the one really behind this whole gemstone spying debacle, then maybe, *maybe*, Luna would recall them.

Probably not though. Luna was an alicorn, and used to having everything go her own way. Why just have Felyawn when she could have him and Hafflow to terrify and lord over?

But maybe Prey could still engineer some sort of situation?

"I need to think over this carefully some more." Prey decided, frowning down at the dark water rushing by in the exposed floor pipes.

Things looked simple, and while Prey could choose to follow the simple solution and just stay far away from Felyawn's crazy plan, there were also possibly complicated factors to consider.

He could probably work out some way to expose Felyawn while in his capacity as Prey of the ISND, without having to do anything suspicious. What with how Hafflow had been an ambassadorial aide, Prey could easily get away with simply pretending he'd thought the actual griffin ambassador himself was also a bit suspicious.

But was it the most advantageous course of action out of all of them to take...?

"I think..." Prey mused, letting each individual word out slowly as he considered it, "It might do to accept this job after all, so as to meet the ambassador. Felyawn will have the answer to a lot of questions."

Lemon blinked in the silvery glow light, "You do not mean to try and attempt to steal the Elements of Harmony though. Is that correct, Prey?" She checked.

"Oh no, no chance of that. We're going no where near anything that has something to do with Celestia. But the griffins don't know that, so we can safety risk meeting them at least once without committing to anything... hmm, yes. I just want to see what Felyawn has stored inside his head. I want to be there for the meeting, when you go in disguised as Average Accountant."

Prey nodded to himself, "Yes, one meeting with Felyawn, take his

memories, then leave. That sounds like a viable plan."

"Yes, Prey. I will drop off a letter to that effect at the given address, shall I?"

"Might as well. The sooner the better really if it might mean Crimson gets back from Griffonstone sooner. Once he's better too, of course."

Prey had sent out the medicine package to Crimson by express courier. It would've arrived by now, and Prey was confident it would fix Crimson up. He worried though, about the answers Crimson may come looking for once he got back. But what was done was done. Prey would face Crimson and answer his questions then, if Crimson decided he wanted to know the answers.

On the way trekking back up out of the sewers, Prey briefly wondered, as he did sometimes when not worried for his own life or for Crimson's, and an introspective mood took him, about how the deer holt were doing? Fallen Leaf, Happy, and the others. Whether they were all still alive? If they'd found somewhere else safe?

The deer hadn't tried to foolishly fight the Reaper King. In the face of the warlock, they'd taken the sensible option and slipped quietly away. Prey wished he'd been able to do the smart thing and copy them.

He mostly wondered about them because, in a lot of ways, that deer holt had possessed what Prey someday wanted to achieve for himself.

Independence from anything Equestria, beyond the selfish reach of alicorns, without hidden enemies in the shadows, but with everything upfront. Freedom to survive on his own merits and his own merits alone.

Nature was harsh, but it never lied to you. It never tried to trick you. There was no theft, no magical shenanigans, no greedy

landlords or arrogant nobles. Nature didn't care. It was honest like that.

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Author's Notes:

The editor for this latest chapter was Panem et Circenses. Much thanks and praise there! (Trust me, it was alot of editing this time around.)

Also, I would appreciate a moment to those who have previously helped with both editing the chapters, and also just taking the time to point out typos and mistakes. Thank you.

Also, greenface made a picture Here for those who would like to see it!

77.5 A Bird in the Bush is Worth Two per Bit

Extract from the autobiography of Triton Fell - 'The Duty of a Noble'

A pony is born no higher nor lower than to the station in life they deserve. From there, it is up to that pony to either improve, or fail on their own merits alone. Those chosen few of us who were preordained before birth to be nobles, I believe, were hoof picked by Harmony. In one form or another throughout my life, I have heard through many different sources the oft repeated belief; "All ponies are equal under Celestia."

That is an untruth. One the common pony chooses to believe, that they may be equal to their betters. A comforting delusion, but a lie nonetheless. I can well understand why they might want to believe so, and I can sympathise, but I do not agree. It was my father who enlightened me to the undeniable truth when I was a young colt, nine years of age. I remember it well, and his lesson has stuck in my recollection clearly to this day.

I had been called to his grand study by the maid; Gertrude was her name, a good earth pony servant for many a year of service. She bowed and left, and I cheerfully greeted my father, unawares that anything was wrong.

"Son," He addressed me, "I have been told you have been playing with the servant's colts after your lessons."

"Yes, that is right." I answered clearly as I had been taught.

"That is beneath you. You will never do so again."

I believe I was quite stumped at the time as to his reasoning why, so he further explained it to me:

"You are better than them. You are a unicorn noble, it is your duty to live as such."

I was flabbergasted, never had I truly considered myself better than them because of my station in life. Merely that I was the son of the pony employing their parents, but not because of who I was. "But, they're just colts like me. What's wrong with that?"

My father made it utterly clear to me. "It is wrong because you are better than them. You are my son, and you are a Fell of House Fell. In every single way you are better than them. And because of this, you must live up to it."

I still didn't yet understand it, so my father had to explain in detail:

"You are a noble. Wealth, fame, and power are yours. They are your birthright. And you must live so as to be worthy of that birthright your whole life. You are taught by the best tutors in Equestria. Where a common earth pony foal may be satisfied with their achievements, you must never be. You have the advantage of all of them. You are better, and you must live better so that they may know it. Every task your hoof is set to, you must ensure succeeds, because anything less is unworthy of a noble. You are better, so you must live better."

"Happy Loaf, he said his mother said that everypony is equal. But that isn't true?"

"Happy Loaf, that is Gertrude's foal? Yes. The servants have told me what you talked about during your times of play. His mother will not be returning here for work tomorrow."

"But, father, that's-"

"Unfair. He might just be a play mate, one who has forgotten his station in life, but she should have taught him better. His mother will be moved to serve at one of our lesser estates. But this is the lesson I am teaching you. Triton Fell, the foals of servants are not your peers, and they never will be. Do not look for any there. You and Happy Loaf are both from different circles of life, ones that will never touch. You above, him beneath. It can be lonely, but that is the price of our birthright, son. We are nobles. We are better than every common pony. It is our duty to live the truth of this."

I am thankful to my father that he impressed upon me the truth of that lesson at a young age, before I could be tricked into believing the lie. Throughout my life, I have only had reinforced to me how right he was.

I have never settled for less, I have never let anypony convince me that I might settle for second best, and I have never let myself dull and inadvertently disgrace my birthright and House.

This is the duty of a noble.

-Extract End

Prey sighed, slumped over on the ISND's desk between stacked files and scrolls. He idly rolled a pencil back and forth between his outstretched hooves in the lamp light.

One night, Prey would eventually get around to improving on the gloomy light level to something not just that bit too low for anyone not blessed with night vision.

Right now, Prey was trying to think. He was alone in the office, and had already completed enough paperwork tonight to reasonably qualify as a 'full shift of work' in case anyone decided to look in on him. You had to be smart about skiving off.

Specifically, Prey was considering whether or not to go through with pretending to take the griffin ambassador's crazy contract to steal the Elements of Harmony, or whether to back out and sever all contact. Previously, he'd decided to have Lemon Pink continue to play the ruse of being the enigmatic thief, Average Accountant, just so as to uncover more information from Felyawn, but now...

Prey was not blind to the dangers, both known and unknown, such a course of action risked. Prey *thought* he had the upper hoof, but he also knew underestimating an enemy got you killed.

clic-clic-clic-clic-clic Went the pencil across the desk top as it rolled from left to right.

'To go, or not to go. That is the question.'

Right to left, *clic-clic-clic-clic-clic*

In theory there was nothing to lose by going so long as he was careful, went in disguise, met in a public area of his choosing, and had Lemon disguised as Average Accountant doing all the talking. That was probably/hopefully/maybe enough paranoia to keep him safe.

*clic-clic-clic-clic-*Clak** The pencil went off course and fell off the desk before Prey could catch it. Prey groaned, flailed his hooves for a few seconds at the world for doing this to him, then got down off the stool to pick it up.

'In theory, I should go. The risk to myself is low, and there is the potential to either discover a bit more about the trap Celestia has set with these supposed Elements of Harmony. Or even better, find some way to incriminate Felyawn and get him arrested, so that Crimson and the others can come back from Griffonstone.'

Prey climbed back up onto the stool and resumed listlessly rolling the pencil back and forth. *clic-clic-clic-clic-clic*

The thing was, Prey well remembered how badly he'd screwed up with the Sol thieves. He'd been beaten, scared, held hostage by filthy unicorn magic, and should've died. Going into that fight, Prey had been sure his null-zone trap would be more than enough to win. 'And look how that turned out.'

Everything has a cost, losing highest of all. Prey remembered the pain and fear. He *hated* pain and fear. But this time shouldn't turn out like that.

'Perhaps I should take a step back, and get some perspective.' Prey thought to himself.

Why didn't he want to attend the meeting? Because he was afraid something unforeseen would go horribly and out of proportionally wrong.

Did he have a reason to suspect something would happen? No, just his healthy paranoia.

What did he lose by changing his mind and cutting all contact with Felyawn? The chance to indirectly help Crimson and get him back home sooner. No, not home, never home, but back here to Canterlot at least.

Garrow's remnant floated out of the depths of his inner mindscape and decided to have its' say; 'A hunter haz' hiz' pride, yez'? But a predator does not hunt the strongest, they hunt the weakest, yez'? Easy prey iz' best prey.'

'Oh shut up already. I don't need obscure useless advice from a dead griffin.' Prey thought in frustration, snatching Garrow's remnant in a grip of iron and shoving it back down to drown. And how was any of that supposed to help anyways? Because it didn't. It was obvious knowledge and reiterating it did nothing. Well, nothing apart from annoy Prey.

'You're dead Garrow. Stay that way.' Prey thought, scowling at nothing.

Putting aside the frustrating griffin, (who Prey was very glad was dead, because despite his remnant now being stuck in Prey's head, that griffin had been a complete monster), Prey had a different griffin to decide if he wanted to meet or not. Prey knew griffins. He didn't know the individual Felyawn, but he still knew griffins as a whole well enough to make some generalisations and predictions about the ambassador.

As a rough rule, griffins were rather a proud species. They generally disliked weakness, and most of them privately held a strong dislike of Equestria. They didn't necessarily include all people in their disdain, and indeed not even every pony, just those they hadn't met and didn't personally know. This dislike had a little to do with griffins being predators, and while that still was a minor influence, it mostly came from centuries of tradition and differences between cultures.

That said, Griffonia was a cold place, some would even use the label harsh, especially the High Kingdom which was the furthest north. Living in such a land, that couldn't help but affect a people.

Broken down to its simplest, in Equestria you could live. In Griffonia, could be a thin line between 'living' and simply 'surviving', a line the average griffin see-sawed back and forth across frequently. Money, land, shelter, family, power, food, all were things that a griffin needed to keep one eye on at all times.

So for that reason, Prey didn't believe Felyawn was likely to be some pushover. Arrogant, probably, but to be an ambassador, certainly not weak willed. Whatever his plan was by trying to go after the Elements of Harmony, he was obviously committed and prepared to take risks if necessary. Perhaps Felyawn was even willing to bet his life, not just his position as the ambassador? If so, Felyawn was a dangerous person. Prey wouldn't know the full extent unless he met the griffin. With Lemon Pink as a proxy, of course.

clic-clic-clic-clic-Clak The pencil fell off the desk again. Prey sighed, letting his head drop.

'Okay, I've decided. I'm going to the meeting.'

Except, as Prey was making his way back through the streets of early morning Canterlot as his interminable night shift ended, he got that feeling again. The feeling that he was being followed.

Perhaps he'd imagined it yesterday, and it was possible that he was still imagining it today. But twice in a row was pushing the willing suspension of disbelief Prey was prepared to extend. He kept walking without changing his pace or path, not giving himself away.

The feeling of possibly being followed was not pleasant. His stomach squirmed. 'Who could it be?'

The most likely candidate was that idiot Strange Happenstance. Screech had warned him the private detective was skulking about Canterlot, trying to interrogate Night Guards. But it could be the mimics, although so far they had been very careful to keep their distance. Another possibility, although unlikely, was a survivor

from the Brotherhoof of Sol, those fanatical sun worshiping thieves with delusions of grandeur. Or a fourth, unknown faction.

The point was, Prey had enemies. Some of them worrying and suspicious, and others outright dangerous. Again, underestimating an opponent was a quick way to die. When your life might be on the line, you can't afford to give it anything but your all. The lion does not hold back when it hunts, and neither does its prey.

Prey saw early morning ponies out on the white streets or up in the sky, some of the ground based ones walking dogs, but he couldn't see any which were watching him. Certainly no obvious stalker peering out from behind lamp posts or those manicured street trees lining the pavement.

'Zoma'Grika.'

Was this going to be a regular thing every single day? Were whoever it was really going to have him watched or followed until they got whatever it was they wanted?

Because Prey wasn't going to stand for that. He was *Prey*. He did not forget nor forgive. If some new player had stumbled into this game and thought themselves a genius or some chess master, they were not going to live to learn from their mistake. Prey played for keeps. There could only ever be one winner, and sometimes not even one. Survival was not guaranteed, so you had to fight all the harder for it.

'First, get away unseen. Then, get Lemon to be ready and waiting next time I leave work. She'll follow me and see who else is also following me. Failing that, I'll lure them into a trap. If they're looking to kidnap or attack me, then they'll do so when I'm alone. A perfect opportunity to bait them into my own ambush. However if they're just here to keep an eye on me from a distance, then it'll be a lot harder to catch them.' Prey thought.

'But now, right now, I can't go straight back to my flat. *Again*. I need to take another detour and slip away. Can't let them think I have a predictable schedule.'

He'd caught on to being watched earlier today, so he wasn't as close to his flat as yesterday, and had more optional destinations to choose from. Tomorrow, Prey decided, he wouldn't even leave through the Guard Compound but the front gate. Prey calmly walked down the street as if going towards the apartment block, and then for no rhyme or reason, took the next intersection right and began trotting into the outskirts of Upper Canterlot as if he hadn't a care in the world. Let his follower make something of that.

...Except after ten minutes, Prey could no longer tell if he was being followed. The 'watched' feeling was sort of gone, but a feeling was hardly an accurate measurement to start with.

Maybe he was still being followed, or maybe he wasn't. It was even possible he was imagining it in the first place.

'Or maybe they're watching from a stationary position and I've left their field of view. Or any number of other explanations. Damn it, there's just no way to tell.' Prey fretted.

Nevertheless, Prey continued on as if he was certain of still being watched, progressing further into the white marble and ornate houses of Upper Canterlot. The stores here were progressively more upmarket too, with posh bakeries and bespoke tailoring. Still though, everyone needs to eat. Even the rich tables were laid with food which came from grocery stores, it wasn't all just cheese and wine.

At the first shop he found open at this time in the morning, (which had candy jars on display in the window), he ducked inside.

It took less than a minute for Prey to remember why he despised Upper Canterlot in particular as the two store workers, probably having literally opened up less than ten minutes ago, were first gobsmacked at seeing a non-pony, and then treated him like an extra dumb child since he wasn't a pony foal, while still cooing over him being a pretty filly who; "used big grown up words". With the scarring under his eyes mostly covered up by overlapping fur, he didn't even have that deterrent to forestall their ridiculousness.

At this stage, unless someone looked closely or he stared them in

the face, they wouldn't notice the old poison burns unless they were observant. These two were ponies. Conclusion? They weren't observant.

Prey still got a small paper brown bag of blackberry bites, a type of candy he hadn't tried yet, before he left the shop.

The secret meeting with Dandelion's not-so-secret employer Felyawn was set for a private restaurant venue, just two blocks away from the Griffonian embassy.

Lemon Pink, in the blue furred, white maned guise of Average Accountant, was to secretly enter through the backdoor and to sneak into the reserved dining room where the ambassador would be waiting. It was probably a small test on the ambassador's part.

If she couldn't even sneak past the restaurant staff, then she wasn't much good as a thief.

Of course though, Prey was along for the ride when Lemon pushed open the door, and slipped inside the private dining room.

The room wasn't overly large, but the table was on a raised half of the floor to give the diners a sense of subtle self-importance, and being on the first floor meant you could look down from the large windows onto the street below.

It was the griffin lounging at the table who was the center of the room, however.

He was a decently large member of his species, his head plumage a brilliant white, and his lion half a tawny gold. Not brown, gold. His talons holding the soup spoon were gleamingly sharp, and he wore a doublet bearing the stitched flag of Griffonia, but it was Felyawn's eyes that really banished any doubt that this griffin was anything less than important.

They were not yellow, as almost all griffins were, but a cold, almost freezing blue, and they stared with an unblinking, piercing intensity. The twin icy orbs stayed fixed on Lemon as Felyawn

brought up the soup spoon and sipped. But for all their piercing intensity, they couldn't spot Prey, hidden unseen beneath an illusionary veil and sticking close to Lemon's rear hooves.

Lemon Pink did not have a lot of magical power. She had an affinity for mind and illusion magic, but not much else going for her. Illusions were vastly more focus and mana intense than silencing bubbles or light spells, so actively maintaining even one full scale illusion, (either the disguise on herself or the pseudo invisibility on Prey), was pretty much the limit of what Lemon could manage for any extended length of time.

So she was only maintaining one illusion spell. The small pocket of space behind Lemon where Prey was being veiled was part of the first spell. And it was a good thing runes were so useful and versatile, too. The electrite choker Lemon now always wore was no small boost to her limited spell casting abilities.

Runes might be the answer to everything, but *only* so long as you had enough time to set them up, enough space to inscribe them, and the right knowledge. So, not really the answer to everything, but one possible answer to everything. Not the simplest one either, but once you used runes, the answer you got was usually quite final and permanent.

The illusion spell still wasn't ideal, and was a substantial tax on Lemon's strength. But a secret meeting wasn't the type destined to drag on, and so long as Prey stuck close behind her in the area of effect, stepped lightly and stayed quiet, he'd remain invisible throughout the coming proceedings. And griffins relied on scent even less than ponies, so that wasn't worry either.

Felyawn dipped his soup spoon again, not breaking eye contact with Lemon's disguise for a moment. "Have the other seat, please. It is much easier to talk when both parties are seated."

The golden griffin's voice was unaccented, without the thick Griffonian twang. No doubt he'd trained it out as an ambassador, not easy with a beak.

Lemon Pink, or Average Accountant as her disguise was, strode

confidently over to take the seat opposite Felyawn, not pausing or giving any sign of hesitation which might be interpreted as indecisiveness, as previously discussed. Nor did she break the griffin's freezing gaze as a lesser pony would've.

It also meant that while maintaining the eye contact, there was no chance for Felyawn to possibly spot any disturbance Prey might've created as he slipped along behind Lemon and hid below the table top level.

"You've got my interest," Lemon said, speaking through the Average Accountant façade, "Enough for me to come today anyway. If I lose interest, I'm gone. So convince me, what do you want stolen and why should I steal it for you?"

Unhurriedly, Felyawn drank his spoonful of soup, not letting her control the pace of this conversation. He dipped his spoon again, "We will get to what I want in a moment. If this is to be a partnership though, I must first know what you want to get out of this as well."

Standing right there pressed up to the table, Prey was close enough to hear the golden lion hybrid's thoughts, '-<a good start, I can work with this and her. Do not think it will come down to beak and claws. I'll signal Shrike's>-'

Equestrian flowed so smoothly from Felywan's beak, that it was a minor surprise to hear that his thoughts ran in Griffonian just as smoothly counter to that. Not that the Griffonian posed a problem to Prey. He'd known the language even back before he'd absorbed Garrow's mind. Snake really had been a well read, vicious old bastard.

Felyawn casually reached for the pepper shaker, and after briefly seasoning his soup, placed it back on the table on his left, but not the right hoof side from where he'd picked it up.

A signal, and Felyawn's thoughts confirmed it to Prey. It seemed the griffin ambassador wasn't as careless as Dandelion had been. He'd come with backup. They were obviously watching the room right now. Well that made Prey's first plan to take the easiest route of

simply stunning and memory trawling through the ambassador's mind a lot harder.

Under the illusionary veil, Prey looked around the room again. He was confident they were alone in here, which left either someone posted outside looking in through the window, or someone in the adjoining room looking through a peephole. Prey's eyes flicked over the plank panelling of the wall, but there were too many cracks and joins which might disguise a tiny hole for him to pick any definite ones out.

Honestly, Prey had expected the ambassador to bring backup in the first place anyway, so it didn't change much. While Felyawn was unquestionably a fool for his insane theft target, he'd stayed undetected until now so he was far from incompetent.

Lemon was taking her time in answering, giving Prey time to think and listen in on Felyawn's opening thoughts.

'Seems the best choice here is just to play along, act reluctant, and let him reveal his hoof in the hopes of convincing Average Accountant to take the job.' Prey quickly judged.

Lemon could, of course, see Prey just fine, him being inside the bounds of her illusion. So when he signalled with one of his pre-appointed signs on what to say, she saw it clearly.

"What I want is first safety, then gold, in that order. Money is of no use if you aren't free to spend it. If I know I can pull off a job, then it is worth it. If I'm not certain of success, then it isn't worth it, plain and simple. That's what I want, and unless you can convince me you can provide both, I'm not taking this job which you still haven't told me about." She said, answering Felyawn's original question.

"A good commitment to know your limits." Felyawn agreed, although his piercing ice blue eyes still had yet to stray from Lemon's face.

Really, those eyes were the griffin's most prominent feature. He was a bird lion, with powerful wings, claws, and beak, but always you came back to his piercing blue eyes which seemed like they could

rivet steel.

Felyawn continued, slowly stirring his soup spoon in the bowl, "That said, you still have your pride. Why else leave a calling card behind? 'A.A.'? Money, safety, this is something everypony wants."

He smoothly used the word 'everypony' there, despite not being a pony himself. A normal pony wouldn't even have noticed either, merely accepting it as the correct terminology.

"But that is not enough for you. You are not a normal pony. Secretly, you also want the challenge. You have the drive to succeed, to go further, to prove yourself. Would you say I am wrong?" Felyawn asked, staring deep into Average Accountant's eyes.

Prey quickly signed that Lemon should say; 'yes'.

Lemon paused, then briefly nodded, "You're mostly right. Not all, but some."

'-<pha! More than some. I know when I am correct, but you are a pony and you have your pride. It's that same pride which will lead you to accept>-', Felyawn thought, but not a flicker of his inner thoughts showing on his feathered face.

"I can offer you what you want; safety, gold, and also a challenge. If you succeed, leave your calling card. Or do not. It doesn't matter to me if you lay claim to your feats. All I care for are the objects themselves. Provided, of course, you can deliver."

That last part was blatantly chosen to incite Average Accountant. It was an open challenge, '-<leave your foolish card behind, and take the fall for your pride if you dare>-'

Lemon played along, flaring the illusion's nostrils and briefly narrowing its eyes before 'regaining' control of herself again. "I'll be the judge of that. Now tell me, what are you after?"

Felyawn studied her with those piercing eyes for a long moment, considering if he had adequately baited the thief before him, or if he should build up the reveal a bit more first. He decided he'd done

enough and just bluntly stated:

"The Elements of Harmony. Just one of the six artifacts is enough, but the more of them you can retrieve, the better."

Lemon Pink and Prey had already known this, but played it as if they hadn't. Average Accountant shifted in surprise, then was silent for a long minute.

Felyawn waited unruffled, calmly continuing to drink his soup one spoonful at a time. Internally though, he was hyper focused on observing Average Accountant's every little twitch to try and gauge how well his declaration was being received.

'-<I know I've picked well, but there is always room for error. What will it come down to?>-'

Prey signalled it was time to move on when he judged enough time had passed to pretend to think it over; "The Elements of Harmony..." Average Accountant slowly repeated, "And why, pray tell, do you want to steal them?"

"Does it matter?" Felyawn instantly returned.

"Yes," Lemon bluntly stated, "First, the Elements of Harmony defeated Nightmare Moon and saved the world. Why would I dismantle a defence that protects this whole nation, of which I am part? Second, these Elements will be carefully guarded and protected. And third, I don't know what you might know, but there is little *I* know about these Elements beyond what everypony does. A lack of knowledge is dangerous, and I will not risk going in blind."

"Those are good points, worthy of a master thief and any smart individual has at least a hint of self preservation." Felyawn falsely praised, nodding his white crested head as if he agreed with all those points.

"But they are not as closely guarded as you might think. In fact, there are no obvious outward defences, such as guards, at all-"

"-That just means the defences are hidden, and most likely magical."

Lemon interrupted.

"-That much is obvious, yes. Such artifacts cannot be left as unattended as they appear. Which is precisely why I have reached out and extended this offer to you. A skilled unicorn thief should be capable of getting past these wards." Felyawn said, outwardly suppressing his ire at being rudely interrupted.

'-<it is regrettable to have to bring in a pony into this at all, but this task is too important and time is growing short>-'

The ambassador briefly clacked his beak, "As to where they are, these Elements are being stored in the town of Ponyville. If the name is not familiar, it is not far from Canterlot by train and will be simple to reach. There are six Elements, I have obtained drawings, and these six artifacts are being held together in the Ponyville library."

Prey and Lemon both blinked almost in sync. They were just stored... at a random small time civilian library? All six gems, and not split up? No wait, this was obviously part of the bait for the trap. Still though, Average Accountant would be expected to point this out.

"All six Elements are simply kept in the same library? That seems unlikely."

"One of them, or all six of them, it doesn't matter to me," Felyawn shrugged, "If I can get just one, I will still take that as a success. You will be paid well either way."

"From what you've said all six artifacts are needed in tandem to use. Why would you only settle for one? What use is that to you? And you haven't satisfied me such thatI should hoof such a weapon over to you anyway."

"Make no mistake, if you don't take this job, another will. It is merely a matter of whom." Felyawn stated with complete confidence, "You are the best candidate, and I assumed you would want to make your mark, but there is nothing forcing you to be the one to do it."

'-<will be regrettable, but if she says no, the contingencies are still in place and she won't speak>-'

Prey jerked his head and signalled, telling Lemon to play along for now. Average Accountant's image lent back, looking down her nose at the griffin opposite, "True. But what use is it to you? I'm not a fool, I want to hear what Griffonia wants with control over the Elements of Harmony first."

"My nation is not taking action," Felyawn immediately denied, "This meeting between us is my own doing. It is one of the reasons we have met alone and during my lunch hour."

False. They weren't alone, and Prey could read minds.

'-<if I must be disavowed, then so be it. This is more important than one griffin or even many. This is as important as them all>-'

'Zoma'Grika, this is being backed by Griffonia as a nation.' Prey finally had his confirmation, and it wasn't the one he wanted to hear. This right here, this had the potential if things went wrong, and they *would* go wrong, to escalate out of all proportion and end in the possibility of war.

War. *War*. Terrible awful destructive hateful terrifying disgusting evil devastating war. Prey knew war. He'd fought in the Resistance, spited the Border Guard, and survived the Deeper Green. The chances of war occuring were small, but where there was even a hint of a possibility, Prey couldn't ignore it.

He wanted nothing to do with any war, even if for no other reason than he was enslaved into the service of the Night Guard. If this whole thing ended up escalating into war, no matter how small the chance actually was, he himself might somehow end up being forced to fight in it.

Felyawn wasn't a fool, the ambassador knew of the possibility too, which was why he was flatly denying Griffonia was involved with his actions. But if he was caught, (and Prey was keenly aware of Crimson and Gloom's mission over in Griffonstone right now), then the truth of him acting with Griffonia's backing would likely come

out anyway.

Horrible memories danced through Prey's head. Blood and gristle, Bone Rot and shallow graves, screaming, begging, crying, and murder.

Prey did not want war.

'This is too big, too huge. So much about this can go horribly wrong if it gets out.'

Prey couldn't let this get out. But he couldn't stop it either, it was already too late. The ISND were already after Hafflow, and Luna knew enough.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it all.'

Prey tried to take a deep breath. He was probably overreacting. This couldn't lead to war, surely not. Level minds would prevail long before it got that far, Prey was ninety-nine percent sure. But where there was even a hint of war...

Prey looked at Felyawn and decided the griffin was probably going to have to die. He wasn't sure when or how yet, but if the ambassador died while undertaking this off the books mission, Griffonia would surely be much more reluctant to raise a fuss. After all, a severed link in the chain would provide them plausible deniability, even if it came at the cost of their ambassador's life.

Or they might just lash out instead. However on the flip side, because Griffonia believed the Elements of Harmony were real magical super weapons, and not bluffs like Prey did, if they didn't succeed in securing them, then it might induce them to be a bit more cautious and submissive in accepting their ambassador's tragic demise.

Make no mistake, Prey wasn't doing something as large and as grand as preventing a war. There had been disputes in the past with Griffonia just as scandalous and serious which hadn't escalated into war either. History was full of events which had been swept under the rug. Prey hadn't been around for those, but he *was* here for this

one.

Felyawn had kept his silence, waiting as Lemon and Prey sat and thought, although if he knew exactly what Prey's mind was racing with he wouldn't have been so content to sit patiently there.

"So you are acting all on your own?" Lemon clarified.

Felyawn made a cutting motion with his free claw in the negative, "No. I and a small clawful of my fellow griffins who believe the same as me are in on this. However for everypony's safety, you will converse with me."

'-<she would have to be a fool to believe me if I said it was only I>-'

"They also believe in what, exactly?" Lemon repeated, "What makes them think these Elements of Harmony should belong to you? And why should I betray my country?"

"You are not betraying your country. You are helping the world." Felyawn stated with ringing conviction, ice blue eyes boring into Lemon's disguise, "You will be helping save everypony and everyone."

Somehow, some subtle insight the ambassador had gained had keyed the griffin in on the fact that the definition everypony over everyone annoyed Lemon, even disguised. A reminder that even in the face of being deceived, the griffin was still very sharp.

"Yes," Felyawn continued, rising to his topic, "This is larger than one country, it's larger than Equestria. You say your own safety comes first? I ask you this then; what do you know of Nightmare Moon?"

It was rhetorical, because the griffin kept right on going, "Nightmare Moon, now Princess Luna, and the twin ruler of this nation. A mad demoness defeated in her insane quest to plunge the world into endless night like in some storybook. But do you have any idea how close it was? Do you comprehend how present the danger actually was? It came down to the wire. A flip of a coin is putting it too lightly. And if that foul demoness had won? Death!

All of us! Dead! If not immediately, then within a month when the whole entire world froze or boiled because of her madness!"

Felyawn's clenched talon smashed down on the table, soup slopping from the bowl, for a moment the ambassador's steely composure gone.

Felyawn breathed in deeply, ice flecks of eyes drilling into Lemon again, "There were centuries to prepare for the Nightmare's return, whole centuries! We could have prepared, assembled a coalition army, Princess Celestia herself has admitted she knew of her sister's return that far in advance. Her Majesty could've reached out to Griffonia, to the other nations, to any one of us! But she did not. Did we not have a right to defend our lives? Nightmare Moon threatened to murder us all, down to the last unhatched egg, frozen in their nests."

"*Princess*," The title dripped from Felyawn's beak, for a moment all his carefully polite control gone, "Celestia gambled every single life on the entire planet against her sister's. Yours, mine, this restaurant's staff, the ponies passing by outside, all of them for her sister. By her own admission, she put all of us in the hooves of six untrained strangers who had never even heard of the Elements before that night. There is no word in Griffonian, Equestrian, or any language I know of to describe her level of betrayal. In no way is the successful purging of the Nightmare an excuse. Not all is well that ends well."

'-<a tiny slip, a tiny mistake, they would all be gone. My brother, my sister, my parents, my love. Celestia is no ruler. She is a mad psychopath>-'

Everything Felyawn was saying, Prey agreed with, because the griffin was right. Celestia was a tyrant, although if Felyawn was to be believed, one who'd also risked the entire world by hoofing over the Elements of Harmony to six random mares at the last second and then rolling the dice.

That couldn't be.

'I don't believe it. It can't have been that close. The Sun Wolf

defeated Nightmare Moon herself, not these Element Bearers, and she must've had secret backup plans and schemes. She is callous, manipulative, cruel, selfish, but above all, powerful. Celestia would never gamble her kingdom like that. Right?'

Felyawn slowly unclenched his talons, sharp polished points restlessly picking at the wooden tabletop, "We are all alive by sheer dumb luck. For now. Princess Luna fell to the Nightmare and tried to destroy the world once. What is to prevent her, or the sun alicorn for that matter now that she's revealed her true character, from doing so again? Princess Celestia has imposed no checks, no watches, no restrictions on her younger sister despite our appeals and sanctions. She would have us sit idle and do nothing but blindly hope that they don't slip and destroy us all."

The griffin shook his white crested head, "No. Not now, not ever. That is unacceptable in every shape, form, and bit. My nation has asked to study the Elements of Harmony, to be entrusted with a spare set, the magical blueprints, anything. Celestia had refused, citing that these Elements are bound to their wielders and can not be claimed by another, and also that they were not made by her and thus cannot be replicated. We have every reason to believe that is a lie."

"Because?" Average Accountant asked intently.

"Because these six Elements apparently appeared out of nowhere. Celestia said they have always existed, but were lost to time and somehow only now appeared on the very night, indeed the very hour they were so desperately needed? That does not happen. Celestia created them herself or had them made in preparation, either or, it doesn't matter. But she refuses to allow any nation but her own to wield them, or make their own copies. It is the one proven method of saving the entire world, and yet she would keep us all powerless. So that is why you must help." Felyawn finished, having come full circle.

"Think of what I am saying; You would provide the world a way to save itself, and thereby also save yourself. If Equestria should fall, another nation might yet banish the Nightmare again and spare the world eternal night. Only one chance is not enough, we need

multiples, extras, redundancies. We are talking about global extinction. There is no such thing as too much preparation."

Despite all his conviction that the Elements of Harmony were a baited trap, Prey still felt doubt worming its way in. What if there was a chance Felyawn was right? The ambassador believed his own words without a shadow of a doubt, unless he was somehow a mind mage too, there was no way for him to trick Prey.

Prey knew Griffonia wasn't only doing this out of selflessness. Although right now their motivation might only be self preservation, in the future? A set of artifacts capable of defeating an alicorn? What nation wouldn't secretly want their own copy just in case?

"So," Felyawn asked quietly, "Will you accept this task, Average Accountant?"

Was Prey going to accept? Obviously, he was going to verbally accept right now and say 'Yes' just so that he and Lemon Pink could walk out of here unopposed, but that wasn't the question. The real question was; was that seed of doubt enough motivation for him to risk it? Possible war on the one hoof, an unconfirmed chance at stopping a theoretical mass extinction on the other hoof.

Would he really take Felyawn's offer?

Prey looked up at Lemon Pink from under the illusionary veil. She was looking back down at him, even if her head and ears remained facing forwards, her visible purple eye was uncertainly fixed on him. Prey knew how much she used to revere the Nightmare, and still had leftover echoes of her obsession with the night alicorn remaining. But now she'd listened to all this from the ambassador, what did it change for her? What facts did she need to rethink?

The decision was Prey's call though, and it always had been. He could feel the oh-so familiar weight of the golden tracers resting on his legs, but he also felt the weight of the silken ribbon behind his ear.

Prey jerked his head towards the waiting Felyawn. Lemon cleared

her throat, "I, of course, will accept. Let's see that information of yours."

"Excellent," Felyawn stated, pushing his dirty soup bowl aside, as if there had never been any doubt in his mind, "I have it with me here. The planning and execution of the theft is of course up to you as the expert. But it must be soon."

---I---

[[[Bonus Picture - New Night Guard Armour]]]

[image]

Author's Notes:

The editor for this chapter again was Panem et Circenses. Thanks a lot to him!

Bit of a shorter chapter, sorry for the delay in posting it too. I uh, I made a picture though...?

Also, GreatSpaceBeaver has made a quick picture of the griffin ambassador Felyawn, if anyone wanted to see what they drew HERE ☆ and Here

78.5 Happy to Help

Prey awoke that evening to back cramps.

It had been a while since one of these attacks had happened, making it *almost* expected in its overdue nature. After restlessly tossing and turning, and dreaming over the ice-eyed ambassador's warning, it wasn't even surprising.

That didn't make it any better, or any less agonising and humiliating. 'HateYouStingerHateYouHateYou.'

Prey lay tangled in his blanket, panting for a quiet minute after the wracking spasms passed.

These random attacks were just a factor in his life, an unpleasant and unavoidable part of reality. Sufferers all around the world afflicted with one permanent ailment or the other knew the feeling. The fatalistic, helpless frustration. Knowing that there was nothing you could do about it.

Then Prey groaned and got up, going over to the cupboard and pulling out something for an early breakfast. Dry bland oats, and a glass of water. No fudge cake or candy for breakfast. 'Unfortunate.'

Usually he ate whatever slop Cookie decided to serve in the mess hall, but he'd woken early today.

'Hate you *so* much Stinger.'

He went back and forth from the tap to the windowsill, watering his pot plants and herbs in between mouthfuls of oats. Chewing, he eyed the Blood Fern in the early afternoon light. Crimson had been stuck so long in Griffonstone, that it looked like he'd have to be the one to 'water' the Blood Fern with a few drops of its namesake soon.

'He'd better have gotten my package, and be getting better by now. Or else.' Prey thought threateningly to no one in particular.

But that was just a minor distraction to his deeper concerns. Namely, what to do, if anything, about Felyawn, and the griffin embassy as a whole. The ambassador was under the impression he'd swayed Average Accountant into undertaking the task because of his, admittedly very genuine seeming, concerns. It had even served to plant a seed of doubt in Prey's own mind. However Prey and Lemon were not bound in any way into actually upholding the agreement.

Prey absently scratched at the now no longer new fur which'd grown back as far as it was going to across his cheeks. It covered the poison scars as much as it would, and decided he may as well enjoy a nice shower while he thought.

Showers were amazing. Prey had and would maintain it as one of the only good invented inventions ponies had ever envisioned to invent.

But throughout the shower, standing under the hot stream and listening to the gurgle of water, Felyawn's planted seed of doubt still lay there. Dormant, but still present.

As the sun slowly began its descent, Prey was just walking through the Guard Compound's Entrance. Today, or rather tonight, he even happened to spy Honey Topaz on his way in, (that stupid mare who'd tried to pick him up and whom he'd rightly bitten in response), on her own way out.

Not that it was important to Prey, Topaz was a nobody to him now, but he still automatically took note. She'd apparently chosen to store her armour in her locker on site, and thus didn't have the white coat changing enchantment to disguise her, but Prey never forgot the face of someone who'd wronged him, yellow fur or white fur didn't matter.

'Foolish. That enchantment is specifically there to help you hide your identity outside of work. You may not think you have any enemies, but that doesn't mean you don't. Me, for instance.'

Prey slipped to the side, and Topaz didn't notice a thing as she trotted right past him. She was blithely chatting up a storm to a couple of her Royal Guard friends, none of them paying attention, just like typical ponies. Their shifts were over, so for what reason would they still need to be on guard? Prey contemptuously tossed his ear back at their blind inattention, and headed into the Lower Palace. Seriously, he'd been skulking right there. '*Ponies*.'

Felyawn may not even need the services of Average Accountant, the average pony was so unobservant. The ambassador could probably fly right into Ponyville himself, take the Elements of Harmony the griffins were so set on stealing, and fly right back out without getting caught. Well, maybe not Felyawn himself, ponies were unobservant but they were also xenophobic. But hiring any random pony pickpocket would probably have as good a chance at success as any.

On the topic of being unobservant, Prey hadn't yet noted his distant watcher tonight. So far, he'd only felt the feeling of eyes twice, and only when leaving work the following afternoon, after a full night and morning of work. And he could only hypothesise on why that was.

Did they somehow not yet know where he lived? Were they only interested in when he left the Palace, and not arrived? Something else? He'd have to see if they tried to track him again when he left here tomorrow.

'I don't know who you are, but this isn't a game I'm playing. If I catch you...'

Well, if he caught them, they'd probably never even know about it.

'It's looking more and more like it's Strange Happenstance, not the mimics, with how I seem to lose whomever they are so easily. Unless that's what they *want* me to think.'

Prey just couldn't know for sure. He added it to his growing pile of worries and doubts.

Prey was once again sitting on the slightly rickety stool behind the ISND's desk, a mess of papers in front of him, a lantern for light, and a quill in cleft hoof.

This was life. Another day at the grindstone. Out there somewhere, someone was having the best day of their life, and someone was also having the worst. Someone was right now giving birth, someone was laughing with friends, and someone else was eating a baked potato with extra strong melted blue cheese. The point was, there was life going on around the world, in all the corners of the land, completely independently of whatever work Prey did here today inside this very office.

There was nothing like some perspective to remind you how small you were in the grand scheme of things. And nothing like an alicorn to provide that perspective.

Luna, or Nightmare Moon, either or, cast such a long shadow that they eclipsed nearly all else. No pun intended. Prey still didn't know which he believed, that the night princess had been possessed by a demon, or whether she and Nightmare Moon were actually secretly one and the same.

Not that he could do anything about it either way, since she was in power with her hated sister, both of them immortal, and ruling the country. *That's* how big the issue was that Felyawn, and the Griffonian government he secretly represented, had raised. It was as large as countries, as nations, kings, queens, governments and entire generations.

Prey, with all his warring, fighting, and murdering to survive, was small. It was personal, and below the level of national notice. But Luna was an alicorn. One which had tried to freeze the world a thousand years ago, and had returned to try again a second time earlier this very year. That was big, it was huge, and it was known world wide.

And it seems Griffonia hadn't been anywhere as forgiving as Luna's dear sweet older sister. Griffonia was in the right. Luna had tried to murder them all. And yet here Luna was, sitting on the throne, back in power, and free from consequences. No one in Equestria seemed

to get it. To them, there hadn't really been a threat, because they didn't doubt for even a second that Princess Celestia would have saved them if it came down to that.

Griffonia didn't accept that. They weren't ruled by an alicorn, so where was their protection and insurance? Why were they being forced to stand back and let Luna get away with it? If she really was Nightmare Moon, and the demoness was actually just a facet of Luna's suppressed psyche, they had every right to protest and shout out.

Prey wondered how many other nations out there felt the same, but were helpless to do anything about it? The zebras, diamond dogs, Minotaurs, yaks, and the others? They too might have sent emissaries to Celestia, asking for more sets of the Elements of Harmony to be made much as the griffins had, only to be ignored just as completely.

Luna had tried to destroy the world not once, but twice, and she was now in a joint position of power. How could they *not* be worried?

That seed of doubt also sat in Prey's heart, because although he believed that the Sun Wolf would never have really sat back, hooves off, and gambled everything on six forgotten artifacts given to five strangers plus one devoted pupil, the griffins definitely believed it. And that was enough to at least make him think twice. It was impossible, of course, but still, what if?

It made you think.

'The ambassador is going to go after these Elements of Harmony either with the assistance of Average Accountant, or some other thief. The griffin was dead set, I saw that.' Prey recalled the information Felyawn had shared to the disguised Lemon Pink, and therefore also himself, while in that private restaurant booth.

The griffin ambassador had pulled out a brown packet of papers and spread them out on the table, tapping a gleaming talon on a sheet with six labelled sketches on it. The drawings had been of what the six Elements of Harmony were supposed to look like,

which turned out to be six ridiculously cut and shaped gems, five of them necklaces and one a crown for some reason. They each had the label of either laughter, honesty, generosity, kindness, loyalty, or magic attached. Next was a basic bio of the six supposed bearers of the artifacts names, which for some reason were all mares, and marked maps of the town Ponyville, apparently where the artifacts were being held.

It was all very suspicious and practically screamed; trap!

Prey had two questions before him. The first; to take the thief job or not? He could safely cut off all contact and disappear, and Felyawn would never be able to track him or Lemon down. The second question was; now that he knew who was really behind the spying in the gemstone trade as well as why, should he leak that information to the Night Guard? Gloom and Crimson were still stuck in Griffonstone going after that ambassadorial aide, Hafflow, after all.

And if he got it wrong, whichever he chose, Prey was very sure there could be horrible consequences. Nothing happens in a vacuum. The choice he made would have consequences one way or the other.

Prey restlessly twiddled the quill in his hoof, staring unseeingly at the half filled out form before him, 'What do I choose? I can't wait forever. Hafflow's expecting Average Accountant to make an attempt in the next few days, and wants to be kept updated. If I want to cut off all contact or inform on him, it needs to be soon. Tonight, or tomorrow at the latest.'

Prey didn't want to choose, because that would commit him to a path and facing possibly dire consequences, even if in the best case scenario it only ended up being indirectly. But he still needed to choose, and choose soon, or else lose the option to choose at all. He was going to start doubting and second guessing himself, and it was going to spiral downwards from there, he could feel it.

This was all too far above his head. A mad vengeful alicorn, both the Low and High Griffin kingdoms, protected Equestrian soil, and the potential for escalation into the dreadful possibility of war.

The feathery end of the quill carried on twirling just in front of Prey's nose, unable to settle.

'This is hopeless, I'm not getting anything done. I could be doing rune work at the least, but I'm just sitting here and can't decide-'

The runic array linked to the corridor outside of the office pinged, signalling movement coming closer. Prey quickly sat up and looked to the door, just as the person arrived. *Trat-Trat-trat*

"Who is it? Come in."

The door clicked open, and a tired looking thestral in armour leaned in, "Lieutenant Screech wants you." Then he was already gone, hurrying off to whatever his next task was.

'Because of course you couldn't tell me what this mystery task is before you disappear, can you? Well, *far* be it from me to keep the dear wonderful Lieutenant waiting on some all-important but unknown job.' Prey slotted the quill back into the inkwell and slipped off the stool.

Prey trooped through the Night Guard section of the Palace until he got to Nighthawk's office, where Screech was supposed to have been working in the Captain's stead. Unfortunately, tonight it seemed he wasn't. Obviously, the Lieutenant's new location had slipped the tired thestral messenger's mind. Prey gave the Captain's office a once over, just in case, since there was enough Night Guard paraphernalia in storage in there for someone to hide, but no, it was empty of the Lieutenant.

Wonderful. Now Prey had to find him. Just what he needed to start the night, a practice round of detective to get his hoof in before whatever it was Screech no doubt wanted him to do.

'Well, he sent for me, but he's not in his borrowed office, so the next most likely place is his actual Lieutenant's office.' So thinking, Prey turned himself back around and trotted off.

What had Screech distracted enough to make such a silly mistake?

It wasn't anything big, but maybe it was just a deeper indicator of how overworked the Lieutenant was becoming. He was filling in for the other two Lieutenants plus the Captain all by himself, after all.

And indeed, Screech certainly did have a harried edge about him when Prey successfully found him in, surprise-surprise, his old Lieutenant office. He looked up from digging through an open drawer stuffed with files, "Prey? Good, you're here. I need you to vet somepony."

'And a good evening to you too.' Prey thought. "Vet someone, sir?"

"Somepony. A former Royal Guard, who left about a year ago for personal reasons. Now he wants to return, and has specifically applied to the Night Guard because the night shifts apparently suit him better. I need you to vet him. I'm busy, and you've got the proper insight."

'Okay, in theory that isn't too much trouble. Officially against hoofbook protocol, I'm not an officer, but still not too much trouble.' Prey allowed, "I can do that. I'm assuming he has a file?"

"Yes, the records department should've pulled it already, you can pick it up. Read up on him, have a look, see if you think he can be trusted for a Private level entry into the Night Guard. Or if he can come but should be watched. This could easily be somepony trying to get an informer into our ranks." Screech said, shoving the drawer shut and pulling open the next.

'-got enough new recruits from the clans who've answered Luna's call. But we can't deny a genuine potential recruit. That is, if they really *are* genuine-'

Prey understood Screech's suspicion. Why would some Guard who'd been off for the last year want to return, and return into the Night Guard instead? On top of that, the timing was suspicious. There had only been two transfers over from the Royal Guard who'd wanted to stay in the Night Guard, those being Scenic and Lilly, (and look how well that had turned out). The rest had gleefully gone back to their normal duties in the Royal Guard as soon as the Night Guard had the bare minimum numbers necessary to operate with.

So Prey understood Screech's suspicion. That didn't mean he actually cared, but thanks to being a press-ganged convict, he had to pretend to care anyway. "Alright, I'll find the file and have a look at the why's and how's, sir."

"Thank you," Screech said, not finding whatever he was looking for in this desk drawer either, but he paused before moving onto the next. He looked meaningfully at Prey:

"Sargent Gloom and Crimson send their regards, and hope you are well. They said to tell you that Crimson is feeling much better too. And unrelated to that, but to the issue you know about, they predict they'll all soon be able to leave and return to Canterlot."

Prey let out his breath. 'So I was right and it did help Crimson if he's now better.' That was excellent news, the best Prey'd had all week actually. The disaster waiting to happen with Felyawn and Griffonia was soon going to come to a head, especially with what Screech had just said about them soon fulfilling their undercover mission and returning, but at least he knew Crimson wasn't strangely and dangerously ill anymore.

"That's... good news if they can pull it off, sir." Prey said neutrally. He didn't know what plan Nighthawk and the others had come up with to infiltrate the compound over in Griffonstone and grab Hafflow, but he did know how difficult the location was. The compound was situated right under the castle, with eyes from the garrison overseeing it at all times. The griffins could scramble a response in minutes, and like thestrals, they could also fly. Prey could only fervently hope that it was a good solid plan.

"I have faith in Captain Nighthawk. They'll pull it off." Screech told him confidently.

"Yes. I'll go get that file and start then. Unless there was anything else? Sir." Prey added, brushing a drooping ear back.

"No, go ahead. Drop a note in my in-tray with the outcome. Or find me if it's immediately important." Screech said, going back to searching the drawers.

'-really need to ask about that silly blue ribbon one day-', Screech thought in a moment of distraction, but then just like that, the thought slipped from his mind, '-come on, moon take it, I know the thing's in here somewhere-'

Prey left the thestral Lieutenant to it and trudged off in the direction of the Records Department to get this file. He had a feeling the clerks were going to be difficult about it.

Prey flicked through the stallion in question's old Royal Guard file, but really didn't see much of use. Things like medical history, name, age, next of kin, address, pony species, and uneventful service history weren't actually of any discernible worth to Prey. None of that told him whether the stallion was a plant or not.

'Let's see, a pegasus called Rising Star, age thirty-one, lives in Cloudsdale and commutes to Canterlot for work. Was in the Royal Guard for five years, nothing major in the notes, a few minor merits and demerits, attended boot camp, yadda yadda, blood type AB, put in papers for a discharge with reason stated as a family crisis, doesn't say what, was given a redundancy package anyways, blah blah blah. Nothing here about who this Rising Star really is. I bet his parents were so chuffed at their naming sense, too. Pretentious, or what?'

There was a small photo paperclipped to the top page, showing a golden yellow stallion, with a brilliant white spikey mane, a slightly cocky grin, and a confident gaze.

The question of whether Rising Star was trustworthy or not would best be answered by meeting the pegasus in person. Mind reading capabilities were so useful like that. Although this was just a minor distraction to Prey's much more important issue of Felyawn and the griffins, this check on Rising Star did present Prey with a slight question.

And that was, if the pegasus was trying to join the Night Guard for ulterior motives, and those motives were also well hidden, should he expose Rising Star or not? Prey was willing to bet that Screech

would take his word for it and block Rising Star if he just said so. After all, wasn't the rest of the ISND currently over in Griffonia chasing after a spy that Prey had uncovered? But that was only if Rising Star was obviously dodgy. If he hid it well, should Prey just let him join up anyways?

Although it may be a bit late, again because of the uncovering Hafflow thing, perhaps he shouldn't appear *too* competent in sniffing out secrets. It might make some people nervous.

It would be normal for him by this point to make at least one mistake. Or just appear unsure. Unless it was very obvious with Rising Star, he could just tell the Lieutenant; "I'm a bit suspicious, but I can't find anything wrong. I'm neither for nor against. It's up to you sir."

Prey could do either or. Both were options. Normally he would be worried about continuing to prove his usefulness to Luna, but this was just a small thing and wasn't actually in his purview. He could get away with it, and doing so might help curb the ridiculously mounting expectations Nighthawk and the others had of the ISND. But that would only happen when Rising Star slipped up and exposed himself, and who knew how long that would take? *If*, that is, he was guilty in the first place. It didn't do anything for the problem right now.

'I'm getting a bit ahead of myself. I haven't even interrogated, no, wrong word, *interviewed* the stallion yet. Who knows? He may even be clean.' Prey thought, giving the attached photo a last glance before flipping the file shut and tossing it to the side. He'd be dealing with Rising tomorrow when the pegasus came in for his interrogation. Interview. Whichever.

But with that minor annoyance delayed, Prey couldn't help but return to thinking over the encounter with the ambassador yet again. It kept going round and around in the back of his head, that niggling doubt: What if Felyawn really was right?

And Prey still didn't know if he was going to agree to the theft attempt or not. Because the risks and dangers no matter which he chose were, well... Prey had been repeating them over and over

again in the hopes that it would persuade, (or even dissuade), himself.

Doubt is a powerful, insidious thing. It gets inside your heart, then into your head. You look away for a moment, and when you look back the doubts had either vanished, or grown from a squirming worm into a wurm.

'A wurm, a monster of stone and earth in the depths. Sizes varies, but all except the young can eat an equine whole, and have. A quarry eel, but worse in every fashion. Seemingly blind. Hunts by tremors, although no one knows for certain. Few wurms have ever been sighted. Or perhaps it's that few witnesses have survived to tell. The more deadly the monster, the shorter the story. You would not even be a mouthful to one.' Snake's remnant hissed out of nowhere.

'Oh for the love of all the dead, I don't need a running commentary! Will you just *leave me alone*!?' Prey brought his hoof down on the desk hard enough to make the quill in the inkwell rattle.

'Brilliant, now my hoof hurts. Great job, idiot.' Prey berated himself. He should know better by now that Snake's remnant never stayed banished for good.

He wished he had some method of doing so, but no. There weren't even any greater runes Prey knew of which would do it. None which he would risk, anyhow. And the mere thought of the agony carving runes on himself would inflict-

Prey shuddered convulsively, the reaction completely unfiltered. No. Just, just no. Prey hated pain so very much. Prey in theory had an array which would eliminate those cramp attacks across the whip scars which he so hated. But the level of pain that would involve, the sheer heights of it, no, Prey couldn't bring himself to face it. He'd rather suffer random cramp attacks for the rest of his life than suffer the soul deep pain of runes.

It's all very well for someone to say; "Buck up and do it, it's just pain, and once it's over you'll get to enjoy the permanent results." To anyone who said that, Prey would be happy to introduce them to

a manticore. Those people didn't know, they didn't have a single clue. No pain no gain is just a saying for working out, that's just a minor discomfort. Not all pain is the same. Some of its bad, and some of it is so much worse. And then some of it is just *more*.

When pain is so bad that you'll do anything to make it stop, to not endure even one second more of it, when there is literally nothing you wouldn't promise or sacrifice... that there is true pain. And it's horrible.

And Prey hate, hate, *hated* pain. Prey knew his own willpower, and he didn't lie to himself. He knew his resolve would break right before he began carving the first rune. Prey was not brave, he was realistic.

It would literally have to be a matter of life or death before Prey would be able to psyche himself up enough to willingly subject himself to that, and there would have to be no doubt in his head that those were the only two choices.

Real pain is not a joke or some sort of test. Pain is just pain. Something to be avoided, delayed, and hidden from at every opportunity.

'And there's no point dwelling on a pain that I'm not going to have to feel.' Prey thought, making a concerted effort to put it from his mind. Best not to think about it. He hated pain.

'Let's think about something *other* than pain,' Prey told himself, 'Something *useful*. Like whether to have Lemon take Felyawn's job offer, which I really need to make a decision on. Or about how Gloom and Crimson are apparently going to initiate their mission soon and have to run. Or fly, even. At least he's got my electrite feather. Or how about the progress the wickerwatch is making down in the sewers?'

The wickerwatch by this point was well established, and spread throughout eighty percent of the old sewers, those bits which flowed with water at least. The questing tendrils of the artificial plant avoided areas with light, so it wasn't likely to be found in an everyday inspection by maintenance ponies. Or if it was found,

hopefully it would just get written off as an odd weed. The wickerwatch could afford to lose stretches of itself to any periodic cleansing the maintenance crews might perform, just so long as they didn't realise the full massive extent of the wickerwatch's web.

It would have to be a brave maintenance crew, though.

The curse of paranoia and fear the wickerwatch had spread wherever it went was still down there, and there to stay. Fear of the dark is a very real and sensible thing, although most ponies seemed to have forgotten that lesson. Fools. It didn't have to be an entity from a Wolfing Wood, there were plenty of more mundane monsters and horrors out there. But ponies were "civilized", they didn't believe in a monster under the bed. At least, that is, until they got a personal reminder.

Venture down into the sewers for just another day on the job, but venture too deep, and it wouldn't be long before you were hurrying back towards daylight, casting repeated glances over your shoulder, telling yourself it's nothing, but at the same time you were right on the brink of breaking and flat out galloping for the ladder. Fear can be a powerful motivator.

The threat of a nameless and formless fear can be just as an effective defence as a solid and known one. If you knew what you were up against it let you make a plan, although sometimes knowing did you no good whatsoever. What would knowing you faced an adult dragon before the actual confrontation change? (Although Prey supposed it might change your decision to take the sensible option and just run away). But in most cases, an individual facing some unknown danger will greatly deter that individual from even trying, choosing instead to avoid it altogether.

But it was no longer a case of only one or the other in the sewers anymore. Now the wickerwatch also possessed a real physical threat as opposed to only a psychological one.

There wasn't really a way to allude to it or ease into it. The submerged tendrils of the wickerwatch now had what ponies would immediately identify as zombies. Or zomponies, since to them everything must be a reference to the species of their great nation

of Equestria. But unequivocally as a result of their scariest horror novels, which were banned to foals, they would scream; "Zompony!"

Prey huffed. Like he was going to create real undead, plague spreading zombies and leave them to roam free. The term undead was so misleading too. That implied the person whose body it was had returned to take up residence once again. Like a fabled lich. In most instances of zombieification, what actually happened was something took over the dead body and puppeteered it about, giving it the illusion of 'unlife'. Like a corpse crawler, or a skin walker, or dark magic animating the stiff muscles. Well, those bodies Prey had stolen out of the city morgue certainly weren't 'undead'. No hunger for the flesh of the living or mindless aggression, thank-you-very-much.

In all honesty, what Prey had made out of the four stolen corpses was much closer to a kindersnatch than even a misidentified zombie, although he could concede that they looked mighty similar. The difference between his work and the warlock Hard Baked's was that his worked from the inside out, as opposed to hijacking a body from the outside, and most importantly, the bodies he used were already dead, not tortured victims unable to die.

Prey hated pain, even if he wasn't the one suffering it, and he never tortured for the sake of torture.

But the point was, what Prey had weren't *actual* zombies.

What he had were extensions to the wickerwatch, quite literally extensions, the wickerwatch tendrils trailing out of these mobile corpses as they sightlessly wandered the dark, water carrying tunnels of the sewers. All those useless organs a dead body didn't require had been removed, like the stomach, heart, lungs, intestines, eyes, tongue, brain, liver, kidneys, etcetera. Really, these bodies could more or less be considered sock-puppets for the wickerwatch.

The thing was though, bodies were such damned useful templates. Prey knew so much about the body sans Snake's diabolic tutelage. There were nerves, tendons, and muscles far more complicated than any artificial puppet Prey could create which moved the body, if

not smoothly, then at least not jerkily like the scarecrow and reaper king had.

That, and the corpses he'd acquired had been unicorns during life. That changed things. They weren't like the villagers Hard Baked had used, as dismissive as that sounded. These had been unicorns. They'd been steeped in constant passive magic all of their lives, and what's more, had those mystic leylines inside of them, larger and stronger than in any of the other two pony races, which allowed a unicorn to channel his or her magic. Which respectively meant Prey could do more with them when combined with his runes than he could've with a goat's corpse for example. He had high hopes for his 'zomponies' as a result.

Prey morbidly mused that, once again, it all came down to magic and unicorns being better than everyone else, even in death. He just had four wicker shamblers so far, but he planned to experiment and slowly add to their number as he improved, trying out different versions as and when he was able to secretly retrieve more of them from the morgue.

Prey didn't know what he needed the wickerwatch for anymore, nor what use he would have for the wicker shamblers. But if life had taught him anything, it was that every weapon you had, you will be forced to one day use or perish. Just look at the veropedes, the bone rot mines, Lemon Pink, his ribbon, even himself. All had been used.

'What is it the zebras say on the plains? 'Pray for a peaceful journey, but set out with your spear'.'

A good idiom. Prey had his own saying, one which aligned more closely with his deeper belief; Hunger must be fed, and to eat, there must be prey. No pun intended.

Prey sighed and rocked back precariously on his stool, head tilted back towards the ceiling.

The plaster ceiling was dim, the pool of lamplight only spreading so far from the bubble it cast around the desk. Not that there was anything interesting up there to be looking at anyway. Prey stretched his neck, feeling the unpleasant kink pop but not actually

relieve the discomfort. He scowled. The room was just slightly too warm as well. The door was closed, and after hours the heat from the lamp really added up in the enclosed, wooden panelled room. The Palace was also always kept warm too, the chill of the late autumn night firmly denied entry at the Palace's doors. It was an enchantment, Prey knew. Wouldn't want those nobles and diplomats to get cold hoovies in their swan down beds.

The moment of silence stretched as he sat alone in the lamp lit office, looking up at the ceiling, stiff neck complaining. Prey lifted one limp hoof as if reaching for the ceiling, and look at the tracer band. 'I hate Luna.'

The gold carried a dull sheen as he rotated his hoof. His shackle and his leash. If not for these, and also admittedly Luna's dream walking ability, he would be gone from Canterlot and on his way to the border before the night was out.

'But now I know there is *some* limit on her dream realm. What I saw when she dragged me in there was only what she wanted me to see; Her as an all powerful deity. But I already knew her power was far beyond anything I can hope to achieve, because she's an alicorn and doesn't even have to try. But I also learnt there's an upper limit, even if I don't know what it is.'

Prey pondered on what that meant, 'She can control my dream, but not me in my dream. I'd wager she can manipulate your senses flawlessly and trick you, but she can't control your mind from across the dream realm. I didn't want to be there in the dream, and so that manifested as me not having a dream avatar, which wasn't what Luna was expecting.'

It wasn't much, but it potentially changed everything. He had an experiment he was even now working on in his lair, a runic array which could be worn that prevented the wearer from dreaming at all. Of course, there was no guarantee that'd it could stand up to the full extent of the night alicorn's dream magic, and if he somehow one day escaped but the dream blocking amulet wasn't actually as powerful as he thought...

Besides which, he still had no way to escape these hated tracer

bands. He knew what they were created from now, alicorn magic, that exalted pinnacle of power which he'd only recently become aware of and seen once; Witnessing Luna raise the moon in person. He'd felt it, the unquantifiable power. That hadn't been normal magic, it had been celestial magic; *alicorn* magic.

Prey was stumped. He hadn't given up trying to find a way to slip the tracer bands, but he was no closer to figuring it out than he had been the very first night he was dragged before Luna.

'I hate Luna.' Sometimes, it just bore repeating.

And thus Prey procrastinated the night away, and didn't make a decision on Felyawn either way.

The sun rose and he ate one of Cookie's breakfasts in the mess hall, and still he was undecided.

His shift finished and he went home at midday, noting with joint relief and apprehension that he couldn't sense anyone following him today. He subtly signalled to Lemon who was waiting in the crowd that he was in the clear today, and went back to his flat. And was still no closer to picking an option.

Prey knew this calm before the storm, this moment of quiet stillness. Soon it would be broken and everything would be a whirlwind.

He didn't want to choose, he didn't want the consequences which would come from either choice. He wanted this moment of strained peace to last for as long as possible.

When it came down to it, he was afraid to pick, but also afraid not to.

When there are no good options, often the worst thing you can do is to do nothing.

Prey went to sleep early, and also got up early in the evening, meaning that after a swift bite to eat, he had just over three and a half hours free before he had to return to the Palace for his next shift.

Sleeping on the problem had not presented Prey with a solution either, and he had to decide by tonight. Or tomorrow even, since his day-night schedule was so messed up because of his Night Guard work. So, he had about twenty hours from now to decide, which meant he had to have Lemon inform Felyawn by tomorrow evening if he was taking the job.

Or instead, don't get back in contact at all, and let Felyawn try with some other scrounged up thief. See how the chips fell as it were, whether that be win or lose.

Prey didn't get that much done in those three and a half hours. At least, not what he considered much, and he spent all of it worrying in the back of his head. So when he and Lemon stole away another dead body from out of the city morgue and changed the coroners memory, he didn't consider it much, just another task which he'd already figured out.

Desecration of the dead. Defiling the last rest. Stealing away a person's last earthly presence. Touching that which should never even be considered.

What would have been a horrifying crime to anyone else was just another tick on Prey's checklist for the day. Besides, he wasn't actively killing for these bodies, they'd all died naturally of age or illness. He only took ones which were going to be cremated anyways.

Snake used to kill for his fresh bodies, by his own hooves or that of the Resistances, it was the same. Voodoo magic had an insatiable hunger for body parts. The twisted zebra had always wanted to get his hooves on an intact unicorn corpse.
'But I'm not murdering them, so that makes it much better.'

Prey didn't have enough time to do anything specific with his newest corpse, just dumped it in his lair inside a freezing runic

array to keep it relatively fresh until he found enough time to work on it. He had a new idea of a shambler he needed to test and work out.

After that, it was back to his never ending task; making more runes. Even just an hour before he had to go meant an hour he didn't have to spend later. No matter how mind numbing the process of drawing out the foundations for basic arrays to later decide upon their finishing form, someone had to do it.

Then his time was all up, and he had to head back through the tunnels and out up into Lower Canterlot. He did take a three minute side detour on his way up to the Palace, popping into a sweet store, then back out on his way with a nice paper bag filled with candy. He'd decided he should keep a small stash in the ISND's desk drawer. Just a little something to make the long boring hours not drag quite so painfully slowly.

The thought of eating raspberry and lemon gumdrops after literally handling a dead body didn't phase Prey at all. What should have been sickening barely even registered. He was too desensitised by now, he'd survived the Deeper Green and the Resistance, where by the end, everyone was on the brink of starvation. Besides, he'd washed his hooves.

Prey had *literally* sat next to the still cooling body of an earth pony Border Guard, the pony's head a mangled mush and front torn open from griffon talons, and eagerly wolfed down the hard biscuit he'd managed to snatch from the Guard's pack before the blooded Resistance fighters had torn the pack away, and fought noisily over the rest. Prey remembered he hadn't even noticed until later that the mud he'd been sitting in was blood soaked earth. He hadn't had the energy to wash it off until the next day either, Prey still recalled. Such was the all consuming need of hunger.

'I like candies. They're sweet, and sugary, and sometimes fizzy or sour. A snatched back moment of a childhood I always wanted. Sweet and nice and satisfying. They taste like the opposite of hate.'

It was really hard to remember during those times of hate, doubt, and fear, when it felt like you were drowning under the frozen

black ice and helpless to change who you were, that, sometimes, just sometimes, few and far between, there are the briefest flashes of goodness to remind you why you want to live. And why you're willing to kill to keep living. Because you're *hungrier* for it than the other guy.

So yes, candy was extremely important in Prey's book, as juvenile as that sounded.

Prey entered the Night Guard Palace section and went looking for this Rising Star he was supposed to be interviewing.

Prey actually ended up seeing the pegasus in question first before he could find someone to ask, waiting outside one of the Night Guard offices. The spiky white maned stallion almost perfectly matched his file picture, sitting there looking rather laid back about the whole experience.

Prey stood down at the far end of the corridor around the corner, and covertly watched the pony for a while. Rising Star didn't do much, evidently he thought he was waiting on whomever was inside the office, not realising he was actually here tonight to be checked out by a runt lamb. Although what incriminating actions the golden-yellow furred pegasus was going to undertake while sitting in the middle of the corridor, with thestral Night Guards in armour occasionally hurrying past, Prey didn't know.

He *did* note that Rising Star sat up straighter every time a thestral passed, nodding a silent hello and following them with his eyes until they disappeared around a corner. But it was that tiny trace of tension in the stallion's posture that Prey *really* took note of. It was tiny, and Prey didn't even see it at first, but it was still there. He almost missed it, having been focusing on the pegasus's wings and ears. However the usual tell-tale signals of a pony's body language weren't there this time, but rather in Rising Star's actual body posture.

'So he's wary of thestrals. Him and every other racist pony in this blasted city. That doesn't prove anything.'

Although it was uncommon to find a pegasus who was smart enough to control their ears and wings, which were usually their biggest tells. Seemed like Rising had a modicum of intelligence, at least.

'That's either good or bad, I'll decide which after I see some more.' Prey thought, feeling very apathetic towards the source of his next job tonight. 'Although... it wouldn't do him any harm to wait a little bit longer.'

So thinking, Prey decided to pretend he hadn't seen Rising Star waiting there, and instead go straight to the ISND's office. Let someone else finally send the prospective Guard in his direction when they finally felt like it. And if Rising Star had to waste an hour or even two of his life waiting while everyone else was too busy to point him in the right direction... then all the better.

Prey had spent fifty-seven years forgotten and waiting, plus, Rising Star could probably use a lesson on patience anyways since he was a pegasus. The winged third of the pony population were stereotypically renowned for being impatient.

Prey retreated via a roundabout route to get to the ISND office without having to pass the waiting pegasus, and safely stashed his paper bag of fresh candies in a drawer. The office was a relative safe area, and while not as covered in runes as the secret lair, the Sewer's Heart, or his flat, the office had still built up a respectable collection of runic arrays over the days and nights.

Thus, Prey's paranoia was assuaged that someone might sneak in and poison his candy while he was out.

'It's not paranoia if they're really out to get you.' Prey thought, snagging one of the raspberry gumdrops for himself before he shut the drawer.

The sharp tangy burst of sweetness hit his tongue as he pulled out tonight's boring reports and dipped the quill.

It faintly tasted like a faded memory, those first barely ripe wild berry bushes of the season Gossamer and Fleece had been so excited

to find each time as lambs. It tasted of long gone better times which were never coming back. One could probably say it tasted bittersweet.

Prey really liked candy.

Of course, it didn't take the few hour's grace Prey was hoping for before some helpful Night Guard finally took note of Rising Star, found out why he was there, and escorted the pegasus to the ISND office.

Prey had of course noticed their approach through the runic array branching outside into the corridor, and heard the muffled conversation through the wall:

"That door right there. Yes, just knock. When you are done, go back the way I brought you. Don't try to take any detours or wander."

"Cheers. And no worries, I know the way back."

Prey heard what might've been a "Humph", it was pretty difficult to tell through the wall, before the thestral finished and left by saying; "A word to the wise, this isn't a joke. Prey is recognised as part of Princess Luna's Night Guard. Take it seriously."

"No worries?" Rising Star returned, sounding not quite sure.

The Night Guard was already leaving however, their presence on the runic array going back down the corridor. Rising Star waited a beat, then approached the door, hooves faintly clopping outside. He knocked loudly.

"This is Rising Star, I'm here to talk to a Prey?" He called through the closed door.

Prey rubbed at the scarring under his eyes, then took a deep breath, "Yes, that's me. Come in and shut the door."

The door opened, and Rising Star with that exact same cocksure smile and golden coat from his file's picture entered. His eyes surveyed the office and finally met Prey's as he stepped over the threshold.

Prey's runic arrays flared an instant silent alarm. Sound went tinny for a moment in Prey's ears as the blood rushed from his head as his spine went ramrod straight.

Fight or flight! It was a moment of his stomach dropping out, of blind panic.

'Which alarm triggered, which?!'

Which of his arrays was going off? What was the threat? Prey's hoof twitched under the desk, an inch away from touching off one of the trigger runes. Shoot first, ask questions later? Which damned array was it-?

Prey's racing mind finally parsed the silent signal and figured out which one it was just as Rising Star was finishing stepping inside, all of it lasting less than a second.

Or not Rising Star.

'It's not an equine.'

There were no thoughts Prey could hear, just an empty hole, one he'd once felt before.

There was only the one possibility. A mimic.

'Zoma'Grika why's it come here tonight? Is it here to try to kill me?!' Fear immediately bubbled up, then, anger.

Rising Star's mouth was open to speak, his eyebrows going up in apparent surprise at finding a lamb waiting for him; "Evening, I'm Rising-"

A facial spasm, so fast it was already gone. A tiny hitch in the fake pegasus's speech. Somehow in that moment, the mimic had sensed Prey's snap flip to raw hostility.

"-Star, and you must be Prey then. Nice to meet'cha."

The mimic had somehow caught a tell from behind Prey's mask. How? His mask was flawless to a stranger. Wasn't it? Had he been

so careless as to crack in his moment of panic? Thoughts flashed through Prey's mind at breakneck speed.

Prey couldn't tell, there was no way to know for sure. It was just like Shimmer had been, a blank, Prey couldn't hear any thoughts coming from the disguised creature standing right in front of him. And those old unanswered questions from Mayflower came flooding back.

Who had Shimmer really been? Why had he died trying to save them? What had been his mission in pretending to be a filthy Border Guard? And why was it confronting him now?

The mimics had been staying away, doing everything to avoid him and his lair under the mountain. But this one had strolled boldly right into the Palace, past the Night Guard, and into this very office! But why?

'Revenge? Fulfilling Shimmer's final mission?'

Prey's hoof itched, so close to touching the trigger rune on the desk. But the mimic had so boldly walked in, this must be a trap, or it knew about the runes, or it had a counter, or it knew something he didn't. There was no way it wasn't prepared for this confrontation.

'Bugger bugger bugger Bugger *Bugger*.'

The mimic had to have some hidden ace, but what was it? Prey's eyes darted over the fake pegasus. A hidden magical artifact? A spell? This pony form before him was just a façade, just because he couldn't see a horn on their head didn't mean that the mimic didn't have access to magic. Prey didn't know what the limitations where, if any.

'I need time to think, to try and learn something. I need to play along.' Prey thought as his stomach continued to roil.

"Yes, I'm Prey. I've been tasked by Lieutenant Screech to conduct a short interview with you, about why you want to transfer into the Night Guard, after having retired too. Please, sit." Prey said, pretending there was absolutely nothing out of the ordinary,

making a perfunctory wave at the aged stool on the opposite side of the desk.

'What are you?' Prey wanted to asked. What were the mimics? His other hoof stayed only a millimetre away from the invisible trigger rune.

The false stallion smiled jauntily at him, "Don't mind if I do."

But was there an air of wariness to their words as they took the stool? Or was he just imagining reactions where there were none?

'Keep playing the act. If I don't break it , perhaps they won't either and I can get out of this situation without violence.'

Prey one hoofedly flipped Rising Star's file open in front of him and pretended to study it, but never actually looked away from the thing sitting across from him. Never let a monster leave your eyesight.

"Let's keep this short and sweet. If you could start by telling me a bit about yourself and why you want to return to the Guard, and then we'll go from there."

The mimic's mastery of expressions was perfect, near indistinguishable from the real thing as it played the role of Rising Star, "Well I left the Royal Guard a few years back because my mom got sick and needed full time care, but me and dad didn't want to put her into a home. Going to one of those places would've killed her. I liked the Royal Guard, the job was good, and the armour goes great with my coat, you know? But family comes first, so I quit."

Rising Star, or the mimic pretending, shrugged as if it had been as simple as that, and that he, Rising Star, should be applauded for his morals and strong family values. A pony might've been impressed, but Prey knew it was utterly fake. An act, a lie.

Prey darkly wondered whether Rising Star's parents had even noticed when their son was replaced. Actually, was Rising Star even a real person? Was the whole 'family' a fictitious front to conceal a cell of mimics hiding out in Cloudsdale?

"Anyways," The not-pegasus went on, sticking firmly to their established story, "Me and dad have now got a new house down here on the ground in Canterlot, one which works for mom. So we thought, now that I'm back, why not go back to the Guard? The Guard life was good, you know? One of us needs to be home at all times though, just in case, so he's going to have a day job, and I'm going for a night job. So I asked my old commander if there were any options, and you know what? He suggested the Night Guard, so here I am."

Again, a sympathy inducing story, one no doubt crafted to inspire admiration in the hearer for Rising Star's dedication and positive outlook on life. It was believable, and not too over the top or in your face, making it all the more subtle. Prey would see 'Rising Star' and his 'beloved mom and dad' dead and leaking green blood before he believed a word of it. Or maybe Rising Star was here to see Prey dead tonight.

"I'm sorry to hear that, but you sound like you have the situation well in hoof." Prey said politely, utterly insincere behind his mask.

That hint of a sour expression flashed in an instant across the mimic's fake face and was gone just as swiftly. It was like they could sense Prey's intentions, although Prey was absolutely certain this mimic wasn't reading his thoughts. Prey was a mind leech, he'd know, and the mimic would have instant cause to regret if they tried. The mere fact they were still sitting across from him upright on the stool meant they hadn't.

There was a creak from the old, slightly unbalanced stool as the mimic shifted posture, yellow wings moving as if to open for a moment to provide air stability, an action which would've been unconscious to any pegasus, but Prey had to wonder if it too was faked. How much of what he was seeing was real and how much was scripted? Was even that sour face he'd just seen now nothing but another ploy? It was the one who'd confronted him and forced him into this situation. Prey despised the loss of control.

'If I killed it, I could finally study what a mimic really is.' The thought occurred to Prey. Punish the mimics for thinking they could trick and control him.

Prey kept speaking as if thoughts of murder weren't even now running through his head; "You've applied for a possible posting into the Night Guard. As I'm sure you realise, the operational procedure in the Night Guard is different to that of the Royal Guard, and the force is a lot smaller. Perhaps you can tell me why you think you'd be a good fit?"

Rising Star inclined his or rather *its* head slightly, "Sure I can. I'm a good team player, I'm good at working on my own initiative, I have a knack for picking up the ropes quickly, and I'm dependable. And since I've been in the Royal Guard already, some of that experience must carry over, you know? No basic training required whatsoever, I hope."

"Those are good Guard traits, certainly. But you want to return from inactive civilian life straight into the Night Guard. Could you tell me a bit more about what these last few years for you have entailed? It might help me make my recommendation to the Lieutenant." Prey said, making up interview questions on the fly while he furiously thought.

"Sure I can. I'm an only foal, so I got a lot of one-on-one time and tutelage from both my parents. They always pushed me to be the very best I can be. A passing grade in Flight School wasn't enough, they knew I could do better, and they showed me that I knew I could do better too. That's a lesson I've carried with me all my life, you know? Finishing high school-"

The mimic continued on giving its run down of Rising Star with a positive spin, but Prey was only half listening, much more closely focused on the mimic's body language for hints, and his own inner turmoil of thoughts.

Sitting there, across from what he knew to be a fake, as they told him what he knew to be lies, it occurred to Prey that maybe this wasn't about him. Maybe the mimic was just lying to protect its own hide, or carapace, or whatever, much as he himself would do in its place? They were enemies, but perhaps only by the positioning of people much more powerful than them? Meaning, like Luna and her sister the Sun Wolf.

'Logically, this really could be an attempt by the mimics to get an insider into the Night Guard and not an attack on me, since the Night Guard is new, loyal only to Luna, and made up exclusively thestrals of so far, aside from me and Crimson, although he's basically a thestral regardless. There's probably a hoofful of mimics carefully inserted all throughout Canterlot in key places, and they want in on the Night Guard too.' Prey thought with a dreadful sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, although only about the threat that such actions posed directly to him.

He couldn't have cared less if they tried to ruin the city of Canterlot itself.

Casually, without even pausing their flow, the mimic reached a hoof for something tucked under their wing.

A warning screamed in Prey's head, danger! Watch the wings, it was the wings which killed with a pegasus, just as with unicorns it was their horn! The mimic simply scratched at their folded wing, but that wasn't what they'd originally been going to do, they'd changed the motion at the last second, Prey was sure of it. It hadn't been smooth enough, there'd been a stilted transition just then.

That objectively disconnected feeling was utterly gone now, replaced with sick, roiling heart pounding adrenaline.

"-And yeah. That's me about summed up, you know?" The mimic stopped, having finished describing Rising Star's abbreviated life story.

Prey sat there, across the desk from what was one very convincing fake to another, in an old dimly lit office, and fought down the seething urge to lash out in retaliation for whatever it was the mimic had been about to do just now.

'I could kill you. I could kill you and use your corpse. I could put my ribbon on you, tie it round your eyes and leave it there.'

On the one side of the desk, sky blue orbs so mild they seemed almost to be smiling, *fake*. And on the other side, vivid green sparkling with positive energy, *fake*.

Why was this damned blasted infernal mimic here? Why? Just *why*?

Prey wanted answers. Answers he couldn't get because he couldn't read the *foul* things mind!

It was just a *disgusting* creature under that fake fur, one with fangs, and edges and armour. It was *dangerous*.

Prey did not torture, but how this *thing* had simply come in here and was now just sitting *there* thinking it could *trick* him, was making him reconsider.

He hated this mimic, he hated *people*, all people. People lied and deceived, a monster never lied about wanting to kill and eat you.

But this 'Gratta' und krack' thought it could just 'Domolo'dok fa Grot' like he was some idiot, who couldn't see, and 'Zel'man da und Golom'die!'

Prey hated this *Rising Star*, this detestable, corrupt, vile polluting worm!

__Sn__-

'*WaitTheMimicDidn'tHaveGreenEyesJustNow*!'

-__ap__

The world stopped even as it didn't, and changed. Prey's mindscape snapped out of a pall of cobwebs. It was like the office around him had been stretched with invisible strings, slowly wrapping around him as he sat here.

The mimic had been doing something to him! Messed with his head, twisted his perception. Not mind control, Prey knew mind control, some other form of control-It was emotion control! Everything he'd felt had been wild, out of control, yawing wildly between extremes.

'It was trying to control me.'

A blink of time where Prey didn't feel any one emotion, everything was too warped as he second guessed himself. Then came the anger,

burning away all others.

Rising Star's now blue eyes flickered, widening, the mimic not able to control itself in that fraction of a second, body tensing up defensively. It was that instinctive moment of projected hostility, when the disturbed snake lashes out from its nest and you instinctively snatch your leg back that moment before it lunges.

The mimic hadn't been trying to anger him, Prey suddenly knew that, their reaction right then, it was proof that anger wasn't what it had been trying to induce.

Sympathy, happiness, joy, those emotions would have been better to get what it wanted. Somehow though, he hadn't reacted to their brand of emotional manipulation like how the mimic was used to. That changed *nothing*. It had just tried to *control* him!

Prey reached for the trigger tune. The mimic had expected to get away without consequence-!

Anger. He was a burning blazing towering anger, teetering and about to topple over. But the mimic could control emotions, it could read how he was feeling, it could be doing it right now this very second and he didn't have any way to stop it... to stop it-*stop it*.

The red hot anger was snuffed out like a candle. The fire turned into cold ash without even an ember remaining. All that was left was black, icy clarity in its place.

'It was trying to control me.'

There was no anger now. Prey felt like an utter fool, one who'd been stupid enough to let a tiger stroll into his house because he wanted to see what it would do. It was a mimic, what had he honestly expected? Shimmer had been one, and he'd been masquerading as a traitorous Border Guard. Prey had no excuse for his shameful stupidity. Where was his vaunted cunning? Where was his runic array to guard against emotional tampering?

'I see,' Prey thought, his mind still flowing with the freezing black clarity, 'I'm such an utter failure for not seeing it sooner, but there's

an easy solution to all this.'

Simple. Kill it.

Prey moved for the trigger rune. It didn't matter if the mimic had a counter, it didn't matter they were inside the Night Guard wing of the Palace. If the tiger is going to eat you, do you not try to stab it because you're worried about making it angry? No. You stab it and keep stabbing until has fled, or until you or it is dead. It's simple, so simple. Even the dumbest beasts in the woods knows that. Even animals can count to two, and do the terrible and simple equation of hunger.

For one to eat, there must be an eaten. It wasn't going to be Prey.

Prey had learned this lesson already, he knew his one truth about the world. So why by all that was dead and rotten, had he refrained from immediately doing what needed to be done? 'Weak.'

It was there in the mimic's stolen face. It was there, reflected back in Prey's eyes. Terror, sudden and mortal.

"I'm only here for a job," The mimic tried to speak quickly, "I just need a job-"

The mimic wasn't fast enough to save itself. But, by the rolling of fate's dice, by happenstance, by nothing more than pure blind coincidence, something else was.

Muted green fire silently flared up, not from the mimic Prey's eyes were locked onto, but on the desk. He looked. The green glass message-in-a-bottle now held a ripped half page.

The message-in-a-bottle. Prey had put it there on the desk the very night Gloom and Crimson had left for Griffonia. The twin to the bottle of stabilised spell fire they'd taken with them. The one only to be used in emergencies.

Prey stared at the green glass bottle, just sitting there innocuously on the desk. Again, everything had just flipped on its head.

'But, the mimic...' Prey's priorities scrambled to reorder themselves.

'*Crimson*.'

The mimic's stool clattered over backwards as the false pegasus rushed for the door, "I see this isn't a good time. Guard business, not my place. I'll come back another time!"

Prey's eyes swivelled, the only part of him which moved, tracking Rising Star's flight path to the door.

He could've still acted, he had the time. It wasn't hesitation which stayed his hoof, but because the mimic and its goals were of lesser importance than an emergency message from Crimson.

And then the mimic was gone out the door. Prey didn't know if it was going to flee the Palace immediately or not, but it didn't matter. It had tried, and it had failed, and it would carry word back to the rest of the mimics.

The second the sentient chameleon bug vanished from the detection range of Prey's runes down the corridor, he grabbed for the glass bottle, tearing out the cork with his teeth.

The ripped half page couldn't get shaken out of the bottle's neck fast enough for Prey. It had been badly rolled, obviously in haste, and Prey fought to snag the page inside with a pencil to drag it out, angry frustration welling up at the wasted seconds of delay.

This was an emergency, it could be something terrible had gone wrong trying to grab Hafflow, but he couldn't get the stupid bit of paper-!

He caught the edge of the paper with the pencil and dragged it out, almost tearing it in his haste. Hooves nearly trembling with anxiety, Prey flattened the message out in the lantern light.

The scrawled hoof writing looked like it might be Gloom's. It had been written in haste, in what seemed to be charcoal, wasn't straight, and was to the point.

'Password: Mayflower.'
'Arrested Hafflow tonight, flown out of Griffin Stone. Groups split up to avoid pursuit. In hiding tonight. Found letters, and

interrogated prisoner. Danger, tell everypony Prey that: Hafflow was taking orders from the griffin ambassador in Canterlot and they're after the Elements of Harmony. They're going to steal the Elements, you must stop them. They had a plan if something went wrong to immediately launch an attack on the Elements. Tonight? Don't know. Can't make Hafflow talk. Can't wait for him to sleep for Luna to dream interrogate. No time. Stop them Prey.'

And squashed into the bottom corner, the charcoal smudged were the initials; 'G & C'

Prey blinked. For a moment he just sat there, staring blankly at the charcoal scrawl. Had he read that right? *Surely* this wasn't really happening. Felyawn and the griffins were after the supposed Elements of Harmony, which he'd decided he mostly didn't believe in, but... but why was everything suddenly all revolving around these Elements? Why all within this relatively tiny space of time?

Why was it alr...? Then the urgency crashed down upon Prey full force. This was happening now, tonight!

'Felyawn already knows about the kidnapping. The griffins have their own enchanted teleportation vaults in the embassy for emergency communication, they'll have reported Hafflow's kidnapping immediately.'

But would the ambassador really-? Yes of course he would. Prey himself had met the griffin, and remembered those ice flecks of frozen focus for eyes the griffin had. Nothing would sway him once he committed. This was happening, or was going to happen right-this-instant-now.

The town of Ponyville by train was an hour away, because the tracks had to wind slowly down the mountainside. But it was the middle of the night anyway, and there were no such trains running now.

'But griffins can fly. So can thestrals. Screech! I need to go tell the Lieutenant, get the Night Guard alerted, maybe they can make it down the mountain in time.'

Indecision warred inside of Prey. His deep dark fear that this would somehow all escalate into war still squatted in his heart. Could he prevent it? What if he just kept silent? Would allowing Felyawn to get away with this somehow help? Maybe?

The moment of irrational hope withered and died. No, of course it wouldn't help. Now that the Night Guard had caught Hafflow, it was now completely beyond Prey's control. Now Luna would know, and so in turn would the Sun Wolf, and if the alicorn sisters decided they wanted to escalate, then there was nothing he or anyone else in this world could do to stop them. The choice was out of his hooves.

Prey stared down at the ripped half page which had so suddenly thrown everything off a cliff.

'Damn you Felyawn. Why couldn't you see this was an obvious trap?'

But the griffins were doing this because they wanted a way to stop Nightmare Moon from murdering the entire world if/when she ever returned. Potential war, or possible extinction.

'I have no say in preventing this.' Prey realised. Gloom and Nighthawk hadn't only taken the one message-in-a-bottle apiece, but multiples for each four person team just in case. Gloom, Crimson, and whichever other two thestrals they were paired with wouldn't have only sent one warning, but all the warnings they could while hiding out from Griffin Guard patrols throughout the night.

If Screech hadn't already found the message in one of his own magically twinned bottles, he very shortly would.

'Damn you and your proud nation Felyawn. And damn ponies and their twisted selfish alicorn goddesses.' Prey thought, feeling helpless tendrils of despair rising up to choke him. But there was nothing for it.

Checking only to make sure his ribbon was still definitely behind his ear, Prey grabbed the torn note and ran from the room with all

speed. Screech had to be found and told, if he didn't already know. Prey needed his orders, so that he'd have a solid excuse for when everything went to Tartarus.

Prey's thinking was basic, and his plan simple. Find Screech, tell Screech, and then let Screech make all the decisions. The Night Guard would be the ones to deal with all of this crap for once, and would also take all the consequences.

But the world is not one big story. It is a hundred million small, individual stories. Each different, each just one strand woven together in one huge chaotic rope making up the passage of time. Everyone has their own story, and it's often not about you. The thing about stories though, is that to the person in it, there is no more important story than their own in the whole world. Everyone makes their decisions based off their own narrative, and to the best of their ability. Or sometimes they just choose poorly.

The other thing about all these interconnecting stories, is that although to the person it's happening to they're the main character, sometimes their story *isn't* the most important one. Stories happen all the time, they never stop, and by dint of being the story of life, there are high points and low points.

And the thing was, a low point was happening simultaneously, and very publicly, in a large number of story threads elsewhere in Canterlot tonight.

More than half of all the Night Guards on duty were already gone.

Prey stared. "What?"

"Lieutenant Screech has gone with eight units because of the fire in Lower Canterlot." Sargent Major Sharp Tang, the closest thestral to in charge left behind, repeated, not stopping moving.

Lower Canterlot? Fire? And a Night Guard response?

"What fires? I didn't hear anything." Prey exclaimed, hurrying along trying to keep up.

Sharp Tang frowned down sidelong at him without breaking stride, his plumed helmet making the thestral loom extra tall over the lamb, "Of course. The report of arson only just arrived, and the Lieutenant flew out, what, five minutes ago?"

"But, there wasn't any alarm-"

"There was an alarm. You just weren't called. I assume because your unit is not an active responder and it's only you left here. If that's all, I'm about to be very busy very shortly." Sharp Tang told him shortly, if anything, lengthening his already brisk stride.

'-you may mean well, but the last thing we need is another lumber yard incident-'

'Of all the bad timing-! No, this is too close to be a coincidence. That fire's just a distraction to keep the Night Guard occupied.' Prey realised, connecting the dots.

"Wait!" He panted, "Wait, I got an emergency message from Sargent Gloom, just right now-"

"Penumbra, Jackie, get the rest of your unit. Meet me In the Guard Compound, three minutes!" The Sargent Major barked down the corridor intersection at two hurrying Night Guards, who promptly saluted and turned right around. Then, back to Prey:

"Pardon? Say that again."

"I said, I got an emergency message from Gloom and Crimson from one of the message-in-a-bottles literally ten minutes ago." Prey got out between breaths, speaking as fast as he could.

Sharp Tang finally stopped, frowning severely now in confusion, "What emergency message bottle? What are you talking about?"

Prey gaped, missing a step. Sharp Tang wasn't one of the Night Guards in the know about Luna's secret mission to snatch Hafflow. Prey hadn't thought, but it appeared it was so. But secrecy shouldn't

matter anymore, they'd already captured Hafflow, and the emergency message had come through to tell- '-To tell Screech, but he's already gone.'

"It's an emergency-"

"-If this is to do with the Captain and Lieutenant's whereabouts, I'm not authorised to know yet." Sharp Tang cut in sharply.

Prey breathed deeply, reigning in his building temper, "It's an emergency. They took message-in-a-bottles with them just in case. The one in the ISND office came through just now. It's about the mission they were sent on-"

"I just said don't tell me!" Sharp Tang barked.

"-And they said there's a threat against the Elements of Harmony right now. You need to get there and stop anything happening." Prey carried on, hesitating and deciding at the last moment to be vague on if it was a threat to the Elements or the six Bearers since he didn't want to look like he had taken any interest whatsoever in the Elements of Harmony before this.

Those Elements were either bait laid by the Sun Wolf, or one of her own personal pet projects. Prey wanted nothing which could link him in any way to anything Celestia had claimed. The alternatives were too dire to even consider.

Sharp Tang's eyes and tufted ears swivelled to lock solely onto Prey, "Did you say the Elements of Harmony?" He demanded.

"Yes!" Prey shoved the half page with its charcoal smudged message beneath the stallion's muzzle, "It specifically says that someone's going to try to steal these Elements of Harmony. I don't know how many Elements there are supposed to be, or who's going to strike-"

The Sargent Major snatched the letter from Prey's cleft hoof with a slice of his wing, bringing it up close to his face, not even noticing how Prey hissed and jumped away. His yellow eyes flickered left to right over the note.

'-Griffonstone, that's where they were? The griffin ambassador, and,

what? The Elements? What's been happening out there?-'

Then Sharp Tang's confusion levelled out into alarmed acceptance, '-Luna's mane, if there's a credible threat to the Elements of Harmony, then we have to act now!-'

The thestral spun, already opening his mouth to shout after the two thestrals he'd sent off, then faltered as he remembered that Screech had just left the Palace, taking half the active Night Guards with him, and still other units were out on patrol too. Nighthawk and the other two Lieutenants were in Griffonstone apparently, and there were only just enough Night Guards left in the Palace to Guard it.

The Sargent Major's mind raced, '-our duty is to Princess Luna first and foremost, the citizens second. But these are the Elements we're talking about... wait! Princess Luna, this is covered in the regulations. If this sort of situation occurs, active command defaults to Princess Luna first, then her sister second-'

His yellow eyes locked onto Prey, "Run, find every Night Guard not guarding an entrance or exit. Pass on the message, get them to do the same. Meet on Parade Ground One immediatley. Princess Luna is assuming active command, I'm going to inform her immediately. Go!"

With his shouted command still ringing in the corridor, Sharp Tang launched off in a speeding gallop in the direction of the Night Court.

Prey watched him disappear within seconds. Then he took a deep breath, smoothed a hoof down the length of his ribbon just to be sure, then ran off to do exactly as Sharp Tang had said.

This was out of his hooves now. Part of it felt good for once to know that someone else would be taking the blame when everything invariably went wrong. The other part, the darker part Prey tried to suppress in the hopes that it was wrong, was still fixated on the possibility of a diplomatic incident escalating out of proportion into war with the griffins. Prey had seen war. He had *been* in a war. There were no winners in war. Only survivors.

"Meet on the Parade Ground! Sharp Tang's orders, it's an emergency. Tell everyone else you see!" Prey shouted, high pitched, passing by Night Guards as he ran up one dim corridor then down the next. He looped back around at a corridor intersection, lit by four lanterns on each corner, and headed back for another pass.

"Meet on the Parade Ground. Sharp Tang's orders, it's an emergency. Tell everyone else you see!" No one was going to accuse him after this of not doing his part.

Night Guards scrambled, dashing past him in flashes of armour and rapid clacking of horseshoes.

"All available Night Guards meet on Parade Ground One!"

When he'd run down four corridors in a row, and hadn't encountered even one more Night Guard not stationed on an entrance or exit to the Palace, Prey decided he must've gotten to everyone and headed towards Parade Ground One himself at a much slower trot, panting all the way to find...

To find that there was no one there.

Prey first peered into the deep night shadows at the far end of the empty parade square, before swiftly double checking this was indeed Parade Ground One, and that he hadn't gotten mixed up. But no, he had not mistaken his sense of direction. He looked around.

The air had a cold bite to it, but Prey had just spent the last ten minutes running around the Night Guard section. Huffing, Prey stepped closer. In the light of the lanterns hung outside the Palace, Prey could still just about see the kicked up scuffs in the parade ground sand, and large sweeping arcs where take-off beat of wings had blown the topmost sand away.

Prey tilted his head back and looked up towards vast starry night above the city. Prey called up the maps he'd memorised, and turned to the south, in the direction he knew the town of Ponyville was situated.

He was just in time to see the last flying figures exiting the glow of

Canterlot's light bubble before they were beyond his non-existent night vision and already damaged eyesight.

They'd only just taken off, obviously deciding to fly straight to Ponyville to guard these Elements or whatever, and they'd made the call to leave him behind. Perfectly understandable, since he was one of those people who had the audacity to be born without the common decency of wings.

'Or maybe they just forgot about me.'

Prey didn't know if Luna was flying with them. She might be for all he knew, Sharp Tang had run off to inform his beloved princess with all speed, and Prey hadn't been able to tell one distant flying figure from another in the dark. So either Luna was still in the Palace somewhere behind him, or had flown off at the head of her loyal Night Guard to lead them on a quest to prevent villainy, or however it was she chose to see it. Prey nearly spat into the kicked up sand at the thought.

Prey remembered how she'd chosen Lord Vanish over Crimson's claim on a whim, her almost jubilant excitement at learning of Hafflow's treachery so that she could launch a mission to stem her boredom or what-have-you, and how whimsically she'd dealt with the ISND as a whole.

Still, the end result was, they'd left him behind. He now had his alibi. That meant he didn't need to attend, and whatever happened wasn't his fault. 'Yes, this is actually far better for me this way.'

He'd discharged his duties, and either Luna or Sharp Tang in Screech's absence had made the call to leave him behind. Screech was out in Canterlot dealing with an arson attack, while he stayed behind safe here.

It was out of his hooves, beyond his control... Prey hated not being in control, but there was only so much you could do.

He was here, and they were out there, flying through the night. They had wings, he didn't. Well, he could get down the mountain through the green stone cave passageway, but what would be the

point?

Whatever went down tonight in Ponyville, it was the far safer and smarter choice to remain behind here. Yes. He was staying behind.

In that quiet moment of reflection though, still panting lightly from his run, and standing along under the stars on the gritty parade ground sand... The seed of doubt was still growing there.

Prey pulled the rolled and crumpled message out of his wool where he'd shoved it. He'd been lucky it hadn't fallen out while running up and down corridors. He unrolled it and held it up under one of the Palace lanterns so he could read it again. The charcoal message was a nearly illegible smudged mess by now, but the end line was still visible.

'Stop them Prey. G & C.'

G and C, meaning; Gloom and Crimson.

'Stop them Prey.' *Crimson* had asked him to stop the griffins. But what could he do? He'd get there too late to intervene in anything anyway. And while there were only two things he wouldn't do for Crimson, there were still two things he *wouldn't* do for Crimson.

But yet still the seed of doubt festered...

Prey looked at the note. Then he looked up at the night sky above Canterlot. He turned back to look at the high marble walls of the Palace, pale white in the moonlight. He looked at the note again, then the parade ground, then up at the night. Then down at the note once again. Prey turned the note just to check nothing had suddenly appeared written on the back, then upright again.

Night sky, parade ground, torn note. He kicked at the gritty sand with a hoof. He sighed.

"Oh zoma'Grika take it all." Prey cursed.

---I---

Author's Notes:

Aaaand 1 million words. How about that, huh?

Anyway, the much more important bits! The editor of the first draft of this mess was again Panem et Circenses. Thankyou very much. 😊

And another interesting picture/sketch of Prey 👉HERE👈 by GreatSpaceBeaver again as well.

79.5 Is this What it's Come to?

It was only by complete luck that Lemon Pink was already down in the cave tunnels, hauling a small cart of supplies for the lair, at the time Prey ran through. If she hadn't been, well, then Prey would've had to continue down the steep green stone tunnels by himself.

Panting, Prey shouted at her to leave the cart as he ran up, throwing the crystal lantern he himself was using into the cart to be left behind:

"We're going down the, *_pant_* mountain. You light the way. Message bottle came through. Griffins are going after the Elements, *_pant_* tonight. Night Guards already left to go down or are distracted, there's a, *_gasp_* arson attack somewhere in the city. But we're going to Ponyville as backup."

"Why are we going, Prey?" Lemon had questioned, even as she was unbuckling the cart tracers.

"Because Crimson asked it of me in the message." Prey had answered back.

Down the steep winding tunnels the two of them went, a lamb and a unicorn, the stone rendered a greyish-green hue in Lemon's horn light. The air was especially cold in the enclosed stone paths, but in their haste they hardly felt it. The tunnel varied in places from claustrophobically low and cramped, to wide open hollow pockets, and everything inbetween.

Onwards and downwards they rushed over frigid stone. Water worn stone rose and fell in jumbles of uneven bumps and dips. An ache rapidly built in Prey's hooves. Lemon Pink's horseshoes protected her own hooves from the hard and uneven tunnel floor, but he had no such protection as they sped the pace.

Damn it all, if Crimson hadn't asked, Prey wouldn't even be

attempting to get down to Ponyville at this time of night.

It was a long, winding trip down through the caves, too long. The Sargent Major, Sharp Tang, along with the rest of the Night Guards, and/or possibly Luna if she'd come along, would've arrived in the rural pony town long before he did. They were swift of wing, while he was slow of hoof.

By the time they finally reached the cave's exit, opening up out into the night, Prey's breathing was ragged. His sides heaved in and out, and he was sweating despite the cold. Lemon was better off, what with being a pony and having longer legs, but she was hardly a model of fitness herself. She was thin and tall, that didn't automatically equate to being a distance runner.

But they'd made it to the mountain's base.

The green stone of the tunnel's camouflaged exit was protected by runes. Stepping out from under the pressing confines of the mountain into the dark openness of the night, Prey felt the ethereal hum of the arrays signalling their secret existence up into his hooves.

Fresh, cold night air prickled the sweat on his brow as Prey stood there, trying to get his breath back. He dug a sore hoof into the painful stitch in his side, letting the quiet sounds of the night reached his ears. His harsh breathing sounded far too loud in the night.

He'd just run down the insides of a mountain. Request from Crimson or no request from Crimson, he needed a few minutes to rest. And a drink. Fortunately, a drink of water was an option.

Lemon Pink pulled open the small crate of emergency supplies Prey'd had placed down here at the tunnel's end, and removed the waterskins. Still breathing hard, Lemon levitated her own up but wordlessly passed Prey the other by hoof, not magic. The water tasted funny after having sat here, but Prey greedily drank it down. He stopped before it felt like he'd had his fill, but he knew he'd drunk enough to quench his thirst. It'd all just slosh around in his stomach and he'd get sick if he drained the waterskin, and they had

a ways to go yet on hoof before they arrived at Ponyville.

Prey took a more even breath now that he'd drunk, Lemon was still taking slow sips from her own waterskin, and stared with a disgruntled scowl out into the night.

'We're not even going to get there in anything like a reasonable time frame. The Night Guard must already be there and ready to ward off any theft attempt. Or maybe even catch them in the act.'

Although Prey did wonder if it was Griffons Felyawn had sent, or if the ambassador had decided to hire more pony thieves to try and stay unnoticed, as with his misguided attempt with Lemon Pink.

Prey pushed his drooping ears back and let out a raggedy huff, "Haa. Right, time to get going again."

Lemon Pink re-stoppered her waterskin, "Yes, Prey."

The night was cold, but their pace was brisk. These were the tame lands and sleepy countryside of Equestria, there were none of the night's dangers lurking here like in the wilds to worry about.

Prey maintained his fast pace across the ground, but it still took long enough that even the faintest stars in the distant night sky began to shrug off their initial shyness and fade into their true countless brilliance before Lemon and Prey drew close to their destination.

The night felt safe here in Equestria, the cold notwithstanding, but the distance was too far for Prey's liking.

The Night Guard, with their birthright of night vision and wings, could've safely glided down Mount Canter in a little over five minutes, whereas it had taken him and Lemon nearly an hour racing through cave tunnels. From there, Prey estimated it could've only taken the Night Guard another fifteen minutes' swift flight to reach the town of Ponyville. But for the two of them on hoof, they had to cut across countryside for thirty minutes until they came upon the train tracks.

From there, they followed the silent metal rails straight towards Ponyville, taking another half hour before the town's outline was even in view, with dim, night shrouded lights just visible in the town.

Except, as they drew closer, hurrying along the tracks, a sense of unease was growing in Prey. Not of some monster prowling in the darkness, (even the blackness of the nights in Equestria weren't as dark as they were across the border), but of the approaching town.

Lemon Pink put words to the sense of stealing unease:

"The town seems too quiet, doesn't it, Prey?"

Prey slowed, straining his ears towards their destination at the end of the shadowy train tracks, "Yes. It does."

The Night Guard were supposed to be all over Ponyville, possibly with Luna at their head, as Prey still didn't know if Sharp Tang had managed to get to Her Majesty. Sharp tang and/or possibly Luna, had to have flown out with at least twenty thestrals, so where were they all?

There was one obvious answer, and it made Prey slow down even further as he realised he and Lemon would be easily visible to the thestrals with their night vision as they came up the train tracks.

Because if he wasn't seeing or hearing signs of disturbance which would obviously be sounding if the Night Guard were in the act of stopping the griffins or whoever Felyawn had sent, then the most likely reason was because the attack hadn't happened yet, and so the Guards were lying wait in ambush.

Gloom and Crimson's warning note hadn't mentioned a specific time the thieves were supposed to be coming, after all. All it'd said was that there was supposed to be an attempt 'tonight'. Hafflow had confessed that an alert would've gone out via teleportation vault message to Felyawn with his capture, and their contingency plan if they were compromised was to immediately go after the Elements of Harmony before bailing. But that didn't equate to meaning 'immediately' tonight.

Who knows? Perhaps Felyawn had decided to call off the attack altogether, considering it a lost cause. Although Prey remembered the burning patriotism in those ice cold eagle eyes.

'If anything is going to happen, it hasn't happened yet, and they're now all lying in wait to ambush the fools who come to take the bait.' Prey thought. He well knew how patient thestrals were, and how well they could hide in the dark. The night was their element.

Quickly he whispered his instructions to Lemon Pink, the sign language he had was not sufficiently complex enough to convey everything, especially in the dark:

"Change of plan, looks like the Night Guard has laid an ambush. Split up, you stay here hidden under an illusionary veil. I'll follow the train tracks in, pretend I did that all the way down from Canterlot, and join back up with them. My plan is to hang back and let them handle this. Be on the lookout though, don't want them catching you instead. If Luna's here... just don't risk coming in, she'll see right through any illusion." He muttered to her, nervously eyeing the still town.

"Yes, Prey." Lemon acknowledged in a whisper, stepping off the train tracks and ducking down behind the closest bush.

Prey saw her pull her cloak over her head to hide the initial silvery glow of her horn, and then she wavered like a heat shimmer in the night and vanished.

Prey watched her last position for a moment longer to make sure he couldn't see anything. Then he turned back to the quiet town of Ponyville. He licked his lips, and started briskly forwards, not trying to hide. He purposefully wanted to be spotted by the thestrals no doubt hidden up on the dark rooftops. He didn't want to surprise them, that was a good way to get skewered.

He even started stepping on the gravel inbetween the heavy railway slats, instead of from plank to plank just to make some extra low noise, although he half feared he'd turn a hoof in the dark on the loose stones.

__Tac__ *_tac_* *Cunch* *_Krish_* *clac*

He was getting closer to the town's train station, and still no one had swooped out of the night to challenge him. Where were they?

Step, step. *_clac_* *crunch*

Thestrals were flyers, they would've been here long ago. So where were they?

click *_clatter_*

Surely one of the lookouts must've seen and recognised him by now? He was almost into the train station already.

'What if there's no one watching the tracks-? No, they must be. It's the most direct ground route into the town, outside of the road. They'll be watching the sky and the town's perimeter. That definitely includes the train tracks.'

But then where were they, exactly?

Prey stepped off the train tracks and onto the ramp at the end of the platform, walking cautiously up it to the main area. Still no thestral appeared.

Prey looked around the dark platform.

The station building was dark and locked up for the night. The faint sound of night crickets, late for the season, murmured around the empty platform. It was eerily quiet.

And still no Night Guards.

The odd muted light shone deeper into the town, from forgotten lamps or unaware ponies pulling an all-nighter, but there were no crystal street lamps here like in the capital city. It left most of the town steeped in shadow. Not *deep* shadow, the town was built very open, but there were still dark shadows nonetheless.

Okay, something was most definitely amiss here.

The Night Guard had left way before Prey had, and they were far faster than him when covering open ground, so why weren't they here? Prey didn't feel any painful stinging in the runes on his forehooves, but he was starting to fear there was some sort of area of effect magic at work here.

'I'd be able to feel it if it were a giant illusion, but I can't sense anything.'

On instinct, Prey looked behind him. He turned around and around, scanning his surroundings, but he was limited in the dark as to what he could see. He had to rely on his hearing to catch any ambush, and hope his reaction speed was fast enough.

But still he heard and saw nothing out of place, and that was the problem.

'Where the *hell* are they?'

Now Prey was fervently wishing he'd remained outside of the town with Lemon Pink. He looked back down the empty train tracks leading off into the dark. Except it now felt like that since he was inside the station, venturing back out past the town's edge would be a mistake. He was cut off by an invisible line.

Trotting in here felt like he'd waltzed into the kill zone of a trap. And he didn't know what kind of trap it was, either. All that purposeful noise he'd made on his approach he now deeply regretted, the feeling sinking in to squirm in his stomach.

Something was wrong, and Prey didn't know what. Crimson had asked him to come here to help, but this wasn't at all what he had envisioned.

Carefully he shuffled sideways, moving closer to the shut ticket station building. When in doubt, don't stand in the open, find cover, and stay quiet until you knew what was happening.

Prey crept along towards the train station entrance, pressing close to the wall and sticking to every shadow. He wished for the thousandth time his wool was black, or at least brown like Breaker's

had been, and not white. White stood out in the night. And it also showed the blood.

The same fork of the river which he and Lemon had walked beside when following the train tracks seemed to encircle the whole town of Ponyville. The water wasn't deep at all, more a large stream than even a river tributary, however it still meant there was a short bridge between the train station and the sleeping town.

The short hoof bridge was wide and empty. Not even ten paces long. But still Prey stopped and warily stared at it.

The pleasant but ceaseless sound of trickling water tugged at Prey's attention as he carefully examined the far side of the dark bridge, looking for anything amiss in the town. This was *exactly* the sort of spot that should be being watched or defended. Or trapped. This was precisely the place to lay a bone rot mine. Prey had done the same himself in the Deeper Green. He remembered the screaming, and the mess afterwards.

'No thanks.'

Prey turned aside and slithered down the short stream bank. The long grass was coarse, and pulled at his wool until he silently stepped into the stream.

His hooves immediately started to go numb. The water was frigid in the night. Prey breathed shallowly and moved in deeper, sliding himself forwards over the invisible submerged stones and mud rather than step. Taking steps whilst in water would make splashes.

The cold reached up his legs, the stream was deeper than he'd expected. Prey tried to hurry without splashing across to the other bank. The water rose up higher, soaking the wool of his underbelly, and he had to keep his head tilted up to stop the ends of his ears from dragging in the current. The uncut grass on the other bank helped as he pulled himself out of the water, even if he couldn't quite see what he was grabbing at.

Now half soaked, it really was cold. Prey ignored it. A neat street of cosy looking houses greeted Prey when he poked his head above the

bank. Over half of the homes were thatched. They were also all silent and dark, aside from a light behind a curtain in the window of one.

Prey waited, but didn't see any movement of shadows behind the curtain. And still no sign of any Night Guards. Paranoia was fearfully gripping his shoulders with iron hooves by this point.

The town of Ponyville was roughly circular in shape, he knew, but he didn't know where in among the houses and buildings these six Elements were supposed to be stored, just that Felyawn's information had said it was supposed to be in the public library. But that was secondary, because the Night Guards were supposed to be covering there, but they weren't! They. Weren't. Here.

'If Luna didn't come along, then there is a remote possibility that all twenty or so of them were ambushed and taken out by a sufficiently large force before they even arrived. I don't actually know what resources the ambassador has at his disposal.'

Could the Night Guards have all been taken out? Felyawn might've dug up any number of dark magic using unicorns for all Prey knew.

There was a horrible thought, but he couldn't deny the remote possibility. In this world, magical might trumped all.

Unicorns first, then the flying pony races like thestrals and pegasi, and then earth ponies. Griffins ranked below unicorns but above thestrals and pegasi as a threat. Minotaurs below them, but above earth ponies. Diamond dogs about the same. And then, below the sturdy and robust earth ponies, everyone else. Zebra, deer, goats, donkeys, cows, and finally, sheep. And alicorns of course at the unassailable top, but that was a completely different scale which wasn't worth even factoring in.

But twenty thestrals? Prey had been there when the Resistance launched their doomed assault at the hill, and had seen them all burn. Twenty thestrals, even warriors, could die in seconds if four or five skilled unicorns got the drop on them. But that was only if Luna hadn't come along. And seeing as how the Night Guard weren't already here in Ponyville, it was looking more and more

likely that was the case.

Sharp Tang had run to inform Luna. But what if the Sargent Major had never actually found Luna? Maybe the night alicorn had disappeared, or gone off somewhere? It wasn't like Luna had anyone she had to answer to. Prey hadn't actually seen who had flown out when they left him behind, just the distant flying shapes disappearing into the night, having been just half a minute too slow.

For all he knew, Luna could've been interested in doing something else tonight, and have simply said; "No".

This wasn't the Deeper Green at night, just a small pony town, without the hungry dangers, but some approaches were constant between the two; Scouting. When in doubt, gather more information.

Prey stayed under the level of the stream bank, and began to slink sideways.

Sleeping houses, dark gardens, an empty market square, closed flower heads just visible in pots, trees outlined against the night, the slight **creak-creak-creak** of a storefront sign on its' chain moving in a faint breath of night wind. But no sign of external life or activity.

Prey's soaked fur and wool had gone from cold and out the other side to that fake, almost numbingly warm feeling. He'd suffered far worse. But he was still cold.

He saw a round lump on the doorstep outside one house, and for a second thought it could be a severed head. But it was just a foal's ball, not a warning or some such other gory thing. He even saw a small playground, it taking him a moment to work out what those odd, unfamiliar frames were in the dark. A playground, not a gallows. But this was a pony town, rural or not, so it was only to be expected.

Prey moved on, methodically following the stream's path skirting the edge of the town, eyes and ears scanning the dark for anything of actual use. He was looking for movement, looking for something out of place, eyes never still.

He glanced up and behind himself frequently, trying to accurately keep mental track of his surroundings at all times. His neck hurting from his shoulders being wound so tight. He knew, he just *knew* that any second now the other horseshoe was going to drop. He'd tracked halfway around the small town already, and hadn't found anything, which only meant what was going to go wrong, was waiting in the other half of town and was getting closer every step.

Now he wished he'd stuck with Lemon Pink. Perhaps he should go back and find her? He was split on if it would be safe to leave the town or not to hurry back to her. All of Prey's bitter past experience firmly told him not to even try relying on anyone else, no not even Lemon Pink.

'No, that's not quite true. Crimson for example, he saved my life twice.'

Prey's paranoia warred with his indecision and fear of being spotted if he tried to leave, against the knowledge that Lemon was waiting out there, and might be able to provide assistance. Never underestimate the power of a unicorn's magic to tip the scales.

What should he do? Stay put, go further in, or turn back?

Prey shivered on the dark stream bank, the long grass sticking to his wet wool. He let out a long breath through clenched teeth, 'I should go back and try to re-join with Lemon. It's the most logical choice.' Prey admitted to himself.

He'd have to crawl all the way back around half the town and cross the stream again in the dark, and hope Lemon Pink was waiting where he'd left her. If nothing had gone wrong, and something was *very* wrong right now, she'd still be hiding behind that bush, under an illusionary veil.

Prey stopped moving. He hadn't been making any motion before

that, but now he stopped even breathing, going as still as the dead. Slowly, just his eyes swivelled up towards the expanse of the night sky.

Slowly, oh so slowly, three wheeling black shapes drifted down on silent wings.

Like giant owls, they didn't make a sound. The three figures silhouetted against the stars didn't flap or beat their wings, just slowly drifting down towards the ground.

Prey watched unmoving, as the three griffins finally reached and alighted in the middle of the street. They were griffins, they had to be. No one else went around with razor sharp talons instead of forehooves, and the curved beaks instead of muzzles were another clue.

The three bird lions in the middle of the unlit street wore light fitting, dark grey coverings, but no black. Many mistakenly assume black is the perfect camouflage at night, but it's not. Very few things in nature are pure black. Dark grey actually blends in far better. The plumage of their heads were similarly obscured beneath face coverings. Prey didn't know if they'd dyed the feathers of their wings for this mission, or if Felyawn had found only griffins with dark feather colouration to send. Whatever the answer, it hardly mattered. These griffins were here now.

'They're standing right here, so where the everlasting hells is the Night Guard!? What kind of scenic route did that idiot Sharp Tang take them on?'

From his cover on the cold river bank Prey stared at the griffins, heart thumping, mind racing, as the three finished checking their surroundings. Two of them looked to the last one, who swiftly flicked through a number of gestures with his talon.

'Hunter sign language. For when you are stalking your prey, yez'?' Came the knowledge from Garrow. That didn't help Prey, he was too far away to see what signs they'd made in the dark.

'Shut up shut up shut up.' Prey strangled Garrow's remnant,

crushing the memory for all he was worth, 'Not now! Shut up and stay dead.'

When Prey looked again at the griffins, he found he'd missed whatever further signals they'd exchanged, because they'd just split up. The tallest one broke off towards that large oak tree growing down at the end of the road. The town's public library was supposed to be somewhere around that tree. A second griffin padded soundlessly off around a turn to the right, and the last one, distinguishable for seemingly missing the tuft at the end of his lion tail, slunk off to the left.

Small defining details, minor distinctions, pointless things your eyes caught on and stuck in your brain. Prey recognised the prowling slink they moved with, the way they kept their center of gravity low and their limbs loose, he'd seen it before in predators. A hunting stalk.

The situation settled and crystallised in Prey's mind. Somehow, the griffins were here and the Night Guard was not.

They were here to steal the supposed Elements unopposed, even though Prey was mostly certain the Elements were just bait. He'd rushed down here on Crimson's request, but only because he'd been expecting for the Night Guard to already have everything well in hoof. He'd mistakenly split up from Lemon because he feared Luna was already waiting here and would see, and now he was alone.

It was just him here in this sleeping town to stop three griffins, or even possibly more than three since he couldn't assume he'd spotted them all.

Those were terrible odds. He had no tools or traps with him, and there was no time to set up any runic arrays. The griffins were already moving, spreading out to whatever or wherever their targets were.

If he could get back with Lemon Pink in time, and catch one of the three griffins alone, then maybe with Lemon's assistance he could stun that one, and break into their mind. But they could be about to grab the Elements and fly off into the night, gone before he could

do anything. Zoma'Grika, his absence at the Palace must've been noticed by now. Before, he'd only been going to say he'd been left behind by Sharp Tang, and so followed the Night Guard down the mountain at his own pace. He should've met with the Night Guards down here, and all would've been fine.

But now, *now* he was down here in Ponyville alone. If Luna ever found out he'd merely stood back and watched the griffins fly off, when he was the only Night Guard around, she would, she would... He didn't want to think what she would do.

'Why? Why's it always only me?' Prey silently screamed to the dark night sky.

Why was it always up to him to fix all the problems of ponies? There was no justice in the world.

'But I already know that, don't I? The world isn't fair. The strong take, and the weak suffer. It has always been so.' Prey bitterly reflected, hiding there in the dark grass of the stream bank, cold and wet.

'Truly, nothing ever changes.'

Prey let himself slowly slide down the bank backwards. He'd cross the stream and circle back around to the train tracks to find Lemon Pink. You had to be realistic about these things.

He was a runt lamb, and they were three hunting griffins all tensed and on edge. The last time Prey had tried to fight a griffin one on one, look what had happened. He'd been trapped inside a burning building with Garrow, and almost plummeted to his death. Only Crimson's miraculous timing had saved him from splattering his brains and organs out all over the concrete.

A hero would've probably leapt in, sounded the alarm, woken to townsfolk, and faced the griffins down. Heroes are also always the first ones to die. It's usually the coward that survives. Being good at killing didn't make you a fighter. It just made you a murderer.

Prey wasn't a hero, he wasn't a fighter, but he *was* a coward. He was

going to go get his backup, and hope the griffins weren't already gone by the time he got back.

He took a fortifying breath, and then held it as he stepped back into the frigid water of the stream. His legs, which had just started to warm back up to normal, promptly went back to yelping and hyperventilating about the cold. He ignored their bitter complaints, pushing forwards into the dark stream to get across, his sore hooves seemingly hitting every submerged rock in the mud he couldn't see. His forelegs were tingling very unpleasantly in the cold water.

Prey halted. He looked down.

Underneath the dark surface, he could make out his forelegs submerged beneath the flowing water. The golden tracer bands were softly glowing gold.

"What?" The tremulous whisper escaped his lips.

The faint golden glow began to pulse.

'Oh no no no noNoNo!'

He was frozen in the middle of the stream, terrified, head racked back in a futile attempt to get away from his own forelegs.

'No no no, No! Not me, not now!'

The golden pulsing stopped. Prey held his breath, shivering and trembling, blood pounding in his ears.

What was going to happen? What was Luna doing? Was she right now about to-?

Tiredness crushed Prey like a falling boulder. His legs almost buckled, the stream tugging at his limbs. The world blurred as his eyelids involuntarily sagged.

'*No*.' Prey desperately rallied. Not *now*. He couldn't afford to fall unconscious right now.

Again the smothering tiredness hit him, a physical force, and turned

his muscles to putty.

He was in the middle of the stream, if he fell asleep right here-No. Prey refused. He refused the screamed demand by the siren sleep. He refused to fall.

'Get out of the water. Back to the bank.' Prey latched onto that thought with all his might.

He stumbled around, turning, the grassy bank just there-

-His eyes slid shut against his will. A moment of blackness.

The cold shock of water dragged him out as he fell to his knees. He gasped, the sudden cold driving the air from his lungs. But it wasn't freezing water, just really cold, he could still breathe-

-Sleep.

Prey choked, the last of his air escaping as bubbles. He'd tipped over forwards, another second of boneless blackness stealing the exact moment he fell from him.

People can drown pretty much anywhere. In the ocean, in their kitchen sink, in a puddle at the very top of a mountain. Half an inch of water is all that's needed. And the stream was significantly deeper than half an inch. Prey flailed limbs which barely seemed to move, kicking against the mud, cold water soaking his wool, it was up to his neck!

Panic. Breathing, he tried to take a big gulp of air. 'Breathe.'

But he was so tired.

Black. He'd shut his eyes again. There sounded like there was a bell clanging in the distance but also terribly close. Ashen grey. His mindscape, but there was some force pulling at him and trying to drag him away.

'Wake up wake up WAKE UP!'

Prey spluttered, reflexively inhaled, and cold water shot up his

nose. Prey jerked his head up, but found he'd lost his footing on the streambed. His legs were trying to disobey him, he was spluttering, cold water stinging his cheeks and weighing him down. Move! Get to the bank. If he could just reach the bank-

-He fell forwards back into blackness. Ashen grey. His mindscape again. The distant bell was ringing an alarm right in his ears. No, it wasn't a bell, it was a booming voice, demanding something. He couldn't make it out, but it was tugging at him like a riptide, pulling him away.

Prey frantically clung on to his mindscape, the burnt husks of trees bending over as they were sucked towards the pulling boom of the voice. He made out what it was demanding clearly for the first time. His name; "Prey!"

The burning in his lungs as they failed to get oxygen was what snapped him back to reality this time. Would this be the last time he awoke?

Prey was terrified, he was going to drown and yet the bank was right there, less than a hoof away as he floated down the stream.

Prey fought his body, fought the pull of the river, fought for air, fought to force one hoof to reach out and snag ahold of a clod of long grass-

Black. Ashen grey fading away behind him as he was sucked into a tunnel, tumbling through he didn't know what.

"PREY." The bell boomed in his head. "PREY, ATTEND TO OUR SUMMONS."

Cold stream water splashing. The dark bank slipping away. Water in his ears, in his mouth, in his nose. Eyes sliding shut once again. He desperately took a deep breath and held it.

Blackness, swirling into stars. Prey was bodiless, all sense of touch gone. It was just him, getting thrown into an infinite starfield. Prey knew this, he'd seen it before. A mirror-still lake lay far below, filling the plane and reflecting the nighttime heavens back up

above. It was just an endless lake of stars, the mirrored constellations slowly wheeling overhead, and a confusing disjointedness, not quite able to tell which way was up and which was down.

"PREY! HEED OUR CALL AT ONCE."

The vast dream avatar of Luna loomed over Prey's presence, galaxies making up her mane, and stars and comet trails her body. It was fake, merely how Luna chose to let others see her in the dream realm she controlled, but that did not stop the fear it inspired. In a nightmare, the dreamer doesn't know to question the fear they'd find ridiculous if they were but awake, because in that moment they are asleep.

Prey bit down on his tongue.

Stinging pain and the copper taste of blood filled his mouth. He jerked his head above the water, sucking in another desperate lungful of air. The real night sky was spinning above him. No, he was the one slowly spinning, caught in the stream's current as it carried him along.

'Get to the bank before Luna calls again!'

The very real promise of drowning lent Prey a burst of strength, enough for a moment to counteract the magical tiredness. Prey drove his legs down, hooves finding mud and smooth pebbles. He stood up, water level dropping back down to his chest, and water streaming off his wool.

Get to the stream bank. That was the only thing in Prey's head.

Get to the bank. He didn't even have to get out. Just half out would be good enough, please, just even half out. Get to the bank.

"PREY!" Luna thundered.

It was so fast, Prey didn't even realise the switch was happening until he was already floating weightless again in the starry dream realm. "Cease thy aggravations! We have summoned thee for a purpose."

"No no no, go back, let me go. In the real world, I need to get back right now-"

"Cease! Thy panic is meaningless, so cease we say! Tis' I, thy rightful Princess. This is our dream realm, look around thyself, canst thou not recall? Now be still, we have questions for thee that thou must forthwith stand and answer for."

Prey could scarcely think enough to be coherent, but desperation lent him the presence of mind to try using the forms of address Luna always demanded, "Princess Luna, please, Your Majesty, I need to wake up. There's a stream, and I-"

"Be quiet we say! We have not the time for prattle. Answer our questions forthwith, and hurry. And do not attempt a lie, for we shall know. We have given thee the benefit of the doubt, and wait to hear thy answer, but why hast thou abandoned thy post?" The astral avatar of stars and night loomed over Prey.

"Please, the emergency message from Gloom and Crimson. Screech-I mean Lieutenant Screech, he was gone to fight the fires. I told Sargent Major Sharp Tang Your Majesty, I swear. I told him, I did what he said, but please let me wake up-"

Luna cut him off, literally silencing his dream voice to speak herself, "What message did thou bare to Sharp Tang? This is of the utmost importance. And what is thy purpose for leaving our city and venturing to the township of Ponyville in this time of emergency without informing anypony?"

"W-what? I did, I did tell Sharp Tang, it was the message! The message from Gloom, it said the griffins were going to try to steal the Elements-"

"The Elements of Harmony?" Luna boomed, the stars in the dream realm shaking.

"Yes! I swear. Sharp Tang told me to get everyo-pony to the parade ground! I ran around telling all the Guards, but when I got there, they'd already flown off! I thought they would be down here already! I thought they'd left me behind, so I went down the

mountain to follow them, but they're not here! I need-I need to wake up, Princess Luna, give me just one minute awake-!"

"The Major Sharp Tang has been found dead, murdered in our very Palace! Craven knaves have dared to defile our home!" The looming avatar of star dust roiled in displeasure, angry colours mixing with dark, constellations swirling faster, "But now thou sayest he led our Night Guard off, and that thou hast left and gone down to Ponyville unattended. How then is this possible?"

Sharp Tang was dead? But how? Who was leading the Night Guards then when they flew away, if not to Ponyville? Prey didn't know, and he didn't care, *because he was drowning!*

"Let me out, I'm-!"

Again Luna silenced him, his dream voice automatically cutting out when she herself spoke, "Who dares to murder ponies under our wing? Who would steal from our worthy heroes? Tell us Prey. What does thou know?"

"Griffins! The griffins, they're here! I saw, three of them, they're here right now. Please, L-Princess Luna, listen, I need to wake up!" Prey begged.

He was going to die. He was going to die because of this! He was going to drown in a muddy ditch, this was going to be his end. Nothing more than a sodden, bloated runt corpse, found days from now stuck under some bridge. Ringing in his head, far away terrible burning in his lungs. The burning was rapidly kindling stronger at horrible speeds, even here in the dream realm. Now, right at the end, it was breaching even his unconscious mind.

Ringing in his head. Pounding in his lungs. Luna was still going on, but it was a distorted booming, and it was rapidly fading. Harder to think, fading...

...Black.

Underwater, the cold nothing to the blazing fire filling his chest. Prey hadn't thought he was going to wake up again. Heavy,

everything was so heavy. But his chest burned. And there would be no Lemon Pink fast enough to revive him when he stopped breathing this time.

Water choking him. The thundering ringing pounded in his ears, in his heart, smothering all else.

Move. Move legs. Move. *Move*.

It was so hard, muscles as weak and frantic as a hummingbird's. Luna was still droning. He was awake, and asleep, conscious, unconscious, and dying. The burning was too much, Prey had to breathe. Just raise his head, reach the air waiting just there. Just one more breath, not even to reach the bank, just to live one more moment!

Water rushed down his throat. His lungs had given up, his mouth opening all by itself. The burning of his chest turned to that of liquid fire, somehow infinitely worse. Fading, the banging in his head, blackness, water, sinking, choking, drowning.

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Prey remembered afterwards. It was a post memory. There was only *before* the happening, and *after* it finished happening. There was no experiencing the moment in-between, only recalling it afterwards.

And even then, his recollection was suspect. His brain had been starving for oxygen, Luna's magic dragging him down, the whole world spinning, water filling up his lungs, terrified, panicking, and dying.

Prey had wished to get to the stream bank. That was it. He had wanted to get out of the water which was killing him. So he'd wished for the closest salvation he could find, and that had been the stream bank. So he had wished, not in words, but in desperate feelings.

Then he remembered the world pulling the curtain back, leaving the fabric bare. He'd remembered it, the world of cloth and tangled threads, tying everything together. it was the stitching holding

everything in place. And he remembered again the dreadful horror. That in-between, that space, the things the fabric of the world was stitched over and holding back.

In that moment, Prey remembered *remembering* the time when he'd seen this once before. Terrible, terrible, *wrong* memories that could only be experienced while in that in-between. Not before, nor after, only during. Before and after, the experience became black and white, the meat of the contents missing. But during...

Prey's own stitching had pulled and opened up. He'd been full of stuffing and straw, and he remembered a threaded needle-

-- - ~ ~ x ~ x ~ X ~ x ~ x ~ ~ - - -

Then the time of remembering was over, and Prey was coughing up his lungs, draped over the stream bank. His ribbon stuck to his wet cheek, and his wool was a sodden mass of weight. Burning up inside, but shivering fit to burst on the outside. There was no strength left in him, but by all the dead he could breathe!

Air. Sweet air. It burned his throat and he hacked out more water, coughing and breathing and trying to do less of the first and more of the second and then Luna-

And then Luna dragged him back again.

Ashen grey, then sparkling black. The world swirled and ran together, and when it finished resolving, he was in the starry expanse of Luna's controlled dream realm yet again. Luna's vast dream avatar was still towering over him, still thundering away, still demanding answers of him.

Prey didn't have a dream avatar. He hadn't last time either. He had just wanted to be left alone. He was bodiless, without a face or expression, but for a moment, he hung there and just *looked* at Luna.

He. H A T E D. Luna.

"For the last time, stop fighting us! Canst thou not comprehend the severity of the situation? Thy presence is required until thou hast

answered our questions and not before." Real anger resounded in Luna's command, and hers was the power to enforce it too. A Night Guard had been murdered in the Palace, *Her* Palace! There was no patience left in Luna tonight.

"What are these three Griffins you speak of Prey? Speak quickly!"

'This...'

Her arrogance... Prey just did not have words.

She had so very nearly killed him by sheer accidental arrogance.

He'd just barely survived that... just *that*. A new deep-seated fear was now forever kindled in him at the word 'drowning', the memory only minutes old. And that was Luna's fault too. His throat burning and his lungs screaming, relegated to dying in a muddy ditch, all because Luna hadn't listened for even ten seconds. *Ten seconds*. Less, even. She hadn't listened for even that long because she had a dead body on her end, and so it was inconceivable to her that something just as dire might be happening on his end.

She was an alicorn, the princess and defender of Equestria, with a chip on her shoulder and a thousand years to make up for, and therefore her every choice held weighted significance far beyond any of Prey's.

He was a lowly pawn. She was the grand queen. There was no equating their two worths.

And Luna was still waiting for his answer.

"I came down the train tracks. I followed them into Ponyville. I expected to find the Night Guard already here. They weren't. I grew suspicious. I snuck into the town. I saw three griffins in dark clothing land. They split up. I was about to follow one of them, when you whisked me away. Your Majesty."

It hardly felt like the flat, calm words were coming from him. But he had to answer, to give Luna what she wanted to hear. All the hate in the world couldn't hurt the immortal alicorn princess. However, she was more than capable of hurting him if he didn't

comply.

'Pride is for the strong. I am not strong. I am weak. I almost drowned in a ditch. I have nothing to threaten Luna with, nothing in the world with which to make her pay.'

The strong take, and the weak suffer.

"What is their purpose in daring to set hoof in Ponyville?" Luna asked, or rather demanded. Why exactly, Prey didn't know. It was obvious, wasn't it?

"To steal the Elements of Harmony, as per Sargent Gloom's emergency note, Your Majesty." Prey answered quietly and without any inflection. It was that, or scream the words at her.

In her anger or just indomitable self assurance, Luna didn't even seem to notice anything amiss in his attitude, "That was rhetorical. These griffins split up though? Where is each of the knaves' destinations?"

"I don't know, Princess Luna. They split up. I didn't see where. Because I was put to sleep." Prey repeated, still fighting to smother his blazing hate. Luna was already angry, he wouldn't be making himself into one of the causes. Prey could feel the world laughing at him with how blindingly unfair it all was.

"How did they infiltrate our Palace? How did they slip by and murder one of mine own? One of our little beloved ponies, who swore into my service, and we to their protection. Yet they dare!?" Luna's avatar ranted. Prey wasn't sure she was actually expecting and answer. He did so anyway, reclaiming a pitiful amount of spiteful joy in being able to answer in the negative. It was all he could do:

"I don't know, Your Majesty."

Rising above the bubbling mire of black hate he was fighting to repress, a moment of clear intuition somehow still managed to float up and into Prey.

'That mimic pretending to be Rising Star...'

He/she/it had been in the Palace. Prey didn't know where it had gone or what it had done afterwards. The arson distraction that'd called away Lieutenant Screech, Prey had thought it was a ploy by the ambassador, Felyawn. But could the griffins really have somehow killed Sharp Tang inside the Palace before the thestral could make it to the Night Court to warn Luna? How would a griffin even have overheard Prey passing on Gloom's message to Sharp Tang? How would a griffin have even been in the Palace in the first place? And who then took Sharp Tang's place, flying off on a detour with the rest of the assembled Night Guards afterwards?

This all screamed "mimic" in Prey's head.

'I should've killed it the moment it stepped into the office, not let it talk, not let it take over my emotions, and not let it flee without destroying it afterwards.' Prey thought in bitter regret.

Luna's avatar abruptly twisted down, her astral constellation of a face coming close to Prey's presence. It was as if the moon had suddenly lent down, filling the entire night and blocking Prey's view to all else.

"Have these thieves stolen away the Elements from their rightful Bearers yet, doest thou know Prey?" Luna's voice filled the entire dream realm.

"No, Princess Luna. I don't know. You 'called' before anything else happened."

"Hast not been five minutes then, good. We doubt these griffins can have yet taken the Elements. The fools. None but their rightful pony bearer may wield them anyway. Nevertheless they will pay for their impudence. What do they even hope to accomplish-? But nay! Tis' is best if we put an end to this first, and question later. They can answer for themselves from the confines of our dungeons." Luna's vast avatar pulled up and away, becoming a piece of the rotating night sky again. Angry red stars were still sparking into distant supernovas in her avatar's mane.

Luna almost seemed to only say the next bit to herself, still pulling further away, up and up into the night sky, the avatar losing

features and melding back into space and stars:

"The Element bearers, we have not had a good enough cause to yet meet, but perhaps... tis' poor recompense, and poorer circumstances, but the cowardly griffins have forced our hoof. This is our chance to repay, at least in small part, our sins against their august selves."

Black. Prey woke back up on the muddy bank. His whole body was shivering in his sodden wool. The coppery taste of blood from biting his tongue still lingered in his mouth, and his throat felt hot and raw from coughing and retching up stream water.

Painfully, muscles cold and stiff, Prey rolled himself over. The real night sky, not the fake construct of Luna's manipulated dream, spread above him. Prey gazed up at it, his hate for Luna running in an uninterrupted loop inside his head. Hate. Hate. Hate. Hate. Hate.

He shivered, hugging his legs to himself.

The three griffins could do whatever the hell they wanted. They could steal, torture, and kill every single person and foal inside of Ponyville. Prey had no intention of moving from this spot. He was done. He was so utterly done tonight.

Life said 'No'. The choice wasn't up to him. Life is hundreds of stories happening all at once, and tonight, it was someone else's story. Sometimes, from another's point of view, you're just a side character. To play your role, and then be forgotten in their own grand narrative.

Tonight was someone else's story. The strong take, and the weak suffer their will.

The moonlight abruptly spiked into painful brilliance. Prey threw a stinging hoof over his abused eyes, panic blooming back into full force.

'Zoma'Grika, what now?!' Prey struggled to get upright, hooves slipping on the wet grass and mud of the stream bank.

The cold silvery brilliance ended as suddenly as it had appeared.

The night was abruptly much darker in its absence. Prey blinked rapidly, peeking above the height of the bank.

He... wasn't surprised really. The theme of magic had been obvious, as had been her words just now. Above the bank, standing tall and proud, dark mane alive and moving by itself, was Luna.

Because who else would it have been? No sharp *crack* of standard teleportation magic, because of course it wouldn't be a normal level teleport. Luna was an alicorn.

The two armoured Night Guards she'd brought along in her wake were normal, though. They looked uneasy, shifting around and trying to check in all directions for anything that might pose a danger to their princess. Prey tiredly wondered if Luna had even bothered to tell them where they were going before she teleported them out of Canterlot. Probably not.

But they were also just background here, side characters. Like Prey. This was all about Luna, she was center stage of the spotlight tonight, and from every line in her posture, she knew it.

Or maybe she just accepted it as her due. Yes, that was more likely. An alicorn was automatically the center any room. Or in this case, rural town.

Luna half turned her head, crown still resting on her brow and long horn held high.

Prey blinked, and realised she was looking around for him. He crawled over the edge of the bank and stood stiffly up, still shivering, muddy, and cold.

"Princess Luna." He said, eyes lowered. 'I hate you!' He internally screamed.

"There thou art, Prey. We-what is the cause of thy appearance?" Luna changed what she was saying mid sentence.

A spike of fear shot through. Surely she wasn't taking offence at daring to appear in her presence like this? Ridiculous, but he still worried, because Luna was still angry. Her eyes were even colder

than normal, her motions jerky, and when she moved, it was too fast. And if he wasn't imagining it, her mane was roiling faster than usual too.

'No, she's upset that someone dared to break one of her toy soldiers, Sharp Tang, not about me.'

Prey cleared his raw throat, swallowing the lingering taste of blood, "I was crossing the stream. Then you summoned me, Princess. I fell in."

Did that make her realise he could've drowned because of her poor timing? Or did she even care?

"Thou art not injured then." Luna said, just like that dismissing him from her concerns. She snapped back around to look into the town of Ponyville, which despite the royal figure standing right on its outskirts, was still sleeping. Which was... understandable, even if it seemed impossible. There hadn't been any loud noises as of yet, and unlike her usual form of address Luna was not shouting, so the residents hadn't had a reason to wake up yet.

"Now," Luna's voice was deceptively calm in the cold night, "Let us put an end to this farce. If all goes well, our innocent ponies here will not even have cause to wake from their beds. Such was our duty then, and such is our duty now as Princess of the Night."

Prey exchanged a look with the two Guards which was both alarmed and haggard, but without the power to change anything as they were dragged along in the alicorn's wake.

One of the two Night Guards still tried, the one with a clan Cilldara stud in his ear, "Princess L-"

That was as far as he got in trying to circumspectly reign his princess in.

"Hold thy peace, all of thee." Luna ordered without turning, "This here, this night, is our duty. Nopony, nay not even our sister, may gainsay us here. On every rulers' crown is levied a cost, that of stewardship. To protect everypony under thy rule who cannot

defend themselves, and not the other way around. To not do so, is to be a tyrant."

For just the briefest moment, Luna's mane stilled as she stood there, back straight and unyielding, "And we are no would-be tyrant. Never again."

For all Luna had just said, the words kindled a reminder of the opposite in Prey's head. He could all too easily recall Felyawn's own words, about the griffin's justified fears of Luna descending into madness once again, and this time, succeeding in dooming all life. Because Prey knew a thing or two about madness. And madness is contagious.

'Oh you're not a tyrant, are you? You speak of saving everyone, but when are you going to start? You make empty grand statements, but never think it worth your time to look at the small picture, at the little guy. Like me. Who's fault was it I almost drowned not five minutes ago, huh? You didn't save me, *I* had to save *me*!' Prey internally seethed, still shivering away and having to clench his jaw to prevent his teeth from chattering.

The Guards however winced in almost physical discomfort at Luna's words. Their thoughts gave voice to their worry.

'-it's not like that. It shouldn't be like that. It's our duty too, Your Highness-'

'-this is why our loyal clans came back. To make sure you never had to go it alone again-'

But neither voiced their feelings out loud. Now was not the time. Luna had given an order, and like good thestrals, they would stoically obey.

Luna wasn't waiting for their agreement anyway, or even disagreement, because she didn't need it. She was an alicorn, and she had made a declaration. Now she was going to follow through. It was as simple as that.

"Now we begin."

Invisible needles immediately assaulted Prey's hooves. An involuntary hiss escaped from between his clenched teeth as Luna cast a spell. A huge build up of sparkling blue and indigo magic formed before Luna in an instant, without even a hint of strain as a nod to the extreme effort a normal unicorn would've suffered. And it *was* unicorn magic, not that elusive and otherworldly alicorn magic Prey had once witnessed Luna command. Just normal unicorn magic, but on a far grander scale.

'Normal magic. As if there is such a thing.' Prey resentfully glared, unseen and already forgotten at the back of the group. His jaw clenched tighter, not just to prevent his teeth from chattering as he shivered, but also against the shooting needle pains building up in his hooves.

Apprehension began fluttering away in Prey's stomach as Luna went on channelling, the cloud of dark blue magic above Luna's head building higher and higher, 'C'mon, she's got to cast soon. What do you need so much magic for. Just do it already!'

Luna flicked her horn, "There. That is the innocent sleeping inhabitants seen to. And now..."

The magic snapped into a huge geometric shape too fast for Prey's eyes to follow, and vanished in an instant into an expanding afterimage. Prey flinched, jerking back but too slow, the magic was already in effect. His hooves flared in pain, wind rushed in his ears, and his wool stood on end.

Prey cast around wildly. The world had gone and changed on him. Thatched houses with dark windows had sprung up all around them out of nowhere.

'What? What?!'

No, it was them who'd moved, not their surroundings. They'd been teleported to the middle of Ponyville's main street. But after the sudden transition on the stream bank, and his memory still fresh of a world full of stitches, the sudden teleportation didn't do Prey's state any good.

There was magic in the very air, all around, Prey could feel it layered over everything. He hunched in on himself, afraid at the hated touch.

"**Halt**!" Luna's unexpected bellow had Prey falling back onto his haunches, forehooves snapping uselessly up to cover his ears. His head was actually left ringing, feeling like spikes were crawling into his brain.

"Surrender forthwith, and we may yet have mercy." Luna boomed.

Hooves still clapped protectively over his ears, Prey looked past Luna and the two Night Guards.

There, caught in the act of take-off at the end of the main street, feathered wings spread, one of the griffins stood frozen.

Wide eyes stared at Luna from out of their cloth mask.

Prey hadn't even seen them crouched there in the disorientation that had come after the teleport.

The griffin's wings twitched, hackles rising. "A poor choice indeed!" Luna announced disappointedly.

A blur of starry blue magic lashed out from Luna. The griffin let out half of a piercing avian screech, but that was all they had time for.

The thick whip of magic struck like a constricting snake, wrapping around and binding the griffon, claw and talon. They struggled, flapping, trying to claw free. Utterly hopeless. Luna's magic was completely impervious to physical resistance, and in two seconds flat, she had the griffin trussed up, legs, wings, and even tail all bound tightly against their body, and beak clamped shut.

Their eyes were left uncovered however, and in them Prey saw the terrified panic the griffin couldn't voice.

"One down, two to cowards to go." Luna stated in the exact same disappointed tone, striding forwards down the street.

The Night Guard with the wingblades hurriedly spoke up, "Your

Majesty, any other griffins will have heard-"

"Nay, fear not. None that I do not wish to will hear anything tonight. The cowards may not warn their fellow knaves, nor may they disturb the rest of our little ponies. We have seen to it." Luna cut him off, not even slowing her march.

So that was the unkown spell Luna had cast earlier. Something powerful enough to subdue the entire town. How terrifying.

Bravely, or stupidly from Prey's perspective, the other Guard also tried, looking towards the bound griffin floating in their magical bindings, "The, ah, your prisoner-"

"Ah! A good call. Yes, we shall bring them with us. No doubt they wish to be speedily reunited with their fellows." Luna said, as if she'd already dismissed the defeated griffin from her mind they were so unimportant, but Prey still heard the witheringly cold and sharp edge under her words. He wasn't fooled for even a second by the self assured victor persona Luna was projecting. Because it was only her outer shell.

Beneath it was still the unfeeling and coldly alien half of Luna, the part which ponies were blind to and only Prey seemed to sense.

Luna didn't stop, or slow, or look back. But the implied "keep up" to Prey and the two Night Guards was imperiously clear. They were expected to follow without question. So they did. What else were they supposed to do in a town magically put to sleep?

'The action of a tyrant indeed.' The silent accusation again whispered in Prey's mind. He snuck a glance at the bound griffin, feeling nothing but tired disdain for the griffin's fate. The bird lion's eyes were rolling, darting everywhere frantically, but it was hopeless. Luna's magic held them immobile as it quietly floated the avian along behind them. Like a disobedient pet on a leash.

They were just at the edge of Prey's mental perception range, bobbing in and out. Their thoughts were a panicked despairing mess of Equestrian and also Griffish;

'-mein land braucht mich! No no, High Sky save and protect me. Das Nightmare hat mich!-'

Prey had no sympathy left in him tonight for anyone but himself.

He was tired, sore, cold, shivering, afraid, exhausted, and his hooves were aching savagely. Just the same as the griffin, he deeply hated and feared Luna, *more* even. There was only one difference between the griffin; his leash to Luna had a bit more slack in it, and was gold, not midnight-blue.

'It's your own fault for coming to Equestria. It's your fault for trying to fight an alicorn. And it's your fault for believing you were doing the right thing in serving your country. Why'd you leave Griffonia were you were safe and happy to come to pony lands? You should've stayed at home.' Prey thought pitilessly as he stumbled along and tried to keep up with Luna's long strides.

This, everything that happened next, it was all on Felyawn and Griffonia. Prey had no power to change anything anymore, he was just a spectator to Luna's actions. Him, and the two Night Guards she'd brought along. He was starting to think Luna had only brought them because she wanted witnesses to spread tales of how she effortlessly captured the three griffins afterwards. She wasn't using the Guards to scout, nor to hold the prisoner, and certainly not for her own protection.

Luna was leading them very confidently along the main street, Stirrup Street, Prey saw from the dim sign, one of the few streets in Ponyville that seemed to have been paved. Prey assumed that meant she knew where they were going, and was heading to capture the two remaining griffins. There was no question of 'if' in Prey's head, only 'when'.

The threat and the risk of this mission were all gone. Luna was an immortal alicorn. What could two magicless griffins do against that?

'Nothing, just like me. A magicless and talentless runt. A pity case to Equestrians everywhere for not being born a pony.'

They reached the end of the street, the thick but invisible feeling of magic still hanging in the night air and savagely stinging Prey's hooves. Here, the street split into a three pronged fork.

There was a small collection of dark houses directly ahead. Off at an angle to the right of the fork was that large, squat oak tree again, mostly just a shadowy shape in the night. And finally on the left side more dark homes, one of which stood out for being oddly shaped, a rounded spire slap bang in the middle of its roof. Of all things, the top looked like a giant cupcake with three candles sitting atop it in the dark.

With their night vision, it was normal that the two Night Guards would spot their adversaries before Prey could; "Princess L-"

"We see them, Swift Slice. Thy warning is unneeded." Luna interrupted again, not breaking stride as she turned down the left fork in the street.

It took Prey that one second longer for his own worse eyes to pick out what she meant. Both shrouded griffins were ahead, one directly outside the weird cake house, and the other in the attitude of approaching the first, their back towards Luna. They hadn't heard the alicorn or the thestrals voices, because just like Luna had said, she was in complete control of this confrontation.

The levitating griffin in Luna's magic uselessly tried to scream a warning to their friends, '-<renn weig!> Run away Jacknaw. Turn around and see! <Renn weig>-'

'Hopeless.'

Those two griffins were already as good as captured. Prey felt no apprehension or danger at the coming conflict only seconds away, because Luna was here.

The outcome was a foregone conclusion. Prey had already said it; he was just a spectator here tonight.

Griffin number two conspicuously had a lumpy cloth bag slung over his shoulder, and was hurrying towards his compatriot, who was

sweeping the skyline anxiously. Too bad. He should've been searching at ground level. Not that it would've made the blindest bit of difference.

The waiting griffin looked around as he heard his companion's approach. Luna had not made them invisible, although Prey knew without a doubt it would've been easy for the alicorn. No, she obviously wanted the griffins to see her coming. And the griffin definitely saw Luna.

Wings snapped open as he reared back, feathers bristling in fright:

"Nightmare Moon!" He screeched, and attempted a standing take off.

By instinct alone, Prey just managed to cover his ears in time. "We are NOT that evil hag!" Luna roared.

Predictably at the sonic assault, everyone who wasn't Luna, even Prey who was behind Luna and had his ears covered, reeled. Like a thunderclap, it was so loud it physically staggered you. Luna chose to use their moment of stunned deafness to strike.

Effortlessly two more tendrils of night blue magic speared forwards.

By sheer dumb luck more than any sort of skill, it was the griffin facing away from Luna who dodged, throwing themselves blindly to the left in a roll. The other one attempted to follow through on their standing take off, but was still too stunned to react to the lash of magic.

Luna smacked that one flat into the dirt hard, their legs buckling under the crushing blow and wings akimbo. Then the magical tendril plucked the griffin off the street almost disdainfully, like it was being defiled by being relegated to picking up litter, before binding them up just as tightly as the first griffin Luna had captured.

The griffin who'd blindly dodged rolled across the street and leapt back upright with catlike agility, landing in a fighting crouch, cloth bag still slung across their chest. They actually hissed at Luna, half

enraged cat, half raucous caw, "*Luna*. The very mare of the hour."

Prey recognised that voice. It was Felyawn himself.

The ambassador had dyed his feathers and golden fur, and wore the obscuring face covering, but now that he was facing towards them, it was impossible to mistake those ice blue flecks for anyone else's eyes.

So Felyawn had actually come here tonight himself. It fit in a strange way. The griffin completely believed in what he was doing, and would never send a subordinate to do what he himself would not.

Luna didn't immediately strike again, or cast a different spell. She tilted her head slightly in thought, "I know thee, thou hast been in our sister's court before. Thy name, what was it again?"

"Felyawn, ambassador of Griffonstone, and the High and Low Kingdoms." Felyawn answered tightly, still poised to spring.

His piercing gaze tracked his battered subordinate, as Luna reeled them in to float alongside the first captured and gagged griffin. Both floated helplessly there, adding their mental cries of anger and despair to Prey's headache. The Night Guard with the wingblades was keeping his attention fixed on the bound pair at all times, rather pointlessly, while the other with the claw boots was solely devoted to Luna's wellbeing.

"Then thou hast much to answer for, ambassador Felayawn of Griffonstone, and the High and Low Kingdoms." Luna's voice was as cold and hard as stone, "We thought that the griffins knew better. They certainly did when last I walked Equss a millennium past. Thy nation will not be forgiven for this act of unprovoked aggression."

Prey swallowed. Was it going to be as he had feared all along? Was Luna going to choose to escalate this into war? She had the perfect excuse right here in front of her, the very griffin ambassador himself caught in the act.

'Why did you have to come yourself?!' Prey thought at Felyawn

angrily, but his anger was tinged with hopeless resignation. At this stage, it made little difference. Everyone would know it was the griffins who'd ordered this, captured ambassador or not.

Felyawn narrowed his eyes at Luna, never breaking eye contact, "Unprovoked aggression? Such transparent lies are unbecoming of royalty, Your Majesty." He spoke the title with disdain every bit the equal to Luna's own.

Luna twitched. A shadow of burning rage flickered across her features, then it was gone, replaced again by the cold alicorn princess. She turned her nose up in contempt at Felyawn:

"Thy motivations are meaningless, and we have no interest in listening to what is no doubt well crafted rhetoric of poisonous hate. Thou hast caused the murder of one of our little ponies. We will not further waste our breath tonight on thee. Thou would only further stain their memory with thy lies."

She said that, but Prey was almost certain it wasn't the griffins who'd killed Sharp Tang, they'd only been in it to steal the Elements of Harmony. Sure, it was probably Felyawn who'd organized the arson attack in Canterlot to occupy Screech and half the Night Guard, but the murder was done by that mimic who'd still been in the Palace at the time, and who had then led off the rest of the Night Guards on a wild goose chase while pretending to be Sharp Tang.

Except, why would the mimics do that? What did they get out of this? Why the sudden intervention on behalf of the griffins? Why help in Felyawn's scheme at all?

Were members of the Griffonian government secretly working with the mimics, then? Or maybe the mimics meant for the griffins to take the Elements and then steal the lot off them.

And... why wasn't there any surprise on Felyawn's face at the accusation? Surely talk of Sharp Tang's death should throw him, he wasn't supposed to have any idea what Luna was talking about, right?

So why couldn't Prey see anything like that reflected in Felyawn's eyes or posture? It was more than Felyawn being masterfully self controlled as an ambassador, it felt different. Prey knew a mask when he saw one, and he didn't think he was looking at one now.

"An unintended casualty, and one which could've been easily avoided, if Equestria had co-operated with us." Felyawn stated, "We are supposed to allies, yet when we came to you ponies about a threat to the whole world, with evidence and cause, and petitioned you for months, you refused point blank to act. You have no right to act like you're the innocent party in all this. Everything I have done I have done not only for my nation, but for everyone who will ever live."

"Thou admits it then, this was foreplanned by thy nation as a whole." From the side, Prey saw Luna's lip curl down in distaste, "They shall answer for their crimes in time. But first, you. Surrender thyself, and turn over the Elements of Harmony at once. We shall not ask twice."

Felyawn glared, beak clenched sharply shut. Slowly, he reached around to the lumpy cloth bag slung across his chest, and pulled it over his head. Wordlessly, he tossed it to the packed dirt of the street, halfway between him and Luna. Or rather, he would've done if Luna's magic hadn't snatched the cloth bag away before it could ever touch the ground. She yanked the bag close, almost anxiously ripping the binding off with a flex of her aura and looking inside. Prey himself didn't get to see what was in it.

Felyawn took Luna's momentary distraction to start speaking again. He'd willingly given up what was no doubt the six Elements of Harmony in the bag just to gain another minute to speak. It was the only method of defiance left to the griffin.

"This dispute between our two nations has only just begun. When facing the threat of extinction, there is no right or wrong left, only survival. And we are in the right. To live, to breathe, to survive, it is everyone's right, and we will not let Equestria steal it from us."

Was... was Felyawn actively trying to incite war?! Prey's heart pounded in the back of his throat, and the taste of blood was back.

No. No, Prey couldn't believe it. He'd spoken to the griffin through Lemon Pink, and he couldn't believe Felyawn was capable of that. The ambassador was a patriot through and through, and he would never actively damage his own nation like this. He might've risked war by stealing the Elements, but that was different, and had the secret approval of Griffonia behind it too.

Risking war to save his country in the future was one thing, but actively trying to throw it into a war after his plan had already failed, just out of spite? To potentially sacrifice thousands of his own beloved people?

No. No, Prey couldn't believe it and didn't, because it just couldn't be true.

It *wasn't* true.

'Mimic.'

Prey took a cautious step forwards, then another. He moved out from behind Luna's presence and to the side. He pushed aside the shivering of his body, the painful throbbing in his hooves, the pounding in his head, and *focused* on Felyawn.

And heard nothing. There was just a black hole where the griffin's mind should've been.

Prey had been in the same room with Felyawn before, he knew the real griffin wasn't a mimic. But this one in front of him was.

Prey stepped back in shock. The mimic's acting had been almost flawless, the glare, voice, pattern of speech, everything but what he said, and that Prey could only tell because he'd met the real Felyawn. This was the first time he'd encountered a mimic imitating someone he already knew to be real.

For a moment the icy blue *fake* eyes locked with the lamb's own. Prey thought he saw a moment where the mimic and not the griffin mask was looking back. Loathing, fear, revulsion. And then it was just Felyawn again, still spouting off to Luna:

"As it stands now, our nations cannot coexist. Yours is blatantly

playing at being antagonistic and unreasonable, in a transparent attempt to incite hostilities so you might claim you were provoked. One must wonder, why? Perhaps with the return of her sister, perhaps Celestia now feels confident enough to begin an age of conquest, hmm?"

It all made sense to Prey now. It had been the griffins' plan originally, but the mimics must've caught wind of it or manipulated the griffins right from the get-go. Here right at the end stage in the plan, they'd replaced Felyawn to try to steal the Elements of Harmony, which were sounding more and more like they were real with every passing minute, for themselves. And in the aftermath, they intended the griffins to take the fall, to ignite hostilities or even outright war between Equestria and Griffonia.

From the monarch of the mimics' point of view, it was coldly logical. Pit ponies against griffins, leave them to fight and weaken each other, while you get to keep the Elements for yourself. After all, while Equestria would invariably win the war, you had nothing to worry about if the Sun Wolf was out hunting birds and not bugs.

The quest to steal the Elements had failed the moment Luna had become involved. But the quest to start off conflict or even outright war? The mimic playing Felyawn was giving it his best shot.

"Take take take, nothing is ever enough for Equestria. Tell us, what will you do when you've taken the whole world? What about when there's nothing left to take? Will your pride and greed only be satisfied then?"

War. The mimic really was trying to start a war. A war where the Border Guard killed griffin chicks and burned towns, where unicorns would murder with lightning and magic. War.

Prey wasn't mad anymore. He didn't want a war.

But Prey wasn't in charge, he was just one of the spectators, Luna was the main actor on this stage tonight.

And Luna was seething. She wasn't shouting Felyawn into deafened silence, she was just standing there silently listening and steadily

getting angrier and angrier. Prey could see it, there was a literal distortion in the air around her body as ambient magic warped in her presence. Prey could only stare. He felt petrified.

Luna wasn't petrified though, she was just choosing not to obliterate Felyawn yet. *Yet*. Perhaps the suicidal nature of the apparent ambassador in front of her had impressed her just as much as it angered her. Or worse, she was patiently giving the 'griffin' enough rope to hang his whole entire nation with. What if she was actually liking the sound of a war, Prey thought in horror? A war to avenge Sharp Tang, to soothe her own pride, to remind the world who she was after being forgotten a thousand years.

To an immortal alicorn who played with their nation like gaming pieces, the dark allure of war might be an enticing board.

'But, I don't want war. I don't, I don't, I don't!'

What simple, what childish logic. 'I don't want war.'

But the logic was all the more true for it, more real than any complex speech given in any grand hall of philosophy.

I don't want war. How utterly undeniably and unquestionably true, a sentiment to ring down the ages, to be carved into the hearts of every mother and father who loves their child.

The world would be a different place if more people just said; "I don't want war".

So from the very depths of his soul, Prey gathered his courage, steeled his pounding heart and locked his shaking legs, and dared to interrupt.

"Princess Luna."

Once before, Prey had dared to speak up against Luna's order to be quiet in the defence of Crimson. For that, he had been dismissed and magically knocked unconscious for daring to say "But" to Luna. He'd learnt his lesson; do not contradict the strong if you are weak. Bow your head and bite your tongue, because you have no power to change anything, and will only suffer if you try.

Once. One word, "but", and then he'd been punished. But Prey had to try.

It would never be known by the world, or remembered as a moment of crossroads by nations. Who knows? Perhaps it didn't change anything, or perhaps it only changed just the smallest thing. Perhaps it was never as serious as it appeared to Prey.

It was highly possible a thousand others in the Equestrian government, the nobles and politicians, would've been able convince Luna to reconsider anyways. Perhaps Griffonia would've folded, perhaps Luna's temper would've cooled by itself, perhaps any number of the other factors would've come into play. So who knew if it made the blindest bit of difference in the end?

"Princess Luna," Prey squeaked, then coughed in a moment of burning shame and fear at his runt body betraying him like that, "I'm, I'm sorry for speaking out of turn. P-please forgive me, but, but I feel I must speak."

Luna didn't so much as twitch. She didn't turn, acknowledge, or look at him. But suddenly, although the mimic's beak continued to move, the sound of his poisoned words no longer reached Prey's ears. Luna had magically blocked him. That must be a signal for him to continue:

Prey choked down the lump in his throat, it felt like his pounding heart, and forced himself to hurry on:

"I, I think, I don't think the ambassador is in his right mind. I, I mean, d-doesn't this all seem rather suspicious? What, what he's saying, isn't it like he's trying to *provoke* a war?"

Prey was stating the obvious, but just like that, it was out in the open and clear for everyone to now see. It was the simple logic of spite. By pointing out it was what the 'ambassador' wanted, Luna would feel like doing the opposite, out of stubbornness if nothing else.

Silence. The two Night Guards had gone still. The captured griffins were silently screaming away in their head against Luna and the

prospect of war, now that Prey had said the dreaded word out loud.

Prey waited, feeling sick with fear, for Luna to smite him, or blow out his ear drums, or any number of horrible things for daring to interrupt when she was this furious.

'Please don't hurt me, don't hurt me, oh please don't hurt me. I hate pain, I hate pain! Don't kill me!'

The moment of silence went on. "We realise that, Prey." Luna finally said.

Prey's legs almost folded under him in relief. Luna had heard him, and wasn't lashing out at him either. He breathed again, the air thick with sweet freeness at how he was allowed to do so. Luna hadn't chosen to finish drowning him instead.

Luna dropped whatever invisible sound barrier it was she'd erected, and the voice of the mimic chimed back in, also gesticulating animatedly with a talon, "-you have no right under the Endless Sky or Mother Gaia to place all of our lives in the hooves of six of *your* citizens."

"We have heard enough out of you. We art thoroughly sick and weary of this drivel. Surrender now. Or don't. We would prefer that, actually."

Luna's mane rose around her as a wool-rasingly huge charge of magic built up in her, radiating so strongly that stones and dirt began rising off the street, charged air reeking of ozone so thick you didn't dare move lest you fry yourself with static. Prey fell over as his hooves shrieked at him in agony, filled with liquidised needles and razors.

Then the door of the building right next to the disguised mimic slammed open.

A second of utterly bewildered vertigo, as all around him the world froze instead of exploding.

"I knew it I knew it IKnewIt! New ponies in town! Ha! No pony can fool me, was all sleepy and some party pooper wouldn't let me wake

up, but now I'm here!" A pink pony screamed at aggressively excited decibels, exploding out the door.

Just, nothing. Prey drew an absolute blank.

"Pinkamena Diane Pie, thou-you-Get away from him!" Luna spluttered out in shock.

The mare's hooves shot up to her cheeks in beaming delight, "Princess Moony-Hootie-Tootie-Fruity! You got my invite after all-!"

The mimic moved. Fast. A feathered wing shoved up into Pinkamena's face.

"Hey meanie-"

Flip, glint, slick, **Shnnk**

The mimic masquerading as Felyawn rammed the dagger through the obscuring screen of his loose feathers and up under the mare's flapping jaw. They roughly twisted the handle to finish the job in a practiced motion, and yanked the dagger free.

The pink mare staggered, mane flopping straight, hooves uselessly going up, and fell.

The mimic twisted back to face Luna, dropping the bloody dagger and reaching under their dark shirt, "There, now your nation is as helpless as our own-"

"Laughter!" Luna shouted, voice resounding with... horror? Why? What did laughter have to do with anything-?

Bang Flash. The fake griffin was blown down the street. A coil of magic shot after him, too fast to follow, and reeled him back in. Then it threw him with a wet **crunch** to the dirt next to the other two forgotten and bound griffins.

But Luna had already been moving. She sprinted forwards, crossing the distance in a moment, Night Guards and Prey left behind, "Pinkamina, no, Laughter. Shh, shh, we are here. It will be alright. Trust us."

The pink mare called Pinkamina was on her back, blood soaking her front. She would be gone in a second or two, the dagger had not only destroyed her jaw and upper throat, but at that angle and depth, would also have punched through the bottom of the skull and touched the brain.

Contrary to what people thought, Prey knew stabbing through the head, while fatal, in rare exceptions wasn't always immediately so. He'd seen it himself, a Border Guard strapped down with Snake picking over the still living brain inside the cut open skull. Or that goat who'd caught an arrow through the temple, and kept walking blindly in circles, unresponsive to everything until Torment came and put him down.

But extreme blood loss coupled with a punctured skull? Death in seconds.

Luna was crouched over the dead but dying mare, impossibly gentle and concerned in a way Prey could never have even conceived of from the alicorn. The pink mare was trying so desperately to say something, twitching hooves already slipping limply out of Luna's hold.

"Ssh, hush. Rest. Tis' naught but a bad dream. It is our job to banish nightmares. Trust us, 'twill all be fine. Does thou trust us?"

The mimic's last victim never answered. She'd already finished dying.

Too slow, the two Night Guards arrived in a rush of hooves and bat wings at their Princess's side, but too late. Too late and too slow. They couldn't say or do anything.

Prey stayed were he was on the dirt, blankly watching.

Someone had woken up despite Luna's spell, and now they were dead and Luna was saying it was just a bad dream. So. This was what was happening now. Okay. Alright then. He was too tired, cold, and sore to feel much of anything besides a sense of, 'Huh.'

Luna drew a deep breath, and brushed the mare's eyelids closed

with the wing tips of her pinions, "'Twill be naught but a bad dream whence thou wake. Trust us. We are Lady Luna of the Night." She murmured softly.

She straightened up, broad wings opening and pointing towards the starry heavens. She raised her head, facing towards the moon. Prey saw her eyes. They were crystal clear. Not a single tear or even wet eye, just a desperate sort of frozen focus.

"Trust us. We say it shall be fine. We *will* it so, and so it shall be!"

What was she doing? The jagged pain in Prey's hooves abruptly faded away. Completely gone. So surprised was he, that he actually looked down at his hooves, despite knowing there would be nothing there to show. But the stinging of magic all around had ceased. No... no that wasn't quite it, they weren't back to normal, they'd just gone... sort of numb.

Prey blinked uncomprehendingly down at his hooves. He could barely feel them at the ends of his legs, they were so numb. Soft light touched Prey's face, and he jerked his head back up.

In the night sky, a rainbow, no, a nimbus. It lit up Luna every colour, every pulsing shade, coalescing in the night above Luna.

An aurora, except not. It was different, not wrong, but different. Garrow had seen the aurora borealis, and so Prey had too through the griffin's memory. The silent living lights were similar yet... different. Garrow had thought the lights were cold, distant, and primal.

These, this corona of living light, it was primal, and yet somehow almost... tamed. It was silently beautiful, it transfixed the mind and soul to witness, but wasn't a part of nature, and Prey would never have believed so for even a second. Nature does not care. It is a cycle of life and death.

But this, *this* soft nimbus of infinite colours, it was *all* life. Every colour, yet somehow Prey had the name for them. It just came to him; 'The Colours of Harmony.'

"Thy time is not yet done. Do not go gently, come back. Pinkamina Diane Pie! Come back!"

The lights swirled, a silent tempest of roiling life and colour.

"We command thee, come back!"

The light, it built and built, so blindly-soft-bright.

"Come back to us! Return! Come back. Please."

With those simple words, Luna brought the light of harmony flashing down. Lightning. It travelled through Luna, channelled through her body, and into the corpse. Prey threw up a leg to shield his eyes.

Heat. Warmth. Life. Light. Breath. Sound. A quiet laugh. The smell of mint. The gentle impression of a hug.

Prey groped outwards blindly with a hoof, but there was no one there.

He heard Luna, "Wake. Awake! I am thy princess, we command thee, awake!"

Why was she talking to a corpse? The pink pony wasn't coming back. A thousand words couldn't bring them back, Prey knew because he'd tried. A thousand tears couldn't do it either, Prey knew because he'd cried.

He felt the warm light fade from off his eyelids. Slowly, Prey opened his eyes.

Luna was still standing over the dead mare's body. The alicorn's ethereal mane was sluggish, slow, her posture drained. Except the corpse was now clean, the wound closed and the blood gone, but it didn't matter, because whoever she'd been, she was still dead.

Then she weakly opened her eyes.

The two Night Guards froze, the three captured griffins' frantic thoughts stilled. Prey's worldview broke into a thousand shards of

glass.

"P-Princes Luna? Was, was I **sniff** was I dreaming?"

Luna sagged, "Yes, yes t'was only a bad dream, Laughter. Naught but a dream."

Hesitantly, the mare reached up towards her throat, "I, I was dreaming, it, it, it was h-horrible, an', and-"

"Hush, it was only a nightmare. There is nothing to fear now. We art the guardian of dreams, of course we would respond to thy call."

"Only a-a dream?"

"Yes, this is just a dream. Come morning light it will fade, as all dreams do. Now sleep, return to thy rest. It is all okay." Luna's horn tip was glowing, and the mare's eyes slowly drifted shut. She muttered something unintelligible, and then her head dropped and she was out like a light.

Prey stared. Everyone stared.

Slowly Luna straightened. Her ethereal mane was still only sluggishly moving, and she looked weary. She looked up into the night sky, and not at them as she spoke: "Swift Slice."

The thestral jumped, "Ah, Princess?" He asked, sounding faint.

"See to the Bearer of Laughter. Return her to her bed. Make haste, we do not wish to linger here any longer."

Swift Slice hesitantly looked down at the pink sleeping mare, the *living* sleeping mare, "Princess Luna, I, that-?"

"Now Swift Slice. We wilt address thee in a minute." Luna ordered, still staring up into the heavens.

Swift Slice snapped out of his daze, "Yes, Princess." He murmured, and bent to haul the sleeping mare over his back with a grunt of effort. As a trained Guard and warrior, he knew how to carry another pony in the event of accident or injury, and was strong

enough to do so. With short, but brisk steps, Swift Slice disappeared in through the house's still open door.

Prey stumbled to numb hooves. Everything felt like it was in the wrong place, as if his head was full of stuffing. That hadn't been healing magic. Healing magic couldn't do that. Even the greatest accounts of the greatest magi healers throughout the ages couldn't do that. And the mare had been dead. She had been dead, not on the brink of dying, *actually* dead.

Resurrection wasn't possible, it wasn't. No black, dark, or blood magic had ever succeeded, no unicorn, runic, or voodoo magic could do it. Many thousands had tried for thousands of years, from the righteous to the depraved, but not one method had ever brought back even one soul from the great beyond. Not once, not ever.

But none of those attempts had ever been alicorn magic.

'Alicorns are immortal.'

Swift Slice returned breathing lightly, and quietly shut the ridiculous pastry house's door. Every eye was on Luna. There was nowhere else any of them could've looked, not after the impossible miracle they'd just witnessed.

Prey's heart was hurting him, everything was like broken shards of clear glass in the world around him now. It had all changed, it was all different. 'Resurrection.'

Luna finally turned and surveyed them all. Deep down in there, there was unease. "We will have thy oaths." She stated.

No one understood.

"We will have thy oaths, from each of thee. Thou shalt tell nopony of what thou saw this night. It must remain a secret. So we must have thy oaths."

Prey opened his mouth-

"You will have nothing from me, witch!" Felyawn spat. Prey whirled around. The mimic was still trussed up tight in Luna's magic, bound

along with the other two wide eyed griffins, yet somehow the mimic had managed to move and speak.

'Shapeshifting within its bonds!'

The mimic's claw was holding something under their shirt.

Luna stared, as if she had forgotten, but her brow quickly furrowing in anger, "Ah. Yes, thou shalt-"

"*Never*." Felyawn hissed, and pulled something.

Flames exploded out in a roar, all three bound shapes vanishing. Heat, racing flames, reaching for Prey-! And was stopped far short. The explosion hit a barrier, a shield dome over the whole area. Luna's magic compressed in, the boiling flames a dome of brilliant burning orange.

Luna crushed it down, smaller and tighter, the light turning from brilliant orange to almost white.

"Thou utter, utter fool!" Luna shouted, her magic squeezing the explosion down into a ball.

Then just like that, it went out. The dirt street left was smoking, scattered and blackened with charcoal *bits*. Prey was left fire blinded, but he didn't need to see to know what had just happened.

The mimic had failed its mission, so it had erased all evidence. Even itself. The commitment and devotion to blow yourself up for a mission that had already failed... it was terrifying.

But that fear was distant, disconnected, and far away in Prey's thoughts. Because Luna had resurrected a person. Right here, he'd seen it! Right in front of him! What was witnessing a violent death, when there had been a return to life right in front of him?

The two Night Guards however weren't taking the suicide and double murder right at their hooves very well. Prey didn't care. Because Luna had resurrected a person.

'Breathe,' He had to remind himself, 'Breathe. Hold it together.

Wait. Wait and breathe. I can do that. I can do that.'

Swift Slice, Keen Eyes, they were both shaken, looking to Luna, asking for orders on what to do. Prey barely heard their words. Luna just kept staring at the charred and blackened bits on the street, face set in tired grimness.

'Who CARES?!'

"There is naught more that we can do. The ambassador Felyawn seemed to have taken leave of his senses at the end. It will yet remain to be seen if the rest of his government is similarly afflicted. We hope it is not so. My anger is spent. This is, not the outcome we wished for. Not at all. To willingly to take one's own life and in such a hateful manner..." Luna shook her head, ethereal mane only sluggishly following the movement. She squared her shoulders and turned away from the patch of road:

"When the living depart, it is up to those ponies who remain to pick up their burdens and carry them. Tis' a hard lesson, but there is nothing more we can-"

Prey threw himself onto the road before Luna. He bowed, heedlessly pressing his forehead into the dirt, "Princess Luna, I beg of you, please bring them back."

"The griffins cannot be... Thou art not talking about them, art thou Prey?" Luna sighed.

"I'm begging you. I'll, I'll do anything. Anything! Just bring them back to me. Please please please!"

A long weary exhale left Luna, "*Ahhh*... Raise thyself up, Prey."

Prey didn't even budge, grovelling right where he was in supplication, "I'm begging you, please! Please. Whatever it takes, whatever it costs, I'll do it."

"We art sorry Prey, but this is why we wanted thy word. We cannot-"

"Anything! I'll do anything. Gold, treasures, artifacts, secrets,

knowledge, I'll, I'll find it. I'll do whatever you want for the rest of my life without question. My soul! Anything it takes. A life? Do you need a life? Do it, please! I'll trade anything in the entire world, or out of it, I'll die if that's what it costs."

Prey was terrified of dying. He hated pain, he hated death, and he didn't ever want to die. Number two on the list, his survival above all else. But not number one. Never number one.

Number one on the list he had never thought possible. It was number one but he'd always known he would never achieve it.

His own life, number two.

Fleece and his mother, number one.

Dirt and tiny pebbles dug into his face and ears as he pressed his head to the road. His hooves hurt so bad, his eyes stung, his head throbbed, he was freezing cold and shivering. It meant utterly nothing. *Nothing*.

'PleasepleasepleasePleasePLEASEpleasepleasePleasePleasePLEASE!'

Prey eyes were squeezed shut. He daren't look, he couldn't. His hope, his painful desperate hope, he couldn't look at it for fear it would break. He couldn't have it vanish from before him. The hope hurt so badly.

"Please. *Please*. I'll do anything."

"No Prey. We cannot do so."

Prey did not accept that. He rejected the lie. It could be done, Luna had done it, done the impossible right before him! He would not accept anything else.

"If, if there's nothing you want from me, then, then please just do it anyway! As a child begging you, a pity case, out of empathy, anything. Just, just please-"

A huge pinion feather stopped him, softly covering his mouth. Prey froze up for only a second, before brushing it aside. His terror of

being touched, his fear and loathing of the alicorn, it didn't matter.

If Luna wanted to break him into pieces right here with her bare hooves, to torture and mutilate him, if that was the price, he would pay it. His brother and mother, *Gossamer's* brother and mother, now that he knew it was possible, he *had* to have them back.

Luna's feather was soft, yet also unbendingly strong. It forced prey's chin up. The alicorn was leaning over him, so much bigger than he was.

"Oh child. Listen to us."

Prey tried to open his mouth. The feather immediately silenced him again.

"Nay, first listen Prey. Thou needs to hear this. Dost thou understand?"

She waited. "Dost thou understand us Prey?"

Prey wordlessly nodded, the feather still in the way. He wasn't agreeing, just waiting until he could start begging again.

"Tonight was an accident, please understand that. We have never done that before, and we doubt we could ever do it again. T'was only because it was a Bearer of Harmony that we even attempt as such. We knew it t'was not her time. Those who have passed must stay in the beyond. Their time has come and gone. For the world to continue, those left alive must not hold onto them. T'will only bring you great pain to futilely hold on to those who have gone. When it is a pony's time, you must let them go. This we know well Prey."

It was their time? It was their time?! It was time for them to be murdered by the Resistance and Border Guard? But it wasn't this random pink mare's time to die?

Luna was not done however, all but pinning Prey to the road with her searching stare, "Tonight was what should never have happened. But it is because it should *not* have happened, that we were also *able* to do what we did. It was not her destiny to so tragically fall tonight, for she is one of Harmony's champions. Fate

was on our side, that was all there was to it. Do you understand?"

'Understand?'

Understand that Luna was saying Gossamer's mother and Fleece had died because destiny said so? But that because a 'pony' had been blessed by 'Harmony' and chosen by 'fate', they got to cheat the certainty of death?

Oh yes, Prey understood what Luna was saying.

Luna's eyes tightened around the edges, "No. We see that thou does not understand. Listen to us Prey, and what I say to thee I say to thee both Swift Slice, Keen Eye. Listen, and try to understand. Pinkamena is an Element Bearer. That means more than thou canst possibly know. This was not some miracle we conjured from sackcloth, thou does not know of the preparation and magic that went into calling her back."

She took a breath, "Millennia ago, when we bore still the Elements ourselves, we... 'researched' into a spell that might do what we did tonight. All our tests said it would forever fail. Yet tonight a miracle happened. It may seem to thee that we never held any doubt when performing, but we assure you, we were as unsure as thee all."

A ghost of a smile, then it was gone. Prey hated it. "We art sorry, but we cannot perform the feat again. This is why you must not spread this tale. Before the night was out, thousands of bereaved ponies would flock to our court, desperate for something we are unable to give. That is why you shall tell nopony. Destiny cannot be cheated, and that is why Pinkamena Diane Pie Pie now sleeps peaceably in her bed. Harmony cannot be cheated. When it is a pony's time, then it is their time. Let the dead rest. Does thou all understand?"

Swift Slice bowed his head, "Yes, Princess Luna. You have my word."

"And mine as well, Princess. I understand." Keen Eye joined in quietly.

"Good. We thank thee for thy trust and service. It has not been an easy day for anypony."

Then Luna looked down to Prey and finally removed her wing, "And thou Prey?"

"I don't care. Please, please try anyway! Please Princess, please just try. If it doesn't work, if, if they won't come back or something, then okay, we can figure out a way around it, but please-"

"No. You art not listening Prey. No means no!" Luna rebuked him sharply, patience seemingly gone, "We understand this is hard, but for the last time, no. It is not possible. We have not your father's body, and his soul is long gone, and it is not destiny's will. Tis' not, we cannot-You do not listen, by my moon! Why must this be so hard? No Prey. No."

'No?'

No. No. *No*. No that was not allowed. He heard the words. He understood them. He even knew in his soul that they were true. But he didn't care.

No.

Luna shifted, "Cease thy crying Prey. You must be strong. You have moved on once before, now thou must do it again. Thou canst do it again. Dry thy tears. Stop crying, please. We do not, we do not like it."

Destiny? Fate? Harmony? The immortal alicorn telling the mortal runt lamb, 'It is only proper that you die in the end, so don't fight it'?

A pony that Prey had never even met was special enough to receive the ultimate gift after she got herself killed out of stupidity, but no one else was worthy? Because the mare was drawn out of a random lottery along with five other ponies, and that made her irreplaceable?

"Wipe thy tears, shh, stop crying. Thou shalt be fine. It will be fine, life carries on, it is not the end. Thou, we, that is to say... we cannot

do this." Luna mumbled, turning away.

Prey's hoof twitched all by itself, wanting to reach out, to touch Luna, to b**Re*a*K** *h*ER **m**i**N***D*. It didn't matter if it wouldn't work, it didn't matter that Luna was an alicorn, because she had said n**O**. *N*o. **NO**. n*O* N**o n***o* ***NO***.

Luna spoke from far away, underwater, or from above the stars in the sky, "This is for thy own good, Prey. Rest now. Sleep. Sleep, and wake, and begin again."

Tiredness raced through his body, so familiar. Prey had felt it already tonight. The magic gripped him and dragged him down. Prey... only half fought it.

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Prey awoke in the bunk of one of the Night Guards barracks. There was no one there to keep watch on him.

It was daylight outside. The night had passed.

It had all reset, the truth from last night was forever covered up and now it was the bright light of day again.

Prey stiffly got out of the bunk, leaving the covers a mess. He looked down at his hooves. The dull gleam of the golden tracker bands greeted him.

Everything was backwards, like this here was the dream and out there somewhere was the real Prey. Numbly, Prey reached up and felt for his ribbon. It was there, tied behind his ear. That meant this was all real.

Prey started to shake. His teeth started chattering. He felt, he felt-! He didn't want to feel. He didn't want to be in this hated city, surrounded by hated ponies, with its hated alicorn rulers, and hated unicorns, filled with hated magic, guarded by hated Harmony, in the hated capital city of hated Equestria.

Prey thought he'd finally changed. He'd thought he'd finally started to move on. He'd thought his final trip to Rushweed had helped him

find closure.

He'd thought wrong. Wrong wrong wrong *wrong*. He was so wrong.

Wrath so red he could taste it. Rage was good, the fury was good, it burned him and made him warm. So familiar, and old friend at the fireside.

It was the same lesson all over again, a never ending cycle in the saga of this pathetic runt life. Hate and rage felt so much better than the gaping abyss of despair.

He didn't want to have to crawl out of that abyss again, never ever never again. Just, just no, no not again. He couldn't do it again.

Prey fled the Palace.

He couldn't stay, he couldn't, or he would ruin the last remaining tatters of everything. He avoided all the Night Guards and ran, slipping out the gates and away. Down, down into Lower Canterlot. Down, down further, into the sewer overflow pipe. Down, and down again, into the twisting cave tunnels and dripping stalactites. And down at last into his lair.

Lemon Pink was down there. She'd returned from Ponyville, and waited here all night. She blinked awake, and groggily rose as Prey stumbled in. His head was ringing. He couldn't hear her words, so he had to lip read instead. She wanted to know what was wrong, what had happened, and what was their plan now?

Prey couldn't deal with her right now. The shaking urge to break something, *anyone*, to make the world fair, it was crawling through his blood.

Prey sent her away. He told her to go find Randy Pickaxe, her coltfriend, to spend the day with him at the park. He, he couldn't face her, couldn't tell her how close he had been. And how cruelly that hope had failed him.

So he sent her away and told her to enjoy her first day off ever.

She was deeply alarmed. She asked again. Prey *ordered* her to go.

She finally did, and he had the secret cavern to himself.

He shouted and raged and screamed and cried. It didn't help, not even a little bit.

Expressing the clawing grief and raging sorrow just made it increase. The weight crushing his lungs just kept getting tighter and tighter, as he got angrier and angrier. Nothing was helping.

Smashing beakers, throwing rubble, screaming, promising all sorts of fiery death to Luna, it wasn't helping. His anger just kept building into a mountain of black broken glass.

He was so angry, he was viewing the cavern through a haze. He wasn't aware of the passage of time. He tasted blood and ashes. Was it a haze of ashes? He couldn't think clearly, but he just. Wanted. To. Make. Someone. Pay.

He found Selenia's pincushion waiting on its pedestal of a broken off crystal. Except the old sewing needle it had taken from him was now sunken in. The charge it had somehow gained was now gone.

That was how he'd gotten out of the stream when Luna would've unknowingly drowned him.

The charge was gone, spent on surviving Luna's arrogance. Seeing that drove him into new fits of rage.

Luna.

He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. **He hated her**. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. He hated her. **He** hated her. He **hated** her. He hated **her**.

And then for one moment, through the misty haze of unthinking ash and red, piercing clarity came to Prey.

It was that second when you are so angry you lashed out at the wall, and in that moment before your hoof connects serenity comes

to you. You know you're about to break your hoof, but you don't make any move to stop. You know it, but you don't stop because you're too angry.

It was one of those stark moments, and Prey realised just how badly he was teetering on a knife's edge of black ice. 'I've got to stop myself.'

But he wouldn't stop, he *couldn't* stop, he was too angry, nor did he even want to stop. Prey wanted to hurt and be hurt. And he was about to do something terrible, something that would doom him to death.

He could feel it, feel the bitter hate like a physical driving force. He had a half-formed suicidal plan, to scar Canterlot forever, make a wound in the history so deep it that ponies would never be able to forget.

Actually, he didn't even care if it was forgotten by all but two ponies. The two immortals. They would remember. They would know what this loss and fear felt like every time they looked back.

'Yes. Let me earn their hatred. Now, and forever.'

Prey was terrified. *And not.*

He was about to follow through and actually do it, he could feel it. *It felt like freedom.*

He was making a mistake. *He was making the only decision he could.*

His mind was unstable, his inner mindscape ocean draining away. *It was always going to happen eventually.*

It was wrong. *It was fair.*

The rusty bars bent. Eyeless heads turned towards the surface. A taste of unending hunger. Bitter and sweet. And so hungry. It wanted it.

It wanted everything. *And nothing.*

Nothing but to eat. *Everything to eat.*

There is only one truth in this world that matters. *Hunger.*

Sudden, piercing terror and clarity seized Prey. His ribbon freezing so cold it burned the skin of his ear, his stomach so empty it screamed.

'No, what am I doing? I can't, I mustn't, I can't do this. I can't. I WON'T.'

But the bars had already been bent back, just for a moment. He restored them, hastily reforged them out rusted, corroded, and brittle iron, but iron nonetheless. Yet a part, a sliver, a tiny fragment had still slipped through.

It swam up and up, up through the ocean of his mind, up through the black, the violet, the indigo, the blue, up and up and up. Up towards the surface, and the world so full of life.

It was a worm of hate and bitterness and grief and rage, and all wrapped up inside the skin of hunger.

Prey fought back. He tried to stop it. It was like trying to stop breathing. Easy at first, then impossible. He stumbled along the walkways, sharp rubble moving and crunching, staggering towards the sinkhole.

The rage was gone, the hate was gone, the grief was gone, all gone into the twisting squirming leech trying to get out of his head. For the first time since entering the cavern, he could think clearly.

Clarity only brought terror as he knew what he'd done.

'Stop stop stop! I take it back! STOP! I don't want this anymore.'

But I do want this. I want it all, I want everything, I want it all to crumble to grey ash.

The sinkhole was before him. The gravel of broken crystals and stone chips led in a bank down into the depthless water. The bottom of the crystal clear water was lost in blackness. Prey's head

was burning, his ear freezing at the touch of the ribbon.

Feverishly, Prey made it to the sinkhole's edge and looked into the water.

It wasn't a perfect mirror, his vibrations had caused the slightest tremors to distort the pool's surface, but it was still enough to see himself, or enough of himself, reflected back.

Prey never looked in a mirror, not after the liches' mirror. This wasn't a mirror now, just an imperfect water reflection. It was enough.

Prey saw himself.

His gorge rose, every single thing but revulsion fled from his mind. Even the grief, hate, and rage, it all withered away. Because he saw himself looking back up.

Prey vomited sickly into the pool. He shivered, spat, and then hurled again. His throat hurt. His eyes and whole body hurt, burnt out and spent.

He stayed there at the pool's edge, eyes clenched shut and panted for a long time.

The water slowly stilled, his sick sinking and diluting away down into the bottomless depths. The pool's surface returned to smooth glass.

Prey was... empty. Just empty. Empty, hollow, burnt out, any and all of those. And ashamed.

He hadn't changed anything. He had fixed nothing. He'd just made everything worse.

But the numb emptiness, it was preferable to the rage, and infinitely better than the grief of failed hope.

That didn't make it any better. He was so tired of walking in a circle, sick of seeing the circle of his own bloody hoof prints as he went around and around.

He was so weary of thinking he'd moved, on only to find he was just as breakable as ever. He was already broken, so why oh why did the world keep managing to get him to hurt himself?

He was tired of this. Tired, and empty. Just empty. Empty of it all.

Pitiful. Weak. Useless. Runt. Naïve. Powerless. Hypocrite. Crybaby.

"Go to hell." Prey managed to choke out to his reflection, which he knew was still there in the pool even if he refused to look a second time. Words Lemon Pink had spoken all those nights ago on the rooftop in Vanhoover.

He imagined the reflection repeated his own words back to him, "*Come with me*."

Late the next night, Nighthawk and the other Night Guards finally returned.

Gloom and Crimson successfully delivered the bound Hafflow into Luna's custody. It had been a daring and perilous mission, but they'd avoided all the griffin patrols and pulled it off by the skin of their fangs. Crimson was all better too, showing almost no lingering signs of his mysterious illness.

The rest of the Night Guard warmly welcomed them back. Even if they didn't know where they'd gone on their secret mission, they were still glad to now have them back, especially Lieutenant Screech, who could heave a sigh of relief and turn the reigns of leadership back over to Captain Nighthawk.

The arson attack which had drawn away the Lieutenant that night, taking most of the active Night Guards on duty, had ended up being relatively small in scale. It was more lots of little blazes than one huge inferno, started often in poor places to set a fire, so the Guard managed to get to most of them in time, working alongside an emergency response pegasi weather team.

Relatively small or not, the newspapers went into an uproar anyways. The original inferno at the Lumber Yard had not been

forgotten, and another string of fires incited all the journalists into a frenzy. Again, at least half of them scathingly criticized the Night Guard since it had occurred during the night once again. Feelings in the public which had just begun to cool were immediately reignited.

"What is Canterlot coming to?", "How could this happen?", and, "Why isn't more being done?" were among the most common sentiments. The journalist Yellow Pages was one of the most vocal, yet again.

However, just like last time, the general population were left with very little in the way of concrete answers.

Still, no one had died in the fires, there was no permanent damage to any major businesses, and to everyone who was actually in the know and had the power to render judgement, the Night Guard had dealt with the crisis efficiently and that was that. Nighthawk was back too, they'd caught a griffin spy, and stopped an attack on the Elements of Harmony.

Sharp Tang's death was the one pall over everything.

His name was engraved on the private Guard monument. Only Night Guards could visit it, and the alcove of grey stone with its black obelisk of polished obsidian was kept quiet. They mourned, but had to move on. Some did so better than others. Those from his clan who'd grown up with him... less so.

Few outside of the Night Guard even realised the Sargent Major was gone. Such was the life of the thestrals in Canterlot. An unknown and forgotten sacrifice.

There was one mystery though. It was assumed a griffin with some high level disguise artifact was the one who had impersonated Sharp Tang and led the Night Guards off in the direction of Manehattan, claiming; "A hydra has appeared from nowhere and is ravaging the city. The city Guard has begged for help."

But at some point during the flight, Sargent Major Sharp Tang had mysteriously vanished. They'd been in the middle of the sky when

someone had realised and called a halt, yet 'Sharp Tang' was already gone.

Hafflow, when interrogated, didn't know about Sharp Tang's death beforehoof, or the arson attack, or the suicide incendiary device Felyawn had carried, and most of it ended up pinned on the deceased ambassador going insane.

No one was told about the other pony death which had temporarily occurred that night.

Pinkamena Diane Pie was never informed that her memories that night had been anything more than a bad dream, and in a slight deviation, at the occupancies of Nightmare Night, welcomed Luna back into Ponville instead of starting a ruckus.

None of the famous six mares or the inhabitants of Ponyville were told about Sharp Tang, Felyawn, or the griffins who had died on their very doorsteps that night. It was deemed for the best. The Night Guard were soldiers of the night. They quietly did their jobs, and then just as quietly faded back into the shadows, assuming they survived that is. It was their duty.

Which was not to say the Griffonian mission was done and dusted, or that the case was open and shut. Griffonia was furious. It wasn't war, or anything like that, but that day the relationship between the two nations turned distinctly sour.

Tariffs, and import restrictions were immediately implemented on Equestrian trade coming into Griffonia, and Equestria did the exact same on their end. Accusations and refusal to accept blame were thrown back and forth, in a political way.

Equestria didn't admit to sending in a secret strike force to kidnap Hafflow, even though he was now in their custody. Likewise, Griffonia rejected all allegations that Felyawn had acted with the High and Low Kingdoms' approval, saying he had gone rogue.

Either way, more Guards were posted on each side of the border, and each nation drew back to glower at the other. It was far too soon to say if that was the end of it, or if the troubles had just

begun.

Such was the dance of politics and the plays of power.

There was just one other thing.

Princess Celestia quietly requested the Elements of Harmony returned to Canterlot for safekeeping. Just as a precaution. Her student wasn't even informed of the very near theft as the reason why, just that it was for the best.

It was just a small thing. A sensible precaution, a footnote really. But one which the impact it caused would not be seen until much later.

Small things. Big things. Consequences. The six Element Bearers never really thought to question if there had ever been a deeper reason for the recall. It just didn't seem important to them.

Sometimes you're not the main character in your own story. Sometimes, you're nothing but a side character to someone else's success.

[End of Arc 5]

Author's Notes:

So, who was expecting that? 😇

I made this chapter with a few, *important*, things in mind. The first is this: Anyone *can* die. *Might* die. Could maybe possibly die.
"The sun rises, the sun sets, but we all have to cross the river someday," And all that.

Second: You act *stupid*, you win a *stupid* prize. If you jump out on a griffin with a knife, you get a knife to the brain. Duh.

That said, hope it was fun to read! Does everything make a bit more sense with the griffins now?

Editor for this long chapter, so extra thanks to:
Panem et Circenses

80.6 To Kill a Mocking Prey

[Arc 6]

There are many sayings about the passage of time, some of them ponyish in nature, but every nation has its own people and culture, each with their own individual outlooks and views. These differences are not just in their climate, language, foods, cultural norms, festivals, and customs, but also in their sayings. Such as:

"Someone killing time is not living their life."

"See how fast this year went? You had best stop wasting your time."

"Time is the greatest teacher of patience."

"The more time passes, the more you realise how little you know."

"Find peace with your limited time, and you shall enjoy that same peace throughout it."

Time marches ever onwards, never one second faster, or slower, just exactly where it is supposed to be on the track of the universe. It cares not if your clock is set right, or if you woke up late, or how many more hours people want in the day, more days in their years, and more years in their lives. Time will always keep plodding along just the same as it has since it first began: At its' own pace, and no one else's.

Either sign up and get onboard, or don't. It doesn't make the blindest bit of difference.

Time passed. Some things changed. Others didn't. But no matter what you do or say, time still passes.

And that was what, to the surprise of none, had happened. Time had passed, and the days had moved on. Gloom and Crimson had returned in triumph from their secret mission in Griffonstone, along

with the other Night Guards and Captain Nighthawk.

The griffin Hafflow had stood trial, even though he wasn't a citizen of Equestria, but they were using some law about visiting ambassadors, emissaries, and their aides still being liable if they offended royalty, and Luna most definitely had taken offense.

Griffonia was still denying everything, calling for justice for their ambassador's death (even though they were also claiming he'd been operating rogue), and demanding the return of Hafflow. As an end result of all of this, official relationships between Griffonia and Equestria were now strained.

There was no mention ever made about the Bearer of the Element of Laughter who'd been attacked that night. In fact, in all likelihood, she'd written off the whole thing as a nightmare, just like Luna had intended. After all, you can't die in real life and wake up afterwards, so it *must've* been a dream.

The days rolled steadily onwards, though. Gloom and Crimson were glad to be back and return to normal ISND work, even if that meant the 'work' bit of paperwork.

Lilly Blossom could be found most days, if you went looking for her, in either the company of Saffron when the supermodel could find time off, or with Carton Juice. She was still going through rehab, learning how to live every day with a wooden leg, a disfigurement, and no magic. She had to re-learn how to write, how to cook, how to clean, how to shower, how to put on a coat, how to carry shopping bags, anything and everything that you never thought of until you were no longer capable of doing it.

It was uphill all the way, with many steps forwards and just as many backwards. Lilly was not a patient person, took failure hard, and was the wrong kind of stubborn. It wouldn't have been easy for any unicorn in her position, but it was especially hard for Lilly because of her personality.

Still though, between bouts of depression and misery, Lilly was committed to getting back control of her life and returning to the Night Guard. High highs, and low lows.

Scenic Paint on the other hoof had officially put in his resignation papers. He would shortly be jobless, not that it affected him much. He was mostly devoted to painting, and could live quite comfortably off his parents support, even if he didn't like his parents. Prey thought less of him for it, although a lot of that might've been envy that Scenic could leave the Night Guard and escape Luna. The ISND still saw a lot of the stallion and his marefriend though, since both were still very actively engaged with supporting and being there for Lilly.

Things changed. Others remained the same. People move, make decisions, or sit back and wait. It was the passage of life and living.

The sun rises, the sun sets. But we all have to cross the river some day.

With all that said and done, time does not pass in a blink of an eye. It passes exactly as fast as it passes. There may be no significant life changing events between one big happening and the next, but that time in between still has to pass.

However there were still some events, or meetings, or minor disasters which still happened between one of Prey's utter failures, and the next.

The first. On the very night Gloom and Crimson got back, after everything was sorted, the reports given, their prisoner delivered, dinner had been eaten while half dead with tiredness, and everyone had gone back to their own apartments to sleep.

It was late, very late.

There was little more than an hour left until the dawn, even with the longer nights and shorter days of progressing autumn. Prey wasn't sleeping. He was sitting on his bed, watching his hooves.

Prey basically never sat idle, there was always work to be done. If he didn't work and didn't prepare runic defences, something one

day would get him. So whenever he wasn't sleeping, eating, working at the Palace, or otherwise occupied, he would be creating runes. Rune work was draining, it physically sucked the strength from your limbs and emotion from your body, which was all the more reason to keep plugging away at it bit by bit every day.

So Prey was basically never idle. Yet he was idle now. He wasn't crying or raging or sullenly staring at the ceiling, none of those. He was just sitting there and blankly considering his own hooves.

After a while, Crimson had knocked on the door. Prey had hopped down and let Crimson in.

They had talked, for a bit anyways.

Prey asked questions about his undercover mission in Griffonstone. Crimson had told him about the contrast between night and day there, with the sun blazing down even high up on the mountain slopes and during fall, and then the biting freeze that came every night.

"It reminds me a bit of winter in the caves of clan Myrrdon. Not the same, obviously, but there are parallels."

Recollections of memories that weren't his own but Garrow's prompted Prey to ask more about the country, as opposed to what had happened while they were there undercover and secretly trying to track down Hafflow.

Crimson told him a bit about the fish and meat market, although he himself had stayed out of it. He mentioned the lack of cloud homes, unlike here in Equestria with Cloudsdale. It was too cold in Griffonstone come autumn and winter for anything but solid walls where you could burn a fire. Griffonian weather was also a lot more wild than Equestrian standards. Griffins did not have as much weather magic as pegasi naturally did, and so large-scale weather control had never really been a thing in Griffonia.

That, and the storms and winters were much worse up there, making it a losing battle right from the get-go.

"The alpine forests there are beautiful, though." Crimson said, "You fly for miles along the lower mountain slopes, and it's this rich band of thick, unbroken, towering green. I think I like the land. I mean, I think griffins aren't missing anything here in Equestria. They have it different there, that is all. Not worse, just different."

Their talk moved on. They were both tired, struggling to keep their eyes open and dawn was not far away, but they sat up and talked regardless.

Prey only gave the barest run down of his time here with them gone. There wasn't much to say. Prey gave a summarized account of what, from his perspective, had happened after he'd gotten their scribbled emergency message-in-a-bottle note. He made no mention of Luna's resurrection of the dead. He hadn't given his word to Luna, but that didn't really matter because she was an alicorn. She gave an order, and you followed it for your own good.

Neither of them were much good at small talk, and the topics meandered and jumped about rather nonsensically.

Prey returned Crimson's Blood Fern to him. Crimson thanked him again for the magical feather, citing how he had definitely noticed the difference when having to haul the bound and gagged Hafflow. "Between the four of us, I managed to go twice as long on every cloud pushing shift."

As in, they'd hidden during the day, and during the night compacted a cloud and dumped Hafflow on top of it, and taken turns pushing it until dawn the next day. The others had been impressed, but seemed to have put it down to Crimson just being the fittest and best flier out of them all. Crimson had merely kept quiet and not corrected them, since Prey had asked him to keep the electrite feather a secret just between the two of them. For Prey, Crimson had agreed.

"Yes. Well, you're welcome Crimson. It's not as active or 'flashy' as the jade necklace was, sorry for that. But, it's what I could get. It's just lots of passive buffs." Prey had responded.

"I would not trade it Prey. There is... no cost associated with this

feather. And thank you. Again."

Eventually though, after a period of quiet, Crimson had gotten around to asking the hard questions. There were two of them. Visibly steeling himself, although Prey only noticed the tells because he was paying close attention, Crimson had asked what he probably thought was the lesser of the two questions first:

"Prey, are you, I mean, are you alright?"

"Fine, thank you for asking. I've dealt with something recently, but I'll be fine. I'm fine." Prey smiled. He tried, but he couldn't hide the empty edge.

Crimson didn't seem fooled either. He looked more concerned instead. His wings shuffled, a tufted ear twitched once nervously. "Did something happen while-? No, *what* happened while we were gone, Prey?"

"Things happened, yes," Prey admitted reasonably, still keeping the smile going, "But I'm dealing with it. It'll be fine soon. I'll get over it."

Again a wing twitch, the same one which bore the disguised electrite feather Prey noted, "If you say so, but... does it have something to do with your short holiday? When you went to see your family, I mean. Lieutenant Screech mentioned it."

"I..." Prey paused, mouth open. He could say it, tell Crimson, dispense with this secret here and now. But he couldn't. He just couldn't tell anyone. The secret burned on his tongue like a live coal, but he'd rather swallow and burn than spit the coal out. He just couldn't tell.

"...I went back on the train to my village. Rushweed. I remember you saying you might want to come along, but since you were gone, and the opportunity was there, I just went by myself." Prey kept up the bland smile, "Perhaps next time, though."

Crimson was eyeing him with something Prey couldn't quite put a name to, "Yes please. I would like to meet your mother quite a bit.

It would be very educational, if nothing else."

"Sure thing." Prey agreed, and even half meant it.

If he ever went back there to the overgrown ruins, it would have to be for a very good reason, and if that was the case, perhaps taking Crimson and *showing* him rather than *telling* him would be easier. He smiled at Crimson.

Crimson unconsciously rubbed at the line of scars on the underside of his foreleg. The tally mark line. It was a very unguarded movement, coming from Crimson. He must be thinking hard about something else. Prey sat up and tried to pay attention, trying to push past the empty grey apathy filling his insides. This was Crimson, he needed to at least try to be here in the now.

It was then that Crimson asked the second hard question, the one he'd been putting off:

"We, that is I, got a parcel delivered by courier to the room we were renting. While in Griffonstone, I mean. While I was sick, and the griffin doctor thought it was the Blood Feather Plague at first. Inside, there was another bag tied up with a blue ribbon in a bow. It came from you, right?"

"Yes, I sent it. I did include a note too."

"I, yes, I was just making absolutely sure, though. Anyway, you wrote you'd found a herbal remedy, that was in the box, and that I should take it." Crimson's wings again shifted at his sides.

"That's right, yeah." Prey nodded.

In the box had been a number of slightly mismatched small dark cubes of ground up herbs, roots, and a few other things. The squares were baked in an oven to make them keep, and measured a few inches cubed. Prey had baked and included eight of them, twice as much as he'd estimated would actually be needed.

"Well, I know you wouldn't send anything dangerous or poisonous, and there was nothing to lose by trying, so I ate them. And they worked. I got better." Crimson stopped for a minute. It didn't take a

genius to know there was something he wasn't saying though.

"I don't think I quite put that right. Whatever you sent worked Prey. It wasn't the Blood Feather Plague, but still. I was sick Prey. I don't know if you realise how bad it was, but I was very ill. Could hardly eat, no strength, hard to breathe, could barely drink, couldn't sleep, getting that bit weaker every hour..." Crimson broke off his wooden recounting, eyes blinking and suddenly back in the now rather than the memory. He took a fortifying breath and moved on from the past:

"And I got better. I'm almost certain beyond a doubt it was whatever you sent. But, you see the thing is, it wasn't unexpected-No, I mean my, that illness-I'm not saying this right."

"Yes?" Prey prompted after Crimson didn't continue.

He knew where this was going even if Crimson's mental walls were still solid, but he was finding it hard to care as much as he should have. Everything just seemed to be... half. Half as important, or worrying, or concerning as it really was. So he simply kept smiling.

"Prey, what was, I mean... what did you put in those food blocks? There were lots of herbs, but also... something else?" Crimson asked but he wasn't asking, not really.

"Before I answer that, I feel I should ask; do you really want to know?" Prey asked kindly, "I have always said there are only two things I will not do for you Crimson. I will say it again, and again, until you finally believe all that it entails. So, do you really want to know?"

He smiled at Crimson, and made a great effort to make the smile as genuine a one as he could summon up.

Crimson looked at him, and his amber eyes flickered with self-doubt. Prey waited for Crimson to make his choice.

Crimson wanted to know, but he also suspected he knew what the answer would be. Crimson hated lies. Prey wouldn't lie to him here if he asked. If he didn't ask, then he wouldn't have to know the

truth. He doubted Prey really had scrounged up what he thought he had, but still, he didn't know. But Crimson doubted it, because it was so hard to believe.

"He wouldn't have done. He wouldn't know..." Crimson mumbled to himself, voice so quiet even Prey wasn't sure if that's exactly what Crimson had said.

The answer in the end was no. Crimson did not ask.

So they moved on, changed the topic, spoke of other things, and left the question unanswered. That was one of the happenings that Prey remembered as important. Other people wouldn't have thought it important, and to them it wouldn't have been either. They had their own lives and stories. Other things happened.

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Prey restarted his rune work down in his lair, but it was... half hearted.

He still put in the hours, still steadily built new arrays, but he was only going through the motions even if he was sticking to his schedule. Lemon Pink was keeping very quiet whenever they were both in the same room. A thought had been coming to Prey more and more recently about that. In fact, the thought had probably been long overdue to begin with.

Lemon had come from his memories. She'd fought with him, saved his life, and had travelled with him back to Rushweed. She'd cried there too. But the more time passed, the more she naturally diverged from him. Again, it was what happened with the passage of time.

'Lemon Pink is my tool. But she is also a person. Her own person. Mine, but also her own.'

She was physically an adult, a pony, and a unicorn. And a she. She had a coltfriend, Randy, even if Prey himself thought very little of the simple earth pony. However, that just proved the point even more.

Lemon was loyal, there was no question there, but still, she was developing further and further into her own divergent person. A broken person, yes, but then weren't they all? She knew what it was like to be trapped under the black ice, knowing that you'd never break free of it.

Prey idly made a note to see how her development ended. It might be interesting, maybe enough to hold his undivided attention when that happened. Prey smiled at nothing, then blinked and let it fade when he realised he was alone in the lantern-lit lair, and there was no one to see it. Oh well, he decided it didn't matter.

Very little seemed to nowadays.

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And then there was the Night Guard medal award ceremony.

Way back when, and it felt longer than it actually was, after surviving the horrors of Mayflower, it had been decided the ISND needed medals to reward them for almost dying. At the time Nighthawk had not decided on this, but Luna had, so it was going to happen.

The ceremony had been delayed, then put back, and then delayed again what with one thing and then the next interrupting schedules and plans. But unfortunately, there was no getting out of it any longer.

Luna had mentioned the ceremony for the second time to Nighthawk, which was as good as an order for the Captain to get on with it.

What precisely was the medal for, though? Barely surviving? Failing to rescue any of the kindersnatch victims? Later killing most of them with bone rot mines? Not even stopping the warlock in the end, with Hard Baked seemingly just committing suicide? Prey wasn't quite clear on what merits they were supposed to be awarded for here. Maybe it was a gold star for trying?

'Ah well, it doesn't really matter.'

Prey fixed a smile on his face. He stood on the small set-up stage, lined up with the rest of the ISND, even the soon to be ex-ISND and inactive ISND members. Because Scenic and Lilly were also here.

Lilly was standing between Gloom and Scenic, who had both helped her up onto the wooden stage. Scenic was in his old Night Guard armour, while Gloom and Crimson were in their much newer and more functional armour. Apparently it shouldn't be too long, only another month or so, until the rest of the Night Guard were finally outfitted too. But for now, it was still just the two of them out of the entire Night Guard. The armour wasn't flashy, it didn't have any ridiculous helmet plumes, but they still stood out starkly from every other metal-clad thestral now.

This little presentation was taking place in the Guard Hall. The sun had just risen outside, and for most of the Night Guards present, it was the last event of their shift. Looking around, there were still only enough Night Guards to fill about half the assembly hall. Or if you were a cynic, the hall was still half empty.

Prey smiled inanely out at the rows of helmeted heads and yellow slitted eyes, all standing at attention in front of the raised stage.

He didn't want to be here. His wants didn't matter though, this was merely the way things were. At least Luna wasn't here.

The Princess was apparently indisposed. Doing what, only the higher powers knew. Meaning; Luna herself and her sister. Because whatever the distraction was, the Sun Wolf herself had left very clear instructions that the two of them were not to be disturbed under any circumstances.

The guess going around the Night Guard was that it had something to do with Griffonia, and to those thestrals in the know, that it had something to do with their newest political prisoner. Was the Sun Wolf pleased? Was she displeased? She certainly didn't deign to inform the lesser mortals if her sister had messed up or not in her eyes. That an alicorn can do no wrong against mortals, only another immortal seemed to be the prevailing lesson here.

Captain Nighthawk was coming to the end of his short, gruff

speech. It really hadn't been much of a speech, more a presentation of the non-classified facts of their mission to the assembled Night Guards. Thestrals didn't go in for speeches, to whom actions spoke louder than words, but if you were recounting the ISND's actions to them, it amounted to much the same thing Prey mused.

"...That leaves me the honour of presenting each pony the Half Moon medal." Nighthawk finished rather abruptly. Without any further ceremony, he pulled a crumpled pouch out from under his armour and trotted to the first person in line, which was Gloom as he was the Sargent.

Prey only half watched as the Captain fished out one of the medals with a wing claw and pinned it to Gloom's sleek armour. It stuck on with a little metallic *tack*. The medal wasn't big, just the size of a gold bit, a shiny silver semi-circle, fitting the Half Moon nature of the medal.

Prey had been forced to listen to some of the history of this medal. It was the usual tripe; only awarded for excess bravery and selfless sacrifice in the field, yadda yadda. They were the first Night Guards to receive it in over a thousand years, since Luna's banishment, and it was a big honour, yadda yadda. A Full Moon medal was only awarded posthumously, though. Prey didn't care about that, he didn't care about any of this, but he smiled anyway.

'Smile.'

Lilly Blossom was next in the line. She couldn't wear armour anymore though. She had on a long sleeved shirt, and a light, but very fluffy, scarf. It was her standard attempt to hide the meldwood disfigurement. It did nothing for her face though, so it only half worked. Or cynically again, it half failed.

'-be brave. They're looking at you, but they're not staring at you. Breathe. Do what doctor Helpful said, count to ten. I'm in a happy place. It's fine, it's all fine. Gloom explained it, they're thestrals, they don't care. Be brave. Tons of them all have scars and stuff too-', Lilly was repeating internally to herself.

Prey saw her jerk out of the corner of his eye when she refocused

and found Nighthawk standing in front of her with her medal, the taller pony looming slightly. Lilly opened her mouth, forgetting she wasn't supposed to say anything, but Nighthawk simply pinned the medal onto her dark navy shirt with a swift motion and moved on to Scenic.

'-I don't want a medal. I don't need or deserve a medal. A medal isn't right, shouldn't all those poor, poor villagers get a medal instead? I didn't do anything-', Scenic was thinking, staring straight ahead, embarrassed, feeling ashamed, and desperately wishing this ceremony was over.

tack Went the Half Moon medal while the assembled Night Guard silently looked on, and when Nighthawk moved out of the way and on to Crimson, Scenic was left facing them all. He hastily dropped his gaze, unable to meet all those yellow eyes, and secretly afraid they all knew how much of a imposter he felt like.

Crimson stood perfectly straight and unmoving, just like a good thestral warrior while Nighthawk tacked the second-to-last Half Moon medal to his chestplate. No words or nod needed.

'-there isn't even a point to this award ceremony anymore. Shining Armour declined to attend last minute, that was the whole point, to show the Royal Guard-', Nighthawk thought in annoyance, fishing the last silver medal out of the bag with a wing claw.

He stepped in front of Prey, looming over the lamb, although not on purpose. Prey smiled up at him. He didn't have any armour, or even a shirt like Lilly wore. Just his wool and his ribbon. Oh, and the two gold tracer bands too, of course.

Prey took a hurried step backwards when Nighthawk bent down with the silver medal. His smile stayed strong though. Nighthawk frowned, but then just wordlessly offered the medal to Prey, balanced expertly on the end of his wing claw.

After a moment, Prey gingerly took it, and with some fumbling, managed to get it to stick in his wool enough that it wouldn't immediately fall out. He stood back up straight, faced the silent ranks of Night Guards as they looked at the ISND, and smiled.

He kept smiling until Nighthawk gruffly finished up the ceremony and they were able to go.

They'd barely finished seeing Lilly safely back into her flat and shut the door, when Scenic finally tore the medal off his chestplate and flung it violently into the trimmed bushes flanking the garden gate.

Prey's head jerked round to track the sudden movement, but seeing what Scenic was doing, he relaxed and smiled.

"Why did you do that?" Crimson asked blankly, looking at the offending bush.

Scenic was breathing heavily, staring at the same bush.

"Scenic?" Gloom prompted.

"It's just a stupid piece of metal." Scenic said sullenly. The three ponies might still all be in armour, but they weren't on duty. Scenic didn't need to use any formal form of address.

"I see. You think that medal is supposed to mean that everything we went through at Mayflower was worth it, because we were given a medal at the end of it. Am I right?" Gloom asked, trotting over to the bush. It was an evergreen of some kind, since the leaves weren't even slightly orange or brown by this time of the year.

"It's not alright and it wasn't worth it. What about all those ponies who died? The villagers? Mayflower and Alfalfa Dale? Fallen Leaf and the deer holt, even. It's not right. Why should we get given a medal for that?" Scenic demanded, although not really of anyone. He was just ranting.

Crimson flicked a wing tip up to under his own medal, lifting it up with a pinion feather to look at it upside down. "It does feel that way, but it's not true Scenic. I mean, a medal does not fix anything, but it's more a reminder for you. I mean, not that any of us will forget, but that's what I see it as anyway. Neither a mark of success nor of failure. Just a mark of duty."

"Well I don't want it, no matter the reason." Scenic muttered, not taking his back when Gloom straightened up from the bush with Scenic's thrown medal.

"Too bad. It was awarded to you. Take it, it's yours whether you want it or not. Put it in a box and try to forget about it, show it to Carton or don't, tell her about it or don't, but it's yours." Gloom pushed the Half Moon medal onto Scenic. "Take it."

"I'm just going to throw it off the mountain or something if I do." Scenic muttered, still not taking it back.

Prey smiled and silently nodded along. He was probably going to do the same thing. A medal was worse than utterly worthless. And also a painful reminder of failure. Of the villagers of Alfalfa Dale in that pit. Of the avenging diamond dogs. And of worse.

Gloom sighed in a longsuffering manner, "Fine, I'll give it to Carton Juice for safekeeping then."

"No!" Scenic hastily snatched it off from Gloom's wing claw, "I mean, no. She doesn't need to know about what happened, I mean she does know, kinda'. But it's not, she'll just think that..." His words trailed off into inaudible mumbling.

Not too quiet for Prey's ears though, but he didn't care. It wasn't like it mattered.

Gloom and Crimson were far from unobservant either, and Scenic was a pony, meaning anything but subtle.

"You still haven't told her about what really happened in Mayflower." Crimson stated.

"No, I did. I just, skipped on the, ah, gory details. And, and about, about that night. Around the fire. In Mayflower. In the dark..."

"You also didn't tell her how it really felt, did you?" Gloom asked, unsurprised. It didn't mean he wasn't still frustrated with Scenic, though. This was all old news, something that should've been over and dealt with by now.

'-is not easy to share those kinds of things, but moon blast it, that's what the therapists have been telling us all to do from the very beginning Scenic-'

Crimson raised one eyebrow slightly under the curved rim of his sleek helmet, "And her seeing your medal will ruin this how, exactly?"

"It just will. Well, it won't, I know that. But it also still will, even though it'll just be a little bit. I don't want to... disappoint her. She's a Canterlot pony. Carton's strong, stronger than me. Uh, not just physically I mean, although that too duh. But she's..."

Scenic searched for words. "...She's so kind and good at harmony, and I'm not anymore."

'-but blast it all, I just don't want to do this and I don't want this stupid medal-'

Prey twitched at the word 'Harmony', but he pushed it away and affixed his polite smile again. Ponies misused that word every single time, especially now that he had seen 'Harmony', but he would just have to get used to it.

'So just keep smiling.'

Gloom and Crimson exchanged looks in silent conversation.

Gloom shrugged, "I don't agree, but if you want to talk about it later to somepony who isn't Carton, you can find me."

"Or if you want to spar, you can come find me instead." Crimson blandly added.

"Uh, what?"

"I mean, if you would prefer to work out your frustrations with a sparring match, I am willing to be your partner." Crimson explained patiently.

"Uhh, thanks but no thanks Crimson."

"I was joking."

"What, really? You?" Scenic asked in complete surprise.

Crimson gave a brief wing shrug, "Yes. I mean, unless you really had said yes, then I would be happy to spar with you, but I would've also been very surprised."

'-oh. He was trying to make me feel better-', Scenic thought, realising that Crimson's efforts had even briefly worked too.

Prey idly eyed some passers-by on the street while the other three kept on talking, who were likewise eyeing Gloom and Crimson in their armour, and speeding up their pace. Few even noticed Prey standing there in the small front garden, but to the rare few who did, he smiled brightly back. When were they going to finish so that he could leave? He should be doing more important things than standing around twiddling his hooves. Should be, anyways.

He just couldn't feel any drive to do so however. Inside he was empty, like an old box filled with dust and cobwebs.

'-alright, I think this is enough back and forth about this medal. It's time I moved Scenic on, he's fixating-', Gloom decided.

"Scenic, could we stop by your house briefly?" Gloom interrupted.

Scenic blinked, "Uh, ah, sure?"

Gloom opened the garden gate, ushering everyone to go on through, "Thank you. We want to drop off our armour at your house briefly. We'll pick it up once we get back, if that isn't an issue."

"No problem, no problem. Where're you going?" Scenic asked, as they filed out.

"No, where are we going. We as in *we*. The four of us are going to get ice-cream milkshakes. Curlies' Cream Cup, it's not far from your house. It has some very nice fruit milkshakes, mango ones too."

Scenic blinked again, "Er, I wasn't planning to..."

"Come with us anyway." Gloom told him.

Scenic looked to Crimson, "Only if you guys were already going. Don't feel you all have to on my behalf." He said a bit weakly.

"It sounds nice." Crimson said, agreeing. If you weren't much bothered either way, then taking the option with a nice treat involved in it wasn't a hard choice.

"Good, it's decided then. First to your house, then to Curlies' Cream Cup." Gloom announced stepping up to Scenic's left. By unspoken signal, Crimson took Scenic's right, supporting Scenic between the two of them.

'-take a page out of Taffy's book. Sugar, and a battering ram for all their objections-'

The ice-cream milkshake was okay. That was all. Just okay.

The other three thought they were great, Gloom with his long scarf draped over his chest and his Dusk Pony amulet on, but Prey didn't find his anything more than okay. It wasn't as sweet as it should have been. Just okay, like any candy he'd eaten recently. It was as sweet in flavour as ever, but it lacked that certain something now. Just okay. Prey alternatively tried drinking and eating his incredibly thick milkshake in turns, and smiled anyway.

It wasn't really an important event, but it was one which still persisted in lingering in Prey's fore-memory.

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Time waits for nobody nor anything, and ever moves on. The ISND were all back up and working again, mainly on making damn sure the griffins didn't have any more spies left in the city. It was one of those tasks where you would never know if you'd been successful or not. If they couldn't uncover any more spies, couldn't that just mean they were better hidden? Or perhaps they'd only found all of the *current* spies. There was nothing stopping the Griffonian government from simply laying low for a few months or longer

before starting again, after all.

But one consequence of the never-ceasing march of time was that other events had now rolled around for the Night Guard. And that meant T-Day.

Prey had gotten out of the last one, but no such luck this time. Training Day was supposed to be a fortnightly exercise for every Guard in the first place, but with the extremely understaffed and overworked nature of the Night Guard up until recently, it had been once a month participation at best. Now, with the introduction of more thestrals into the Night Guard's ranks and the initial integration problems over with, Nighthawk had every intention of finally meeting that fortnightly quota.

Crimson was busy sparring against one of the new thestrals at that very moment. In fact, it happened to be the one-eyed new Lieutenant, Vivid Edge, who'd gone with them undercover to Griffonstone.

Crimson's slice was so fast it was almost lazy, the *flick* right before contact that gave the strike all its' power looked nothing but casual. Vivid Edge barely managed to get her training spear up at the last second.

Crimson had already stepped forwards though, two precise paces, and struck with the other wing while simultaneously kicking out for her leg.

Vivid Edge's one eye was a disability, but she was an experienced fighter and protected her blind side as best she could. Just because she was a Lieutenant didn't make her a good warrior, take Starry Wing for instance, who was excellent at the job but just a normal thestral fighter otherwise. However, Vivid Edge had obviously earned all her many scars through bitter experience.

She shifted out of the way of Crimson's kick on instinct without losing any speed, blocking and lashing out with her spear again, trying to get distance.

Her lightning quick jab either missed Crimson or he dodged it, Prey

wasn't exactly an expert, and they were going too fast to really track. That, and he was running laps at the back of the pack, panting heavily.

Crimson went after the older Vivid, relentlessly hounding her around the mat, never giving her a moment's breathing room. *Strike*, dodge, parry, dodge, dodge, dodge again, *feint*, sweeping kick, *slash-stab-sidestep-strike*.

Vivid took blows, mostly on her padded armour. Her normal armour probably would've blocked them too, but the odd hit would've been telling strikes. They kept going regardless, it was what sparring was for. It wasn't about winning or losing, just practice. Plus, in any real fight, it would most likely never be a one on one. Both would rely on teammates, surprise, terrain, and/or ranged options if available. A unicorn, or just a crossbow, hardly did the 'up close and personal' kind of duelling this spar was.

Crimson had already been on the sparring mat for quite a while, and was going to be there for quite a while too, since not to put too fine a point on it, Crimson was one of the best warriors in a straight-up fight the Night Guard had. As such, he'd been told to stay on the sparring mat and train/beat up in a helpful way every other Guard who faced him. There were four mats rotating Night Guards in and out, but Crimson hadn't stopped for more than a short water break since the beginning.

No one aside from Prey and Crimson himself knew this stamina and endurance was in no small part because of the electrite feather. The skill though? That was all Crimson.

Just so long as he didn't overdo it and get badly injured again, then it didn't matter.

Around the training hall, the rest of the attending Night Guard were efficiently getting on with their current exercises or training. Which included the unhappy Prey.

Running circuits, lifting weights, striking targets, armed and unarmed sparring, a crossbow and normal bow range next door, hoops and aerial obstacles suspended from the high ceiling for the

fliers (meaning everyone besides Prey), and while doing these, half the time also carrying weighted packs and still in armour to simulate real life.

Prey had raised a token fuss at the start, but then just went along with it. He was dead last in everything, struggled with the few exercises he could actually perform, and physically hated it.

For a moment, he'd actually been tricked into giving it his best effort, thinking that he could lose himself in strenuous exertion.

It hadn't worked, he'd been mistaken, and he'd fast realised once again this was all just a complete waste of his time. He panted and sweated and strained, and achieved nothing. Because he was a runt. Always had been. Always would be.

After running yet more laps, Prey leant against a wall, breathing heavily, and pushed his dangling ears back. Around the marked out track lanes, the other Night Guards were still going, but he personally was taking a break. He should've probably kept trotting on the spot like you were supposed to do to cool down, but he didn't care.

He was fumbling for his ribbon to tie back his stupid ears to prevent them swatting him in the face while jogging, no matter how ridiculous it would look, when he heard someone trotting up from behind him.

On turning around, he found it was Vivid Edge herself, sweating and breathing hard from exertion just like everyone else, but doing remarkably well nonetheless.

"Hello, Lieutenant." Prey got out, still breathing heavily. He smiled.

"Prey." Vivid nodded, doing what Prey should've been doing and trotting in place while she caught her breath.

"Something I can do for you, ma'am?"

"I came to ask you some questions. I just want your honest opinion." Vivid answered, turning her head so she could fully look at him with her one eye.

'-he didn't come along with us to Griffonia, but he's the pony who uncovered the griffins plot in the first place. Can be easy to forget that when looking at him-'

The mare had been on the mission to Griffonstone, and had obviously spent a lot of time in the company of Gloom and Crimson both while working. No doubt they'd all talked and gotten to know one another better, how could they not when working in such close proximity while undercover? Prey, as the only member of the ISND not taken along, was also therefore the only active ISND member who Vivid didn't know.

Simply put, she was here to get some insights into Prey for herself. Gloom and Crimson would've told her some things, but like most thestrals, she preferred first-hoof experience wherever possible.

"I'd be happy to answer most questions, ma'am." Prey said, still smiling.

Vivid snorted, "Not likely. Sargent Gloom said the exact opposite, although he also said you'd say that."

Prey seamlessly changed tack, idly untying his ribbon, "He probably did. But you still have questions, one which Gloom and Crimson wouldn't or couldn't answer, so you've come over to ask them yourself."

Vivid wiped some sweat off her face, "I won't flit about the cloud, then. The ISND unit has been hyper-effective for its' small size. But what, in your opinion, does it still lack? What would allow you all to achieve even more?"

'-I've had Gloom and Crimson's answers, now I'll get Prey's own-'

Prey shrugged, "Probably luck. I won't say more people, because look what happened with Lilly Blossom and Scenic Paint. If the Night Guard as a whole increased in size further, that would help quite a bit, though." He answered, carefully shifting her attention away from the ISND.

Her notched ear tilted to the side, "The Night Guard has just

recently expanded. Or do you mean even further?"

"Yes, further. The Royal Guard still has many more bodies than the Night Guard does. With more Night Guards, it would mean more hooves to spread over more tasks. Then, some of those tasks that are being relegated to us, the ISND, can be accomplished by other units just fine." Prey said. It was a generic, safe answer, adding: "Of course, everything is up to Captain Nighthawk, ma'am."

Meaning; 'We don't need or want your help, you'll just make everything worse, and Nighthawk's already tried, so keep your nose out of our business'.

Prey didn't care if Vivid thought she was breaking new ground and trying to be helpful, Nighthawk and the other Lieutenants had already mentioned all this before, and he hadn't wanted anything to do with their suggestions then either. He didn't care for anything Vivid Edge might suggest, Lieutenant or not. But he smiled anyways.

The scarred mare didn't quite catch all of that hidden meaning in Prey's words, but she wasn't unintelligent. In other words, Prey's answer to her question was; "there's little more you can do to help".

'-I picked up a lot on our mission, but back here in Canterlot, everything's back to being different again. Like dealing with those nobles. Different circumstances, with different skills and needs-', Vivid thought, her mind turning towards how they all served Luna to the best of their capabilities, however different they may be.

"Lieutenant Screech spoke of how you gave some crash-course training to the new Night Guards while we were away in... just 'away'. You did quite well at it too. Is giving more such condensed, I believe the term would be 'lectures', something you think you would be capable of on other topics too, Prey?" She asked.

Not 'will you', but 'can you', because if he could, then he was only an order away from that becoming 'you will'. At the end of the day, or rather night, he was still a subordinate, and she his superior.

"I don't really know what I could further teach anyone. All I'm good

at is paperwork." Prey answered. Paperwork, runes, and murder.

"Wrong. If that were all, you would not have achieved all you already have." Vivid Edge disagreed bluntly.

"No, that is *literally* how I noticed something was off and followed it up into finding out about our spy problem. Paperwork. If it's anything else to do with being a Night Guard, I'm afraid you're better off asking someone better qualified, ma'am." Prey politely disagreed back. He was not going to be teaching anyone else anything more if he had any say in the matter.

Vivid Edge studied him for a minute out of her one yellow eye, eyepatch covering the other, "We'll see. Who knows? Perhaps more lectures on paperwork are actually what we need to learn." She mused, referring to herself and the newer thestrals.

'-Luna knows that we all hate it though. That liaison officer is an unholy pain in my flank too-'

"If that is what you think is best, ma'am, then I'll do so." He replied, re-tying his ribbon. But not a second before the order came.

Not that he really cared. The aggravation he felt at the idea of having to again talk before all those unknown strangers wasn't as bad as before. It seemed a lacklustre problem now, lesser than it ever had been.

"If we decide it's needed, then yes." Vivid nodded. She rolled her neck, done with her break and ready to go back to join in the unpleasant exercise and training. However, she wasn't done asking Prey all she wanted to just yet, either. So she lingered to get the answers she sought.

"Why were you chosen by Princess Luna, Prey? Sargent Gloom briefly mentioned something about it, that you were hoof-picked, the same as Crimson." She looked down on him, waiting for his answer.

Prey smiled brightly, and lifted his forehooves to show her the two golden bands. "There's no need to flit about the cloud." He said,

quoting the turn of phrase back to her.

"Captain Nighthawk, or the Lieutenants, or anyone else who was there must've told you Crimson and I were both criminals. Our posting in the ISND is a second chance. A chance graciously granted to us by Her Majesty in return for our loyal service."

There was no way Vivid wouldn't have known. She was a Lieutenant even if she was new to the scene, and would've been filled in on every aspect of the Night Guard. Why had she even asked? To see if Prey would deny it? Or try to talk around the subject instead? Maybe to see if he was properly thankful to Luna?

Vivid studied him for a long moment more, thoughts not revealing much of anything solid to as she was focused on a feeling, not thinking a decision through. Still, he picked out enough to get the feeling that they were both thinking of different things in this conversation. Finally, she just gave him a nod:

"You've done the Night Guard and Princess Luna great service. I don't doubt you'll do even greater in the future. Oh, and that medal is nothing to be ashamed of. Neither are your scars."

'-Gloom said how difficult his job was. I see a bit of what he meant. Still, I don't really understand. There is a lot here still to learn-'

Prey wordlessly smiled after her and tipped his head in goodbye. Ashamed? Ashamed of a medal he didn't care in the slightest for? And ashamed of his scars? He assumed she meant the mostly obscured but still obvious poison burns on his face, and didn't know about his whip scars. Because if it was the latter and someone had told her, he would be angry. Probably angry. If he could stir up enough embers to kindle properly the anger, that is.

'Not that it matters. I can do nothing about it either way. It doesn't matter.' Prey repeated to himself. He firmly fixed his smile, and reluctantly got up to re-join the training.

He really should've kept moving in place, because the next five minutes on the track were utterly miserable on his legs.

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More lengths of time passed at their own unchanging speed, more nights and days cycled by.

A sun, a moon, a sun, a moon. A night of work and day of sleep, reversed breakfast and dinners, cold nights frosting the air with your breath, and leaves turning from yellowing orange to golden brown and just brown.

It wasn't that long, not really. Only a week and a couple of days. Seconds, minutes, and hours going round on the clock, two rotations for a day and a night.

Prey went with Crimson to work every evening, and returned in the early afternoon, sometimes with Gloom, sometimes with just Crimson. He walked, and worked, and slept, and smiled. Smile for everyone who's looking. Smile and whatever you do, don't look in the mirror.

Garrow and Snake took turns periodically whispering in his ear when he was not on guard. Taffy blathered on about the upcoming Nightmare Night Guard party they were supposed to be attending. Lemon Pink and Randy Pickaxe were progressing glacially in their stilted and rather one sided relationship. There were scandals in the paper about more nobles, and other news of vital importance to Equestria.

Nationally, very few ponies actually knew about their new strained relationship with Griffonia. Or perhaps most just didn't care. What impact did those griffin savages have on their peaceful everyday life under Celestia's smiling sun? None!

The dates and daily crossword puzzles in the newspapers ticked up one by one, signalling the passing of days. The vapid and substanceless content of their articles never failed to disappoint Prey into feeling nothing. There was barely any point to even trying to read them. It didn't matter if he did or didn't, so he might as well read them anyways. And was still vaguely disappointed every time. Not by the newspapers necessarily, but rather by everything. It didn't matter, though.

Life wasn't about living anymore. It was about surviving.

Smile.

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"Did you pack the mustard jar, Spot?" Carton asked, delicately rummaging in the picturesque picnic basket with one massive hoof.

"I, uh, I'm pretty sure I did?" Scenic answered uncertainly, pausing in slicing the loaf.

"Well I don't see-Aha! Never mind, found it. I got it mixed up with the honey."

"So one tomato, mustard, lemon grass, and cheddar sandwich coming right up."

A picnic. One of Canterlot's pristine parks. A honeycomb-patterned blanket over wonderfully green grass. Bright sun, all overhead clouds cleared away to the horizon. One of the last few opportunities for a picnic before it got too chilly even at midday.

A mare and a stallion doing what pony sweethearts did, taking an outing in nice weather, to somewhere warm and safe, with food easily to hoof, and each other for company.

Nothing grand and romantic like clouds spelling out both their names in a huge heart, or a five-star restaurant at the Rose Garden, but more normal, realistic, *solid*. The sort of dates you could go on again and again, where your expectations were normal, and you could really just *be* with your opposite. Memories of heart-shaped clouds and lovey-dovey besotted romance fade. It's the time you spend together that really counts.

Will you still love them when they're thirty years old? Thirty-five? Forty? Time passes for everyone, and with it so does one's own mortality. When they're old, and starting to forget, when they have trouble walking, when they get sick and feeble, will you still love them then?

If the answer is "No", and you cannot work through it to turn that

answer into a "Yes", then it's not love. Merely infatuation.

Looks, health, memory, those all fade. Money can be lost, houses can burn, circumstances can change on a coin flip. Only the real sort of love can stand the test of time.

"Aaaand, done. Your sandwich, honey." Scenic said, slapping the top slice of bread on and pushing the plate across to the much larger earth pony.

"Oh, thanks. Remember I told you about how Cherry came by yesterday?" Carton asked, eating nearly half the sandwich in one bite.

"Uh-uh." Scenic agreed, starting on creating his own sandwich.

"She and the other girls at the beekeepery-"

"-I'm ninety percent sure that's not a real word."

"Shush. Anyway, they're putting on a going-away party for Heather Weather, you know? She's the one with the purple mane. Anyway, we're going to be doing a small party, and it's going to be Nightmare Night themed, since it'll be so close anyway. Pumpkin carving, fancy dress, spooky cakes, all that."

"Uh-uh." Scenic repeated to show he was listening, rummaging in the basket.

"So I thought; why don't we take Lilly along? I know you've got that work party too, and I'm sure Lilly's also invited to that as well, but if we have Heather Weather's party early enough, say, afternoon time, we could go to both. Two parties in one night. How does that sound? You up for it?"

"Oh, uh, I guess? I, I don't really fancy staying late into the night for the Guard party, but yeah. I don't see why we couldn't go to both. Taffy's organising it, so I'm sure it'll be great."

"Wonderful!" Carton Juice beamed, and swallowed the rest of her sandwich in one go, "Now, what are we going to go dressed as? Matching costumes? Part of a pair? Themed? Not themed at all?

What'll it be?"

"Do you know those two ponies, Lemon?" Randy asked, shifting on their shared bench.

Lemon Pink turned uninterestedly away from the earth pony couple sitting on their picnic blanket in the middle of the park, "No."

"Oh. Uh, never mind then." Randy ducked his head, returning to his own sandwiches. Overhead, the oaks faintly rustled, the occasional brown leaf drifting down around them.

His job gardening in the park was very busy for Randy at the moment, as he'd just been telling Lemon:

"Everypony's working hard, there's loads to do to get the park ready for winter. There's hundreds of bulbs to plant every day, mulch to lay, compost beds to build up, digging out shrubs before their roots set in, transplanting the winter flowers, protecting the ones you can't, raking up the mountains of leaves, pruning the dead branches, all that good stuff. And weeding! There's *always* more weeding to do no matter what season it is. There's lots to do, but everypony's been kind and shown me the ropes."

The more the park gardeners did now in the autumn, the less onerous the work would be come springtime. Randy liked his job, even if it was hard work at the moment, and as stereotypical and outdated of a view it was that he, an earth pony, ended up working with plants and mud even after moving here to Canterlot, it was nevertheless true that he still personally found it fulfilling.

Half the reason Randy had wanted to move to Canterlot so badly was to get away from those traditional expectations, but once here, he'd ended up following those traditions anyway, and liking his job too.

Lemon had flatly pointed out in her calm way the irony of that.

Randy had sheepishly ducked his head and shrugged helplessly. What can you do? He was a simple pony, and simple happiness was

enough for him, even if it came in a form he'd at first dismissed.

Lemon had also just as calmly pointed out the error in his thinking that Canterlot was a paragon of progressive thinking. It might be called the City of Invention but it was paradoxically also the most entrenched in adherence to its traditions.

He'd been confused, until she'd explained that Canterlot was the oldest pony city, literally the New Unicornia, modelled after the old, and thus firmly rooted in history. She'd laid out the ingrained traditions that history brought, the noble bloodlines and the upper crust's stranglehold on land, government, politics, and the like. The mere existence of Upper Canterlot meant there was also a Lower Canterlot, and how the bulk of the population of Canterlot were unquestionably unicorns. Cloudsdale was nearby, but that was a separate equation in and of itself.

"I, I didn't think about it like that." Randy admitted shamefacedly. Lemon Pink had just shrugged, razor-straight mane rising and falling with the motion, and said it meant little to them, the common pony. Life went on day to day. There was no point feeling guilt over something so utterly out of their control and that they had no power to change. They just lived here.

But regardless of all that, the point was that despite his busy job at the moment, Randy still religiously came every lunch break to the bench to meet with Lemon, and she came by on the days when she was able.

Lemon lit her sharp horn to lift the book she'd set facedown on the bench to hold its place, but then hesitated.

"Randy Pickaxe, I am available on Nightmare Night. There will be various festivities being held throughout Canterlot. I am able to attend if you want to go." She stated, not asked.

"Wa?" Randy coughed, thumping his spotted chest to swallow his bite, "As in, you're saying you'll go if I want to go, but if I don't want to, then you're not going to go by yourself?"

"Yes."

"I, I would like yes-Hang on, do you actually even want to go?"

"Not particularly."

He blinked, his ears dropping slightly, "If you don't want to go to Nightmare Night, uh, why are you saying you'll go with me?"

"I said I don't particularly care about Nightmare Night. It is not a festival focused towards the night time and stars as I would prefer, but rather one towards a defeated demoness. Yet even that is no longer true, all the cautionary elements of the tale have been removed and replaced with celebration and excessive amounts of sugar. The way they celebrate the night beyond the border is very different to here." Lemon made a very deliberate flick with her hoof, as if brushing something distasteful off her pink fur:

"Regardless of that though, I do not care to attend the festivities alone. However, I would instead be agreeable to attending the festivities with you." She finished, calmly laying out her logic.

Randy actually started to blush, "I'd, uh, I'd love to go with you, thanks Lemon."

Lemon nodded imperceptibly, like she was thinking very hard about her next carefully spoken words, "Yes. And I... I would love the opportunity to go with you, too."

"Great. So, uh, where d'you want to meet?"

"At the Lullaby Clocktower, west side, next to the canal on the path. Find the little anchor pedestal. Seven-fifteen sharp. Don't be late." Lemon immediately rattled off.

"Umm, can I have that one more time please? A bit slower?"

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What Lemon Pink saw and knew, Prey saw and knew. And what Prey saw and knew, Lemon Pink *mostly* knew. Some things weren't safe for her to know, literally not safe, but those few things didn't really matter, as Prey was never going to let them become important.

Lemon was finally making moves to become her own person, making personality decisions, such as this one. It had taken too long, and Prey had meant to both allow and push her towards this before, but other things had kept coming up, and he'd kept delaying, but now it was happening.

At the time, before his test, Prey hadn't been able to banish all his paranoia. Despite everything, despite all evidence pointing to the contrary, and despite unequivocally knowing better, he still hadn't been able to completely root out the creeping paranoia clinging to his heart. Now though, it wasn't as important anymore.

Lemon Pink was slowly developing an adult personality? Okay. She was hesitantly and haltingly pursuing a relationship with an earth pony? Okay. That was fine. It hardly even mattered to Prey anymore. So he smiled, and said nothing from the sidelines.

More days, more hours, more minutes. All will pass in time.

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One more event of importance in the passing of Prey's story of life. It would not have been important in the slightest to most other people, but perhaps of extreme importance to a select few.

Up above, on one of the streets in Lower Canterlot, Prey just happened to have exited an old bookstore. He'd been listlessly browsing the magic section inside, looking for anything old that might have references to dark magics, which might've slipped between the cracks and not been censored. It wouldn't have been the first time that exact series of events had occurred in Equestria's history.

It was that type of bookstore too, out of the way, verging on ancient, stuffed with many old, one of a kind, hoof written autobiographies and the like. Which wasn't to say they were good memoirs.

In fact, they were all, to a fault, self-aggrandizing, disjointed, second thought scribblings. There was nothing in the bookstore matching Prey's criteria. Lethargically, he'd flipped through one

age-yellowed book, then the next, and found nothing.

He was tired. He'd finished his Guard shift at the Palace, and now this was extra. Still, it was on his and Lemon's schedule to check such bookstores as this one. For that reason, he was doing so. Even if he didn't feel like it.

But there was nothing in here. Which wasn't really a surprise. Was it good he hadn't found anything? That meant he didn't have to do anything, since there was nothing to act on. This task felt so lifeless, but it was on his schedule, and Prey knew it was important and needed to be done. So he put on a smile, and did it.

Do it. Done it. Did it. But that had still left nothing to show for it at the end. Prey was tired. He wanted to go back to his flat and sleep. And that's exactly what he had been about to do.

He'd just slipped back out the way he came in, avoiding the doddering unicorn store owner's notice, when the jolt came.

Prey's head reflexively jerked his head to the left, the side which his ribbon hung from.

He ignored the ponies out book shopping up and down this street, instead staring through them as if they weren't there, looking off at an angle and down towards a point under the city's foundations. He couldn't see through brick and cobble, but he knew unerringly where he was looking. Not down in the winding crystal cave system, but beneath to the tunnels of Canterlot's sewer system instead. A silent alarm bell of runes had been rung.

Prey was tired, but he wasn't going back to the flat anymore now.

Prey took the careful approach through the sewers, only using tunnels which were sufficiently secured by runic trap arrays at each end, and slowly making his way deeper towards the Sewer's Heart.

It was dark and clammy, and the hex in the air sought to get inside his head at every opportunity, watching from the shadows and approaching when his back was turned. Prey didn't give the

formless curse of the hex any purchase, and it slipped off him like water off a duck's back.

In the end, Prey didn't need to go the whole way down into the Sewer's Heart. He came to a shallowly submerged tunnel, the crystal lantern he carried on his back reflecting off the rippling water's dark surface. He stepped down with a splash into the cold water, and slimy cold wickerwatch tendrils immediately brushed against his submerged hooves.

The wickerwatch was not sentient. It was most closely related to a water plant, with a few key differences. It was not aware, did not think or feel pain. Like all plants, all it did was grow and duplicate. With the exception of those few key differences.

Prey heaved up one of the wickerwatches' rubbery tendrils, the plant surprisingly heavy once it left the water, and wrapped it firmly around one hoof. He got a better grip, and once he was satisfied it was wrapped securely enough not to float free if he put his hoof back down, did so. Then he closed his eyes and focused.

Disorientation. Swirling water all around. Darkness. Flowing bubbles. Foreign touch. Alien, other-

Prey wrenched the unthinking existence to his will. And like the willow tree in the wind, it bent to his will, but not because the wind was mightier, rather because it was simply the way of the tree.

It was a long wait for Prey, almost three quarters of an hour. Comparatively, it wasn't actually that long considering the expansiveness of Canterlot's sewers. It was actually a sign of just how far and how thickly the wickerwatch had spread. And also how far his protected runic chokepoints hadn't. Which was why he wasn't venturing any further in, rather staying right here. But it was still forty-five minutes of waiting unmoving in the dark.

He had to stand there with the cold water numbing his hooves, the clammy smell of the sewers never fading, along with the constant annoying niggling of the curse trying to fruitlessly get into his head. Normally he could ignore something like that with ease, he was a mind leech after all, nothing got into his head without him

knowing, not to mention it was his own curse running through the wickerwatch, but...

But now it was tiring, and aggravating, and he didn't want to have to remember to even care about resisting.

**sloop*-slosh* **sloop*-slosh*

Distantly, the sound approached from down the tunnel. Prey stretched his stiff neck, even the lightweight lantern having worn heavy on his back by now, and turned in that direction.

**sloop*-slosh* **sloop*-slosh*

And into the pool of lantern light came wading one of Prey's wicker shamblers. It was not a sight you'd want to see in a dark alley.

When you came down to it, it was visually for all intents and purposes, a wicker zompony. Dark, dripping wickerwatch tendrils trailed out from its underbelly, white sightless eyes stared at nothing, with the flesh and remaining fur having turned grey. Water dripped constantly off its body, even from its upper body well above the waterline, and tendons bulged wrongly beneath the skin. But for all that, there was no rot or decay.

It **sloop*-slosh*ed through the water with a rocking, unnerving stride, but it wasn't as slow as it looked. It wasn't fast either, but it didn't stop or slow and could simply keep going. There was a divot in its' forehead. An indent where Prey had sawn the deceased unicorn's horn off.

Unfortunately, Prey had yet to find a way to create a magic capable zompony, or rather wicker shambler.

Yet even so, Prey estimated that even with *years* to experiment and advance, he could never build a golem that could move even half as well as what he had right now.

A huge attack scarecrow of his own all made out of blades sounded nice, but it would never work properly. Not without a murdered person acting as its base, at least. The way the approaching shambler could walk, balance itself, step over stones, right itself if it

ever fell, compensate for the drag of the water, the thousand and one things which a person's body could manage, a true golem couldn't. It was why he'd stolen these bodies from the morgue. One of the reasons, anyway. With them, he didn't have to even try to build, he just added on his own bits and runes to what already worked.

Prey's smile, even worn down here all alone beneath the city, finally faded as he spied what the wicker shambler was bringing him, carried in its' too-wide jaws.

**sloop*-slosh*

With the final slosh, the shambler arrived in front of Prey, dark wickerwatch tendrils trailing behind it. In its jaws, the torn end covered with a dark green crust, was a huge insectlike leg, the size of a pony's.

The thick black chitin was broken and splintered around the end where the wicker shambler had torn it off its' owner. A pony's jaws were not made to bite and tear. But this was not a pony, not any longer. In appearance and size it was, but that was it. No equine had ever possessed the bear trap teeth Prey had implanted into it, for example.

Prey recognised the leg. He'd seen the like once before, on the dead body of Shimmer. A mimic's leg, the green ichor dried and crusted, but utterly unmistakable. The mimic had managed to get away, obviously, but only at the sacrifice of a limb. Could it maybe shapeshift and heal that? Prey didn't know. There was so much he didn't know about the mimics.

What he *did* know was they'd tried, and utterly failed, to sneak into his crystal lair. He'd assumed they'd given up even trying, and pulled back completely from the caves he'd claimed as his own.

Now though, it seemed they were exploring the sewers instead.

'What a pain. There's so much of the sewers I don't have covered. And now I'm not going to risk going into those areas to place runes either. Now I just have to stick with what I have to be safe. What a

pain.' Prey thought to himself. He knew it was annoying, dangerous even, the way the mimics were pushing in and snatching up unclaimed ground, but to be honest, he was struggling to care.

That was a distant problem. He knew that attitude was wrong, hell, he even despised it, but it was still true. He just didn't care enough about it. But this leg right here was before him now.

Prey's jaw tightened as he looked at the chitinous limb. He'd originally meant to take Shimmer's body to study, back in the ravine, but the other mimics had retrieved it first and cleansed the area. A priceless opportunity, stolen. Prey had so dearly wanted a fresh mimic corpse. Half a torn off leg was a poor trade, but Prey wasn't about to say no.

All those questions about the mimics, perhaps here was an unexpected chance to answer a few of his questions. Not about the mimics' motivations, plans, or tactics, but maybe something about their biology and, dare he hope, their shapeshifting magic. Prey could learn an awful lot from a corpse. Just look at what was holding the ripped off leg for him.

Prey didn't feel any culpability or guilt for the violence and agony his wicker shambler had inflicted. The mimics were his enemies. And more than that, he really didn't care.

'Hmm. Part of a leg is better than nothing. Maybe I can learn something. Too bad most of the blood has drained and I'll bet all the ambient magic has faded too. But it's something at least.'

Prey smiled. It was the exact same smile he'd been wearing before, and in the book store, and this morning, and working in the office, and eating in the mess hall, and filing his reports, in leaving his flat yesterday evening, and waking up. A simple, rather pleasant, and mildly friendly smile. The exact same one.

So he smiled at the severed leg. He smiled and took it off his wicker shambler. He smiled as crusted ichor brushed off in his wool. He smiled as he took the leg down to his lair. He even smiled as he was disappointed by what he found when he put it inside a scanning array. But it was still a smile.

A smile that meant absolutely nothing.

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False string cobwebs had been strung.

Stockpiles of candy and sweets had been bought by everyone.

Fancy-dress costumes were finally sewn, along with the perfect witches' hat finally being found.

Paper lanterns had been hung in long chains between street lamps.

Foals were juddering with impatient excitement just waiting for the night to come, and in some cases, adults were just as excited.

Pumpkins had been carved, either with smiles or leers depending on the tastes of the carving pony.

Haunted houses (but not too scary), were prepped and ready. The festivities were almost here!

The pony population of Equestria waited for Nightmare Night with the excited anticipation one holds when looking forwards to their birthday. It was a time of laughter, trying to jump-scare your friends, dressing up, and inducing stomachache and rotten teeth via sugar overdose. To them, it was all that, but not a frightening time of remembrance and wariness. It was a celebration!

Some few in Equestria still remembered what the night really stood for, the thestrals, perhaps the tiny clawful of resident griffins, and maybe a very select few others. They did not look forwards to Nightmare Night with glee and celebration, but something else.

Irrespective of all that, whether it was anticipated with excitement or something else, Nightmare Night finally arrived.

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The night was finally here. The night of the ridiculous Nightmare Night party at the Palace. The common gardens had been properly decorated up in order to fit the night's theme, and as the evening

came and the sun sank, opened up for the Palace staff attending.

"~Pumpkin, pumpkin, shining bright. Jack-o-lantern, flitter fright!" Dressed up foals chanted in the streets, shrieking with laughter and cheap scares.

"Nightmare night, what a fright, give me something sweet to bite! ~"

Prey plodded along behind Gloom and Crimson in the last orange rays of sunlight. Up ahead, tall and magnificent, the towering structure of the Palace waited, lit with hundreds of glowing lanterns. There was already a steady stream of staff trotting ahead of them, and in through the garden entrance, which had been opened up, a Royal Guard and his partner with a list were checking people in.

Past the checkpoint and into the common gardens, large open tents and marquees had been set up, lit with yet more multicolour lanterns and appropriate decorations. Tables, stalls laden with foods, drinks, pies, and cakes, all tended to by laughing ponies in costume. Some unicorn or unicorns had a small scale illusion going overhead, very unrealistic transparent red and yellow bats and spiders floating overhead. Fake cauldrons leaked constant rainbow coloured mist, and some sort of low music was on repeat in the background beneath the chatter.

"Prey, are you alright?"

Prey glanced aside, and up to find Gloom's yellow thestral eyes looking down at him with some concern. It was completely unrelated, but Prey noted yet again how those slitted orbs caught and reflected the light in a slightly ominous way that really fitted with tonight. Crimson had also stopped at Gloom's question, and was also waiting to hear Prey's answer. None of them had bothered wasting time dressing up.

Prey smiled at them both, "I'm fine."

That wasn't going to work, Prey immediately knew. Swiftly he added, "Alright, I can't really say I'm looking forwards to this, all

these people and socializing, but otherwise I'm fine."

Gloom's frown stayed. '-that's not right. Or rather, that's not all of it. At least I don't think it is-'

"Are you sure you're fine, Prey?" Crimson asked what Gloom was thinking.

Prey shrugged, ears flopping with the motion, still smiling, "Six of one, half a dozen of the other. It's fine, we're here now, let's satisfy Taffy."

Through the decorated entrance way into the garden venue, he could just about make out some other Night Guards. It wasn't hard, it was the group of yellow eyed, dark furred, bat winged thestrals standing on their own off to the side, with nearly everyone else avoiding them.

Prey blinked and refocused when he realised Gloom and Crimson were still looking at him. They didn't seem convinced, even when he smiled wider. Actually, that just seemed to worry them more. Why? It was fine. This was all fine. None of it mattered, so it was fine. Why were they worrying?

'-he's been like this for... how long has it been? When did Crimson first draw my attention to it? Why did I not notice earlier?-', Gloom asked himself.

They'd been talking about him behind his back? Actually, Prey didn't feel even any minor betrayal. So what? He didn't care, and Crimson could say and do whatever he pleased.

Crimson shifted closer to Gloom, leaning over to mutter into the other stallion's tufted ear when it obediently swivelled. Crimson wasn't trying to prevent Prey from hearing, because just as he knew his own eyesight was far superior, they all knew Prey's ears were superior. No, it was to stop any of the other ponies heading into the venue from overhearing:
"Sir, Prey should come with us afterwards. After everything, he has the right to come."

"I'm not on duty." Gloom automatically responded, before properly even hearing Crimson's words. He agreed though, "Yes. I, yes he should come. I can't think that anypony would question it. He's not a thestral, but he's a Night Guard. That means a different thing nowadays."

'-Prey should come. I want Prey to come. And if nothing else, my special talent isn't telling me it's the wrong path to take-'

"Prey," Gloom directly addressed him, drawing his attention yet again away from the Guard duo checking the arrivals, "After this whole event is finished, please stick around with us. There's another event, at midnight. You should come."

Prey didn't care. "Alright, I'll come." He smiled.

Gloom and Crimson exchanged more looks. However, they evidently decided whatever was bothering them could wait a bit longer. They'd come here tonight for the party, or if they were being honest, because Taffy would go on and on at them if they didn't attend after she and the other organizers had put in all this effort.

"Well, we're here already. Let's go in." Gloom said quietly, squaring his shoulders and stepping up to the arched gate:

"Gloom, Crimson, and Prey, of the ISND." He announced them.

'-I haven't forgotten who you are, punk-', The Guard with the list thought, eye twitching. He was a Royal Guard, and was evidently still sore at the Night Guard even after all this time.

However the other Royal Guard wasn't willing to jeopardize his own performance while on duty by being snide, "In you go." He said gruffly, waving them through.

Inside the gardens, the chatter, laughter, changing lights, and the scents of baked goodies filled the early night air, all that much closer and more real now that they were inside.

Taffy really seemed to have thought of everything. Set up under the better lantern-lit open sided tents, or sometimes simply in the open,

there was apple bobbing, mystery pies, horseshoe toss, lucky dips, various craft tables, a cake competition, pumpkin carving, a unicorn performing magic tricks, and some other Nightmare Night themed stalls he couldn't immediately identify the purpose of.

Prey noted that there was even a children's area off to the side for staff who had to bring along their foals tonight, set up with a few minders and games. He shifted until he was walking along by Crimson's left, putting a body between him and the young foals.

He decided his whole goal tonight was to get through the night, and then go back to the flat to sleep. Tomorrow was their one day of the week off. Prey began methodically lining up things in his head he needed to do tomorrow, even if he didn't feel any motivation.

'Boil up more bone rot. Reinforce the safe chokepoints in the sewers with more runes. Don't overdo it and exhaust myself again. Inform Lemon to be on the lookout for more electrite to steal. Don't get caught. Eat and drink enough. Get enough sleep. Check the pincushion. Stay away from the sinkhole. Make sure Crimson is stocked up. Don't look in any mirrors. Find a reason to-'

"Gloomy! Yoohoo. Gloomy and co! You made it in the end." Taffy appeared out of the crowd from nowhere, somehow sensing their arrival within seconds.

"Hey, where's all your costumes? This is a fancy-dress party! You can't come without fancy dress, that's like having hay fries without ketchup. Let's get you three all costumed up and ready to party."

Prey turned along with the other two as Taffy hurried up, customary big grin already in place. She was dressed in a sparkling purple witches outfit, frizzy orange curls spilling out from underneath the straining hat, with a hole for her horn. Prey had seen real witches and voodoo witches, and they wore nothing of the sort.

"No thanks." Gloom hastily denied.

"But it's the festive time of year, it's *made* for dressing up, and it's what everypony's doing." Taffy smugly cajoled, grabbing her

witches' hat when it threatened to explode off under the pressure of containing her frizzy mane.

Crimson shook his head, "I didn't want to, nor do we have any such disguises, and so I haven't. Besides, we're here now."

Meaning, 'It's too late and you can't make us dress up now'. As if such pitiful logic would stop the mare.

"No problemo! We've got a box of spare fancy dress set aside just for this circumstance in case guests came under dressed. I insist. You'd make a great pirate Gloom, ooh, no, a vampony and Crimson can be the pirate." Taffy blithely said as she pulled a stiff Gloom in the direction of a tent, completely bypassing in her cheeriness what suggesting a thestral be a vampire because of the fangs might've indicated.

"There's no need-" Gloom tried.

"Nope! Everypony here's going to party in fancy dress, it said so on the guest invites. And all the other thestrals are in fancy dress too, so there."

Translation, thestrals took guest rights and being a good guest very seriously. As such, Taffy had pigeonholed them into doing what she wanted because she was one of the hosts. The thing was, she was aware of this and had manipulated it to be so on purpose.

'-I knew they'd all try that. Ha! Taffy one, thestrals nil-'

Briefly, a flicker in the back of Prey head reminded him of that pink pony from the night he didn't think about. The one who should be dead. She'd jumped out of nowhere into a situation she didn't have a hoof on, expected her blind exuberance to carry her through, and gotten a dagger through the jaw. Taffy and the Bearer of Laughter linked briefly in Prey's head, before he buried the worthless memory.

Nothing had changed. Those who should be dead were alive, and those who should have lived were dead. It was meaningless to linger over it. Feeding the ever-burning spark of anger might keep

you warm, but it also burnt you at the same time. Sometimes heat was what you needed no matter the hurt, and sometimes you'd prefer to give into the numbing cold of the black ice.

"...And I mean, just look at Prey. Why, he'll make an excellent cat! Let's get him a collar with a bell, along with that nice ribbon and a few fake whiskers, and he'll be adorable." Prey tuned back in to hear Taffy say as they arrived at the tent.

"No."

"Aww c'mon Prey. You'll be the best dressed foal tonight, I promise."

"No."

Taffy huffed, magically grabbing out a cat bell on a collar from an open crate of garish costumes, "You need to wear *something*, so why not this? Live a little, you're only young once."

"N-"

"Pretty please? With sugar on top?" The bell tinkled brightly as Taffy shook the oversized cat collar. It was the exact item she'd been talking about. She'd obviously known the prop was sitting in the box already. She'd thought about this. Another collar to go with the golden pair resting on his forelegs.

Prey looked Taffy dead in the eye and repeated slowly and clearly for the last time, "No."

Crimson cleared his throat, "I am now dressed. I mean, I have a costume. Can I go now?"

Crimson had donned a wide black hat, with a stuffed parrot toy stuck to the brim. He'd grabbed the first and easiest thing he could from the crate, simply to satisfy Taffy, and now she couldn't claim he hadn't at least tried.

"That's... very nice. How about the rest of the pirate outfit to go with it? There's an eye patch, a cutlass, and a sash somewhere at the very least." She tried. Crimson wasn't swayed.

"I am now in fancy dress. Am I not?" He asked blankly.

'-actually, I should probably not push them so much. It's nice that they've come, and they've had a hard enough time as it is-', Taffy thought, suddenly remembering and feeling guilty.

"Yeah, you know what? That's good enough Crimson. Tell you guys what, you two also grab something, and then I'll take you over to where Scenic and his marefriend Carton are hanging out."

Gloom blinked and looked up from gingerly poking at the crate of costumes with a wing claw, "Scenic beat us here already?"

'-and by Luna's starry mane, can she actually remember all the ponies here tonight by name? How?-'

"Did they bring Lilly along with them too?" Gloom asked.

Taffy's grin dimmed somewhat, "No, I haven't seen her tonight. I gave Scenic an invite to hoof to her, but sadly I don't think she's coming tonight."

Was that supposed to be a surprise? Because Prey definitely wasn't. Even though you could've looked at this night as being the perfect time for Lilly to go out in public without needing to cover up, she certainly wouldn't see it that way. Lilly thought she was resilient, and although she was putting in the effort, she really wasn't. She'd see tonight as a mocking reminder of how hideous she looked. A monster out for the night with all the pretend monsters who, coming morning, would be normal again.

Prey didn't feel anything about that. The bitter annoyance from Taffy's humiliating suggestion had already faded back into grey apathy. He eyed the tent exit, where outside the bulk of the invited ponies were now arriving en-masse, all wearing fancy dress too. Prey didn't particularly want to remain in here with Taffy, but he also didn't really want to go back out there.

He decided it would be best just to copy Crimson and make a token effort. He looked around the overflowing crate for another hat.

There. That'd do.

Prey snagged the first hat within reach, another witches' hat, gave it a cursory check for anything dangerous like poisoned needles in the brim, and jammed it down on his head. It was meant for an adult and was too big, resting only right above his eyes, but he meant to discard it as soon as he was out of Taffy's sight anyways.

"There. I'm ready. Happy?" He announced. He smiled as he said it too for extra effect. Taffy, unlike the other two, seemed to buy it.

"I'm set as well." Gloom swiftly chimed in, donning the first article of fancy dress to hoof. A waistcoat thing with cog wheels and designs and a truly huge fake pocket watch. Outnumbered, and her objections technically satisfied, Taffy decided to give in with good grace:

"That's wonderful. Now, you wanted to meet up with Scenic Paint and his beau, right? C'mon then, let's get you all reunited!" She declared brightly. Then, quickly grabbing her pointed hat again when it nearly slipped off, marched them out.

Finally.

Outside, the breath of night air which blew around the gardens was brisk. Even in the short time they'd been inside the open tent, its' roof had still trapped some heat, so when stepping outside into the lantern-lit night, the temperature came as something of a minor surprise. Prey supposed that's what all the cauldrons of soup, mugs of warm cider and hot cocoa, and still steaming pies on the tables and being served to whomever wanted them were for.

Wherever you looked around the paper and jack-o-lantern illuminated gardens, ponies were chatting, laughing, playing stupid games, eating, and getting into the swing of things.

Prey instinctively wanted to get away from all of it.

"This way." Taffy guided them.

Some of the ponies glanced at him in his oversized witches' hat. Some were surprised, some who were off duty Guards weren't. Prey smiled at any and all who met his eyes.

"Scenic, Scenic ye-no, look this way, yes. More to the left! No, your left. Over here!" Taffy called, energetically waving a hoof.

And there Scenic was indeed, along with his huge marefriend. Dwarfed by Carton, you actually needed to glance twice to spot the smaller earth pony sticking to her side. Scenic didn't like the night, he didn't like the dark, and he really didn't like sudden scares.

'Nightmare Night is not the night for him to be out and about, then. Bad things can happen on Nightmare Night.'

"Oh, uh, hello all." Scenic greeted nervously, giving a quick return wave.

Carton turned around, a cup of soup's handle looped over a hoof and wafting steam, "Who is-? Oh, happy Nightmare Night!"

Carton Juice smiled happily as she spotted them. She was dressed up as, surprise-surprise, a giant bumble bee. A striped yellow and black knitted sweater, a headband with bouncy antenna, and a pair of stuck-on wings. Meanwhile Scenic was dressed as, surprise-surprise yet again, a beekeeper, with the mesh hat and long covering white coat. Obviously, Carton had insisted.

"Hello Scenic, and hello Carton." Crimson nodded seriously to them both.

Gloom and the rest of them exchanged greetings. Prey simply kept smiling at everyone and nothing, and waited. Let them talk. He was just here until he didn't have to be here any longer.

Shrieks of foals' laughter made him twitch and quickly look around. He shifted a couple of steps further away from the group of fancy-dressed children, who were engrossed in a puppet show of Celestia and Nightmare Moon. He watched them stuffing down candy from little carry buckets inbetween breathing, laughing, and utterly carefree. Innocent.

"Well I'm going to love you and leave you, I've got party obligations to run, but I'm sure we'll catch up more later," Taffy said in farewell, backing away, "Thank you all for coming once again. See

ya'!"

Prey smiled blankly after her as she left, tracking her as she assimilated into the crowd, greeting nearly everyone she passed by name. That left the five of them in their own company. One could argue that Taffy's motives for doing so were slightly less than congenial for doing that.

Prey knew this was about to descend into awkward, stilted conversation. He knew it, but he didn't really care. It was just talk, and words didn't matter. But he was also hungry, and that was something he could solve, rather than standing around here idle.

"I'm hungry. I'm going to get some food." Prey announced before anyone else could start trying to find anything to say, and walked away.

He was abandoning Crimson, but only a little bit. It was a pony party. There wasn't anything either of them could do, but to simply endure. And enduring this waste of time would be a lot easier if he wasn't hungry. He'd had very little appetite ever since... well, ever since. But that did not equal no hunger. There always was, and always would be, hunger. It was a simple truth. It was *the* truth. Never take your next meal for granted.

Prey had never forgotten what it was like to starve, and never dismissed free food.

So he smiled at all the food-stall tenders, and with his oversized hat and his innocent face, he got thick slices of pumpkin pie, gooseberry tart, a cup of butternut soup, and a candy apple on a stick. Although not all of them even noticed the lamb taking the food, him having approached from out of their line of sight when they were distracted.

The mare hoofing out plates of pie was too engrossed with chatting to someone she knew. The pony on soup duty was busy multitasking between that and eating his own pie. And the one attending the candy apples, mainly to make sure the foals didn't take more than one each, was looking in the wrong direction.

Actually, none of them noticed Prey taking the food. But if they *had*, he would've been smiling at them with his innocent face and annoying oversized floppy witches' hat anyways.

He checked for poison. He ate the pie, drank the soup, and bit into the candy apple. It was all so bland. It had taste, but it was just fuel to delay hunger. It was food, and there was plenty of it, and it was free, but that was all it was.

Prey slunk along, seeing the oblivious ponies happily munching away on their own pies and fresh pumpkin cookies, all thoroughly enjoying the night's refreshments. 'It's just me who finds it so unappetizing.'

Well, he'd already known that. And besides, it didn't matter. Once again, food was food, you ate because it was the only counter to hunger. Not even the overflowing buckets of sweets and candy were tempting anymore.

'It doesn't matter.'

Prey wove back through the laughing crowds and tents the way he'd come, returning to find Gloom and Crimson still with Scenic and Carton. They hadn't even moved from the spot. Carton seemed to be the one carrying the conversation, while Gloom politely made an effort, Scenic was nervous, and Crimson was just blankly observing the festivities. Technically, they didn't have to stay here together. They could each go their separate ways and do their separate things. There were other off-duty thestrals sticking to the edges who Gloom or Crimson could find, and plenty of normal ponies here for Scenic and Carton. Normal ponies were always looking to make friends with other *normal* ponies, after all.

Prey considered leaving again rather than try conversing with Carton and Scenic, but better the boredom you knew. He slipped back into the group, and it took Scenic and Carton a minute to even realise he was back.

"Gah!" Carton jumped, half snatching up Scenic who let out an undignified wheezing squeak, '-goodness! Didn't even see him there, almost gave me a fright, since tonight's Nightmare Night-'

"Oh, oh it's just you. Heh heh. Don't sneak up on me like that. I'm on tenterhooks waiting for the oogie boogie pony to jump out all night." Carton laughed, relaxing.

Prey smiled up at her. Still in his marefriend's grip, Scenic winced.

"Excuse me, the... what pony?" Crimson asked.

Scenic raised a hoof and opened his mouth, but Carton, not noticing him about to answer since he was still being crushed to her side, beat him to it:

"The oogie boogie pony, you know, from that foal's story? It gets told to all the foals every year. It's not even that scary, it's just what everypony says. You know, 'Watch out or Oogie Boogie will get you'?"

In another time, Prey would've been mildly surprised. Surprised at the pathetic, watered down, and pony-friendly level of the story. Only mildly. But now, not even that. He'd heard in passing around Canterlot and especially tonight the tales of Nightmare Moon the ponies told. Safe, trite, non-scary stories. About how she hungered for candy, how she gave nightmares which were chased away by the sun, how she hid in dark corners and jumped out to yell "Boo!"

And all this after earlier this very year, Nightmare Moon had sought to make a return to kill the entire world. And now they were telling children's stories about it?

How quick they were to forget the truth because it was uncomfortable.

"...And so Oogie Boogie waits under the bed, chuckling to himself. And Flower Petal, she hears him, and thinks to herself; 'By golly, that Oogie Boogie is hiding under my bed! I'd better-"

Carton was busy relating the "Oogie Boogie" story from her childhood. Gloom was enduring through it better, but Crimson really had that glazed, dead inside look in his eyes. He'd asked the question, but that hadn't been a request to have to suffer through a retelling. Carton Juice wasn't good at reading people raised in

thestral clans though, and was taking Crimson's blank faced staring to be polite interest, and not speechless boredom.

Scenic wasn't paying enough attention to notice his marefriend's blunder either, sipping his cup of hot pumpkin soup, looking around at all the colourful lights and games, thinking that; '-I'm sorta' glad we came to this second party tonight in the end. It's much better than I thought it was going to be. Also, really not scary-'

"...and Oogie Boogie exclaims; 'Toadstools and frogs, I've been tricked!' And he rushes back out Flower Petal's bedroom door without a backwards glance-"

Prey put on a smile, and tuned her out. He waited for the time to pass.

Finally the rendition finished. Gloom paused for a second, "Thank you for that, Carton Juice. I haven't heard that foal's story before."

'-even as a foal, I would've fallen asleep listening to that-'

Crimson blinked, eyes unglazing as he returned to the present from wherever else he'd been, "Ah, yes. I hadn't heard that tale before either." He hastily thanked the mare, just in case she was in the mood to start telling another one.

"That's fine, I'm really not a good storyteller though. Although I think it really is strange you didn't have that foal's story back in you clans. Why's that do you suppose?" Carton hmm'd in thought.

At the mention of 'the clans' included in a question, Crimson and Gloom immediately went on alert, before catching themselves. Gloom settled back down, wing muscles relaxing as quickly as they'd tensed.

'-no, she's just asking, it doesn't mean anything. Besides, Scenic doesn't know anything sensitive, and even if he did, he knows better than to give away other ponies' secrets-'

"I don't know what you have heard, but while the thestral clans stayed separate from Equestria as a whole until Princess Luna's

recent return, we still kept up with the political and economic happenings of Equestria. It allowed us to stay up to date." Gloom said, reciting the canned answer from memory. It was one he'd heard Lieutenant Starry Wing give to a Royal Guard officer when pressed.

"That's what I mean though, shouldn't you then also have those sorts of foal's tales? I thought they were pretty universal." Carton asked, the bee antenna headband bouncing as she tilted her head.

Gloom shook his head, "No, we had our own foal's tales. Still do, too. After listening to that, uh, thrilling story about the oogie boogie pony, I can't honestly say that they're similar either."

"Oh. I just thought, you know." Carton mumbled.

"So what did you have then? As a foal?" Scenic enquired.

"Fables." Crimson immediately stated.

"Yes, fables." Gloom echoed.

Carton was surprised, "Fables? Like, myths and legends? Those are the stories you tell foals? Hmm. I wouldn't have thought foals would listen to those kinds of sagas."

"No, no," Gloom quickly disagreed, "Not those sorts of fables. Fables as in, short stories to teach a moral, or a principle at the end. Like the greedy fox who ate the bear's stash, and was then too fat to slip back out again. Or about the cloud who wanted to be a stormcloud and rained himself all away."

"Stories with an actual point at the end." Crimson added, a tad bluntly even for him.

Carton shuffled her massive hooves self-consciously, "Oh. Oh right. I didn't think, well, it's just the oogie boogie story, and..."

The mare had gotten a lot more comfortable with the different culture Gloom and Crimson came from, and sometimes Prey saw her even forget that they weren't just the same as the next pony. Something she probably meant as a compliment, and not the insult

it conveyed. But still, at times, like right now, her old unease would return full-force and she couldn't look Gloom or Crimson in their yellow eyes.

Carton glanced around hastily for a distraction, her gaze settling on Prey, "Well how about you, Prey? Did you hear all of those stories in your village? I bet they're some of the same as here. I think you said your home is in a village off on the border somewhere, right?"

Prey smiled, and answered, "As I've said before, we did things slightly differently on the border. That also includes our Nightmare Night tales." He said with sweet innocence.

In a moment of blindness, Carton responded in surprise, "Wait, you've not heard of the oogie boogie story before now either? What did they teach you as foals?"

"They taught us to bar the windows and doors on Nightmare Night, and to leave at least one corncob on the doorstep for each person sheltering inside." Prey told her.

Carton blinked in surprise, the bouncy bee antenna really adding to the ridiculous effect, "What? Corn? What about corn?" She asked, just as Prey had known she would.

"The crow pony story. I thought you'd have heard of it, since it's pretty universal. What? You mean to tell me you don't leave a corncob outside your door on Nightmare Night?" Prey returned innocently.

Carton shook her head, looking interested, "I haven't. How does it go?"

"I haven't heard that tale either." Crimson put in.

"You want to hear it?" Prey asked.

"Sure." Gloom shrugged, Crimson and Carton joining in with agreeing.

"Uh, I'm not so sure I want to hear it. I don't, I don't like those sort of scary stories." Scenic said, eyeing Prey.

'-no thank you to any scary story Prey's gonna' tell. I don't wanna' hear it-'

"Shh, let Prey tell his story. It's only polite." Carton quickly hushed her coltfriend, before smiling brightly at Prey again, "Go on, we're all listening."

"Um, no, seriously. I'm good." Scenic tried again.

"Whyever not?" Carton asked in bafflement.

"Because, uh, because..." Scenic winced, looked at Prey, flinched, and looked at his hooves. His throat worked, and everything he wanted to say was swallowed in acute embarrassment but also real pangs of fear.

'-because you weren't there, Carton. Because Prey's gonna' say something nasty and I don't want to be reminded. I don't want to hear about another Wolfing Wood thing-'

But too late, he'd stayed quiet and lost his chance, so Prey told one of the creepy, but also cautionary tales he'd been told on quiet nights. It wasn't strictly speaking a Nightmare Night story, those he *wouldn't* be telling, not when it was that very night tonight, but he'd adapt it. The crow pony story was just a tall tale. Not one of the *real* ones.

Maybe if he did a good job retelling it, he might even find some satisfaction instead of grey boredom in doing so? He doubted it. Not that it would matter anyway. It was just a story, so it didn't matter.

"Once upon a time, through the field and down the lane, forgotten voices are heard again. This story starts on a withered, weather-beaten farm. It was the time of drought, the rocks were scoured bare, and the cornfields were already dead..."

It was just a short story. But Scenic and Carton, after only a few sentences, were drawn in.

The night's atmosphere within their little circle changed. From

standing safe and comfortable in the multi-coloured lantern light, to something else. Prey tricked them into forgetting how tonight was nothing more than a festive night, and made them remember that underneath all the candy and decorations, it was Nightmare Night.

"...Hungry, and so afraid. The crow pony had taken them all. The last corn kernel in the last empty sack was gone. Nothing to leave outside the door at night. Nobody left now, nobody... *but me.* I'm so scared. The voice of what was his not-brother kept calling out from dark, back the way he'd come, from the rotten corn fields, 'Brother, where are you? *Where* are you?~ It's cold. Wait for me. Wait for me~'."

By halfway through the tale, Scenic and Carton were huddling into each other. One ginormous bee, clutching her teddybear sized beekeeper.

Prey didn't consider himself a good storyteller, it was just that the two earth ponies really were wimps.

"...It was still out there. It moved around the dark hut. He couldn't get out. It was out there. Scratching. Wheezing. Digging. It was digging. Digging, and calling out in his not-brother's voice. And the voice was getting worse, more broken, a crow's caw. 'Brother, open the door. Let me in. *Let* me in~. Come to the door. Closer. *Closer*~'."

Prey only put in minimum effort into a proper rendition too, only occasionally saying something which he knew (since he constantly had to listen in on everyone's thoughts), would definitely get under their skin.

"...All alone, lost in the dark. But it was gone. The scratching had stopped. The call of the crow had sounded one last time, but far away. It hadn't come back from the field. And then, from out of the dark, hot wet breath on the back of my neck. The last forgotten voice heard once again; 'Wait for me. Wait for me brother~. I'm tired. I'm cold. I'm *hungry*'."

Prey finished the tale, and stood there smiling.

Carton and Scenic both stared at him, slowly coming back up from

the story. Both glanced around themselves at the Nightmare Night celebrations, but also at the night beyond the lights, their ears lowered. Gloom smirked, and leant over between the pair to softly announce, "Boo."

"Nhaaaa!", "Aaaaah!" Twin shrill whinnies were ripped out of the couple. Carton jumped over three hooves in the air. Scenic blindly bucked thin air on instinct.

Gloom spluttered with laughter, "Bwah hah ha ah ha!"

"That wasn't funny!" Scenic shouted, angry and embarrassed, while Carton Juice clutched a hoof to her chest, gasping.

Gloom just grinned at Scenic, unable to help himself. It wasn't like him to do that, but he'd gotten caught up in the joke he'd thought Prey was pulling. Crimson simply arched one eyebrow beneath his pirate hat, and Prey? Prey just kept smiling.

"It *wasn't*! That's why I didn't want to listen to the stupid story in the first place." Scenic hissed in upset, tail swishing wildly.

'-I knew Prey was going to do something like that, I just knew! And I thought a Sargent would be better than this-', His ears kept flicking between straight up and then back down. His breathing wasn't back to being steady either.

Really, it had just been one creepy story, but both ponies had taken it so poorly. Perhaps Scenic could be excused some of it, he'd suffered through Mayflower and the memories still haunted him every night, however the three of them had been there too, and yet none of them were overreacting to a simple scary story.

Hell, even Carton Juice, who hadn't taken the silly little scare well at all, was recovering and trying to nervously smile it off, but that's because she didn't get it. She didn't get what had upset Scenic so much. But she still supported him. So despite not getting it, she took Scenic's side, because that's what you did when you were a couple, you backed the other person up.

Something very close to an argument was brewing between Gloom

and Crimson on his side, and Scenic and Carton on the other.

'And I don't actually care. So I'm not going to deal with it. I don't care.' Prey thought.

There was something liberating in the empty freedom of that. To just say three words, followed by another three other words. 'Not my problem', and, 'I don't care'.

Scenic was still upset and emphasizing how he'd made it clear he didn't want to hear the scary story in the first place. Gloom was attempting to calm the other stallion back down, but was failing to hide his amusement at Scenic's overreaction very well. 'Not my problem.'

Prey readjusted the oversized witches' hat to stop it from slipping over his eyes, and just settled back. He put on a smile, became an observer, and just let it all pass him by.

He didn't care, and none of this mattered. Merely leaves floating across the millpond's surface.

And that's what Prey did. He tuned out the concerns and voices of others, only listening at a surface level to what those around him were saying, before discarding it. Unless any of it was life or death, it didn't matter. Prey smiled, and stood, and watched the night pass him by.

Like watching over there, outside one of the tents, the out-of-uniform Corporal Fleet Glass who was with some friends, was aggressively disparaging a trio of thestrals on the edge who weren't responding, trying to taunt them into an argument about Nightmare Moon. Fleet Glass was treading a thin line there between Luna and Nightmare Moon, but Prey really didn't care. It wasn't his problem how one random Corporal chose to lose his job.

Costumed ponies in their fancy dress went around between the stalls, trying out all the games. They were happy and carefree, and they could continue being happy and carefree over there. It didn't matter to Prey if they got scared tonight or did the scaring.

That small colt dressed up as a hay burger who'd lost his parents, and was now bawling his eyes out while everyone around him tried to find his parents? That wasn't Prey's problem. Who cared when the colt was reunited only seconds later and scolded for wandering off? Prey certainly didn't.

He saw Taffy again, subtly trying to hook up her oblivious cousin Future Spark with one of her mare co-workers. Future Spark was just nodding and going along with wherever the flow took him in the party. In his own way, the unawares unicorn was doing much like Prey actually. Just following along and letting time happen. Maybe there were actually even more here tonight doing the same? Prey didn't care, it didn't affect him, so it didn't matter.

None of it mattered.

The night wore on, the moon rose higher, the foals who'd been brought along were all yawning and simultaneously saying they weren't tired, and that they just needed to eat some more candy and they'd be fine. Their parents weren't listening, and were winding things down to take them home. The rest of the party was still going strong though, the pies and baked goods were mostly gone, but ponies had gathered in clumps around warm glowing braziers to continue talking and laughing, while drinking hot cocoa.

Prey simply stood there throughout one whole hour, then the next.

The night air was cold when only standing in place, but with his wool, it was just above uncomfortably cold. The ponies who'd come to the party stuck close to the braziers. Prey didn't. He was cold, but not freezing cold. It didn't matter, it was just mild discomfort. Mild discomfort for two hours. But... he really couldn't find enough motivation to care. If the night were bitter, or if he didn't have shelter, he would've stirred himself. But it wasn't. So the discomfort which could so simply have been solved by moving closer to one of the braziers went ignored. It wasn't important enough.

Since this was their second party of the night, Scenic and Carton finally bowed out and said goodbye, Scenic in a rather surly manner

it must be said, while nervously eyeing the night outside of the Palace Gardens which they would have to trot through to get home. Prey smiled and placidly waved goodbye, then promptly let them drift from his mind.

Unimportant. Worth nothing. They didn't matter in the grand scheme of things.

None of it mattered. It was all just the passing trappings of time.

Everyone was living out their tale in the one big story called life. What few ever realised though, was that they were almost never important in more than one story. That lone one being their own story. And sometimes, they weren't even that. Everyone has a chapter in their story they don't read out loud. Blandly, Prey considered that philosophy.

'I know I'm no one's favourite person. Sometimes, I'm not even sure I'm a person.'

So smile, and find empty peace in the silence of being nothing. The sun rises, the sun sets. But we all have to cross the river someday. So smile, smile, smile! Smile and find something to occupy yourself with while you wait for time to pass.

The Nightmare Night party had finally finished.

The last few lingering guests were even now making their way towards the garden's exit. Satisfied, but equally as tired staff were beginning the task of cleaning up the platters and food crumbs, the tents and the rest would wait for tomorrow. Throughout Upper Canterlot, and so probably throughout the rest of Canterlot too, the last sounds of festivities were dying down also.

Above the city and the Palace and the parties, the silent full moon watched. Midnight had almost arrived.

"Finally." Crimson removed the pirate hat with the stuffed green parrot, and went to toss it aside. He nearly did, but at the last second looked around at the deserted party area which would need

to be cleaned up, and perhaps a bit guiltily settled for simply propping the hat on one of the empty tables instead. Gloom himself had wasted no time in shrugging out of his cog waistcoat either, wing getting tangled in the huge fake pocket watch.

"Get off." He growled at the dumb piece of clothing as he fought with it. Finally, he managed to jerk the stupid thing free and threw it, with an awful lot of spitefulness for what was an inanimate object, on top of Crimson's discarded pirate hat.
Prey stood to the side, quietly waiting.

Gloom tilted his head back and looked up at the silvery full moon, "It's almost time." He noted quietly.

"Yes." Crimson agreed simply.

Time for what, exactly?

Gloom scratched at his puckered chest scar, then glanced over at Prey. "You're still coming with us, right Prey?"

Prey smiled back, just like he had been doing all night, "Yes, that's fine."

"You're not going to question where or why?" Gloom asked, grimacing.

'-I don't like that smile. Not like his old smiles, those ones were false, but these ones now are just... wrong.-'

Well it wasn't Prey's problem if Gloom didn't like his smile. "You asked me to come along with you and Crimson. I don't feel a dire need to know the answer beforehoof." He said in answer.

It wasn't going to be dangerous, Prey had deduced that much already, and thus it didn't matter. So smile and go with it.

Crimson's wings shifted restlessly, "And that's enough for you, Prey? I mean, there is no way that would've been good enough for you before."

Prey shrugged, unconcerned, "You asked me to come. Besides, it

doesn't matter."

"What doesn't matter, Prey? What's happened? You've been... off for, I'm not sure how long. Longer than it should've taken me to notice." Gloom pressed, coming closer.

Prey shrugged again, oversized hat slipping on his head, "It doesn't matter what doesn't matter."

Crimson joined in with Gloom, "If it doesn't matter, then will it matter if you tell us? I mean, we aren't trying to force you, but if you did, maybe it's something we can help with even if you don't think we can."

"No, I can't tell you. Sorry. Been sworn to secrecy." Prey said lightly, like they were only talking about the weather. He could've easily come up with a good excuse, but he didn't feel like it. Besides, telling the truth here was easier.

Gloom chewed his lip in concern, "Can you tell us *who* has sworn you to secrecy? Or is that part of the secret?" He asked carefully.

"Princess Luna, but no I can't tell you why." Prey answered. He'd been vaguely expecting to get at least some vindictive pleasure out of rightfully throwing things back on Luna, but no, just nothing. Just more numbness.

And just like he'd known it would, that answer silenced Gloom and Crimson. What could they do against their liege lord, immortal princess, and boss?

Gloom took a deep breath, "Prey, I made a promise to you. Do you remember, walking in the Palace Gardens? Like you asked me to? That I would take your side over the laws if it happened again. Is this, is that what's happening again?"

Now *that* was enough of a shock to break through and surprise Prey. Gloom had never chosen him over his duty to the Princess before. But here the thestral was, seriously asking. If Prey answered yes right now, then even Gloom wasn't sure what he would do. Unfortunately, it was still too little, too late. There was nothing

Gloom could've done even if he'd been there that night in Ponyville.

"No. This isn't about anything like that. There's no law been broken, no rules to circumvent. There is nothing in your power, or mine, or anyone except Luna's, to change that. So no, you don't have to worry about choosing a side." Prey told him, almost kindly.

Gloom let out the breath he'd been holding in a rush of relief, '-thank all the stars in the sky for that-'

Crimson was still watching the lamb closely however, "So we can't help. But something did happen. But there's nothing we can do about it. But we're also still worried. I mean, you don't seem to care about anything anymore."

Prey thought about that, "Mostly true, but that's fine. I'm sure I'll recover to normal at some point. It'll happen eventually."

It was true. Prey was no stranger to the slow passage of time just as slowly driving you insane. He'd languished for fifty-seven interminable years in Dreverton.

"But until then, because I don't care, I also don't care about not caring. And I don't want to care, either."

"Prey, that's not..." Crimson shook his head, feathers rustling in frustration, "You know better than that. You know that's not how it should be. Gha, I'm not good at words. Please Prey, I don't understand, but whatever it was that happened, come back from it."

Gloom had gone quiet. Prey smiled up at Crimson sadly, sad that he would have to disappoint him, "This isn't one of those things you can just come back from. It's one of *those*."

One of those things that has trapped you under the black ice. One of those where you've already sunk and the ice has frozen back over. Crimson was the same as Prey, so he knew what Prey meant. A person is their past experiences and memories. Those don't just disappear simply because someone asks you nicely to come back from them.

Crimson understood what Prey meant from the way his face shifted.

Even Gloom mostly understood, although he could only see the plane of black ice. He was aware it was there, he'd walked across its' freezing surface numerous times himself, he'd seen the cellar and helped bury the remains after that dark night in Mayflower after all. He'd almost quit the Night Guard and given up, but in the end, he'd only ever walked across the black ice. He'd never fallen in and drowned on the other side, from where there was no coming back.

So Gloom understood, but he didn't know what he was still missing. But Crimson did.

'Sorry, but that's just the way things are.' Prey silently thought.

Crimson sighed, "Then don't come back from it if you can't. But leave whatever it is behind. I want my friend back."

Prey tugged at the end of his ribbon, but didn't do Crimson the discourtesy of looking away, "It's not that simple. Life since then has... changed."

Crimson crouched, coming closer but stopping out of hoof's reach. He looked Prey dead in the eye, "Prey. Life is meant to be lived. Not endured. Wake up from whatever this grey dream is, and remember that."

Life is meant to be lived, not endured. That stabbed something in Prey's chest, a horrible needle of squirming discomfort. Why did that concept sting so much? He couldn't just brush Crimson's words off as ignorant either, because Crimson spoke from experience.

Prey didn't know what to say. He searched for the right words to express what he was feeling while Gloom and Crimson quietly waited. It didn't work, he couldn't find the correct words. How could he, when he didn't have a clue what he was feeling?

What can you say to that? What should you say? Or should you even say anything at all?

Prey closed his mouth. Damn the two of them and their thestral patience, they were still waiting and would continue to wait for however long the three of them needed to stand here for.

And then, unexpectedly, it was Gloom who made a snap decision to break the silence. '-inspiration! I've found the path to follow-'

"I'd like to make a request, Prey."

Gloom had gotten a hint from his special talent? Prey didn't care enough to feel bitter about that. "What?"

"I want to ask you to wait."

"Wait? For...?"

"Wait until after tonight, until after you've come with us and seen what we have to show you. Wait until then, and then give an answer. It's something special, something no non-thestral, I mean, non-clan pony, has been invited to attend in centuries." Gloom hesitated, before reaffirming this choice to himself:

"Yes. It's not forbidden, but it is something sacred. We have to ask you not to speak of tonight to any outsider, or even bring it up in casual conversation even if it's only with clans ponies. Tonight is special, and we don't take or talk about it lightly. You need to understand that. So, with that said, will you still come?"

Standing beside Gloom, Crimson nodded along encouragingly, urging Prey to accept.

Sacred, huh? Now it was Prey who didn't know of how much he didn't know, only aware that they were taking this utterly seriously. In his life, there had never been any special day which he observed. The day of Gossamer, Fleece, and their mother's deaths weren't sacred. He remembered the dates, always, he could never forget them, but they definitely weren't sacred. The exact opposite. Unhallowed.

Prey didn't have anything sacred, but if he did, he'd have probably already tainted it. But that wasn't to say he'd never encountered other people who held certain days, places, or events sacred. Hell, just look at the average Canterlotian unicorn. They all revered Celestia as a sacred goddess.

So he tried to stir himself enough to take this as seriously as Gloom

and Crimson obviously were. And if that were so, then...

Hurriedly, Prey reached up and finally removed the oversized witches' hat. He'd gotten so used to the annoyance throughout the night that he'd almost forgotten it was there. He dropped the hat to the trampled grass, not even giving it a second glance. It didn't matter, but this, what was happening right here, *this* mattered to Gloom and Crimson.

He didn't think it was going to matter to him, but he could at least put in the effort to try. Crimson wanted him to after all.

"Yes, I can do that."

"Then come. We'll need to walk since you're coming, it's just outside the city limits. Crimson and I just need to make a stop on the way."

It wasn't far, even though they had to walk on the ground with him rather than fly.

The three of them had exited the Palace's common gardens, but now seemed to simply be following the outer wall back past the main gates, and on towards the edge of Canterlot, where the Palace met the final border of the open night sky. Beyond that, and far below, one could endlessly look out on what felt like all of Equestria.

On route, by nature of following the Palace Gardens' outer wall, they were also moving past the streets closest to the Palace in Upper Canterlot. Here, the fanciest crystal street lamps in the whole city illuminated the wide marble sidewalks. Leftover decorations from Nightmare Night were evident even here in the most upper-class district, but somehow of a higher quality. Bigger, more ostentatious, or simply going for quantity as its' own quality with their themed decorations. Like that house, which had every single inch of the wall top filled with uniquely carved jack'o-lantern. There must have been over five hundred of the smiling vegetables on that house alone.

Prey smiled back at the candlelit grins, before even realising he was doing so.

He half shook his head, then stopped, huffed, and just kept going. 'It doesn't matter.'

Prey glanced upwards.

He'd just seen movement at roof height in the night. Prey didn't stop walking, but he kept looking, watching the stars for any drifting patches of blackness. There was one, some way ahead. Actually, that there looked like another, he'd only just seen it before it dipped back down below the rooftops.

Prey kept watching, and saw another after a pause, and a fourth, fifth, and sixth shape. The stomach-dropping edge of Canterlot was coming up ahead, the wide open starfield beyond offering an untouched canvas of stars upon which it was easy to spot the flying shapes of thestrals arriving.

"Here."

Gloom and Crimson came to a stop. Prey blinked. They'd stopped short, the safety wall dividing the city from the empty sky was still a ways away over there.

'Here' however wasn't their final destination. It was up ahead, where the rest of the thestrals Prey knew were there were congregating in the night. 'Here' meant a small alleyway, one of maybe three or four in the entirety of Upper Canterlot, since alleys weren't considered classy. Also, 'alley' usually implied bricks and concrete walls. Here, alley simply meant a darkly-shadowed thin strip of nopony's land between two expertly manicured hedgerows. Because Lord Snobby wouldn't stand for *his* hedge to be touching Duchess Snooty's, no sir, and visa-versa.

But that satchel Gloom pulled out from somewhere under the shadows of the hedge, that definitely was not a natural part of Upper Canterlot.

"Prey, would you mind waiting a minute?" Gloom asked, standing

up and brushing off the dark satchel.

What, was he going to say no after coming all this way? "Sure. I'll wait right here."

Prey stood at the alley's mouth, checking ahead again at the drop-off edge coming up. He peered closely, even though he knew his eyes weren't good enough to pick out much of anything that the congregating thestrals were doing in the dark. Oh well, it didn't matter. He was going to see it in person himself in a few minutes' time.

But even so, Prey still wondered, in a vague way, what they could be doing which counted as 'sacred'? It was midnight, and Nightmare Night, and they'd picked somewhere forgotten and away from any watchful eyes which might somehow still be awake. However, this was Canterlot. There was nothing sacred about Canterlot, not to mention thestralkind had only set hoof inside the city this year. Before that, they'd been rejected and thought of only in stories about vamponies.

How could observing the performance of whatever rites or rituals they were doing tonight be in any way sacred if they were doing it in Canterlot?

A slight metallic noise behind him, like two coins rubbing together in the night drew Prey's attention. He pushed back his ear and looked over his shoulder at the hedged alleyway.

Crimson and Gloom were wearing silver jewellery as they stepped out. Not jewellery like the gaudy strings of diamonds, gold, and pearls the rich ladies wore, it was nothing like that. It was plain, sleek, and all silver. It had the ring of age to all of it too, like it had been passed down for generations.

Flat rings of metal on their wings, and a close-fitting band around each of their throats, abstractly resembling the moon. Both had their long warrior's manes braided tightly back with more silver, nearly paper-thin strips of silver dangling from their ears, and finally a narrow silver circlet was resting on each of their foreheads.

There was nothing effeminate about it. Both of them wore the outfit with a quiet sort of solemn pride. All the silver was closely fitting, there was nothing that would catch or tangle. It was so different to all the costumes, masks, and fancy dress that had been so adventurously worn by all the ponies at the Nightmare Night party.

Prey was reminded of the thick golden neck and ear rings of zebra shamans. To them, it was their heritage. It was what they wore as part of their calling, simple as that.

And he was also reminded of his own blue ribbon. Almost reflexively, he reached a hoof up to touch the strip of silk.

Prey silently dipped his head in acknowledgement to them both. He'd follow their lead, and not try to question or ask why. In the moon's full light, the bands of silver against Gloom and Crimson's darker fur had almost a luminous tint to it. As both of them stood there, straight-backed and wholeheartedly committed, Prey thought for a moment that they looked timeless and magnificent. Like true knights from stories of old.

Gloom and Crimson walked forwards in their silver regalia, and Prey followed them towards the city edge.

The thestrals gathered on an open courtyard. If you were to lean over the high safety wall and look down, and had night vision, below you would see the foundations of Canterlot dropping away into open night. And far, far below that, the base of the mountain.

There should have been howling winds at this height, but there wasn't even a breath as the thestrals that were dressed in their ancestral apparel lined up. Centuries of pegasi control had tamed Equestria's weather, and massive enchantments inlaid into the city's foundations protected its inhabitants.

Prey stayed at the very edge of the dark courtyard. He knew without being told that although he was invited to witness, he was not permitted to step in. Every thestral as they arrived one by one joined the line, Canterlot to their backs, and their faces framed with

silver upturned to the full moon.

Prey stood there to the side and waited. A few more thestrals arrived, trickling in. Prey counted them in the line, '...hundred and ten, hundred and eleven, hundred and twelve...', He counted on until he came to the end.

If he wasn't mistaken, every single thestral in Canterlot was here tonight. Not even a skeleton guard left at the Palace. Nighthawk must've wrangled that somehow with Shining Armour. But they were all here tonight, or would shortly be here. There were only a few more left to arrive by his reckoning.

Prey didn't need to be told to know that out there, back at their clan caves, the reverent scene in front of him was being repeated.

A last thestral arrived with a flap of leathery wings, quietly alighted, and took their place. And then, without any signal or leader that Prey saw, they began to sing.

It started just as a deep hum from every throat, and Prey checked his ears at first before realising it was coming from them. There was no thestral leading them, no one in charge like Nighthawk or one of the Lieutenants. All were equal here.

It wasn't smooth, not everyone started singing at once, but that didn't matter, because it wasn't a song with any words. It was all sound, where one thestral started and another joined in didn't matter.

They sung, and Prey listened

"~*Hm* Hmm Hymm *HmmmMM*~"

And then the first one opened their mouth and began to fully sing. The voices of thestral mares and stallions, every type and swiftly joining in.

It echoed wordlessly, somehow quiet in the night. It felt to Prey like he imagined seeing a far-off stormbank on the horizon would feel, while sitting under shelter safe in the knowledge that the storm would never reach you. It was an odd image, but Prey couldn't

quite get it out of his head.

Prey let himself be drawn to whatever concept his mind alighted on as he listened. Flying one wing beat at a time. Towering cloudbanks of white, anticipation, distant rain, the ever-blowing wind in your fur and under your wings.

And just as he was having that thought, a thestral stepped forwards out of the line and opened her wings in the free space, her silver wing bands glinting. She took a short run up and took off, wings driving powerfully down. Another thestral had already stepped forwards, no, not just one, but all the way up and down the line individual thestrals were breaking forwards and taking off with flashes of silver. No one stopped singing, their wings beats mixing into the background of the song.

They sang of the freedom of flying into the endless skies, the plaintive note of sadness that the freedom would end come the dawn was distant, because for now the night was theirs.

But Prey didn't have wings. He was a flightless sheep runt. Thus he had been born, and thus he would remain. All the thestrals, Gloom, Crimson, they were all taking off one after another in a cacophony of wings beating and the sound of the song. But not Prey, because he'd been born a sheep.

But the customary tired bitterness... it didn't come. The long-buried jealousy he knew so well, Prey didn't feel it.

And just like that, the last of the thestrals were in the air, pounding their wings and gaining height. The flock was wheeling overhead, above the reach of the cities' lights, just hundreds of distant flitting shapes in the night. The edges of the wordless song still just reached his ears down here, but he could no longer pick out the meaning.

The flight wheeled round and round, tracing the circumference of the silvery orb of the moon. So perfectly did the flock seem to match the distance and perspective from where Prey was standing down here, that he could almost have thought that they were doing so just for him, the lone spectator.

But of course they weren't, he was a guest viewer here to this, their sacred tradition. Tonight was for them, and them only.

Prey tilted his head back, and watched. His neck grew sore, but still he stood unmoving down here on the ground, and watched the distant dance far above.

He didn't feel bitter. What was he feeling?

Nothing, but a different sort of nothing. A washed out nothing, not an empty nothing. And with something else just hinting on the edge of the nothingness. Renewal?

Not hope. But maybe a portion of acceptance.

Not forgiveness. But possibly a touch of new resolve.

Not absolution. But perhaps the inclination that he could still have purpose.

Prey stared up with a placid calmness he was no longer feeling. His breath came uneven. His face and especially his eyes felt hot. 'Huh. So this was all it took. Simply seeing a flight of thestrals doing their own thing. Is that just completely random, or am I really that fragile?'

It didn't matter what the reason was, because all that mattered was that now it *did* matter. It mattered. Life was important and it mattered again.

Prey was alone down here, the only one left standing on the edge of the dark courtyard. There was no one else around who might see him let the mask he'd been keeping so carefully on tight crack.

He was safe to let the mask drop for a bit.

So he did.

'Damn it. Damn it all. I hate being called a cry baby.'

But there was no one around to see, so it was okay. No one would know.

A time passed. It was neither fast nor slow. It was simply time, and it passed at the rate it always had. Its *own* rate. Occasionally though, time is subjective to the person living it. Sometimes it passes too fast, sometimes too slow, and just sometimes, it lasts just as long as it needs to.

By the time the thestrals broke off and flew their separate ways, and Gloom and Crimson swooped out of the night to land, Prey had dried his eyes and was ready to meet them with a new face.

Prey didn't smile in greeting at them. It wasn't okay anymore, but it did now matter.

Time only ever goes one way; forward. Never backwards. There is no changing the past. Everyone knew that, but sometimes, in the face of the inevitable, they tried to forget. In the end though, all had to pick themselves back up, square their shoulders, and carry on forwards into the future.

'The sun rises, the sun sets, but we all have to cross the river some day. But if that day is not today, and since it can't be yesterday, then the only option is that it must be tomorrow. Or many tomorrows. But it is not today.'

---I---

He would not forget, and would always remember.

[[[Bonus picture - Concept art]]]

[image]

Author's Notes:

Hello to everyone, another chapter done. It was a bit delayed, due to the long nature of it. [image]

What inspired the thestral tribal silver jewlery at the end there was I recently watched a show which included some African tribes, with the whole gold neck bangles, beads, and headwear.

And I thought, 'Boy, do they look weird', but then I thought, 'No, to them, *we're* the weird ones for mistakenly laughing at it.'

They took pride in what they wore, as it was history and part of their tradition. So, uh, yeah, just wanted to say that's where that came from. Uh.

And here is another picture done by GreatSpaceBeaver over Here if you would like to go check it out!

Editor for this overly long chapter, Panem et Circenses, so say special thanks to him.

81.6 Listening to Demands

Things did not go back to being okay. They had never been okay to begin with, and surviving didn't ever mean it had been alright. But at least that period of time in Prey's life had passed. Everyone has that one chapter of their life which they don't read out loud.

That had been three days ago.

It wasn't now okay, that hadn't changed, but Prey had. And he chose to move on and focus on different things.

'I am such an idiot. I can't believe I stood there like an idiot, in the middle of the night, without any defences, while everyone just flew off, and left me alone with no witnesses. I was practically *begging* to get killed or kidnapped by a mimic.' Prey thought in self-recriminating disgust.

Although that disgust may have had something to do with where he was currently standing.

The cloying nasal fumes coming off of the pool of spent bone rot and liquified *somebody* at his hooves. He was down in the caves under Mount Canter again, this stone tunnel was one of the offshoots from the crystal lair that he'd only recently secured. Or *thought* he'd secured.

The liquid was contained in a shallow depression in the cave floor, the dip spanning across the narrow tunnel. The roof here was low enough that anyone not a runt lamb would have to duck, and narrow enough that they'd have to nearly squeeze to get through.

A lethal choke point. There was a hollow pocket in the stone of the ceiling, invisible in the shadows, which was exactly where Prey had suspended a bone rot mine. You'd never spot it as you were forced to duck your head and shuffle underneath.

Prey had said it before and he'd say it again, tunnel warfare was like trying to fight while trapped in a coffin. The dark, the pressing

stone, one way in, one way out, never being able to see what was waiting around the next corner. It was the stuff of terror and nightmares.

If the enemy claimed a tunnel system first, you didn't try to reclaim those tunnels, that was the rule. You found a way around, looked for a hidden back entrance, tried to smoke or starve them out, but you didn't go in through the front unless you wanted to die.

Yet a mimic was lying dead at his hooves from trying. Or floating. Prey looked down at it, and had seen it all before.

This, all of this, Prey felt like an old hoof at. Like a cart's wheel slipping back down into the same rut over and over, he'd done this song and dance what felt like a thousand times. The traps, the dangers, the ambushes. It was old. Old, but new, and still just as fatally punishing now if he made a single mistake as the day the dance had first begun.

Prey hated death. He hated pain. But he had to keep what was his, and most irreplaceably of all himself, safe. He hated his own hoofwork floating before him, hated that he was so good at it, but not that it worked. The mimics were the ones who wouldn't leave well enough alone, not him. Survival isn't pretty. Everyone's hungry, but few are willing to hunt.

The mimics were willing to hunt. Or at least to recklessly pay the price for trying to eat.

Prey had a sinking feeling as he stared at what had once been a living, thinking being in the lantern-light. He'd had the sinking feeling for a long time now, whenever he thought about the mimics really. It had settled in, fermented, and only grown more potent as time had passed.

He felt like there was a huge, invisible hourglass somewhere. Grains of sand had been trickling down, one by one, for months. Individually inconsequential, but like snowflakes, they were inexorably building up towards an avalanche.

First had been Mayflower. Nothing had come of it then, but it had

been the start.

Next had been his chance sighting of one in the dark down the end of one of the tunnels.

Then, after the disaster with the thieves, the mimics had tried to enter his trashed lair after he was forced to abandon it.

There'd been more echoes and scuffling in the shadows, picked up by the wickerwatch in the sewers, but it had then seemed like they'd withdrawn or given up.

And then all at once, they'd attempted to infiltrate the Night Guard, tried to mind control Prey through emotional manipulation, and had implemented their last minute replacement of Felyawn in an attempt to steal the Elements of Harmony, which had led into trying to spark hostilities and maybe even outright war between Griffonia and Equestria.

And now they were pressing forwards aggressively, both in the sewers and here in the crystal caverns under the mountain. Why? What had caused the sudden shift in stance? Prey had yet to encounter or find any complete bodies, all he had was that one ripped-off leg.

The mimics seemed determined to never leave behind a corpse or evidence, going to great lengths to scour all traces of their attempts and failures from existence before they vanished back into the maze of tunnels. The seeming disregard for their own lives frightened Prey. To retrieve a comrade from a trap, even those already dead, was almost guaranteed to get another mimic killed in the process. Prey wasn't proud of it, but he was sure of his runes and traps.

The mimics were losing people. And it wasn't stopping them.

That frightened Prey.

The mimic impersonating Felyawn had not hesitated to blow him or herself up, along with the other two captured normal griffins, once it became clear their mission had failed and Luna was going to interrogate them. Thinking back, Prey didn't even know what

Shimmer's mission pretending to be a Border Guard in Mayflower had been, or why they'd died trying to distract the reaper king. A mistake? An oversight? He'd never know.

But all this meant that his oldest strategy wasn't working. Fear had ever been Prey's weapon of choice. Back when he had been the only one left, fighting the Border Guard, it had never been about destroying all of them. There were too many, they could get reinforcements, and it would've been impossible. So he'd resorted to fear.

Maybe if he'd gone all out, with runes and poisons and recklessness, he could've killed ten Border Guards at once before he himself was cornered and killed.

But if a trap managed to kill even one, if the nine survivors were then too traumatized by the one's horrible death to dare come back, then maybe he could win. Bone rot could kill a whole squad, but Prey'd never had the ingredients to make enough of it. But spring spikes, pit-falls, poison darts, dead-crushes, even a runt could make those. Prey could set a trap to kill at least one again, and again, and again.

But fear wasn't working against the mimics. As a group, they were prepared to sacrifice individual mimics on this reckless scouting.

What could drive them to such suicidal devotion to their cause? How large were their numbers?

'Why doesn't this cycle ever stop? Why can't someone for once just leave me alone? Live and let live, I'd settle for that if they would. I'm so sick and tired of the hunt.'

It might seem like Prey was winning, killing a mimic here and another one there, keeping all the areas he'd secured with runes locked down tight, but the mimics weren't playing by the old rules. They were willing to fight a war of attrition, and while Prey was winning individual battles, this was a case where he'd lose the war.

Prey didn't know what more he could do right now than he already was. And without knowing the mimics' overall goal, it would

remain impossible too.

He didn't know why they were pressing so hard. He didn't know how many of them there were. He didn't know where they hid, aside from somewhere in the dark caves under the mountain. He didn't know how their emotional control worked, why he couldn't hear their thoughts, or how deeply they'd already infiltrated every level of government and society.

'And I dare not venture further into the tunnels to try to claim more ground. I am only safe in the areas I've already covered with runes. If I'm stupid enough to go further, then it'll be me who dies suddenly and violently.'

Prey was trapped inside the safety net he'd built. While yes, he was safe inside, the mimics had everything outside to work with while he was blind to their movements. He was much like a turtle in its' shell.

Prey sourly eyed the thick puddle of bone rot, worry and unease squirming in his gut. 'Why are you doing this? What's so important it's worth your lives?'

He was fed up to his back teeth with this. Sick of the fear and fighting for his life against yet another shadowy threat. Why'd always have to be him? It was always him. Every time. Every *single* time! Nothing ever changes.

It was the same manure, just a different day.

"What's weighing on your mind, Prey?" Gloom asked, dropping back down from shoving a box filled with dusty reports onto the top shelf. Invariably, after spending any amount of time in their office, Gloom and Crimson were left with their armour sporting a fine sheen of dust.

Prey allowed the quiet huff of annoyance at the question to escape him, setting the pencil down on the desk. Gloom and Crimson were both still keeping a worried eye on him. Neither were convinced

that he'd gotten control over what had been bothering him, and wasn't just hiding it much better. Maybe because he was. He was locking it away and suppressing it.

Prey took his time to answer, leaning back on his rather precarious stool and stretching until his neck criked, "I'm thinking that I'd like a proper lantern in here so I don't end up with aching eyes every single night."

Crimson looked up from methodically, and rather hopelessly, shifting through the latest dusty box of closed case reports for one which might help, "A proper lantern? Why? I mean, I always thought this one was fine."

Gloom looked up at the lone crystal lantern lighting the dim ISND office, "I thought it was fine too. Is it breaking or something? It doesn't seem any dimmer to me."

"No. It's exactly the same brightness as it always has been." Prey answered dryly.

Gloom and Crimson continued to miss the obvious. Gloom blinked, brows scrunching slightly under his helmet rim as he looked between Prey and the crystal light.

'-what's that I distantly recall, about something...? After Mayflower, that doctor said looking into getting glasses might be a necessity. But it's been so long-'

Crimson drew the same connection, bluntly blurting out, "The reaper king poison damage. Why didn't you say anything before now?"

Prey sighed, "Half marks for effort, but no. You're both completely overthinking this."

Both Gloom and Crimson looked at him, then up at the crystal light, then around the office. They really didn't get it. It was enough to amuse and distract Prey for a moment from his worrying mimic problem, 'Ahh. Sometimes so alert and sensitive, sometimes so stoic and unobservant.'

Prey sat up straighter on the wobbly stool and clapped his forehooves, "Okay, let's try a little thought experiment."

Neither Gloom nor Crimson even thought to protest at taking the time to take a small break. They'd been digging through these files for three hours straight. Two minutes doing anything but that sounded nice, even if Prey was going to be sarcastic about this.

"I, am a sheep." Prey stated. He waited for them both to nod unnecessarily.

"And you, are both thestrals."

Crimson blinked, "I'm not a thestral-"

"You count," Prey waved his hoof, "You were born to thestrals, you lived with thestrals, you were raised by thestrals, and you have the requirements of thestrals."

He politely didn't outright say; 'You need to drink blood like three-quarters of all thestrals', but both knew what he meant. Prey still recalled how badly they'd reacted to him first revealing he'd figured that out, so long ago. But now? Not even a twitch. Neither of them even thought Prey was being presumptuous by labelling Crimson basically a thestral when it really was up to Crimson to decide what he was.

"Right, so you're thestrals, I'm a sheep. What do thestrals have that sheep don't?"

"Wings." Gloom deadpanned.

Prey pretended that didn't cause the ember of deep jealousy he kept buried to spark. Not jealousy of them, because Gloom and Crimson deserved their flight, but jealousy of them not being runt lambs. He just raised one eyebrow instead.

Crimson unfolded a wing and began counting off on his pinion feathers, "Wings, fangs, cutie marks, a mane, uh, a tail sort of? Cloud walking, weather control magic, normal hooves, can wear horseshoes, I think you mentioned ambient magic or something once like that once? And... oh."

Prey smiled sweetly.

Gloom tapped a hoof sharply on the floorboards as he finally put two and two together, "Eyes. Or night vision, rather."

Prey nodded, "Yes. While I realise this office looks completely illuminated to you, it's rather lacking in decent lighting to me."

"Why didn't you say anything before now? If it was a problem for you, we could've fixed it." Crimson asked, frowning.

Prey shrugged lightly, "No real reason, I just didn't. But now since Sargent Gloom asked, I've answered."

Really, he could've easily said something before now. He just hadn't, choosing instead to squint and have aching eyes at the end of every night shift. Not the most intelligent choice Prey could admit, now having finally spoken out, and indeed he really didn't know why he hadn't said something before. Perhaps because he was unwillingly working here, and he never meant to stay here if he could ever actually find a way to escape.

Prey knew why he'd said something *now* though, because he'd wanted an answer to distract Gloom with, and his goal had been achieved. Gloom and Crimson were successfully distracted from hovering over him.

Gloom tapped his wing claws together before him as he looked at Prey, "Sooo, this wasn't something dumb like suffering in silence, was it Prey?"

He asked the question lightly, putting in levity, but in his yellow slit eyes they'd just been talking about was a hidden sliver of seriousness.

'And here's yet *another* thing I get all the more sick and tired of every time I see it. I'm going to be confined to a sick bed if I get much sicker of it.'

Prey silently counted to ten in his head and assured Gloom; "Your concerns are noted, and also unfounded. I just want a better lamp, or lantern, or something to see what I'm reading by."

"Sure. We can request that tonight easily. Or actually, hmm..." Gloom paused.

'-the requisitions department. The same requisitions department that took three weeks to get us this old desk and three rickety stools-'

"...Change of plan, let's not put in a request with the requisitions department. Let's get another light ourselves."

Crimson fanned some dust off his sleek armour with his wing, "Yes. Or we could ask Taffy, sir. I'm certain that she knows someone, who knows someone, who knows someone else in requisitions who'll do it because it's Taffy asking."

"Yeah, that'll work too." Gloom agreed.

'Distraction successful.' Prey thought, picking the pencil back up and returning to what he had been doing. On the surface, that meant going through the stack of reports on past crime rates and marking down the correct statistics. Internally however, it meant struggling on trying to think of a solution or even a partial solution to the mimics.

"Wait, which box were we up to? I got distracted." Gloom asked, passing as he looked between shelves.

"Shelf seven, the second box labelled 'F.D. reports for 906 C.'" Prey answered without needing to consult the list or look up.

The only minor consolation to even being here, in the Night Guard, working in the Palace, even though he could be much better utilizing his time in ten different, no, twenty different ways. Twenty-five. Thirty. He could think of more every second, actually. But anyway, the one and only minor consolation; they were in the office, where it was safe, where no one was trying to kill them, and he didn't have to interact with anyone outside of the ISND.

'Oh wait, never mind.'

Coming from down the corridor, the feedback from Prey's secret trail of runic arrays let him know that there was someone briskly

trotting towards their office.

Knock knock-knock

Prey looked up in fake interest. Gloom and Crimson both stopped what they were doing and turned to see who it was in sync. Then Gloom realised he needed to allow the visitor to come in first.

"*Ehrm*, Yes? Come in."

A Night Guard, one of the new ones who'd come in with Lieutenant Vivid Edge, stood in the doorway and saluted to Gloom very crisply. Gloom blinked, just a bit nonplussed. He wasn't used to that. It wasn't the novelty of having someone salute him, even if usually the ISND were working under people of higher rank. No, rather it was that the Private seemed impressed and respectful of the ISND.

Gloom hadn't considered before how undertaking that secret mission in Griffonia would reflect on their internal reputation among the thestrals. From an outsiders' perspective, the ISND might seem extremely competent and worthy of respect. Specifically, an outsider new to Canterlot and the Night Guard, who'd come in and gotten to hear some of the stories about what happened before they joined, who would end up hearing about things like the Lumber Yard, Garrow, the Royal Inspectors, the train town riots and Wheat Plow, and possibly even a bit about Mayflower.

"Yes?" Gloom prompted.

"Captain Nighthawk apologises, but he needs you to come in tomorrow during the day. He said four o'clock, sir." The stallion replied. He looked like he was only maybe a bit younger than Gloom himself was. Prey squinted at the clan stud in his ear. Clan Cilldara, he was even from the same clan as Gloom.

However there was now a world of difference between not just their Guard ranks, but also the unspoken hierarchy of respect within thestral society. Prey didn't know why Gloom found it so startling, you need look no further than their differences in Guard armour for a hint that this had been coming. The ISND wore the new, more extensive and sleeker Lunar Guard armour, (as it was being

dubbed), which the first bulk delivery of hadn't even been finished yet. Gloom and Crimson were literally wearing the prototype sets.

Sure, once the bulk order had been completed, then every Night Guard would get a set, but the point still stood.

'And me with no armour whatsoever.' Prey thought, mentally rolling his eyes. It's what he would've done before. He was making an effort to try to return to that, even if only within the privacy of his own head.

Prey was not back to being okay. He hadn't even been okay before. He could scarcely *think* of Luna without being swamped by helpless hate. A black, broken hate. It was hard, trying to return to what'd passed for 'okay' before.

But for now Prey could *make* himself be more interested in why exactly Nighthawk was ordering, (the Captain was asking but really it was the same as an order), that they get up in the middle of day, when they were supposed to be sleeping, and come in. What of importance was happening at four o'clock in the afternoon?

'-moon take it, but this is going to be a long day. Oh well, duty comes first-'

The messenger was still waiting patiently.

"Got it. Please tell Captain Nighthawk we'll be there." Gloom told him.

"Yes sir."

"What do you suppose this is going to be about?" Prey asked as the messenger left. He didn't quite have a bad feeling, but he was still apprehensive. When was the last time anything good happened when they were unexpectedly summoned to see the Captain?

But Gloom only shrugged with his wings and Crimson shook his head. They didn't have any more of an inclination than he did.

Prey rubbed at the scars and fur under his eyes, 'Whatever it is, it's also going to be another headache that I don't need.'

The Palace slowly fell away behind roofs, buildings, and spires as the three of them walked down the street, having clocked out. The early afternoon sun overhead helped ward off the nippiness in the air, but since they kept to the shaded side of the streets purposefully, it didn't help much. That was the one downside of the night vision Prey wasn't blessed with; over-sensitiveness in daylight.

"I am not looking forwards to the meeting this evening." Crimson admitted. Then he cocked one ear, "No. What I mean is, I am not looking forwards to the aftermath of getting up only an hour later to resume our work again."

"It's going to be, what? If I manage to get straight to sleep, about three total hours of rest?" Gloom estimated morosely.

'-damn, I hate working through the day on top of the night-'

"So then why," Prey asked as he hurried as always to keep up with their stride, "Are we going to Carton Juice's house?"

"We're just going to be stopping by. At this point, five minutes isn't going to make a difference." Gloom replied as they turned into the street.

"And the why?" Prey repeated.

"Because we said we would-"

"*You* said we would." Prey corrected.

Gloom didn't even pause, "-And because Scenic and Lilly will be there. We haven't checked up with them, especially Lilly, recently enough."

"It is just a brief stop, Prey." Crimson joined in on subtly prodding Prey. He checked the few cloud banks there were in the sky, half closing his amber eyes against the bright blue of the sky. What for, Prey didn't know. Maybe just keeping an eye on the sky, like so many people forgot to do.

"Five minutes. I'm already tired, and at this rate, I'm going to be wasted by the time tonight rolls around." Prey grumbled. That was only half the reason why he was insisting, though. He had a long arduous trip down into the caves to meet up with Lemon before he could get any sleep. Although at this rate, getting even one hour was sounding more and more like a fleeting dream. Just like sleep.

As they came up to Carton's garden gate, with its cartoonishly carved bee and honeycomb, the swish of curtains in the window of the house next door caught Prey's attention. The pony inside probably thought they were being very sneaky, but Prey still easily spotted them with barely a glace, peeking out from behind the curtain's crack. The curtains were white. The pony's fur was green. Evidently they couldn't do the math.

'Someone's having regrets about moving into the house next to who they thought was a nice normal neighbour. Because nice normal neighbours don't get repeated visits from Night Guards still dressed in full plate armour. Why, I'd bet our visits are lowering the average property value of the whole street.' Prey thought as Crimson opened the gate, now just a tiny bit less annoyed about having to come along.

Gloom didn't even get a chance to knock.

"Gloom! Hello Prey, hello Crimson. Do come in, please all come in." Carton beamed in the open doorway, the head of the doorframe literally brushing against the tips of the huge mare's ears.

"Hello Carton Juice. Are Lilly and Scenic here?" Gloom asked, dipping his helmeted head politely.

"Yes, they arrived just now." Carton said, gesturing them to come in.

"We really can't stop, but thank you. We only came by to say hello for five minutes." Gloom apologised.

"Only five? That's a shame, but I'm sure they'll appreciate it anyways." Carton waved the excuse away, then went back to ushering them inside, "Come on in Crimson, Prey you too."

Carton had not held any kind of grudge for the scare on Nightmare Night, unlike Scenic, who was still a little sore over that. Prey'd been quietly informed that on the way back on Nightmare Night, Scenic had been desperate to find anywhere still open that sold corn on the cob to leave outside the door so the crow pony wouldn't come and take him. Desperate, and also desperately embarrassed and humiliated at his own fear over a mere story. But then again, the wolfing woods had only been a story too. Carton Juice didn't get it, and Prey guessed she'd been secretly a bit exasperated with her coltfriend.

Not that it mattered to Prey. And this was one of those things which *genuinely* didn't matter either.

Lilly was seated awkwardly on a floor cushion in the main room, her meldwood leg straight out to the side, the gnarled wooden end poking out of the sleeve of the long shirt she was wearing. Scenic himself had very obviously only just sat down at the sofa, the fresh teacup and saucer he'd just poured from the pot steaming on the coffee table, and Lilly's own cup placed right next to her on her good side.

Lilly awkwardly twisted her head to see who'd just walked in, the bulging roots growing down her face, and those just beneath the skin, standing out disturbingly. "Sir-I mean, er, Gloom." She said in surprise, almost knocking over her tea as she struggled to move.

"Please don't get up. Really." Gloom hastily told her.

"No, I should-" Lilly gave up and subsided back down onto the cushion, "-Alright."

Prey and Crimson spread out, each offering silent nods of hello to Scenic and Lilly. Prey, because he couldn't be bothered to say "hello", and Crimson simply because he was Crimson.

'Just five minutes, then I can go.' Prey repeated.

"Uh, how was work?" Scenic asked, not knowing what else to start with and really not wanting this to become uncomfortable for Lilly's sake.

'-she was just telling me today was a good day for her. Let's not ruin it-'

"Average. Work is progressing well. We aren't working on an active case at the moment, but that might be changing soon." Gloom answered as Carton squeezed back into the living room and went around to check Lilly's tea, even though it'd only just been poured.

"What case?" Lilly asked, perking up in almost a hungry way.

'-life hasn't stopped, I need to get back to it. I've got my goal, and I'm not going to quit until I'm back up there-'

'I bet she's already talked herself into loving that medal instead of hating it, too.' Prey thought, subtly shifting a bit further to the left to leave Lilly's active line of sight and hopefully also her attention span.

Gloom didn't get a chance to repeat that they didn't know yet, because there was a knock at the door.

"Oh." Carton exclaimed in mild surprise. '-I didn't see anypony else coming up the street. Who could that be?-'

"Please excuse me, back in a tick."

The rest of them, not having anything else to do, waited. Prey sniffed the air, finding that it was raspberry tea that he'd been smelling. He could see a pile of Carton Juice's beekeeping gear piled haphazardly on the table. Seems like time had gotten away from her or she'd been distracted, because Prey made a habit of memorizing other peoples' ticks and tells, and Carton was not a sloppy mare. By nature, she seemed to take delight in quietly organizing her own house to her satisfaction.

Things like making sure the flower pattern dishes were always stacked on the left of the cupboard, and that the yellow bee ones on the right. Or that the bee-stencilled calendar, along with the little statue of Celestia and all the other small ornaments on the plinth, positively tiny in her hooves, always all aligned properly.

Carton trotted back in, filling the doorway. There was an uncertain

look on her face and a hesitant tilt to her ears, "Um. Uh. There's somepony at the door, asking for you Lilly dear."

Carton stepped aside, showing she was not simply passing on a message, but had actually also blindly let the stranger follow her in with her back presented to them all the way, "He says his name is Tallow."

Lilly jerked, this time successfully knocking her cup and slopping tea, "T-Tallow?" She gaped.

The peach unicorn wearing a rumpled coat and drawn expression waved nervously, just a quick motion of the hoof before he just as hurriedly lowered it. His eyes widened comically as he saw the two armoured Night Guards, his throat bobbing:

"Uh, hi. Yeah, it's me, Tallow." Lilly's brother quietly introduced himself.

Lilly's brother didn't stay long.

Barely five minutes, actually.

The rest of them were made to vacate the living room and give Tallow and Lilly some privacy.

That didn't mean they couldn't still hear what was being said as they all squashed into Carton's kitchen.

It was the five of them in there, all uncertainly looking back and forth between each other silently, and trying to pretend they didn't have ears.

"So, um, what have you been up to, Lilly?"

"What do you think, Tallow? Trying to recover so I can get back to my job."

"Ah, sorry. Wait, your job?"

"My job as a Night Guard. You know, the one I got injured in the line of duty doing?"

"No, I knew that, I just meant I uhhhhh, that wasn't what I was expecting." Tallow answered cautiously.

"Captain Nighthawk says that I'll always have a post in the Night Guard, just as soon as I get myself fit for the job again." Lilly declared, almost challenged.

"That's good of, him? It's a him, right? Right. It's just not something I keep up with, I haven't read the newspaper in a while, and the bat ponies haven't exactly been front page-"

"How did you know I was here, Tallow? Did you blab to the family, too?"

"No no, nopony else knows. I, well, this is the second time I've tried to find you. I tried your flat, but you were out both times-"

"That's not my fault, I still have a life to live. But you didn't answer my question."

Prey's ears picked out a quiet sigh from next door, "I was about to- Never mind. I asked your neighbours. They said you might be down the street."

So Lilly's neighbours were just as nosey as Carton's ones. Prey wasn't surprised in the slightest. Ponies were all convinced that any business was also their business.

"So you *haven't* told mom or dad? Or Pearl?" Lilly checked. Her strained tone suggested she didn't know which answer it was she wanted to hear.

"No... no I haven't. Listen Lilly, things aren't good at home. I have to keep up with my job, but whenever I'm around, it's like... mom and dad, they're so listless. Nopony talks to each other. Or they hardly do. It's horrible-"

"Cry me a river Tallow." Lilly snapped.

Squashed into the corner of the kitchen next to the pantry, Carton flinched at Lilly's harsh inflection. '-oh dear, oh dear. Please Celestia I don't want them to start fighting-'

Scenic saw and reached over and briefly rubbed his marefriend's leg reassuringly. The earth pony himself didn't quite know what to think, it had all developed too fast. '-this might be Lilly's chance to reconnect. But, her family were the ones who were nasty in the first place-'

But in the living room however, things hadn't stopped. Tallow hesitantly spoke. Prey could've sworn he even heard the stallion swallow:

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like-not like... yeah, look, I came to find you to say sorry."

"Sorry? Sorry after you all just, what, gave up on me? Just like that?"

"It wasn't like that-Alright, some, but not all of it! You wouldn't even let us in."

"Look at me. No, look at me when you're talking to-*Look* at me Tallow! I'm not on the floor, I'm in front of you. This is my face. Look at it!"

"Lilly I'm, I'm not trying to make it about, about whatever the accident was. They wouldn't tell us, and-And I'm just here to try and start again."

A pause, "Start again?" Lilly asked, sounding thrown.

"You know, start again. Like, us. Brother and sister. Start again, you know?"

"Start again?" Lilly repeated, but this time flatly.

What sounded like another gulp, "Yes. We're family, we're supposed to have each others' back. I might've failed a bit there, I admit that, but better late than never, right? I want us to get over this."

"Get over-? Get over what? You have nothing to get over, *Tallow*." Lilly stressed the word into a hiss, "You're not the one who lost their magic, you're not the one without a leg, you're not the one who's got meldwood growing out of them."

"Lilly, *please*. I didn't come to start fighting with you."

"Do you know how hard it is to sleep at night? Do you, huh? I can't sleep on my side, or on my front, all these twigs get stuck on everything and they pull and they hurt!"

"Lilly, I'm trying. Okay? I'm trying. You've got some issues, I've got some issues, but we can get over them. I can't just pretend you're not my sister or part of my life."

Prey was ready for Lilly to respond with something along the lines of; 'Well you had no trouble pretending up until now', but surprisingly, Lilly reined her temper in. A vast difference from the mare who'd first swaggered so confidently into the barracks room that first day.

The tips of Gloom's tufted ears twitched in surprise as well; '-right. Just another reminder about how much this disaster changed her. We shouldn't be listening in on her like this though, but they both know we're all in here, so...-'

Lilly's sounded like she was trying to speak clearly, hoping not to catch on anything in her throat, "Okay. You've found me. You've said your piece, and, and I've heard you out."

"That's, that's great. I've been trying to find-"

"I wasn't done." Lilly interrupted her brother. She took a deep breath, "I've heard what you said, and your selfish reasoning."

"Lilly please! It's not selfish-"

"-*But*! But the world isn't fair. I've finally learnt that. A mare can't get everything she deserves. But everypony, they've all made me look for the positives instead. Now I know better, and I know to take what I'm given and make the best of it."

Prey's brows involuntarily went up. That was much more mature and grown up than he'd been expecting, even from this new and improved attitude of Lilly's. There was still plenty she was secretly bitter over, meaning although she'd been trying and had made great steps forwards, (at least by pony standards), Prey had still very much been expecting her to blow up at her brother.

Lilly's family had abandoned her in fear and disgust over her physical condition. That wasn't something a pony raised in Canterlot and swimming in privilege could just put behind them. They had too much pride and entitlement for that. Prey had never abandoned or given up on Breaker, even after all his brother had done. But things were different on the Border.
Prey really hadn't expected Lilly to have that same kind of loyalty in her.

Crimson caught his eye. The pegasus flicked his yellow eyes towards the living room to indicate Lilly, an eyebrow up in surprised approval. 'She's learnt one of life's lessons, that family is irreplaceable' was Crimson's silent message.

It wasn't a happy message, because the lessons of life are harsh, cruel, and vicious. But it was still an acknowledgement of Lilly's effort.

Her brother Tallow obviously didn't get it. Tallow was here today mostly for himself, because he knew that if he didn't assuage his guilt, his conscious would continue nagging for however long it took for him to learn to ignore it. Tallow didn't want that, he wanted to think well of himself and to be able to say he'd done the right thing, but those were selfish reasons, even if he didn't realise so.

Tallow came from Canterlot, where morality was bright, shiny, and easy. He wasn't acquainted with sorrow or grief. He'd never thought that it might happen to his family. This meeting right now in Carton's living room he was attending? It was mostly out of a misguided attempt to return things to the way they were before.

Tallow just didn't get it. He didn't get that there was no going back to how things were before, but he was trying anyway for his own

sake. His *own* sake, not Lilly's. That's why it was only selfishness, and not true remorse.

But Lilly seemed to know that, even if she didn't have all the words to describe in those terms, she still knew inside what it was. But she was still willing to accept Tallow's selfishly motivated offer regardless, because she wanted to have a chance at reconnecting.

At least in that one way Lilly, was on the same page as her brother. She knew her consciousness would plague her if she didn't grasp this opportunity with both hooves, even if she wasn't the one in the wrong here.

"So, how do you want to do this?" Prey heard Lilly ask, very calmly.

"Uh... how about coming back home-?"

"No. If mom and dad or Pearl want to see me, then they can come to my house. And no telling them where that is either! If they care, they can find it just as easily as you did."

"Lilly, please. It would help them, I'm sure of it."

"No Tallow. I'm not ready for that, and they need to come to me. They're avoiding me like I'm some kind of huge shame, or, or diseased. If it's not like that, then they need to prove it. But, just forget mom and dad for now, I'm not talking about them. How are we going to do this?"

There was another silence. Then; "If you're not going to come visit, then I don't know."

'You come visit', not; 'I can come visit you'. Tallow was still pushing, however Lilly didn't budge. "Okay, I'm going to do what the doctor said and take a step back. Let's both go away and come back. Tomorrow? Can you meet tomorrow?"

"I'd really prefer Friday, if it's all the same to you."

"...Okay. Okay, Friday then. And where? This isn't, uh, I don't want to impose on Carton again. This is kind'a her house." Lilly said, suddenly embarrassed.

"You have your own house, don't you? What's wrong with that?" Tallow asked, sounding confused.

"No way, that's-No, we're not back to there yet. Maybe if this, whatever this is, works out. But until then, neutral ground only."

"Alright, fine, have it your way. We'll just, uhhhh, I'll find a café that does private rooms." Tallow sighed, giving in.

"Right. Cool. It's agreed then."

"Yeah. For now, anyway. So, uhhh, I'll, I'll just be going then. I'll let myself out. Please pass on my apologies to, uh, Carton Juice, was it?"

"I will. See you Friday, Tallow."

"Till Friday. See you then... bye." The sound of the stallion's retreating hoofsteps came to them.

The five of them in the kitchen all shared a look, and by unanimous unspoken agreement, decided that they wouldn't mention anything from the private meeting they'd just overheard.

Gloom shared a look with Prey and Crimson, and cleared his throat, "We'll just be going too. Good afternoon Carton, Scenic."

With that, they skedaddled, getting out of there and heading back to their own flats for some precious rest before whatever it was that Nighthawk was going to lay on them this afternoon.

The three hours of sleep the ISND had hoped to get before having to return to the Palace for their four o'clock meeting ended up being more like two and a half, at best. Or if you were Prey, only one.

Prey's drooping eyelids were complaining that number felt overly optimistic, and that zero would've been more accurate.

He quietly yawned as the three of them came to a stop outside the Lieutenants door. Vivid Edge and Starry Wing were sharing this

office. Screech had his own, more cramped office down the corridor. Although all three Lieutenants seemed to rotate as and when some new crisis made it necessary.

The Captain meanwhile got to do the smart thing and go home to sleep, leaving just the one Lieutenant awake on duty throughout the day. And also to deal with passing on whatever task required the ISND to be here at four o'clock in the afternoon.

'So who's the unlucky bastard this time?' Prey thought grumpily. Misery loves company.

Gloom and Crimson were just as bleary eyed as he was, although on the one hoof you needed to look more closely to see it under the grey recolouring by their armours' enchantments, but on the other hoof the old poison scars made them always look like they were tired.

'Or maybe, just maybe, that's because we *are* always tired.'

"If that's Sargent Gloom, come in." The voice of Starry Wing filtered through the door in response to Gloom's knock.

Well, it was apparently time to get this show on the road. The three of them trooped inside, Prey bringing up the rear and shutting the door.

'Well, what do you know? Back to being stuck in a poorly lit office that everyone else has no trouble seeing in.' Prey thought as he took his place next to Crimson, and both of them behind Gloom as he saluted. It was the middle of the day, but the thick curtains were drawn tight across the office's window, and there was no other light source.

Starry Wing had his helmet off and set aside on a pile of paperwork, letting his neatly pulled back warrior's braid hang free, "At ease."

Gloom did so. The Lieutenant took a second looking them over, not just Gloom, but each of them in turn.

'-I hope to Luna that today doesn't somehow end badly. If Princess Luna rescinded all titles and made everypony start from equal

again, it wouldn't be soon enough-', Prey heard Starry Wing think.

From that snippet, Prey interpreted that they'd been called in for something to do with a noble or nobles in some fashion. The last time they'd been forced to deal with a noble, Lord Vanish had stolen Crimson's jade necklace, gotten Crimson imprisoned when he then lost the necklace, and unknowingly started Prey's shadow war with the thieves.

"Captain Nighthawk didn't tell you why we called the ISND in beforehoof, did he?" Starry Wing checked.

"No sir."

The Lieutenant had already known that, but he'd still checked for the sake of proprietary. "I will be explaining why that is in a moment. But first, a question if you would."

"Yes sir?"

Starry Wing pointedly tapped his Guard helmet with a wing claw where it sat on the desk, and not on his head. "Unrelated, but a message arrived just last night with a flyer back from my clan. I'm sure you've heard, but the Fellion Council of Elders has been trying to keep a watchful eye out of any movement or sign of Clan Myrrdon."

Prey could almost feel Crimson tense through the air. Starry Wing turned his eyes to the pegasus and voiced his question.

"There have been distant sightings, of what they're certain are Myrrdon scouts way out on the edge of the territory. When they pulled back and disappeared, they all but emptied their clan caves. Now though, there's circumstantial evidence to suggest they're possibly looking to maybe return. That, or are simply foraging. They fly off when anypony gets close, and nopony has been able to track them. I know it's a long shot, but you don't happen to have any idea where or what Myrrdon might be doing, Crimson? Even just a rumour of an old clan cave from when you were there?"

Starry Wing was really holding out hope here, and Prey knew the

answer even before Crimson started shaking his head, "No sir. I was always on the outside anyway, but, no. I didn't overhear anything like that."

Starry Wing shrugged, not surprised at all, "I didn't really think it would be that easy, but I thought I'd better ask just in case." He said, reaching over and picking up his helmet between both wing claws.

He dipped his head and slid the purple plumed helmet on, and when he look back up, he was Lieutenant Starry Wing of the Night Guard again, and the clan business was put behind them.

"Right, back to the reason we needed to call you in at this Luna forsaken hour," Starry Wing briefly quirked a lip at his own joke, before going back to full seriousness, "A representative has... actually, before I get to that, it'll be easier just to ask whether any of you know who House Fell are?"

"No." Said Crimson.

"Sort of." Said Gloom.

"Yes." Said Prey.

"So some of you do. But to summarise, House Fell is one of the three great noble households of Canterlot. And of the entirety of Equestria too, actually." Starry Wing was doing an excellent job of keeping his tone neutral, but his ears flicking gave away how 'great' he thought they were.

"For your information, the three are Houses Fell, Blood, and Crust. Fell and Blood are the two biggest ones, although you don't actually hear much about the Fells. They're the sort which just carry on in the background, but they're always in *every* background, if that makes sense. Most ponies don't have any idea just how much power House Fell actually has."

"So how much power do they have?" Gloom asked, not really getting it. And why would he? He and every other thestral alive had spent their whole lives mostly disconnected from Equestria. Why

should they know the names of famous nobles beyond just what they overheard?

"Monetary wise? Lots." Starry Wing said bluntly. It sounded almost coarse coming from him. He lent back at the desk:

"Alright, how can I explain this? So, House Fell is rich. Stinking rich. Obscenely rich. Silly money. Gold bits coming out of their ears. Because of the representative's visit yesterday, I got shown the public financial accounts of their holdings they published last year. Assuming those were accurate, and that House Blood isn't holding back on something, outside of the crown, the Fells are the richest ponies in all of Equestria."

Starry Wing began tapping his hoof in time as he began to tick off points; "And I don't just mean, 'they have a lot of bits in the bank'. They own entire streets in Upper Canterlot, strings of apartment blocks in Manehattan, Fillydelphia, Vanhoover, Detrot, Cloudsdale, and everywhere else too."

He took a breath so he could continue going, "They've got thousands of acres of undeveloped land, the Old Forge Woods, the Caspian Forest, and a bunch of other private woodlands I forget. What's more, they've owned them for hundreds of years. You know the Crop Holders who won the election? Most of the farmland the landowners rent isn't actually their own, but the Fell's too. They've got airship dockyards and factories, they own an entire trade port on the coast, and their own small merchant navy to go with it."

Starry Wing gestured at the covered window, indicating the wider city outside; "You wouldn't know it to look at the signs above their doors, but House Fell own and maintain museums, art galleries, and old castle forts. Through various subsidiary companies, they're the leaders in nearly a third of all industries too. You know the Gemstone Refinery you investigated? They own that. They also own seventy percent of all mineshafts in the mine where those gems come from too. Did you know that they fund two entire mage towers, even? Because I didn't. The Dancer Tower and I've forgotten the other one, but I could point it out to you. But the point is, they control two entire mage towers, although they use a light hoof."

The Lieutenant exhaled and sat back, "And all of that list? That's about a *quarter* of their total holdings."

Prey had already known all of that. He'd made a point to keep up to date with Equestrian politics, even if it was all a pathetic joke to him. Still, the way Starry Wing had laid all of that out really did help to hammer down the point.

Gloom and Crimson were quiet in contemplation for a minute as they digested all of that.

"Okay, I think I've got all of that. But if I may, what has this to do with the Night Guard, sir?" Gloom asked with a hint of trepidation.

'Smart guy.'

The Lieutenant let out a tired breath that sounded like hours of overtime and paperwork, "Lord Triton Fell himself has reached out to Princess Luna with a private request. It sounds like a private investigation he wants carried out by the Night Guard. Usually, we'd say no immediately, the Night Guard is neutral, but Princess Luna has decided there is merit to at least hearing him out. Oh, and if you didn't know, Triton Fell is the patriarch of House Fell."

A sliver of ice shot through Prey's gut. This was ringing all sorts of alarm bells in his head. He'd killed Captain Valour, and Valour had been one of the two direct grandsons of Triton Fell.

'Surely we're not going to get told to investigate the very murder I committed? I made damned sure to remove all evidence and make it look like a candle tipped over in the night. The Solar Guard would've almost certainly conducted a preliminary investigation anyway, since he was their Captain, but they would've found nothing. Surely Triton Fell wasn't that close to Valour that he's become obsessed out of grief?'

But Prey remembered where or rather *who* he'd had Lemon Pink post the same lure totem he'd used to trick Valour with to. He hadn't acted yet, and the little statue of Celestia would continue to sit in its potential victim's house harmlessly, up until when or if he decided to use it. He hadn't been going to use it, it was just there in

case he ever changed his mind. A child can't be guilty of the crimes of a parent. So he'd decided against exacting his revenge against Big Fields, despite his previous plans. It was part of working towards being a better person. Unless, that is, Big Fields started following in his parents hoofsteps.

While Prey was deciding if he needed to panic or not, Gloom was nodding slowly in understanding of the Lieutenant's words. '-well, if Princess Luna thinks Triton Fell is important enough to warrant this, then it must be-'

"Alright sir. And we've been summoned to meet Lord Triton Fell today?"

Starry Wing blinked, "What? Ah, no, not Triton Fell. Sorry, I wasn't clear. He's not going to actually come in pony, he's sent a representative of his House instead."

'-and he's enough of a big wig that he can get away with doing that, no questions asked-', The Lieutenant's thoughts accompanied his answer.

Prey silently let out his breath. That was probably a good sign, although there was absolutely no reason the Lord seeing him in person should mean anything to Triton Fell. Plus, having a representative deal with whatever the problem was on his behalf probably meant it wasn't a super secret matter either.

Starry Wing got up from behind the desk, gesturing them out ahead of him, "Come. The representative is already here in the Palace. I'll take you up to him."

One of Crimson's wings twitched, "Up?"

"Up in the main Palace." The Lieutenant explained.

In the Upper Palace. *Not* down here in the Guard section. But up in the Palace where all the gold, gems, and glitter were reserved for nobles, dignitaries, and heads of government. The divide and message here wasn't at all subtle.

Triton Fell the representative might not be, but incredibly

important they still were. They'd requested a meeting at four o'clock, set the place, and made the Night Guard come to them. An unspoken statement that the name Fell demanded privilege and concessions even from the law.

'Arrogance and power at its finest.'

Not concessions from Luna, though. '*I hate Luna, I hate Luna, I hate Luna.*' Why she was deigning to humour Lord Fell's request, Prey knew that it wasn't because of the name 'Fell'. Lord Vanish had thought he could make demands, and indeed Luna had let him steal Crimson's necklace that one time, but Prey was certain it hadn't been because Vanish had been able to pressure Luna. She was an alicorn. She'd just decided to play along with the overconfident lord that one time.

Maybe Triton Fell thought because of all his wealth and power he could do something similar. If so, he was a fool. Because as Prey was so often unwillingly reminded, the hated alicorn of the moon was immortal. Fell was just a mortal. Maybe that was why Luna had let Vanish win, because she was interested to see who else would be dumb enough to copy him.

Or maybe it was nothing to do with any of that, and it was all for a completely different reason. To be Lord of the richest, the biggest, and one of the oldest Great Noble Houses, which had stayed successful for centuries, Prey doubted one could also be a complete idiot.

'Let's see what this oh-so important House Fell representative wants first before jumping to any conclusions.' Prey thought grimly, as they followed Starry Wing out into the much brighter hallway.

Setting can be important. It can and often does set the precedent for the whole direction and tone of a conversation. The influence their surroundings have on a person can trick them into behaving in a manner they would normally never consider.

Setting is important. Would you perform a wedding in a graveyard?

Would you lay out a picnic in the middle of an art museum?

Those were simple examples, but what about a bigger one? It was the setting which allowed a king to get away with being a 'king'. If not for appearance, everyone would realise that a king is just another nobody. That the title king didn't physically empower that person.

Expectations. Rules. Promptings. Non-verbal cues. *Setting*.

A king's power was all in appearance and setting, which was why they went to such efforts to make sure no one ever forgot they were a king. Because if people forgot they were a king, then they were a king no longer. It was the truth. It was why a king had all their titles, and heralds, and crowns, and royal clothes, and castle, and jewelled sceptre, and everything else that you expected a king to have, to say, and do. So as not to let anyone forget they were king.

If someone seated on a golden throne, dressed in rich velvet, with a red carpet leading up to them, flanked by stained glass windows, in a huge hall, and wearing a crown gave you an order, you'd be a thousand times more likely to listen to it than if a muddy beggar wearing rags on the street gave you the same order. They could be the exact same person, but because of the setting, you'd respectfully listen to the one and ridicule the other.

Much can be gained from the mere appearance of invulnerability. That was the big scam of kingship, run by great con-artists.

Because kings die just the same as everyone else, and that at its heart was the difference between a petty king, and the alicorn rulers of Equestria. The Sun Wolf's power did not come from royal appearance, golden palace, and throne. She had all of those things certainly, but it was different. Celestia was an alicorn. The most magically powerful being in the world, ageless, immortal, and able to control the sun.

That was the difference between Luna and Celestia, and everyone else. It was why they ruled, because might makes right.

If, by all the godless demons in Tartarus, an alicorn was just to

appear out of thin air, it was why they would be able to take or do whatever they wanted. They would be immediately worshipped, revered, and obeyed. No one would question them. No one would ask for proof of their lineage. They wouldn't need a throne to sit on or a crown to wear.

They wouldn't even have to do anything. Setting and appearance didn't matter to an alicorn. They didn't need any of that to 'trick' people into obeying them, because there was no trick. They were an *alicorn*. They could own not a single material possession in the whole world, or literally crawl into existence out of an open sewer, but if in the same breath they gave you an order, you would obey. Because they were immortal and all-powerful, and you, *you* were only mortal.

So for mortals, for the nobles and lords to whom maintaining their position of power over you was so ingrained, setting was very important.

The Fell representative was making use of a private sunroom in the Palace. It was the background details which really made the setting and let Prey know what dealing with the smartly dressed grey unicorn was going to be like. The stallion was sipping from the silver tea set, which a maid had laid out and poured just for him.

Small details, like the rich, exotically embroidered tapestry on the wall which came from Neighpon.

That tea table made from ebony, covered with a lace cloth that had real gold thread in it.

The 'modest' chandelier which even this small room sported, that was hung with clear diamonds, and not glass. Almost certainly no ignius diamonds, but still.

The ceiling wasn't just plain white either, no, that wasn't good enough. It was exquisitely painted with an image of the sky, deep blues, elegant flying swans, and clouds in every colour of the rainbow.

Really, the whole room was part of the effect. The velvet curtains, the absolutely spotless room, the polished blood oak floor, the gold painted plasterboard, the huge tassels on the curtain drapes, all of it.

The Fell representative had requested a private room, for a private meeting, at the time of his choosing, and this is what had been quickly provided for him.

The waiting unicorn unhurriedly looked over as they entered, not pausing in sipping his tea as he evaluated them, and 'evaluated' was definitely the correct term. It was completely obvious in the grey stallion's eyes that he was judging them as Starry Wing led them in. What's more, he didn't seem even momentarily freaked out by Gloom and Starry Wing being thestrals.

One brow arched imperiously in condescension as he spotted Prey, but that was it. It would be un-gentlecoltly to be so crass as to voice his disdain when he could convey it all with a look.

'-let's get this over with-', Starry Wing nodded to the suit wearing stallion:

"Thank you for waiting. May I introduce the ISND of the Night Guard, the most successful investigator unit to date serving Her Highness, Princess Luna, as requested. This is First Sargent Gloom, along with Crimson, and Prey."

Again that judging eyebrow went up at Prey's name, as the unicorn unhurriedly lowered his teacup from his magical aura and dabbed at his mouth with a pure white napkin. Starry Wing pressed on, ignoring the look. He wasn't going to play any kind of non-verbal game:

"And this is Dunlop Scrims, aide and servant of House Fell. He's been sent on behalf of Triton Fell-"

"-His Lordship, Triton Fell." The stallion interjected calmly. His voice was as smooth and cultured as his outfit and combed fur.

Starry Wing didn't pause in correcting himself, "-Slip of the tongue,

on behalf of Lord Triton Fell. Now that we're here, what did you want to discuss with the Night Guard?"

Dunlop inclined his head, "Not discuss, it would be more accurate to say request." He corrected with surprisingly civility. It detracted from his previous appearance of complete upper-class arrogance.

But Prey heard his accompanying thoughts; '-an honest mistake should be forgiven, provided it isn't repeated. Not everypony can have the privilege of meeting nobility in their life-'

'Wow.' Prey was in some ways impressed. That was so arrogant it wasn't even really arrogance anymore. Rather, misguided benevolence.

Lieutenant Screech made a subtle almost-nod to Gloom that their unicorn guest missed. It was a nod that clearly indicated Starry Wing's unspoken intent that went along with it:

'-the stormcloud is now in your sky. I'm just the spectator now-'

Starry Wing was backing off and letting Gloom take over control of trying to run this conversation. Gloom got the message, and cleared his throat, "Ehrm. No offence, but what might House Fell need to make a request to the Night Guard for, Mister Scrim?"

"Simply Dunlop Scrim will be fine," The stallion magnanimously corrected, straightening one of his already perfectly straight cufflinks, "And yes, a request. I'm sure you appreciate, as the spokespony of House Fell within Canterlot, I am a busy stallion. You will have no problem then if I move us straight on to the crux of the matter that concerns us today?"

It wasn't really a question, but Gloom shook his helmeted head anyways, "No problem. Go ahead."

Dunlop waited a moment to see if Gloom was going to correctly add his name in addressing him, but when he saw that Gloom wasn't aware, he frowned minutely and moved on. He hadn't asked if any of the four of them wanted to take any of the other seats around the ebony table either.

'-it is not my job to reprimand them as I would a maid or butler under my oversight-'

"Then I will lay out my Lord's request clearly. His Lordship has reached out to Princess Luna in relation to the duties of the Night Guard, such as yourselves."

Even without being able to hear thoughts, Prey could have picked out the implication there. Nothing in Dunlop's correct posture or professional tone said it, but if you looked for it, you would see it in the words. 'Reached out to Princess Luna' implied Triton Fell was doing Luna a favour by giving her a chance to prove her good intentions after her recent return from exile, and not the other way around.

But of course, that was only Dunlop's view on this 'request'. As Prey had already deduced, Triton Fell himself couldn't be a complete moron like Lord Vanish had been, trying to insinuate or maneuverer an alicorn into getting what you wanted was the height of foolishness. This was just Dunlop's interpretation of his master's words.

Gloom didn't quite get the implications, however Starry Wing did although he gave nothing outwardly away. And Prey couldn't hear Crimson's thoughts, so he couldn't tell if his friend had picked up Dunlop's misguided view either.

"It's offensively simple in its common nature, it irks me say. Our nation has enjoyed bountiful prosperity for an age, but, sadly, despite the abundance every pony has been granted according to his station in life, there will always be somepony who coverts what their betters have earned through hard work and diligence."

"You mean theft." Gloom summarized after a moment.

"Correct. Theft of House Fell property. While we hold all our direct employees to the highest standards, House Fell's interests and assets are too vast to manage everything directly. As I'm sure you are well informed, you must likewise be aware that House Fell has a near endless list of subsidiary ponies and businesses who all work indirectly for us. Only those who possess an outstanding business

reputation, of course, but the oversight of their own employees is left to them. Regrettably, this has left the potential for abuse of his Lordship's trust."

'-so in other words, you think somepony in one of the businesses you don't directly control is stealing from you. Why not just say that instead of wasting all those words?-', Starry Wing thought from off to the side, more or less echoing Prey's own thoughts on Dunlop's overly formal speech.

The grey unicorn switched to absently fussing over his opposite cufflink, "If it were a small lost value, our policy is to deal with such matters internally. However, the stolen items are anything but negligible, nor are they completely free from the possibility to cause harm."

Dunlop looked hard at the four, well, three of them since he'd already dismissed Prey as nothing more than a young filly, and therefore unimportant. "I trust you now understand why his Lordship has reached out to the Night Guard. It is not just about reclaiming House Fell property and seeing the ponies responsible punished, but also about preventing potential harm."

The unicorn now held all of their undivided attention. Three pairs of yellow eyes stared unblinking at Dunlop's face, waiting for him to explain. Dunlop might've not reacted earlier, but even a gentlecolt couldn't help but purse his lips uncomfortably under the combined weight of their yellow stare. But Prey wasn't watching the unicorn's face, although it would've looked like he was if anyone were to have glanced at him.

Rather, he was watching the unicorn's horn out of habit, and thinking about how this might tie in with the mimics, if at all. It didn't seem likely, but still.

'-if whatever this theft was could pose a risk to pony life, then why by Luna's starry mane make us wait until this meeting instead of telling us the dangerous details right away?-', Gloom thought.

Their Sargent struggled to keep any of the judgement from his tone as he prompted; "Go on. What items? How are they dangerous, and

to what extent."

'-getting angry here helps nopony-'

"House Fell directs and entirely funds two mage towers here in Canterlot," Dunlop said with understated pride, repeating what Starry Wing had said just before they came here, "Those being the Dancer Tower of Rites, and Golden Tower Shimmer."

Prey blinked in recognition, 'Oh. So *that's* the other one Starry Wing forgot the name of. Shimmer.'

If you excluded the Royal Mage Tower, then out of all the rest, Tower Shimmer was supposedly the best and most successful. There weren't any graphs or scales to measure with between the mage towers, but just going by hearsay and public opinion, that was certainly the case.

Dunlop's pride turned into a frown of deep irritation as he went on, "This funding we provide also extends to the acquisition and supply of rare magical reagents, items, artifacts, and raw components. Both for research purposes, but also to keep a healthy stock of. As you can imagine, the rarer they are, the more expense and time consuming such items are to source and supply. House Fell is not short on means by any token, but even express airship transportation from abroad takes time."

'-perhaps a bit of background for the magically uneducated wouldn't go amiss-', Dunlop thought.

"Such highly magical and sensitive components cannot simply be teleported either, at least if a pony is sensible enough not to risk both life and limb of not just themselves, but of everypony in the vicinity. Have any of you gentlecolts heard of orichalcum, by chance?"

The grey unicorn barely waited just long enough to see that they didn't, before he drove on, shifting forwards on his seat to better gesture and emphasise his point:

"What was stolen from one of the tower's external storerooms was

raw orichalcum. There is no sign of how the intruder got past the alarms and magical wards. The strongboxes containing the raw orichalcum were set to be transported into Tower Shimmer. The upper floors there are strictly protected, and is where all charged orichalcum must be stored, along with the other magical metals such as atlarus, carmot, or rubracium to name a few. But that is not important for you to know right now."

Dunlop paused to refrain from letting any ungentlecoltly anger slip into his tone for his next words, "But somehow, it seems the worker responsible for moving the strongboxes in signed off early sick that evening. In the morning, the raw orichalcum was gone. The pony responsible has, of course, since been dismissed from service. By the by, this all took place two days ago."

'-two days? You waited two days to report this?-', Gloom thought in aggravation. It wasn't just him either, Starry Wing was judging heavily too.

"Two days?" The Lieutenant put in as politely as he could manage, "From your words, this magical metal can be very dangerous if used incorrectly. Why has alerting us been delayed so long?"

Dunlop gave Starry Wing a polite but very reproving look, "Two days ago is when the raw orichalcum was taken. However, the theft occurred during the night, and it was not noticed until yesterday morning when the strong boxes were opened. An internal search was of course carried out, which took more time, and then longer still to filter up the chain of command to his Lordship directly."

In other words, things happened on the Fells' timetable, or not at all.

Gloom took a silent breath, "Back to this raw orichalcum. What is it, and why is it dangerous?"

Crimson and Prey weren't saying anything here, but they were listening closely.

Dunlop sniffed, "That is a reasonable question to ask. To answer you, raw orichalcum is dangerous in a few different ways. The first,

and most immediate danger, is to any pony who comes into unprotected contact with the metal. Understand, raw orichalcum is volatile. It will absorb any magic it comes into direct contact with, including sucking the ambient magic right out of a pony. Second is if orichalcum absorbs too much magic too fast. If an unskilled unicorn was to channel magic into the metal, depending on the mass and density, it could easily reach criticality and explode."

Dunlop waved a hoof, indicating the very nice room they were in, "A house the size of this room or a litle bigger would almost certainly be completely levelled. Worse, if the stolen orichalcum is being kept all together, that could easily cause a chain reaction, and the destruction scales exponentially from there. If all the raw orichalcum was to go up at once, an estimated area the size of a warehouse and grounds would be violently destroyed. And lastly-"

'-there's more on top of that already?-', Starry Wing thought.

"There is the possibility that our emboldened thief knows exactly how to turn raw orichalcum safely into charged orichalcum, and intends to use it."

"Use it for what?" Gloom asked.

"Why, for anything a pony can use charged orichalcum for. The possibilities are wide and varied. A ritual, enhancing leylines, building an artifact, invisibility cloaks, and way beacons to name but a few, but I fear their purpose is more nefarious. It could be used to build something much more dangerous than any of that."

Dunlop didn't need to provide any examples. Gloom and Starry Wing could all too easily think of some themselves.

'-something to teleport an entire building a mile into the sky, or bury everything under ice, or arrows of spellfire. Anything's possible-'

'-a scarecrow, like at Mayflower, or acid bombs, like those Prey made in the forest-', Gloom wings shivered at his sides.

Prey had already known most of that about orichalcum. It was

something he'd researched back before he had Lemon steal that spool of electrite, actually. Value wise, gram for gram, electrite was worth more, but orichalcum was still very valuable. Knowing what he did, Prey could and already had come up with a few ideas of what you could use orichalcum for to add to Gloom's list.

'I could combine it with my runes to create a near unquenchable, clinging, self sustaining fuel source, that burns in water and doesn't need air, and which could also melt through iron. In theory.' Prey thought. And that was only one such idea he had.

Dunlop's horn glowed with a muted blue aura, and he neatly slipped a notebook out from the inside of his suit's inner pocket. With a well practiced flick, he snapped the book open to the last page of entry, and removed a folded sheet of thick, cream-coloured paper. Dunlop spoke on as he unfolded the sheet:

"This is to be your copy. It details the near exact times the losses were reported, the rooms and areas it was taken from, and quantities of orichalcum. It has been double checked and verified directly by House Fell staff."

The thick sheet of high quality paper floated across to Gloom, who took it between his wing claws and looked it over. Prey had to hide a wince as Gloom didn't even blink twice at coming into contact with the magical aura.

Gloom's hoof twitched, like he wanted to reach up and scratch at his chest scar, but of course, it was hidden under his chestplate, and they had important company anyway.

The unicorn wasn't finished however. Dunlop snapped his notebook shut with the same flick he'd opened it with, returning to his inner breast pocket, and then going into the opposite pocket. This time, he removed a heavy red seal trailing a black tassel. For a second, Prey thought it was made from wax. But it wasn't, as Dunlop held it up in his magic, it caught the light better, and Prey saw that it was actually carved stone. The seal on the front was intricately carved by what must have been a master mason, so fine were the details.

"And this is your seal of access. It is recognised by all Fell staff, and

grants you permission to their assistance. With it, feel free to visit Tower Shimmer and any other establishments you think wise over the course of your investigation. Please do not lose it, and once your investigation has wound up, I expect it returned promptly."

The ISND hadn't actually agreed to anything yet, but Dunlop evidently thought it was a done deal. He likewise levitated the red stone seal across to Gloom without leaving his seat.

Distracted, Gloom took it and looked the carved insignia over. It showed the crest of House Fell, a grand unicorn standing on land, cloud, and waves, and in the corner was carved the romane numeral 'IV'. So they had access into any Fell property of level 4, whatever that meant.

Dunlop folded his white napkin and set it on the porcelain tray next to his now-cold tea. He straightened his gold cufflinks one last time and stood up. Standing, it turned out Dunlop was actually the shortest person in here, excluding Prey of course. However he still held himself with absolute confidence that he was still the most important person in the room:

"Alternatively, if you need to contact me, my secretary can put you in touch. Simply ask at our office at the City Hall and show your permission seal. Since this is a matter of importance, I will instruct her to set up any meetings at my earliest convenience, where possible. Good day to you all."

He nodded to everyone but Prey, not as equals but simply a polite acknowledgement as fellow ponies, and without another word left them standing there. Although Dunlop didn't use the front door, but rather the private door at the back of the room, which led into the nobles' section of the Palace. Because of course he did.

Left behind in the decked-out sun room, Gloom and Starry Wing looked at each other, and Prey and Crimson looked at each other too.

'So, I guess this is what we're doing now then, huh?'

'So now the ISND is on the hunt for yet another thief. One whom the Night Guard is very worried might be a terrorist.' Prey thought, taking the next turn in the tunnel.

The shadows on the stone were dark and the air was cold, but Prey had his lantern balanced on his back, and by this point, he could probably take this route down to his lair blind anyway. These winding tunnels were protected with runic defences, and he could use the touch of those runes to guide him if need be.

But that wasn't something he would try, even if he was confident in being able to do so. You didn't willingly go down into the dark earth without a light.

Prey felt the long strings of invisible runes under his hooves, running up and down the corridor both ahead and behind him. Their presence was a comfort, because they represented safety, but damn if they hadn't taken an exhaustive amount of time and effort to draw.

Ahead, there was the glow of a light. It came from out of the scoured entrance into the crystal cavern, inside the walls and stone floor scored smooth from the thieves' attempt to destroy his lair. They'd failed. He'd won. His crystal lair still stood, and was now better than ever. Not the superficial damage or all the rubble still littering inside, but rather the runes were better.

Prey relaxed as he stepped inside, the wooden boards of the walkways he and Lemon had laid out before his hooves. No one who wasn't supposed to be here would be able to even *see* the lair's entrance. Prey trotted forwards, the lantern on his back no longer needed. In here, he was safe. Gravel mixed with sharp crystal shards crunched lightly underneath the boards of the walkway as he walked.

Prey cast his eyes over his lair once again.

Over there, barrels of rations and water were prepared just in case. Near the other side, crates of the other kinds of supplies were stacked higher than Prey's head; harvested leaves, dried herbs and poisons, metals, wicker, thread, catalysts of all kinds, a few

gemstones, metals like tin, copper sheets, silver wires, iron filings, and much more.

Here, on a solid patch of the floor, made from some stone slabs placed over the rubble as opposed to wooden boards, was braced a set of thick, lead-lined pans for boiling up bone rot. Currently empty, but Prey always intended to have a nice stockpile of the mines.

There, on the stump of a shattered crystal column and surrounded by runic circles, Selenia's pincushion sat inert.

Over here, a metal table with draining channels and laid-out buckets, for processing the stolen bodies from the Canterlot morgue. Squat, dark stone vats held removed organs and unicorn horns, again preserved by runes.

On its own small table, the torn-off mimic leg he'd managed to get with one of his wicker walkers lay, surrounded by a little circle of tools and scalpels.

By themselves, looking very plain and ordinary, a number of blocky, irregular pieces of materials sat. A wooden plank, a stone chunk, a metal block, and the like. However, each was set very carefully by itself, and when you looked a second time, you realised they were actually hovering and not touching anything else. Runic experiments in progress.

And there, on the largest section of boardwalk, was Lemon Pink. Once his tool, and now mostly a person. Her cloak was removed so it didn't hinder her work, and she was carefully undoing the complicated locks on a small sealed box, about the size of a loaf of bread. She had seven other identical boxes beside her too. You wouldn't know it from the outside, but those boxes were actually lead lined.

Prey trotted up as Lemon put the box down and turned, the tri-coloured sheet of her mane swaying as she nodded, "Hello, Prey."

Prey didn't verbally return the greeting, simply going straight to business, "Slight adjustment to the plan. The mage tower already

noticed the theft, and escalated it up to their benefactors. House Fell."

Lemon glanced back at the box she'd been unlocking. The seven other identical boxes sat there, locks already picked. Within them, rested all the stolen raw orichalcum.

'Average Accountant' had come back out of 'retirement' for one last job.

And here lay the fruits of her, and Prey's, labour. Eight boxes of raw orichalcum. Lemon lifted the lid off one of the boxes by hoof. Inside, the orichalcum sparkled. Thin ingots, each roughly only the length of a pencil. The colour though...

The metal wasn't a colour Prey could have ever accurately pinned down.

It looked like a solid liquid somehow still in motion, and it wasn't the colour of anything else in the world. A silvery, sparkling purple mercury blue, but with greens and oranges somehow mixed in there too. The raw orichalcum was captivating to look upon. The colour of magic.

When Dunlop had given the name of Tower 'Shimmer', the name Starry Wing had forgotten when giving his explanation, Prey had immediately realised.

When the pompous, arrogant unicorn had been listing out disaster scenarios for the orichalcum in the wrong hooves, Prey's own ideas hadn't simply come to him on the spot. They were ideas he'd considered before. Thought over. Planned for.

'Looks like I was right to be worried House Fell wanted the ISND to investigate a crime I committed. I was just mistaken about which one.' Prey thought, part amused, part relieved. This he could easily solve. Indeed, he already had a plan to do just that. It was why he'd come down here.

Prey twirled the free end of his ribbon, the silken touch smooth and reassuring, as he looked at the box of sparkling, glittering, rainbow

metal.

Prey had a plan for claiming back the near-infinite twisting paths of the caves below the mountain from the mimics. Because even if he could risk venturing out from behind his runic defences to try to claim more ground, he just didn't have the time or resources. Look how many hundreds of hours Prey had to pour into completely securing the crystal lair from everything.

The few other tunnels he'd managed to claim weren't nearly as well defended as right here in the middle, but they still had enough runes to make them what he considered 'reasonably safe'. Or to at least buy him enough time to flee.

But all he'd claimed was perhaps only one percent at best of all the winding crystal tunnels and caves still down there.

He didn't have the time to take over them all, and he wasn't even going to try. But he couldn't let the mimics hold them unopposed either.

So Prey had his plan.

But first, he had to throw House Fell, and more importantly, the ISND, off the scent.

And wasn't that a weird thing to think?

"We're going to have to sacrifice some of the orichalcum for a sufficiently flashy and noisy distraction. It's a good thing that we took more than we need."

---I---

Prey would remember, though. He never forgot.

Author's Notes:

Hello to all. As always, this chapter has been expertly and helpfully edited by: Panem et Circenses

Also, here is a really nice Picture done by GreatSpaceBeaver. Do you recall the scene from the last chapter at Nightmare's Night? The Halloween party? It's an interpretation of that.

82.6 Forged in Rainbow Tinted Spell Fire

Author's Notes:

NOTE: My kind editor has not had a chance to go over this chapter yet, because Real Life is a thing, and there is work to do!

So, that said, this chapter isn't fully checked, but I thought it might be better to post and then fix later. I think I got *most* of the obvious failures. That said, anything really obvious, still do point it out, thanks.

Enjoy! (Hopefully)

It was early in the morning when the ISND were admitted into the parlour of Dunlop Scrims' house. Well, it was only midway through their shift, but for any sun loving and worshiping pony, it was Goddess forsakenly early.

The twenty-four hour butler had shown them into the parlour to wait, while he went to wake the sleeping steward of the Fell House. A *twenty-four hour* butler. Dunlop Scrims was so important that he had a servant awake at all times to answer the door, monitor his home, and ready to serve him if he woke up in the middle of the night, reached over to his nightstand, and rang the bell for some hot chocolate.

'Pony privilege at its finest.' Prey thought in disgust, examining the parlour they'd been told to wait in closer. Because although they were Night Guards, even Guards had to wait on the convenience of the noble class for some reason.

A parlour was literally just a room for visitors to wait in. But to the surprise of none of them, the room was of course still lavish. Did it

need to be lavish? No. It was literally just a waiting room, it served no other dual purpose. Was it lavish anyway? Yes.

Further more, it wasn't the gaudy sort of over-the-top lavish, but rather that restrained, understated kind of taste which nevertheless somehow still managed to be even more expensive than if you'd had gold and gems. The dark wood of the floors and wall panelling was that iron hard kind which you only got from centuries of care and polishing by generations of servants.

What was more, they'd found out that this here was just *one* of Dunlop Scrim's houses, the one which he stayed in when he was here in Canterlot on business. He had more such properties in every big pony city. More properties in the Upper Class districts, more servants employed year round and maintaining houses he might end up only using for two or three weeks per year total. And the really crazy thing was; Dunlop Scrims was just a steward.

Dunlop had all of this, and yet it was nothing to Lord Triton Fell's own. What was more, Dunlop wasn't even 'The' steward, but one of four stewards all serving Triton Fell.

So here the three of them were, in Dunlop's Canterlot house. Waiting.

Crimson idly shifted his wings, habitually testing his wingblades in their sheathes were ready to flick out with just a flex of his wings. Prey was completely used to the tiny metallic whispered scrape the blades caused that only he could just hear with his superior hearing. He was not in a positive mood.

Neither was Gloom. The armoured thestral seemed to be rigidly examining the large painting hanging from the wall, no doubt done by some famous artist. Really though, the Sargent was going over the events of earlier in his head, eyes not even seeing the painting of a wind swept plains.

And Prey was anxiously trying to locate the source of the passive thrum of magic in the room that was painfully prickling his hooves. There was some enchantment somewhere in here, and no it wasn't from the glow crystal lights. Likely, it was either some kind of fire

alarm or fire prevention, but not knowing was driving his paranoia levels up.

'Over here? No, not there. Back by the door frame? Not there either. Where? And what? Is Dunlop spying on us right now? Is it a giant trap that he can trigger if he feels threatened?' Prey flicked his eyes up and down the room, being as subtle about it as he could.

He could feel the stinging in his hooves, so familiar that he could literally differentiate between the subtlest tones in the pins and needles. Prey shifted from hoof to hoof, feeling when it intensified. 'Over towards that wall, something behind the wood panelling.'

What was it though? Whatever it was though, it was magic, and so Prey didn't like it.

Prey looked back at the other two out of the corner of his eye. Gloom was still thinking over the events of earlier. Crimson was obviously thinking about something too, although as always Prey couldn't tell what. Neither were paying more than passive attention to him.

Casually, Prey moved over and leaned against the wall, leaning on his left shoulder. The free end of his ribbon brushed up against the smooth wall, the blue silk sliding over the polished wood.

The prickling needles in his hooves faded, and then cut out entirely. Just as casually, Prey pushed himself off the wall, faking that he'd changed his mind and that the wall was actually uncomfortable, and trotted back over to stand by Gloom and Crimson. And there he waited, as outside the sun rose, and the stuffy butler went about rousing and getting his master presentable.

Dunlop sure took his sweet time, though. Or maybe it was just to pay them back for their bad manners in waking him? No doubt the steward was used to other people, no, other ponies, conforming to his schedule, and not the other way around. Yesterday's meeting at the Palace an immediate example of that.

'-serves him right for waking us up at four in the afternoon. I still haven't gotten my sleep back because of that-', Gloom thought.

Petty, yes, but petty was also small and normal. Something mundane you could focus on instead of worrying.

Still they were left to wait.

Finally though, the hoof steps of the butler returned, and the door *clicked* open with an expensive sounding noise. The same snooty unicorn from earlier wearing the black and red colours of House Fell stood there, and gravely informed them; "Mister Scrims will see you now."

Gloom smiled politely, close lipped, even though smiling was the furthest thing from his mind, "That's very kind of him. Come, let's not keep the steward waiting."

Crimson rolled his shoulders back under his armour, resettling his wing muscles. Prey brushed the end of his ribbon back behind his ear. Together, the three of them followed the butler out for their second meeting with Dunlop within that many days.

They found the grey unicorn from yesterday waiting for them in his living room.

The curtains were drawn back from the bay windows, allowing the bright morning sun to stream in over the long dining table. At the tables head, with a silver breakfast tray with all the trappings set before him, (egg, egg holder, butter, butter bowl, butter knife, strawberry jam, apricot jam, cherry jam, gooseberry jam, a different jam knife for every pot, toast, toast rack, toast place, tea pot, tea pot cosy, tea cup, tea spoon, tea saucer, sugar bowl, cream, knife, fork, spoon, white napkin, and ironed morning paper), was Dunlop.

A uniformed maid, who'd just finished pouring the master of the house's tea, was quietly taking her leave as Dunlop looked up in the ISND's direction. Behind them, the butler just as quietly closed the double doors, leaving the four of them undisturbed in the dining room.

The sight of the unicorn immedidetly irked Prey. Partly because he

was a unicorn, partly because of all the wealth and position he was arrogantly flaunting, partly because of yesterday, and partly because of the stewards neatly groomed appearance.

'*That's* why you made us wait? So he could brush his fur and comb his mane?'

Dunlop's knife scraped on the toast as he buttered it, not even looking at them as he addressed them, "I hope you realise, that when I said you could get in contact with my secretary to arrange an appointment, that's what I expected you to do. Contact my secretary, and arrange an appointment."

Finished with one slice of toast, the unicorn switched to buttering the next:

"I am a busy pony, and I value my limited private time. For you to be here at this hour in the morning, some event must have occurred. Some event has occurred, yes?" Dunlop asked, finally looking up from his breakfast tray. The aristocratically judging look he was giving them was so perfect Prey wondered if he'd had to practise it in the mirror.

With great effort, Gloom refrained from sceptically raising an eyebrow back. '-don't like getting woken up early, huh? Horseshoe's on the other hoof now-'

Nevertheless, Gloom answered the steward concisely. The sooner they finished up here, the sooner they could get back to their other Night Guard duties. And there was a lot of those to be getting on with now.

Gloom reached in under his chest plate and pulled out the carved seal Dunlop had entrusted to them yesterday, "As you say, you're a busy pony. So we'll just return this to you and get out of your mane."

Dunlop blinked as Gloom placed the thick seal down at the end of the table the steward had left them standing at, rather than inviting them closer. "I... beg your pardon?"

Gloom smiled thinly, (no fangs), "The ISND is returning this, since we no longer need it. The investigation is over."

"Over? What are you talking about?" Dunlop asked in bafflement.

Gloom waved one wing each at Prey and Crimson waiting beside him; "We, as in the ISND, no longer need to carry out this investigation. Because Mister Dunlop Scrims, there is no investigation left. At all."

"You're not making this any clearer. Explain yourself properly." Dunlop demanded.

"You won't have heard yet, since it happened only just after midnight, and I see you're still reading the newspaper there," Gloom nodded his helmeted head at the freshly ironed paper set to Dunlop's left, "But in light of the events that happened, the investigation for the stolen orichalcum is over."

Dunlop didn't snatch, because snatching wasn't gentlecoltly, but he did hurriedly pick up and unfold the newspaper in his aura. The front page was an article about Griffonian trade embargos and sensationally wild theories about the why of it. At the use of magic, Prey's eyes latched onto the unicorn's horn and stayed there, closely watching him. Sure the steward was just using his aura to perform telekinesis, but if he had good control, the glow from using his telekinesis might easily be used to cover up the casting of another spell. It never hurt to be on guard.

Dunlop swiftly flicked through the pages, looking for something which could explain the ISND's sudden presence here this morning. After less than five seconds though, it obviously occurred to the stallion to give up and get the answers from the ISND in front of him. He tossed the newspaper back onto the table cloth.

"If you could kindly stop beating about the bush, and tell me straight, that would be appreciated."

Next to Prey, Crimson's wing gave that little curt flick of annoyance at the stallion's aggrieved tone. What did Dunlop have to be aggrieved about? He'd strong hoofed them into doing what was

essentially a private investigation on behalf of the Fell House, dumped his job on them to do, and then waltzed off to go home to his nice house, gotten a good nights rest, and was now sitting here eating a wonderful breakfast.

Meanwhile the ISND hadn't even had a chance for breakfast yet, and the way the day was going, it was still up in the air whether they'd even get any lunch today.

Gloom hummed and tilted his head slightly to the side, "Hmm. Well to summarize, it went something like this..."

---Earlier---

It was two-fifteen in the morning. Most of the pony inhabitants of Canterlot were asleep, nicely tucked away inside their homes from the cold night air. However, at one very specific point outside of Canterlot, not far down the side of Mount Canter, there was a spot where it wasn't so dark or so chilly.

Prey, Gloom, Crimson, and the rest of the Night Guard who'd been called were getting to enjoy the benefits of a fire. That was an optimistic way to look at it. However, the pessimistic viewer wouldn't have been hard pressed to point out the negatives in the situation.

The fire wasn't a nice cozy campfire glow. It was a blazing wreck of a train carriage.

The heat was hot enough that no one could get closer than at minimum fifteen hooves. It was also blocking the train track, the wreckage of the carriage and metal wheels cluttered everywhere. The train engine itself had been spared, and had safely detached and pulled off down the mountain, as it had literally been the last train carriage which'd exploded.

But the last and most glaringly obvious point that caught all who saw its attention, was the fire itself.

A normal fire is made up from shades of orange, red, yellow, white, and very occasionally blue.

This fire here busily consuming the wreckage was blazing away merrily as a rainbow kaleidoscope. The flames were burning every different bright hue; oranges, purple, greens, indigos, blues, yellows, reds, and all the other shades of colour in-between. The way that each flame seemed to flow into the next, nearly liquid almost, was hypnotic to watch.

While the twenty or so Night Guards were keeping a safe distance, Prey stood even farther back and upwind from the train tracks, by an out crop of rocky mountain wall. Close enough that if anything unexpectedly exploded, he could dive behind the rock for shelter. He was showing a healthy respect for the magical fire. Why? The reason was very simple. Because it was spell fire.

And not the very carefully stabilised kind you found in the very expensive message-in-a-bottle either.

"You are being very cautious." Crimson stated, coming up to stand along side Prey, joining him in eyeing the multi-coloured flames. He'd approached far quieter than you would expect for someone in armour.

"Of course I am. That's spell fire." Prey stated bluntly.

Crimson blinked, then narrowed his eyes at the blaze, "Spell fire? As in, the kind which can..."

"The kind which is unpredictable, which can burn through solid rock like wood, or might randomly leave it untouched instead. The kind which turns living flesh to mush and ash, and that if you try to use magic on it, it'll simply grow larger and more unstable? Yes. That kind of spell fire."

Crimson's frown deepened a tad, "I thought it was only magical fire. I mean, obviously, because of its colour and shape, and obviously it's very dangerous, but I didn't realise this was spell fire. It looks nothing like that from those message-in-a-bottles'."

"That was stabilized spell fire. This isn't. Just like that stuck up Fell steward said yesterday. Raw orichalcum is dangerously volatile precisely because of how unpredictable it is. And orichalcum fuelled

spell fire? Multiply that by ten."

The raw orichalcum. Blazing away in front of them. The cause of the massive explosion shortly after midnight.

"Everyone else, they're aware of the danger, right?" Crimson checked, glancing quickly to the other Night Guards. Gloom was over by Lieutenant Vivid Edge and Screech, and also Future Spark. Since Taffy's cousin was one of the unicorn's on call by the Guard for his scientific expertise, he'd been roused from his house and brought out here.

Prey had trekked down the train line in the same little group as the unicorn, actually. Perhaps the one, only, and lone similarity between a unicorn and a sheep was that they both had no wings. They had to rely on their own four hooves. Well that, and Future Spark while a scholar of magic, wasn't more than about a level two unicorn himself in terms of actual magical ability, and so therefore wasn't capable of teleporting.

Because of Dunlop Scrims warning about how the stolen raw orichalcum's potential for detonation if not handled right, the Night Guard had been on high alert for any hint of the magical metal. Just as concerning had been the threat of what a competent warlock might do with the orichalcum if they got their hooves on it.

'Well, I doubt they're worried about that any longer.' Prey thought as the flames danced. Which was exactly why he and Lemon Pink had loaded half of their pillaged orichalcum onto the train, and sent it off to explode.

The Vanhoover train had been returning to its couplings during the quiet hours of the night, so as to be ready in time for the Vanhoover morning passengers, when the raw orichalcum had utterly annihilated the last car of the train in an explosion that brought rocks tumbling down the mountainside.

Standing here on the mountain side looking at his own hoofwork, while next to him Crimson didn't know he was right beside the very culprit, was tugging on Prey's withered but still just alive sense of guilt. He didn't let it show, though. He'd destroyed a train carriage,

wrecked the track, delayed all train travel into Canterlot until they could fix it, which wasn't something they could even attempt until the spell fire finally burnt itself out. His actions here will have cost businesses many thousands of bits when added up. Perhaps the night security guards for the train station would lose their jobs, too.

Prey only felt very marginally guilty on the scale for that, though. He was feeling much more guilty about deceiving Crimson like this.

No one had been murdered in the course of his distraction. No innocent passers by, no train workers, and no random strangers. They might have only been arrogant, soft, privileged, racist ponies, but that didn't mean they deserved death. Prey was trying not to be that person anymore. Despite his backwards slip for that period after Luna's selfishness, he'd recovered, and he was going to make the effort to keep to the goal he'd set before. To improve as a person.

But that just meant not murdering innocents. Who cared how many thousands, or tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands of gold bits were lost? A single life was priceless by comparison. Unfortunately, he'd had to fake it for tonight, and if he'd estimated right, they'd be finding the explosions 'fatality' soon.

Prey and Crimson stood quietly watching the fire. There wasn't anything for anyone *to* do, but stand there and keep an eye on the fire until it went out. Traces of the Lieutenants words reached Prey's ears as they received reports and stood there discussing:

"No trace of any bodies yet... all workers accounted for... thank Luna, but it doesn't look like anypony was lost in this."

"Not even the thief himself? Or herself?... if they were in *that*, I doubt we'd find anything."

'Or it's possible my estimate was wrong, and they won't find the fake remains at all.' Prey thought. No one could fully predict uncontrolled spell fire, after all.

Prey kept one eye on the flames, and the other one on Future Spark who was consulting something in a notebook, and waving around a

metal device of some kind in his magic. It looked like some sort of half cog wheel merged with an alarm clock.

Whatever the device was, it obvious told the ditzy scientist something, because after going back to his note book, scribbling out some calculations, double checking his device again, his device, then notebook, device, notebook, device, notebook, device, the rock on the ground for some reason, and finally notebook, he snapped it shut.

"Yep! Looking at the load out... circumference and overcharged ambient saturation... estimating the burn duration... and the math checks out if you apply it to Grants rules of mana overcharge..."

Screech very obviously interrupted Future Spark and told him to get to the point.

"Oh right! I was trying to say... like ninety-nine percent certain that for a detonation this size, all eight boxes of raw orichalcum would've gone up."

Vivid Edge's one-eyed face bathed in all the colours of the rainbow somehow still perfectly expressed her's and Screech's doubt without saying a word.

"What? It would've." Future Spark defended his hypothesis.

"...was lead to believe the explosion would've been larger than this." Was the snatch of words Prey overheard Screech saying.

"Oh yes, without a doubt! ....but that's assuming it all went up together. It's a compounding effect, but if it was only a chain reaction... raw orichalcum is kept in separate lead lined strong boxes precisely for this reason."

"Then how do you know it was all of them?" Vivid asked, gesturing with a wing at the merry blaze.

Future Spark excitedly waved the odd device in their faces. Prey tried to listen harder, "... ambient mana is too overcharged for only one strong box to have gone critical. See, it's all to do with the saturation levels when you compare it to the background..."

He went on for a while in that vein. Eventually Screech abandoned Vivid Edge, leaving her to continue enduring the excited unicorn's ramblings, and went off to get on with doing his job.

Towering flames continued to flicker as the Night Guards carefully swept the surrounding area.

A thestral with a message swooped out of the night, alighting by Lieutenant Screech, telling him something, then taking off back up to the Palace.

The fire crackled and danced, steadily melting and destroying more of the wreckage, rails, and stone itself.

Then someone on the far side of the blaze seemed to find something, and a couple other Night Guards were called over to see what it was. They clustered there for about five minutes, before they broke up. Some began spreading out and searching the ground in the shadows. Others went to inform the Lieutenants about what ever it was.

Prey and Crimson watched them reporting, but couldn't hear the muffled words. The fire danced and blazed on, flames as tall as houses muting the stars above in the night.

Gloom finished up whatever the two Lieutenants on the scene had called him over for, and trotted back over to Prey and Crimson.

"You guys heard that?" Gloom asked as he approached. He took his place alongside them in intently watching the colourful fire.

"Most of what Future was saying, yes." Prey nodded, but not looking away from the flames.

"Enough of it." Crimson nodded shallowly, "Things are never this easy for us. It feels weird. I mean, where's the monsters? Where are the spies? Where's the hidden disaster?"

"Is that a complaint I hear? If that raw orichalcum had gotten into a warlock's grasp..." Prey didn't need to finish that.

They had all been there in Mayflower. They'd seen the reaper king,

and they remembered what Hard Baked had done.

Gloom winced. '-ah, so they didn't actually hear everything. Moon blight. Now I've got to explain this. I hate it-'

"Actually..." Gloom began slowly, "It wasn't that easy. They just found, well... Tisk was flying around the mountain side, looking for any dangerous debris you know, and he found the remains of, of somepony. A mostly melted horseshoe and some of the leg. It was... badly burnt."

'Good, they found it. I'd worried that it would've burned to ashes instead of getting thrown out of the carriage, even though I set it right at the edge.' Prey thought. Outwardly though, he played his part. He let his face sink into smoothness.

"Ah."

"Oh." Crimson echoed.

There was a silence. What could you say to the apparent death of someone, even though Prey knew it was fake?

Gloom and Crimson hadn't known the supposed 'dead' pony. They didn't even know what colour, race, or gender they'd been. They'd been a criminal, a thief.

And now they were 'dead'.

Crimson shifted, his wings tightening against his armour.

Prey pretended he was trying to avoid both of their gazes, acting like he was feeling guilty that he wasn't feeling worse about the news.

'-we didn't know him. Or her. We didn't know them-', Gloom repeated himself, thinking much along the same lines as Prey had just been.

Because of the fire, there wouldn't be a body to find. That shouldn't have made a difference. A person had died, but there wasn't a body. Perversely that somehow made it not feel as bad. No grisly scene

like down in the cellar, no tortured villager trapped inside a kindersnatch.

From Gloom and Crimson's point of view, this hadn't been murder, just an accident.

That shouldn't make it any better, but it did. At least a little bit.

Crimson shifted again. "Is there any way to tell who they are? I mean, who they were?"

Gloom shook his head, the multicolour fire light glinting dully on his helmet as he moved, "No. There isn't enough left to, to piece together anything. Luna, that sounded wrong."

"Is there a way to be definitely sure it's the same person who stole the orichalcum in the first place?" Prey asked, leading them to the next logical conclusion. He felt really guilty about doing this to Crimson, but he told himself he hadn't actually lied yet, and he needed the raw orichalcum for a cause. Not a good cause, though. Just a cause.

"Almost certain. We asked the train station already, before we even knew sompony had died. They're not missing anypony. And since that train carriage was recorded as being empty, but somehow had the raw orichalcum in it..."

"It couldn't have been anybody else." Crimson finished, glancing up the dark mountainside to the golden city above them. Even in the dark of night, you could still see it was definitely 'golden'.

"Anypony." Gloom idly corrected Crimson without really thinking.

'-Luna, I really hope it was quick. They hadn't hurt anypony yet, just stolen. They didn't deserve this-'

The silence was settling back in, the bad kind, like a smothering fog.

Prey thought it best if he tried to say something sage to move this on, "The sun rises, the sun sets, but we all have to cross the river someday. There's nothing we can do to change anything now."

Again, rather harsh, but as far as anyone but him knew, it was the truth. The 'thief' was dead, and it was too late to do anything now. Gloom and Crimson might disprove of him seemingly moving on so quickly, but Prey knew they were each privately feeling the same way too.

It was still cruel though, because Prey knew that the both of them secretly feared they too were slowly becoming desensitised to this, to death and body parts. Look at the cellar, and how awful that had been. But now, because there was hardly any body left, and no blood, they weren't traumatised. There was nothing wrong with building up some resistance, but both Crimson and Gloom felt the opposite was true.

'Really, you're both worrying about nothing,' Prey thought, 'You're not psychopaths. You've nothing in common with Garrow, or Ruin, or Stinger. Or Snake, or Torment, or Razor. You're both good people. You're better than me.'

'-this can be dealt with later, if it needs to be dealt with at all. Do our duty first, then we can see to ourselves-', Gloom decided, pulling his thoughts together.

"So. That's that. At least the stolen orichalcum is no longer a threat anymore. I won't say this was the best outcome, but... at least there's one positive to this whole mess." Gloom said, trying to find the silver lining. His attempt fell rather flat.

'-what would it have been like to be in there at the exact moment? Future Spark said nopony would've had a chance to feel anything, but would he or she still have...?-'

Listening in to that, Prey's guilt mounted a bit. Not enough that he wouldn't do the exact same thing again without a moments hesitation, but still, he felt bad.

'But hey, nobody really died, that was just one of the legs I stole from the city morgue. Really, they could've had it worse. Like, I could've used a whole body, instead of just a foreleg for them to find.'

Gloom's mouth was set in a line, dancing fire light reflecting in his yellow eyes, "I wonder what they were going to do with it? The raw orichalcum. If it hadn't exploded on them." He murmured.

Prey shrugged his thin shoulders, "We can make guesses, but we'll probably never know for certain. Plus, all the evidence just got blown up." He observed, speaking the truth, or one version of it at least.

Never could be too careful with Gloom's special talent.

The blaze continued to rage in an inferno of colours, the heat basking their faces. The other Night Guards had already set up a perimeter, and were now flying up and down the mountain side for anything they might've missed, keeping well away from the airspace even close to the fire. Vivid Edge and Screech had completely zoned out of Future Spark's explanation, which was still ongoing, and were discussing how to proceed. The unicorn didn't even seem to notice their lack of attention, and was happily explaining away to nobody.

Gloom let out a weary exhale, "I just can't keep wondering though... how did all of this happen?"

'Wellllllll.....'

---Even Earlier---

The sun had been approaching the horizon as the station watch stallion fussed with getting his hat to sit right. He'd clocked in only twenty minutes ago, and already he could tell it was going to be a long, boring night.

Somepony cleared their throat politely beside him.

'-what?! I didn't notice anypony-', He jumped. An utterly plain mare wearing an utterly normal hat stood there-
-There was no pony there.

He blinked and rubbed his eyes. His head ached for some reason, but there was nothing there. He blinked heavily, frowning. Then he looked at the big station clock visible from all the train platforms.

"What? I'm behind already? Buck!" Where had ten minutes gone? He hurried off, supposed to have locked the side gates by now already.

The stallion never realised he'd been without his keys for ten minutes.

Or that someone, two someone's actually, had let themselves into the 'staff only' part of the station.

Or that his memories had been used to find a suitable train and carriage.

Who knows? Maybe if he'd known, he might even have been grateful, as miniscule as the likelihood of that was, because it'd been the pink mare who'd gone through his head with her sharp, numbing precision, and not the lamb instead. *If* he'd known that is, which he didn't. And never would.

Later that night, the last train engine from Manehattan would pull in. Then, even later, after all its returning passengers had disembarked and the train drivers had switched out, it would hitch up with this extra car to take back out.

The ten minutes the watch stallion missed was plenty of time to unload the four boxes of raw orichalcum, and all the attached blocks of connecting metal layered with invisible runes.

Prey had positioned the neatly preserved foreleg at the end of the carriage, and set the runes to go off some time when the train was going down the mountainside, where it wouldn't harm anyone. The train schedule would put the time at about two in the morning, halfway through the ISND's shift. A nice little bonus, so that they could be done and dusted with all the resulting work this would cause by the time their shift finished. Hopefully, Prey would actually be able to get some well earned sleep tonight.

Prey had chosen only to sacrifice exactly half the raw orichalcum. Half, and make up for the rest with runes to compensate for the missing magical charge.

Four boxes, or roughly four kilograms of the metal. With that much, Prey could've made an explosion that would have consumed the entire train and eaten a chunk out of the mountainside, turning solid stone to melted sand.

The destruction he could've wrought if properly utilized... but that wasn't the objective. He'd wanted it to look like an accident, not like someone had purposefully charged the orichalcum beforehoof.

Like Dunlop had said, the raw orichalcum itself was only as dangerous as it was volatile. When charged, it became stable, but when charged, that was when it also had the potential for the most destruction.

It was like a lump or rock. It could fall and kill someone in the right circumstances. But if a blacksmith was to hammer it out, extract the metal, and forge it into a sword, then you'd have a weapon which could kill again, and again, and again. It all depended on how proficient the user was.

So he'd sacrificed half the raw orichalcum, set the runes, slid shut the train car door, left Lemon Pink to give the keys back to the stupefied watchpony, and left to meet up with Crimson and Gloom to start their shift.

At the end of the day, he still had half the raw orichalcum left.

Four boxes. More than enough for what he was going to do with it.

---Now---

"So we're returning your seal, and informing you that the investigation is over more or less before it began. I'm sorry for the loss of the orichalcum, but at least it isn't in the hooves of somepony... regrettable any longer." Gloom summed up tiredly.

Dunlop Scrim's seemed momentarily speechless, just blinking at the three of them over his rapidly cooling toast, separated by the mahogany table.

Prey still kept a watchful eye on the unicorn's horn. Next to him, he listened in on Gloom's thoughts as the thestral tried to remain

positive, '-it could have been worse. There could've been a train worker in the carriage at the time too. Or it could've exploded at any point during the day while the thief was still in the station, surrounded by innocents-'

The Fell steward finally came to himself, "That cannot be it, surely." He stated flatly.

Gloom paused, "I'm sorry? Could you please explain what you mean. The orichalcum is gone, and there's nothing left to reclaim. And the thief has-"

Dunlop spoke over him, "This is not finished until the transgressors have been caught."

Gloom's face twitched, the rest of his armoured body going still. At his side, Crimson's wings were bristling even if his face was blank. Prey noticed it all, and felt bad for having tricked them, but once again for his part Dunlop missed the signs completely, so that was all on him.

The grey stallion made a curt slash of his hoof, "What was once stolen can be stolen again. What is to stop these vandals once again stealing more dangerous magical metals? And this time, much more cautiously and circumspectly? The danger of misuse has not passed, it is just as serious as before, and I expect everypony to behave as such."

Gloom waited for a long moment, making sure the steward was done before he finished what he'd been about to say, "The thief is gone. Dead. They died in the explosion. I've been assured it would've been quick, at least. A second at most."

For a moment, just one, Gloom's words invoked enough imagination in Dunlop to break the stallion's upper class veneer. But then he whipped it back up and straightened.

"That is a tragedy, and I won't make light of anypony's death, even this thief's. But I must still insist, this investigation isn't over yet. One thief is not *all* of the thieves. Corruption begets corruption. Where there was one, there is almost certainly a group, and this

pony could not have been working alone. I want the rest of them caught and stopped before they can try again."

Completely disregarding the mood, the steward annoyingly had a point. Or would have had a point. But Prey had dealt with the possibility of someone raising this concern already. Now, Gloom stiffly repeated back the theory Prey had raised earlier; "There were no accomplices. Or rather, we have good reason to believe the pony was working alone."

Gloom took a breath, telling himself to calm down, '-don't let him rile you. He's probably never faced death before. He's a rich noble, and at an age fortyish, his parents must still be alive too-'

"Only eight boxes of raw orichalcum were stolen. That's about the size and weight limit that one normal unicorn could carry, even with their magic. Those boxes were lead lined and heavy. From your explanation, there were more than eight boxes of orichalcum in storage, not to mention plenty of other valuable magical regents and stuff. If there was more than one thief, they would've stolen a lot more." Gloom finished explaining.

All true. Prey had been completely honest when he laid out that theory. Lemon Pink was not a magical powerhouse. Carrying out about eight of those boxes was over her comfort limit, actually. And while Lemon could've done more than one stealing run, Prey had not wanted to get greedy.

Dunlop wasn't swayed, "One thing does not equate to the other. While only one pony might've broken into the store house, and only the remains of one might've been found in the wreckage, that does not mean there are not others out there waiting to strike."

The steward was more right than he knew, especially since one of those 'others' was standing in this very room, who'd already taken all those points to heart long before the snobbish stallion had voiced them. What the severe, grey furred unicorn *didn't* have a point about was thinking that he could order the ISND around.

Dunlop Scrims was missing one blindingly obvious point here.

The ISND were Night Guards, under Captain Nighthawk, and in the service of Luna. *Not* House Fell. Which should've been the end of it, but unfortunately, it was also Luna who'd directed Dunlop in their direction with her tacit approval, or implied approval at the very least to use them.

That complicated matters immensely. While Dunlop was technically a civilian, and so should have no say in how a Night Guard investigation was conducted, Luna approving Triton Fell's request to assist in solving this crime for some reason gave the Lord's steward and appointed voice in this matter the power to give them orders. To simply say in the face of their objections; "No, you're not done yet, that's not good enough for me".

What had happened to this being a favour from Luna to one of her loyal lords, Triton Fell? Funny how quickly Dunlop had shifted to applying pressure and making demands.

Prey could almost feel Gloom and Crimson's frustration radiating off of them.

Gloom took a deep breath and tried to remain civil, "Mister Dunlop, there is very little we can reasonably do to achieve that. We are a Guard Force. There is no way for us to beyond a doubt ever prevent sompony from trying to steal again, that's just not possible."

"I would've thought the Night Guard would be more than capable of that themselves," The steward shot back, "Crime prevention is your entire job remit. And I still require measures implemented to prevent any further would-be thieves."

Prey made a motion with his hoof, indicating he had something to say. Gloom turned aside from going to retort to Dunlop and looked at the smaller lamb instead.

"You have an idea, Prey?" Gloom asked, purposefully ignoring Dunlop's sharp look for daring to speak to a child over him.

"I do." Prey nodded.

'-finally. Something to shut this stallion up. Just get us out of here

Prey-', Gloom thought in relief.

He motioned Prey to continue; "Go ahead then, share with us."

"Yes, do share." Dunlop added with a hidden note of scathing disbelief. Prey blithely smiled back at the unicorn, as if he was completely oblivious.

Prey began innocently twirling the end of his ribbon as he spoke:

"It sounds like the issue is preventing this from happening again, right? If so, you'd be better served by hiring a security specialist to improve your security at your Mage towers. Maybe get some more watchpony's to patrol. Or hire a private detective." He added, internally a bit amused at the idea of that.

'Wouldn't it be ironic if they went and hired Strange Happenstance?' Prey went on as the stewards eyes couldn't help but watch the blue silk of the ribbon lazily spinning in the air.

"Think about it. The Night Guard have a lot of areas to cover, and aren't really specialized for any one thing. More jack-of-all-trades. However there are ponies out there who's whole career is literally security. They'll know all the best warding enchantments, the latest risks to watch out for, and the best way to combat them. So wouldn't it make more sense to hire the best unicorn security specialist gold can buy? I'm sure they'd fight over each other to take a contract, even indirectly, for House Fell."

Prey was certain he hit pretty much all the buzz words there for the steward. Gold, unicorns, expert, House Fell, all the while with a subtle helping hoof from his ribbon.

Dunlop seemed to ponder over that for an overly long moment. He magically half raised his cooling teacup, then put it back down again in indecision.

'-Prey raised some good points. But will he listen?-', Gloom thought, mentally crossing his wing claws. He wasn't in the mood to put any hope into it though.

Something was visibly troubling the steward, going over some

nagging thought in his head. His brows were creased in internal contemplation. He almost lifted the teacup again, but just ended up lowering it once more.

Prey's smile didn't change even one tiny bit, it was already a perfect forgery, but just then it became real.

'Got him.'

Dunlop blinked, and then looked sharply up. His horn lit up and he scooped the carved Fell seal off the end of the dining table and floated it over to his side. He absently folded the attached tassel around the thick seal as he addressed them, tone back to being curt and all business:

"You might've unintentionally lost the raw orichalcum, but you have still raised a valid point. House Fell would be better served by hiring private experts who can be expected to fully devote their time to performing their job to the highest degree."

Prey caught the wing twitch of Crimson's surprise. He, like Gloom, had been listening to everything Dunlop was saying before and had been envisioning the ISND being forced to waste the next however long being the personal investigation squad of the Fell steward.

'-that actually worked. Logic actually work for us for once-', Gloom thought, '-better act quick, before he changes his mind-'

"In that case we'll take our leave. Our Captain needs us back at the Palace to do our part sorting all this mess out." Gloom swiftly said, already making a motion with a wing towards the door for Prey and Crimson. Prey dropped the end of his ribbon and moved to follow Crimson as the pegasus went.

Dunlop sniffed in irritation at the rudeness of the abrupt departure, looking down at them even though he was the one seated. He didn't stop them though, instead shaking out his forelegs and turning back to his silver breakfast tray.

"The servants will see you out. Don't dally." Dunlop called out as levitating up a slice of perfectly toasted bread, already dismissing

the three of them from his attention.

The same butler from before opened the double doors right before they could get to them. Crimson blinked slowly down at the uniformed servant, who blinked back up at him, a bit wide eyed at coming so suddenly face to face with an armoured Guard.

Prey slipped under the butler's sight and out the doors while the stallion was still backing up from Crimson, and Gloom who was coming up behind him. Seriously, had the guy been waiting outside listening just to open the double doors before them? And who needed double doors inside a house anyway, especially for a room where the sole activity performed in there was to eat breakfast?

'I guess they needed double doors to fit that massively oversized table through. The decor's got to match the size of Dunlop's ego after all.'

If Prey never saw another representative of House Fell or Triton Fell again, it would be too soon. Although in the future, if he ever needed to steal something like this again, he'd have to make extra sure it wasn't from someone affiliated with House Fell first.

"Wait-No, leave it. I'll get it." The servant was saying, trying to get back to the front door ahead of the ISND.

"There is no need." Crimson blankly tried telling him.

"No, I insist. Just let me-"

"It is fine. Really." Gloom said, not slowing their pace down in the slightest.

"No, I really do insist." The servant may have been a unicorn, but apparently he didn't know how to teleport, because he had to break into a very undignified canter to get there first in time to do his job. Either way, it did a good job of distracting him from Prey quietly following along in their wake. So much so that when the ISND finally exited out the grand door into the morning sun, the servant had to stop and double check.

'-one, two, that's both of them. Wait, I'm forgetting somepony,

where'd that silly filly disappear to? If she breaks a vase then I swear to Celestia!-'

The stallion spun back around to check the hallway, and then did a double take when he spotted Prey already standing behind Gloom and Crimson. Prey smiled innocently, blue eyes big and sparkling, and waved a hoof at the butler.

With a petulant huff, the unicorn shut the door on them with a heavy **Thud** of expensive wood.

Despite the meeting the ISND had just come out of, their shift wasn't over yet. Gloom had told Dunlop Scrims the truth; Nighthawk was waiting for them at the Palace. Although, with Dunlop's house of course being in the upper *Upper* Class district of Canterlot, they really didn't have far to go to get back to the Palace.

But as Prey hurried along in the rear, as always struggling to keep up with the other two's much longer legs, it at least gave him some time to consider, and to quietly prepare himself for the next step.

It was also time to think and reminisce over what he'd done here today.

It was a really basic thought exercise when you broke it down.

It was simple. An ordinary person does not suddenly choose to become a criminal. Not once has that ever happened. No one has ever out of the blue suddenly stolen their neighbours property. It doesn't work like that. An ordinary person does not go from good to bad on a coin flip. Outwardly it doesn't show, but internally, it was because they'd been thinking about stealing before.

They must have considered stealing many times previously, planned it all out in their head, lingered on how much they wanted what their neighbour had, but in the end always dismissing the idea. Because they'd get caught, because they liked their neighbour, because it was wrong. But each consecutive time they dismissed the temptation, they didn't do so as firmly as they had before. A small

piece of the temptation lingered each and every time.

And all those lingering traces eventually add up. Because they still wanted it, deep down, and the more they revisited the thought, the more persistent it grew, and therefore, the more they revisited it in a self perpetuating spiral.

Until finally one day, that ordinary person seemingly out of the blue, society sees them 'snap' and become a criminal.

However that final outcome is without any outside influences on a person, only internal ones. Desperation, hunger, external threats to a lifestyle, mental instability, unresolved enmity between two people, any and all of those can help drive a person to steal.

For example, Prey.

He had stolen the raw orichalcum. He had considered it, planned it, and then done it. He wasn't some civilian who'd finally given in to greed, no not at all, because he'd already been a thief way before this orichalcum business. Rather, he was a long time repeat offender.

But he was a murderer long before he was a thief.

Prey had not wanted to be a murderer. He hadn't considered or lingered on it in his heart before. He wasn't a bright eyed monster who loved the thrill of it like Garrow. No, it was entirely an outside influence that had driven him to do it.

Gossamer had gone away when his brother Fleece had died, and Prey had taken his place. And Prey had murdered because if he hadn't, Snake would have killed him on the spot.

Prey hadn't chosen to become a killer, but he had chosen not to die. There is a price for everything.

"Hey, stop here quickly. Two minutes, if that. Got to be quick." Gloom said, swiftly pulling them aside and towards a side street.

"What? Why?" Prey asked, snapped out of his thoughts. Were they being followed, *this* close to the Palace? Oh bugger bugger bugger! He hadn't noticed anything.

"Because we're getting baked croissants from in there." Gloom pointed down the side street to a colourful shop front decorated to look the walls were giant waffles.

"What? Why?" Prey repeated, stunned. That was not in keeping with the dark mood at all!

"Sir?" Crimson echoed, just as thrown.

"Because I'm hungry. Because we haven't eaten. Because that smell is delicious." Gloom answered, not slowing.

"But, Captain Nighthawk..." Crimson trailed off.

"Is waiting for us, I know, I know. But we haven't eaten anything. And I really want one of those right now."

"But, now? Right now, after what's happened?" Prey asked, not contradicting Gloom, but still very surprised as he hurried along after.

"I know. I know that after that... but I want something hot and sweet. Just something. I don't know, you know, like... I just want to enjoy it. For just a minute, and then we will have to go back, but just for a minute..."

Gloom didn't finish, but Prey understood what the Sargent was trying to say. It was ridiculous, sweets couldn't help fix anything. But a chocolate croissant, with roasted nuts and glazed in sugar, maybe some berries or maple syrup, just maybe? Yes, maybe.

"Okay." Crimson blankly agreed.

Prey nodded enthusiastically, "Okay."

It actually took three and a half minutes, a guilty waste of Night Guard time, something that Gloom was very aware of and wouldn't have ever condoned in any other circumstance, but those croissants

really did smell delicious. There was no line, they were the first customers of the morning, and the baker gave them the fastest service possible just to get them out of the shop faster.

'Hmm, chocolate croissant, with roasted nuts, and glazed in sugar. Just as advertised for once.'

The confectionary was hot, but they didn't stop or slow, and had to wolf them down as they hurried back towards the Guard Compound.

'But chocolate croissant, with roasted nuts and glazed in sugar...'

Utterly delicious and worth every coin, well, Gloom's coins. Prey brushed copious traces of sugar off the corner of his mouth and hid a sigh. It was part amused frustration, part mild regret.

'Now I really do feel bad about tricking him and Gloom like that. They think someone died and it was just me playing pretend. But at least I got a great substitute breakfast out of it. Chocolate croissants, I'll have to remember that one.'

After arriving back at the Palace, things went almost exactly how Prey expected them to. Which was that the rest of the morning and up until afternoon was absorbed by cleaning up the mess Prey had created.

Which included but was not limited to; placing a rota of Guard on the burnt train tracks to stop any curious pegasi from flying down to see what was happening, filling in the Royal Guard Captain, distributing Future Spark's official report, getting access for the work crews from the train line coming to fix the damage, and all the other little things that really shouldn't have been the Night Guards problem, and therefore the ISND's problem, to sort out.

Prey didn't have a leg to stand on when it came to complaining however. *He* was the one who'd decided to blow up a train car and melt the railway, after all.

It was hard work. Prey was running around everywhere to keep up

with Gloom and Crimson, plus the two Lieutenants who were working overtime and staying late into the day, (for them), to try and get all of this sorted.

'-of course the one, the *one* night Captain Nighthawk finally takes off, and this happens-', Gloom had thought, rather more bitterly than normal. It was the feeling of frustration and helplessness at once again being too late to save a life.

It wasn't Nighthawk's fault, how could he have predicted that his first night off in who knew how long this would happen? Nearly everyone got the feeling that somehow the Captain had been jinxed.

Prey knew better. Luck had nothing to do with it. He'd chosen last night to set up his distraction based on more than one factor, and the Captain's absence had been one of them.

Once again, he silently apologised to both Gloom and Crimson inside his head.

Finally though, their work had to stop. The sun was high in the midday sky, and there was only so much they could fix in the short term. Patience would be required to fix the rest. For example, the railroad was already on top of the task of getting in powerful unicorns from the mage towers to try and get rid of the burning spell fire, understandably anxious to get their source of revenue opened again. Already they were having to refund a fortune in tickets to not just all the impatient Canterlot citizens who had places to be, but also to all those people out there in the other pony cities who had wanted to come in.

The newspapers were also still running with the story and milking it for all they were worth, alternating between blaming the rail road, the Night Guard, the mage towers, and teenage hooligans. Sometimes all at once within the same article.

But the higher the noon-day sun rose, the more Prey's attention kept drifting further and further away from the tasks the Night Guard were rushing to complete.

He couldn't help it. Not when the next and most important step of

his plan was coming up. That was far more important than cleaning up his mess.

Far, far, *far* more important.

While Prey was seemingly paying attention to the work and people around him, he was really focused inwards thinking about his plans, and not outwards. So it was somewhat of a startling reminder when he was jolted into looking outwards again as he was reminded that everyone else was living their own lives. When events happen, people react. That is how life works.

Prey rubbed his face to try and get some life back into it. The midday-sun shining through the stained glass windows really wasn't agreeing with his desire to sleep.

'But we're finally done. At least for today.' He thought, already looking forwards to getting back to the flat and his bed. He definitely needed some sleep before it was time to initiate the next phase of his plan.

That's what the lamb was thinking about as he plodded down the corridor towards the Palace's exit, a group of dead eyed thestrals shuffling ahead of them in the same direction, all of them making for the Guard Compound's gate. Then Prey became aware Crimson was not ahead of him already.

Prey looked back, but the pegasus was not just behind him either like he'd been a moment ago.

"Crimson?"

Crimson was walking back towards the corridor junction, instead of heading out towards the compound. He looked back over his shoulder, and tilted his ears forwards towards the tunnel, grimacing slightly in apology. Obviously, Crimson had something else on his mind rather than following Prey and Gloom out.

Prey turned back around, dodging a tired thestral mare who was busy trying to walk and also adjust her helmet strap at the same time. However when Crimson's slight grimace didn't change

however, Prey stopped.

'Oh. He wants some privacy.'

Prey raised a hoof and backed up, sending the silent message; 'Alright, I'll be back at my flat then.'

Crimson instinctively half made to unfurl his wing to make a halting motion at Prey, but caught himself, unsure.

Prey paused, hoof still in the air, 'Ooorrr maybe he does want some company after all?'

Prey tiled his head in silent question in the face of Crimson's indecision, very obviously asking, 'Am I supposed to be staying or going?'

Crimson looked down the corridor intersection, then back at Prey, and uncomfortably shrugged. It was a very eloquently shrug. It almost perfectly conveyed the silent words; 'You can come along too if you want I guess. It's up to you.'

Meanwhile Gloom, in his sleep deprived funk and mind still jammed full of work and worry, hadn't noticed and was still going on ahead. Prey caught the exhausted stallion glance back to the two of them, but not really register, like he thought one of them had merely forgotten something back at the office.

Prey let Gloom go on, and started trotting after Crimson, back into the Night Guard section of the Lower Palace.

After two turns, Prey knew where they were going by process of elimination. However he didn't quite understand the 'why' of their destination.

The private Night Guard memorial. An out of the way and hushed spot, set in the privacy of a tiny paved courtyard. It was surrounded on all sides by four of the Palace's various wings, and was only accessible either from the sky, or the one door, which you had to pass through the Night Guard section to reach.

It was towards that door Crimson was heading.

Prey frowned, an edge of concern touching him, but held his peace.

Crimson pushed down the bar lock on the door and stepped out. Prey caught the door before it could close and also slipped through, letting it quietly shut behind him.

The small, enclosed courtyard was very quiet and chilly in the late autumn air. The various greys of stone cast in constant shadow everywhere didn't help with retaining any warmth.

This tiny, nearly forgotten area reminded Prey very heavily of that little cut off alcove where he'd first seen Saffron Swirl sitting in, back when she was contemplating ending her own life.

The 'nearly forgotten' part really fitted as a description. Almost no one outside of the Night Guard knew this was here, and of those who did, likely even fewer cared. Much the same as the thestral clans had been, and still were.

And the memorial itself was a polished chunk of smooth obsidian, cut into a wall. Or the writing face was smooth, the rest was left uncut. If you looked closer, carved into a corner of the obsidian was a compact list of names.

Against the shiny black of the obsidian, the carved names were difficult to read unless you got close enough. Prey knew he'd only recognise the one name up there if he were to get close enough to squint up at them. Sharp Tang, the one murdered by the mimics when they imitated him and took his place.

The rest of the names though, those came from Luna, back from her time. A thousand years too late, but what was time to an alicorn? Prey darkly wondered if she'd flipped out back then too at someone daring to break her pawns?

Or had she been the one to break them herself, as Nightmare Moon? Not that Prey was suicidal enough to ask. All Prey wished though was that their deaths had hurt Luna, even if only in some tiny fashion.

'Outrage at someone breaking her toy soldiers indeed.'

But that had nothing to do with why Crimson was here now. Prey noted evidence of the memorial and the single step leading up to it having been washed recently, as Crimson quietly approached.

Prey hung back, just watching to see why Crimson was here. While it was obvious, it also wasn't. Who was Crimson here to pay respects to? Sharp Tang? He was the only active Night Guard who'd been killed in the line of duty so far. There'd been far off many times the ISND came too close to adding to that list.

Crimson stopped before the monument and bowed his head in silence for a minute. The obsidian was higher than he was tall.

Prey still couldn't work it out, though. He waited patiently though, not sure if he should approach or not, but jerk in shock when Crimson unsheathed one wing blade with a smooth flick so fast and yet casual that Crimson had already pricked his fetlock before Prey even caught on.

"Hey-!" Prey started in alarm.

Crimson flexed his ankle inwards, the flicked the few drops of blood the motion had squeezed from the tiny cut onto the base of the monument.

"What are you doing?" Prey demanded, hurrying up.

"It is, I mean it *was*, no, I suppose it actually *still is* how you pay respect to the fallen in Clan Myrrdon." Crimson explained. The three or four drops of red blood blended with the shiny black of the obsidian, almost vanishing.

"But why? And for who?" Prey demanded.

"For the person who died last night. I know they were a criminal, but they didn't deserve to die." Crimson answered, shifting his foreleg away from Prey when he tried to peer closer at the tiny cut.

"And the why?" Prey asked again.

The feathers along Crimson's wings rippled, "Because..." Crimson finally answered.

Prey waited.

"Because I wanted to see if I still cared. As much as I should, I mean. I'm worried that I'm becoming hardened. Desensitised. A person died, and I thought... what I mean is, because I didn't get to see the body, and because I wasn't there when they died, do you know what I thought Prey? I was relieved. I thought 'Oh good, it wasn't so bad this time'. And that's wrong."

Guilt squirmed in Prey's stomach, "I don't think that's fair. So what if you felt like that? We weren't there when it happened, and there's nothing you could've done about it. So it really wasn't as bad. You shouldn't feel guilty for being glad it was nothing as awful as the kindersnatches were."

Prey couldn't stop himself from glancing swiftly at where the small collection of scars rested on the inner part of Crimson's forleg, beneath the armour. The self-inflicted tally marks.

Crimson of course caught his guilty glance, and instinctively moved as if to hide the spot, before realising that was pointless, and that the lines were covered by his leg armour anyway.

"I, no, it's not like that. It's not like that Prey. I'm not, I mean... I don't feel responsible for his death, or maybe her death I suppose. It's not like that. I mean, of course I wish they hadn't died, but it's not like..." Crimson searched for the words.

"It's fine. I get what you mean."

Crimson let his ramblings searching for the correct sentence go. He didn't have to try and explain anything further. Prey was like him, Prey understood what he couldn't articulate.

Crimson turned his eyes forward to the monument again, "I just don't want to become hardened to death and suffering. Being ice cold isn't a strength."

Prey understood that too. He knew it wasn't a strength, but a

perverse depravity. He also knew it was too late for him. He'd tried, he *was* trying, to come back from that, to value other's lives properly, but... but it hadn't worked. '*I hate you Luna.*' He'd improved, but improving was not the same as being better.

It didn't matter if the ground was a stinking bog, or a blooming marsh. Both were still rotten ground that could swallow you if you were careless. One just looked prettier than the other on the surface.

'And considering what I'm planning, how can I even claim to be trying afterwards?' Prey asked himself.

He looked up at the smooth, black face if the obsidian set before him. There was still so much space for names to be added. But only your name, and nothing further. How did that make it right? That if you fought and died on the orders of Luna, all you got in thanks was your name carved in small letters (which were hard to read), on this lonely hunk of stone in this nearly forgotten courtyard?

What right did an alicorn have to ask you to give your life when they themselves were immortal?

Prey hesitated before he spoke, but it was Crimson, and even though the chance of it going wrong was small, he owed Crimson the warning. He owed Crimson.

There was a large risk he would give himself away, but he couldn't not do it. It was against his instincts of secrecy, but it was Crimson.

"You might want to get out of the city instead of going back to the flat. I know you're also tired, but. Can you just... go for a flight? Or rent out a room in an inn somewhere in Upper Canterlot?"

"Why?"

Prey squirmed, "Because there's a chance part of it may end up burning down by tonight."

Crimson's yellow eyes widened, and he asked, "......

Things can change in a heart beat. Or the lack of a heart beat.

From one moment to the next, your whole life can shatter into broken, crude, splintered shards.

But just as often, change doesn't come as dramatically as all that. Things can also change slowly, gradually, gently building up to the final outcome. An oak tree grows slowly, but it will eventually crown itself king of the forest. Gradual change lets you acclimatise, to look ahead, and to know what event is eventually going to occur. With that knowledge, you can make your plan and prepare yourself.

A plan is a great thing, it can give you security and peace of mind.

Look to the future. Make your plan. Lock your plan in. Then follow your plan.

You know what a plan can also do for you? It can destroy your peace of mind.

Knowing what's coming, knowing full well in perfect clarity what you're going to do, with no excuses and all the time in the world for the guilt to set in...

The oak tree grows slowly. But so does the rot in its heart.

But Prey was used it. He made plans, terrible, awful, horrific plans all the time. It was why he was still alive.

Sitting in Dreverton, locked away down in that unchanging cell and forgotten by the world, Prey'd had nothing but time.

Time to agonise of his failures, to revisit everything he should've done differently, and to plot how he could've changed it all.

Fifty-seven years Prey had lost down there in his cell. He never forgot. Not a single day went by when he didn't remember Dreverton.

How few people can really understand how long fifty-seven years is?

Crimson was his friend, the ISND claimed his time, Canterlot bustled in the background, winter was approaching, days and nights passed, he watered his pot plants, he saw Gloom and Scenic, listened to Lilly and Saffron, he did all of that.

Yet every single day, Prey still silently recalled his cell. He might've changed, but his past never would.

Fifty-seven years.

Fifty-seven years of nothing. Of a cell. Of Memories. Of madness.

Prey had made many potential plans in those years. He'd had fifty-seven years to fester and to rot, to grow even worse than he had been there at the end in the Deeper Green.

Somedays, somehow, Prey could almost forget. He could see Crimson, breathe the air, taste the sweetness of sugary candy, feel the warm sun on his wool, walk without tripping over any chains, and he could just...

Just *be*. Almost.

Almost he could. In those moments, those few precious moments, it was so almost.

Fifty-seven years. That's how long Prey had known what he was capable of one day committing.

And he'd do it with a smile on his face, rotten slime in his heart, black ice in his veins, and his ribbon behind his ear.

He'd do it, and go to bed and get a full nights rest afterwards, because to live, to survive, number two on The List while number one was impossible, Prey would follow through on any of his terrible plans.

And one he would enact tonight.

'A stitch in time, running through the hangmare's twine.'

Prey was repeating that to himself in the grey, 'A stitch in time, running through the hangmare's twine.'

'A stitch in time...' Prey broke off as he became aware of himself. Of his surroundings. Of not knowing how he'd gotten here.

He was in the hallway between their two flats, his and Crimson's. He was facing Crimson's closed door. Crimson was somewhere inside, he knew that because of the electrite feather was in there.

Why was he standing here again?

Prey's eyes felt hot, his body tried. There was that old, sore stiffness in his back across the whip scars. A cramp attack? And something else, too. He felt drained, drawn out, emotionally wasted.

No, *why was he standing here again?*

Prey's heart began to pound as he cast about himself. Nothing, no enemies. Just the short, dim hallway. There was no one else close, his outlying runic arrays were around him.

'What's happened!?'

His eyes were grainy and sore too, his cheeks raw. He stopped and rubbed at the scar flesh under one eye, and was startled to find it hot and damp.

'Crybaby.'

Wait wait wait! He'd been repeating the answer to himself all along. 'A stitch in time, running through the hangmare's twine.'

That was the code, the signal to himself from himself. He knew it.

No one else did, aside from Lemon Pink.

A signal to himself that all was not as it seemed, but only because he himself was the cause of it.

Prey froze, 'I erased my own memory? Did I really? Or did someone else invade my mind and is only making me think that?'

Desperately, Prey left the outside world beind and dived down into his outer mindscape, and there he found-

-A memory packet. From himself.

Prey mentally seized it, raking it over with frenzied suspicion, looking for any sign that it was a false plant.

There was no way. Surely he wouldn't have done this to himself. Unless-Wait, the last thing he recalled was he'd been at the obsidian Night Guard memorial with Crimson. What had happened? Why? He'd given a warning to Crimson and then-

The memory packet opened up.

It was short. It was a snippet of thought, his own, cloned and left for himself. It felt ragged in his head, like the ends each side of the start and the end of the memory had been ripped off. But it was his. Prey knew his own work, and his own mental touch.

'Like rusty thorns and hooks indeed.'

That was what the memory packet said. His message to himself. The confirming words, and the ragged feel of the edges of the memory to prove further those words. That, the hidden impression hidden underneath those six words that Prey was listening for.

The memory could've been faked, he could even have been forced into creating it, but while rotting in Dreverton, he'd come up with a method to embed a wordless warning underneath for a scenario just like this.

But the warning wasn't in there.

'It must've been me. It's genuine. Or if it isn't, I've already lost so completely and utterly that there's nothing I can do about it.'

Still, Prey was certain it was he who'd done this.

'But that leaves the question, *why* did I do it?'

He thought back over what he'd been doing with Crimson, and where he was currently standing, with Crimson inside his own flat.

'Ah.'

The answer came to Prey easily. He turned his attention to the space in his memories, reaching out into his mindscape to find-

The memories were still there. They weren't gone, just suppressed beneath a thin barrier of grey.

A wonderful spark of relief washed through Prey. That proved it almost beyond a doubt, he'd done this willingly to himself, not the mimics or someone else.

The memories were still there, and if he wanted to, all he had to do was tear through the obscuring skin of grey and then the memories would flow back into him.

Disjointed, out of place, and painfully jagged, but he'd still get them back.

But Prey stopped. He'd done this to himself for a reason. He'd created that barrier of grey ash. He didn't know why he'd done it, but he'd done it purposefully.

He'd been at the monument with Crimson. Now he was here. And the memories of intervening time were gone.

'So it was a memory that had to be erased. Except I wouldn't have only done this to myself if Crimson was going to be remembering it too. So I've been in Crimson's head and gotten rid of his memories of whatever happened too.' Prey realized.

But... why? What had happened?

'I wouldn't have don't his, unless, unless...' Unless Crimson had asked to forget something. Unless Prey had exposed his secret of being a mind leech to Crimson. Unless they'd somehow spiralled down to that level of conversation. Unless it was something he'd agreed to.

What had Crimson said? What dark secrets or traumas had he exposed or shared with Prey? And what had driven Prey to revealing himself to even make the offer of erasing the memory?

Prey burned to know what the hidden memory was, but that went against the entire point of why he'd done it. But still his curiosity was killing him, he wanted to know, he hated not knowing. But there must have been a damned good reason why not.

'But I can't help it. What could have happened?'

Prey's eyes still stung from dried tears, and his back still ached from cramp. Whatever it had been, it had been no small thing. And the memory of what Crimson had asked him to erase were *right there*, floating in that memory packet, if he wanted to find out.

'In there must be what I saw in Crimson's own memories. His most private secrets...'

Prey stopped. He mentally withdrew, moving away from the hidden memories. He left them there, untouched and unopened.

'No I can't do that. I hid them from myself for a reason. Because I owe Crimson. Because he must've asked me to make myself forget whatever was said along with him. He must have asked, and I must have said yes.'

If Prey had given the promise to Crimson, then he didn't want to go back on it. Not couldn't, just didn't want to. Prey knew himself. By leaving the option there, to know that he could, that would be enough to make him choose not to. Because he had the option, because he had control over the choice.

'Because I have the choice, I choose not to.' That was what made all the difference.

'If I knew the memory was lost forever, and that I could never know what'd happened, I'd be forever frantically worrying.' Prey admitted to himself.

Prey was a liar. A deceiver, a coward, a fraud, an oath breaker, a cheat, a killer, a thief, a murderer, and more. He lied all the time, took and stole from others, and then lied to their faces. He'd done worse than break a promise to a friend before, so much worse.

And yet still, he didn't want to break this one small promise to Crimson. Not this time.

'I don't know what was said. I don't know what we discussed. I don't know what in the course of one evening led to me to go this far, and to reveal that much, but...'

Prey shook his head, scarcely able to believe that apparently something had pushed him this far. He felt exhausted, like he'd been forced to run a mile. He scrubbed at his eyes again, the raw flesh there under his still damp fur letting him know that he'd done that a lot.

'There must have been a damned good reason for all of this.'

Actually, there was the trace of a foul, acidic taste still lingering in the back of his throat too. Had he been sick? Huh.

But all the time he was thinking this, the temptation to tear through the grey covering and look to see what it had been was eating at Prey.

'Damn. This is going to bug me forever now.' Prey thought wearily. But he could deal with it. He'd have to add it to the list of unspoken things he had to always avoid thinking about. And this one was tame compared to those other things. Some of those must-not-think-about things weren't safe.

Plus, he knew it was there, and that he could look at any time if he ever gave in. Knowing that, and knowing he could change his mind at any time, helped immensely.

Prey tentatively raised his forehoof, that hated golden band still

sitting there, and quickly before he could lose his nerve, rapped on Crimson's flat door.

He waited, but nothing happened. Had he put Crimson to sleep afterwards? Prey winced, knowing that his mental touch wasn't gentle, and imagining the state Crimson was probably in on the other side of the door.

'Yeah, I probably left Crimson to sleep off as much of the coming migraine as possible.' Prey deduced. What excuse would he have implanted in Crimson's subconscious for that? Prey was ninety-nine percent certain he would've just left Crimson with false memories of slowly starting to feel sick over the course of the day, a building headache from overwork.

But Crimson was still going to have a throbbing head when he awoke. 'And that's going to be my fault too.'

Guilt, not just for that, but for everything else which must've been involved. But what was guilt, but an old, well worn coat to Prey? He knew how best to carry its cold weight.

If any outsider, who was purely unbiased and only objective in all their judgements were to somehow pull aside the curtain of this moment, and to look and see, and if they could understand the guilt that Prey was feeling right now, they'd have been disgusted. Why? Because this, giving his one friend a headache, was causing Prey more guilt than the orichalcum he'd stolen, the dead body he'd desecrated, the damage to the train line he'd caused, and arguably even most worse, what he was planning to do with the rest of the remaining raw orichalcum.

But that was guilt for you, wasn't it? It wasn't always rational. It wasn't what other people thought you be torn up over that really chewed you up from the inside.

Garrow had not regretted terrorizing, torturing, and in the end outright murdering the ponies in his salt dealer gang. In fact, the griffin had thoroughly enjoyed it.

Snake hadn't been sorry in the slightest for all the people, both ally

and enemy, he'd dissected for parts and study on his bone saw table. It was just part of his profession as a voodoo witch.

And Prey? He hated unicorns, he'd killed them in the Border Guard, melted them in bone rot and asphyxiated them with poisoned water to name just a few. He'd sacrificed the villagers of Alfalfa dale, executed Hard Baked, destroyed the diamond dogs, mind broken Captain Valour, and more. He felt guilt about that, he did, to varying degrees between each. But the runt lamb wasn't sorry in the slightest for sacrificing them all as the price of his own continued survival.

Now, next on The List, were the mimics.

Prey stood in the cave tunnel under the mountain. Not in the sewers, he had his wickerwatch, the wicker shamblers, and the hex working to secure that front. But for all he had secured them to the best of his ability with the time and resources he'd had, the Sewers' Heart had always been the lesser of the two places of power he'd captured.

The maze of dark caverns under Canterlot was far more valuable to him. The naturally occurring crystals disrupted magic, blocked scanning, and unlike the sewers which had been built by pony hoof, the deepest innards of Mount Canter were still completely unmapped and unknown. No pony water or sewerage workers ever ventured down into the caves, now did they? Even the geologists and cavers never came in any deeper than the pretty caves near the surface, all marked out and partitioned off with guide ropes and safety barriers.

But the deeper caverns, those hidden caves which had never seen the light of day, were open for contest. For supremacy of those caves, it was Prey against the mimics.

The mimics had been winning so far. Bloody victories bought in death and sacrifice, but still victories. They were prepared to sacrifice themselves to take the caves, and there were so many of them. They could push and probe from every direction, night and

day, rotating in and out without ever having to rest.

Prey was only one person. He had to rest and sleep, all while keeping up with his Night Guard job. His captured safe tunnels protected with runes were so few in the grand scheme of the mountain. It took far too long to make even the basic arrays needed to defend a tunnel. Nor could he be in two places at once. Lemon Pink's strength wasn't in rune work, so she couldn't even help him, and even if she could, they would still be massively out numbered.

That had been the story. Him slowly losing the contest through attrition.

Now Prey stood down here, the crystal lantern let on the stone floor behind him and to the side, rather than in front of him where it would blind him. It cast its light forwards past him, his own distorted shadow splashing across the uneven stone.

It was cold down here, more than cold enough to see the breath from your lungs in the dry cave air.

It wasn't visible to the naked eye, but right here where Prey was standing was they very edge of one of his safe zones. Invisible runic arrays were layered into the walls here, both defensive and sensory, to let him know to not come down here if there was any danger. And, if somehow the mimics still sprung an ambush which slipped passed his sensory arrays, to protect him while he ran away. As long as the attack wasn't something completely exotic that circumvented his runes, he should be able to flee.

But he was alone down here for now. No mimics.

It didn't matter. Even if they had been, this specific area right here was actually inlaid with runic arrays a fair bit more 'specialized' than those laid on his other small collection of safe zones and tunnel choke points. A bit more robust, further reaching, stronger, with air filtering, and unusually heavily geared to ward against one very specific type of magical effect.

Prey stopped brushing his hoof down the silk end of his dangling ribbon, 'Enough of this stalling and planning. No more. No more

threats, no more stalling, and no more mimics under the mountain.'

He *could* continue to hesitate, to stand here and second guess what he was about to do, but what would be the point? Prey knew he wasn't sincerely hesitating, so why even pretend? The mimics weren't the splinter pack of diamond dogs. They didn't deserve his pity. There was no one else down here to judge him, no one he had to lie to and deceive. Just him, and the silent dark of the mountain. So why continue pretending to hesitate?

Prey honestly considered the question for a moment. Then shrugged to no one, smiling. 'Ah well.'

It was just an ordinary, small, everyday smile. Like one you'd see on a baker's face as he took his bread out of the oven, or on a gardener's face as she pruned off the dead heads on her rose bush. The type of small, unconscious smile the owner was barely even aware of. A plain, but innocently distracted smile. Not the smile of the guilty.

Prey wasn't fooling himself by pretending to hesitate. He wasn't about to suddenly be overpowered by an onset of conscience and stop.

Prey turned to his other side, the opposite side to the shining lantern. Stacked carelessly, the discarded and empty lead lined strong boxes sat, but those weren't what Prey wanted.

Instead, it was the thing that looked something like a twisted sea urchin. Sharp, wicker spikes sticking out crazily from the sides, and bunched thickly at the top. The solid core at the middle of the thing was about the size of a watermelon, obscured beneath all the sticking out wicker. But between the gaps, if you looked carefully, you could still catch the glint of the rainbow coloured metal.

Perhaps not a mutated sea urchin, something Garrow had seen on the coast, once. No, perhaps it appeared more like a foul flower. All the bunched up wicker spines at the top were like closed flower petals, like the whole thing could open up to expose its center.

A center of charged orichalcum, a shell of wicker, and the unseen

bindings of layer upon layers of runes.

You could achieve all kinds of magical things with orichalcum if you used it right. Dunlop Scrim had expanded those dangers to the ISND for precisely that reason so they'd take the threat seriously. He needn't have worried. Prey had thought of his own uses for raw orichalcum long before the Fell steward had come along.

Making a big bang with raw orichalcum was among the least of its uses. It was when you got the orichalcum charged up that the possibilities really opened up. As Dunlop Scrim's had said; performing a ritual, enhancing leylines, building an artifact, invisibility cloaks, and way-beacons, but those were amongst the most harmless options.

Gloom and Crimson had been permitted to see a small piece of it, the raging spell fire on the mountainside, burning metal rails and solid stone like it was wood.

Prey trotted over to the spikey wicker bundle, and without any further prelude, simply gave it a shove. It was heavy, and solid, but it was enough to roll it over the invisible line of runes that divided the tunnel; the safe from the unsafe.

And then for some strange reason, the uneven ball, with all its protrusions of wicker which should've stopped it dead, it kept rolling. Not fast, nor straight either, but just steadily trundling off down the tunnel, leaving the lantern light and slowly into the shadows.

It would be a while before it was in deep enough to unfold and activate. And then-

-And then this wouldn't be a victory for Prey. A win, but not a victory. You had to be realistic about these things.

He was one runt lamb. The mimics, whatever they truly were, were still legion. But if he couldn't claim anymore of the crystal caverns of the mountain, well, then no one else could have them either.

Scorched earth. Sowing salt. Nopony's land.

Prey watched his terrible weapon slowly and unevenly roll out of sight. It wasn't a veropede, but while a juggernaut, a veropede was still only one, a creature, like the baloth and reaper king had both been. Nigh unstoppable, but something that you could run from and hide from.

'Oh but you must travel through the woods again and again, and you must be very lucky to avoid the wolf every time. But the wolf... the wolf only needs enough luck to find you once.'

Up above, on the surface of the mountain, up high in the city of Canterlot where the sun shone and the clouds drifted, not a single sign of what happened registered. It was just like before, when the thieves from the Brotherhoof of Sol had detonated the Cataract of the Sun inside of Prey's crystal lair.

There was no rumble, no shaking, no distant explosion transmitted through the floor.

It was easy to forget, but back then, at the time of the thieves, the mimics had already been there. Hidden within the shadows, circling like piranhas in the murk, but they'd still been there all the same. They'd come before the thieves, they'd been in Alfalfa Dale and Mayflower for some unknown reason. Prey had found their traces in the sewers, in the caves, in their attempts to claim his section of the mountain. Never seen them, only ever the signs of their presence.

They'd been there, even back then.

Now, in the darkness, deep down in the winding tunnels, black plated heads turned upwards. Blue faceted insectile eyes caught and focused the faint, dim green glow.

It was doubtful, how much those first mimics ever saw. Or even if they'd turned their heads in time, sensing something amiss in those moments before. Who would ever know?

When the silent fire came flooding down the tunnels, those first few at the forefront would not have survived to tell anybody. And, well,

if any of those mimics further back managed to flee in time, and *also* managed to run faster than an earth pony could sprint in a straight line over open ground, instead of in the winding cramped tunnels, and if they somehow managed to escape the hungry flames in time... if, if, if, if.

If any did, the mimics certainly weren't telling anyone.

Fire, and flame. It always came back to fire in the end.

Fire. It was a power. An old force. The primal spark of life and yet also destruction.

Fire was how Gossamer's life had crumbled. Fire was how Prey had first come to know what hate was. Fire was how the Resistance's aspirations had burned on the hill.

It was all very poignant and dramatic if you looked at it like that, but the truth was, it was so much simpler than that. And so much more terrible.

Fire, and flame.

Fire is straight forward, it doesn't bargain, it doesn't know mercy, empathy, or sorrow. All it does if given even the smallest chance, is burn, consume, and grow.

Fire. It's a hunger. Not quite the primal hunger, but it was oh-so terribly close, that what difference did it make? When the fire roars and the world burns, when the flames blot out the sky and the air ignites in your chest, the difference is oh-so small.

All fire, *every* fire, wants to burn and burn and burn. Everything is just food to its hunger.

You can cage fire, use it to cook, warm your house, light a candle, but what nearly everyone overlooks is that first part. That fire is not tame, *never* tame, only caged.

And when it breaks that cage and slips its leash, it ravenously tears through everything, consuming all before it without ever being satisfied. Prey had seen fire racing through the treetops. You would

not believe how fast fire can move, how far it can reach out with a flame and grab ahold.

And so the fire Prey ignited went spilling down the tunnels. Spreading, growing, down every turn, squirming into every crack, and racing as fast as the air could combust.

But there was nothing to see. No burning light, for the flames were nigh invisible. Just a distorted heat ripple in the air. And if you were close enough to see that, it was too late.

For a distance, the racing fire was soft, quiet. No roaring blaze, no cracking embers or explosions. Just the sound of an inhalation, that quiet *_wumf_* of a flame catching. A lie. It was that the air was being sucked backwards into the heart of the fire. In the heart of the racing fire, it shrieked with the rage of a whirlwind.

It was magical fire, and it sought out other magic. The ambient magic in the air, that was what it fed on, what it gulped greedily down and kept reaching for more. It was a flash fire, searing hot enough to ignite the air it sucked in to fill the empty vacuum it left behind it.

It travelled dizzyingly fast; one moment unmoving tunnel air, then the ambient traces of magic in the air burnt hotter than a furnace for the barest millisecond, and then empty burnt-out air, the fire already passed.

To anyone the fire raced over, here and gone in a second, they would go from nothing to second or even third degree burns across nearly one hundred percent of their body. They'd die almost immediately from shock. Shock would be the kinder way to go at least.

If they survived that first flash, they'd still be dead within a minute, but what an indescribable minute it would be.

Their eyes would have flash fried, their mane and fur burnt to embers in an instant, the oxygen sucked from their lungs, and skin peeling off like cobwebs. Dehydration as all the moisture in their skin boiled away was certain death, but if they somehow dived into

a cave pool in the nick of time as the fire raced past them, or more likely if they had some form of magical protection, they would still die.

Asphyxiation would take them long before they reached any cave exit. There would be nothing left to breathe in the narrow winding tunnels of the mountain, with no vents to suck in fresh air, all that would be left in the air was the carbon dioxide.

It had been good enough to bring down the magically superior and artifact wielding thieves, despite all their power. Because every non-immortal in this world needs to breathe.

That was how the mimics died. Or probably died. It's not like Prey went down afterwards to check. There was always the chance that, despite everything, somehow, someway, there could still be a few mimics left. That was the first rule of magic. Never assume you know everything. Or perhaps the mimics had fully sealed caves, where the fire wouldn't touch, and the lucky ones inside would be spared the flash fire.

It was even possible mimics were extra resilient to fire, although the torn-off leg he'd tested hadn't been. The chitinous shell had held up well on the outside, but like a bug on the inside, the flesh had still cooked.

The unseen fire raced through the mountain, fed by ambient magic for just long enough to race onwards, directed by chasing the unconsumed oxygen left in the air to the caves it hadn't yet touched, and sustained by runes converting the orichalcum nestled in the fireproof wicker flower's center.

The orichalcum wouldn't last forever, in fact, even with the runic arrays carefully prepared to prevent any slippage or waste, there was only enough of the magical metal to sustain a little more than thirteen minutes. Perhaps a minute more, perhaps a minute less, depending on environmental factors. Also, it was likely Prey had overestimated and the flames would finally splutter out before reaching the caves and tunnels near the very base of the mountain.

The flames would not live long enough to escape the mountain into the world above the ground, and even if the orichalcum did sustain it for that long, with no stones tunnels and funnelling and compressing the flames, the fire would rush upwards and also outwards in a cone. The runic fire would spread itself too thin, lose concentration and heat, and die.

Fire is short lived by nature. It can't be anything else, what with its need to consume constantly to live, and the bigger it grows, the more fiercely it needs. But for that short period of time when it rages... for the fire and everything it touches, that is all the time that exists in the world.

And so, the mimics died in the first purging of Mount Canter. The last purging came at the time of Princess Cadance's Royal wedding. And one in-between.

[[[---IIIOIII---]]]

A decade later, after the changeling reformations and introduction into society, a retelling of the events would only ever be given by a few of the changeling infiltrators who survived, and even then, only verbally, not purposefully recounting it for historical recording.

The drones from before the all-important reformation didn't have the capacity to recall, not with how little love they'd been birthed with, resulting in a near total reliance on the hive mind to function every single day. A pitiable situation to move even the stoniest pony heart. But of the higher functioning infiltrators capable of independent thought, less than half-a-dozen reformed individuals survived the event and the years which followed, to recall the event in question when asked.

Comparatively speaking, more changelings from near the fringes of the tunnels survived than was first apparent.

The natural armour of these scarred survivors allowed perhaps one-in-twenty to weather the flash fire long enough to survive and crawl out to fresh air. But that was only comparatively speaking. Because

in reality, it was *only* one-in-twenty. What a horrifyingly small percentage.

And of the retellings, out of the few that were ever captured and are now recorded in the history books in the restricted section of the Royal Canterlot archives, even less of the tales ventured to give an account of the first purge. And even fewer of the second. The last purge, yes, comparatively it is well documented, but few retellings of the first, and only in brief detail.

"There was fire. You weren't there. I don't have the words for you to properly understand. But there was fire. And it burned."

Prey did not forget. Nor did he forgive.

83.6 A Quiet End to an Adventure

Author's Notes:

Hello to all. Once again, the same note as last time. The editor is still busy with real life important things, so this chapter is still rough(ish).

That said, please don't refrain from pointing out mistakes. Thank you. 👍

Also, here is a funny meme/drawing done once again by GreatSpaceBeaver that you'll hopefully find as amusing as I did. 😁

From 'Living by the Feather and Talon', penned by the griffin Rekaw of the Low King's court - 942 A.C.

To be a Grand General, a griffin must either first be insane or able to wilfully don insanity. For none but an insane individual can so confidently issue orders which they well know will cost the lives of their Griffins, and yet decide, 'Yes, these many lives are worth my objective.' For how else could they do so? Those commanders under the Grand General at least know the orders they must execute come from higher than themselves, but right at the very top of the chain of command?

Only the insane can remove the soldier part from the value of a life. Only they could sign with their own talons to condemn so many to death again and again. Or the murderously mad.

Prey had a dream. Or he used to have one.

Not a dream, as in what he saw when he slept. When asleep, unless Prey was so tired he couldn't control it, he was the one who decided

what he saw within the ashen world of his outer mindscape. That is, assuming, Luna hadn't taken a sick interest in tormenting him that particular night.

But rather he'd had a dream, as in, an impossible goal. A distant desire you always said, "One day I will," but deep down knew the truth to be; "I never will." But that's why it was a dream. A fleeting, fading flash of brightness too good to be true. That was the type of dream he'd had. Not something at the very top of The List, but that was because he'd never believed the number one item was ever possible. But still a dream, something that brought hope rather than cold, logical despair.

A dream which he'd barely dared to imagine to believe that he might be allowed to hope for.

Truth be told, it was the same dream it'd always been down the long years.

Prey had dreamt of being left alone. Of being free. Of one day, just being allowed to leave all responsibilities behind, to simply walk away from everyone and everything, and be forgotten. To just be free to be left alone.

That had been Prey's dream. It was *still* his dream, but now he wasn't so sure of it anymore. Things had changed, like they do. That was life. And when he waking dreamed now, he wasn't sure what he wanted anymore. Because of Crimson.

Crimson was his friend, his only friend. He owed Crimson. He didn't want to leave Crimson. Prey wanted-
-He wanted the impossible, he knew that.

He wanted to be free of Luna's golden shackles and to be left alone, that was the same as before. Except now he wanted Crimson to come with him when he left. Or to go with Crimson instead. As long as it was away from danger and he could be left alone, he didn't really care about the destination. He'd survived in the Deeper Green, so he could survive almost anywhere.

But Crimson would never just abandon his duty to the unworthy

Luna, or the ponies he'd grown to know here in Canterlot. And Prey hadn't forgotten that nor had Crimson forgotten his own blood feud with his old clan.

Gloom, Scenic, Lilly, Saffron, Carton, Screech, Vivid Edge, Taffy, all of them. They had a hold on a piece of Crimson's heart now too.

And if Prey was being completely honest, the thought of leaving some of those people, only some of them, well... he'd regret it.

No, they were not friends. He didn't like them, this wasn't him succumbing to the racist pony friendship claptrap. They were not *friends*.

He could and would leave them behind without so much as a backwards glance if he were able to escape Luna's golden leash. But if he had to pick them or a stranger's life to save, no, not just a complete stranger, but even a stranger who he knew to be a good person, he'd pick them and damn the stranger.

Prey was no fool. He knew they weren't his friends. He knew they only acted as such because he'd deceived them, because he wore a mask, because he hid what he was capable of doing in cold blood. If they knew, they'd run from him. So no, they weren't 'friends'. In fact, many of them had been the cause of at best, numerous headaches, and at worst, almost getting him killed.

And while he couldn't forgive that... they were still people he now knew. Them, and Lemon Pink. She too was his tool, but she was also a person now. She was slowly developing, despite her stunted mind. Lemon had Randy, and eventually, maybe others too. There was still a bit of pony left in Lemon Pink from her creation, after all.

But putting her aside, that still left Gloom. Gloom was... the thestral was... Prey wasn't sure what Gloom was to him. Less than a friend, even if Gloom counted himself as such, he was less important than Crimson. But he was more important than Scenic, Saffron, Lilly, or Carton Juice.

Crimson. Then Gloom and Lemon. Then all the others.

Prey wasn't sure what his dream was anymore. He hated Canterlot, he hated the Night Guard, he hated magic, unicorns, ponies, and their racist bigotry. And he HATED Luna.

But he loved Crimson as strongly as any brother. And he didn't hate Gloom, despite all the issues the thestral had caused him in the past.

'I don't know what my dream is anymore.'

It had been quiet. More than a week had passed, (nine days if you wanted to be exact), and Prey had heard nothing from the mimics.

No sight, no sound, no scent. Nothing. He hadn't risked venturing down into the mountain tunnels to double check for certain, a task he would've dearly loved to still have had his veropede for, but he sensed nothing from in the depths of the tunnels. As in, nothing. Just still, dead air.

Prey didn't know how many of the mimics his orichalcum flower had killed. He didn't know if their fried corpses still packed the dark tunnels even now.

But it had been quiet down there. An empty quiet. A promising sign, but Prey wasn't about to let his guard down.

If their situations had been reversed, for what he'd done to them, Prey would either have immediately given up and run away, or viciously attacked back with everything he had. But since nothing of either nature had occurred, it was a promising sign.

'Hearth Warming Starts Soon! - Shop Now and Save on Stress!' Shouted the poster in the hat store front window. Throughout Canterlot, and seemingly overnight, all the shops and commercial districts had sprouted similar such signs.

Early gold, red, and green themed decorations were already being put up here and there and everywhere.

Likewise, scarfs seemed to have come into fashion overnight, and as such, Gloom with his own long black scarf draped over his puckered chest scar no longer stood out. And also because he was wearing a dusk pony amulet, not just the disguise capabilities of his scarf.

Although, it wasn't actually cold enough that you really needed a neck warmer. Unless you were a pony, because apparently, the temperature was somehow ten degrees colder to you and *only* you if you were a pony.

Winter was finally here. It had slipped in rather unannounced. Partly because as any season here in the heart of Equestria, it was very mild. Ponies got angsty if it was any other way, demanding that the weather they'd slowly tamed and refined over centuries bend to down to their already low tolerance levels.

In another few centuries, who knew? Perhaps they'd have gotten to the point they could say "No" to the yearly season of winter altogether.

Scenic heaved in a deep, deep breath, chest expanding for all he was worth, and then let it all out in one huge long exhale, "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh. I love the first week of the month at Hearths Warming."

Next to the earth pony, his towering marefriend joined in, "Sure is, sure is. Why, the airs got this wonderful taste to it. Like happiness and snow."

Carton Juice was excessively bundled up in maximum sized warm clothing against the honestly only very mild chill at this time of the afternoon; a warm hat, scarf, fluffy coat, and hoof warmers.

"This is nothing. Griffonstone at midday in the sun was still colder than this." Crimson bluntly commented, unconsciously shuffling his wings. Likely, he was missing the familiar weight of his wingblades. Gloom, Prey, and he were here, on their one free day of the week, because the earth pony couple had invited them to attend the first market day of December. Apparently, it was supposed to be something 'special'.

"Ooh, you've been to Griffonstone?" Carton asked in interest, leaning in, "When? What was it like? Are the ponies nice over there?"

"Ah." Crimson fumbled. Their mission to Griffonstone was restricted information. "That is..."

Hurriedly Gloom cut in, deciding it best to just bluntly end this, "Sorry, we're not supposed to talk about that. Please don't ask or bring it up."

"Why? What happened?" Carton asked without thinking.

"Please don't ask or bring it up." Gloom repeated firmly.

Carton's moot snapped shut, "S-sorry. I wasn't thinking, I just, er. I won't."

Next to her, Scenic let out a quiet breath if relief. He didn't know about the Griffonstone mission, and what's more, he didn't want to know.

'-whatever it was or whatever they were doing over there, it's best we don't know. I'll sleep better this way-'

'Coward. A smart coward, though.' Prey thought judgingly. He looked ahead to the bustling crowd as it joined into the Lower Canterlot market square they were approaching. More warm clothing, and seasonal decorations and colours swirled in the noisy crowd.

'And here I am. Again. Getting dragged out of my comfort zone. Again. Attending some stupid pony festivity. *Again*.'

Prey wasn't even surprised anymore that this was his life. His enforced Night Guard work up at the Palace taking up nearly all of the waking hours six out of seven days, and for the few remaining, it was spent either sleeping like the he was supposed to with the allotted rest time, creating runes like he needed to, or somehow being shanghaied yet again into more pony tomfoolery.

'Am I getting to used to this? That I'm just accepting it like its

something that couldn't easily be changed if people would just leave me out of their mundane everyday plans like I want?'

Seriously, was he growing inured to getting forced into these sorts of things?

The hubbub of the main crowd was steadily increasing as they approached the huge market square, stacked with stalls, stands, and shops.

Prey winced in anticipation of the headache to come, 'My heads hurting just at the *thought* of all those thoughts.'

Prey decided then and there he wasn't going to be sticking around here. While Gloom and Crimson were both resigned to joining in with the crowd, and not actively looking forward to the excitement like Carton and Scenic, neither were either of them going to end up nursing a headache afterwards.

'Seriously, if people would just leave me alone, I'd never even leave my flat. Or rather, not leave that anyone else would be aware of.'

"You're splitting up from us, then." Crimson said from next to him.

Prey jumped and glanced up at Crimson, who was observing him in return, one eyebrow under his lanky mane raised. Prey hadn't even said anything yet, or moved to breakaway, but the pegasus had somehow noticed his intentions straight away.

Or maybe he'd just guessed in advance. It wasn't exactly a huge leap of logic, if you knew Prey. But still.

"Yes." Prey answered honestly, "I'm not interested in... that."

Crimson added his own nod as Prey indicated the noisy crowd they were almost upon, "Neither am I, really."

"Come with me then." Prey beckoned, seizing the presented opportunity. Over the noise of the ponies ahead, the other three didn't hear him.

"But Scenic and Carton have invited us here. It would be rude to

leave already." Crimson said, but he was looking around the street as if he wished to agree.

"We're not guests at their house, and this is a public festival. There aren't any guest rights enforced here, we're allowed to go enjoy ourselves elsewhere if we want," Prey pressed, "Come on. Let's go."

They were just about to wade into the flowing crowd now, a grinning Carton in the lead. With her greater height, she was encouraging the pony crowd to instinctively part and make an opening. Crimson threw Gloom a look at the last second as the disguised thestral was dragged in, and then turned aside to follow Prey instead.

"We'll catch up with you later." Crimson called out.

Gloom half turned, caught up in the crowds pull, "Wait, what?"

"He said, catch you later." Prey raised his voice, giving the retreating Gloom a cheery smile as he was pulled in further after the oblivious Carton and Scenic.

"Hey-!"

"Bye-bye." Prey waved without actually looking back at his disguised thestral Sargent, as he guided his friend Crimson towards a side street instead.

The side street, while not nearly as busy as the main market square, still bore a lot of hoof traffic coming and going, so Prey took them towards another side street, then down a third, leaving most of the ponies and festive red, gold, and green behind.

A fourth turn got them even further away from the market, the various walls, buildings, and houses Prey had put between them and the square cutting off the last of even the most persistent noise.

Here, finally, was some time to spend with Crimson, and only Crimson. Not that they didn't spend all day working alongside each another, because they most definitely did, night-in, night-out,

slaving away in the ISND's office.

'Still haven't gotten a better light installed in there, yet.' Prey realised, leading them towards a small gap in between two houses, where the street rose in a smooth incline to cross over the pavement of the street of the tier below in a short bridge. Being built on the side of a mountain, space was always at something of a premium in Canterlot, especially here in Lower Canterlot. The system of tiered building and levels helped with that.

"Where are you taking us?" Crimson asked in interest, glancing over the railing to the strip of street below as they crossed the hoof bridge. It wasn't a far drop, and the houses pressed in close here. Snug, that was the word. Snug and rather antique, actually.

The close packed buildings here were rather old, bricks and plaster built around thick crossbeams, sometimes just that bit wonky with centuries of age and decades of paint, and in places on the narrow winding street, the cobblestones were worn so smooth they almost shone. The clean ones, anyway. Flocks of pigeons and doves seemed to love this area. Prey could hear the cooing and flapping of bird wings never far away.

"No where in particular. This is just one of the less awful sections of Canterlot I've found." Prey answered.

"You still dislike the city so much?" Crimson enquired with mild curiosity.

"Yes. This place, this whole city, sometimes it's bearable, but then the next second you see something that everyone has taken for granted their entire lives, even here in Lower Canterlot, and I just..." Prey shook his head, mouth turning down, "...And then I hate it."

Crimson walked in silence for a minute, thinking over Prey's honest opinion. He didn't disagree or tell Prey he should be more understanding. If Prey didn't want to, then that was up to him. As they'd established between themselves, through quiet testing again and again by putting a bit more of themselves out there each time, there was nothing they couldn't say in private that would drive the other away. They were friends, and they wouldn't betray each

other, but that wasn't their fear.

Both of their secret fear wasn't that the other would betray them. It was that they themselves would be the one to betray. It was illogical, but the fear that somehow, someway, he would mess up sat in Prey's heart.

And if that ever happened, well then... Prey didn't know what would happen between them next. However he knew that if it was Crimson that somehow messed up, he'd forgive his only friend because he knew it would've been an honest accident. And he secretly hoped that Crimson would do the same if, all the godless forbid, he was the one to mess up.

And because of all that, all those things they didn't say but each instinctively knew the other knew, Prey was confident in saying what he truly thought about this disgusting pony city to Crimson without fear of censorship.

'Except, apparently, whatever it was that we said that one time, and I wiped our memories. Or suppressed my own copy, at least.' Prey thought, guilt stinging him.

But Crimson didn't know about that any longer. It was only Prey who did, so he'd pretend and they could go on as if nothing was wrong.

They walked for some more. Presently, Crimson commented, "I think I've figured out why you don't mind this bit of Canterlot. Or dislike it as much as the rest, I mean."

"Oh?"

Crimson nodded at the latest in a long line of all the asymmetrical shops they were passing, "All the bookstores."

"Well, you've got a point there." Prey conceded. Out of the last ten shops they'd passed, eight out of those had been secondhoof book stores. The others had both been antiques stores.

Crimson's ears swivelled one way, and his eyes tracked in another as they kept trotting along, Prey still guiding their path. "You've got

somewhere you want to show me." The red pegasus observed bluntly.

Prey had said they weren't going anywhere in particular, and while that was true, Crimson's statement was also true. "You got me." Prey easily admitted, not slowing.

"So, what is it? Or is it a surprise?" Crimson asked, idly watching a dove swoop overhead and just letting Prey take them wherever he wanted.

"Yes, but only a little bit of one. It's not far now."

"Okay." Crimson agreed, not pushing for details.

And indeed, it wasn't long at all. Crimson looked up at the sign above the door, some of the paint on the old, gothic lettering flaky in patches.

"The Green Cockatrice." Crimson read.

"It's actually a two part establishment. It has a small café, but much more interesting is that it's also an antiques dealership. Including magical trinkets." Prey supplied.

Crimson quickly looked back down at him, "Are you saying this is where you got...?" Crimson trailed off, his right wing partly unfolding briefly. The one secretly bearing the electrite feather.

"No," Prey shook his head, "This has nothing to do with that. No, that was completely something else."

"Then, the jade necklace? Back when it was just a ring?" Crimson asked, going to the next logical, if wrong, option.

Prey tilted his head, "What? No. Look, this is just a trinket shop for old curios as long as they're magical. I only recently heard about this shop here, so I decided to come here today."

Crimson picked up on the rest of what Prey didn't say, "I see. And since the choice was between the market with Scenic and Carton, or coming to check this out, this was your choice."

Prey smiled lopsidedly, "Hey, you wanted to come along to. I didn't exactly have to try hard to convince you."

Crimson just wing shrugged.

"Come, let's go in then." Prey said.

If there was one thing Prey had learnt from the thieves, it was the hard lesson to not under estimate random, previously unknown or untested magical artifacts. Something he had known before, but it had just been beaten home even further in pain and blood. And while there were a hundred, no, a thousand trinkets out there to shift through for every decently powerful artifact, unless you spent that time shifting through the dross, you'd never even have the chance to find the silver.

The thing was though, Lemon Pink had already been through this particular shop earlier this week, and had found nothing worthy. The Green Cockatrice was only one of a score of these shops throughout Canterlot. No, Prey hadn't brought Crimson here with the goal of finding some forgotten and powerful heirloom of another ancient mage family.

Not everything was about obtaining artifacts of exceptional magical power.

He'd simply come here because it was quiet, and he wanted to spend some time with his only friend. That, and when Lemon had visited, she'd gotten a good look around the entire store, and found nothing dangerous.

'But it never hurts to be cautious.' Prey thought as he pushed the door open, but not immediately going through. Instead, he waited for those two seconds to check that nothing was about to explode or that a trap had been triggered, and that there was no one obviously armed or dangerous inside, and then *and* only then stepped in.

And indeed, as Prey had said, it was just an antiques shop. Old, with many curious bits and bobs, but just a shop.

No mysterious hooded stranger lurking in the corner, no restricted section of the store locked off behind bars, no suspicious counter teller who offered you a deal to good to be true, and no invisible pull towards any of the knickknacks on display.

It was just an antiques shop, with a tiny café included, which was simply going about its business of turning over a profit.

Prey got the faint painful prickling in the runes on his hooves as they passed by the shelves, but it was just that; faint. All the trinkets and baubles here were magical, but only at a basic level. There was nothing in there more enchanted than the average crystal lamp.

Crimson's quiet comment on it all, as they looked around at the close packed shelves, was; "Huh. I was almost expecting something else."

There were only five other people in the store. Two shop workers, and three browsing customers. All slightly older unicorns, the kind you'd stereotypically expect to find in a magical antiques store. Spectacles, a note book, no fashion sense, and utterly unconcerned about it.

But that didn't matter, that wasn't why Prey and Crimson see here. They were here to get away from the market square for an hour or so, and then they'd go rescue Gloom. If they couldn't find the disguised thestral, along with Scenic and Carton, then they'd simply go on their way and meet up back at the Palace for work later this evening.

There wasn't anything special about his shop, it was simply where they'd ended up at. So that's what they did.

They wandered around for a while, idly looking at the trinkets for sale, but quickly losing interest in that. So they ended up just talking, discussing the ISND work, and commenting on the odd thing on the shelves.

Normal, everyday things that were ten times better with a friend.

Prey and Crimson could've gone anywhere, since neither of them had any interest in actually buying anything, not that the two lethargic workers seemed to mind, and it would've been much the same. The Green Cockatrice was simply background.

"Do you suppose Carton Juice would like that?" Crimson asked, examining some kind of wind up music box in the shape of a pudgy bird.

Prey cocked his head questioningly, "Probably, but why're you getting Scenic's marefriend a gift?"

"You know," Crimson waved one hoof vaguely, "For Hearth Warming. I mean, you know, because you're supposed to give gifts to everyone apparently."

"Oh that? That's a pony tradition only. Besides which, it's not that you're supposed to get gifts for everyone. Just your friends. Or not at all, if you don't want to. As I said, it's just a pony tradition."

Crimson hummed, still examining the bird music box sceptically, "Carton Juice counts as a friend. And we're in Canterlot now, so I think I should follow the tradition. I mean, it's up to you, but I'm going to. So there's Carton, Scenic, Gloom, you, Lilly, oh and Saffron too I guess. Wait, do I need to give something to Captain Nighthawk? What about the Lieutenants?"

"I'm pretty sure you aren't expected to get presents for people who are only work colleagues. Besides, they're thestrals and just as new as you here. And really, I'm fine, you don't have to get me anything." Prey added on.

Crimson tilted his ears to the side in a so-so motion, "We're in Canterlot now, and it would be a nice thing to do..."

Prey blinked, reaching up and rubbing the fur under his chin as he thought over that.

Giving gifts to non-family was very much a pony thing. Just like with Nightmare Night, out on the border, they'd had some different traditions. Given gifts there were usually a birthday thing, if you

had the money, (which they hadn't), but Hearth Warming for Prey hadn't ever involved presents.

Instead, it had been about family, about eating a big enough meal and not going hungry for once, about doing all the farm work and then everyone gathering in the village to listen to the story tellers. One day out to rest at the end of the year, and to remember. But actual physical gifts weren't common. Maybe exchanging baskets of food between neighbours, or cutting all their fire wood for them, but not trinkets and baubles.

"It's not what I knew, growing up." Prey said after a bit.

Crimson shrugged eloquently, "Me neither. But here we are."

Prey shrugged back, "I suppose so. Hmm. *Hmmmm*. What can I give Gloom and the others?"

"You want to try this to?" Crimson asked, then swiftly added, "Please don't give Scenic a dead rat or something. Or anyone a dead rat, actually."

"Why would I do that?"

"Yes, why would you do that?"

Prey thought about it, recalling how badly the earth pony had reacted to his ghost story on Nightmare Night. If he was feeling malicious, that was exactly like something he'd do. "Right. I won't do anything like that, I promise."

“So,“ Crimson nodded at the music bird again, returning to the subject of his original question, “Do you think this would be something that Carton would like?”

Prey thought they’d be lucky to get what they were given, and should just be thankful with that. Although, with how timid the giantess of a mare was when confronted with anything, Prey was willing to bet that even if Carton Juice hated any gift, she’d still beam and thank the giver. If Prey thought a present he’d been given was actually given as an insult, he wouldn’t have any such compulsions about being gracious. Depending on who it was, he’d

either refuse it, or smile and secretly plan to get even with them later. Unless it was Crimson of course. Or Gloom, since if that happened, it would've been because of a genuine mistake.

"You don't need to get me anything, really." Prey thought to repeat out loud again.

"And if I want to? I mean, you won't mind if I do anyway, right?" Crimson checked.

"If you *really* want to, I suppose not." Prey flicked his eyes away, feeling a bit embarrassed. Their friendship wasn't based on giving gifts.

Prey had heard there were ways to qualify how a person expressed affection. While he wasn't surprised in the slightest that it was a pony who'd come up with the idea, because who else would feel the need to classify and breakdown friendships? But what was surprising was that even if he was only restating the obvious, it was still an accurate assessment in Prey's view.

In essence, the study said there were four different ways people, (well, in the study it specified ponies), expressed affection for another, and that was by giving of something to the other.

The first method was affirmation. Telling the person how much you appreciated them, by paying them compliments, telling them how good they looked.

The second method was the one that Prey recoiled disgust from in disgust, the idea enough to make him feel sick. And that was by physical affection. Hugs, kisses, nuzzles, sitting with the person, patting them on the back, platting their mane, etcetera.

Third, and the one Prey could actually identify with was, quite simply, giving of your time to the person. That meant spending your free time with them, doing what they wanted to do, talking, chatting, participating in an activity, or simply being with them.

And the last way was by giving gifts, expressing how they were worth more to you than the monetary value of the item.

Any wholesome expression of friendship or affection could be broken down into one, two, three, or sometimes even all four methods.

Prey just felt that Hearth Warming was a forced scenario of number four, because it was a tradition where giving gifts was the 'accepted' way of appreciating friends or family. Basically it was at the point that the expectation was; if you didn't give them a gift, then you were clearly saying didn't care about them. Which was a false representation and utterly stupid.

True, Prey had given Crimson the gift of the electrite feather, but that was completely different. It was a weapon, something he'd created during a time when he'd thought Crimson's survival was at stake. But giving presents simply for the sake of tradition on one day of the year irritated him.

'Well, if Crimson's decided to follow the tradition anyway, I guess I could stand to do the same.' Prey decided, eyeing Crimson up and down.

Now, what could he get Crimson? He was... hesitant to gift Crimson something like the electrite feather again. First, because just like he hadn't been able to offer a believable explanation for its origin the first time, he wouldn't be able to a second time either. And it would be much more suspicious the second time around too.

'I could probably get him to accept a second such gift anyway, since he's my friend, but...'

But to make something powerful and actually worth the while for Crimson to carry, he would need more rare components, and he was loath to risk something again so soon after stealing the raw orichalcum. That, and the sheer time and runic effort he'd have to invest wasn't a small weight on the scale of consideration either.

And to top it all off, there was also the matter of an energy source. The electrite feather worked half off of Crimson's natural internal magic, and half off the ambient mana in the air. It had no internal power, it didn't recharge, but it never deactivated. It passively worked all the time off those two small sources of energy.

If Prey gave Crimson another feather, neither would have quite enough energy to function at peak efficiency.

'Well it doesn't have to be like the electrite feather, it could be something which activated and then needs to recharge afterwards.' Prey considered.

Hadn't he earlier been thinking that not everything was about magical artifacts? And yet here he was, considering it yet again.

Crimson was poking at an egg whisk which apparently whisked eggs by itself. 'Well it doesn't actually have to be magical at all and risk drawing attention. A normal, mundane gift might be fine too. Like a hoof dagger. Or a crossbow. Or another set of wingblades.'

Prey thought about the options as they continued to meander around the Green Cockatrice's shelves. He paid some more attention to what they were seeing, as unlike with Crimson, he was a lot less concerned with what he'd give to any of his other acquaintances. Something or other would suffice, like that serving spoon which changed colour but did nothing else.

'I suppose Gloom deserves something a bit better than that.' Prey grudgingly admitted to himself. How things changed. Gloom was technically one of his jailers, and while Prey never forgot that, Gloom was not his enemy. Their enemies were out there. It was a case of 'them', against 'us'.

He'd have to think of something for the Sargent, considering how he'd abandoned him in the market to Scenic and Carton while he came here with Crimson.

"What is even the point of this?" Crimson asked, sounding honestly baffled. Prey smiled and returned to back to see whatever item it was.

How boring was this? Walking around a store, looking at trash you weren't even interested in buying, all because while you had plenty of better things you could be doing, you weren't. So how boring was

this? And yet, it wasn't.

With a friend, a true friend, every experience becomes better than it actually is.

The Green Cockatrice wasn't actually that big of an antiques shop, so they'd finished meandering around the isles with still plenty of time to spare. So it wasn't really a hard decision to move onto the tiny café it had.

It was literally just three round weathered tables outside the front, with a couple of chairs to each which looked old enough to be artifacts themselves. Also, café was perhaps a bit of a stretch too. It served four things, three of them drinks. Hot chocolate, tea, water, and toast. Not exactly thrilling.

Nevertheless, Prey and Crimson found themselves outside at one of the three empty tables, waiting for their order of hot chocolate.

Again, it wasn't cold, at least not to them despite all the bundled up ponies from earlier, but it was at least chilly.

Prey was sitting upright on his old stool, meaning the edge of table was still up to his neck, absently picking out a tangle in his wool while Crimson was looking up at the gap of sky between the close packed buildings.

You didn't need to fill the quiet with chatter. Sitting in silence also worked just fine for the both of them.

Prey twitched one drooping ear at the sound of a small flock of pigeons who'd been strutting around on the cobblestones behind him noisily took to the air in that way they did.

Crimson's own tufted ears swivelled, and he looked around, tracing back the pigeons flight path to ground level behind Prey's seat.

Prey saw the moment.

Crimson did not stiffen, but he went from casual to readiness in one breath to the next. The muscles in his folded wings were suddenly somehow much more prevalent, and although he was without

wingblades, Crimson didn't need those to break bones or kill if he wanted to.

The muscles under his red coat didn't bunch up, but all of them shifted just a millimetre all together, creating an overall change from non-ready to ready.

And of course the last signal was Crimson's eyes. The tells in those amber eyes were always the biggest giveaway.

And lastly, because he was Prey, he also felt the sudden hardening in the mental walls of Crimson's mind.

Prey did not turn around, he didn't let himself give them away so easily. He calmly reached up to stroke the end of his ribbon, and stared straight into Crimson's eye, silently asking the question:

'What is the danger? Flee or fight?'

In the one second that they had, Prey stared at Crimson and watched for his response. But Crimson didn't rise, he stayed seated. He held, so Prey stayed and held too.

Only one second, but Prey was abruptly too hot and sweating.

What was the danger? If they were waiting, was it because fleeing would be pointless? Or because holding still was their best chance?

He wanted to turn, to look, but that would trigger everything to start happening.

Prey should've easily been able to hear any hooves approaching them on the cobblestones here, pigeons or no pigeons. That meant it was a griffin padding closer, or a unicorn under a silencing-

"You are not welcome. Go away." Crimson spoke loudly.

"No thanks, I don't think I will. This is a nice public venue, open to anypony. How strange to run into you two, though." Came the confident reply from behind Prey's position.

Prey twisted around, a scowl of distaste already scrunching up his

face at the owner of the voice, 'Strange Happenstance.'

Relief warred for dominance with apprehension for a moment, and then was superseded by aggravation. *This* was who he'd being getting worried about?

Then Prey made the connection, 'How did he find me? Find *us*?'

Had the unicorn been following them since they left the apartment block, and yet none of them had noticed? Or was that his special talent, like Gloom's, but much stronger and accurate? That, or was Strange Happenstance somehow one of the very few master scryers in existence who could somehow scry a person, not even just a stationary object, in real time? Because if it was magic or a special talent, there was little Prey could do to prevent it either.

And did his sudden appearance have anything to do with the demise of the mimics? Prey had not forgotten his first suspicions about Strange Happenstance, despite all evidence to the contrary. Suspicious, very suspicious that the private detective should choose to appear now.

Yes, actually. On second evaluation, this was actually who Prey'd been getting worried about.

Crimson kept coolly regarding Strange Happenstance as the unicorn strolled up, "Fine then, that may not be illegal, but harassment certainly is."

Prey scooted his stool around sideways so he could see the mud coloured unicorn's every move. The solid blank of Strange Happenstance's mind pressed against his mental perception, not quite like that of a mimic's, but not like Crimson's own disciplined walls either.

Prey had learned his lesson with the last mimic, the one who'd so brazenly waltzed into the ISND's office when he was alone, and tried to take control of his emotions. Prey should have been in control of the situation from the very start, the disguised mimic had been in a room surrounded by runes he could've used.

But he'd held back, he'd let the mimic speak first, worried about what contingencies it might have, overconfident that if it came down to it, he could defend himself. So in he hadn't ended up taking any option until it was almost too late and the mimic escaped.

If you let the snake slither into your house instead of killing it because you were afraid, the question wasn't *if*, it was *when* it would bite you.

'I'll just kill you.' Prey thought. Dash forwards and touch the unicorn, throw his ribbon at him, either or, but just make sure he died before he could do whatever he was going to do.

Kill him. Right here, right now. Right in front of Crimson...

'Zoma'Grika.' Prey's heart dropped.

He could kill Strange Happenstance, but then Crimson would see. Hell, it was the middle of the street, even a quiet one like this. *Anyone* might see.

The same indecision which had paralyzed Prey back in the ISND's office once again afflicted him. He couldn't just kill someone like this, no matter what he might suspect, not and expect to get away with it.

'I can't just do this. Driving out the mimics has rattled my perspective, I'm losing sight of what's reasonable.' Prey got ahold of himself. Furtively his eyes darted around, trying to see if he could spot anyone obviously watching. No, but that didn't mean they weren't. Strange Happenstance could have back up hiding just around the corner, and Prey couldn't read the disgusting unicorn's mind to find out.

Prey was in the same predicament all over again, like one giant bloody loop.

It was only a few seconds. The hat and coat wearing detective had walked casually up to their table, ignoring the way Prey drew back, and stopped in front of their small table just out of hoof's reach. Yet

he didn't try to oversell his casual act by pulling up a stool from another table, instead he remained standing, weight evenly spread across his hooves.

Prey considered jumping off his stool, but then he'd be below the table top, and Crimson hadn't risen either. Strange Happenstance slightly tipped his hat brim back and raised one brow challengingly at that. 'You underestimating me?' He seemed to be saying. He probably didn't know how fast Crimson could move.

Crimson and Prey warily watching from one side of the tiny table, Strange Happenstance regarding them back from the other.

Prey finally finished considering his, no, their options and reached the obvious conclusion, 'There's nothing to be gained from interacting with Strange on his terms, and who knows how much to lose. It'll be better to simply leave.'

Unfortunately, by complete chance, Strange Happenstance started speaking just as Prey was making to push away from the table.

"You're both a sight for sore eyes, you know that?"

'What?'

"What?" Crimson echoed Prey's thought out loud.

But Strange hadn't meant it as any sort of compliment, "Seeing both of you, still both free, it makes my eyes hurt. By the way, how's the job destroying border towns going? I see you are both still enjoying the jobs perks at least, what with using your Guard position to escape justice."

Prey didn't look away from the possible threat in front of him, but out of the corner of his eye he spied how Crimson's feathers along the wing he could see bristled.

Mayflower and Alfalfa Dale hadn't been the ISND's fault, they'd fought and bled to stop the reaper king, and here this private detective who didn't know the details was blaming them? It could only be an attempt to rile them up and get emotional. No matter how infuriating and insulting the insinuation was, that was just

what made it so effective. There was no way Prey would believe Strange actually felt that strongly about the perceived injustice to let his emotions control his tongue, not after how manipulative the unicorn had previously proven to be.

Prey spoke fast, cutting in just in case Crimson was about to rise to the bait, "Says the stalker without Night Guard access or knowledge of events. I know for a fact that a private detective has to pass the certified exams to be qualified. It's strange, Strange. I didn't know they approved of their approved detectives skirting the law and blindly following lies and bigotry over hard evidence. I think I should check that with them, actually. I'm sure Captain Nighthawk will be able to put me in touch with the right people."

Prey finished up with a friendly yet utterly unfriendly smile. When pushed, either ignore them or push back, turn the tables and put the fault back on them.

But while he was verbally reposting Strange Happenstance's barb, he was looking around the streets and houses for any witnesses. 'The mimics kept pushing and encroaching, and now they're dead. If you really are with them, then you haven't learned the lesson yet.'

Strange didn't seem moved in the slightest however, just as confidently smirking at them from under his hat brim, "Evidence is what you can prove, and up until you can, it's an investigation. By the way, I never said I was investigating you. This is just a chance meeting. But on a completely unrelated note, I've yet to to undertake an investigation I haven't seen through to it's conclusion. I told you before, the truth will always come out in the end. *Always*."

Crimson let out a low snort, thoroughly unimpressed, and also ticked off if the clenched muscles in his wings were anything to go by, "If I believed that, then I'd have nothing to worry about. But all your words reek of half-truths. And I don't like lies." He added for good measure.

"Well said, now let's get out of here. All those lies have left a bad smell in the air." Prey chimed in, jumping down off his stool. Meaning; 'let's get back to the market where there's Gloom and lots

of witnesses'.

However that seemed to startle Crimson for some reason. In that half a second of surprise his eyes flicked sideways to Prey, showing something, before firmly locking back onto Strange Happenstance and any move he might make.

'What? What's the issue? Is there something-?' Then Prey realised Crimson was hesitating because they were supposed to be waiting for their order of hot chocolate from the Green Cockatrice, because they hadn't paid yet. It was so silly, there was literally nothing stopping them walking away aside from a sense of honesty, but Crimson was caught off guard by the notion of just leaving. Obviously it simply hadn't occurred to him.

Leaving was the smart plan. So what if they didn't pay? It was just hot chocolate. It was foolish to let Strange Happenstance trap them here at the table simply because of ingrained societal expectations.

But of course the infuriating stallion in his coat and hat caught the hesitation. Or perhaps he simply worked it out from the fact they were both sitting at this table, obviously waiting, with no food or drink in front of them.

Strange Happenstance raised his brows in faux offence, "Dine and dashing? Now that *is* illegal and a reportable offense."

"We haven't eaten. Que-e-dee, we haven't stolen anything." Prey immediately shot back, covertly gesturing at Crimson that they needed to go.

"You've placed an order with this fine establishment. You're obligated to pay, even if you don't use the service provided." Strange pressed, taking a step around the table. He stopped though as Crimson smoothly rose to his hooves:

"Keep away from us." He coolly ordered.

"Try me. I'm legally permitted and even obligated to stop you from performing a crime. And dinning and dashing? That's a crime."

"And being publicly harassed at such an establishment is just as

criminal." Prey shot back, eyes locked on the unicorn's horn for the first hint of a spell.

"I've no idea what you're talking about, I'm just passing through the area." Strange said airily, repeating his earlier lie. Then he flipped back to trying to nail Prey in place with his mahogany red gaze alone:

"Violating your probation is also a criminal offense, I shouldn't have to remind you, but here we are. You might want to remember that in case the urge for any more sudden... 'midnight strolls' take you. Oh, and the Nightmare Night party too. Did you remember to inform your probationary officer in advance beforehoof? No? Tsk tsk, that's your second strike. Tsk tsk. Just one more and a re-evaluation and hearing into your case will be realised, and all the evidence brought up and re-examined. Just one more strike, and you're out. You'll slip up and forget to hide your wrong doings again, it's inevitable. I've got you no matter what."

Prey's first instinct was to lash out and kill him. So was his second. Not only did Strange Happenstance dare to try to threaten him, how did he even come by that information? But what really alarmed Prey was the mention of 'midnight strolls'. Did he know? Was he just fishing for a reaction? Was he referring to the night with Luna in Ponyville, repeatedly raising Nightmare Night, or another? Or was he just trying to drive a wedge between Prey and Crimson with false suspicion?

Prey clenched his teeth, 'But I can't kill him. At least, not here.'

It was utterly cliché, but Crimson beat him to asking it; "Are you threatening us?"

Strange Happenstance didn't answer. Rather than repeating his legal blanket denial from earlier, he simply stayed silent, still staring intently at Prey from under his hat brim. Prey openly glared back, but it was just a mask.

He was angry, angry at Strange Happenstance's arrogance, and sick to death of this constantly happening to him over and over and over, but Prey was calculating in his anger.

Prey was just so **sick** of this stallion and the paranoia the private detective caused him, 'I'm changing Lemon Pink's orders from avoidance, to hunting you down and ending you.'

He shouldn't have to deal with this. Hadn't he done more than enough of it for one life time already? He'd only just exterminated the mimics in the tunnels, and Strange Happenstance was so puny compared to that. Prey'd survived the Deeper Green, the Resistance, the Wolfing Wood, kindersnatches, sun worshiping zealots, thieves, Luna, himself, and now latest of all, the mimics. He should be so far beyond a random pony detective by now

But despite it all, Prey didn't feel safe.

Surviving those things didn't suddenly grant him any kind of magical protection from lesser dangers. It doesn't have to be a baloth, it could simply be a lucky child with a knife. Both could kill you just as dead. Prey would know.

All but the Sun Wolf and her younger sister would have to cross the river someday.

So Strange Happenstance? Prey held a healthy fear of him for what he could potentially do.

The detective's eyes narrowed, his thoughts completely opaque. And then completely unexpectedly, he stepped back. Strange Happenstance adjusted his hat, "Well I'll be. So that's how it is, then." He mused.

"That's how what is?" Crimson took a single, precise pace to the side, getting the table out of his way.

Strange just kept backing up, a thoughtful, knowing look on his smug face, "Don't you worry your pretty feathers over it." He drawled.

Whatever he was talking about, Prey didn't know. What could he possibly have just worked out? What did he know? Or was this yet another bluff just to get under their skin?

'You're dead. Shortly, you'll never be a problem to me again. No, no

that's too risky. Don't have Lemon kill him, have her find him and then steal all his memories and mind wipe him instead.' Prey reined his hostility in.

It would be less permanent, but a safer solution. He wanted the departing stallion dead, but if making it look like an accident was too difficult, he'd settle for simply out of his wool.

'But if I can get away with it, then you're dead.'

Prey and Crimson watched the private detective with hawk-eyes as Strange sauntered off, not looking away until the last stitch of his heavy coat disappeared around the turn.

There was a long minute of silent tension, neither of them relaxing. Just waiting for the other horseshoe to drop with a clang.

"What was that about?" Crimson finally asked. He was still standing.

"I've no idea," Prey scowled, "How did he find us? Were we followed? Tracked somehow? It can't just have been dumb luck, so how-?"

The door to the Green Cockatrice was pushed open. Both of their heads jerked around to see the green unicorn worker from earlier, who served both as store worker and the waiter, come out with their two hot chocolates on a tray.

Prey had almost completely forgotten about their drinks order, and why they were waiting out here in the first place.

The unobservant pony didn't even seem to notice both her two customers were both standing and looking like they were about to leave. She just cheerily shuffled up, carefully balancing the tray in her magic.

"Here you go, here you go. Sorry for the wait, yes sorry for the wait." She echoed herself happily, sliding the tray onto the table, managing to just slop a splash of the steaming hot chocolate over the rim of the two mugs. The full moon glasses and non-existent mane style she employed really didn't help her seem any more aware of anything that wasn't her own personal little bubble.

'-nice day, yes, a very nice day. Got an extra mug left, and it's all good. Everything's good-'

'Service with a smile, even if there's nothing worth while going on behind the smile.' Prey thought, glancing back towards the corner again where Strange Happenstance had last been. He tried to relax the tension from out his scarred back.

Slowly he climbed back up onto his stool, and Crimson also retook his place at the old table as the green mare shuffled back to the door, happily humming something annoyingly tuneless.

"I don't understand. Why'd he just leave?" Crimson asked into the silence, looking down blankly into his untouched hot chocolate.

Prey could only shake his head, he didn't know either. Absently he pulled his now hot chocolate stained mug over.

He took a cautious sniff, then raised the steaming mug in both hooves to take a sip of the hot liquid. The heat kind of blanked out the taste, but even so it wasn't great. Prey'd had better hot chocolate at the Nightmare Night party, and that was the mass boiled kind. This had the faintly hidden bitter taste of-

Prey violently spat out his sip.

Crimson lent away, "Is it that hot-?"

"Don't!" Prey shoved himself across the table top to reach Crimson's own mug and knocked it flying.

Dark drown hot chocolate went flying through the air. The mug *cracked* on the cobbles but didn't outright shatter. Crimson sprang to his hooves, wings half spread and ready to fit. "What's happening?"

"Poison." Prey gagged. He hacked and spat, trying to get any trace out. Zoma'Grika, he'd tasted it! Had he somehow swallowed any of it? How much was a lethal dose?

His mind raced in time with his pulse, 'But the waiter wasn't thinking about poisoning us! How-? Someone else in the kitchen?

Slip in and slip out?'

"Prey? Prey! Are you alright? What's going to happen?" Crimson demanded, beside him in even less than an instant.

"Dunno', *gah* I don't know. I spat it out, I don't, I don't think I swallowed any." Prey spoke fast.

Crimson reached for Prey's mug, "But-I mean, was it Strange? But how did he even-?"

"No! Don't even touch it. It might be dangerous, leave it. Strange Happenstance, I'm going to kill-! No, it can't have been him, can it? Wait, could he? The waiter! Stop her!" Prey suddenly cried out.

The green mare had been happy, *too* happy. Oblivious and happy, she'd been shuffling about and barely seemed to have even seen Prey and Crimson. Prey had been distracted, but those signs-she was being controlled. She'd been tricked, her mind or emotions messed with.

The mimics. This was their retaliation. Stupid stupid stupid! He was so stupid!

And what was the last thing he'd heard her thinking? What had that been about an extra cup?

Prey knew the mimics. He'd seen it in Mayflower, and when the fake griffon ambassador had blown himself up rather than be taken captive. 'No loose ends.'

Crimson didn't stop to ask any questions, he sprinted for The Green Cockatrice's door. He hit the door just right to blow it open, the momentum carrying him brought and inside before the rebound could slam it shut again on him.

Prey leapt off his stool, stumbled, and ran after him. He couldn't just bowl through, he actually had to push the door open.

"Stop, stop! You can't go back there!"

There was a clatter, Crimson was already in the kitchen, the

manager ignored. The two ponies who'd been browsing the shelves were frozen, staring towards the kitchen door.

Prey cast around the shop, looking for a giant pony-shaped insect, or for anyone out of place. Someone had manipulated the waiter after all.

But he couldn't see anything wrong about them. More noise from inside the kitchen, the manager was nervously reaching for the door. There was no time to speculate. Prey ran for the store's kitchen himself.

The manager jerked back and yelled in surprise as the lamb slipped out of nowhere and beat him to the door. Prey had no time to waste on him.

The cafe's kitchen was tiny. Little more than room for a cool box, jars of tea and sugar, a stove and kettle, cupboards and shelves, and a backdoor leading to the bins out the back.

It only really had enough room for one person to work in it. Now there were two, three with Prey just inside the doorway. Crimson and the green mare.

Except she was on the floor against the cupboards, spilled hot chocolate across the tiles soaking into her fur, and Crimson crouched over her, gripping the feebly struggling mare's neck and head.

"What have you doing to her?!" The manager shrieked from behind Prey.

Prey grabbed a lie instantly, "She's choking, we heard from outside! We're here to help. Quick, turn her on her side Crimson."

"But I didn't hear anything! How did you-?"

"Don't just stand there, get help!" Prey snapped, desperate to get the panicking pony gone and out of the way, "Find someone, anyone to help."

"B-but, but, but I don't know-"

"Go! Call for help. Pass the word. Go."

Finally that got rid of him, the stallion turning around in a panic and yelling to the other two customers in the store what was happening, so they could all three panic together.

Prey turned back. Crimson had successfully gotten their waiter onto her side, and was forcing her chin up, keeping her airway open. The green mare wasn't helping. Her thoughts were an incoherent mess of panic strangely mashed up with false happiness.

All she knew was that someone was overpowering her, and that it was hard to breathe.

'A simple asphyxiation poison? But then why not go for something slower acting and less noticeable? Because they didn't know I'm skilled in poisons myself? A rushed job? An attack of oppitunity?' Prey thought even as he ran up to Crimson's side, avoiding the mare's kicking hind legs.

She blindly kicked a cupboard door, sending whatever was inside down in a noisy cascade. The spilled hot chocolate slicked the tiles, and the kettle started whistling shrilly on the hob. That's one thing you forget to envision with a potential emergency scenario. That it's not clean, that there's no time, and that there's a lot of noise.

"It's not her. She drank it too, I saw it. She's not the poisoner." Crimson grunted, fighting to keep her head up without hurting her as the kettle whistled.

That's right, Crimson hadn't known that, he'd misunderstood Prey's warning, but there hadn't been time.

"Zoma'Grika." Prey cursed. The mare was his only witness, never mind that the mimic had likely been shapeshifted and she wouldn't remember anything in her addled state anyway.

"Zoma'Grika," He cursed again, "We need to make her throw up right now. I don't know what poison it is, but it's her best chance. Hold her, I need a-"

Prey cast around, and saw a pile of knocked over cutlery holder on

the tiles in the spilled puddle. He snatched up a long handled spoon in the cleft of one hoof.

"Hold her. Get her jaw open, turned to the side." He ordered. The mare struggled, the kettle shrilly whistled, the ponies out in the store neighed and shouted uselessly.

Crimson opened his wings and pinned the mares head down, then used his hooves to drive her jaw open. She panicked harder, but Prey was quick. He ducked under a wing shoved the handle of the spoon down her throat and hit her tonsils.

Naturally, she gagged and then hurled. Prey had already ducked back, avoiding the vomit which came out.

"Don't let her swallow any of that. Make her spit if you can, did you see any water? Charcoal-? No, they wouldn't have any here. Gah!" That could be him on the tiles instead, he'd even tasted the poison on his tongue.

"The sink. Get a cup or something Prey."

"I can't reach, where's a damned-?"

"The kettle has-"

"That's boiling, no way. Need clean water. Salt water, is there any salt?"

"Wha-? Oh, that kind of salt. Stay still. Listen to me, stay still-no don't do that."

"Keep her head up."

"I'm *trying*."

"Hey! If you can hear, stop fighting us. We're trying to save your life."

The mare kicked feebly, the ponies out in the shop panicked uselessly, and all the time the mimic who'd done this was getting away.

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Nighthawk's face was dark. The helmet on his head further cast his expression in shadow. Or maybe it was the weight of the helmet and the duties it represented which weighed so heavily upon the Captain.

"This is the first time something like this has ever happened." Nighthawk stated for those gathered in the first free office they'd found after exiting the Palace infirmary. Prey had been taken in there double-check that there were no effects from the attempted poisoning.

Prey had tried to wheedle out of it, not trusting his health to the Palace doctor. He'd had no luck. The tired and grumpy doctor who'd been awoken hadn't found anything wrong with Prey. Yet. Apparently, there was always a doctor and nurses on call twenty-four seven, and who slept at the Palace exactly for situations like this.

The doctor's surprise at seeing a sheep, and a runt lamb at that, in the Palace and in the company of the Night Guard had privately triggered all kinds of superstitious suspicions in the stallion's head, even if he'd kept his mouth shut throughout his examination. The unicorn had left as quickly as possible afterwards, though. Prey had heard his departing thoughts:

'-what're all these bat ponies even doing with a foal is what I want to know? And poisoned too, and all in Canterlot. Why, if he weren't a Captain…-'

Now they were in the commandeered spare office. Gloom and Crimson were standing close to Prey, as close as they could get without invading his personal bubble of space which he always so rigidly maintained. It was like they were worried someone would appear out of nowhere to try to poison him again.

They hadn't been able to identify the poison used. Not surprising. Prey was probably the closest thing to a poison expert in the whole Palace, not that he sharing that titbit with anyone but Crimson, and he didn't know what the poison had been either. He knew hundreds

of poisons, but there were thousands more out there. And those were only the naturally occurring variants from nature.

He'd gotten a lot of sympathy and worry from everyone, but in the reserved, thestral kind of way. Actions speak louder than words, and what good was; "Sorry you were poisoned. Hope you don't die"? None what so ever.

Instead, they sort of stood around, attentively waiting for the doctor to pronounce if there was anything they *could* do, while thinking grim, worried thoughts.

'-that private detective has some questions to answer. If it was indeed him-'

'-again and again, everypony keeps striking out at us, the Night Guard-'

'-cowardly. How did they even slip in and slip out so fast? No, that isn't what's important-'

'-was it really attempted murder? Cold blooded murder? And one of them a foal?-'

'-why must the ISND always bear the brunt of these assaults? Why can't any of us ever be there in time-'

Although, and here was the big, important point; as far as every single person aside from Prey here knew, the attempted attack had been against the ISND, not solely targeted against the lamb. Prey had just happened to have been the first one to drink from the hot chocolate, but it could just as easily have been Crimson. Prey hadn't been the only target. And that was important.

They didn't know about the mimics, or why they were seeking revenge on Prey. If Prey'd had his way, they wouldn't have ever even found out about this attempt on his life. He would instead have dealt with it personally, but Crimson had been there, plus the waiter, and all the other ponies in the Green Cockatrice at the time.

'But at least they don't know all the details, so that's something.' Prey thought. He felt queasy and ill, but he was prepared to put

that one hundred percent down to the psychological aftereffects, and nothing to do with a sudden onset of poison.

He'd been attacked. Again. The mimics had tried to kill him. He knew this sickening feeling all too well.

'Zoma'Grika, but I hate The Hunt.'

Then there was the waiter mare herself. She hadn't been brought to the Palace, she was in a bed in the Canterlot Hospital. She hadn't been very coherent, barely even seeming to hear those around her asking over and over what had happened, what she remembered, and if she'd seen anypony.

Not that it really mattered. It was obvious to all that if she had seen or sensed anything off, then obviously she wouldn't have drunken the poisoned hot chocolate now, would she?

For that reason, she was cleared of any suspicion of wrongdoing. Someone had somehow poisoned the pot of hot chocolate, and she'd been an unintended casualty. To everyone else concerned, it was just bad luck on her part that there'd been enough left for a third cup, and so she'd poured the excess for herself after serving her customers. She knew nothing.
The manager of the Green Cockatrice would of course be questioned, but all the Night Guards already knew it would go nowhere.

Strange Happenstance was going to be found and questioned, but it was obvious he'd get out of it. He'd been in full view of Prey and Crimson the whole time, and so couldn't have entered the kitchen in that short space of time. An accomplice wasn't out of the question, but all Strange would need to do was deny it, and they were back to square one. Because nobody had been seen, they didn't have anything even remotely approaching proof.

'-we're still going to bring the bastard in and grill him for everything he's worth first, though-'

Plus, as a certified member of law enforcement who'd been thoroughly vetted before he received his detectives licence, Strange

Happenstance got to enjoy a degree of protection against baseless suspicions. Because technically, he had no motive to break the law.

In short, they had no evidence.

“What a mess.” Screech involuntarily muttered, tail swishing behind him, the rest of his thoughts dark and angry.

‘-wherever good ponies rise up, the evil ponies there all lash out. That is the way of it, but by the moon, I miss the clans. Everything is always so complicated and bucked up here. Those nobles, the griffin spies, all criminals, why must it all be so damned complicated? Luna give us all strength, especially Prey-‘

Privately, Prey definitely did not echo that particular sentiment. Gloom, Crimson, and Prey were here as the ISND. Captain Nighthawk, Lieutenant Screech, and a new Corporal by the name of Pinnacle who was to be in charge of co-ordinating with Canterlot Hospital, were the entirety present for the rest of the Night Guard. Not that this news was going to be contained.

By tomorrow night, the rest of the Night Guard command would have been informed about this development and all the Guards under their command would be warned to watch out for any similar attacks against themselves. Because while it was almost certain this was an attempt only against the ISND, not the whole Night Guard, it would be stupid not to spread the warning just in case.

Thestrals were not average citizens. They wouldn’t mass panic, like a lot of normal ponies would've in their place, so there was no point in attempting to contain the information.

It was still just one huge mess, and it was only Prey who secretly knew how big of a mess it really was. Not even Lemon Pink knew yet. He’d have to fill her in as soon as possible.

Yet Prey wasn’t surprised. This was what happened in war. Murder, or attempted murder in this case. He was as guilty as the mimics were. He could only wish once again that it hadn’t spilled over onto Crimson too.

He was still taking it very, *very* personally.

Captain Nighthawk was speaking. Prey stopped tugging at his ribbon to pay attention:

"…Gloom. An attack of opportunity, but that does not mean it cannot happen again. Or even that attempts which simply failed haven't been made before. Princess Luna will be told. However-"

Nighthawk's gruff tone dropped an octave in resigned frustration. They all knew by now how that sentence was finished, 'however there's nothing more we can do'.

Not seeing a need to finish that sentence, Nighthawk moved on and switched to instead saying, "-Our duty remains unchanged. Both as Nights Guards, and to Princess Luna."

"Gliding is easy, but to fly you must flap." Screech murmured in agreement. It seemed to be the thestral equivalent of the saying, 'The only easy roads are those which go downhill'.

"I wouldn't know." Prey demurred with false innocence before he could catch himself. He was distracted, busy juggling potential plans and consequences in his head. Usually in the Night Guard commands presence he stayed as quiet as possible to avoid drawing attention. But the atmosphere and the very recent poisoning attempt drew the secretly sarcastic comment out of him.

It got some mildly surprised looks as people blinked and once again remembered that there was a non-flyer in their midst who didn't get the references and experiences they all understood. Crimson's feathers shuffled. Prey pretended not to be paying any attention to anyone, and that the comment had been reflexive.

By the dead, Prey hated being a runt lamb.

"What action can we take, sir? I'm thinking, but honestly, I can't come up with anything practical or sane." Gloom asked, returning them back to the start of this discussion.

Gloom was angry, furious even. It went beyond someone trying to poison one of his unit, although that was unforgivable enough as it

was. But after all they'd done and endured together, that an attack came when they were in the middle of Canterlot, on their one day off…

It was somehow deeply violating and personal. '-and I wasn't even there when it happened. How *dare* somepony do this-'

That sparked an idea in Gloom's head. "Ah, I just realised, this could've been Griffonia."

Nighthawk and Screech both stood up straighter as that thought settled in their heads. Unseen, Prey winced.

"Huh. Griffonia." Nighthawk mused gruffly.

"And we all know they'd have reason to. But that's only if they've found out it was us who infiltrated Griffon Stone." Screech thought out loud, but it was definitely a thought.

"It would have to have been a pony sir. I mean, a pony working for Griffonia. A griffin would've been spotted if they were the one's to do this." Crimson put in.

Griffonia. There was no evidence, but to everyone here, excluding Prey who's mouth was staying firmly shut, it could fit. But again, no evidence. But even so, it still fit.

"Let's take this to my office." Nighthawk ordered, "It looks like we have more to discuss. Seems there might be spies left in Canterlot after all."

He didn't say the word out loud, but again, everyone here could think for themselves.

'-or not spies, but worse. Assassins-'

Prey mentally groaned in exhaustion, 'What an utter mess.'

Intrigue. A failed assassination attempt. Mystery. Politics. False accusations. Paranoia, both justified but also misdirected. It was

like one of those awful action novels, where the hero gets the heroine in the end, or visa-versa.

It felt a lot less silly to Prey when he'd been the one to survive the assassination attempt. And while there was no proof which pointed to Griffonia, in fact there was an abundance of proof that it couldn't have been them, the tension's between the two nations were going to increase yet again because of this. Or maybe only on Equestria's side of things, since the nation of feathered bird lions wouldn't be in the know.

Or it was even possible nothing would change. Prey was hardly important. He was a runt lamb, a convict pressganged into service, and a child. He was a nobody. Now, if it had been an Equestrian noble or diplomat on the other hoof...

Still, it hadn't been the griffins, but the mimics sloppy attack still meant Prey was the one left in the lurch, what with being a Night Guard, and serving Princess Luna. How unfair was it that you had to help deal with your own failed assassination attempt? There should've been a law against that. Emotionally compromised, or some other excuse, Prey wasn't picky.

But no, that was against cosmic law. As punishment for his sins, and they were many, Prey wasn't allowed to have nice things.

Prey had to accept with weary resignation that the next fortnight, or longer, of his life in the ISND was going to be exclusively taken up with the hopeless task of hunting for more Griffonian spies that didn't exist. Two solid weeks was not a short amount of time. It wasn't months, but a lot could happen in two weeks.

Or a lot of nothing could happen instead. A lot of dull, boring, dragging, nothing.

Ask anyone. Two weeks is a long time when you're spending twelve hours a day, sometimes even fourteen when they over ran, working yourself to the bone on a task which turned up nothing.

Gloom and Crimson had become... oddly protectively paranoid. Which irked Prey for reasons he couldn't quite pin down.

They didn't discuss the poisoning attempt, only talking about it from the professional standpoint of their job.

"What motives would any employee of the Green Cockatrice have, if any?", "Where there any disturbance reports filed in the area the day before or the day after?", "Can the poison be traced?"

Things like that. ISND things. Things they didn't have to try to express and muddle out how it affected them personally.

So by silent agreement they didn't talk about it except professionally at any point during those two weeks.

The three of them tried searching through the Equestian postal service lists again to see if there was anything there. They found over a dozen possible links. A dozen possible links that they had to investigate, and a dozen possible links that turned out to be nothing.

They went back to the Gemstone refineries and mines, interviewing some of the forepony's and managers, but it was just turning over old ground again.

They even interviewed the captured Hafflow, the griffin who Nighthawk and the others had secretly abducted on their mission to Griffonstone, and who'd been the start of all this. Surprisingly, it was the first time Prey actually ended up seeing the griffin in person, despite having viewed the dark, almost black feathered griffin before in the dreamscape. In the shared dream with Screech. The one Luna had dragged him into without his permission, and utterly against his consent.

Luna. Even bottling up and putting aside his own personal disgust for Luna, and only looking at it from a logical standpoint, (and it was a not an easy thing to do), Prey still had trouble wrapping his head around her arrogance and brashness in ordering the mission in the first place. It should have failed, and if it weren't for Crimson and Gloom having been on the mission at the time, Prey would have been insulted that it *hadn't* failed like in all probability it should've.

But back to Hafflow. The visit to see the captured griffin had ended up being only brief.

The griffin had a cell. Not a dungeon cell, but more an actual room. One he couldn't leave, but still a room nonetheless. That had come as an honest surprise to Prey. He'd expected Luna to have given special instructions specifically ordering Hafflow's life to be made miserable. There were so many methods available to slowly break a person over time. No light, withholding food and water, a cramped, low ceiling, a cold cell, loud noises at irregular intervals, the removal of all forms of privacy, and those were only the most harmless of methods Prey knew of.

Instead, Hafflow had a small room. White, unadorned walls, a desk and a chair, an unmade cot, and a sink and a toilet in the corner with a privacy curtain which could be drawn. The desk even had a couple of paperbacks on it.

Really, the only difference which clearly distinguished this as a cell, not a room in a very cheap bed and breakfast overnight motel was that it had two doors, both of which could only be opened from the outside. The first was just a solid door with a viewing hatch, but the second was a metal barred affair. The second was always shut, but during the day, the first door would be kept open so that the prisoner's room could be seen into.

There was no need for a lightless, empty, lead lined vault when you were a magicless griffin. Not that there weren't some enchantments on the cell, Prey was sure there was an alarm spell in there at the very least.

Seriously though, this is what an international criminal warranted? This was actually slightly better than most households out on the border. Or was it precisely *because* the dark feathered griffin was an international criminal?

'Then again, perhaps Luna doesn't care enough to bother tormenting the griffin now that she's gotten what she wanted. Her hatred did seem to be more aimed at Felyawn, and he's now apparently dead.' Prey had thought as he stood behind Gloom, looking into the 'cell'. He was sure and alicorn had better things to be doing with her

time.

Or maybe not. Who knew? When you were immortal, you got to experience all the time in the world once. The only thing you couldn't do was go forwards or backwards in it.

However, Prey didn't get his questions on the passage of time from an immortals perspective answered that day. It balanced out though, in a way, because the ISND didn't get any of their other questions answered either. Hence the short visit.

Hafflow had been laying on the cot on his front. He looked up when the three of them arrived outside the barred gate. From the way he started, he clearly recognised and remembered Gloom and Crimson well. New armour and colour changing enchantments or none, they'd been the ones to capture, tie up, and fly him all the way back to Equestria after all. Of course the griffin would recognise his tormentors.

Hafflow had rolled off his cot and stared at the two stallions. Not glared, just stared. His sharp yellow eagle eyes didn't have the sharpness Prey had come to associate with griffins. They were the eyes of the weary who was slowly loosing hope day by day.

"When can I go back to my home?" Hafflow had asked.

He hadn't answered any of the questions they asked, just; "When can I go back to my home?"

None of them had been very sympathetic to Hafflow's plight, and the griffin could obviously see that. He well knew his position as a political prisoner, and despite his trial and sentencing, the actual punishment which would be levied against Hafflow was still a bit hazy to everyone.

"When can I go back to my home?" Hafflow knew that his imprisonment was political, and knowing politics, he was holding out hope that he'd get politically released. But that flame of hope was obviously dwindling as one day turned into the next.

'He's no Stormcrow, yez'? A city griffin. No point to his talons, and

no iron in his wings.' The remnant of Garrow had whispered in scornful glee.

Still, just as Prey had known they wouldn't, the ISND got nothing further out of Hafflow. Not even when Prey made a token effort and got under Hafflow's feathers and riled him up did the griffin do anything other than stand in his cell and refuse to reply to any of their questions with anything but; "When can I go back to my home?"

"When you've served your time, and not before." Gloom had eventually snapped at him, and they'd left.

The griffin had never been going to be able to tell them anything, but it still felt anticlimactic and cheap to Prey. Felyawn in contrast had been so driven, so sure of himself. Prey remembered the freezing fire in the griffin ambassador's ice fleck eyes, before he'd been replaced by the mimics of course, but his message and his devotion to his nation had been so much more impressive than the defeated, black feathered griffin in the cell behind them.

And it circled back around to the mimics in the end, exactly like it had started.

The mimics.

Prey had thought he was done with them.

He had hoped he'd finally driven them out.

He'd believed they'd finally learnt to leave him alone.

'Perhaps it's I who should've learnt the lesson.' Nowhere is safe. Nothing is sacred. No one can be trusted.

Now his future was back to being uncertain and dangerous again. He honestly didn't know what he could further do to scare them off.

He'd burned them, cut them, hurt them, suffocated them, poisoned them, and killed them. And in such a final, all encompassing, blanket sweep was which killed everything or nearly everything in the tunnels under the mountain. And yet still, the mimics had tried

once more.

Was it a final attempt at revenge by a broken force? Or was it them continuing to fight back with what remained to them? Which was it? The answer could change everything. Too bad Prey had no way of finding out on which side the answer fell, and so would have to assume the worst. If he ever dropped his guard, then he was dead.

Prey was not taking the attempted poisoning well. People tried to kill him all the time it felt like, but the threat, that fear of death in the moment when your heart was pounding in your ears, and you could taste you own bile, and the unbidden question comes and you don't know the answer; 'Am I going to die?'

It wasn't a pleasant experience. It's not fun being the prey.

But two weeks became three, Hearth's Warming was right around the corner, and their work still yielded nothing. Because there was nothing to find. It hadn't been the griffins, it had been the mimics.

Prey didn't know what, if anything, Luna thought about this. Nighthawk had no doubt of course informed her in his reports, as a good little Guard Captain was supposed to, but whatever she'd told the gruff thestral Captain in return, he wasn't repeating.

That was honestly the best outcome Prey could've hopes eventually for on that front.

And then, because it had only been just around the corner, Hearth's Warming finally happened.

The green, gold, and red decorations on the streets and hanging from the eves of every houses had bred and multiplied. Small green fir and pine trees sprang up overnight, imported holly wreathes morphed out of doors, the sound of carols could be heard distantly throughout the day, no matter where you were in the city, and ponies started wearing ridiculous sweaters, jumpers, scarfs, ear warmers, and hats. Some of them even had bells on them.

Now everywhere and everything seemed to be infested with the

festive holiday cheer. Everyone had been warned well in advance of the coming weather schedule for snow, how long it would last, when it would be carried out, where to take your children for the best sledding, and where to go for the best winter scenery. Because apparently, there was a rota every year to make sure all of Canterlot got its fair share of the festive spotlight.

Prey hadn't realised just how big of an event Hearth Warming was to ponies.

But standing on the open hallway of the second story outside his apartment, with the cold, dry breeze blowing stiffly into his face, and looking out onto the neighbourhood from his vantage point, that point was really driven home.

Because you could see it. Looking down from up here, you could literally see the decorations, the festivities, and the atmosphere. It was all around. The magnitude of it had rather snuck up on Prey with how seriously everyone was taking it, or everyone who wasn't an outsider or a Night Guard that is.

Why, if you had an unobstructed line of sight, were to look up and to the east from anywhere within Canterlot to the Palace, you'd see the biggest Hearth's Warming tree in all of Canterlot out the front. It was massive, glittering with decorations and light at all times of day and night. The tree must have been centuries old before it was felled, so large that it'd needed to be airlifted into position between two airships. Prey hadn't seen it himself, they'd been busy, but he'd overheard all about it from the chattering Palace staff.

Hearth Warming was everywhere.

The season was a nationwide event. Not like out on the border, where it was small and private, here in Equestria it was loud and huge. If nothing else, most businesses turned over more profit on the weekend of Hearth Warming than they averaged for an entire month. Or even two months.

Looking at it from even just that one angle, of a monetary one, Hearth Warming was huge. And what allowed every single nation in the whole entire world function? Why, the wonderful glitter of

gold of course.

And reluctantly, Prey had a piece in the seasonal event by dint of being in Equestria, and by them knowing non-thestrals. Scenic, Carton Juice, Lilly, and Saffron.

"Happy Hearth's Warming!" Carton and Scenic chorused. They were there in the giant earth mare's bee themed flat, all seven of them.

Prey, Crimson, and Gloom from the ISND.

Saffron Swirl was also here, but couldn't stay for long, because she had a Hearth's Warming show she had to appear in as part of her job. She was dressed in what on anyone else would've been a garishly bright red and green festive jumper, but which on her somehow looked perfect.

Then there was Scenic, wearing a ridiculous paper crown matching his marefriend's atop his head, and who had helped greatly in getting this evening's celebration ready.

Carton Juice herself, the huge mare beaming down at all her guests as she welcomed them all into her sitting room, a small decorated pine tree in the corner with colourful wrapped presents underneath.

And last, and possibly least if you were feeling spiteful, Lilly Blossom, wearing her now customary loose shift and silk scarf to hide what she could.

Lilly was reluctant to be here, but Prey listened to Lilly mentally telling herself not to buck this evening after all the effort Carton had put into it. Lilly had been silently hoping that her parents would reach out to her at least for Hearth's Warming, and invite her to share in the family's celebration back home.

Failing that, she had at least been hoping for an invitation from Tallow, her brother, the one who was slowly making an effort. But nothing had come of her hope, and so she was left to celebrate Hearth's Warming with strangers for the first time in her life, instead of her blood family.

Actually, it was only Carton Juice here tonight who'd *had* the option of spending Hearth's Warming with her elderly parents.

"Who wants pie?" Carton Juice enthused, thoroughly enjoying herself tending to all her guests, setting out the fruit punch on the bee patterned tablecloth here, darting over to get Lilly comfortable on a floor cushion there, and just generally being a good host. Gone were the days of her nervousness in front of Gloom and Crimson, although she still couldn't look the former in the eye for any length of time:

"There's plenty to for everypony! I've baked an apple one, a rhubarb, a pumpkin, and parsnip one so everypony has lots of choice. Then we've got the roast potato bake for the actual meal, and then there's ice-cream, orange cake, cream, jelly, and chocolate for desert. Oh, and also just plain shaved ice for anypony who wants to follow the Hearth's Warming tradition instead."

Prey looked on for his second-most customary corner out of line of sight from the window. He'd dragged over a floor cushion almost as soon as arriving, intending to remain as unnoticed as possible for the duration of the visit. Unfortunately, his usual corner of Carton's living room was taken up by the Hearth's Warming tree.

Meanwhile Gloom was putting in the effort to be a conscientious and good guest, Crimson too in his own brand of blunt and sometimes obliviousness, but with Saffron and Lilly there as well, there was plenty of attention to go around. Enough that Prey didn't have to join in on any conversations, he could just sit near the fire, (his second seating choice), and go mostly undisturbed, him being bodily present enough to qualify as 'participating'.

The mantlepiece had its now familiar assortment of bee ornaments set upon it, but also hanging beneath it now a number of fake snowflakes dusted in glitter, and a weird decoration which was a fusion of four horseshoes, joined in the middle and all fanning outwards. Prey vaguely wondered what it was supposed to be, but only vaguely. He wasn't about to ask.

Which was fine, as it turned out Gloom was also intrigued by the oddly forged bits of metal, and asked the other ponies what it was

supposed to represent.

Saffron had beamed broadly, "It is a clover, as a symbol of Clover the Clever. Note the four leaves to signify good luck and hope in the future to come."

'-I asked that same question the first Hearth's Warming after I was put out. I hadn't seen one either back then-'

It appeared there was a multitude of small, (and pointless in Prey's view), traditions surrounding Hearth's Warming. Like the placing of an orange on the mantlepiece, the sun decoration at the top of the tree, hiding a bundle of string beans around the house, and using a broom to sweep the doorstep, (even if there wasn't any snow on it because of the porch's roof), and singing the Hearth's Warming story carol around the table before you could start eating.

Prey actually knew the one about the hanging mistletoe in the door frame, or thought he did until Scenic and Carton kissed under it. That wasn't what the mistletoe was supposed to mean! Or at least, not out on the border. But this wasn't the border, this was they golden city of Canterlot.

When Prey un-subtlety checked his meal for poison, well, it was still too subtle for the normal ponies in the cosy room, Gloom and Crimson didn't say a word. In fact, they waited for him to nod and cut into a slice of pie before they even touched their own. Not that they thought for even a single second Carton Juice would even consider poisoning a rat, let alone a person, but then, the waiter hadn't known she was serving poisoned hot chocolate either, had she?

Free food was free food though, so Prey at least made sure to politely say thank you to Carton Juice for that, since you should never take your next meal for granted.

At his thanks, Carton had predictably gone; "Dw'aa, it's nothing," While still smiling with pleasure.

Everyone else complimented and thanked her for the food as well, Saffron the most eloquently, and Lilly the most perfunctory even if

she really meant it, and Carton was left bubbling with happiness. She was an honest person who found honest happiness in making other's happy too.

'Spoiled, racist, entitled, and ignorant, and yet she's still a nicer person than me.' Prey could admit that to himself.

"Gather round, gather round. It's time for the gifts." Carton announced, clapping her huge hooves softly together.

Mayhap's she'd meant it to be a surprise, or perhaps simply not expected Gloom and Crimson to quite get all the nuances of Hearth's Warming as outsiders, but if so, it wasn't a surprise. Everyone here had brought a bag with them this evening, with a selection of small gifts for everyone else. Nothing big and fancy, just as a nice gesture all around.

Even Prey had ended up buying a present for everyone. It was less effort than arguing over the real value of giving, and it wasn't like he really cared about his Night Guard salary.

Gloom got up and went to get the bags and boxes they'd left in the hallway, while Carton and Scenic went on about how; "You didn't have to", and Saffron excused herself to also go play fetch. Crimson had kindly carried Prey's own bag of small purchases from their flats to here tonight, and when Gloom returned, he passed Prey the plain cardboard box.

Prey flipped open the lid, and inside, loosely wrapped in newspaper and tied up with string were his gifts. Because really, what use was fancy wrapping paper? All you did was rip it off to get to the real thing inside. No one cared about a banana peel, only the fruit.

What followed was the sounds of polite delight, mixed with thanks, laughter over some of the more humorous or ironic gifts, and the noise of scrunching paper.

Saffron helped Lilly get out and pass around her very badly and overly wrapped gifts, some looking like they'd taken almost a ream of wrapping paper to get right.

Prey ended up with a small pile of unwrapped presents of his own in front of him. He'd checked for any traps before unwrapping each one, but nothing exploded, and at the end of it he was left with a collection of mostly useless knick-knacks.

Carton and Saffron still didn't get it, despite everything, they hadn't experienced anything alongside Prey and the rest of the ISND, and so didn't understand, and thus, had given Prey some distinctly unsuitable presents. Obviously they meant well, and Prey smiled with a happy mask, but the gifts were still worthless.

Carton's was a small sketch pad and colouring pencils, specially chosen small so they'd be easy for him to use as a runt.

There was some ironic humour there, Prey thought, about the giantess giving a runt something scaled down to his size. He'd discreetly throw them away later, but for now, he just thanked her and pushed his own newspaper wrapped forwards for her. He didn't hoof it over directly to avoid any contact. Carton was so delighted she didn't even notice.

"Aww, that's so sweet and thoughtful of you! Thank you so much Prey." She almost squealed. Really, she was just a giant child.

Saffron Swirl on the other hoof had given him a big collection of ribbons, in every colour of the rainbow and size. "I thought you might want some variety. A different colour for every day." She'd said.

She didn't know how close to the invisible line she was treading, nor what Prey's ribbon meant. Crimson and Gloom didn't even know, but they both still winced and put on a false grin and offered Prey false congratulations. They didn't relax until they saw that Prey just thanked her, and didn't take issue.

Ha, as if Prey was going to flip out and suddenly kill someone over a misunderstanding which was harmless. If she'd known, *and* given him a ribbon knowingly, then Prey would've taken issue, but that wasn't the case here. Besides, Hearth's Warming was supposed to be the season of forgiving and new starts, wasn't it?

From Lilly, he got a box of chocolates. Gloom had thought along similar lines, except with him he'd given Prey a huge paper bag bulging with a mix of candies and sweets in every shape and size.

"I, it seemed appropriate at the time. I won't hold it against you if you throw it all out instead." Gloom quietly confided in Prey with a meaningful look. He was thinking about the poisoning attempt, of course.

It went without saying that Scenic, Lilly, Carton, and Saffron weren't in the know about that. They weren't Night Guards, and that information was considered sensitive.

"Thank you anyway." Prey nodded. It was a nice gift, not practical in the immediate sense, but it was food which was practical all on its own, and what's more, it was candy which meant Gloom actually knew something about Prey.

Prey decided to decide whether to throw all the candy away later. It would be a shame, but all that sugar and sharp tastes really did make it hard to spot any poisons.

Silly, ridiculous, unlikely, but it had already happened once hadn't it? But he could debate that later. Back to the presents at present.

Scenic and Carton had already exchanged their own gifts earlier, so now they were just distributing what they'd for everyone else out.

Saffron got a book series from Scenic, and a fancy tail ornament from Carton. Lilly also got a book series, but a different one, and a bee patterned scarf from Carton, which was a little bit awkward, as Saffron had also gotten Lilly a scarf, but a much more fashionable one.

Gloom had gotten a painting off a sheepish Scenic, depicting a windswept crag that the thestral nevertheless seemed quite taken with. He got a vest coat from Saffron, one of those thick ones with lots of pockets, which honestly wasn't a half bad gift, chocolates from Lilly, and jars of honey from the only beekeeper among them; Carton.

Crimson gave him a magic tinder box. Basically it consisted of two enchanter crystals, which shot off sparks when they touched together. 'Very nice. I should get a bunch of those as spares. Matches are great, but only as long as they stay dry. And those stones are faster to use than runes would be.'

And Prey gave Gloom a knife.

It was a nice knife. In fact, Prey gave everybody a knife, even Lilly, which might've been a bit inappropriate but that wasn't his problem.

"Um, thank you." Saffron said blinking down at her knife, for once at a loss for words.

Honestly, there was no pleasing some people. It wasn't as if he'd given them all skinning knives, or fighting daggers.

Saffron had been given a nice kitchen knife, very sharp, with a hoof loop for use by non-unicorns. Or in this case, magicless unicorns. Lilly had gotten a similar knife. Scenic had gotten a pocket knife, one with plenty of fold out tools which you'd use maybe once, if that, during the entire time you owned the whole thing.

Carton had gotten an oversized bread knife, one with a wooden handle to match her size, which was honestly almost a small hacksaw. It had a bee imprinted into the wood, so Carton was happy enough with it. Gloom and Crimson both got something a bit smaller and more harmless looking, but that was a lot less innocent in purpose.

Two small, short, flat blades, with handles less than the width of the knife, and shorter than the blade itself.

"How do I hold it?" Gloom had asked.

"Try touching it."

When Gloom did, the enchantment in the handle made it cling to his hoof. Gloom pulled the short blade from its also very flat sheath, looking over the gleaming metal. It wasn't purposefully made for cutting, or sawing, cleaving bones, or stabbing. It was meant to be

hidden. The small and flat nature of the knife and sheath was purposefully chosen to allow it to be strapped beneath armour, or to the underside of a foreleg.

'-a backup blade-', Gloom had correctly deduced almost immediately.

Just a little something to help tilt the odds just in case. Something you could use to cut ropes, or if it really came down to it, whip out in a close quarters scuffle to open up the other person's stomach before they even realised. That, and just a few runes Prey had added for some extra unnatural sharpness and willingness to part hide and muscle.

Crimson looked over his own knife, testing the sharp edge with a loose black strand of his long mane. Satisfied, he slotted the small, deceivingly inoffensive blade back into the plain sheath, and nodded once to Prey in thanks and understanding.

Not that she was here tonight, but Prey had even gotten Lemon Pink a knife, or rather *another* knife. It had a fair few more runes on it than Crimson or Gloom's did, but it wasn't simply for a Hearth's Warming present, it was first and foremost to fill a practical role. Prey idly wondered what she herself had gotten her coltriend for Hearth's Warming, and what she'd been given in return.

Well, he'd find out when they secretly met after work tomorrow. The city morgue was basically empty of staff at this time of year, but just as filled with the deceased. Death is a festive tradition three-hundred and sixty-five days a year after all, and Prey could do with some more intact unicorn corpses to study.

The rest of everybody's gifts were more mundane in nature. Shiny baubles, chocolate, kitchenware, jars of honey, another couple of good paintings done by Scenic, ear muffs for the cold, a snow globe, and the like.

After all the wrapping paper was cleared away, Carton Juice broke out a strawberry meringue cake, with enough sweetness to give you a sugar headache at sight alone, and let everyone sit back, relax, digest their overindulgence, and enjoy.

Well, that's what they *would've* done if they were normal, conventional ponies, but only half of their number were. As a result, what *should've* by all seasonal rights been a relaxing evening which maybe descended into monopoly or charades, instead ended up as a theoretical debate about how you would survive a night on top of a mountain in a howling blizzard. Which lead naturally onto the fables of wendigos, a slightly sarcastic offer from Prey to tell a tale about wendigos from the border, which got hastily rejected by Scenic, and a delayed rejection from Lilly after she'd thought it over.

All in all, Prey'd had worse Hearth's Warming. Many worse. Fifty-nine of them worse. Fifty-seven of those rotting in Dreverton, and the other two inside the Deeper Green where he'd been so focused on simply surviving he hadn't known what day, week, or even month it was. Gossamer had experienced other Hearth Warming's from before, but not Prey.

All told, the evening wasn't as awful as Prey had been expecting it to turn out to be. And while it would've been much more productive to have spent it building runic arrays, he didn't have anything special he would've been doing alone for Hearth's Warming either.

So as the perfect thickness of a layer of snow blanketed the windowsills and rooves outside, (officially judged to be three and a half inches by the weather teams), and the warmth and cheer of the indoors contrasted the bright cold, there could certainly have been worse ways to spend an evening.

It was... not bad. Not bad at all.

In fact, there were only three ongoing things at present which would serve to ruin the sense of peaceful enjoyment. Which for Prey, when compared to his normal count, three wasn't actually that outlandishly of a high number.

Number one, his ongoing enslavement by Luna. That hadn't changed, but nor had it gotten any worse.

Second was of course the mimics, and was the most immediate and very real threat to him.

And for number three, was Strange Happenstance. And that issue was, Lemon Pink had failed to find the other unicorn.

After Strange Happenstance's incredibly suspicious timing at the Green Cockatrice, and that was before even taking into account all the paranoia, anxiety, and fear the private detective with his shielded mind had caused Prey. He didn't know what Strange's real motives were, nor what he was hiding. And Strange Happenstance most certainly *was* hiding something. And Prey was utterly sick of him.

So he'd sent Lemon Pink out to track down the stallion, or possibly even secretly a mimic, (because every time Prey thought he had the stallion's species figured out he went and did something to induce doubt), and Prey'd had enough. Lemon was going to find him, then they were going to capture him, and then they were going to take all of his memories. Then Prey would know how concerned he really needed to be, and what courses of action he was free to take to permanently deal with his Strange problem. Be that either mind alteration, or making the pony disappear entirely.

But Lemon couldn't find him.

Strange Happenstance was supposed to be a private detective, and he was officially registered too, but there was no registered home address. The office address came up empty, the small rented building dusty and unused. Further more, even illegally gaining access to the citizen registry hadn't revealed any one living in Canterlot with the name Strange Happenstance, although it was certainly possible they'd missed them. Even when you narrowed it down by the start of a first and last name, it still left hundreds of possible records, both current and old in storage.

Lemon Pink asking in disguise at the Civil Law and Prosecution Agency, that agency which Strange had subtly tricked into going after Crimson before Prey had dealt with them, hadn't yielded anything on how to find Strange Happenstance either. All the workers there knew was that he occasionally appeared in conjunction to cases, but nothing about how to actually contact him.

Strange Happenstance seemed to have business acquaintances, but no close friends or even business partners who could assist in the search. Be that willingly, or unwillingly.

It was utterly suspicious, and not at all like any other citizen in Canterlot. It meant without a doubt Strange Happenstance or someone else had gone to a lot of trouble to hide the private detectives everyday and public existence. Law wise, it was bordering on illegal. Or at least negligent on the records departments.

Not that Prey cared about the legality. If he found Strange Happenstance, what he would do to the stallion was in every way illegal too.

Not even when Nighthawk had summoned in the Private detective after the poisoning incident to interrogate him, (because of course the Night Guard Captain wasn't remiss enough to let Strange's unfortunate timing at the Green Cockatrice slide), had it given Prey anything to go off.

Mainly because Strange Happenstance had presented himself at the Guard compound without fuss before he could be summoned, which by the sound of it, would have been an issue since he didn't seem to have a permanent address. Almost like he didn't want his private address to be on the Night Guards records.

And of course in the interrogation, Strange Happenstance had denied everything, citing pure bad luck, just like they'd known he would before they even began.

Nighthawk and Screech hadn't explicitly told him about the attempted poisoning of Prey and Crimson, trying to trick the stallion into slipping up and admitting something, but that had yielded no fruit. And really, when they got down to it, it didn't seem likely Strange was guilty to them in the first place, or at least not guilty of the poisoning attempt.

Regardless of any of that, Nighthawk had told Strange Happenstance in no uncertain terms to leave the ISND alone, or else. Not that Prey had been there for the interrogation, but he'd

heard second hoof that when Strange Happenstance challenged the Captain, "Or else what?", Nighthawk had refused to elaborate, simply growling, "Or else you'll find out." Either way, it had been a dead end.

It was infuriating. Nobody should be able to hide from Prey with all he had at his disposal. But Canterlot was huge, home to tens of thousands, and it was really diluting the scent, as it were. And Prey wasn't able to fully commit himself to the hunt, he had to split his focus on the mimics, and building the runes he and Lemon both needed to survive. It unfortunately came down to priorities. And Prey was much more afraid of the unknown shapeshifting mimics, with equally unknown numbers, magic, and motivations than he was of the private detective.

Not to put too fine of a point on it, but the mimics had definitely tried to kill him. *Multiple* times. Strange Happenstance had maybe tried to kill him once, total, if he was indeed even involved with the poisoning attempt.

Strange Happenstance would have to be a problem for another time. For tonight was Hearths Warming. And Prey got to spend it with his one true friend. Alright, one true friend, one nearly-almost friend, and four tolerable acquaintances.

Not the best possibility he could've imagined. Actually, he'd had a different idea about inviting Crimson to something of his own design instead, but this wasn't too bad of an alternative in the end. Not so bad at all.

A poisoning attempt. Two, and then three weeks of pointless investigation. Scheduled snow, and then Hearth's Warming. One year draws to a close. Another was shortly to begin. New changes lay ahead. New events, new perils, new successes and failures, new surprises both good and bad.

Come what may, it would still come. Because that's what time does. It never stops, nor slows, nor tires. It is simply the passage of time.

Prey, Gloom, and Crimson would shortly go back to their flats, return to work tomorrow afternoon, and from that perspective, not

much would've changed. Was that good or bad?

And indeed, the new year didn't bring huge change to the ISND. Not every seasonal event finishes in a climax of self reflection and new year resolutions. Sometimes, it was just *time*.

It was late in the new year, approaching the end of January, and already the weather teams were pushing Canterlot rapidly back towards the warmer temperatures and climate that ponykind so adored.

The ISND had already completed two separate cases to catch some small time smugglers, quite by accident uncovering them when searching for the griffin spies which didn't exist.

And then, at the end of the first month of the year, chaos did reign.

"*Despair under a sweet tasting sky of pink, because up will be down and down will be up, and how shall we fly away when we fly in reverse*?"

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Some forgot. Prey didn't. But did it ever help?

84.6 Candy Apple on a Stick

From the thestral Clan of Myrrdon, a prophecy by an unrecorded elder sometime between 320 - 340 A.C.

'Despair under a sweet tasting sky of pink, because up will be down and down will be up, and how shall we fly away when we fly in reverse?'

It was late in the new year, approaching the end of January, and already the weather teams were pushing Canterlot rapidly back towards the warmer temperatures and climate that ponykind so adored.

The ISND had already completed two separate cases to catch some small time smugglers, quite by accident uncovering them when searching for the griffin spies which didn't exist. Really, the smuggling ring had been nothing big.

And then, at the end of the first month of the year, chaos did reign.

Self-deceiving liars. Ponies who thought they were something special, who'd been told their whole lives growing up they were something special, whose cutie marks convinced them they were something special. A unicorn who was exceptionally skilled at ice magic, a pegasus who could fly the fastest, an earth pony who could crush boulders with their hooves.

They all thought that made them special. Unique. *Powerful*. That's what they thought.

'All those arrogant ponies, with their *pride* and their *precious* harmony and their shallow *friendship*. And somehow that makes them oh-so *special*.'

Prey wasn't special. Despite all he'd done, survived, and achieved,

he was anything but special. The Deeper Green, Snake, the Resistance, Dreverton, the mimics, any and all of it. He should be dead. He should not have survived all of that. It was nothing but blind luck. He might've fought, struggled, and crawled, giving it his every breath and sacrificing everything, but that didn't make him special.

Others had done the same long before he had. But they were still dead and he was the one alive. Why? That wasn't fair or balanced. He wasn't special.

People always think if you're special, and if you have the one thing you can do better than anyone else, that somehow makes you better. Unique. Skilful. More likely to survive.

Prey wasn't the fastest. He wasn't the strongest, the smartest, the luckiest, the most ambitious, the most resilient, the best liar, the best tactician, the most determined, flexible, perceptive, shrewd, focused, resourceful, creative, daring, skilful, or even the cruellest.

Prey couldn't claim to be the best at any of those. And he wasn't. He wasn't the best at any of them. There were people who were *more* at any of those than he could ever be. Prey was a survivor, but he wasn't special.

He was just a scared little runt lamb who wanted to be left alone.

'The sun rises, the sun sets. But we all have to cross the river someday.'

Everyone but immortals, that is.

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Prey's head was hurting. It was behind his eyes and thudding in his ears.

His head was hurting. Why was he hurting-? Oh, that was right.

That's right. He remembered. He *could* remember.

What was he remembering? His head was hurting. His shut eyes

were throbbing. He remembered he was-

He was running! Prey surged back to his hooves, and then flailed wildly as he went to far. His stomach lurched, the cobble stones just below his hooves. Everything was wrong, he was almost weightless, he was starting to tip into a summersault.
The road came back into reach-Yes! His hooves scraped on the stones and-

-And gravity snapped back as if it had never left. Prey hit the hard cobbles on his front, the air painfully leaving his lungs. He desperately clung to the cobbles with all four limbs. That was the rule, he had to keep at least one hoof on the road at all times or he would 'slip'.

He flinched as a horn blasted deafeningly close by. Trumpets joined in out of nowhere, trumpeting away with no tune. It was deafening.

Jangle ***Smash**** Was that breaking glass? Metal? An odd, flowery smell filled his nose. Prey looked down at the road.

The cobbles were bars of white soap, embedded in the cement of the road.

Prey shouted and recoiled in shock, almost losing hold. And then he did lose hold, the soapy cobbles becoming too slippery just to spite him.

'No no no!'

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There was a cart spinning end over end at obscene speeds, locked in place in the air. Wind whistled dangerously with its rotation speed. The crumpled wheels lay smashed into splinters below deep indents against the far wall, showing where the extreme rotations had hurled them with lethal force when they'd sheared free.

Prey's head was really hurting. It was a specific kind of hurt, thudding behind his eyes and ringing in his ears.

He was afraid. There was fear lacing his blood, weakening his

muscles and making his legs shake.

'Gloom, and... where's Crimson?!'

"Round and round we go! Life's a merry~go~round, round round around~!"

Prey flinched and glanced upwards fearfully, although he hadn't a clue if that's where the screechy shrill singing had come from. It could literally all be in his head. The sky was red and purple and every other colour too. It was a riotous patchwork, but horrible, nasty, and malicious in a way you couldn't describe, only behold.

He didn't know what was going on. Nothing made sense, everything was wrong and he was alone and afraid.

Or not alone anymore. Prey felt the moment the air around him shifted and that fact of truth changed. 'Alone' to 'not alone', he just knew it. The shattered sky of horrible throbbing and pulsing colours laughed down at him.

"Round round-around, merry~go~round *around*!" Shrieked in his ears, loud enough to nearly deafen him.

Prey spun around, just as the grating shriek had told him to. It was almost upon him, rushing and tumbling and trumpeting.

An amalgamation of percussion instruments, blaring horns, crashing brass, smashing cymbals, all mixed up together into a tumbleweed thing the size of a house, and it was rolling towards him.

The voice, it was coming from there, on top of the insane mishmash of banging and sounding instruments. A unicorn, a mare, wild mane greyed out and crazy, enraptured joy plastered across her features, was prancing atop the ball. One of the crazies. Prey stared, and realised she was rolling the instrumental ball, like a circus performer.

She looked down at Prey, face lit up with glee, "Round and round, merry~go~round we go! *Sing*!" She cackled, and the instruments cackled with her in tones of brass and metal.

The mad mare accelerated the ball, capering and dancing atop it, rushing forwards upon Prey. She was purposefully trying to squash him. "Round round I get around~!"

Prey snapped out of his stunned horror at the impossibility of it and ran. The mare rolled after him, clashing and bang and trumpeting, cackling and shouting for him to come back.

That was just the start. Or the end. Or maybe the middle? When up is down and left is right, who's to say when and where events happened?

Something huge and yellow and bubbling oozed over the roof top and splattered down-

No no, wait! Wait. This wasn't in the right order, this was supposed to be a memory of *before*, not happening *now*.

'Foolish, *foolish*.' He chided himself. Why would the world happen sequentially? That wasn't how insanity worked.

The three of them, Gloom, Crimson, and him. In the Night Guard section of the Lower Palace, near the end of their shift. Just walking from the ISND office towards the mess hall. Nothing special. Nothing out of the ordinary or ominous.

It grabbed hold of Prey, like invisible static washing over him. The sense of some awful balancing scale being flipped. He only had half a second.

Pain spiked behind Prey's eyes as he froze, but not in his hooves.

"-!" He didn't get the chance to shout anything.

The corridor... 'peeled' open. The floor, the ceiling, the left and right walls, all rolled back on themselves like sheaf's of parchment rolling up into a scroll, as if not stone, brick, and mortar. It was so fast. Ahead, the corridor rolled up, the disappearing floor racing towards the three of them. Beyond, in the opened up space, was the rest of the Palace.

Prey could see into it, see an impossible twisting and changing

network of tunnels, walls, and everything in between. He saw panicking ponies clinging to anything they could as the Palace twisted and reformed from the inside out. Prey saw internal internal water pipes stretching and elongating impossibly, glass breaking apart like a jigsaw puzzle but not actually shattering-

But that was all there was time for, and then the rapidly vanishing floor was upon them.

Both Crimson and Gloom instinctively jumped upwards, wings flapping open. The ground was impossibly collapsing and they could both fly, or even just glide. But Prey had no wings.

"Prey!" Crimson realised and dove forwards, coming back down. Gloom was only a second behind him as he too remembered Prey's helplessness.

Too late.

Prey was flinching backwards, away from his friend's stretching hoof even if he hadn't meant to, but they wouldn't have reached him in time. It was already too late.

The floor dropped away. His stomach rose, and then dropped with him as a scream was ripped away in the rushing air.

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Crimson was alive. That was all Prey knew. He had the electrite feather, and as long as he did Prey would know he was alive. But where in this forsaken mess of a imploding city, he didn't know. No time, no time! No time to stop and find out! Crimson was at least still alive somewhere, that would have to be good enough.

'Don't you dare die Crimson.'

An entire line of houses ripped free of the earth, a huge cascade of dirt, water, and stone falling like hale. Earth blinded Prey as he dived beneath cover-

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Two more ponies, two more of the crazies, those who had gone insane. A wife and her husband. The mare had once been overweight, and the stallion unhealthy thin.

She had been turned into a being of cake, and he was trying to eat her.

The mare was running in circles around a street lamp that was shinning down darkness, not light, while he chased her, jaws snapping like a wild dog's. Round they galloped in a mindless circle, she whinnying and he hungrily chasing, neither getting closer. There was no rational thought left in them, neither tried to dodge or run away or simply reverse direction. Mindless. Crazy.

Prey ran past them heedlessly, heart pounding, breath sawing, desperate to get away before they switched focus to him or reality suddenly betrayed him yet again.

That was how it had began, back at the Palace with Prey falling. Except, it wasn't how this madness had really begun, because Prey didn't know what had sparked this disaster.

'The Sun Wolf, and Luna. What are they doing? Do they not care about their prize holiday home?! Zoma'Grika, is any of this even bloody real?'

Prey was just trying to get to the tunnel. If he could get down to his crystal lair, the runic defences there should help. *Must* help! He had to get there, he had to be safe. He didn't know, but if Lemon Pink had any semblance of sense, she would already be there ahead of him.

'But Crimson, Crimson got left behind. Where could he be? Where's Crimson?' Prey thought that, but he didn't stop running. He couldn't.

He didn't know where Crimson was in this citywide spanning disaster, and while his heart hurt as much as his pounding head, there was nothing he could do in this twisted land. He didn't know where Crimson was, or what could've happened to him, or if the pegasus was stuck inside a gravity loop in the sky, or one of the

pink clouds crackling with lightning, or any other terrifyingly-insanely-real possibility.

'Get to the lair. Get safe. Get to the lair. Get safe. Just get to the-'

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At every twisted turn, at every warped corner, down every self looping path and road, beneath every floating building and over every submerged house Prey ran, or tripped, or crawled, or floated, or swam.

His head hurt so much, the chaos picking away ceaselessly at the edges of his mind.

There was a chequered path, black and white. He tried to cross it and lost time. When the grey buzzing cleared from his stuffy head, he found himself lying on the pavement, struggling to breathe, and desperately clutching his ribbon with both forehooves. He remembered, or he thought he could remember, for a moment-

Drowning in custard. A floating bowl as big as a warehouse tipping up above him and washing him away.

Prey staggered back to his hooves. 'Gotta' get to the lair. If I can just get there...'

A raucous caw behind him, louder than any crow or raven. Prey looked back over his shoulder, dreading what he would see.

A crazy Pegasus melded with a crow, three hooves replaced with claws, a black beak slapped on the end of their muzzle, one eye the beady black gleam of a birds, the other rolling wildly. Their tail and mane were each replaced a fan of bristling black feathers.

Kraaww!

They dived, flopped, fell at Prey, beak wide, three bird talons grasping. Prey recoiled, they were so much bigger than him, bristling feathers doubling their size.

He ducked. They swiped, then *pecked*, huge beak darting in. Prey

realised their beady bird eye was fixed on the golden tracer bands circling his legs.

'Bird. A black bird. It's a Magpie.'

"Really?!" Prey screamed in terrified frustration, "I. Hate. You. Luna!"

The twisted pegasus's next darting peck almost took his eye out. Prey lashed out with a hoof as its head withdrew.

Prey wasn't strong. His blow wouldn't even have unbalanced the amalgamation with his strength, but it wasn't about that.

Prey only needed a touch to break a mind. Just a touch.

'Break!'

The twisted pegasus collapsed. Their bird bits kept spasming wildly, wings loudly thrashing the air, beating frantically the pavement with the thwap of feathers. But the pony bits of them lay unresponsive. Prey hopped out of range of the bird half's wild thrashing.

He turned and ran without looking back.

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More crazies. More who appeared out of nowhere, insane, twisted, impossible. Prey tried to flee, but when he couldn't outrun or escape whatever was wrong with them, he broke their minds too. No remorse. No guilt. Only desperation.

His touch was distressingly unreliable. Three, five, nine, then twelve more crazies-

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Prey staggered down the stone steps, so glad they were still there. He'd made it. He didn't know how, he didn't remember it all, but he'd finally made it down to what passed for Lower Canterlot now, and to the maintenance hatch into the overflow pipe.

From there, he could get into the cave tunnels, and then if he could just make it to his lair...

Prey staggered to a stop, staring at what was ahead.

"No. No no no. No that's not fair." Prey whined, the strength leaving his limbs.

He sagged against the closest wall, "That's just not fair..."

The steel access door was tiny. It had shrunk down to the size of a mouse hole, resting at the floor level. Prey had thought he'd been looking at the wrong wall to begin with, but no. Only a rodent could fit through it now.

There was no way for Prey to get through. What was he going to do now? How was he supposed to reach the safety of his lair?

He wasn't. He wasn't supposed to make it, because *of course* he wasn't. Could he get down into the tunnels through one of the other entrances perhaps? But how? He'd have to brave the twisted city again, risk the crazies and the chaos. He'd have to do it all over again and hope that the other entrances weren't likewise warped.

'I won't make it.'

Prey's head hurt, his eyes stung, his ears felt like they were constantly popping. He wouldn't be able to make it a second time. The madness, the chaos of what had once been Canterlot, it had been getting worse.

If Prey dared to brave it again, he wouldn't make it through to the other side.

But was there any other choice?

Prey clambered weakly back up the stone steps, out onto the warped street beneath the pulsing purple and red sky. He stood there, one hoof clutching the free end of his ribbon, and stared around tiredly.

The pressure behind his eyes spiked in itching waves, wanting him to give in to, to... to something. Over there was a house turned inside out, stairs crazily crisscrossing its roof. There were far off clouds in every colour and geometric shapes. The distant water fountain at the end of the lane now flowed with milk.

Some twisted changes were almost tame, like those few. Harmless.

But then there were others which weren't, swinging far to the opposite extreme. There was every variety of impossible change, and some of those were just as dangerous as others were harmless.

A side street suddenly turned down ninety degrees and plunged into a hundred meter drop to concrete.

A rooted street lamp which had gone crazy, and was lashing around in a blur of metal like a whip, striking everything within its reach. It smashed paving stones in half, turned a fence into kindling, and battered other street lamps into scrap.

And the worst, the most dangerous and unpredictable threat; the roaming crazies. You never knew which side of the line the warped pony fell on until it was too late.

There was a hapless pegasus flying along backwards, shouting something mangled in reverse. And then there was a unicorn who's hooves were now made of fire. They ran about, greedily trying to snatch up anything they could, and setting it all ablaze.

Prey let his ribbon go and weakly passed his hoof over his eyes. But nothing had changed when he looked again.

Crimson was out there somewhere in this dangerous madness. Gloom too, and Lemon Pink. Were they even still alive?

'Please don't be dead Crimson.'

There was a sudden huge explosion, the howl of blistered wind, somewhere above him in the city.

Prey ducked back down, clutching his ears until the distant crashing echoes passed. He didn't know what that had been, it had been far

away, but it had sounded destructive. Prey nervously looked around himself again. He couldn't stay here. If he stayed here, he would die. The whole city was an uneven, ever expanding knot of chaos.

Prey looked up to the boiling violet sky, looking out beyond Canterlot's edges and squinted towards the horizon.

Way out, miles away, he saw the pale blue of the normal sky. Beyond the sickening pulsing of this sky, there was a border marking the end of the reach of this sickness.

A border of hope. This insanity hadn't infected the whole world. There was still normal, natural lands beyond this. Prey's mind locked a hold of that.

'I'm getting out of here. I'm going to get away.'

All he had to do was get off Mount Canter and down to ground level.

All he had to do was get off a mountain. Prey wheezed a laugh.

Get off a mountain, how simple the words were. He just had to get out of Canterlot and down a mountainside as it all erupted in a volcano of insanity.

If everything were still normal, getting out of Canterlot would have been a task in simplicity.

If he'd still had access to the cave tunnels, he could've simply gone down through the greenstone tunnels, and emerged safely out in front of where he had buried his veropede and the thieves.

But he didn't have access.

If only he had been born a pegasus, or a thestral, or a griffin and had wings, he could've flown off the side of Canterlot. But he didn't have those either

Prey laughed again, harder. His head really hurt.

"He-he-ke, and, and if wishes were oat cakes, ke-he-he."

He was a runt lamb. Just a pathetic runt lamb.

He wasn't a unicorn who could teleport, and even the teleportation platforms which catered to rich paying pony customers wouldn't be working in all this madness, even if he trusted a disgusting unicorn enough to let them use teleportation magic on him.

There was only clear way left down off the mountain, and that was the train tracks. Not that the train would be running, but he could follow the cleared tracks themselves down the side of the mountain. Assuming the trains hadn't turned into giant hungry caterpillars who hungered for flesh or something.

'But then, what's the alternative choice? Staying here?'

There was no choice. To stay here was to die, either to the warping chaos or to the crazies. Or break and turn into one of them. Loosing his mind was the same as death to Prey.

With no choice, afraid and alone, Prey set out into the chaos.

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His head hurt fiercely, the constant internal pressure still fighting away behind his eyes.

His harsh breathing was distant in his own ears, the blood rushing through his head much louder.

As he ran, or skidded, or crawled in places, desperately not looking at the insane dangers he was forced to move past, the fields of effect of some of it literally only a hairs breath away as he inched passed, he remembered something he'd once thought about Canterlot. It had been not long after Luna had press ganged him into service. It felt so long ago, but he remembered his thoughts. One thought in particular.

He'd seen Canterlot suspended off the side of its mountain on the massive supports, and wanted to set the whole golden city on fire, find a good spot from outside, and watch it fall.

But now when what had been an impossible wish actually looked

like it might happen, he was still inside the city

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Prey's memory was a bit hazy on him getting to the train station. He at least remembered going around the side and slipping into the tracks, panting and tired, rather than try going through the warped station itself.

There had been giant chess pieces, but no spilt between black and white. Instead, all the pieces were striped in bands of white *and* black. Knights, pawns, and kings, as tall as trees, levitating and then smashing down inside the station itself. His view was blocked as to what the moving pieces were stomping on.

The dark thought that it was people the pieces were crushing came to him and wouldn't leave, although Prey didn't actually see anything.

It didn't matter. His head, eyes, and ears were all hurting too much. He had to get out of Canterlot.

It was probably only by perverse luck that the rails weren't giant snakes guarding the train tracks or something similar. He started off down the train tracks as fast as his tired, wobbly legs would carry him, beginning the long, winding trek off the mountain.

Prey never made it to the bottom of the mountain by following the tracks.

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Prey's throat was parched. His legs hurt as he forced himself on under the boiling, pulsing, *wrong* sky.

Sweat clung to his brow as he panted. He didn't look back. But by chance, he did look up.

The vast sky pulsed in glaring shades of purples and reds, stinging Prey's eyes. He squinted against the glare, some shifting patches of the sky were as bright as noonday, and others patches like clouded night.

The sky was so vast, the riot of sickening light and colour so huge, that Prey almost missed it.

It. Cold tendrils sunk into Prey's wool. There was something up there, swimming through the open air, a long something, serpentine, lazily winding its way through the sky.

It was distant, far away, and his eyes were bad, but Prey could make out four legs, horns on its head, the long tufted tail. He'd seen something like it once before, a stone statue in the Palace Gardens.

But this one was alive, languid, and terrifying. It was hundreds of meters away and up, but Prey shied away.

Fear, danger, the cold hoof of it pressed down on him. He somehow knew that the creature up there in the sky was responsible for all of this, the mad instigator of all this destruction and insanity.

One yellow eye swivelled in the creatures head. Across all that distance, it somehow looked straight at Prey, and somehow Prey saw it looking at him.

The twisted creature did not turn its head, did not stop its lazy swimming flight, did not open its jaws or slow. Yet it spoke to Prey.

The voice whined in Prey's ears, not grating, but cloying, and utterly without any empathy or mercy; "Ah, the next toy in my toy box. An itty bitty sheep, my first new sheep. What shall I do with you?"

The terrible question which somehow reached across the distance and crawled into Prey's head froze the breath in his lungs.

He choked down a bubbling hiccup of fear, because the creature had asked; 'what shall I do with you?' But it wasn't what the thing had really said. It had meant was; 'What shall I do to you?'

"L-Leave me alone." Prey stuttered out, drawing fruitlessly back against the cut rock of the mountain face.

The crawling, clinging voice went right on as if it hadn't heard him. Maybe it hadn't. Or it just didn't care.

"A cute toy you are, and a cute toy you will be-Oh, what is this? What is this?! Already a toy? Someone has beat me to the punch line, already a cute little lamb doll. Who do you belong to, I wonder?"

Finally, the creature in the sky turned its head, and with malicious glee its full attention bore down on Prey. He saw mismatched yellow eyes, the warped grin as it spread, the jaw full of teeth.

"No, leave me alone! Go away, go back to what you were doing! Go away."

Those eyes, that face, that expression. So vast, so powerful, and yet so recognisably petty. It was the temperament of a cruel child who pulled the legs off of insects. And to the impossibly powerful creature, everyone was an insect if it wanted them to be.

Prey turned around and ran, back towards the self destructing Canterlot, it didn't matter, as long as it wasn't here. He had to get away.

The creature opened its clawed hand and... *Reached.* It reached across the empty space between them, yellow bird talons spread wide, covering the distance like an optical illusion. Except the illusion was real.

The grasping claw was suddenly right on top of Prey, massive, bigger than a dining table. Prey ducked, and the hand snatched him up anyway without any effort.

Prey struggled for all he was worth, hammering on the huge claws wrapped around his middle, the beast was touching him!

"Let me go let me go! Let go!"

When he frantically looked up, the twisted face of the serpentine thing was looming right over him, eyes wide wide too wide, and teeth sharp sharp sharp. Its horns, its fur, its body, it was all wrong.

Prey couldn't look away. His hoof fell to the huge claws holding him airborne. '**Break**.'

The huge serpentine beast twitched. And nothing else happened.

"Oh, oh ho? What have we here? That wasn't very nice of a toy. Or friendly. Toys should be child friendly. Especially a toy child-No, what is this? Already someone else's toy, yes, but what is-? Oh, these perhaps?"

Prey was panicking, kicking, despaired, trying to think, gasping for breath. The shadow of the things heavy grizzly bear paw, claws long and heavy, overshadowed him. He looked up, and the massive paw grabbed his left foreleg.

"No! Let go!"

It was like being gripped by a baloth. His foreleg, his own flesh, was completely out of his power now. The paw effortlessly snared his right foreleg next as he attempted to evade. Prey was hyperventilating, the immovable strength holding him utterly helpless.

"These then? Is it these?" The massive paw withdrew.

Prey's forelegs felt wrong, too light. He looked at them, wide eyed, terrified he'd see bloody stumps- Nothing. White wool and fur. His hooves. Normal. Nothing.

No gold.

He looked up. On the end of two of the huge bear claws tips, the two tracer bands sat like rings.

It had removed the alicorn tracer bands. Just like that. Just. Like. That.

The beast held up the rings a few inches from its mad yellow eyes, scrutinising them. Prey stared, frozen.

The thing frowned, and then... *ate* the two golden tracer bands consideringly.

"No," It mused, "No not these. The taste is wrong. But if not little mad Nightmare's toy-Oh ho! Wait what is this? Not make sense, this

doesn't."

The beast's eyes spun back to Prey like two spotlights, freezing him into immobility. The beast raised him up, closer, closer to its mad face, closer to its teeth and unblinking ringed red-yellow eyes. "What is this? What is...?"

And then it roared with laughter. A gale force of breath blew into Prey's face. It stank of age and hidden rot, like the inside of a fallen tree trunk. Perhaps it was the fear, perhaps it was the smell of wrongness, but Prey almost threw up. His throat burned. His pounding head and throbbing eyes were hurting so much. But he could only stare in frozen shock up at the thing which had so casually circumvented and *eaten* alicorn magic.

He didn't... he couldn't... impossible. *Should* have been impossible. Yet it clearly wasn't.

It was mad. The beast was mad. Prey knew madness, and how dangerous it was. This creature in front of him was mad. It was laughing at him, laughing *and* talking *and* making no sense.

"That's it! I see, I see, yes yes! Ehe-he-he! Oho-ho-ho! Aha-ha-ha! All of the styles, don't you know it's good for you to laugh? Good for your soul! Already a lovely dolly, aren't you? Where's your soul, little black hearted doll~?"

Its huge bear paw came back, blocking out Prey's whole face, and then the chimeric beast stroked his head. Roughly, with strength to match its size, the force dragging Prey's head back. Like a rough child stroking some small pet, "Perfectly cute and innocent. Yes, oh yes. Yes, hmm, hmhmhm, heh, Ha Ha! Blue eyes, blue ribbon, its so sickly sweet my teeth might just rot if I gobbled you up next!"

Prey hated being laughed at. "Let me go." The words were silent, without any force behind them. Because Prey had no power here.

Maybe the beast holding him heard him. Maybe it didn't. It achieved nothing either way.

"A delightful toy, the best type of toy! The one's with hidden secrets

inside! What else is there? Give it to me, entertain me! What else is locked away up behind those bay blues? Little lamb, little lamb, won't you let me come in~" It's gleeful voice flipped into a perfect mimicry of Prey's own, "Not by the fluffy wool of my chinny-chin-chin, I will not let you in!"

The mismatched paw, bigger than Prey's whole body five times over and with enough strength to crush him like a grape, made a fist and rapped a single knuckle against his head. Prey reeled, the force bruising, but it was more than the 'light' impact. His head was ringing.

'What's happening to me?!'

His mindscape shook with each 'knock', the ashen grey of his mental landscape pulling away from the resonating force that battered him.

A vicious gale blew back the blanketing ash in his mind, trying to uncover what hid underneath, a gleeful hiss in the wind, '*Let me in, let me in little lamb. I want to come in!*'

'Stay out, stay out of my head!' No one, not until the sky froze and the world ended, would Prey ever allow someone to crawl into his head and pollute his mind. Never.

'STAY OUT OF MY HEAD!' Prey shook. He desperately tried to shut out the world and focus. What was that sound-? His teeth were chattering.

'*Letme' in, letme' in, letme' in! I want to see in! How fun, a puzzle box doll, a nesting doll! Let me see what's inside*.'

The words assaulted Prey's senses, all of his senses. The demand rang as a repeating echo in his ears, crawled across his wool, curdled on his tongue, burned his nostrils, and darkened his vision. "Let me in like a good little toy lamb is supposed to. Didn't your mother ever teach you it's rude to make a guest wait outside?"

The way the thing uttered those words, it was on purpose. It had somehow gleaned enough to know the shock it would cause. Prey jerked, his mental defences shaken for just an instant. Too late.

Immediately the raucous laughter drove in, sweeping away more ash of his mindscape before Prey could re-brace himself and halt its advance again.

This was nothing like his battle with Night Watcher had been, no chance of victory. He couldn't win here, only hold out.

Cold sweat sprung across Prey's back as he shook, but that was outside. He couldn't focus on that, he was inside, keeping what was outside out.

'*Let me in!*'

'Never.' Prey grabbed ahold of his desperation, his fear, all of it. His anger, his terror, his hate, and bundled it all up and forced it to turn into kindling. He lit the fuel, made it burn, frantically blew on the fire to give it strength. He drew on everything he could muster. Even what he shouldn't have.

In response his inner mindscape rose up, the ocean water rising higher and higher, until it smashed the bottom of his outer mindscape, shoring it up and making sure it wouldn't fall. But only because there wasn't any space left under it for it to safely fall into anymore.

There is always a cost. Mental pain whited out Prey's world as his two mindscapes collided in a way they had never been meant to.

Prey lost time.

Ringing white noise that was so high pitched it wasn't noise. There were only words left for those seconds of white noise.

'*Stay out of my head.*'

Prey returned to his senses just as the laughter took a turn for the worse, "Stubborn little toy, that's no fun. What use is a toy that won't play?"

Whether he was hearing the words within or without his mind, Prey didn't even know. He'd almost completely lost feeling in his body out in the real world. He just couldn't let the words in. But the

words of the mad beast weren't finished yet. They took with them knowledge of the uncovered pieces which had been hidden beneath the obscuring ash of his mindscape:

"There we go, that wasn't so hard now was it Prey? Little Hunted One? Or rather, is it Gossamer?"

Fuzzily, Prey's blurry eyes swam back into focus. The wetness of tears trickled over the uneven scars on his cheeks. A shadow was over him. The terrifying mismatched face of the beast loomed, pressed right up close. A horrible teeth filled grin so impossibly wide and gleeful at his misery, but those burning red and yellow eyes, those eyes were old and mad.

"Gossamer, Fleece. Fleece and Gossamer. One for the price of two, don'cha know it should be two for the price of one? Now who is this woolly Fleece? Let's see where it's written, and aha! A nobody! An absolute nobody! Because he's got no body! A broken body for Breaker, a bad bothersome brother bashing border baddie. Hmm, not my best verse. Eh, you win some, you loose some."

Prey had successfully defended his inner mind. Luna herself couldn't break directly into his dreaming mind without him at least being aware. In body, he was a weak, hornless runt lamb. In mind, he couldn't even claim to be sound, but he was at least strong. This creature of chaos could kill him in a moment, all it had to do was flex its claws. Physically and magically, it was so much stronger than him, stronger even than an *alicorn*!

But it still couldn't push any further into his mind.

Likely it didn't care to even try, because where was the 'fun' in that? Prey was merely a distraction for a few minutes, an unexpected toy, but that was it. Why should it care what secrets a toy fought so hard to hide? Why should it work to unlock all the secrets of its puzzle box? It wanted immediate satisfaction now now now! Any longer than that and it became 'boring'.

So it didn't try to get any further into his mind. But that was also because it didn't need to.

In that first moment of attack, and then with the second moment of weakness where this vicious creature had attacked him with the terrible word 'mother', it had still managed to find enough to gleefully hurt him with. Just like the toy it kept calling him, and like a giant spoilt child, he was to be broken for its selfish amusement, then carelessly discarded in the search for the next toy.

Prey had no hope. Hope was a cruel, cruel thing. Yet he still struggled.

"L-let me go, let m-me go!" He gasped, struggling, crying, and kicking against the yellow talons holding him. They might as well have been solid iron. He pushed wildly and beat at them anyway for all the good it did. He tried mind breaking the beast again knowing it wouldn't work-

The beasts face twitched in annoyance, "Stop that!"

It shook Prey like a misbehaving puppy trying to bite. Prey's teeth clacked together so hard he thought he felt them chip. Hot pain ran up into his gums and he felt blood in his mouth.

He wheezed, unable to cry out to express the pain, only able to hang limply. His head spun sickenly from the whiplash. He was going to be sick.

"Your defiance was amusing, but now it's boooo*ooring*! Show me something new, huh? Huh?! Have you got anything else good left in you, anymore delightful amusement?"

There was a beat of sudden silence as it held Prey up, waiting, like it really did desperately want him to say yes and perform another new trick to hold its interest. It stared at him, into him as it peered close, waiting with baited, sweet-yet-rotten smelling breath.

"No?" It asked into the silence.

Prey stiffly lifted his head on strained neck muscles and weakly glared up through the silent tears.

"No." It repeated almost sadly. Its red and yellow eyes dulled as the curiosity they'd held became boredom, "On to the next thing, then."

On to find the next person to break, to torment for a few minutes perverse entertainment, then discard. But first-

"-Waste not, want not."

The creature's thumb claw lifted up from the first it held Prey grasped in. The pointed end of the thumb claw, almost as long as Prey's whole body, came down on top of his head.

It was going to skewer him! Punch through his head and impale his brain like an olive on a cocktail stick!

Prey screamed, high pitched, "*No*!"

The talon's squeezed, "Oh stop fussing." The thumb claw poked against the top of his head.

Prey jerked like he'd been electrocuted. His sight went fuzzy. What felt like a blast of boiling air enveloped his body for a second, and then was gone.

In the aftermath, Prey felt suddenly exposed and cold-No, not cold, it wasn't cold. Numb. His eyesight returned, and he frantically lifted his fore hooves up his eyes. He was wrong, his legs were too light, like they didn't weight anything at all.

Pink. He was pink. His wool was pink spun candyfloss.

Numbness. No weight, no mass. No sense of touch. He was made out of candyfloss.

Prey couldn't...

He didn't...

How could even...

A joke. A sick joke. Something only an insane would find funny.

He'd been turned into candy. Sugar with no substance. It was a death sentence.

Prey couldn't look away from his hooves. 'I'm as good as dead.' No tears of despair welled up, his body couldn't make them anymore. His body?

No, this thing wasn't him. His runt body was gone, stolen. He was going to die. His body was gone. He couldn't eat, he couldn't drink, he was made of sugar. Candyfloss. He was as delicate as cloud fluff. As delicate as gossamer. A breeze would blow him away.

Candyfloss. Roasted sugar. Water would melt him like bone rot. He was already dead.

"Oh perfect, perfect I say! I do have such a sweet tooth, and you already looked so sickenly sweet before, but now, why, I could just gobble you up." The delighted, terrible voice sounded right in his ear.

Prey whipped his head around, the beast's head was right beside him, it had bent its long serpentine neck to his height. Its mouth full of grinning teeth was right there-

It bit his drooping candyfloss ear off. Sudden half-deafness. Numbness. Spun sugar didn't feel pain. It just bit his ear off!

His left ear. His ear with the ribbon.

The abominations whole face abruptly went still, the fanged grin freezing.

Very carefully, the creature opened back up its jaws and stuck its long, prehensile tongue out. Stuck in its saliva, the blue silk of the ribbon glistened.

The talons abruptly dropped Prey. He fell back to the train tracks. He landed softly, so softly. No weight.

The beast didn't even notice. It frantically grabbed the ribbon off its tongue, pinched between thumb and index talon and ripped it away like it burned. It held the ribbon away from it, drew in a deep breath, and then bellowed like a wild beast:

"**GGGRAAAAAA**!" It whipped its claw behind itself and flung Prey's

ribbon off the mountain side. The length of silk fell away, a brief fluttering spiral which vanished.

"Raaagh! Ghaaa! Gha! Gha, *Gha*, ***GhaaaaAA***!"

It hunched over, clawing at its tongue, before rounding on Prey in a blur, "Thow't thaf' was funnie'? You thought that was funny?! You don't make jokes, **ONLY I MAKE THE JOKES**!"

Prey was terrified, stunned, and utterly numb, half deaf, futilely trying to come to terms with what had just happened to him. He couldn't make his limbs obey him. He didn't have enough strength to even push himself off the hard rocks. He was made of candyfloss. But the tiniest worm of spiteful satisfaction crawled into his mouth at the creatures fury, and twitched his lips up in a bitter smile. It tasted like ash, but it was all he had.

"Ha." He weakly muttered.

"I'll give you Ha! HA, HA, and *HA*!"

The second of spiteful revenge blew away like the ash it was, leaving only wordless, trembling fear as the thing grew bigger and bigger in anger, reaching out its huge talon for him.

Prey was candyfloss. He couldn't feel. He didn't understand why he wasn't dead instead of living sugar. Candyfloss doesn't bleed.

It was a small mercy. Such a blessed mercy for something so horrible. That he couldn't feel.

The beast ate his other candyfloss ear. Then it ate his legs, one after the other.

A child pulling the wings of butterflies, indeed.

Then it plopped Prey back down on the train tracks. It propped him up in the gap between two of the planks, critically examining its work, tilting its long head back and forth, then all the way upside down.

Prey couldn't look. He couldn't, *wouldn't* turn his head. He couldn't look at himself. He just stared at the black grey metal of thick thick train rail just in front of his face. He focused on that, on the metal scratches along the polished metal, on the dark matt texture of the rest, on the bolts with their tightly fitted nuts, and on nothing else.

"Hm. Hmm. Yes, yes, there we go. That'll do. And for the finishing touch..."

It snapped its huge talons sharply, an action Prey had only known griffins were capable of.

White. Silver and reflections appeared all around him-

Prey clenched his eyes shut just in the nick of time. He hadn't seen, or only just a glimpse for a half-second.

"And there we go! Perfect!" The muffled voice of the cruel creature still reached him, even if little else did.

Mirrors. Prey was surrounded by mirrors. A dome of silvery mirrors, all reflecting back in at him, and themselves, repeating in every direction from now and on into eternity.

The creature really had seen enough in his head to hurt him with, after all.

"Now you just wait right there, don't move even a smidge. Ha! Well I'm off, places to be, chaos to spread, you know how it is. Well, cheerio, ta ta for now~!"

Prey didn't hear it leave, but it left.

Left him there, helpless, crippled, ribbonless, in a web of terrible mirrors.

Silence. Without his ears, he couldn't even hear the low wind blowing on the mountain.

There was only darkness of his eyelids, and the mirrors waiting just beyond.

All Prey could hear in the dark was his own breathing. It was too loud, too uneven. Even without his large ears to catch the sound, he could still hear that. He couldn't feel anything, just hear.

Out there Beyond his tightly shut eyes, the mirrors were waiting.

Legless. Powerless. Cotton candyfloss. Insanity raining down across the land. Anarchy. No ribbon. No Lemon Pink or Crimson. Maybe not even any hated alicorns anymore.

Prey was alone here.

'But I'm going to survive, aren't I? I'm going to find some clever way to turn this all around, aren't I?'

Nothing. Out there the mirrors kept waiting.

'Some will come along. Lemon Pink will make another appearance in the nick of time again, won't she?'

Nothing. He waited.

He counted a thousand of his too fast breaths... then a thousand more... and another thousand just to be sure...

'I'm not going to die like this. It's too ridiculous. I'm not allowed to die like this. It'll get fixed, right? All turned back to how it's supposed to be. That thing can't just turn me to candyfloss, eat my limbs, take my ribbon, and expect to win. Right?'

Prey rode out a wave a panic until it passed. He'd done so a dozen times already trapped here.

'I'll get better, I'll get fixed. I will get it all back. I survived the Deeper Green, Dreverton, Captain Valour, Luna, kindersnatches, scarecrows, Wolf Woods, all of it. This won't be it. This can't be it.'

He breathed. Just blackness. Surrounded by mirrors. He breathed, and counted, and waited, and... and nothing.

'That creature, it can't win, it's impossible. The worlds too big, there's too much for it to destroy it all, right? Even Nightmare Moon got stopped in the end. Somehow, someway, it'll get defeated to. It must be. And then, and then its mad magic will wear off. I'll go back to normal. And get my full, repaired runt body back. Right?'

The was nobody but Prey here. Nobody came. Somewhere out there, Canterlot burned and the world twisted.

'Right?' Prey repeatedly asked himself, 'Right? Right? Right?'

But Garrow didn't answer him. Snake didn't answer him. Gossamer didn't answer him. Not even Prey could answer himself.

Prey couldn't feel Crimson, and he didn't know when he'd lost the link to the electrite feather.

Was it before after this had been done to him? Because he hadn't noticed at the time. If it had been after, then it was because of his current state. But if it had been before, then... then Crimson might be gone forever.

Prey didn't think about that, didn't dwell on either possibility. He couldn't know for certain. So he didn't think about it. *Couldn't* think about it, just couldn't summon up the proper fear over Crimson's fate when it was his own that held him gripped helpless in its jaws.

His ribbon, his precious ribbon was gone. But something in him was hungry.

'I'm going to get my ribbon back too. It'll turn up, or blow in on a breeze, or just appear back with me. It must. It's supposed to come back to me, and I'm going to get fixed, and the mirrors will go away, and I'm going to survive. Because it's not allowed to end like this. There are rules somewhere, right? I mean, right? Right...? Right...'

But Prey waited and persevered in vain. He breathed, and counted, and finally lost count in the self imposed blackness.

His head didn't hurt anymore. Nor did his eyes. He was just numb, and sort of cold.

'It's not getting fixed.'

'I'm not getting better.'

'No one's going to do anything.'

'We all have to cross he river someday.'

'The worlds not fair.'

'The worlds never been fair.'

'It's not fair.'

So why not make it fair?

Wait. Wait. Before he did that, he just had to wait. Just a little while longer. Just wait out the seconds, the minutes, the hours. He could surrender and give in any time, so why not wait just a little bit longer? What was one more breath to wait, and then one more?

Just wait little more.

He waited. But nothing changed.

Still Prey counted his breaths and waited. Because if it was really inevitable, then why not wait a little bit longer? He'd already waited so long, so why not? The days, the years, the endless unfairness of a mortals' dwindling time.

Prey *could* give in. He'd always had the option to give in. At any time, in anyplace, anywhere. Give in, let them out, make it all fair.

For when there is nothing left, everything is equally fair.

Prey breathed, and counted, and waited, and delayed giving in.

Just one more breath, then he'd decide if it was finally time. And then one more. What was the hurry? It was all going to be made fair in annihilation, so why hurry?

He could give in at any time, any second he wanted to, Prey told himself that over and over.

He'd choose the second, the *exact second*, and no one else could force him into it if he didn't want them to. Not that there was anyone else trapped in here. It was up to him. Him and only him.

There was a terrible peace in that. The peace of ruination.

He could wait, or... not wait. That simple. It was completely up to him. So as each second came, Prey decided to wait at least one more.

And then one more.

And then one more again.

He breathed, and let the numb peace of despair overtake him. His churning background thoughts slowed. One more breath. And one more.

The silent world and still mirrors waited to see if there would be yet one more. And in morbid, broken fascination, Prey waited along with it.

Breathe in. He held his breath, teetering. One more? He breathed out. Yes, at least one more.

How about now? Or now? Now was as good a second as any. He wasn't holding out hope of rescue.

Another second. Another now. The same choice.

The same choice again. Another now, and another then as it passed.

Perhaps Prey didn't have any right to either make or delay the

choice? He was just a murderer after all. Shortly to be deceased. No one else knew he was here. He was all alone here in his blindness.

He didn't have the right to make the choice, not when the consequences went beyond him. But he was still going to make the choice, *was* making it, again and again as every second passed. Choosing to choose again.

There were others out there, somewhere in the world who had it worse than him, Prey knew. He wasn't special, he knew that. Just a runt lamb who'd survived longer than his allotted time through murder. He wasn't special. He wasn't unique. He wasn't an immortal. And everyone but alicorns die in the end. Rich, poor, bond, and free.

'Is there a point to all this waiting...? Is there a point to *not* waiting?' Prey didn't know if there was anyone living still out there. The world could have ended beyond this dome of deadly mirrors.

'Let's just make it one more second. And now one more...'

Prey knew what was happening. He had stopped lying to himself. The truth was he'd given up. He was trapped. He was crippled. He would be dead in a few days regardless of anything that happened. He was limbless and made of candyfloss, and that mad creature was still out there.

'I'm just a dead sheep walking anyway. Or laying. I can't walk. There's no point in waiting. This isn't like all those other times. I was never been mortally wounded before back then. There's no

point.'

Prey didn't have any anger left. No fury. It wasn't even despair anymore. Not even the hate he so carefully hoarded despite how badly it scorched his insides. It had all drained away. There was only cold numbness.

So Prey made his choice. The one he kept choosing to make. Why? He didn't know. There was no hope.

But he kept waiting anyway. Death could have him when it was time. But up until his last second, his very last rattling breath, he would keep making his choice. And choosing no, and no, and no, and no again.

In the history books, this period of time would be recorded as The Return of Discord. How long this period lasted, however brief, is less certain. The already recently disturbed day and night cycle of Equss was once again disrupted. Just ten months previously, The Return of Nightmare Moon had also taken place.

As a tangent, this second disruption would unofficially lead to the breakdown of all attempts at reconciliation with the Griffonian Empire for years. Historians have only recently been able to back track and link these events, however the first cause, if any, which led to the deterioration in the first place is still left unconfirmed.

But from time pieces recording outside the radius of effect centering on Canterlot, Discord's return lasted for only seventeen hours, and roughly twenty minutes.

However within the chaos field of effect, the passage of natural time has been brought into question.

There are many conflicting reports from ponies caught inside, both recovered victims, and those who managed to hide and wait. Recovered time keeping devices from inside all differed wildly,

even after the purging of chaos by Her Royal Majesty, Princess Twilight Sparkle of Magic, forever may she reign, with the Elements of Harmony.

Relegated to relying upon the wildly conflicting testimonies of ponies, the most reliably accepted time frame for The Return of Discord is between the aforementioned seventeen hours and twenty minutes, and up to forty-eight hours.

This humble historian leaves the unanswered question up to the discretion of the reader and the first hoof accounts of the poor ponies caught up in the events.

Distant, far, far away. A booming, musical chime. Almost like church bells, but also not.

The air changed. The world held its breath for what was about to come.

Prey couldn't see. He couldn't open his eyes to look. He hadn't the limbs to move to try and escape. But he felt the moment.

Then there was living colour.

Prey saw it, even through his closed eyelids, he saw the living, dancing aroura of breathing colour consume the world in a wave.

Bright. Lightness. Warmth. Silent, living laughter. It touched everything. It filled every inch of air, blanketed the heavens in its passing, caressed everything with its beautiful touch.

Prey had seen this living light once before. The Elements of Harmony.

There only existed the living, ever-changing light to Prey. That was all the world was for those seconds, minutes, hours, or however long from one breath to the next lasted.

The numbness fled from him as if it had never been. And then, elation so strong yet sour that it felt like his bones would melt with warmth, all at once Prey feel his legs once again, his ears, his whole

body.

Impossible. A miracle. Undeserved, unearned, but a gift given regardless.

The swell of emotions in that single moment... Prey didn't even know or understand all of what he was feeling.

'I, I can-I can, I can feel. I can feel. I can feel!'

His hooves were his own. His ears were his own. His wool was his own. His hated, and yet so precious runt body was his own once again. He could feel the living light as much as he could see, the gentle force softly ruffling the fur across his whole body like a warm wind.

He was warm, like he couldn't even recall the memory of having ever been cold. He was so warm. So very warm.

He was burning.

Prey screamed and heard nothing.

Time lost meaning for a passage of, with no other word for it, 'time'. It passed beyond memory and words, and became something that was Prey. There was Prey before the burning, and then Prey after the burning.

He was still Prey, he'd always been Prey, he was just... a different Prey now.

The sky was blue. So blue and bright. No more poisonous pulsing violet and red. Blue like the ribbon he didn't have. So bright and clear above him.

Prey lay on his back, staring up. He couldn't feel the hard rock, knobbly beneath him. His back was numb. No whip scar cramp attack. Everything was just terribly numb. A scoured, raw, numb.

Like one of those insects which had split their own skin to crawled

to crawl out from their own skeleton. Numb and tender. Exhausted. The phantom sensations of burning.

The sky was so bright and blue.

He couldn't quite feel the fresh air against his wet cheeks, but it yet somehow still stung.

Prey didn't know if he'd ever seen the sky so blue. He didn't remember looking. It took up his whole field of view. Just blue sky, and the edge of Mount Canter peeking into the top of his vision. He couldn't turn his head to see if the rest of the world had returned to normal, he didn't have the strength.

He was as weak as a newly hatched chick. Or as a dying sparrow.

A quiet stillness. The sound of a mountain breeze blowing up the slopes was a low, constant background noise. Sometimes swelling, sometimes waning, but always blowing. The sky was blue, that bright, crystalline blue you only saw under the skies of Equestria. His ribbon was gone. The rock was hard and unyielding beneath him, only slightly warmed by the sun.

Normal. It was all back. It had been real, but now it was all back as if it never had been. There were no mirror's left.

All reset to how it had been before, like a clock hand turned backwards. Like a careless pink earth pony mare's death impossibly reversed. And that was the power of Harmony, wasn't it? He'd thought it impossible, and yet he'd seen a resurrection, a miracle, with his own two eyes. He'd begged, and had been told that the Elements of Harmony weren't something that could bring Gossamer's mother and brother back.

He'd thought it had been Luna's selfish choice. Now, he saw it was because Harmony was too big to care. It was *almost* like nature. Nature. Does. Not. Care.

And yet that was also false, because Harmony obviously *did* care, or at least it could be harnessed, like a stream could be diverted off from a huge river. It could be focused down to a small enough scale

to return someone from the land of the dead, not just wipe away the insanity of an entire land.

Prey chocked a laugh. It came out as barely more than a whisper. Ha! Small! As if bringing a person back to life was small!

Harmony. A joke. What a joke. What a hilariously bad joke!

A fools jest, and he, Prey, was the biggest fool of all for first dismissing, and then later thinking he understood it, and now it turned out he'd been wrong from the very start.

The magic of 'Harmony' didn't mean harmony at all. It didn't even mean peace. Rather it meant the power of absolute control. An imposed ideal of perfection that rejected everything that didn't fit. This type of Harmony didn't mean natural balance at all. It went so far beyond and above that. It meant redefining what the scales of balance were, and making it the new balance.

It was a giant, cosmic joke, a laugh at the expense of everything which thought it understood anything.

It had reset death. Death was uncaring, merciless, and yet utterly and completely natural. Immortals were unnatural. Immortals were unfair. And who decided that ideal? Did anyone? Gods? Goddesses?

And the biggest, most ironic joke of all? No, actually the *second* most ironic part of the joke? It was that he'd had no control, had done nothing, hadn't survived through any merit of his own. His runes and defences had availed him nothing against the chimeric, miss-matched serpentine creature of chaos. Absolutely nothing. It had been the all consuming power of Harmony which had won the day.

And the biggest joke was that he, Prey, the unbeliever, had benefitted from the pony worshipped power of Harmony.

A part of Prey's unbalanced, waxing and waning mind put forth the idea for what took third place for irony about the nature of pony Harmony.

'And Harmony didn't like me, not one bit. It saw straight through

my lies to who I am in an instant. No kindness. No generosity. No loyalty. No laughter. No honesty. And definitely no magic. How utterly natural that its touch would burn me.'

The sky was blue, and open, and empty. So high and so far above his reach. Prey felt there was a metaphor in there somewhere for his whole life.

His thoughts drifted in the quiet of the mountainside, 'So that was Harmony in all its glory, huh. For the second time.'

During that period, as the living light was burning-when it had burned him, Prey had... Prey had thought he was dying. Had *known* he was dying.

Prey didn't know why he was still alive. Had Harmony let him live? Given him another chance?

Prey didn't feel that was the reason. Maybe there wasn't a reason, but inside, he felt it wasn't because Harmony had decided to show pity. It had felt different from a trial too, somehow. Prey didn't feel he'd been granted mercy. He felt like he'd survived. The distinction between one and the other was huge. Enough to live or die over, apparently.

He couldn't remember precisely... 'what'... had happened while he was burning. His own infallible mind leech memory had in this instance... failed him. But Prey thought he remembered the fleeting sensation of... he didn't know what it had been, because he didn't have any comparison to the feeling.

Not a sight. Not a sound. Just a feeling of unravelling and burning.

Of coming undone, of being split open even as he was glued back together. Like a length of straining cloth caught at both ends, the threads in the middle ripping, but with the tears being seamlessly sewn back together faster than they formed. Like a torn silk ribbon. Prey didn't understand, but he was sure that no person should be able to feel what he'd felt.

Beyond the pain, beyond the burning, the actual sensation of it had

utterly frightened him because of how unnatural it was. Because it hadn't been hot, or burning, or what he understood as pain. It hadn't even been the numb cold of death and ice.

It had been nothing. It had been the powerless nothing of being reduced to a 'thing'. Like a rock, or a branch, or a hat. A thing.

Pain was pain. The burning of Harmony's light had been agonising, and you could not ask someone to willingly choose between one torture and another. And yet the nothing which had briefly followed the burning...

He hadn't had any free will. No mind. No thoughts. No feelings. Just a thing being held and shaped in the hooves of something so much bigger than him into something it wanted him to be.

Or maybe Prey was completely wrong about all of that. He hadn't exactly been able to think clearly at the time. The power that was Harmony was so big, so vast, so beyond understanding, that why would something like it care about a tiny mote of dust when it was cleansing the whole land?

For all he knew, that terrible, terrible burning that he couldn't even properly conceptualise had happened to everyone when the chaos was purged from them. Prey was assuming that it *had* fixed all the ponies of Canterlot. He couldn't conceive it *not* doing so. Perhaps its light only burned to non-pony's? That would certainly fit in as the fourth biggest joke of the day.

Prey didn't know what to think. Nothing, perhaps? Everything? He didn't understand. The sky was blue, his precious ribbon was missing, his body was weak and numb, and everything was just so... just so...

"...But alive. I'm still alive."

Presently, Prey heard a bird. The noisy wing beats sounded like a pigeon. It got closer and louder, and then too loud to be a bird. A pegasus. Someone, by luck or chance, had found him.

Prey had resigned himself to being left here, probably for an entire

night, before he was finally found. By then he might've regained enough strength to have moved himself. Or have faded away forever.

But to his complete surprise, it sounded like someone had found him ahead of schedule. He heard the pegasus pull up and land on the train tacks a little distance away.

It wasn't Crimson, Prey sadly already knew that. They'd made too much noise for one, and weren't flying fast enough to have been his red furred friend either. And no electrite feather. Just a random pegasus then. But who were they?

Summoning up all his strength, Prey lifted and twisted his head towards the hoof clops cautiously approaching over stone.

A grey, sallow faced pegasus. They looked sickly, too thin, fur and mane unevenly long, and so unhealthy looking that Prey couldn't immediately tell their gender.

The budding hope that had nevertheless been strongly tinged with caution immediately turned into bubbling alarm in Prey's chest. Something was very wrong with them.

'A crazy?! Has everything not been fixed?'

The subtly wrong pegasus kept coming closer, stumbling hoof steps shuffling and cautious. They were staring at Prey with milky eyes.

Prey stared back, transfixed. He searched for the strength to move. He couldn't find it.

'Move!' His numb body quivered, rose an inch off the stone, and then fell back exhausted. He hadn't even gotten his wool fully clear of the ground.

Then the thin grey gender less pegasus crossed into Prey's mental perception range, and Prey instantly knew what they were.

"*Mimic*." Prey weakly hissed.

The mimic stopped. There was caution in its tense stance as it

stared at Prey. Prey didn't know what was wrong with its disguise, but it looked damaged. Weakened.

It occurred to Prey in a flash that he hadn't been the only one scoured by the Elements of Harmony.

"Khe-he-he." The weak giggle slipped out.

The mimic defensively shifted its stance lower to the ground.

It was scared of him. Of *him*! Here he was, unable to move and powerless, a weak runt lamb, and yet it was hesitating, afraid of a trick or a trap. It wasn't stupid. It knew what Prey had done. It was waiting to see if he really was as helpless as he appeared.

"Come to scout if all the ponies have been magically restarted, have you?" Prey grinned at the false pegasus, heart thumping, "By the living light, yez'? I mean, yes? It burned, didn't it?"

The mimic bared a mouth full of thick, black fangs at him and hissed.

Prey barely managed to hide his flinch. He could not afford to let his mask slip. But did it matter? This thing could feel his emotions. Or could it? In that weakened and battered state, who could tell?

Prey held onto that hope. Not because he believed in it, but rather because the emotion wouldn't give him away to the mimic.

"You're a scout, then. But only one, all by your lonesome. No back up? You're all weakened, aren't you? All you who survived my fire. Did any of you survive my fire? Or are you fresh? A fresh pawn to be sacrificed? Certainly looks like it, what with how you've been sent up here alone to see if you can discover anything useful before you inevitably die."

The mimic didn't react. It's milky eyes didn't leave Prey for an instant. Prey was beginning to wonder if it was somehow deaf, or couldn't understand him from how utterly reactionless it was, when it opened its jaws and a voice came out.

It spoke wrong. Its lips and jaws did not sync with the words, "You

understand nothing of us, hateful worm. We are the swarm, and we have already seen all you tried to hide. You have murdered individuals, but we still saw all. A drone is nothing. This one is nothing. The swarm will live. The queen will triumph."

A broken, hissing monologue. A cliché in any other circumstance. So bowel looseningly real when it happened right in front of you, coming out of the fanged maw of a twisted shapeshifter.

Prey snatched at the first thing that came to him, a question, merely a tactic to stall, "Why were you in Mayflower? What were you doing pretending to be the Border Guard Shimmer?" He demanded.

The hollow creature in front of him, a drone, like a bee? Prey didn't know. It spoke again, mouth still not syncing to the rasping guttural words it uttered.

"The swarm does not forget. The queen does not forgive. Crawling worm rotten with hate, you will no longer stymie the swarms progress. We are the living tide. The seat of pony kind will fall. The pods are ready, the hatcheries are bursting. How can one worm stop us? You can't."

"Oh I'm shaking in my wool. I'm one runt lamb, and I've destroyed all your efforts? Oh how mighty this swarm must be, then. Look at you, one drone, all burnt and twisted by the Elements of Harmony, which you already failed to steal once! Did you know, I was there? I saw Luna destroy your fake griffin ambassador." Prey half spat, and half coughed.

He hated Canterlot, he didn't care if it fell, and it infuriated him that he had been forced to defend it as this mimic had said.

"We know," It garbled, horribly wet and hissing, "We know all. We saw through our eyes the Second Sister that night. We are the hive. We saw you break and beg. We saw you cry. We saw you lie. We saw everything."

Prey's tired and strained mind raced through the impossible implications of what he'd just heard.

It was impossible. Yet it wasn't. It all fitted, the reckless way the mimics were willing to sacrifice individuals, the co-ordination, the fact that there was only one mimic here in front of him, meaning it had been sent up to scout the state of Canterlot. Only one was needed, and even if it died, as long as it saw enough before it perished, then the rest would know. It was only by pure miserable just bad luck it'd encountered him on the way up the mountainside.

The milky eyed mimic was still rasping out its message, "The swarm will take all. The Elements will be accounted for. The Sun Tyrant's defences will only delay us, we will find a way. We are ready. We are so very hungry."

'We are hungry.' Prey knew hunger. At those words, a frozen claw of dread speared through Prey before he could hide the feeling.

The mimic's broken hissing was rising in pitch, feverishly repeating itself, "The hatcheries are bursting. We must eat. And so, our queen shall take what is hers. We will roll forth as the tide. We will wait no longer. Discord's chaos has struck with perfection, there is no better time, the swarm of war will feast!"

Days. The mimics were talking about days. Not weeks or months. Days.

They had an army, and they were going to attack within days.

War. The mimics were going to go to war. Come *here* to war.

Prey's vision went grey and foggy for a second as his mind swam. *War*.

Tumbling puzzle pieces fell into place, locking together into a terrible undeniable image as Prey suddenly saw it all.

He'd suspected it, he'd worried over maybe's, he'd weighed if's, but hadn't known. He hadn't known. But now he saw the whole terrible picture.

The mimics had been scouting out the crystal caverns under the mountain since before he'd been brought from Dreverton. They'd meant to flood the city from the inside, and had been securing the

maze of lightless tunnels for their building army.

And then he'd come along, claiming the crystal cavern for himself and getting in their way. His conflict with the thieves, the diamond dogs, all the while the mimics had been biding their time in the shadows beneath the rocks. Waiting.

Back then, their army hadn't been ready, so they hadn't rushed in to retake the caves. But they hadn't predicted how utterly Prey could lay claim to anything with his runes. Their recent increase in movement, their probing pushes which left mimics dead and burnt, it was because they now *needed* those tunnels back under their control.

The mimics had known about the true nature of the Elements of Harmony before Prey had, back when he hadn't believed. That was why they'd hijacked the Griffonian's scheme for their own. Prey himself had ended up down in Ponyville on the very night the fake Felyawn had attempted to steal the Elements.

They'd been trying to pre-emptively remove a threat to their coming invasion. To claim the super weapon for their own side, maybe. But the theft had failed, Luna herself had arrived on the scene, so the mimics had turned to a darker solution. Resource denial.

The disguised mimic had not hesitated and had stuck a knife in the brain of that pink mare the instant the opportunity presented itself. Such swift thinking. Without all six of the bonded bearers, supposedly the Element's either didn't work, or were at least greatly weakened.

And then the moment of victory was snatched away.

The Elements had resurrected their bearer. Death had been undone, and the impossible happened. And just like that, the mimics efforts had become null and void.

The oblivious and uninformed Element Bearer's were effectively untouchable. The six mares, despite being utterly ignorant, effectively gained an untouchable aura, because there was no point in going after them anymore. If they were killed, apparently they

would just be returned from even death.

The Bearers were out. Only directly removing the Elements would work. And the Elements had been quietly recalled to Canterlot, where they now were locked away behind mighty doors and magic.

But now the mimics had an army. And they were about to invade. They must have a different plan to stop the Elements.

A secret way into the vaults. A method to capture and hold one of the Bearers, or simply split them up. Kill them over and over every time they resurrected. Or possibly even ignore them entirely.

Prey had seen war. And while in his bitter experience, all armies always came down to one individual killing another in the mud, he was no fool. He could think on the grander scale required for war. An army. Thousands upon thousands of soldiers, or rather drones.

The mimics had an army. The phrase reverberated in his skull. They had an army. A shortly to be starving army. A *desperate* army.

Prey didn't know what their exact plan was. He didn't know if it would succeed either, but it didn't matter. Because the mimics had bred an army and they were going to try. There was no other choice left for them, they'd backed themselves into a corner.

Take Canterlot, and then Equestria for its bountiful supplies and rich lands, or have the bulk of their new army whittled down by starvation, thousands and thousands of deaths, until only a smaller, sustainable number of mimics remained. Win or die.

But Prey wouldn't be around to see that army pouring up out of the tunnels in a few days time. He was lying here on the rocks, helpless, without his ribbon, and unable to move.

The mimic had hesitated long enough. It had cautiously observed Prey, and Prey knew it had seen the truth. It knew he wasn't faking, and that he didn't have some secret defence.

Burnt and injured as the sallow thing was, Prey was still the one who didn't have the strength to move. It could literally taste the helplessness he tried to hide.

It took a slow step closer towards him. And then another. And another. Its milky blue eyes glared into Prey, its fur patchy and limbs stick like, but its oversized jaw filled with black fangs.

Prey's eyes darted to the sky, to the sides, all around. But there was nothing to help him. It was even worse than that.

Another mimic had climbed up the rocky slope while he hadn't been looking. Prey's heart thudded painfully. Two, no, four, seven of them. Or more. All of them hollowed out and burnt from the light. All looked like wrong versions of skeletal ponies. All still able and willing to kill him.

The first mimic hadn't just been assessing him. It had been waiting for reinforcements. They were going to make sure this time, no poison in a mug of hot chocolate

After all the madness, the chaos creature, and the burning, this was how it went.

Bitterness gripped his lungs, and sour fear coated the back of his tongue. He couldn't look at the approaching mimic. He didn't want to.

Prey could only weakly turn his head slightly to the side, to look away. But he couldn't even have that, because the other mimics were creeping in closer too. He was surrounded. If only he still had his ribbon-! It wasn't fair.

"...But life has never been fair." He let the words float out on his breath.

The mimic opened its jaws wide, and scurried suddenly forwards. Prey tensed up. He didn't-!

A lunge. Milky white, then sky blue eyes.

The sky was clear and empty above them all.

I am free. So wonderfully free. I love no one, and no one loves me.

----I---

Prey had not forgiven or forgotten. It didn't help him in the end.

[End of Arc 6]

Author's Notes:

NOTE: Once again, this chapter is not fully edited, but for the sake of time, I am posting it now. Please let me know the mistakes you all inevitably come across, and I'll fix them when I get back tomorrow. Thanks.

85.7 And when We come Home

[Start Arc - 7]

It is remarkable how swiftly things can return to normal. Only a short while ago chaos reigned, and as everything had been so completely beyond anypony's control and the Royal Sisters were silent, many had despaired in that moment.

But hope had dawned like the glorious sun on a new day. A whirling corona of rainbow light had driven back the insanity, restoring everything to its correct and proper place. Harmony had once again prevailed!

As ponies abruptly found themselves restored to their proper frame of mind, or sitting in the middle of a street which had just been floating, first came shock at the suddenness, then fear that Discord would strike again any second, and then third and finally, joy.

Celebration! Upper and Lower Canterlot, for once there was next to no distinction between the classes as all rejoiced and gave thanks.

Tears were shed as frantic ponies found their loved ones alive and well.

The destruction, the warping, all of it was undone. There wasn't any need for even one of the many statues of Celestia to be repaired. Every single thing, large or small, had been restored to its proper and perfect place.

On the first day, most of pony-colonised Equestria partied long into the night.

On the second day, a good feeling of hope and renewal still pervaded everywhere. A second, unofficial holiday was announced by all non-essential businesses. Meanwhile, messages flew frantically back and forth not just across the whole of the country, but across all borders too.

Assurances, explanations, more assurances, promises, schedules for urgent meetings, yet more assurances, and a push to immediately restart all halted trade.

Here though, even if it didn't become common knowledge until a fair while later, a lingering black stain was caused. Griffonia didn't accept Equestria's reassurance, and essentially blocked all incoming Equestrian trade by rising tariffs so harshly that no pony trader was willing to take the loss.

Not only that, but without further warning the Griffins clamped down on their side of the border, ejecting all visiting non-citizen ponies from their lands over the course of the next few days.

But that wasn't a problem to most Equestrians, not having anything to do with griffins or the cold, mountainous lands up north. It was a case of, 'How dare those spiteful Griffin heathens?', mixed with the attitude of 'Oh well, their loss'.

It really was utterly remarkable how quickly normal life resumes after a disaster ends. Almost too remarkable.

The entirety of Canterlot had been overrun by one mad creature, the land and sky warped with impossible, uncounterable magic, life and all sense turned on its head, even the two alicorn sisters apparently unable to answer, and yet now...

And yet now, ponies were going about their lives once again. Trotting down the streets, working the weather, coming and going, and otherwise back to earning a living.

And while many a pony was still upset about Discord, and the newspapers were still going wild, there was no massive uproar. No riots. No panicking citizens loading up their valuables and fleeing the city. Nothing of the sort.

Why was this?

Because there was no lingering signs or evidence of any damage? Because everything had been reset? Because it was the pony beloved power of Harmony which'd saved them all?

Why?

Unexpected and unforeseen pony resilience? Patriotic union in the face of adversity? Pride? Even just complacency? Or perhaps rather because there seemed to have been a subtle, unnoticed calming effect left over by the magic of Harmony.

Everyone was calmer, *far* calmer than the situation called for. More upbeat, more positive, more cheerful.

It was like Discord's return had occurred a few months ago, and not just a few days.

And then there were those who had been warped by Discord himself. The crazies. Thankfully restored now, of course, but still. How could they just shrug it off? Ponies who had never suffered tragedy or seen disaster, who were naturally skittish and distrusting of the unknown, and who should've by all rights been left with PTSD.

But they weren't. Most weren't even left overly nervous and distrusting after the incident.

When interviewed, nearly without exception, these ponies reported that their memory of the event, both before and while under the crazed effect of Discord's influence, were blurred hazes.

In the few cases where an individual could correctly be linked to the actions as one of the crazies, (bearing in mind that all evidence was now gone and the land restored), these recovered individuals could barely even remember the perverse acts they'd performed while under the serpentine chimera's chaotic influence.

And, as a result, these ponies weren't left feeling particularly guilty, despite there being strong evidence that the warped actions an afflicted individual undertook while crazed were strongly linked to their original personality. Either as a complete reversal, or as a removal of all inhibitions.

Again, to those few who took note of the lack of 'worry' caused was itself worrying.

Actually, somewhat ironically, it was mostly the ponies who had escaped Discord's touch, and who'd instead had to either hide or run around trying to survive inside the unleashed world of chaos, who were the ones left with the greatest degree of lingering trauma. If the word 'trauma' could even be applied.

Trauma implied horrific damage. It would probably be more accurate to call it instead at most, 'lingering nervousness', and leave it at that.

So everything returned shortly to normal, a miracle in and of itself.

Oh, there were of course a few exceptions, there always are. Individuals with different stories, different views, who hadn't forgotten it all, and who were still strongly affected, but they were vanishingly few. And of those who did still remember the chaos as it had really been, terrifying and raw, fewer still wished they did, and withdrew into themselves.

Maybe their loved ones would draw them out. Maybe they wouldn't. Maybe they'd overcome it themselves. Maybe they wouldn't. There are many different stories out there, and everyone is different.

And so it was, and so it went. Within a few short days of ecstatic celebration, restoration, and Harmony, Equestria returned to normal and resumed its ever onward and upward trot towards a better future.

Lieutenant Screech's eyes were heavy with dark bags, evidence of his lack of sleep, as he had to shake his head yet again to Crimson and Gloom.

"No, I'm sorry but there's still nothing. Every patrol knows to be on the lookout for him, but nopony's found hint nor scent of Prey."

Even as they were speaking, the three of them were swiftly moving through the Night Guard section of the Palace, first down this corridor and then that, passing by opening and closing doors. Other

Night Guards were rushing everywhere, making it seem like they possessed twice the numbers they really did.

Everyone and everything in the Palace was caught up in the same rush.

Everything may have been reset, but Discord had still created so much work for the Guard, both Royal and Night alike, that they'd still be trying to catch up for at least a month to come. At best.

"Somepony's got to have seen him. I don't get it, I don't get it! Everything else has come back, so Prey's got to be here somewhere." Gloom repeated for the twentieth time. Gloom wasn't directing his frustration at Screech, but at the facts. It was frustration which had morphed quickly into rising desperation. And that had been two days ago.

Now, it was more an exhausted sort of dread.

The Sargent was just as tired as his Lieutenant, but unlike the senior thestral, he was the only officer who didn't have everyone under his command accounted for. It was increasingly looking like Prey might be the only missing person in the whole city.

"I'm sorry Sargent. I have nothing more I can tell you." Screech sighed, truly feeling both Gloom's pain and the weight of his own responsibility. He was as a superior to Gloom and Prey both after all. And Crimson too, of course. Duty before all else.

Crimson finally spoke up. It was the same question he'd asked last time, and the time before that, and the time before that. The same request, the same demand.

The armoured pegasus's voice was tightly controlled. Gloom and Screech still heard the brittle strain he tried so hard to suppress in it; "Has Princess Luna been able to search for Prey yet? Dreams, or his tracer bands. Sir?" Crimson's tensed wings were rigid at his sides.

It was the same question. The same one he'd asked three days ago.

Screech had to give the same answer he'd given three days ago as

well.

"No. I'm sorry." Screech answered heavily.

He didn't have to explain why. Not again. Not after Crimson had demanded an explanation the first time. Demanded! Him, Crimson, had *demanded*. Again, something Screech could well understand and empathise with. It is hard to hear that the one you care about, the one who is missing and might be lying helpless and hurt somewhere, could not come before the good of a nation.

Intellectually you understood, but your heart? It would never accept that answer. But there was nothing new he could add to try and reassure them. No word of the lamb. No sign.

Screech understood. He was a clan warrior. He knew what it was like to go out to greet a returning foraging party, not expecting anything to have gone wrong, and that moment of vertigo-inducing dread which seized your heart when you only counted three, instead of four, thestrals flying back.

The sudden anger which flashed into denial and then a dreadful numbness as you helplessly watched the three shapes flying closer, unable to do anything but already knowing the truth, and yet still desperately peeling your eyes and searching for the fourth figure to reappear. Screech well knew. It had happened to him.

Duty can be such a heavy burden, and never does it weigh more heavily than when you least feel like upholding it.

Screech stopped, taking the few seconds out of his hectic rushing back and forth. He briefly touched a wing to Crimson, then Gloom's shoulder plates, "I'm sorry again. But there's nothing more that can be done right now."

Then the Lieutenant was striding off. It was the same again. Gloom and Crimson had waited, hoped, and worried, but it was the same. Two, now almost three days, and no hide nor hair of the lamb had been so much as glimpsed.

They'd wanted to go out and search for Prey themselves, no matter

knowing that they'd have no more luck than the combined forces of the rest of the Night Guard.

What had happened? Why? Was it because Prey wasn't a pony that he hadn't been restored? Where was he? How were they going find him? *Could* they find him?

Those were the questions the two of them asked themselves. They didn't ask the questions they tried to smother even in the privacy of their own hearts.

Was it already too late? Had it always been too late?

The Night Guard was being run ragged, and it wasn't just their lack of numbers this time, the newest although not-so-new thestral recruits notwithstanding. The Royal Guard was also pulling double shifts and overtime, having to match their bat-winged counterparts in working upwards of twelve-hour shifts, six days a week.

For a moment, before the rush of duty reclaimed them, the two of them stood there, out of the way to the side of the corridor. Exhausted yellow slit eyes met the dropping amber pair. Nothing was said. Nothing needed to be said. Nothing further could be said.

Crimson's wings bunched tightly at his sides, the feathers dull. He hadn't cleaned them in days. There hadn't been even one minute of free time. The weight of one feather in particular was heavy.

Gloom's hoof rose in the moment of distraction and tiredness, but encountered only the unyielding polished metal of his armour as he tried to scratch at his chest scar.

Everyone else was fine. It was selfish that when after the miracle of Harmony, and everyone else was fine, Scenic, Lilly, Carton, Saffron, all of them, but yet-

The private moment of stolen time ended, "Sargent Gloom?! Anypony seen-? Sargent Gloom, Captain Nighthawk wants you."

A harried thestral called out, barely waiting to make sure he'd been heard, and then was off again, this time calling out for Lieutenant Vivid Edge.

Crimson had demanded an explanation from Screech. He'd strongly 'asked' one of Luna.

Luna hadn't had time to see them, she was the Princess, and alicorn, co-ruler of the entire nation, with tens of thousands of ponies looking to her and her sister in this uncertain hour for guidance and instruction.

Luna hadn't had time to see them, and yet, for them, the ISND, in recognition of their service, she had still given them time. Three and a half minutes of her invaluable time that first night, when it was also most in demand.

A minute and a half to listen to their hasty request, and to say "No". She could have left it there, she was an alicorn and it was her right. The two extra minutes was the additional time she chose to succinctly explain why she couldn't, and to apologise for their disappointment, but that they must hold out hope. Then she'd teleported away to meet with her sister.

Gloom and Crimson's request had been simple. Please locate Prey through the tracer bands, or failing that, through the dream realm.

"Nay. We cannot, for we have not the time. It is all we art able to do to manage even half the nightmares infesting our dream realm and plaguing our subjects. Tis' never so simple as finding but one dreamer among many, and at this time..."

Luna had shaken her head, apologetic, even understanding, but as unyielding as iron, "At present there is no time. How long wouldst thou have us search. One hour? Two? And pass by the dreams of suffering sleepers who art before us and in need now? Nay."

"Princess, the tracer bands, can you not-?"

"Nay," Luna had interrupted again, "We cannot. Once more we have not the time, but even so... we art troubled. We suspect Discord's foul hoof. We cannot sense our magic near. We felt out for it, but it is gone. Or it is very far from here. Again, we have not the time to

spend that we might confirm one way or the other."

Then she'd attempted to briefly comfort them, "Take comfort in this. We will search when the most immediate need has passed and there is time again. We do not forget those who serve us. Until then, wait and hold out hope. Our night will watch over Prey. Now fare thee well, Sargent Gloom."

The Lieutenant had listened to Crimson and Gloom's plea. He'd repeated their request to ask Luna the second and third nights to ask if she'd had time to check yet.

The answer was still no.

A brand new stained glass window was installed in the main throne room of the Palace. What was more, it was commissioned, installed, and finished on the second day.

That such speed and importance was placed upon the construction of this one new stained glass window showed from how high up the order had come from.

The court was packed and heaving at all hours of the day, and so all who bothered to look up had the chance to gaze upon the glorious depiction of the brave Elements putting an end to Discord the Lord of Chaos' madness by the powers of Harmony.

There is a limit to what one person can endure. Or rather, what they *think* is the limit, only to discover that the world doesn't care for where you drew the line on what you're prepared to suffer.

The world doesn't care. Stand in its way, fight back, give in, run away, it doesn't matter. It will run you over and grind you down to nothing without ever even noticing you in its path.

Scenic Paint had decided he'd had enough. And the world hadn't cared. He'd quit the Night Guard because of what he'd seen in Mayflower, the horrors he'd survived, and the unnamable terror

which had come in the night. No, he couldn't do it again. He just couldn't.

Scenic had quit to live safe in Canterlot, to paint, to love Carton Juice, to find happiness. He wasn't brave, he knew that, but he couldn't do it again. No, he just couldn't.

The world hadn't cared. Discord hadn't cared. It had come along and swept him away in the flood of chaos, like his life didn't matter. Like he was nothing, a nobody. Like he didn't matter.

And he hadn't been able to butternut-squash about any of that!

There was a terrible, huge truth in that. A harsh wake up call.

"He's not coming back. Discord isn't coming back." Scenic stated out loud, stirring the pot.

"I know, I know, Paint Spot honey. Princess Celestia will be ready for him if he does. And the Elements of Harmony will also put a stop to him too." Carton Juice answered.

She'd said much the same before. And same as before, Scenic wasn't certain she wasn't trying just to convince herself.

"Yeah. Princess Celestia will stop him for sure. Her and Princess Luna too." Scenic agreed firmly, nodding at the pot of simmering potato soup as if it would agree with him.

Carton Juice had been one of those touched by Discord. He hadn't seen it, they'd been split up at the time. He hadn't even seen the creature Discord once during the madness, perhaps the one small relief about the whole terrible affair.

Carton Juice hadn't wanted to talk about it. Knowing he was an utter hypocrite for it, he'd still pressed her into telling him out of deep seated concern. He knew how much Mayflower had bucked him up, the therapist had helped him realise that, so he'd been terrified of what it would do to sweet, loving, gentle Carton, but instead...

She barely seemed to recall any of it. She'd just said she wasn't sure,

that it was like a waking dream, but there might've been: "Something about trying to collect pollen from flowers? And trying to be a giant queen bee? Maybe running around going 'buzz buzz buzz' and trying to sting everypony?"

Swallowing, Scenic had asked her if she had stung anypony? If she had been turned into a giant bee?

Carton had blinked blankly, brow furrowed, and then given him a strange look, "No of course not. A pony can't be a bee." She'd said.

Scenic had bitten his lip when he'd gone to say how Discord had done that and more, and physically turning you into something else was foal's play to that monster. But he'd stopped himself just in time, and smiled weakly in relief instead. How could she not remember? Scenic didn't understand, but he knew that wasn't something you could just *forget*.

Or was it? Maybe it was something she should try to forget? Was that right? Or was it wrong? Scenic didn't know, he just didn't know, and he was worried for Carton.

Surely not being able to remember something was a bad sign, and yet so many other ponies didn't seem to clearly remember either, and none of them were worrying about it.

Scenic himself had a hard time differentiating all of what had happened during that time of chaos, the floating buildings, the inside-out trees, screaming lampposts, false streets, and animated food to name just a few, with the sun and moon flying this way and that through the boiling purple sky and time distorting all around him. But Scenic couldn't shake the feeling that he still remembered more clearly than anypony else did. And he didn't know why that should be the case either.

A very small cynical part of him, one which hadn't even existed until a mere hooful of months ago, blamed his trip to the border of Equestria.

If he hadn't gone out there, and hadn't seen, then he wouldn't have the experience of these sorts of terrible things. And perhaps that

experience was why Discord hadn't faded from his memory quite like it had for his beloved marefriend.

But Carton Juice was okay now. Physically, at least. And she didn't seem concerned mentally either. That should be all that mattered. So long as she was okay, then he could suck it up and learn to just deal.

For the first time, Scenic thought he was the same as Gloom, Crimson, and Prey, at least on this one thing. He hadn't gotten it before, sure he'd been a part of Mayflower, but also *apart*, and afterwards he'd quit when they'd stayed... but this he now got.

To put it in Scenic's own words, which he'd spoken to himself after taking a good long hard look at himself in the mirror, "Okay. So I've seen some bucked up stuff. And now that stuff's in my head. I'm now bucked up too. But I can't tell anypony, because Carton wouldn't understand. And most importantly, I don't want her to understand. And so what? So what?"

So what if she didn't remember like she should? So what if she didn't have to sleep with a night light on like he did? So what?

He didn't want her to be like him. So he was going to make sure it didn't happen.

Next time, (and before, he hadn't ever conceived there even *could* be a next time, and hadn't that been another nasty wake up call?) next time, what if Carton was the one who got hurt?

That's what Scenic had learnt. That was the lesson he'd taken away.

That there could always be a next time. That it might not be him who was the one who got hurt. And that there wouldn't always be somepony else there to magically save Carton Juice for him.

Scenic sightlessly stirred the soup pot, the now too hot stove making the thick potato soup bubble and spit. He barely even noticed when a scalding drop hit the scarred skin of his cheek and briefly burned him. The rest of his thoughts were too loud.

Princess Celestia will protect us. The Elements and power of

Harmony will save us.

"Yeah... yeah..."

Randy tipped his heaped wheelbarrow of rich compost onto the freshly dug flowerbed. Then he turned around and went back for another load. The much lightened wheelbarrow bounced along as he set out across the open grass stretch of the park, towards the collection of Park Gardener's work huts.

Absently, Randy hummed a tune he couldn't quite remember, but which was nevertheless stuck in his head.

There was always plenty of work to be getting on with in the park. Budding flowers didn't care about no Lord of Chaos, no sir'ee! All they wanted was some nice sunlight and warmth to begin pushing up.

Vast patches of small, but exceptionally pretty, snowdrops and delicate crocuses thronged the flowerbeds, always the first to awaken every year just before spring even arrived. They didn't mind the cold.

Neither did Randy, not with his gardner's uniform, brisk work, and warm fluffy hat with earmuff flaps.

Actually, the warm hat had been Lemon Pink's Hearth's Warming gift to him, which made it doubly warm in Randy's opinion. A simple, practical gift for a simple, practical pony.

Although he had only seen her once since all the chaos had been put right...

But that was fine, because she was okay. Not that there had been any doubt. Nothing could phase her. She probably could have coldly stared down Discord until he'd run away, easily!

But he'd been so worried at the time, and so relieved when he'd thrown open his front door and she'd been standing there. In relief, he'd gone to hug her. She'd frozen up, and then shoved him away a

mere second later with surprising strength. In surprise he'd looked up and found her pretty lilac eyes hard and cold.

"What's wrong Lemon? Did something happen? Are you not okay? What happened?" He'd blurted.

Lemon had given herself a shake, "I... I am fine. Pardon me, I was not ready for that. Hello, Randy Pickaxe by the way." Distractedly, she'd brushed her silvery mane away from her face as she looked back at the street filled with celebrating ponies.

He'd tried to get her to come inside, to ask what she remembered and what she'd seen, (He himself had hidden in the attic while the chaos was happening) but she'd refused.

He'd asked her to please stay, but Lemon had insisted she had to go. That there were urgent things she needed to check on. Randy had wanted her to stay. That she hadn't had hurt him more than he'd thought it would. But Lemon was an important pony, and she had important pony things to do. He was just grateful she'd checked on him. That counted, didn't it?

Even if Randy suspected it was her mysterious boss who was always overworking her that she'd gone to check on...

And that he hadn't seen her since...

And that he was missing her...

And he really needed her opinion on something...

'No! No more moping! Things are good, everything is fine, the sun is shining, Firea is fine, Canterlot is back to normal, and everything is looking up.'

Hang on, that reminded him. Thinking about Lemon, wasn't the tune he was humming now from a snippet he'd heard from her?

Randy thought hard, what had it been? Lemon Pink really wasn't somepony he could picture humming, let alone singing despite how much he would've like to hear it, so when had he picked up the tune from her?

Now how did it go? Randy tried to recall the words as he let go of the wheelbarrow and reached for the shovel, which was planted in the compost heap.

"Hmm hm, hmhmhm, Hmm hm Hm~ Something something... ah! Yes. Raven magpie fly away, scarecrow, keep at bay. Wheat n' barley dance and sway, Harvest King, come to play, hmm hm hmm Hm... uhh, how did the rest of it go? It's really stuck in my head. Just'll have to ask Lemon how it all goes when I get to see her again."

He really did hope that was sooner, rather than later though. Randy missed his friend. Not because, well, not *just* because she was his marefriend, but because she was his friend too. They didn't do any coltfriend and marefriend stuff together anyways, not really, only going on dinner dates. But the time Randy was lucky enough to spend with Lemon, he found was somehow more real.

Lemon Pink was exactly who she was. She knew it, and didn't need to try and prove it to anypony. She didn't need anypony else, which had first been unnerving to Randy, but now just was. She was an orphan, avoided because of her sharp horn, and you know what? She wasn't bitter or confrontational about it at all. It was sorta' inspirational to Randy.

Lemon was controlled and alert at all times, and Randy felt calmer and more contemplative when in her company than he did at any other time. And he missed that.

He really looked forwards to it coming around again. Randy didn't think about the future much, but when he did, he unconsciously thought about a future where Lemon Pink was in it. In what form, he wasn't sure, just that she was.

Discord had... been Discord. But that was in the past now. He didn't want to think about it. He didn't like to think about it, and he didn't need to. Discord had been a villain, trying to ruin all the good in everypony's lives.

And he, simple Randy Pickaxe, had a lot of good in his life to get back to. If he let Discord taint his happiness of the future, then the

nasty villain had won. That was how he'd decided to look at it, at least.

Randy nodded firmly to himself. Yep. That was that. Live in the moment and be happy.

He pulled the shovel free and began, well, shovelling. "Hm hm, hm Hm hmm, ~Raven magpie fly away, Scarecrow, keep at bay..."

"There." Saffron said quietly, deftly tugging the last line of Lilly's new shirt straight.

Lilly grunted. Then she caught herself and made a better effort, "Thanks. It's a big help. You know, caus' clothes are your thing."

"It's part of my job, yes. I get paid to be an actor." Saffron agreed, smiling as she checked Lilly over once again. Specifically, checked over her meldwood deformities, that they were properly covered up by the new outfit she'd insisted on.

Lilly nodded absently, nervously thinking about her coming meeting with Tallow, her brother, "Wait-actor? But, model?"

"My job is to pretend to be somepony else, somepony confident, happy, and bright. So yes, an actor. That's who the producers and photographers pay me to be; somepony else. They don't even bother to try and see the real me." Saffron said shrugging easily, beautiful golden curls bouncing.

Lilly searched for something to say. But this was really not the time, with her worry over trying to meet up with her unhelpful brother again, Discord's chaos and the fear it had induced in her heart, the smouldering anger at that fear, and compounding it all, the news Crimson and Gloom had brought. That Prey had vanished. Maybe even *literally* vanished, because Discord.

"I uh, that wasn't how I saw it at all. Are you saying it's all like...?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. It's my job. But it's not my life. At least, not any longer. I have a life outside of work now, difficult as it is to

find the spare time. Volunteering at the hospital, reading, baking the odd pie. And visiting all of you."

And Lilly, in a moment of rare insight, was able to look beyond herself, something she was trying and failing to improve on. And she saw that despite not being able to see anything off in Saffron's perfectly made up face, that there was still something wrong. She too was getting torn up inside over the missing lamb they both knew. Maybe not for quite the same reasons, but still. Saffron knew Prey as the lamb. Lilly knew Prey as a member of the Night Guard.

'Because it's probably dangerous. Whatever could take Prey, it can only be dangerous.' Lilly thought.

Crimson couldn't sleep. He was tired, both physically and mentally. Exhausted, really. They'd done so much, worked late into the day after an entire night, and there was still so much for them yet to do. Them. The two of them. Only two, not three.

Crimson couldn't sleep. He'd seen to all his needs, eaten, drank, removed his armour, and collapsed onto his bed. But he still couldn't sleep.

So instead he sat on his bed, and methodically sharpened his father's wingblades. **ssssscrape**

His fur and mane felt greasy. His feathers needed proper care, and soon. He'd get round to it. He would. Just not right now. He was too tried. And he and Gloom needed to be back at the Palace in only six short hours.

He really needed to get some sleep, but sleep just wouldn't come.

sssscrape Went the whetstone.

Someone had visited Prey's flat today. It hadn't been Prey.

He'd smelt them, their faint scent lingering in the air. A pony. A mare. Smelling ever so faintly of old blood. It had tickled a faint memory that Crimson couldn't place despite his best efforts.

And they'd gotten inside of Prey's flat, and that was wrong. Strangers didn't get to go into Prey's flat. No way would Prey have allowed that. More than that, Crimson had subconsciously believed the feat just *couldn't* be done, for some reason. He hadn't realised his own assumption until he'd confronted it earlier. Because somehow, someway, Crimson was certain that Prey had something to keep out intruders. He didn't have an explanation, yet he was sure of it.

But that mare had gone inside, Crimson was certain of it although he had no evidence. They'd either had a key, or had at least picked the lock.

He carefully finished sharpening one side and turned the wingblade over.

sssscrape

Crimson didn't think they'd picked the lock. Again, no evidence, but deep down he was certain that no one could pick Prey's lock. Or at least, not without consequences.

ssssscrape

He had tried Prey's door earlier. He hadn't gone inside, that would have been wrong, Prey never entered his flat without permission, but after what he'd scented, he had to check.

The door had opened for him without a whisper. Both when he used his spare key... and also without.

Crimson didn't have a reason for why he'd tried. He'd turned the key back, re-locking the door, and then simply pushed with his hoof. And it had opened.

Magic was the simplest explanation. It probably was just magic, since Crimson wasn't any kind of expert. But he wasn't going to mention his discovery to anyone. Not even Gloom. Perhaps the door would open of its own accord for Gloom if the thestral tried, perhaps it wouldn't. It wasn't up to Crimson though, it was up to Prey. Because the door opening meant Prey's trust.

Prey would be back. Crimson refused the traitorous idea that the

door had opened to him because Prey wasn't coming back. Like it was now his. But that was ridiculous, because Prey would be back.

sssscrape

And when he came back, Crimson had some questions to ask his friend. Because that mare, whoever she was, had opened Prey's door and gone inside. Crimson wanted... he wanted to know if the lamb had another friend.

If Prey didn't want to answer, of course that was fine too. Crimson didn't need to know, he just wanted to know.

But Prey had to come back first so he could ask.

"Hurry up Prey." Crimson muttered tiredly in the dim gloom of his empty room.

He couldn't sleep. **sssscrape**

When weighed on the grand scale of the world, the effects of Discord's return, and then subsequent defeat once again, could be estimated through a much more definite and numerical scale.

Because one thing that never changed when operating at the scale of governments and countries, was money. Trade, economy, investments. *Money*.

Individual leaders, rulers, government officials, they might all react differently, have a different view on the events, and most importantly, have very different goals. But when all of that was set aside, you could always see the drive of gold behind it.

You could tell a lot about a specific country, about their reaction, and their real 'hidden' reaction to any world event you cared to name by looking at whether gold flowed in, or out after the event.

Griffonia had all but blocked Equestrian trade, hurting their own economy just as much as they hurt Equestria. That simple fact was so much more significant than most people could understand.

Griffonia was willingly cutting off a history of trade which had been mutually beneficial to the toot of not thousands, not even hundreds of thousands, but multiple millions of bits every year. Furthermore, Griffonia was split into two kingdoms, the Low Kingdom and the High Kingdom. Yet they'd come together in their denial of Equestria.

It meant Griffonia was dead serious about their stance.

The world stage was not limited to just Griffonia and Equestria however. There were other nations out there. Not as big, not as prosperous, but certainly not small nobodies. The Zebrican Lords, the Minotaur kingdom, the Diamond Dog mines, small but nationally recognised nations of mixed species, there were plenty more out there.

All combined, these lesser nations' total landmass might only just exceed Equestria, or Griffonia, but they still had a voice.

And once again, on the world stage, the volume of their voices could be accurately measured in money.

And the big surprise? After Discord, and with the recent debacle of Nightmare Moon being real, having returned, and uncovered as Princess Celestia's sister, perhaps the biggest surprise was that Equestria was *still* making money.

Oh, they'd taken a hit across nearly every single market, but their national income was still greater than their expenditure. Equestria had, and still continued to operate on such a wide breadth of markets and levels, that all the censure, protests, and imposed tariffs against Equestria by all the nations put together simply weren't enough to halt the pony nation's prosperity.

Because if any nation really truly wished to hurt Equestria, they'd first have to hurt their own economy even worse. Equestria was too big, too wealthy. And Celestia and Luna weren't bending to any demands, or even the politer entreaties.

The discovered world wanted to know what had really happened to Discord, they wanted to know how he had been stopped, how they

could duplicate the feat themselves, and most of all, they wanted reassurance that it wouldn't happen again. Because a nation is big, powerful, and slow moving. But the individual, the leader in charge of the nation, they're afraid and very mortal. Whether from self-preservation, or a genuine desire to defend his or her own people, every single leader, king, or lord wanted to be certain.

And the two immortal sisters, the alicorn rulers of the wealthiest nation on Equus? They weren't giving anything more than reassuring platitudes.

"We have seen to Discord." "He is no longer a threat." "Fear not, all is well again." "The Sun and Moon are ours again."

Non-answers. Possibly fake reassurance. A refusal of responsibility. But at the end of the day, the gold was still flowing into Equestria. So all the other nations, barring Griffonia, in the end had to reluctantly stifle their protests, bow their heads, and let it slide.

Equestria had the Border Guard, but no standing army. Despite their vast swathes of land, Equestria was not a nation of military might. It was rather one of unequalled economical power. And the rest of the nations? Even if they formed a coalition for the first time in history, they wouldn't have the power to bring Equestria to heel. They didn't have the power, or rather, the gold. And it's gold that makes the world go round.

The lands of the Fell House are wide and vast. Their reach, even more so.

On the seas, on the land, in the sky. The Merchant Fleet of Triton Fell was world-renowned. The physical holdings of their estates reached everywhere. They owned and maintained the largest sky ship docks in Equestria, possibly the world, even though the sky ship trade had never evolved to a global scale. Not that it mattered. The Fell House was one of ponies, and what was a full third of the pony race capable of? Flight.

House Fell *owned* one quarter of all property in Cloudsdale.

The reach of their leg was long, the might of their hoof vast. They employed, sponsored, and funded experts in every field and walk of life. They owned, stocked, and fully supplied two of the most highly renowned mage towers there were, for Celestia's sake! And what's more, that was more as a side project that the Fell House had undertaken over the centuries. They weren't even bothered if the towers turned over a profit! It was all about the prestige and being at the bleeding edge of magical advancement.

When you talked about the world stage, and mentioned the global power that was Equestria, after the name Celestia, the very next one which came to everyone in the know's lips was 'Fell', followed in third place by 'Blood'.

The trade set-back all the chaos and global panic Discord had caused? It wouldn't show up as more than a blip on the Fell accounting ledgers when viewed on the timeline of a year.

When you were the level of Triton Fell rich, anything material became equal in value to you, since you could have it all. Barring the time required to acquire and transport whatever it was, of course.

How wonderful it was to be that wealthy, to never even wonder what it was like to be without, because that circumstance would never happen.

Subsequently though, it could be said that the most expensive thing in the world to to Triton Fell was time, for only the two sisters were without limit in that regard. That one, ultimate, end all.

But Triton Fell had anything and everything else. As such, he only placed any further measure of value on a hooful of things outside of his time. His Fell name, the pride of his house, and his pure blood family. So that a meeting had been granted by Triton Fell to another pony, late at night, inside a private mansion deep with Fell owned land, said a lot.

If the meeting had been widely known, it would have been of great interest and excitement. None but the servants, all of whom were utterly loyal to House Fell, whose families had grown up in service

to House Fell and who would die in service to House Fell, would know of the meeting. Them, and the two ponies the clandestine meeting was between.

The cause of meeting, the other individual, the topic discussed, the obscene payment offered without even blinking, and the iron-bound self-confidence of Triton Fell when he gave his demand, it would not be known to the rest of the world at large.

Canterlot had been restored. Equestria was whole and unbroken. Like the clock had been reset and the events had seemingly never even happened.

Seemingly. If you only look above, if you were a pony, if you had been cleansed of madness, if you put your now vindicated faith in the Princesses, (who since they were back in charge meant they must've done something important against Discord), and if you believed in Harmony.

Seemingly, all was right again under the sun.

But there were places where the sun didn't reach. Under the earth. Down in the caverns, and beneath the mountain.

Down there existed a veritable maze of tunnels which had been slowly formed over millennia, the huge crystals which grew everywhere blocking or deflecting all long range magics and spells. None of this was new. Ponykind had known of the unmapped caves since the great city of Canterlot was first built.

They knew the tunnels were there, there were even tours of two or three of the uppermost caverns. Canterlot knew of the magic distorting properties of the crystals, it was a well documented phenomenon. They also knew the depths were unmapped, sometimes geologists would take brief caving expeditions down the few safer and well known paths.

Ponykind knew all of this already, and they thought nothing if it. The caves were just background, everyday life. They'd forgotten,

they didn't *see*. A way down into the caverns, but also a way up into Canterlot.

Complacent. Safe. Relieved. Happy. Blind.

They'd had centuries to map the depths, and yet they hadn't. A monumental undertaking to be sure, but with collaboration, it would've been possible.

They could have posted a watch on the underground entrances where they joined the city, but there were no sentinels.

Failing that, they could've at the very least simply filled in or blocked off the way, if they didn't want to have to bother with maintaining a guard. That hadn't been done either.

An army could've marched right into the heart of the city from out of those caves.

It would have to be an army who weren't afraid of the dark, who'd invested great time and effort in carefully mapping out the tunnels with scouts over the months, who could get to the Mountain's base without being seen, and who could move in secrecy.

A changeling army could do it.

Not just an army, a swarm, a vast swarm, a *war* swarm.

An army so large that they were literally on a starvation deadline. So many troops that they were burning through their supplies like wildfire. An army that had an operational time measured in weeks, maybe even only days.

An army so large it would win by sheer weight of bodies. Losses wouldn't even matter, because every death was simply less mouths to feed at the end.

An army large enough to cover the skies of Canterlot and fill every street all at once, to bury any Guard under black carapaced corpses if need be.

An army without morals, or self preservation, or intelligence. Just

overwhelming surprise and sheer numbers.

If such an army existed, and if it could traverse the maze of crystal tunnels, and if it could emerge undetected, then Canterlot would fall from within.

If the attack came from without the city walls, it would never work. The army would be seen in time, either by eye or magic. The defences would be raised, all the Guard summoned, magical enchantments activated, civilians evacuated and defended.

Attack from without was all but doomed to fail.

But it is vanishingly rare that any castle falls to assault. Almost always, as proven again and again throughout sordid history, they fall from within.

The tunnels were the way in. The changelings had an army out there somewhere. Days away at most, perhaps only hours. And nobody but Prey knew it. And Prey was gone.

------<<<O>>>------

And then he wasn't gone. On the morning of the fourth day after the defeat of Discord, a little after ten-past-eight actually, a runt lamb with white wool walked right into the Night Guard section of the Palace and politely asked the first exhausted and harried thestral he came across where he might find the ISND.

The little lamb smiled politely, thanked the rather nonplussed thestral, who was that special sort of tired and overworked that they'd reached the stage of just; 'It is what it is, I'm not going to question it anymore', and trotted of down the indicated corridor.

The tired thestral noticed something was amiss, he'd seen Prey before, but he was too tired to care, and he still had so much left to do before his shift was out. Oh, and he needed to go report the safe return of Prey immediately too. And he was happy about that of course! But, seriously, right now it was just more work.

The word spread quickly. Nighthawk and the Lieutenants on duty knew within four minutes. Gloom and Crimson dropped what they

were doing and rushed out.

They noticed what was wrong so much faster than that first tired Night Guard had. Sky blue eyes. White wool. And the absence of any other splash of colour. Gloom's eyes first saw the lack of gold on Prey's forelegs. Crimson first saw the lack of Prey's ribbon.

The lamb was smiling wryly though, and beat them to speaking first, "Hey, I made it back. Sorry for making you worry. Have I missed anything important?"

---I---

There was a lamb who couldn't forget, but who'd wanted to be forgotten.

Author's Notes:

Now edited by: Panem et Circenses

Also, more great pictures ☆ done by GreatSpaceBeaver found Here and HERE

86.7 All Hail the Conquerors

"What did I miss?"

Prey's return was not sudden and dramatic. Sudden certainly, but on the scale of national heroes and the defeat of Discord, not dramatic.

All Night Guard patrols had been on the lookout for him, but there were no actual search parties to recall. Princess Luna would be made aware, but as part of Nighthawk's daily report, for she hadn't given instructions to be informed immediately. Questions about where Prey had been for nearly three days would definitely be asked, but only later when this current crisis was sufficiently dealt with.

To the thestrals of the Night Guard, Prey was simply one of their number. The youngest member certainly, but still first a Night Guard, then a child second, and duty always came before all else. Besides which, outside of the Night Guard, there were precious few who even knew Prey existed.

No, Prey's return wasn't shockingly dramatic. Not even that important in the grand scheme of things. Canterlot didn't care, the world isn't fair, and the day carried on.

To a few though, those limited few, they *did* care, and Prey's return was incredibly important to them.

Joy. Elated relief. First Gloom and Crimson, later would come the others.

All that waiting, that worrying, that holding out on dwindling hope while trying to keep the rising doubts at bay, it had all paid off in the end, because it had somehow worked. Prey had come back unharmed.

"What did you miss-? What did you miss!? Why, all the paperwork, but who cares? You're alive, you're back!" The exhaustion seemed to have slid off Gloom's shoulders like a duck shedding water as he'd spoken.

Crimson's wings had almost spread wide of their own accord as he nearly lunged over to Prey, "I knew it. I knew it! I knew you would be back. You knew, I mean I knew, I knew you wouldn't leave us just like that."

Gloom's hooves had twitched, his wingclaws flexing, instinctively wanting to draw the small lamb into a relieved embrace and only just refraining. His fangs shone in a huge grin he wasn't able to stop, even if he'd wanted to try.

"Did you only just get back? From wherever you were? How did you only get back now, by the way?"

As for; 'where did your tracer bands go?' That question could come later. And anyway, those bands hadn't ever been needed in Gloom's opinion, and since Prey had returned completely of his own volition, it just cemented his point.

The lamb's smile shrank a bit, "Ah, that." He scuffed a cloven hoof on the floorboards, "In one word? Discord."

The name was a lance through the buoyancy of their joy. Crimson's wings flexed, his wingblades whispering in their sheathes, "You were... I mean, did he get to you personally?"

Everyone personally knew at least someone who'd ended up 'Discord Touched', twisted into a perverse reflection of themselves before the Elements of Harmony had fixed everything.

Prey nodded, "You know how the Elements of Harmony undid everything? Well, apparently that doesn't include undoing where you ended up, like where Discord teleported me. Without any money, it's taken me this long to travel back."

That obviously wasn't all of it. Prey's short story was lacking in all the details, but neither Gloom nor Crimson even considered asking.

Asking what Discord had twisted Prey into against his will wasn't something they needed to know if Prey didn't want to share.

But that was in the past. Prey was back and healthy, and now all the worry and fear was over. All the rest could wait for later. Or forever, even.

At that thought, the smile pushed its way firmly back onto Gloom's face again. He bent down to Prey's eye level, still grinning like a loon under his helmet and too happy to care, and behind him, his tail swishing and flicking, unable to stay still.

"I'm so, *so* glad you're back, Prey. And safe. I don't have the words, but I feel so, so, just so happy." Gloom laughed in delight at his own fumbling.

Prey tilted his head, a huge matching smile of his own nearly creasing his blue eyes shut it was so big, "Thank you."

Crimson was just as caught up in a choke of emotion, relief and delight, the laconic pegasus all but prancing or maybe hovering in place as the positive energy washed through him.

Crimson didn't say anything, but only because he couldn't seem to find words which would be enough. So he just grinned and vibrated in place. Even his normally creepy smile was just so jam packed with happiness that it looked right.

"I...You...We can...I..."

The white lamb laughed briefly, quietly, "Yeah. Gloom, Crimson. I'm back. Sorry for making you wait."

Then Lieutenant Screech burst upon the scene, having heard the news and rushed here to confirm their one M.I.A. Night Guard really was unharmed. That, and because he too had been secretly fearing the worst.

"Sargent Gloom, I was told-Prey! There you are, praise be to Luna!"

The last of them was back. The ISND was finally back up to strength, or back up to the original trio, at least.

A small thing on Canterlot's scale. A momentous thing by the scale of those who cared. But perhaps, if some secrets had been known, if the city had been more watchful and not caught up in post celebrations, the return of one small runt lamb would have finally registered as much more important to Canterlot's future.

And not some distant, vague and far off concept of the future either, but one much more immediate. Or perhaps, the moment was already past, and it was too late to change what was to come.

Sooner or later, welcome or rejected, the future would come.

Just because someone thought the worst was past, or that because something dreadful had already happened the world would now grant them a reprieve, this wishful thinking wouldn't change anything.

You might think you knew how things were supposed to go, and that you thought you saw a pattern for the future, but no one can control the future. Unexpected or unwanted, the future was already breathing down your neck. It *always* was, most just never realised that the future was only ever a breath away.

Don't take that breath for granted. The sun rises, the sun sets, but everyone has to cross the river someday. And that day could be today.

Canterlot as a whole was not aware. It had not been prepared for Discord, (not that the city ever could have possibly been, because who even knew where the insane chaos chimera had come from? That old statue? No way, that couldn't have been the *real* Discord, just a historical recording. The Princesses would never have overlooked something so obvious) but neither was Canterlot prepared for any further disaster.

It was too fast, too soon. Only three days had passed. Maybe, if given a month or two, perhaps the governing bodies of Canterlot would, like a giant golden turtle, begin to implement some changes

and safeguards against future magical apocalypses. Maybe, maybe not. But not *right* now, when Discord had only just fallen, and all was well with the world.

The Night and Royal Guard forces were all working overtime, trying to get everything back in order and under control, but they were only being reactionary. Look at them and their efforts. Thestral and normal Guard pony alike were doing good work, and achieving great things, but what the Guard forces weren't able to be was proactive. It was just the way of things.

That, and they were looking outwards. It wasn't any individual's fault, just their fault as a whole. Canterlot was looking outwards. It didn't think to look inwards. To try seeing beyond what it thought it saw. To look beneath.

Seemingly utterly unrelated to any of that though, on the morning of the third day after 'The Defeat of Discord', a runt lamb with white wool and soft blue eyes quietly returned to the joy of those who knew him.

Joy. Yes, joy. A pretentious word, and also a simple word. If asked to describe or rate, most people understand the word 'joy' to be of a higher state of happiness. Happiness, but just more in every aspect. Ponies themselves use the word joy fairly often.

But yes, joy. It wasn't silly, or exaggerated, it was simply real joy.

Saffron Swirl hugged Lilly such was her feelings when she heard, the disfigured mare squawking and trying to push off the glamour model, "Sargent Gloom found him, and he's fine. Oh, I'm so happy for them. It would just have been too sad otherwise."

"Hey, hey, watch my face. Don't bump the twigs." Lilly grumbled, but not without cause. Roughly jarring the meldwood sprouting from her flesh hurt. She was smiling too though, proud that Prey was back from whatever had gone wrong.

Proud, because he was ISND, and she was also ISND. Relieved because she needed Prey to be fine. For herself, nearly as much as for the tiny group of people she could still call her friends. After Mayflower, Lilly couldn't let herself believe that anything less could break a member of the ISND, because she needed to get well enough to be a member of the ISND again. She had to.

It was her goal, her focus. If she couldn't believe she could reach it, she'd break.

Joy. More fleeting than happiness, harder to hold onto, with a nearly non-existent shelf life, but once tasted it was so incredibly hard to forget. To those who knew the depths of sorrow, they could understand the heights of joy better than anyone who had never suffered. It was about contrast. Gloom, Crimson, Scenic, Lilly, Saffron, although not Carton Juice, they all had at least some measure of the perspective to understand that contrast. But honestly it didn't need to be complicated.

Someone who they had feared might be dead was alive. Why did it need to be any more complicated than that?

It had been morning when Prey had returned to them, meaning a bit over halfway through a long, tiring shift. It certainly made for a much more lively second half!

Taffy arrived in a whirlwind of bursting excitement, talking a mile a minute to express her happiness.

Other Night Guards, although they were being run off their hooves, if they happened to be passing by still stopped for the ten or twenty seconds necessary to look in and confirm the good news for themselves. Not that they knew Prey personally, but rather as fellow Night Guards who knew Gloom.

Cookie the cook served the lamb an extra big helping in the mess hall, and didn't even grouch at Gloom and Crimson for once.

Everyone was happy, and why wouldn't they be? Good news was to be celebrated, especially after Discord's so recent defeat.

Time still passed however, and the shift finally came to an end. And, to be honest, it had been a bit hard to focus on anything to do with paperwork. By then, the ecstatic joy had also finally faded, but it had been replaced by lingering warm happiness as the three of them left via the Guard Compound's gate.

Gloom and Crimson hadn't suddenly been cured of their previous tiredness and hours of missed sleep, but both unanimously agreed simply splitting up and going back to their apartments was simply out of the question. There needed to be something further to round off this stressful and wonderful day.

So they went and got milkshakes. Simple, and quiet. Or it *was* quiet once they finally got their drinks and left the bustling parlour. Everypony and their dog was still riding high after Discord's defeat, and were still taking impromptu opportunities to spontaneously celebrate even now three days later. Such as with ice cream and milkshakes.

The ISND left the noisy parlour behind, and moved to a quiet spot. The sun was bright overhead, taking the brisk bite out of the air, as they stood undisturbed on a small street bridge overhanging a mostly forgotten water canal.

This bridge was one of the few poorly designed but inevitable mistakes in Canterlot's street layout. Simply put, it had been built some time ago down here at this end of the street, instead of at the other end where ponies wouldn't have to detour down the whole street just to use it. At some point, enough ponies must have complained, because a newer hoofbridge had been installed to do just that where it should've been built in the first place.

The poor planning didn't really matter to the ISND though, just that it was quiet and less trodden. Gloom and Crimson stood at the bridge's edge, their milkshakes resting on the wide stone rail.

The lamb of the hour sat atop the stone railing itself, for once equalising the head height between them all.

They stood, or sat, quietly watching the water of the old canal slowly flow into the shadow of the hoofbridge, occasionally sipping from their milkshakes.

Mango for Gloom and Crimson, and blueberry for their smaller woolly companion. The lamb hadn't finished the whole cup within the minute like he usually did, oddly enough. He was copying the two armoured stallions in their pace instead.
In hindsight, perhaps their non-gold Guard armour might've had something to do with why not even one pony had passed across this bridge, not counting how out of the way it was.

The sun was rather bright, but Gloom kept his eyes lowered, and it didn't really catch and sparkle on the water below, so he was okay. The air wasn't exactly warm, and they were drinking milkshakes, but the three of them were used to far colder. Every now and then, the water eddied and gurgled. It was a pleasant filter to the background sounds of street and city life whenever this happened.

This. This right here. This was one of those moments. The ones where, in between the struggles of life, you were truly living.

"What are we going to do if this ever happens again?" The lamb finally asked conversationally.

There wasn't any clarification needed as to what 'this' was. Gloom took a deep swallow from his now mostly gone milkshake, "What can the three of us do? It took the six Elements of Harmony to defeat Discord."

"And set everything right afterwards. That was just as important." Crimson put in, leaning on the stone railing to watch a floating leaf pass on the water below.

It was an important point worth reiterating, one which felt like it got overlooked. They knew this lesson well. After the fight, the damage, destruction, and death doesn't just go away. Win or lose, you still always lost something.

Except the Elements had also fixed the damage done. Imagine if all the chaos magic hadn't also been cleansed by Harmony when it

dealt with the Lord of chaos?

"Right. So what are we going to do? Because I am... not happy with the way things went." Prey said. His smile was airy, but his tone was dark.

Prey hadn't told them exactly what had happened to him during the chaos. Neither had Gloom. Nor had Crimson. Each of the three of them had only given a vague recounting to the others. None of them had pressed the matter with another. It wasn't needed. They didn't need to share it to be able to remember clearly the very real danger and dread, even if the rest of the city seemed to have forgotten those parts.

Discord could have killed them all, if that's what he'd found amusing. And he would have, eventually, when he changed his twisted mind or thought it would be a laugh to turn Mount Canter into a volcano.

Gloom did not like that feeling of helpless powerlessness. And he imagined neither did the other two. The Reaper King, the kindersnatches, that dark, dark night... they'd been powerless then too, and their failure had meant the deaths of others.

"There's nothing we can do. Realistically, I mean." Crimson stated bluntly and sourly. "I mean, Discord was too huge for us. We can't do anything to stop that."

A bitter truth. They were just three. They didn't have any special powers like the Princesses, or the Element Bearers. They were all part of the countless who'd been useless. The whole of Canterlot put together hadn't stopped Discord, what would one undersized squad of Night Guards do against something like that in the future?

Nothing. It was like the sleeping dragon all over again. They would just have been fodder if had come to a battle.

It was the moon-blighted truth. When such giants walked, all the worms frantically crawling around in the mud could do was try not to get stepped on.

"I know that Crimson," Prey spoke up again into the unhappy silence which had fallen, "What I mean is, what are we, the three of us, going to do when the next big thing goes wrong. How are the three of *us* going to survive?"

Gloom gave the lamb a sidelong look, "We're Night Guards. We'll be doing whatever we are ordered to do to help mitigate the disaster. Even if it's only to help pick up the pieces afterwards."

A thestral's duty. But Prey was already shaking his head, "Nah, I don't mean like that. I mean..."

He waved one cloven hoof in the air vaguely, "Like, sure, we'll do all of that. But what about in a disaster scenario? What I'm saying is, we should have a plan. Like, if Canterlot was overrun or something. If all is lost, we should have a place to meet."

Prey abruptly swivelled to look at both Gloom and Crimson, "Seriously, where should we meet? Just the three of us, tell no one else. We should have an emergency meeting point in the city, where we could find each other if we needed to."

"If that happened..." Crimson said slowly, "Would it not be better to flee out of Canterlot first?"

"You two can fly out whenever you fancy. I can't. And in that case, you probably should. But let's set a place in case it isn't quite that bad, or we have to meet in secret. You never know what could happen."

Gloom supposed there was no harm, and it might save one of their lives in the future. He blinked tired, heavy eyes, and actually made himself seriously think about it. "Actually, I think I know a place. Do you remember on our first day off, we went into the market in Lower Canterlot. Do you remember where we met up afterwards?"

Prey cocked his head, raising an eyebrow in question. Crimson nodded as he recalled, "That alcove. The lone statue of Princess Luna."

"Yes, that's the one. Remember it now, Prey? That's what I have in

mind. Do you agree?" Gloom asked.

"It'll do." Prey nodded.

"I also agree." Crimson added.

"So if, and I pray to Luna it never comes to that, but if something happens, and we're separated, and we have to meet again, that's where we'll go. Just the three of us." Gloom said.

"Perfect," Prey smiled, "I won't forget it."

The sourness over the topic they'd discussed on the hoofbridge didn't linger past their conversation. Today was a good day. Today was a miraculous day even. Today was midday, actually. And tonight, they would need to be back at the Palace to start their shift, rested and ready to go once again. There would be no day off for Prey's unexpected return.

That meant finally bringing their day to a close and actually getting some sleep. The thought of the Night Guard sparked a thought in Gloom's head, one he'd been subconsciously putting off. It had to do with Prey's missing tracer bands. Prey had obviously proved they weren't necessary, since he'd returned by himself, but the decision wasn't up to Gloom.

This seemed a poor way to repay the trust which had been more than earnt by now. Trust was supposed to be a two way street. What would it say about the Night Guard if they couldn't extend that courtesy to somepony who had done so much in their duty?

For that matter Gloom wondered, what about Crimson? He was still forced to wear the tracer bands too. Would his hopefully be removed as well now that Prey's were gone? Or would another pair of golden cuffs instead be slapped on Prey's hooves? Would Prey's probation restrictions force Nighthawk's hoof in the matter?

Their Sargent tried not to let himself dwell on his disquiet, and told himself surely with all the goodwill going around, things would turn out for the best. Today was a good day. Hope and relief was in

the air. Prey had returned to them safe and sound, after all. Or mostly, anyway.

His cutie mark had told him there had been something amiss in Prey's story, or rather that he felt Prey's route back to Canterlot hadn't been what the lamb had said it had been. It worried Gloom, but only as worry for Prey. He trusted Prey. His worry was that whatever Prey had decided to keep private might be something it would be healthier to share. Whether it be how he had lost the tracer bands in the first place, or what Discord had personally done to him, or what he'd been going to do when he got back to his family if the Elements of Harmony hadn't cleansed the chaos. His home village was the only destination Gloom could think of that someone like Discord might send Prey to.

Although if that were the case, both he and Crimson were hypocrites too for not sharing.

But Gloom chose to have faith in Prey, in Crimson, and in himself. There would be time to discuss things later, if they really had to. For today, life was good.

So thinking, Gloom tiredly, but contentedly, bid Crimson and Prey a good day, a tiny disbelieving part of him still amazed that this wasn't a dream. He would see his two dear colleagues, friends, and companions later. Gloom wasn't used to having good days, where life gave back instead of taking for once. But today had been one of them.

Crimson shut the front door behind him, leaving the short corridor to their two separate flats cast in a cool gloom. The shadow was pleasant on tired eyes after the brightness of the sun outside.

The pegasus paused, seeing the small lamb standing at the end of the hallway. He hadn't made to open his own door or go inside. Crimson tilted his head, one ear cocked in silent question.

Prey blinked, returning to from wherever he had been in his head. "Sorry Crimson, did you ask something?"

"No I didn't, I was just... I was wondering. I mean, there was something I have been meaning to ask. Is now a good time? Or should it wait?"

"That depends on what it's about I suppose." Prey shrugged thin shoulders.

Crimson took a step closer, but not too close because he knew how much personal space meant to Prey, "While you were gone, someone came to your flat while I was out. A mare. And I think they went inside. Do you know who they were?"

Crimson asked the question carefully, watching Prey for any reaction. He didn't ask about the unexplained access he himself also seemed to have into Prey's flat, not yet.

The lamb grimaced slightly, "Actually, now isn't a good time for that question. Can I answer it another time?"

Crimson nodded, because of course Prey could. He might want to know, but he couldn't and wouldn't force his friend. His other question about Prey's door would have to wait too. But, Crimson still wanted to ask something more. He felt the burning need to speak, even if just for a little longer. It was just the two of them standing in here.

"What happened to your ribbon?"

Prey's face didn't so much as flicker. "Oh, my... ribbon. Don't worry about that."

Crimson blinked in obvious shock, "But, it was your ribbon..."

"You don't need to worry about it. Seriously, don't worry. I didn't lose it, rather, it'll turn up at some point." Prey answered vaguely.

That did not sit right with Crimson. Didn't that ribbon mean as much to Prey as Crimson's wingblades meant to him? Why was Prey denying his loss? Because he wanted to try and forget about it as quickly as possible? Or, maybe Prey really did mean that the blue ribbon would somehow be returned to him, Crimson could believe something like that could mysteriously happen.

Yet even so, it strongly did not sit right in Crimson. On impulse, the pegasus drew in a deep breath, but no, there was only the scent of the two of them here. He knew Prey's familiar scent just as well as he knew Gloom's or his own because of his special talent.

"Say, if I had a small request..." The lamb started suddenly, and then trailed off, rubbing one forehoof against the bare ankle of his other leg.

"Ask away." Crimson urged.

Prey seemed to internally debate for a second longer, before simply giving in and unashamedly laying out his request, "I would prefer to sleep in the same room tonight. Well, it's not night, but you know what I mean. So can I take the floor in your flat?"

Not sleep in his own flat? Crimson was silent for a moment as he absorbed that. Many different thoughts danced behind his eyes.

Prey went on, "There's a couple of reasons. I'd just prefer to be around someone else for a night, that, and I'd like not to be caught off guard and apart if something were to happen."

"Is something going to happen?" Crimson asked, dead serious.

The lamb simply shrugged wryly, "Who can know? Look at how Discord came out of nowhere. So while nothing should happen, Discord shouldn't have happened either. Nobody knows just what is going to come out of nowhere next."

There was something hiding beneath those words, however it could have just been cynicism. But whatever the hidden meaning was or wasn't, Crimson's answer was the same.

"Of course, Prey. Please do come in."

Crimson let them into his flat. The curtains were open, and the overly bright sun streamed in. Shutting the makeshift blinds was the first thing Crimson did. Second was getting his spare blanket out of the cupboard, already neatly folded, and giving it to Prey.

Crimson would have offered his bed without a second's hesitation,

but he knew Prey would never share a bed no matter how tired the lamb might be. Crimson himself wasn't fond of contact, but with Prey it was at a completely different level of loathing.

Gloom had muttered once before that he desperately hoped Prey at least still hugged his mother. Their Sargent had meant it with complete sincerity too. It was another question which Crimson had that he also would not ask of Prey, but wait to be told.

Prey had said he would take the floor. A normal pony host would have protested and argued, before finally giving in, since there was only one bed. Crimson didn't protest. If Prey hadn't wanted to sleep on the floor, he wouldn't have said he would take the floor.

Crimson was tired. Finally back in his own flat, with the blinds drawn and the bed so close, tiredness was rapidly gaining on him. It could plainly be seen in the sloppiness to his posture and droop of his wings.

Prey had already folded up the spare blanket in half and was curled up on his front, politely waiting for Crimson to divest himself of his armour and take the bed so that he might say goodnight. Or good day. Or whatever.

They only spoke of one further thing before Crimson lay down to finally sleep, a sleep where he finally didn't have to worry. Perhaps that was real reason Prey had asked to sleep in here, for the pegasus's peace of mind, just for the first night as continued proof that he really was back and wasn't going to disappear once again.

Crimson had just set down his sheathed wingblades at the foot of his bed, and was pulling himself wearily up onto the mattress, so utterly ready for some dreamless rest, when the watching lamb said his last piece.

He spoke quietly, thoughtfully, chin resting on a mound of the blanket set between his forehooves comfortably as he watched Crimson. His ears were flopped out to each side, pushed back so as not to end up inadvertently falling asleep atop one.

"You said they were fine after Discord, but, I doubt you've had any

chance to visit them and make sure. I think I would like to see Scenic and Lilly for myself. When I was... during the chaos, as I was lying there, I thought of them. Not just you and Gloom, but them too. And I hoped they were okay. I hadn't realised, but... but if something were to have happened to them, I would... I'd miss them."

Crimson didn't say anything to that right away, letting those words settle first. He absently tugged the metal ring binding his lanky mane out, uncaring of the pinch in his haste and tiredness.

"I, **yaaaawn**, that's good Prey. That's a good thing. I would too. I mean it is just... now that I do care, I don't want to try to *not* care anymore. It's cold, and lonely. It feels so much better to care."

The pegasus's last words were simply a murmur as his eyes drifted shut, sleep claiming him with a vengeance.

Maybe the prone lamb said the next words, maybe he didn't. Maybe Crimson heard them, or maybe it was the flutterings of the first wingbeats of dreams.

"...lonely isn't cold. It's hungry..."

There was only one further thing. But it was also a thing of no note, something to be forgotten.

Crimson blearily opened one yellow eye, all he could manage. Half raising his head was too much effort.

"...Prey...?"

The lamb was standing below the covered window. He turned around quickly.

"Nothing. Just checking the time of day. Don't worry, it's not time to get up." The lamb whispered, moving quickly back towards his blankets.

Had there been a voice...? Just a pigeon...? At the window...?

Nothing but the bubblings of a rudely-awakened mind.

The red stallion mussily let his head fall back to the pillow and returned to the bliss of sleep.

Another day passed in Canterlot, or above Canterlot, or even *from* Canterlot, if you measured the 'day' as the passage of the sun overhead and remembered who controlled it. Or controlled it once again, much to the relief of all.

Discord was gone, banished or destroyed, no one actually seemed to know the specifics, but obviously the Princesses had gotten rid of him for good now. Discord was gone and life was good!

Every time you stepped out of your front door, and looked up to the wonderful blue sky, and breathed deeply of the bracing air, you just couldn't help it. You couldn't help getting wilfully caught up in the swell of being alive all over again. A reminder not to take the order and harmony of the world for granted, and also a reason why Harmony was so great, because just look at it! Look at it all! Look at the glorious city of Canterlot which had been twisted beyond recognition not so long ago but which was now perfect once again!

Swinging shop signs, pegasi swooping in and out, business and trade starting back up or kicking off with brand new opportunities, golden spires reflecting the sun, and the whole of Equestria spread out below the grandest pony city of the age, from here to the horizon.

What wonder, and what a wonderful day.

And for most, it *was* wonderful. But there are always sad stories out there. It is the contrast that makes the happy ones even happier. So long as you are not the one on the negative side of the contrast, that is. Then, it's even worse, because the reverse of the contrast is also just as true. All those happy stories make the sad ones even sadder.

A thousand ponies breathed in deeply of the free, purified air and gave thanks in their hearts to their Sun Princess and Harmony once

again. But somewhere in a hospital, or gathered around a bed in a family's house, or utterly alone, there would be those who drew their last breaths today.

Harmony had come, the chaos had been purged, the Elements had triumphed! But time never ceases. A thousand stories, and then add one extra, because life is a tapestry of interwoven lives, and there is always another person's story running parallel to your own. Or to be more accurate, more like a thousand parallel stories. One thousand happy stories, and then the one *other* story.

Sudden sickness, or an unforeseen accident could strike out of nowhere with breathtaking savagery even on this, a wonderful day. And even if it didn't, old age will have its due in the end.

Unless, of course, you were one of the immortal alicorns ruling this glorious golden city. Then even mortality was beneath you. Kings and queens came and went, but the Princesses were forever. By dint of birthright, by dint of Harmony-blessed talent, by dint of tradition and history, as long as the sun and moon rose and set, the alicorns would rule into unaging eternity.

More specifically, they would be ruling from out of the highest building in the whole city, the Royal Palace. It was up at this marble pavilion of opulence that the most important decisions of government were made. It was also from within it, down on the lower levels of the Palace, that the Guards dedicated to protecting this wonderful city hung their banners and seated their captains.

The gold and red of the Royal Guard, and the silver and indigo of the Night Guard.

Captain Shining Armour, and Captain Nighthawk.

It was rare for the two stallions to get along, and it had little to do with which of the two alicorns they were each first sworn to, and which one came second. A small part, yes, but not much. Mostly, it had to do with them both being strong-willed individuals, who came from different backgrounds, and who each thought that the other wasn't able to put duty first. The difference lay in what they viewed as their 'duty'. Otherwise, both stallions were actually

remarkably similar.

And like a pair of positive magnets, they repelled.

But that was only on the personal level. On a professional level, they kept things civil and followed their orders, orders which came from the highest powers in the land. However, their professionalism did not reflect the attitude of their respective Guard forces. And the reason they didn't get on had little in similarity to being two of the same magnets.

Captain Shining Armour had stayed late for this meeting. Captain Nighthawk had come in early for this meeting. And the ISND were simply here for this meeting.

Not that either Captain would have been alone anyway of course, because both had a number of aides and other officers they'd dragged into the meeting room too. The optimistic among them thought this was a sign of the meeting's importance. The pessimistic thought it was because misery loves company.

"...That concludes the last of the minor nighttime incident reports." Starry Wing finished, letting the pages on his clipboard fall back down.

Part of the purpose of this meeting had been to correlate any confirmed disturbance reports between both Guard forces. Not something that usually needed to be done in person, as there was already a reporting chain in place to handle it, but with the last few days having been what they were, these were unusual times. Post crisis, both Shining Armour and Nighthawk felt the need to keep their hoof on the pulse.

Hence, holding this meeting.

Nighthawk nodded in curt thanks to the Lieutenant, "That was all. No signs of lingering chaos further abroad, no more reports of minor rioting and looting, nothing else that the Night Guard can't deal with ourselves."

If you were watching, you might have seen some frustrated or irritated eye rolls among the tired Royal Guard officers brought along to this meeting.

Everyone gathered around the meeting table was tired, it could easily be seen in any one of their postures and drooping eyes. It had been a long few days post-Discord. Tempers were short, and it was something of a minor miracle that there hadn't been a fight yet between the ranks of the Night and Royal Guards.

Across the table from the thestral Captain, Shining Armour nodded slightly, "And I don't suppose anything has come to light regarding Griffonia's sudden border closure?"

He spoke clearly and briskly, without anything to suggest an accusation, yet Nighthawk still just stared flatly back.

"No. We know the same as you. Only what their embassy has declared."

Hafflow's arrest was still a silent bone of contention between the two Captains, especially as it was a secret as to how he'd ended up in Equestrian custody. Even more so, now that Hafflow had disappeared after Discord's rampage.

"Moving on," Shining Armour said after letting a significant pause elapse, "There are ponies here with families to get home to or shifts to start. Cloudsdale sent the report in this afternoon. At least half of Equestria is back under full weather coverage and control. Roughly thirty percent of the rest is going to be dealt with in the next two days, and all but one weather tower will be back up and running within the next three days."

"Is this a Guard issue, sir?" Starry Wing spoke up from beside Nighthawk. It was a fair question. Was this not the weather department's, well, *department*?

"The national weather was disturbed as a result of Discord, an issue of national security. Therefore, the weather recovery also falls under the Guard's purview." Shining Armour's own lieutenant, Twining Ivy, retorted.

"At least in part." Shining Armour added to be factual.

Nighthawk grunted. "Is there a problem, then? I'm assuming so, since you've bothered to bring it up when Cloudsdale is supposed to be dealing with it."

Shining Armour's cool expression seemed to say; 'Of course there's a problem, duh' right back. "It's the last twenty percent of Equestria which isn't going to be covered in time which we need to step in and protect."

"Protect?" Nighthawk related the last word as a gruff question.

"Yes, protect. The farthest the reaches of Equestria have been without weather control for a week already, only with what local pegasi, if any, can scrounge up. All schedules and deliveries no longer exist. Being out on the edge of the country also makes this last twenty percent the biggest work load. Simply put, too many farming towns out there are teetering on the edge of drought, and the three days until the weather towers are all up to speed again, assuming everything goes smoothly, will still be too late. So it falls to the Guard to aid them in putting right the last of Discord's aftereffects."

The Night Guards in the room didn't seem quite as moved as the Royal Guards were by news of this impending disaster. Beyond the border, the thestral clans had lived with untamed weather just fine. It wasn't that they hadn't done some small time weather control around their caves, but that had been nothing but small time dabbling.

It takes decades to subdue natural weather patterns, constant maintenance, and much more work and many more hooves than the thestral clans had even if combined. Small time weather stuff was one thing, but when a storm came, the clans had to simply bunker down and ride it out, same as everyone else living outside of Equestria.

But they were *in* Equestria right now. Ponies here, and especially the farmers, both expected and relied completely upon the cleverly scheduled weather to the exact day. It wasn't that the farmers were

knowingly lazy, it was simply that they'd never had not to before, simple as that.

"We don't have any thestrals to spare." Nighthawk stated bluntly, "One squad, perhaps two at most. That won't be enough to fill in for the down weather towers."

"Make it three, Nighthawk. I'll be committing eight full Royal Guard pegasi squads, which is already more than Canterlot can afford at this time, truth be told. Shield Basher's done the math, we need at least three more flying squads." Shining Armour answered back.

Nighthawk stared flatly back while the other Night Guards shifted in irritation. Nighthawk hadn't said one squad, two max, to be conservative. He'd said exactly the number he meant, he wasn't here to bandy words or be pushed.

However Shining Amour had meant exactly what he'd meant, too. Looking at the coverage, eleven squads was the bare minimum needed, or otherwise they might as well not bother.

Neither Captain was in the wrong here, but it was precisely this and reasons like it why the two disliked each other so much. Unfortunately, this spilled over to their subordinates too who saw their boss's stance and copied it.

To the side, the three previously quiet members of the ISND had largely been ignored, as they'd been contributing nothing. Now though, Crimson nudged his Sargent with a wing, muttering a few words in his ear.

"If I might field a suggestion, sir?" Gloom spoke up.

The Royal Guards turned to look at him, but Nighthawk had already sharply nodded for him to go ahead.

"Captain Shining Armour, you might have already considered this, but what about giving this task to the Wonderbirds."

"The who?" Twining Ivy blinked.

"Ah, the Wonderbolts I mean," Gloom hastily corrected himself,

"They're an extension of the military, and so could be given the task. They're an exclusive, pegasi-only group, they'd be perfect to get around to these far-out places."

Starry Wing didn't seem able to stop himself from tacking on; "Especially since they pride themselves so much on speed, from what I've been told."

A Royal Guard pegasus with Sargent rank pins on his shoulder looked deeply offended, even outraged at the suggestion of debasing the famous flying squad by relegating them to that, but he was smart enough not to voice his objections solely on that basis.

Shining Armour was shaking his head to Crimson's suggestion through Gloom, "No that's not going to work."

Nighthawk shifted forwards, leaning slightly on the table, "Why not?"

Shining Armour raised one brow back, "Because I've already included them in the calculation and passed down the orders for them to take part. We need an additional eleven squads *plus* them."

The pegasus Sargent's face, which had been shifting into vindicated, fell again as it turned out his own Captain had already thought of and approved the idea.

Nighthawk shifted back again, "Alright then."

If one had been watching Crimson closely after Shining Armour's explanation, and had known how to read the laconic pegasus, they might've spotted the way he resettled his feathers in some mild, smug satisfaction. You'd have needed to be someone in the know to have known why, though.

Crimson had a very low opinion of the prideful Wonderbolts, which had lowered further when they'd kept trying to get him to take their tryout because he was 'Wasted in the Night Guard'. Not in those words of course, but that was how Crimson had understood them nevertheless.

Small mercies, the inter-Guard meeting was pretty much done after

that. It had been approaching the end already, with all the important topics, or in some cases arguably unimportant, having been aired and addressed already. The Royal Guards who'd had to stay late for this meeting could finally leave, meanwhile the Night Guards who'd had to come in early needed to go and start their shifts, putting them already behind schedule for the rest of the night.

The Royal Guards filed swiftly out of the meeting room door, the thestrals waiting for them to all exit first.

Starry Wing sighed and rubbed at his face with the back of one wingclaw, commenting to Craghill, "At least the Elements of Harmony didn't reset the whole of Equestria's weather to a natural normal at the same time they destroyed Discord. I don't want to even have to imagine the fallout that would've caused."

Captain Shining Armour had been one of the last Royal Guards to leave the room, and happened to be striding past on this side of the table as Lieutenant Starry Wing was saying that. The tall stallion's ears swivelled and he looked over sharply, eyes scanning until he identified the pony who'd been speaking.

Starry Wing blinked and lowered his wingclaw, "Yes sir?" He asked, nonplussed but not overly bothered by the Captain's attention.

The unicorn stallion was tall, with the air of command and a strong gaze, but honestly, how was he supposed to try and compete with Nighthawk's own stare? On the other hoof, a point in Shining Armour's favour was that he could at least look the thestrals in eye. Ponies who could were sadly few in number, even in the Guard.

Shining Armour's frown cleared, and he shook off whatever it had been, "Nothing. Carry on. I for one am just glad the Elements didn't decide my country needed all bread replaced with books and all bakeries with libraries. Let them read books, and not eat cake indeed." He finished with a tired chuckle as he left.

Starry Wing's ears tilted to the side, knowing he was obviously missing something in the joke. His companion Craghill simply shrugged too, so they let the strange joke pass and took the

opportunity now that the doorway was clear to leave and get to work too.

Nighthawk had already risen from the table, but he didn't follow his subordinates out yet, "Sargent Gloom, a word with your squad." The Captain called, signalling the ISND to remain behind.

Gloom, Crimson, and Prey, who'd been looking at Captain Shining Armour following his strange joke with an unusually intent look on his face, all turned and came to attention.

“Yes sir?”

With a gruff jerk of his head to the side, Nighthawk signalled them to quiet until it was just them left. Starry Wing, seeing his Captain’s want for privacy, closed the door behind him as he left.

Nighthawk's sharp yellow eyes flicked over Gloom and Crimson's expressions. No doubt Nighthawk saw the brighter eyes there, the perked ears, the remnants of recent smiles. So completely opposite from just one day ago, and he finished by letting his focus come to settle on the ISND’s last member and whose return was the reason for this happy change.

For a brief moment, the Captain let himself smile back fully without reserve over baring his fangs. A rare display of unguarded emotion from the hard thestral, and even rarer, a happy one at that. But it was only for that one moment.

“I thank Luna that you’re back safely Prey. As do many ponies.” Nighthawk rasped.

On one side of the lamb in question, Gloom nodded his helmeted head vigorously with feeling, and on the other, Crimson stole a quick look down at his smaller friend, as if just to check he was still there. The two of them were happy. But from the suddenly guarded look in Prey’s blue eyes, he was sensing bad news incoming. And it was.

Nighthawk’s face twisted down into another uncommon display of emotion, but this one not quite so rare. His fangs showed in a near

sneer as he spat out the rest of his distasteful news:

“Some ponies however are not worth the star they’re born under. I was honestly astonished at the new low and lack of compassion I was exposed to last night. And moreover, that they found time to do so during all of this, it beggars belief. Such a petty-minded, honourless coward not worth carrying on their family name I have scarce had the displeasure of meeting.”

That strongly worded of a clan curse, coming from their gruff Captain, had Gloom and Crimson standing stiff in wide-eyed alarm.

Nighthawk didn't beat about the bush any more than that, "Your probation officer has submitted a declaration for a full court hearing, Prey. His excuse? The three days you were missing after Discord he's counting as a gross violation of all your restrictions."

Gloom and Crimson stared. Prey stared. Nighthawk stared back, perfectly in tune with what they were feeling.

Gloom brought up a wingclaw and scratched disbelieving at his ear, "Sir, did, did you just say-?"

"Yes."

Crimson was slowly shaking his head in stunned wonderment at the sheer audacity of what he'd just heard, "Was, I mean, is this officer actually serious?"

"Yes."

The lamb of the hour was the last to voice his utter disbelief, "Discord. I was gone because of Discord. The same thing that upended the whole country. What does, what does he think? How, just what? Is he... is he an *idiot*?"

Nighthawk snorted, "Yes."

"Sir, this is beyond ridiculous! Nopony can honestly believe that-"

"It's already received preliminary court approval." Nighthawk growled, "I don't know *how*, I don't know *when*. Something is rotten,

the process was rushed through and signed off immediately. Somepony is trying to play games. But it's all legal."

"There's no way Safety Hazard can honestly expect this to stand," Prey insisted, "What kind of small court judge won't look at the facts and throw the case out the window immediately-Wait... this is part of why you said it smells rotten, right sir? Because you think this whole thing is a setup between them all."

"Yes." Nighthawk said again.

"But we're the Night Guard!" Gloom exclaimed. He waved a hoof around wildly, "This has got to be illegal! Princess Luna won't stand for this. Do they actually believe they'll win this?"

Prey was the one who answered first, brows narrowed, "Maybe they don't. Maybe that's not what they want. They want a hearing, or to escalate this, or to expose it to public light, or make a mark on my record to leverage later, or something else entirely."

"My thoughts exactly."

"What, I mean, on what grounds are they even basing this accusation?" Crimson asked, still utterly flabbergasted.

"Apparently, that Prey willingly fled Canterlot after Discord-"

"Oh that is just roadapples. I'm sorry sir, but it is." Gloom snorted.

"Yes. Their excuse is that since every other pony in the city was restored afterwards, because you weren't in the city, it meant you tried to run away Prey."

"That's not-That's just unlucky coincidence! It's also a lie, Prey's back now anyway, he came straight back." Gloom protested.

"I know," Nighthawk repeated, "But they insisted. Said it was proof, since everypony was accounted for afterwards, that Discord wasn't the reason why."

"That's not true. There's Hafflow. He vanished too." Crimson hastily added as he remembered.

Prey looked up at Crimson's words, "Yes, that's right. Hang on, sir-"

He spun back to Nighthawk, a grin growing on his face, "Was that what they said exactly? They said, 'it was proof because every *pony* else had been restored'?"

Everyone else immediately caught on. Nighthawk thought back for a moment, "Yes. Yes that was their words, in writing."

"And we have an example of a griffin who was in Canterlot at the time who also vanished-", Gloom eagerly put in.

"-So we have proof." Crimson finished.

The lamb between them smiled nastily, "I just love loopholes. Ha, everypony, not everybody, oh the irony. Take that."

"Will that work though? Will a technicality be enough?" Gloom still worried.

Nighthawk grunted, "We'll make it enough. Thev're started this on a technicality, and I'll have Starry Wing shut them down on a technicality."

That was not how the uncompromising Captain usually operated at all. He was a thestral of duty before all else, as were all the Night Guard, and to them that meant upholding the spirit of the law just as much the letter. But here, Nighthawk obviously thought he *was* upholding the spirit of the law. It was this Safety Hazard and others who were trying to twist the letter of the law, so Nighthawk saw no problem with throwing their summons back out the door.

Even if it was just stalling, and they filed another hearing summons, so what? Obviously, they are trying to hide something here, evidenced by how they'd tried to rush it through. Telling them to get stuffed was sending them a message that they weren't going to be able to slip this under the table.

Although what under the moon they could hope to achieve by attacking a lamb with no family or home in Canterlot, Nighthawk hadn't a clue. Plus, it they came back and tried a second time, they'd also be exposing themselves a second time to getting caught

out on whatever they were really trying to do.

This wasn't just about Prey, it was also an indirect attack on the Night Guard's good name, and therefore more importantly, Princess Luna's name by extension.

The Night Guard had been refusing to respond to all slander and often blatant provocation so far, whether by nobles, Royal Guards, the public, newspapers, or government bodies. Not only was it beneath them, but because it would also only escalate things into a battle of public opinion they wouldn't win, no matter how untruthful the lies were.

Within the Night Guard, Nighthawk's legal power and authority was near absolute. Outside of the Guard however, he actually had little power over anything which wasn't against the law, or didn't constitute a threat to Equestrian citizens. Like a governmental hearing summons that was to Prey, and not Private Prey of the Night Guard.

But this unexpected solution to a deeply offensive problem, and one which looked like it should work perfectly too, it was a welcome change.

"Perfect."

This cowardly legal attack had come out of nowhere, but just like that and with some quick thinking, they'd found a solution.

The hot anger which had flared up all around turned into smug satisfaction as the four of them exchanged looks all around. Finally, for once, something in life which wasn't needlessly complicated.

An easy win, a quick solution, a simple fix. It felt a lot like finding a solid gold four leaf clover when you went to empty the bins.

Surely this must be some lingering good fortune left in the air by the Elements of Harmony or some such? Good things didn't just happen to the ISND otherwise. But it was about time some of that luck they'd been hearing so much about ended up on their side.

Gloom rolled his neck and relaxed, tufted ears going up from laying

rigidly back, "What's that pertinent earth pony saying? You reap what you sow."

"Too right, sir." Prey chimed in, still with that grin, which would've simply looked cute to anyone who didn't actually know the lamb, but was also a little out of character. But then again, being vindictive *was* in Prey's character.

Crimson flicked his wing, as if flicking the irritation and disgust off like water, "This was utterly stupid. I'm glad it has come to a stupid end."

Awkwardly worded, but the pegasus's meaning was understood by all. "A fitting resolution. They've wasted enough valuable Night Guard time already. They shan't waste anymore. Back to being able to do our real duty." Nighthawk stated.

"Yes sir, and gladly."

"Good. All dismissed." Nighthawk nodded gruffly to the ISND.

"Yes sir!" Time marched on and duty waited for nopony.

The Captain pulled open the door, turning back for a moment on an afterthought, "Her Majesty was glad to hear of your return too Prey. Night watch over you all."

The lamb just kept smiling away.

"I'm not saying I only missed you because of your touch with paperwork, but, I'm not going to lie and say how having your help again isn't going to be a life saver." Gloom joked as he showed Prey the huge stack of papers and files which had mounted on the desk even after only three days.

The lamb looked up from staring at the virtual mountain of paper to stare at the Sargent instead, "What? Why would you say that?"

Gloom quirked one brow under his helmet, "Because you're good at the admin paperwork side?"

"Of course I am. Allow me to rephrase, what I meant was; why would you do this to me? I return early from enjoying my holiday, and this is how you repay me?" He pressed a hoof to his chest in mock hurt.

Gloom laughed as Crimson came through the door with yet another near-to-bursting folder, "Yes, welcome back Prey."

The lamb 'tsk'd, and made his way over to the desk, pulling off some of the lower papers he could reach. He didn't make a start on the paperwork, just poked around and flicked through them all first to get his bearings.

"Well, fill me in on what you've done so far and where you are. It'll make it easier to catch up." Prey said, looking up as Crimson and Gloom came over to get stuck in.

With Prey back, even the prospect of a long, hoof cramping day spent trapped here on the dusty office didn't sound so bad, as long as it was the three of them doing it together.

"Can do," Gloom nodded, searching for where the inkwell had ended up, "And not that you were worrying, but don't worry. That wasn't your welcome back present, that's after work. Carton and Scenic have asked us three to come around. They want to properly welcome you back too."

Prey looked up with a complicated look on his face, but Gloom beat him to it.

"It's just going to be a small thing, don't worry. But they really were worried too. They deserve the chance to welcome you back as well." He forestalled Prey, finding even the lamb's unfriendly attitude nostalgic at the moment.

"No no, that's fine. Really. I felt I should see them too." Prey hastily waved it aside with the grip of pages in his cleft hoof.

"That is good to hear." Gloom said, adding an approving nod to the white lamb. Gloom really hadn't noticed until it was gone how much the blue ribbon had been a part of his image of Prey. Like a

person who'd worn glasses for as long as you'd known them, when they took them off, it looked really odd.

'I think he wore that very ribbon in Mayflower.' The thought came to Gloom. He pushed that away, not wanting to taint the mood. A day of hard work lay ahead of them, but it was honest, if obscenely aggravating, work.

"Right, let's get you up to speed Prey. Er, do you remember where I left the blue folder on the carts Crimson-? Under this one-? Ah, thanks. Okay, so here's what was going on so far..."

As Gloom explained, it wasn't just the ISND who were buried under paperwork at the moment. Currently, all of the Night Guard was generating paperwork and reports at double pace as they frantically sort to establish checks and controls again in Discord's wake.

Crimson took over the explanation without stopping his scribbling away at a report he wasn't even sure was supposed to be filed with the Night Guard instead of the Royal Guard, but going back to ask about would waste more time than just doing it.

As Crimson rather bluntly put it, everything had been given to the Guard to double-check it was still working. Not just out of the rapidly diminishing fear that somehow Discord's chaos magic was still lingering, (because so far nobody had found anything the Elements of Harmony hadn't fixed). But because it was entirely likely for the thing in question to have broken down, or become overwhelmed in the rush *after* Discord.

Take the toll bridges as just one example. No pony had been running them during the time of the chaos apocalypse, obviously, but afterwards when the bridge keepers returned, the days without maintenance and oversight had led to some damage, and one of the cash tills in a toll booth had been broken open and emptied.

The latter was obviously a crime, so a report had to be logged and filed properly, but what about getting the toll bridges repaired before anything more serious could go wrong?

Obviously, that wasn't the Night Guards job, they weren't repairponies, but due to the huge crunch the whole government was under at the moment, it had somehow ended up with them being responsible for making sure the report got to the right place so someone could be sent out to fix the damage.

And that was just one example. There were plenty more in the stacks of files and paperwork to get through.

"Toooot!" "Toot toot!"

"Why are you saying toot?" Lilly asked, askance.

Scenic pointed to his marefriend beside him, who smiled sheepishly, "Well, the party hooters I got turned out to be rubbish. They don't actually work, see?"

So saying, the huge mare blew into her party hooter for them all to see. The colourful paper flopped about and let out a very faint wheeze, and that was it.

"I am... slightly lost." Crimson blankly admitted, "What is the purpose of that?"

"Nothing. They're just supposed to be fun and blown at parties and celebrations." Carton Juice frowned down at the sad party hooter laying limply on her hoof, "Darn it. I always wanted to be part of a triumphant return where we used them."

"Another little dream crushed by reality." Lilly muttered, fumbling the party cone hat she'd been wearing off her head now that they were inside.

"I don't think of this as triumphant anything. It just is. I'm back, that's all." Prey said as they all filed into the living room. There was a tray of large frosted cupcakes on the table.

"Nonsense, this is totally a triumphant return." Carton disagreed jokingly, "It's too bad Saffron couldn't be here today for this."

"Thank you for inviting us." Gloom said politely, pulling off the waistcoat which he'd been using to cover the scar tissue on his chest, the article of clothing having been the Hearth's Warming gift of the missing mare in question herself.

"Oh it's no bother, not a bother at all." Carton beamed, helping Lilly down onto a floor cushion, which the smaller mare grunted and accepted. Well, everyone was smaller when compared to the giantess of an earth pony.

"And it's only right that we do something. Even if it's just small. Like, uh, well, this thing we're doing really." Scenic shrugged, waving vaguely around the room.

"Small is fine. Better, actually." Prey politely said, "I can't say I'm a fan of needless pomp."

"But don't you all work at the Royal Palace?" Carton asked, looking up.

"Precisely." Prey said at the exact same time as Crimson said; "That's exactly why."

Gloom nodded his firm agreement, folding up his scarf between both wingclaws, "Without wanting to stereotype, nobles can be just as bad as all those stories make them out to be. Not that we have much to do with them, thank Luna. But still, you get the point."

"Lord Vanish, of House Time." Crimson intoned, voice utterly neutral.

Carton Juice didn't know what that was referring to, and looked first to Scenic, who winced and made a hushing motion, glancing quickly at Crimson, "He uh, that guy was, err, let's not spoil the mood."

Prey was poking around for a floor cushion of his own, the others doing the same as Carton bade them all be seated. He was the lamb of the hour, but he was acting rather passive about it, just going along with the whole thing. It was a lot politer than showing his mild annoyance with the party thing, as Gloom was sure Prey was

really feeling, so that was good.

"Right then, let's get to it." Carton Juice announced, "Who wants a vanilla cupcake, and who wants a chocolate one? I never got the whole thing of waiting until the end of the party to have the cake. You should start with cake right at the beginning. So who wants what?"

How far the skittish giantess of an earth pony had come. How far they had *all* come. There had been a time when Carton had been scared of Gloom and Crimson, even out of armour, with their weapons, yellow eyes, and scars. Not that she'd ever let herself be repulsed by Lilly's gruesome appearance, but the difference there had been a tragic accident versus the unknown. Although, being honest, Carton still couldn't maintain eye contact with either yellow eyed Night Guard, but that was all.

Very soon, all served with a massive cupcake each of which could easily be an entire meal all by itself, everyone was settled and making small talk.

Crimson, seeing Prey nibbling at his vanilla cupcake, knew the lamb must've checked for poison and bit into his own. Not that Carton would try to poison a fly, but that waiter at the Green Cockatrice hadn't meant to poison them either, but she'd ended up being the unwitting server. Although, here inside this private house, with the cupcakes homemade and still warm, that chance had been vanishingly small to begin with anyway. It was just something that once it had happened to you, you could never forget.

Carton asked Crimson whether if it was true that the floors in the Palace were paved with gold, something that she'd always wondered but somehow had never gotten around to taking one of the day-tour's. To which Crimson answered -no, because people walk on the floors, and that would make a lot of cleaning. Gold went on the walls and ceiling.

Gloom commented in passing to Scenic about the gap there had been in communication with sending letters back to the clan, again caused by Discord, and how glad he was that they'd finally gotten the first delayed letter through. They'd been starting to get worried.

It was round about then that Lilly shared a bit of news of her own. Her meldwood leg stuck out straight to the left from atop the floor cushion, while she laid on her right side:

"The more I try to reconnect with my brother, he's Tallow in case you've forgotten, the more I think stupid runs in the family."

"Don't put yourself down like that, you're far from stupid," Carton gently chided, "What happened?"

Lilly snorted ungracefully, muttering something in private disagreement, before she answered, "The idiot came around to my flat to complain to me, *me,* about how unfair life was. Like it's *my* fault his fiancé's put their engagement on hold and doesn't want to see him. You know how he got Discord Touched? No? Well, anyway, he did, and he doesn't remember what he did, but apparently she does."

Lilly snorted again, vexed, "But what really gets me is he kept saying, 'Oh I don't remember so it can't be my fault, why doesn't she want to see me anymore'? Hypocritical idiot's as thick as a plank of, of, of, what's something really thick and dense? Because he's that."

"Oh. I'm so sorry that happened Lilly. I can see how that might be..." Carton weakly tried to comfort her.

Lilly grumbled something, looking at the floor then away, "S'fine. But it just made me so angry!"

"It's okay. I would probably be angry too if somepony-"

"No, not that. I mean, yeah, that too, but that's not only why. But because..." Lilly broke off in a loud sigh of exasperation, "...but because I did actually feel sorta' sorry for him. Because I felt bad that something bad happened to him. Even if it's stupid, and they're both being stupid, and they'll get back together and be stupid together again. But for some stupid reason I still got angry because it's not... he isn't... it's not his fault he's stupid and doesn't..."

It was only then that the disfigured mare belatedly realised that everyone else had stopped to listen, and that it wasn't just Carton

she'd been addressing.

"It isn't his fault he doesn't realise how lucky he is? How good he's got it?" It was Scenic, of all people, who quietly suggested the end to Lilly's sentence. The stallion stared down fixedly at his own front hooves, resting before him.

"And that somehow Discord doesn't seem to have stuck in anypony's mind and somehow hasn't had a lasting impact?" Gloom voiced his own suggestion, tone serious.

"Or that he wasn't there with the five of us in Mayflower." Crimson stated.

Perched atop his own floor cushion, it almost large enough to function as a mattress for his runt frame, Prey just nodded along with Crimson's words.

It was only Carton Juice who didn't understand, *couldn't* understand, but she stayed quiet, at least understanding what she didn't understand.

Lilly looked around, then averted her head, although the roots growing out of the side of her face were still visible, "Yeah... yeah pretty much all of that." Lilly agreed glumly.

The lamb looked around the room as the emotional tone of the conversation shifted downwards. With a show of a rueful, put upon smile, he set aside his half-finished cupcake and sat up straighter on his cushion.

"Hey, if it's as stupid and silly as you say Lilly, then it's really not your problem to solve. It'll sort itself out in the end, and since this is Canterlot, it'll probably be a happy ending too. And besides, you know the truth deep down."

"What truth?" Lilly challenged, eager but also wary. She'd learnt from experience what Prey could say.

The lamb shrugged easily, "Nothing serious has happened to your brother. His petty worries seriously tick you off, but here's the question. If it was in your power, would you want your brother to

endure even a tenth of what you did?"

"No, of course I don't." Lilly immediately denied.

"Then congratulations," Prey sat back, smiling brightly as he finally got to his point, a mix of smug, uncaring, yet also sincere, "You can now know that you're a good person. And you know what the rest of us have all felt and thought before. You are not alone in this."

Prey, Crimson, Gloom, and Scenic. Lilly looked around at the ISND, both current and old members, and got what the little lamb meant. She'd suffered, and while in the heat of the moment she might darkly wish someone else would suffer too, she didn't actually mean it, and what was more Lilly *knew* she didn't mean it. It was liberating in a way, as proof that at least one positive thing had come out of all this. She now knew what it was to wish not the worst, but rather the best on someone.

And wasn't that a nice thought? One which she could save and revisit again and again when she was feeling down.

It was an unexpectedly nice thing for Prey to say. And it certainly lifted the mood and got the small-talk back on track. Well, small-talk for them.

Carton munched down her second huge cupcake, which was actually probably a normal size to her. The topic of the strained weather schedule came up, the usual substanceless griping, and Gloom put in that they actually had it good compared to the rest of the country at the moment, what with Cloudsdale only floating a mile or so from Canterlot.

Through it though, Scenic kept looking at Prey, going to say something, then shaking his head and letting it go. However a minute later, he'd end up repeating the little performance again.

Finally Scenic worked up his courage, or perhaps his nerve, and got up. He walked over to Prey, and ducked his head to quietly ask; "Hey, Prey. Can I, can I talk to you out the back for a minute?"

The lamb gave him the side-eye, "About...?"

"Some stuff. Uh, private stuff."

"I guess I'm the guest here, so alright." Prey said, rising off the floor cushion without hesitation.

Prey brushed some scattered cake crumbs off his wool, "After you."

Scenic led the way out into the kitchen, the drying rack by the sink still filled with the washed-up baking tray and cupcake mixing utensils.

"You uh, you want some water first?" Scenic asked, fishing in the cupboard for a glass himself. He was stalling.

"I'm not thirsty, thanks."

Scenic poured himself a drink from the tap, drained it, then set the glass upside down in the sink. More stalling.

Finally he turned around to look the patiently waiting lamb in the eyes, "I wanted, I wanted to ask a favour. Or for advice. I need help with something... something..."

He winced as Prey smiled attentively, blinking big blue eyes inquisitively, "Well don't beat about the bush, what is it?"

Scenic was certain Prey was subtly mocking him. Maybe because the runt lamb already knew what he was trying to ask. If he was, then that was probably fair. Gathering his courage, Scenic took the plunge.

"After... after Discord was gone, and everything went back to normal, it was just... did you know ponies don't seem to remember? It was only a few days ago, but they don't remember it properly. But I do. I don't know why, but I can. And you know what I remember? Being helpless. Being powerless. Being nothing."

Scenic started fidgeting, needing to move and unable to help himself, "I did nothing. And if Discord comes back, I won't be able to do anything again. I don't like that. I don't want that, it's not fair that I can't do anything. What if Carton gets hurt? What if she gets, gets k-doesn't come back? It was like, like M-Mayflower. Not

exactly, but different."

Prey just stood listening, waiting.

Scenic was a coward. He'd thought he was being brave, that doing the right thing made him a brave hero. He'd been so relieved to find out he was a good pony, that he wouldn't kill. He'd been so proud of himself.

And now? Now he was still a coward, because he still didn't want to kill. He couldn't, and wouldn't do it. Even if someone like him could've killed Discord, could have stopped him, even to save himself.... he wouldn't do it.

And yet, and yet... when he thought about it being Carton on the line instead of his own life...

Yet even then he still couldn't do it. If someone held a knife to Carton's neck and told Scenic to kill someone or she died-Just no, no! It was too horrible to even think about. But he had thought about it. He'd thought about the sick humour of Discord, and what could've happened, and the harsh lesson he'd finally learnt.

The lesson that there would always be a next time. And what if there was no pony, no Elements of Harmony or Gloom, Prey, and Crimson to step in and save him next time? To save his dear sweet innocent Carton Juice?

This was why Scenic called himself a coward, because he wouldn't be able to do it, but he was not above asking someone else to do it for him instead, so he could keep his hooves clean. Scenic hated himself for that. And he also disgusted with himself that he was still asking.

"...Prey I want, I want, I mean what I want is... s-something to help me, *us*. Us. If, if somepony like Discord came again, or like Hard Baked, or a kindersnatch, I want... I want... can you please...?"

Scenic couldn't get the words out. He jerkily nodded to the side where the cutting board lay.

There, on the wall along with an array of other metal serving

spoons and tongs, was the wickedly sharp kitchen knife Prey had given him for Hearth's Warming. The knife that Scenic couldn't shake the small feeling every time he used it that maybe, just maybe, Prey had given it to him for another reason entirely.

"...Can you help me with, with, I don't even know, something that can, that could, you know, that could, if it came down to it, if Carton was in danger-" Scenic gulped, "Can you? Please Prey? I know what I'm asking, but please?"

Over the course of Scenic's request, the lamb's face had slowly shifted. Now, as Scenic waited in the silence, holding his breath, Prey tapped a hoof thoughtfully against his chin. Scenic realised he hadn't asked why Prey wasn't wearing his blue ribbon, as usually he'd be tugging on that instead.

"So you want something that will protect you and the mare you love?"

"I do. Please."

"But you don't want me to just give you a sword and be done with it, because you don't want to have to lift the sword in self-defence either, right?"

Scenic stared at the floor, unable to look the small lamb in the eye.

"Well, you have a point in that having a sword is worse than useless against the dangers you're talking about." The lamb hummed.

"I, yes. Yes that's true." Scenic breathed out.

"So you want something else. Something more. But you don't want to know the fine details. Or the cost. Have I got everything right?"

"I, I mean, if it's going to cost bits then of course I would pay-"

"Don't play dumb Paint Spot, you know that's not what I meant by that. But I have good news for you, because something does actually come to mind." He grinned as Scenic looked up in hope.

"Yes, yes I've got the perfect thing in mind actually." His grin grew

wider, "Something to sit in the home you love, around the people you love, out of the way where you won't even need to look at it if you don't want to. Yes I've got something for you."

Scenic worked his tongue around his dry mouth, "O...kay. Okay. That sounds, uh, great. What, what is it?"

"Don't worry about that. You'll see it when it gets here." Prey waved that aside, trotting for the kitchen door.

That did not fill Scenic with confidence. The exact opposite. He hadn't liked the sound of all that, but he was the one who had asked he reminded himself as he trotted out after Prey back into the living room. He wondered what it would be? He couldn't think up anything that would do what Prey had said.

It was to Scenic's great surprise and alarm, when only forty minutes later after they'd re-joined the small party and things were winding down, that Prey came up to him again, that grin back in place.

"Congratulations. You've got a delivery. It's out back."

"What-? You mean now? Already?! But, how, what-"

But the lamb was already trotting for the back door, forcing Scenic to follow if he wanted to get an answer.

"Prey, what is it? Seriously." Scenic hissed as he hurried after, anxious not to be overheard by Carton.

Prey reached up and flicked back the deadbolt on the back door and pushed it open. He turned with a strange, bright smile in place, "See for yourself."

On the back step, there was a large, grey, featureless box. Scenic looked all around, trying to see who had brought it, even remembering to look up at the sky for a flier. Nothing, and no one. Just the plain box.

It looked like it was some kind of heavy wooden panelling. It was just a bit too awkwardly large to get onto your back to carry, with no handles to lift it with either, just a firmly shut lid on top.

Scenic cautiously stepped closer. Yes, it was made out of some kind of dull grey wood. It was large enough that maybe if it was empty, someone small could contort themselves to squash inside.

Prey popped up beside the box and slapped a hoof down on the lid, "It's a jack-in-the-box."

On his hoof hitting the lid, it sprang open. Scenic yelped and jerked backwards as the jack-in-the-box launched outwards.

"Holy Celestia! Don't do that Prey." Scenic clutched at his hammering heart.

The jack-in-the-box bounced back and forth on its spring. It was a colourful jester style doll, a huge red smile and bells tinkling on its cap. Even though anyone could obviously see it was cloth and wood, Scenic really didn't like how it was the size of a colt.

Tinkle-tinkle went the bells as the jack-in-the-box finally finished bouncing back and forth and came to a stop, flopped over to one side. At least it didn't try and stare into his soul with its googly eyes, Scenic admitted.

He couldn't see the mechanism in the box, a concertina'd polka-dot cloth covering that and the large spring.

Still smiling, Prey reached around and flipped the heavy wooden lid back up. The jack-in-the-box folded itself away with a clicking of gears as the lid thunked shut.

Scenic blinked as he was left with just the large grey box in front of him on the step. The grey wood was utterly plain and unadorned, even though Scenic felt that was somehow misleading.

"Prey I.... just, just what?"

"It's for you, as I said. Love it, and keep it safe."

"Is this, is this some kind of joke?" Scenic couldn't help but ask, turning his disbelieving stare to the lamb.

The lamb's smile vanished, "I believe a thank you is what you're

looking for."

"T-thank you, but, it's a jack-in-the-box...?"

Prey's look was utterly deadpan.

"And does this, this jack-in-the-box, does it...?" Scenic trailed off, not sure what to even ask.

The lamb didn't answer. He simply trotted past Scenic, who moved to get out of his way, and back inside. Scenic was left with the box. He stared at it, and thank Celestia, it didn't stare back.

"Jack-in-the-box?" He asked to no one.

After a while, he dragged the box inside and moved it into his spare room. It was really heavy for a box of its size, wood or no wood. Was it filled with metal or something? Because it was nearly as heavy as a person.

Scenic hurriedly covered it with a sheet and shut the spare bedroom door, and went back to re-join everyone else.

The small private party finished shortly thereafter, and everyone went their separate ways.

And that was the story. Or part of a story, Scenic's story. Would it mean anything in the future?

Probably not. That's how real life went. Some grand gestures weren't actually that grand or important when you looked back at them later. At the time they certainly seemed important, but were they really? Only with hindsight would you ever know, and that might require years of patience.

Of course, you might not need to wait years. You might not need to even wait months or weeks. You never knew what was going to happen tomorrow.

Also, you might not realise it, but you might've made the wrong

decision at the time. Which side of the coin did it fall on, and when would Scenic learn the result?

Well, at least for one more night, Scenic wouldn't need to learn which it was, as the unyielding hoof of time hadn't advanced the clock that far just yet.

The lamb's strange, oversized jack-in-the-box was put in Scenic's spare room, where the stallion hoped he would be able to forget about it by never needing to try to puzzle out what Prey's cryptic words meant.

And being utterly honest, the idea of an oversized, unusually heavy jack-in-the-box, given to him by Prey of all people, unnerved Scenic. That, and he couldn't shake the suspicion that Prey was just having him on, and that it really was just an oversized jack-in-the-box, and nothing else. Prey was *definitely* the type to go in for subtle revenge in Scenic's opinion.

But that was seen from the perspective of only one person, Scenic. Everyone had the story of their own life ongoing too. Everyone did. Just taking those who'd been invited to that little celebration tonight for Prey's safe return, for example.

Lilly, a unicorn cripple, who nevertheless was reaching out and being dragged into her older brother's drama.

Saffron Swirl, who hadn't been able to attend because of being busy with other demands elsewhere in her life.

Gloom, who shared a few non-sensitive stories about what life was like back in the clans.

Crimson, who didn't share any stories about his clan and his life before coming to Canterlot.

Carton Juice, marefriend to Scenic, and someone who was a normal citizen, and therefore had a unique perspective that all the rest of them lacked about Canterlot.

And that was just one example of one normal house within the massive golden city, filled with rich history, events, and individuals. That was how life worked. There is always so much going on beneath the surface in all walks of life, all the time.

And Prey? The only sheep, the one who'd disappeared, and had just as mysteriously returned, what about him? The runt lamb with his white wool, soft blue eyes, and innocent smile?

What about him indeed.

Everyone in the know already knew the odd lamb wasn't all he said he was. It was what made Prey, Prey. Or they thought they knew.

Alone, finally. Back at the apartment block, up on the second floor. In the hallway split between Prey and Crimson's flats. One door with a brass tag reading 31A, and the other 31B. And alone, with no one to see.

The lamb wore no smile now. No expression at all, actually.

They blinked. The door into the flat was suddenly wide open. The illusion of the solid door which had been sitting in the doorway had vanished, showing it had really been open all along.

The lamb looked up. There was a pony standing inside, safely inside the doorway. It was a pink mare, thin, tall, an unnaturally sharp and curved horn upon her brow. Her tri-coloured mane hung utterly straight, and as unmoving as the mare standing there. And her deep indigo eyes were as cold and dead as an angler sharks'.

Outside of the door, the lamb blinked, “Oh.”

A drawing of breath, that moment in between-

“I was waiting for you to arrive.” The mare said. She reached a hoof up and pulled something out from an inner pocket of her travel cloak. She didn’t use her magic, but her hoof, “And I have a gift for you. It’s not as nice as the one you gave to me, but I hope it’ll do.”

She held out her hoof. Draped across it was a blue ribbon. In the dim light, the silk looked strange. “Freshly returned. It found me

less than an hour ago, just blew right into my mane. Because it knew I would give it to you."

The small lamb's eyes riveted on the ribbon. He reached out slowly to take it, and the ribbon twisted like a live thing and shot forwards-

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-Prey took his ribbon back, the cool silk so familiar. With a swift, practiced move he reached up and tied it behind his ear, where it belonged. In the back of his mind, the grinding gnawing echoes settled back into place. Where they also belonged.

He raised an eyebrow at Lemon, "'I have a gift for you?'" He quoted back to her, "Was that a joke?"

"Yes, Prey. Because you gave me this, and now I'm giving you that." Lemon answered, reaching up to touch the electrite choker at her throat. She shrugged, "I thought it was appropriate to say. But not as funny as I thought it would be."

Prey raised his other brow, "Funny?"

"Yes, Prey. I am aware I am ill-suited to humour, but it is an important trait in a society of ponies. Thus, I am trying to get better at it." She informed him.

"You should take lessons from Crimson." Prey joked, before additionally qualifying, "Yes, that was a joke of my own."

"Also, thank you for bringing by the jack-in-the-box at such short notice." Prey added, as he looked around his flat and breathed in deeply. He'd stayed in Crimson's flat yesterday because he wanted to, because they'd both wanted the other to, but there was something to be said for stepping hoof back into his own flat. And the safety all the runes inside it provided, of course.

"It was no issue." Lemon Pink said, "It was not as if we were not going to give it to Scenic right from the beginning."

"True." Prey acknowledged, "But I'm also making an effort. To say

thank you more, to try and be better. I was supposed to be getting better after Rushweed, after Nightmare Night, I told myself I would try."

Lemon inclined her head, "We both are. It is not easy."

"No. No it is not." Prey sighed. He looked around his bare flat again.

"...Should I, should we have not implanted the suggestion in Scenic's head, then? To trick him into making the request?" Lemon asked into the quiet.

"He was already thinking of asking, we just... gave him a little push." Prey tugged restlessly at the free end of his recently returned ribbon. It was so good to have it back. It was true, Scenic had been thinking of asking something along the lines of what he had already. He'd just been trying to get up the nerve.

"Scenic is not Crimson." Prey said out loud after properly lining up his thoughts to say what he meant, "He's not as important, none of them are. I am not prepared to risk anywhere near as much for them. And I am also not prepared to be patient with them either. I won't wait for them to make such an important decision themselves."

People had free will, and they could choose. But in this, Prey had decided he was choosing for them whether they liked it or not. Then afterwards, using mental suggestions to convince them they'd made the choice themselves all along.

It was wrong, it was arguably abhorrent, but so what? It was nothing new to Prey. He was doing this for him, so he wouldn't feel bad if something happened later. Or at least, make it hurt less. Because as he'd been lying there on the mountainside, turned into candyfloss and trapped by mirrors, Prey had surprised himself by thinking of them. Gloom, Lily, Scenic, and the others.

No one had been more surprised than Prey himself to realise he did care for them. Vaguely, selfishly, distantly, and nowhere near as much as Crimson, and then Gloom in second place, but he knew them now. He still despised their weaknesses, was infuriated by

their pony induced blindness in matters, often aggravated and annoyed by them, but he still knew them. It was possible to both like and hate someone at the same time. Prey knew that well. He hated himself, but he loved living.

"I don't like them, I really don't. Scenic, Lilly, Carton, and Saffron I mean. Gloom's something else. But I *do* know them. Therefore, they are better than any other random racist pony off the street." Prey summed up, repeating it out loud for himself. Lemon already knew all of this, because how could she not? Prey had shared it all with her on his return.

"Yes, Prey."

He glanced sidelong at Lemon Pink, "You know if you want to give Randy something yourself... then okay, I'll approve it."

"I will think on it, Prey."

"It is up to you. It's your decision to make as a person."

"Yes, Prey. I do realise that, Prey."

Of course she did, because that was something else Prey had already discussed with her. He was simply repeating it again to drive the point home. It was time to move on.

Prey's hoof rose up to play with the free end of his ribbon again, just so relieved to have it back. The old familiar motion was even more soothing than he'd realised what he'd been missing. He looked at Lemon and asked the important question. He already knew the answer, because if she'd found anything it would have been the first thing she said, but he still double-checked:

"You found no sign of the mimics, or rather the changelings, down in the caves, right?"

Prey had to ask. It didn't matter that he already knew. He would be asking that same question for a long time to come, he was sure. At least Prey would never be cursed with the fear that someone he knew had been replaced with a disguised insectile equine, with grossly overgrown black fangs, and waiting to tear his throat out

the moment he turned his back.

"No, Prey. Within the tunnels we have claimed, no runes triggered, nor did I find any old tracks or signs with a manual inspection."

Lemon Pink paused there, but she wasn't finished with her report. Prey had to stop the instinctive breath of relief he let out as she continued with her near monotone; "Venturing outside of the bounds of the runic defences, I found the burnt remains. Many burnt remains. I did not go any deeper. I did not need to."

Lemon hadn't needed to, the burnt and rotting remains were answer to the question already. There was no need for Lemon to risk pushing deeper into the dark tunnels filled with stale air and the old lingering stink of ash. If the brittle and burnt remains were still there, when they'd gone to all that effort before to retrieve Shimmer's corpse back in Mayflower, it meant the mimics really had fled. They hadn't even tried to venture back into the tunnels to retrieve the evidence.

They must have meant to retake it all at the same time when they meant to take the city by storm and swarm. An all-or-nothing gambit.

That wasn't going to happen now, though. Their invasion wasn't going to happen at all. Maybe they'd try again in the future, build up their numbers again. But now? Prey was all but certain there weren't enough survivors to even try now.

---I---

You couldn't forget the harshest lessons life ever taught you.

Author's Notes:

Hello to everyone. So. Spoilers. Prey really isn't a Changeling it turns out!

This chapter was very kindly edited and improved by: **Panem et Circenses**

Also, very cool picture of Prey HERE done again by GreatSpaceBeaver, maybe go check out what he's done? 😊

87.7 All Bees Seek a Rose

What had happened? What had occurred on the side of Mount Canter, there betwixt the land and sky, between Prey and the changelings?

And that was their name. *Changelings*, not mimics. Scoured and burned by the retreating light of Harmony, ribbon freshly lost, and almost too weak to move, how had Prey gotten away from them?

No one had helped him. No one had come to save him. He'd been alone on the mountainside. A bitter refrain which rang so true;

'*~I am free, so wonderfully free. I love no one, and no one loves me.*'

The story of the cuckoo bird isn't one most ponies impart to their foals.

The cuckoo has a pleasant enough song, but every time you hear one sing, it means there was a nest of eggs out there which never hatched, pushed from the tree by the cuckoo chick. The cuckoo is a parasite, feeding off the diligent work of the parents with ever-increasing demands for food until they are flown to exhaustion. Only then, once it has taken everything it wants, does it fly off without a backwards glance, to find an unattended nest and lay an egg of its own.

The story of a cuckoo bird is much the same as the changelings in those old tales of children replaced in their cribs. Again, not a story most ponies told their foals.

The story of the cuckoo bird is one of the uncaring cruelty of nature, but is all utterly true.

The story of foal-snatching changelings of the fae legend? Or maybe, it should have been a story about *proper* 'Changelings'. The real ones. How much truth from the first unpleasant story could you find in the second?

The story of the cuckoo bird, and those old dark stories of changelings, which may have held a lot more truth in them than anyone would've liked.

An imposter that could be anyone and anywhere; a changeling. An army of changelings. A *war swarm* of changelings. That is what there had been, preparing to take the tunnels up into the middle of Canterlot. They had only been days away from unleashing their attack and washing the streets of Canterlot red.

So where were they?

Why were Lemon and Prey still in Canterlot, if a tide of chitin and fangs was supposed to be coming to wash them all away?

Where was this changeling invasion right now?

And what lessons could you learn from those tales? The first, a true story of cuckoo birds in nature. Then the old stories of fae changelings, which might be more accurate than anyone had ever realised. And a third story.

A third tale. Not quite in the same theme, and not about imposters or chick infanticide. Just a third, minor, self-contained story.

It was however another true story. Again, it was one encapsulating an instance of nature's unfeeling and merciless cruelty.

The hawk wasp. A vicious insect which stings another, larger animal, and lays its young inside the hapless victim. Then the larva hatch, and eat the host alive. From the moment the insect is stung, they're essentially dead. They just have yet to die and release a new swarm of hungry wasps to find more victims.

The cuckoo and the changeling replace the victim, wheedling sustenance, love, and attention from the parents, slowly draining them dry. The wasp isn't like that. It doesn't replace or trick or disguise itself. It kills the victim, and from the shell of the body, releases something worse.

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'~Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
When something inside, started to stir,
Down Humpty fell, down to his death,
And from within, all the yoke and the mess,
That little some*thing*, took its first breath~'

---<O>---

Afterwards, now truly, completely alone on the mountainside, once his strength had finally returned to his muscles, Prey had sat and laughed until he cried, and sang that old twisted version of the children's nursery rhyme.

It had been because of what the changelings were. Their strength. What in any other situation, would have been an overwhelming advantage. How hilarious! How tragic. Prey laughed and laughed, and couldn't stop laughing.

It was just too damned twistedly funny, he couldn't help it. And only he got the joke.

"Me, it was me, oh *me*. Khe-he-he. *Me*! And no one will ever know!"

Just. Like. That.

A touch is all it takes. And a touch was all it took.

A hive mind. A huge, overwhelmingly powerful and alien intelligence. A link to every changeling mind in the war swarm. Prey had felt the vast, innumerable sparks for just a moment. A moment of helpless despairing, where he comprehended the power of the hive. Despair. Then, a miracle. Just a moment. Just a touch.

It was just so damned funny that he, Prey, the weak, despicable runt lamb, had ended an army with just a touch. It was impossible, but it was true.

"And just, khe-ke-he-he! And just like that! All those years, fighting the Border Guard! And in one moment, oh-ha-ha-Ha! One moment, and I killed more than I ever have all put together. Tens times, a tens of times!"

He had saved Canterlot from invasion, the city he hated, and he could now officially claim to be their hero. The irony was so thick he could have used it to replace the train tracks.

Prey had felt it. All those changelings, just gone! There had been a terrible, wordless scream as the hivemind broke. Through the backlash, he thought he'd felt strong individuals breaking themselves free of the hive mind just in time, but how many? A hundred? Two hundred? Double or triple that?

What a tiny number compared to all those who hadn't escaped the vast hivemind's implosion. The young ones, the freshly hatched, all the drones in the vast war swarm. In essence, all the children.

But it was not because of anything Prey had managed. No achievement, no hidden skill, no feat of mastery.

The hivemind was not weak against a mind leech like him. It was *strongest* against a mind leech like him.

It was so huge, so strong, able to shrug off the mental attacks of one annoying wasp and crush it with the overwhelming weight of thousands.

Prey should have lost. He *would* have lost. He wouldn't have even been able to hold out for a second. A mind bridge goes both ways, and the link he used to touch other minds could be seized, forced wide, and used to crush his own.

But Prey wasn't the hawk wasp in this story. No, he was just its' host.

Down in the depths, the ocean depths the blackness of which light would never touch, the hive mind had effortlessly reached. It'd had no warning, no stirring. Hunger does not wake up, not when it is always hungry, always starving.

No light against the dark. No dark trying to snuff the light. Nothing but-***BiteEatFeed.***

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And like so, Prey had inadvertently killed the changeling war swarm.

It was as simple, and as difficult as the impossibility it was. When something is impossible, and then it becomes possible, how easy is that impossibility now? Is it still impossible, or is it now easy?

Under the mountain, there were now tunnels crammed full of unmoving black bodies. So very many. So many it was just a number, a number made up of thousands of ones. Thousands of individuals.

And you know what? Prey didn't give a damn.

He felt no guilt. Thousands he'd killed by accident, before he'd even fully realised what was happening... and he didn't care at all.

Prey laughed. He didn't regret it at all. There was no false remorse swirling in his chest, only giddy relief. Harmony hadn't burned out a piece of him and replaced it with a false conscience, always a danger with powerful, unknown artifacts that could manipulate your mind. The changelings had come for war, they had attacked him, and through utter blind luck, the slimmest of chance, they'd enabled their own deaths.

They couldn't have foreseen it. No one could have. A piece of unreality, locked away inside a twisted and warped mind. Such a thing didn't exist in this world, because it wasn't real. How could you foresee something which wasn't real?

"Serves you all right, you Zoma'Grika cockroaches!"

He, Prey, had committed a genocide. And he did not regret it at all.

Look inside yourself. Deep inside yourself. What do you see?

"I see victory! I see me alive. Me, I won. Khe-he-he! Imagine, just imagine what Torment would say about me know! Ruin, Stinger, Razor, I've beaten your record a thousand times over, me, Prey, the weak runt lamb. And, ha ha, the best part is, khe-he-he, *I didn't even mean to!*"

Prey hadn't beaten the changelings. He wasn't some great general commanding an army. He couldn't claim any merit, if any merit could be found in this atrocity.

Just as well might the mountain trekker who accidentally knocked off the first pebble, claim the credit for the avalanche which wiped out the village below. It was the exact same principle here.

He wasn't the hawk wasp in this story. He was just the unhappy host.

Prey's exhausted laughter had eventually turned into sniggers, and finally wound down into weak, sporadic chuckling. The gentle but cold mountain breeze blew by overhead in the empty sky.

Then he glanced at the black body of the closest changeling laying broken over the train tracks, distended jaw sagging open, and it was enough to set him off into fits of black humour.

Thousands of dead was too big of a number to understand. But here before him was one of that number, a thin changeling, hungry looking, insect wings crumpled, weakened by the light of Harmony which had just swept the land, and those pupilless, solid blue eyes which would never see again. Counting to one is so much easier than counting to ten thousand. Fifteen thousand? Or twenty thousand? But one is one, and here was one.

"He-he-khe, I don't care. I don't care about your death, because you wouldn't leave me alone. I just wanted to be left alone. And now I'm alone, and you're *dead*. Oh ha-ha-ha!"

All at once the grand truth of it came to him. It was a brilliant epiphany of insight.

How many of these changelings had he just accidentally killed indirectly? Too many for him to know, but that was part of the point.

This must be exactly how Celestia had seen the Resistance and all the border villages they'd relentlessly tormented.

The Sun Wolf just didn't care. She hadn't cared. It was the exact

same situation. She saw, she understood, she knew, but look! Look at all these dead changelings. Prey didn't accept any responsibility for their deaths. He didn't care about what his own hoof had indirectly wrought.

And if he, a mortal didn't care, how much less would the immortal sun goddess care?

That was so unfunny, so sobering, that it went right back out the other side and was instantly hilarious for entirely the opposite reason.

Prey couldn't breathe, and his sides ached fiercely by the time he next managed to stop howling with laughter.

When Prey got his strength back, he staggered around to the fallen changelings, pushing, shoving, and rolling them into a rough pile. Their thick carapaces were hard and organic under his hooves, but thin and light. Prey grunted and shoved. They smelled faintly acidic. He didn't know what he'd been expecting.

Their solid eyes didn't glare at him accusingly, because Prey knew they were dead. The dead don't accuse. He paused to rest for a moment, and with morbid fascination, flicked up and down the transparent eyeshield membrane, which slid out of their heads to cover the whole eye.

Light and starved as the bodies were, there was no way Prey had the strength to pile them all up. He more just sort of got them all lying together.

He had to stop and rest again, and then summoning the dregs of his returned strength, spent the next three long hours under the mountainside sky building a runic array to deal with the bodies. Because knowledge was power, and these thin bodies were evidence. No one could know. No one could find out. He didn't care what he'd done here. But others would. So they couldn't be allowed to know.

Three hours where he could have been moving, getting out of here, or getting back to where it was safe.

'Or beyond.' Prey had stopped then, and looked down at his forelegs. His *bare* forelegs. Luna's tracer bands were gone.

If he ran, would he make it? Could he make it?

His lair was here, his wickerwatch was here, but those could be abandoned or replaced given enough time. Lemon Pink could be contacted to follow after him.

But he still didn't have any method to prevent Luna finding him in the dream realm, though. One leash was gone, but the other intangible tether remained. Or was it actually a noose, one which Luna would hang him with if he attempted to escape in the chaos?

The bodies of thousands lay still cooling right now because of him, a fate so pitiable as to make even the xenophobic ponies they'd meant to invade and abuse to weep, but that wasn't any concern of Prey's. This question was.

'Do I risk it? Do I run right now?'

'Do I leave Crimson?'

---<<<O>>>---

It had balanced on the edge of a coin, so uncertain was his choice. He wanted to be free, and he didn't want to leave Crimson. But he couldn't have both.

All Prey had ever wanted was to be left alone.

Yet somewhere along the way, while unwillingly toiling away here in this hated pony land, Prey had found something more he wanted. A friend.

To leave, or to stay?

It was the split in the path, the crossroads, and Prey couldn't see what lay down either dark path. To take one would cut off the other forever. What did he do? What was he supposed to choose?

He'd always been looking for a way out, a chance to run. The tracer

bands were gone. This was his chance. Was it his chance? Could Luna still find him in the dreamscape? She hadn't done so yet though. Maybe that was only because she didn't give two half-bits, though. If he ran though, he would be hunted again, he knew that without a shadow of a doubt. By her, and by Crimson and the others, looking for their friend.

He should go, he should. Prey knew he should. Why hadn't he gone yet already? He'd wanted this opportunity for so long. It would probably never come again. And yet still he was facing the same choice.

Leave? Or stay?

That was the level of mental anguish it caused Prey. When thousands lay freshly massacred by his hoof, they weren't what pained Prey's frozen black heart, but rather this choice.

Crimson was worth more than the lives of every changeling to Prey. There were only two things Prey wouldn't do for Crimson.

'But I'll never get this chance again.'

Above him at the top of the mountain, a golden prison waited. Below, the empty openness of freedom stretched before him.

No one else, except possibly Lemon Pink, would ever understand what it cost Prey to make his choice.

---<O>---

Of course, that didn't mean he'd gone straight back up to Canterlot, oh no.

No, he'd had much more important things he had to see to first. Vital, dangerous things.

So he'd crawled back down to his lair, and there he'd remained for nearly three days working frantically until he was sure.

Sure that his body was still functioning from after first Discord's chaos, and then the terrible burning of Harmony. Sure that there

were no changeling corpses left where a pony might find them. Sure that the war swarm really was gone. Sure that his runic arrays were still all intact.

And sure through failed attempt after failed attempt, that the still fresh, mind dead and soulless but still breathing bodies of changelings couldn't be used to host a consciousness.

He really tried, using every method he could think of, utilizing Lemon's limited available help too, but in the end he'd had to wash his hooves of the green ichor and accept it couldn't be done. It had been a bitter pill, but nothing when compared to the sweetness of being the victor, and still being alive.

Only then had he gone back up the mountain and trotted back into Canterlot. And here he was right now.

"And do you know what he said, you know what?" Lilly grunted in anger as she struggled to balance on her meldwood leg while lifting up her saddlebag with the other.

Gloom moved to help her get the saddlebag onto her back, "No, we don't know. Let me assist with that-"

"Don't, I got this. I can do this." Lilly insisted. With effort, she managed to finally turn herself around enough without falling over to slip the saddlebag on.

"See? I totally got this. Yeah, anyway, what the doc said? You know what he said to me?"

Prey dropped down from checking the street out the front window of Lilly's house, "To repeat what Gloom just said, no, we don't know."

"That jerk told me I'd won a place at the annual Magical Medical Convention. As a specimen! They wanted me to stand there on a stage while all of them poked and prodded me. And you know what he said?" Lilly demanded in outrage.

"You mean besides what you just repeated to us? Then no, we still don't know." Prey put in with a saccharine smile, which had Gloom

shooting him a look which said; '-you're not helping-'

"He told me that it was an honour to even get an invitation in the first place!" Lilly fumed, the disfiguring root growing down the side of her face standing out starkly.

"So you told the doctor no." Crimson observed blandly, "I mean, I hope you told him no."

"I didn't just tell him no, I told him hell-the-Tartarus-bucking-Nightmare-no, and that if he wanted a freakshow so badly, he could get a mama'duke to eat his leg and shove a tree up it instead!"

Crimson nodded, holding open the door for Lilly with the feathered tip of a wing, "Good then. I mean, not necessarily all that, but also yes, that."

Prey made a note that Lilly's rented accommodation could do with some easy to move doorstops. He'd noticed the doors around her new flat had the habit of drifting shut on their own.

Gloom coughed, "You weren't wrong to say no Lilly, and it is completely up to you, but have you considered that it's possible one of those doctors might have an idea how to heal you?"

Lilly looked away, "The hospital already did all the tests. They said the meldwood isn't coming out without me dying. It's, it's interwoven with my magic now. That's not gonna' suddenly change."

"They don't know of any way to fix it right now," Gloom gently stressed, "But how about in a few years time? Ponies are learning new things all the time. The hope is still there."

"I already know all that." Lilly struggled not to snap at him, "But it won't happen. I already know that. I know. I can't keep uselessly hoping for a miracle to fix me. If a miracle was going to happen, the Elements of Harmony would've-No. I've got to move forwards myself. I can't mope and wait around for somepony else to save me. If I don't make the effort to save me, nopony else is gonna' do it either."

Gloom could respect that, and did. It was a very thestral sentiment she'd just expressed, to keep moving ever forwards to overcome your own problems without making a fuss. Prey's mouth twitched. That may be true of Lilly now, but look how long it had taken the stubborn mare to finally get to this point. All three of them had learnt this lesson while still growing up.

Although Prey thought that disparaging comment, there wasn't any real heat behind it. Lilly got on his nerves, and she was an idiot most of the time, but he was still going to get her those doorstops anonymously dropped off in the post. Because he still found himself wishing her better than what she already had, both in her situation, and in her family.

Prey didn't like wasting his precious time having to come around and visit like this, but he'd miss her if she was no more. He did not want to find her dead one day in her flat. Like if she hanged herself. Or if a shapeshifting changeling controlled her into acting out of suicidal depression instead. Or finding that a swarm had torn her and her neighbours into bloody shreds of flesh and gristle, and strung all their internals from the rooftops.

A swarm, a war, and an invasion that was fated to never happen now. Or at least, not for years to come. If the changelings ever recovered from their losses in the first place.

Ten thousand upon ten thousand. Some more, some less? What was a few more on either end of the scale?

Prey smiled crookedly to himself, a small, twisted smile that was all the more twisted because it was real, 'And I still don't care at all. I sleep fine at night. Well, not fine, but not because of them. I already had trouble sleeping long before them. I regret nothing, and I don't have to care. It's wonderful.'

The murdered diamond dogs. The villagers of Mayflower. The changelings did not deserve a place on the list alongside them, and never would. Prey regretted nothing. He made sure that fact was firmly affixed in his mindscape.

"Right, I'm ready. Let's go." Lilly said, and limped out the door.

Both in annoyance and good humour, (an oxymoron of an emotion), Prey went out into the afternoon sun. It was the usual trio of them, plus Lilly. Outside, he shaded his eyes to check the sky overhead, then in derision pointed out a flier on a lamppost about new-age crystal healing to Gloom for a cheap laugh, while Lilly awkwardly got her key into the door, and for those few minutes, he was simply part of the group. Just one of them.

But Prey thought too much, it was one of his weaknesses, and the worst case scenario was never far from his thoughts. It was all too easy to look twice and see the things he hated all around, and not enjoy the moment. The houses and streets of Canterlot rose and stretched around him in every direction. Whichever direction he turned, he saw the pony capital. Wherever his eyes landed, he saw ponies and their influence.

Prey wasn't free. He had come back to this, back to these cobbled streets and shining spires. Streets which glaringly weren't overflowing with mixing blood and green ichor. What did he owe Canterlot and its ponies? Nothing.

Gloom snorted in amusement at the ridiculous flyer, and Crimson turned his head, one ear cocked in question to what was so funny. Gloom pointed out the flyer and explained the joke. Prey didn't look at Canterlot, he looked at them instead. Gloom with his almost signature black scarf, Crimson with his tied back lanky mane, both with their tufted ears and yellow eyes, and *both* so much more important than ever.

What did he owe them, and most especially Crimson?

Who cared about Canterlot and the thousands of innocents who lived here? They were spoilt ponies, and had the Sun Wolf to protect them. Crimson and Gloom here were worth more than even ten times all the changelings he'd killed, or all the citizens of Canterlot, whom only lived because he'd killed those same changelings.

Not that Prey believed for one second that all of Canterlot would have been wiped out. As he'd just observed, they had the Sun Wolf to protect them, along with the Elements of Harmony. When Prey

thought about the citizens who yet lived because of him, he meant only those who would have died before the Sun Wolf purged the war swarm in fire. The damage and death would have been vast and terrible on both sides, the changelings would have emerged right in the heart of Canterlot after all, and would have reaped hundreds of lives within the span of minutes. The swarm would have been defeated in the end he was sure, but in war, there are no winners. Only survivors.

That wasn't the point though, the point was, as Lilly finally got her door locked in a jangle of keys, was it wasn't for this city he so despised he'd returned. It was because of his friends.

It was the same reason Prey'd spent his first night back inside Crimson's room. Because, he'd realised, for all the attention he'd lavished upon runically securing his own room beyond all doubt, there were only a few basic silent alarm arrays set up inside of his best friends flat. And that was an unacceptable state of affairs to allow to continue.

Hence why he'd wanted to stay in Crimson's flat. Because he was his friend, yes, but also *because* Crimson was his friend and had to be protected. Crimson was a warrior, and he could fight. That meant nothing to a poison dart through the window in the middle of the night.

Crimson was his friend. That was the whole reason he'd made the seemingly impossible choice, no matter how much it hurt, to return to this city. To his friend. To his friend*s*.

'Alright, that's enough lukewarm melancholy for today,' Prey derided himself, 'You came back here, you chose this. So get it together.'

He may have cause to regret this in time, but he'd made his choice and it was too late to take it back. The world wasn't fair, and he wasn't happy with the way things were, which meant it was up to him to do something about it. The world would take and take and take. It was up to you to try and snatch back as much as you could and to make a living out of it.

There was a saying Prey had heard which summed it up quite nicely, the lamb reflected as they trotted out onto the street and pedestrians immediately crossed the street to avoid their little group. It went; 'Your brother's wheat field didn't harvest itself. Your thistle field isn't going to either.'

The meaning was; it doesn't matter if it's either wheat or thistle, both fill an empty belly.

Make the most of what you have, take all you can get no matter what it is, don't waste time fantasizing about what might've been yours, and give nothing back.

---

thump *splat*

'Maybe the saying, 'When life gives you lemons make lemonade' would've worked just as well.' Prey thought.

'Or, 'To reap you must first sow'. Or perhaps even 'Every stormcloud has a silver lining?' Those would mostly all work too.'

thump *splat*

Despite a barren appearance, the wasteland of life could hide myriad opportunities if you were willing to both dig deep enough, and get your hooves dirty. Life was *also* full of danger, heartache, pain, misery, unfairness, death, and suffering, but it did hold opportunities too. It all depended on if you were willing to go that far, and if you could pay the price. Because everything has a price.

thump *splat*

Prey was willing to get his hooves dirty. Not just his hooves, he was willing to swim through the foulest of mires if it meant surviving. And he had. Survival wasn't pretty, and Prey had survived the Deeper Green, the Resistance, the Border Guard, Captain Valour, Garrow, Mayflower, Luna, Discord, and latest of all in a long line of almost deaths, the changelings.

thump *splat*

Prey let the terrible acidic smell wash by him. The trick wasn't to ignore it, because the throat-clogging stench was so thick and acrid that you'd start choking if you tried to fight it. No, the trick was to not care, so that although it was just as bad, you could at least move through it.

thump *splat*

Went the rhythmic sound of falling and landing once again, a slow dreary ticking of some massive clock. Between each tick was a pause of thirty or so seconds. And then...

thump *splat*

Without fail, the next one would come. It was a slow count, but one which only ticked upwards. Could you hear it in the stone shrouded darkness? Tick... Tock... Tick...

thump *splat*

Tock. And another one was added to the pile below. Thump and splat it went, right on schedule. Another lemon thrown by life, another thistle in the sheaf. If not for the smell and the dark of the sewer tunnel, then-

thump *splat*

-Then the noise might not have been so bad. After all, each time it came, Prey's stockpile of material grew that little bit higher. "Actually the most appropriate saying that comes to mind is 'waste not want not'." Prey mused out loud.

thump *splat*

Another chitin-covered changeling body fell the short distance to splat into the basin of the waterlogged Sewer's Heart. And it was a splat, not a splash. Because the under the thin film of dark water, innumerable wickerwatch tendrils were packed together into a solid, slowly swaying mass.

Thump the sound of the latest changeling body coming free of the black tunnel mouth above. *Splat* of it hitting the rubbery mass of

wickerwatch fronds. Slowly, it sank beneath its own weight between the tendrils and was hidden from view. Another one hidden from view. A pause, and then like clockwork:

thump *splat*

The very next changeling body was slowly pushed out by the roaming wickerwatch tendrils in the trickling tunnel above. In every tunnel branching off from the Sewer's Heart, the slow moving water level seemed to rise halfway up the tunnels. The reason why wasn't the volume of water, but the volume of what slowly moved under the water.

thump *splat*

Waste not want not. Prey and Lemon had finally ventured cautiously out beyond the safe zones of Prey's runic defences further into the winding crystal caves. Or rather, they'd sent a wicker shambler to shuffle into the dark, limbs jerky, head twisted, and trailing long damp umbilicals of wickerwatch behind it.

thump *splat*

And there, beyond the reach of the light, they'd discovered the bodies filling the tunnels. The remains of the war swarm. The wicker shambler hadn't been able to get past the blockage, that's how many of the thin, insectile bodies had been jammed together. A veritable wall of still, unmoving corpses in the silence under the mountain.

There were too many to count. More than he could ever find down all the twisting turns and pockets of space in that maze of stone. The first few were only just starting to die and rot, but the rest were soon to follow in a wave of acidic stink.

thump *splat*

A body could survive for three days without water. Changeling bodies seemed to have been able to go a bit longer. Not that it mattered. They were already dead. Without a mind and a soul, a body is dead. Even if it hasn't stopped breathing yet.

thump *splat*

Prey remembered how desperate he had been to get his hooves on a changeling corpse, both as proof and as to study it. Now, with its twisted sense of humour, life had given him more 'lemons' than he could ever use in time.

Prey breathed in through his mouth, "But waste not, want not."

thump *splat*

In the deep indigo distance of his mindscape's sky, ash slowly swirled in ways which would be impossible in real life. But this wasn't a real place, and so it didn't matter what was impossible or not. After all, aren't dreams often made up of the most wild and impossible flights of non-sensical fancy?

The dream danced above, like a film or bubble stretched over his mindscape. Prey was watching his dream from down inside his mindscape, not quite separate but also not quite dreaming either. When Prey willingly dreamed, this was usually how it went. An in-between state.

His mind wasn't active, like where he still needed to force his mind to think and plan even if his body was asleep. Nor had he sunk into the ocean of his inner mindscape, and down past the twilight zone into unconsciousness. Prey was simply... in-between. He wasn't desperately planning, and he wasn't so tired that he'd been slipping away upon placing his head on the pillow.

No nightmares of guilt had tried to raise up twisted heads of a thousand dead changelings, either. That would first require that Prey felt guilt over their demise. He didn't. When Prey's shrivelled little heart beat, it only beat to pump the slurry of black ice around. It was locked away inside a cage of metal jaws.

Or that's what it felt like, at least.

He didn't regret the changeling deaths at all. And he never would. Prey had too many other regrets to make room for something of this

scale, especially when they'd brought it upon themselves by refusing to leave him alone. That wasn't a price he could afford.

Time drifted like the lazy ash in the false sky. Prey floated along, placidly watching the formless shifts of the dream above. There was no rush or hurry in the moment of the dream.

'~Humpty dumpty sat on the wall.....'

'.....~Wheat n' barley dance and sway~.....'

'.....A stich in time, running through the hangmare's twine~'

The time of rest was pleasant in its passing. Up until it wasn't. The grey ash of the world billowed about, suddenly agitated. The purple sky of the dream above bent inwards, as if being pressed by a force from outside.

'...Wrong.'

It was wrong. Prey's sleeping mind awoke to full consciousness in a state of alarm. He instantly knew what was happening.

'*Luna*.' She'd broken her promise to leave his dreams alone yet again!

Hate, fear, dismay, and more hate. 'Quick, hide.'

The reaching presence of cold starlight entered to find a false dream scene, a thin shell spun up to hide everything beneath. The shell was of nothing important, simply a large room with a huge fireplace, tiny undersized tables and chairs, and invisible birds singing from somewhere.

Prey waited, hidden in his mindscape, watching Luna's presence 'look' around and settle itself. How he wished to attack, to tear at the hated alicorn, but he would never win and would only doom himself in real life.

'Why is *she* here? What does she want to take from me *now*?'

Prey hadn't seen Luna even once since the secret night in Ponyville. There had been nothing from her, no orders passed on by Nighthawk, no follow up warnings to stay quiet or die, simply nothing. Perhaps Luna simply hadn't felt the need to. Until now.

Luna's shapeless presence, filled with the impression of the full moon on a clear night, seemed to have finished examining Prey's 'dream' without interfering. But not anymore.

"Awake Prey, awake! Attend to us, for your princess commands you. Come forth."

The command rippled out across the dream with power, a command, one which Prey felt adding clarity and trying to bring consciousness to what should have been a sleeping mind.

This wasn't going to be a test where Luna subtly probed his dreams and interpreted the impressions, this time the Night alicorn wanted to talk and she wanted Prey to remember this conversation when he woke up.

Every single thing about this boded ill, but what other choice did Prey have as he let himself 'wake up' to answer Luna? None. He never had.

Prey made the large room sharpen, the impression of knots and grain in the floorboards forming, windows which had always been there and yet hadn't appearing on the now four, not five, walls. But Prey did not make himself a dream avatar, he just let himself be 'there' in the middle of the room.

Prey made an effort to project confusion around, which of course Luna easily sensed.

"It is us Prey, thy Princess. Calm, thou art yet asleep. We art in thy

dream." Even here, Luna was somehow loud.

"Why? What's going on?" Prey asked, still faking confusion at the situation.

"It is us, Princess Luna. We have need to speak with thee, we have put this off for too long already. Come, will thou not appear? Thou art safe here."

'I'd be safe if you hadn't barged in at all.' Prey internally snarled.

"I don't know what...? This is a dream? I'm here, aren't I?"

"Hm. Even in thy own mind thou does not take on a dream avatar. It is most strange..." Luna trailed off in thought, then shook it off, "Tis' not important now. This is a dream, and thou art who thou art."

The presence of Luna abruptly solidified into her alicorn form, but because his was a dream, it was as if she'd always been there. Silver regalia glittered around her neck and on her brow even more brightly than it did in real life, her dark mane of stars billowing all around, and not just flowing out behind her. She stood too, not floated or flew in place.

It was just an avatar though, and Prey didn't let his guard slip for even a micro second. A form meant nothing here. In real life Luna shouldn't be able to see behind herself for example, but this was a dream, and she was still utterly aware of everything in it. Or aware of the shell of a dream Prey was hiding in, at least.

Yet even with none of it being real, and the avatar of Luna being nothing more than essentially a puppet in strings, in the subtle hints of the avatar's controlled features and cold eyes, it somehow still looked almost... resigned. Not happy about something. Yet determined to see it through.

But it was just an avatar, it could look like whatever Luna damn well wanted it to look like, so Prey dismissed the false observation immediately.

"Art thou well Prey?" Luna asked. The question was utterly stilted,

like Luna was simply asking out of a passing desire to see what it was like to play at being polite.

"I'm fine, I think?" Prey answered, still playing up the confusion like he wasn't completely awake, casting around them in bemusement. "Princess Luna, I mean."

"Thou must be truly tired, as are all of our loyal Night Guard at present, a necessity we regret, but we must all do our part in getting our beautiful country up and running again. Even now, there is still much left to do after that tyrant, Discord." Luna mused, and then was silent for a space.

Why was Luna bothering to waste time speaking about something he already obviously knew, and that she obviously knew too instead of whatever she'd come for?

'I hate her. She always marches in, trampling us underhoof, and takes whatever she wants. I begged, she didn't listen. I almost drowned, she didn't listen. I told her no, she didn't listen. So what's she playing at now?'

This was a trap. Prey didn't know how or in what aspect, but his instincts were screaming 'trap'!

Then in a voice neither loud nor soft, neither hot nor cold, Luna's avatar irrefutably stated:

"There is much we have had cause to regret. Before, and now. We do not expect you to understand, young Prey. For all thy achievements in our Guard, there are still lessons only time can teach a pony. Tis' no failing on your part, for all ponies were foals once. But regret does not come hoof in hoof with age. Regret need not come at all, if we could but...! Nay, regret is not limited to age, but by our own experiences."

Prey was afraid. Hate and fear, the constant sour mix he always felt about anything to do with an alicorn, bubbled inside of him. He didn't know where Luna was going with this, and he didn't want to either. 'Just go away, go away, go away go away and leave me alone!'

"It has come to our attention of late, that is to say, we have been made aware, or our sister has said... Tis' no easy thing. It never is, to have cause to regret. To have been in part wrong. Thou wilt understand this in time, thou hast the years of growth ahead of thee to learn it. But nevertheless.... nay, enough. What we mean to say to thee Prey goes as thus. Remember it well."

With a huge effort of will, Prey did not let the fake shell of the dream recoil or shrink with the disgust and alarm he felt. What was this? Luna was an alicorn, she was never like this!

"Thy father is not coming back Prey. We told thee this before, and now we tell thee thrice. The dead are gone. Let them go. This is a lesson we must be sure that thou understands. Everypony has their time."

Prey didn't answer. He didn't move. He just watched Luna's avatar, and the presence behind the avatar.

Luna sighed, "We see. This is why thou still needs the perspective of age. Tis' not our place to provide it, but thou wilt see it clearly when thou looks back one day. But enough. We have said our piece, and we will not speak further on this. There is yet one further point of regret for tonight that must yet be addressed."

'Zoma'Grika.'

"Private Prey of our esteemed Night Guard, thou hast served us well," Luna announced, "Yet thy station and history still stands against thee. Thy deeds have been valorous, but laws are set and exist for a reason. A fact our sister has, ah, reminded us of. With Griffonia-Nay, another time. Laws we have ourselves given must be followed, or how else shall our little ponies know to follow our example? Such is the burden of leadership. Our word is our bond."

'What laws? Which laws is she talking about?! Which ones? Zoma'Grika!' Why was it always bad news? Why did Luna always have to do this to him? Why couldn't everyone just leave him alone!

"So we hope that thou can understand Prey, that our actions are not a punishment or a declaration of distrust. Tis' simply what it is.

Crimson Trace understood this before, thus his gracious acceptance of our judgement, but now thee must learn this too. And if thou canst see this action for what it is, then even better, for thus we will have no cause to feel regret."

Prey felt power swelling from within the presence of Luna, building up. Prey wanted to flee, wanted to shatter the dream and forcefully wake himself up before whatever she was doing happened. But he couldn't run, because Luna would simply come for him in the real world if he did. It was mental agony to force himself to stay, but he had to, he had to!

Prey had chosen to come back to Canterlot and Crimson. There is always a price.

The building power within Luna, condensing down into something like threads of gold and silver, it was familiar. The sensation of touching something hidden and vast which he couldn't perceive, he'd felt it before.

Alicorn Magic. The power to move celestial bodies, that mysterious, secret, and unknowable magic.

Prey felt the alicorn magic more than saw or sensed, but he could never mistake it having experienced it before. But to have to sit here and wait for Luna to do whatever she was about to do with her hated filthy disgusting magic-! It was akin to been forced to watch the knife being brought closer, the branding iron, the pliers, and despite knowing that struggling was going to make it worse, but you couldn't *not* struggle. If he fled, Luna would be angry. If he woke up, she'd summon him in real life and do the same again.

He wasn't supposed to be able to sense her magic, he couldn't give it away, he had to stay here in the dream and grit his teeth. He had to stay, he couldn't run from Luna, he wasn't allowed to....

...Prey couldn't take it. "Don't touch me!"

He couldn't do it, he couldn't just lay down and pretend he could stomach Luna's horrible magic.

Prey's mindscape grabbed ahold of the dream and wrenched. 'Wake up!' He couldn't be here for even a second longer.

Too slow.

Prey kicked the weight of the blanket off him in a panic, heart thundering. He was panting for breath, and sweating. He fought to get off of his mattress as quickly as possible-

Prey froze as his breath caught. He stared. Then, slowly, he slumped backwards onto the mattress.

"I chose to come back here. I knew this might happen." Prey reminded himself bitterly.

But his stomach still clenched with disgust, and he had to fight the instinctual urge to claw the fur and skin off his forelegs.

Bound around his forelegs, a pair of brand new, but oh-so familiar golden tracer bands dully glinted. The slight additional weight he'd carried for so many months, but after only a week without, they now felt so much more heavy.

For a flicker of a moment, part of Prey tried to look on the bright side that, hey, at least he hadn't woken up to whip scar cramp as well. The rest of him strangled that weak thought out of existence.

But by all the rotting dead, he wanted the cursed golden things *off*.

Prey didn't ask himself why, or about the unfairness, or why Luna had done this. Life was unfair. The reasons didn't really matter, did they? They wouldn't change anything. The facts were the facts. A rose by any other name would still be a rose, no matter how hard you might wish for a tulip.

'I chose to come back, I chose not to run. And yet still...'

Prey's front door slowly, cautiously opened. And that simple fact immediately told Prey so much about who it could be even as he jerked his eyes up from his newly adorned forehooves to look.

With all the runic arrays inscribed into Prey's flat, the list of people his door would open for was short. Gloom could open the door if the thestral used his copy of the key, but only if Prey hadn't set the arrays to reject visitors.

Aside from himself, the number of people who could enter without need for a key though was exactly two. Lemon Pink, and Crimson.

Prey met the yellow eyes of the red pegasus. He should get up, put up his smiling mask. Invite Crimson in, not let on how much he hates this. He couldn't summon up the energy though, not even for Crimson.

"Hey." Prey sighed.

Crimson's eyes flicked down to the golden bands, then back up. Prey saw no surprise or question in his expression. "May I come in?" He belatedly asked.

Prey's wave wordlessly encompassed the door which had opened for Crimson, and how he now stood inside the flat already.

Crimson stepped in far enough to slowly let the door swing shut behind him. His lanky mane was a trailing mess, not bound back into a warrior's braid, like he himself had only just woken up too.

Crimson's wings flexed at his sides. "I'm sorry." He said at length.

Prey let himself slowly slump over backwards until he was sprawled on his back across the mattress. He stared up at his ceiling, droopy ears flopped out to either side, "S'not your fault." He sighed.

Prey heard the feathers of Crimson's wings quietly rubbing together as his friend shifted awkwardly, "But, I mean it's not..."

"I know. I noticed."

"You did? Of course you did. But this isn't fair. I didn't want this."

"I know, and it's fine. Not your fault."

"I didn't want this, it isn't right." Crimson reiterated, trying to

convey his feelings across the empty space by words only.

Prey half raised his head off the mattress, enough for him to see Crimson. And see the bare patch on Crimson's forelegs where his own gold tracer bands had been. Now, Prey wore them. "Don't worry, I understand. I do."

"Princess Luna..."

"Yes."

"She came to me first. Just now, I mean. While I was dreaming."

"I know."

"She told me about this. About doing this, I mean. That it was the law, that I was in the clear but you are not."

"Yeah, she told me that too."

"I told her it wasn't right. I asked her why she had to. And then I asked her not to. Because it isn't fair."

"I chose to come back to Canterlot. I didn't say so before, but, for a second, I thought about... just not."

A quiet. Prey heard Crimson moving, trotting further into the flat, over towards the windowsill with its myriad potted plants stacked there.

"Would you really have left?" Crimson asked almost wonderingly, like he could hardly believe he saying this.

"Maybe. I'm sorry for that. But I didn't. I couldn't just up and-No. I didn't leave. I chose to come back after I got... fixed from Discord's touch. And I knew that something like this with Luna might happen again if I did, but I still made the choice. There isn't much for me in Equestria. Only one real reason to return if I'm counting, actually."

"What about everybody else? Scenic, Gloom, aren't they your friends too?" Crimson asked. 'Aren't they reasons too'? Is what he was asking.

"I... yes. I do mean what I said about them before. I chose to come back, didn't I? But if it really came down to it, I, I could leave them behind. If I really had to. It wasn't like they were in any danger, Discord was gone by then. So yes, they're part of the reason, but you're the main part." Prey mumbled.

"That's.... nice. I mean, thank you, but I am not worth all of that Prey." Crimson said awkwardly.

"Well, to me you obviously are," Prey admitted freely. "As I've told you, there are only-"

"-Only two things you won't do if I asked, I know." Crimson repeated. He lightly brushed his hoof across the stubby leaves of a pot plant, staring unseeingly out of the second story window.

"...Prey, this wasn't fair. On you. On me. We didn't ask for any of this. I've done my duty. You did yours, you came back, but still this happened. Again. Judged and punished again, I mean."

Prey heard the angry bite in the end of Crimson's words, directed at their superiors. And even at Luna, for once. Prey rolled over and heaved himself up into a sitting position on the mattress, so he could properly address Crimson.

"That's how it goes. I'm not saying I'm happy about this in any way, shape, or form. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't expecting something like this. The strong take, and the weak suffer. It's a story which always goes like this. Exactly like when Lord Vanish took your necklace with Luna's permission." Prey stated shrewdly.

"You aren't weak." Crimson immediately said.

"Then neither are you." Prey just as swiftly returned.

Crimson hadn't said, 'we're not weak'. Neither had Prey. Because both had lost too many times to believe that they themselves were individually strong. And each hearing it said by the other, both of them saw the truth and the lie.

Just look at all they'd achieved, at all they'd survived, at all they'd accomplished in the face of all odds. And then look at how much

they'd struggled to get even that far, look how often they failed, lost, and fell.

Prey's lips twitched in dark humour, unable to help himself, "I'm a runt lamb."

"And I'm an exiled, genetic throwback." Crimson returned, looking back at Prey over his shoulder and raising an eyebrow with the same wry humour.

"Heh." Prey snerked, perversely amused.

This all felt so meaningless. Important, significant, but still meaningless. They'd done this before, hadn't they? Perhaps not exactly this, but conversations filled with unvoiceable meaning like it. It felt cheap. It felt important. How could this compare to what had been said between those breaths of time after surviving that morning outside of Mayflower? Were you supposed to compare it? Surely not.

And yet here they both still were, both still talking and not talking, both still wanting to impart what they didn't even know they wanted to say into the silence of this latest setback.

Crimson stepped away from the windowsill and its pot plants. He opened his mouth, searching for words, tufted ears twitching minutely this way and that as he struggled. Prey stopped poking at a golden tracer band in disgust and looked up expectantly. Enough time passed that he needed to blink five times before Crimson got his words into something resembling order.

"I just want to say... I just want to make sure you understand me. I'm not great with words. But you'll get what I mean. I didn't want Luna to do this. It isn't fair. It won't suddenly become fair either. And I wish there was something I could do. I want to help. I wish I could help you the way I know how, but my way won't work. I know how to fight and fly, and not much else. I want to, I wish..."

Crimson gestured helplessly with a limp wing, no strength behind the wordless expression, because he didn't know what he wanted. The uncertain gesture probably said more than Crimson realised. A

pegasus's wings were their strongest limbs. Crimson was always so controlled and exact with every wingbeat when in flight, his feathers always so perfectly maintained.

Prey waited, nearly holding his breath. Crimson's mental walls were bulging, the outlines of impressions almost discernible from behind them. But Prey waited in vain.

Crimson let his wing fall shut to his side. He couldn't find the right words, and he grunted in frustration. "Damn it, I don't know. I just wish you were a pegasus, like me."

Prey sat back, "Huh? I'm sorry, but I don't...follow? I mean, sure, I'd like to be something other than a runt lamb too, believe me, but what's the context?"

"I mean, I wish you had wings. That you could fly like I do, because... it's free. So free. To look down, to feel your mastery over it all, to know that you're free like, like... like a bird I guess. To not be bound, trapped down here to the ground. I couldn't stand that, I have to fly. When I'm happy, when I'm sad, when I'm angry, when I'm lost, I fly. Flying, because it's so... I'm making a mess, I can't properly explain it." Crimson muttered, looking down and rubbing at the mess of his unbound lanky mane.

"What I'm trying to say is, I want that for you too Prey. For you. Because you're my friend. I wish you could fly. Or that you would let me take you flying." Crimson raised his eyes up to catch Prey's.

Prey winced. So that was what Crimson was asking.

He felt no anger at Crimson for the suggestion, or for implying that he, a runt lamb, was physically inferior to a pony, because it was true and Crimson didn't mean it like that. Crimson fervently wished Prey could have been born more. But the joyous freedom of flight that Crimson was speaking about wasn't something he would ever get to enjoy. He had no wings, and so to fly meant being carried by another.

"I see. But I'm sorry, I can't accept your offer Crimson. I can't let you take me up. Not that I fear you'd let me fall, I'm sure you'd catch me

again, but that's something I won't do."

"Even now?" Crimson asked searchingly, not needing to elaborate.

"Sorry. Even now. I simply can't." Prey hunched his shoulders.

'Even now, there are still two things I won't do for even you Crimson. You'd do them for me, but I won't do them for you. You've always been the better person in that regard.'

"Even now? If I said please? After everything?" Crimson tried.

"No, I'm sorry." Prey mumbled.

"Even, even not... even if I only wanted a hug, and not to share flying? Even then, just a hug?" Crimson asked, already resigned to the answer.

Prey felt so ashamed of his weakness, his phobia right then. He sunk down further, almost retreating into his wool, "No. Sorry. S'not your fault. It's mine."

Crimson took a deep breath, "There are only two things, huh?" He echoed, not offended or frustrated, simply resigned to the fact. It didn't matter if Prey's reason was silly to any outsiders perspective, it was important in a way that no one else but the red pegasus could understand, so that was the way it would be.

Crimson understood, and Prey understood, so that was the way it would be. And when the time came for them to stand on the reversed sides of this conversation, Prey would do the same.

Crimson shook himself, opening and refolding his wings, and taking a new stance. He spoke clearly, making an effort to move on afresh, "That's that then. Let's move on. Is there perhaps anything else I could do for you instead?"

"No, no go back for a moment. I don't have anything else to talk about, and..." Prey briefly glanced down at the gold tracer bands, before stiffly forcing himself to turn his head away, "...And I don't want to talk about these. A distraction would be welcome. You were speaking about flying. It sounded nice. I do wish I was born a

pegasus, or a griffin, or nearly anything other than a runt sheep. Tell me more about flying, please?"

"Are you sure?" Crimson hesitated, "I didn't mean to sound..."

"I'm not offended, don't worry. I hate this runt body, no don't look at me like that, it's the truth. How many times did you wish you were born a thestral back in your clan?" Prey pointed out. Crimson couldn't refute that, so Prey went on.

"But life isn't fair, and if wishe'z were fishe'z, sorry, if wishes were oatcakes, and you know how the rest of the saying goes. But you've got wings. You can fly at least. So tell me more about it. I know how much you love it, but you haven't really spoken at length about flying before. So please, now's the chance. Educate me as to the joys of flight." Prey put on a smile.

"If you're sure." Crimson checked, and when Prey nodded encouragingly, he slowly began unfolding some of the joys and mysteries of flying.

Crimson wasn't a great speaker, but Prey could fill in gaps, and he asked questions in the right places, carrying on the conversation and drawing out more words from Crimson as time went on.

Words about the satisfaction in finding a warm thermal of air right where you predicted, about the way it ruffled the tips of your feathers and buoyed you up into the endless sky. Crimson spoke of the heart pumping exhilaration of straining out of a dive, wings locked and wind fighting you to the edge of control.

He struggled to explain the simple freedom of having flight even when you were on the ground. To simply look up, see a roof top, and know without even thinking that with a hop and flap, you would be up there for no other reason than just to see beyond.

Prey wished he could have what Crimson spoke about. All of it, or even any of it. The wishing was tinged with bitterness, but also sour sweetness, because even if he didn't have it, Crimson did. Without being able to explain why, that somehow pacified the jealousy, even if the honest longing to have that ability for himself remained.

Prey was no stranger to wishing he had what ponies did. Magic, flight, special talents, or even just the full sized body of an earth pony. But this was perhaps the first time he saw what he couldn't ever possess, simply because he'd been born without, and not hated ponies for that.

After all, Crimson had been bitterly cursed to have been born with feathers instead of wing membrane, and had been rejected by his old clan. Lilly Blossom no longer had her magic. Saffron had been born without. Scenic and Carton were simple earth ponies. And as for Gloom, had he not fought and struggled for his life alongside them?

Prey jokingly pointed the irony of that out to Crimson, and suggested they should call their little get-togethers 'club meetings' of the 'Cracked People Only Club'.

Prey settled down further into his mattress as Crimson spoke more, listening, and finding simple enjoyment out of a conversation he wouldn't have appreciated with anyone else.

Everything has a price, and Prey had willingly chosen to come back. Partly out of the very real fear that Luna could've reached him through the dream realm wherever he went, but also partly because of what he'd be leaving behind.

Prey hated Canterlot. He wished Discord had burned it with fire. But it wasn't for the golden city he was forced to serve that Prey had returned.

Friendship.

What a fragile, powerful, heart twisting thing.

Friendship. But what a harsh price it demanded.

Prey did not pay it willingly, yet still he'd chosen to return and pay it.

'I chose this. Whatever consequences come later, I came back of my own accord. This time, I didn't abandon Crimson. I came back for my friend.'

-The second great purge of the pre-reformation changelings. Restricted section One, level six.

An account of the second great purge from the firsthoof recollection of a changeling from the time were precious few and even harder to obtain. No complete picture of events as they happened was ever fully constructed.

Again, due to the sad circumstances of the changeling way of life pre-reformation, drones were born by the hundred without any higher brain functions due to the scarcity of love available to their eggs during incubation. Distressingly, it was the merciless logic of the infiltrators, and ultimately Queen Chrysalis, that their subordinates were disposable.

"We were born fast, we lived hard, and we died hungry. There was no other alternative. We didn't even know there could be another alternative." -From one of the few surviving drones to be hatched post-first purge, but survive the second, who could be coaxed into speaking.

"I don't know what happened. I don't. I can't know, because I got out before it could get me, out of the hivemind I mean. If I hadn't? Then I wouldn't be here to tell you, idiot. It was only by luck that I cut myself off in time. Everypony else didn't. It hurts to remember. I was too hungry and afraid back then, I couldn't comprehend. Now I do. I realise how little I was able to think straight back then. Now I can. And it hurts." Changeling drone, Blossom Bee.

Thorax, the first Changeling King- "I'm sorry to anypony looking for answers, but I don't know what really happened that day either. I wasn't even near Canterlot at the time. I just remember the terrible loss afterwards, though. Like being paralysed. Our hivemind was gone. You can't understand what that loss meant, but imagine if tomorrow there was no sun in the sky. That is what losing our first hivemind meant.

So much basic knowledge, so much vital history. Just gone. It took the then queen, you know who, an entire year to piece together enough magic and links to birth the second hivemind. It took so

long. So many of us died, the drones I mean, without the support of the hivemind. I won't tell you the count. But nopony could go back into the old hivemind. Those who tried out of desperation... they aren't here today.

So that's the sad history of the second great purge we survived. Is there more? Well, yes, but we aren't going to share it, for the good of everypony. There aren't any more answers to find, please trust me, and trying will only bring up old pain again. It was a bad, bad, bad time. We've moved on though, we had to. Survival came first. We had to frantically dig and bite to eke out even a fraction of the living we'd once had in the Badlands before. It would be a year before the then queen sent the first scouts back into Equestra for the, well, I think everypony knows by now the story of the Royal Wedding, so I won't bore you with the details again."

---I---

People as a whole forget. But the individual does not. Prey did not.

Author's Notes:

Sorry for the bit of the delay with posting this chapter, so thanks for waiting.

Editor in chief here today was: Panem et Circenses
Thanks!

88.7 Set the Wheel Spinning

Think of a fat seed, planted in the safe darkness of the earth, nourished by rich soil. Presently, the warmth of the sun leaking down from above coaxes a tender shoot to push its way upwards.

Glorious, brilliant light and warmth greet the sprout's first tentative leaves. The seed becomes a plant, rapidly growing into its own little world.

The sun comes and brings life-giving light, rains pass and water the thirsty roots, new leaves unravel from green stems and uncrinkle themselves.

Now the plant has many leaves, deep roots, and tall stems. More time comes. More suns pass by. The days grow yet warmer still, the earth thick with competing root systems.

And now the tall, strong plant has finally uncovered its broad head and flowered. Fat bees come in droves, the warm air hums, and spring is here.

Captain Nighthawk looked over the Night Guards who'd assembled for the night, helmeted head swivelling.

He'd called for a very brief gathering in the disused Guard hall to address them all. There were of course some who couldn't be here right now, their posts too vital to leave unstaffed at any hour of the night, but mostly everyone was here. Thestrals, one pegasus, and one lamb.

The Guard hall could still only generously be judged to be half filled. But there they stood in their short ranks, armour turning every one of them uniform in colour, but not in body.

To most, all thestrals were difficult to tell apart. Which was an understandable point of view. Even though a little racist.

There wasn't a single thestral whose natural colouring wasn't some shade of dark, plus all their slitted eyes were yellow or amber. But none of them were uniform in Nighthawk's gaze, only in purpose and conviction. If you looked, and knew these ponies individually, then you could never mistakenly have said they were the same.

Long warrior manes tied or braided back in different ways, someone who'd recently had a minor accident with a stove and lost several inches of tail, and the way each approached personal grooming. More subtle differences, like in height, a pockmarked scattering of small scars on one pony's knee, the different clan earring studs, someone with a wedge missing from their upper lip, tiny burn holes in wing membranes, how could you ever mistake one for another if you *knew* them?

To Prey, standing in the ranks, who could feel all the minds around him, it was even more prevalent the differences between each and every individual.

Not that he was capable of recognising all these mind signatures, that was much harder than differentiating between physical appearances, but each was different enough. Like being shown a hundred different shades of blue. You might not know each shade's name, but you could easily tell each one apart from the next.

"I will be keeping this brief," Nighthawk gruffly stated, "There are two items of Guard business I will announce tonight. For anypony not here right now, pass on the message and make sure they too get told."

"First up, the time-crunch is officially over. The backlog and workload after Discord has finally fallen back to manageable levels. Congratulations to all. Everypony has pulled double their weight for weeks now, and we've finally caught back up. Well done." The Captain praised in exactly the same gruff, rasping tones as when he'd begun the speech.

Around the half-filled and dimly lit Guard Hall, there was the quiet silence of no one cheering. Loud vocal exclamations of happiness was not the way thestrals did things. But in their own yellow-eyed, bat-winged thestral way, everyone here was very much cheering in

relief if you knew how to recognise it. You didn't *listen* with your ears; you *looked* with your eyes.

"Second, those who compile the reports will already know, but night-time vandalism has sharply peaked. Now that we have time again, I want every patrol to crack down on that. It is mainly limited to Lower Canterlot, and radiates some ways into Upper Canterlot around the divide. I don't care if they're youths, or drunk partygoers. Stomp it out wherever you encounter it." Nighthawk ordered.

"Third, the Cloudsdale Weather Teams have finally gotten their act together. There is no more need for the Night Guard and Royal Guard to work to take up the slack, so the joint weather flights are being halted as of now. Unless there's another sudden emergency."

Starry Wing leaned in from behind Nighthawk and helpfully muttered something in the Captain's tufted ear in reminder.

"I stand corrected," Nighthawk rasped, "The Cloudsdale Weather Teams have only mostly gotten their act together. There's a few exceptions on the corners of their weather maps they still need to fix."

Nighthawk's dismissive tone left no doubt in any of the assembled audience that it was firmly a 'their' problem. The Night Guard had already wasted enough of its limited pony power on that thankless task, and weren't going to be wasting any more.

Understandable. No one here, not even Prey who naturally had no experience with flying or manipulating weather, had been impressed with the Equestrian weather factories' most recent performances. After centuries of such tight control, Equestrian weather could no longer form naturally it had become so utterly domesticated. The country was now completely reliant on its armada of pegasi weather teams to deliver all its weather needs.

So for being so completely reliant on their vaunted weather control, they obviously didn't have the necessary backup plans in place for when something big went wrong. Small things perhaps, but big things? Evidently not.

'Arrogant, and complacent.' Was Prey's harsh judgement.

"And lastly, a piece of good news." Nighthawk unexpectedly announced.

Squinting to get his slightly damaged eyesight to work in the dim hall, Prey saw that, yes, there was an actual tiny grin turning up the corners of the Captain's stern mouth.

"The first full shipment of new Night Guard armour is finally ready and will be delivered tomorrow night. Princess Luna's displeasure at the smiths' continual delays was made clear. Now, everypony will finally have their due and be able to match your brothers in the ISND."

A lot of slitted yellow eyes turned to the ISND, running appreciatively over Crimson and Gloom's more extensive and practical armour, their helmets also lacking those ridiculous purple plumes.

'-finally. I thought I'd never get my set-'
'-much better. Thank Princess Luna-'
'-I'd almost forgotten because it's been taking so long-'

The ISND had gotten the first two sets of proof-of-concept armour as a precaution. Now, it was finally time for everyone else, even the newer thestral recruits, to get fully kitted out too.

'You're not going to do your public image of 'Definitely-Not-Nightmare-Moon-Guards' any good, though.' Prey thought.

Thestrals with their yellow eyes, bat wings, and hereditary fangs were already intimidating enough to the average pony, and the newer, darker, more 'unfriendly' looking armour wasn't going to help that. Not that Prey cared one way or the other.

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The passage of time always brings about change, be it new plant growth, or a new set of burnished and stress-tested armour plates. But the beginning of spring is always a period which brings about many new changes. Controlled by ponies or not, the season of

spring has always traditionally been a time of new life, rapid growth, and fast change.

Or perhaps it was simply that you were more alert to looking out for the changes time inevitably brought during spring? It was, after all, basically traditional.

But this year, the scope of changes seemed a bit underwhelming. After the sudden and terrible reign of Discord, to his just as sudden and out of the blue defeat, followed with the restoration by Harmony, it just seemed like the traditional season of change was a bit late to the party, that was all. And post-Discord, there had definitely been many a party.

Nevertheless, there was still change, because there is always change, all the time.

It was simply that comparatively, these changes really weren't as big or important as what had already happened. These changes ranged in scope, reach, intensity, and importance to Prey. Most didn't or at least shouldn't affect him. Still, Prey took note just in case. Just some of them. And there would always be undercurrents that got missed, no matter how closely he or Lemon Pink kept their ears to the ground.

Like with Griffonia. Most of the actual details were being kept out of the public eye, and most ponies didn't care much about their distant griffin neighbours anyway, but Equestria and Griffonia were in a stalemate.

Overtures and diplomatic talks had gone round and around, and ended up nowhere. Border restrictions were still as tight as could be, with strict bans, not just impossibly steep tariffs, but outright *bans* on Equestrian imports. Only Equestrians with longstanding Griffonian citizenship were being allowed in, and both the Low and High Kingdoms had clamped down on news leaving Griffonia in a rare united front.

In that regard, Prey supposed it was a tiny blessing in disguise that Lemon Pink had never ended up investing his gold in that pig raising company. With the bitter loss of both his veropedes, there

had no longer been a need for a constant stream of fresh meat, and the planned purchase of the business had fallen by the wayside. Lemon was still on the lookout for a different business opportunity, when she had the time. Which wasn't often.

Prey didn't care about the gold, but Lemon had wanted to do it for herself and felt that it was of importance. A rare show of divergent individuality, so Prey had told her to do as she pleased.

Other changes, like the weather teams finally getting their weather towers up and running again. Here in Canterlot and the surrounding lands, Cloudsdale with its famous weather factories was close enough to cover them, but in more distant and rural parts of Equestria, weather towers were a necessity. The newspapers had been making a big fuss of the weather delays, (just like they did about everything else really), with predictable headlines like; "Dire Weather Straits", and "Weather Teams Incompetent?" abounding.

There had been barely a ‘thank you’ in all of the newspapers for the help the Guard had lent to combat this, but at least it was almost all back under control finally.

And another topic of much discussion, (most of it uninformed) was about the Elements of Harmony. Post-Nightmare-Moon, there had been an abundance of wild speculation about the official story, but very little factual information. At least, information made available to the general public. That, and ponies will believe what they want to believe, no matter how outlandish.

But now, with the defeat of Discord, the veil of privacy which had been spread over the identity and backgrounds of the Element Bearers had finally been thrown back. They were the heroes of Equestria! Of course all wanted to know who these brave and selfless saviours were. For the second time!

The secrecy surrounding the Elements of Harmony and their six bearers was finally done away with. That, and literally the day after Discord's defeat, there had been a huge stained glass window commissioned commemorating the event, quite clearly depicting the six ponies responsible and their cutie marks. Word had spread quickly from there.

The gossip magazines were having a field day. Fashion, celebrity, chat, half of the pages out of all of these magazines was devoted to the most sensational speculations, and what was more, ponies were loving it. The Element Bearers had been catapulted into fame and celebrity status overnight. Reporters and a lot of important people wanted to meet them, and meet them now!

Honesty, Laughter, Kindness, Loyalty, Generosity, and Magic. Everyone who was anyone was going mad over them.

Prey wasn't. He already knew what he knew, and also what he wasn't supposed to know. He'd been there that night, hadn't he? When Luna had... when she had... done what she'd done. And then afterwards, he'd been sworn to secrecy against his will. He wouldn't risk Luna's notice, or far worse, her sister's, by even poking around the fringes. Besides, once again Prey already knew all he needed to. For now.

Prey knew their names, faces, and descriptions, as did many people now, but he didn't *know* the Element Bearers. He'd only seen the one personally. But he knew they were six ponies, that they were Celestia's chosen, that they unreservedly believed in the righteousness of the Harmony they were supposed to represent, and that they were in turn being protected against their own carelessness by the living magic of Harmony itself.

That was enough for Prey to know that he would hate them. The rest of them, plus that one he'd already met. The one who'd been undeservingly saved from beyond the pale of an unfair world. The world wasn't fair, but it was always unfair in the other way. It always took, it never gave back.

Unless, apparently, you were the beloved of Harmony.

So despite all the craziness and attention thrown on the Element Bearers by all and sundry, Prey put it all from him, and left it alone. He hated them for what they had and what they represented, and that was all there was to it. Prey had no want or need to become acquainted with the six now famous mares, merely so that he could then hate them more personally. It didn't even really matter who they were, only what powers worked through them, be that the

living magic of Harmony, or the might of the sun wolf.

Prey wouldn't forget, (how could he?), but he'd be staying far away from the likes of them.

There were many other changes too, of course. Big and small, narrow and wide, personal and public, important and trivial. Times change, as does everything. That in and of itself is unchanging, the fact that there will always be change. The only question is; what scope of change?

Things like new spring fashion rotating in, and the shops switching out their displays and advertisements. Or schools beginning again across the country, some foals starting their first year, while others began their last of schooling. Within the various main parks, or along main roads in Upper Canterlot with neatly sculpted trees planted alongside the road in rows, spring brought an abundance of new and exciting colour. New leaves, bright flowers, fresh smells.

Randy Pickaxe was certainly being kept busy, this being the first spring he'd experienced while working as a Park Gardner.

Lemon had observed the job seemed to suit him. Hard, but active outdoors work, and one making use of Randy's earth pony heritage. Stereotypical, but it had been a tried, trusted, and true method for self-fulfilment of earth ponies for centuries, something else she'd also bluntly pointed out to her coltfriend. 'If it isn't broken, why fix it?' and all that.

Things also changed down in the lightless cavern of Prey's lair, and in the waterlogged tunnels of the hexed sewer pipes. Many a plant had experienced sudden growth above ground, why should those beneath be much different?

Prey spent many secret hours, (when he could slip away and had the time), down there. Building, improving, changing. If runic arrays could be compared to plants, then they were most definitely Ironwood trees. They grew slowly, consumed a lot of time and resources, but once fully grown, their mighty trunks and deep roots were immovable.

Things change. Equestria had changed after recent events, the whole world had been changed, even. Big changes, small changes, but changes all the same.

One of these new changes came to the ISND too.

It began much as you might expect, with a summons from Captain Nighthawk, who told them to come prepared.

Meaning; they were about to be called on once more for their specific skillsets.

It certainly felt like it had been a while. And from Prey's point of view, it hadn't been nearly long enough.

The now utterly familiar jam-packed space of Nighthawk's office welcomed the three of them back on entering, the boxes of Night Guard gear which still hasn't found a proper home yet still cluttering the dim office.

Things like disassembled armour racks, stacked in a pile atop a crudely resealed crate of tools, and topped off with a covering of scrolls stuck into every available gap were just one such example.

Without prompting, Crimson pulled the door shut after himself as the last one in. Gloom snapped a quick salute as Crimson and Prey took a place to either side of him, "Sir."

"Sargent Gloom." Nighthawk rasped, nodding slightly back, "Prey, Crimson. At ease, all."

Outside of the office's one window, the darkness of the night was only slightly alleviated by light from the Palace's torches, barely adding anything to the lone lamp the thestral Captain had in here for illumination. It was still enough for the three pairs of yellow eyes in the room to catch and glimmer almost like fireflies.

'One day,' Prey told himself in exasperation for the hundredth time,

'One glorious day, I'll get to attend a Night Guard meeting where there's proper lighting.'

Nighthawk tapping a blunt wingclaw against the desk's surface broke the moment of silence, "It is time for you all to step back up into your true roles, that of serving as the ISND, not merely Night Guards. Everypony has their own duty to perform."

"Yes sir. I take it you mean that you have another mission for us, then." Gloom said, tail going still behind him.

"Just so." Nighthawk confirmed.

'Aaaaand here we go all over again. Life's just one big circle, ain't it?' Prey mentally sighed.

Gloom didn't seem able to stop himself from quickly glancing to either side, to Prey and to Crimson, before making himself face forwards again. "I understand, sir."

'-another mission. I don't know how I should feel. But the last one to Griffonia didn't go too awfully, so maybe this one will also be okayish?-'

Prey nearly held his breath in dread anticipation of what Nighthawk would say next, unable to help himself. What craziness was about to be hoisted upon them now? The banal kind? Or worse, the dangerous kind?

Nighthawk.... hesitated.

'Oh Zoma'Grika.' If Nighthawk was hesitating, then-

The Captain saw their collective reactions, and he flicked a hoof up to halt them:

"Wait, it is not as bad as that. Listen first." He ordered, "I am simply unsure of how to convey this. We have been asked by Captain Shining Armour, and Princess Luna has given approval, to field a joint Guard operation to solve a case that came to us just yesterday."

More reactions from the three of them, all masked to varying degrees, but it wasn't hard for anyone in the know about the ISND's history, let alone the Captain himself, to be able to put two and two together.

'Another Lilly and Scenic?! Replacements? Is that what this disaster is going to be all over again? After what happened last time, how is the Guard so utterly incapable of learning? Night and Royal both?!'

Nighthawk's mouth flattened into a grimace, '-it is not like that. I need to make it clear I am sticking by my previous word-'

"It is to be a *joint* operation," Nighthawk stressed, "Nopony is trying to join your squad. A Royal Guard squad will be working alongside you, and you will need to co-operate and work alongside one another, but both squads will ultimately be self-directed. Separate. This is not a repeat of last time."

Crimson's wings began shifting restlessly. Prey was certain he was thinking the same thing as Crimson here, 'That sounds pretty damn similar from where I'm standing.'

Gloom cleared his throat, "Perhaps sir, if you could explain what this mission is a bit more? Maybe that would help clarify."

Nighthawk's grimace grew imperceptibly, "This is a mission outside of Canterlot, one of the reasons the ISND will be ideal, because of all your experience. The other reason is the type of mission. Missing ponies, along with property damage, from the local town."

Nighthawk stood up smoothly, squeezing out from behind his cramped desk and striding to the map of Equestria pinned on the wall. It was a feature that for some reason seemed to be prerequisite for being an officer and having an office. That you had to include, somewhere, a wall map. Some officers like to stud them with pins and notes, while others like Nighthawk simply had the map as a nod towards the unwritten rule, and left it at that.

'Déjà vu, much?'

Prey was struck by how similar this all seemed, how rote this song

and dance was, and how clearly he could envision this exact same scene being repeated in the future. Now *there* was a disturbing thought.

Nighthawk unfurled a leathery wing and used the bony tip of it to point. He tapped on the golden circle representing Canterlot in the middle, because of course the map maker had made it with Canterlot as the centre, and then swiftly traced down south-east.

Prey's eyes drifted left over the map for a second, to the west of Canterlot instead. Past the jagged line representing the mountain chain of the Ridgeback, and then the Longridge, there was... nothing.

No names or even dots to show where Mayflower and Alfalfa Dale had once existed. And trailing downwards from the nothing sitting there, the all-important dotted line representing the border, the divide between ponydom and the heathens... no name there either. Just a tiny train track line that if the map were to be believed, went to and returned from nowhere. Simply a huge green blob on the page, representing a deep forest.

"Haven Hay," Nighthawk's curt pronouncement redrew Prey's attention to the correct side of the map. "And no. It isn't like Alfalfa Dale and Mayflower. You're not about to fly into *that* situation again."

The tip of Nighthawk's wing was resting on a squiggle and name box set right on the sea's coastline, representing a settlement, built right before a jagged point of land. Although it looked tiny on the map, in real life it must be a massive spur of land, forming an equally massive bay.

Nighthawk had called it 'Haven Hay', very much a pony name. Prey mentally searched through his general knowledge for the place. Prey had made sure to memorise some basic knowledge of all Equestrian towns and railroads, as well as relevant maps. Not a minor undertaking by any means.

It now looked like he had a reason to research a bit deeper than just 'basic knowledge' for this Haven Hay. By the sound of it, all of the

ISND would need to, in fact. But from what Prey could recall, Nighthawk was at least correct in that one pronouncement.

The seaside town of Haven Hay wasn't like Alfalfa Dale. It wasn't on the border for one, but instead situated just inside the border, and for another, it had at least ten times the population of Alfalfa Dale used to have. That also meant the population was entirely made up of ponies. That translated into it having all the basic amenities, facilities, and protection that Celestia extended to all her pony settlements. All those simple things a border town *didn't* have. Weather control, a train station, town walls, waterlines, a main road, and at least a few guards.

Any more than that though, or how big of a harbour and how much sea traffic the town received, Prey would have to further look up.

'But it's not on the border, it's inside of Equestria. People can't just be abducted by a warlock without anyone reacting, so that's good.' Prey thought. That was such a pathetically low standard to judge the merits of a town's location by, but an important one. It wasn't as if any of them could forget such a tragedy had already personally happened.

Gloom gave up furrowing his brow at the map and simply admitted, "I can't say I recognise the name, sir. Is it a port city?"

"Port town," Nighthawk corrected, "Medium sized, but size is ultimately irrelevant. All that is relevant, is the cause for this joint mission. The protection of night falls over all of Her Majesty's subjects everywhere equally."

Unnoticed, Prey touched at the golden band around one of his forelegs, and said nothing.

"You recall that one weather tower which wasn't back up and running yet? It's just outside of the town. But it should have been by now. Over the last week, near consecutive storms, five of them major ones, have shut the harbour and done damage to the town. However the reason for this mission is that the pegasi staffing the weather tower seem to have disappeared. Or deserted. Or are refusing to work. The report contradicts itself a bit. One moment it

mentions them refusing to work, the next it terms them as deserters." Nighthawk curtly flicked his tail.

"Whatever the cause, you are to find out, and fix it. If it's deliberate neglect, arrest whomever is responsible. If it's a case of missing ponies, then this gets more serious."

"Sir, I mean, why are we being sent? Why us particularly sir?" Crimson spoke up, stressing the question that Prey had been hearing circulating in the back of Gloom's head. The ISND never got a simple mission, there was always something complicated about it.

"And why with a Royal Guard squad sir? It doesn't sound like it's a wide ranging task, more of an investigation. You don't need loads of ponies for that." Gloom also asked, not contradicting Nighthawk because he was sure the Captain had already thought of that, but wanting to know the reason.

"The Royal Guards have their own task. That being half civilian control, half emergency weather assistance. The Haven Hay town Guard is too small, and ponies there are very vocally angry about the long delay in first getting their local weather tower up and running again, and now it isn't working at all, and their homes are being damaged by the storms. The Royal Guards are going to fly the flag, flash their golden armour, reassure ponies, and make their presence known. But that's their job."

Nighthawk stared intently at the three of them, yellow eyes sharp, "Your job is to find the root cause of all this. And punish the crime if there is one."

And what Nighthawk didn't have to point out was that, '-the Night Guard is ill-suited to calming skittish civilians anyway-'

'So it's basically another investigation. A mix of possibly brewing riotous intentions, nature doing what nature does, and maybe missing people.' Prey summed up the coming task in his head. It was easy to see why with their past experience that Nighthawk would decide to assign them to this.

Prey looked up at the dim ceiling above and sourly thought about

that for a moment. 'I have so many better things to be doing. Important things. Vital things. The third stage is nearing completion. Now I'm going to have to put it on hold with Lemon.'

At least Nighthawk had made it quite clear they would not be working with this Royal Guard squad, simply alongside them. Or maybe after Lilly's fate, it was the Royal Guards who'd refused to work with the ISND, not the other way around. Understandable, if so.

And deep down, Prey couldn't banish the superstitious fear that this mission was going to horribly mutate into something awful because of the way things always seemed to turn out for the ISND.

"I understand, sir." Gloom said slowly, slit eyes flicking back to the dot on the wall map. He was already resigned to this coming unpleasantness, but prepared to do his duty.

At Gloom's other side, Crimson looked as ready as he always did, back straight and posture balanced.

Prey managed to refrain from looking down at the new, but just as hated alicorn made tracer bands resting around his forelegs, 'And it's not like I'm being given a choice in this matter.'

Someone above them had made the decision, and so it shall be. The mission had been issued, the reports received, the other Guard Captain had been consulted, and all the paperwork was already being filed right now. The ISND were just another cog in the machinery of Canterlot.

The Guard Captains had squads of armed and armoured Guards under their command, being only one step removed from the only higher powers in all the land. The Captains could sign off your life and send you to your death. Worse, it really could be as simple as that. Nighthawk hadn't known the lethal mess he was sending them into out in Mayflower, but he was still the one who'd signed the papers and sent them. What had been a simple choice at the time for Nighthawk had dire, long reaching, and permanent consequences for the ISND.

So what if Nighthawk had felt the heavy weight of responsibility after he'd learned of what had happened to the ISND? Because Prey could guarantee no matter how guilty Nighthawk had felt, it was nothing to the very physical pain, dread, suffering, and terror they'd felt.

Choices have consequences, but sometimes it isn't you who has to pay for them.

And that was what it came down to in the end, wasn't it? They were all thinking it, (although in Crimson's case Prey was only confident, not certain, the Pegasus was thinking it), thinking; would this be another one of those times?

'Hmm... yeah, no. Not if I have anything to say about it. I'm sick of being the scapegoat for everyone else's choices. I'm a sheep, not a goat, damn it.'

Nighthawk pulled out two files from a stack on his desk, and passed them across to Gloom, "Your orders in writing, and details." He said by way of explanation.

After a quick glance inside the files, Gloom passed them down to Prey without touching for him to hang onto, and then saluted Nighthawk, "We will do our best sir."

"Her Majesty asks for nothing more and nothing less. Requisition whatever funds or equipment you feel you need, Starry Wing will sign it off. Night watch over you all." Nighthawk returned. He paused, but then simply shut his mouth and nodded for them to leave.

But Prey felt Nighthawk's yellow eyes following the three of them all the way out of their owner's office door, and then even all the way down the corridor after the door was shut.

It was hard to concentrate on the work for the rest of their shift after that. Informed of their coming trip, all three of them were bouncing theories, maybe's, and what if's off each other all through

the rest of their office shift.

The two files which Prey read over and summarised for the other two held copies of the incident reports, the Royal Guard's return correspondence, the merger request, some information about the local town sheriff and watch in Haven Hay, and weather reports. The second slim folder was the official signed paperwork they could use to prove their authority in Haven Hay, if necessary.

However the provided details were all lacking in concrete certainty for the things they wanted to know, and in the end only served to raise more questions, if's, and but's for them to wonder over than it answered.

And come the end of their shift, a little before midday and lunch time in the mess hall, it came time for them to fulfil one of the first of many tasks of this mission, and they hadn't even boarded the train yet. Or figured out which train they needed to board.

And that was meeting the squad of Royal Guards they were going to travelling with out to Haven Hay. And since it was just about to be lunch time anyways, the ISND had been told to meet them in the mess hall.

Lunchtime hadn't begun yet. A small squad of four pegasi rose from around a table as the ISND entered the otherwise empty mess hall. Four was only half the maximum size for a Royal Guard squad, but they were all pegasi, leading Prey to the conclusion that the non-fliers, (and therefore also non-weather manipulation capable members), had been trimmed for this mission. So no unicorns.

A personal relief to Prey, but that also meant Shining Armour wasn't rating the danger of this mission very high either. Good, and bad.

Prey made all those deductions within the first breath as the familiar-looking pegasus Sargent opened his mouth to greet them, "First Sargent Gloom of the ISND? And is this your squad?"

"Yes." Gloom answered the obvious.

"Great, let's get this meet and greet rolling."

The stallion was buff, his voice loud, and posture boisterous.

Prey finally placed the pony in his memory. Nimbus Feather, that stallion from ages ago who'd once invited Crimson to go play hoofball with him and his mates.

'I remember that this Nimbus guy had only recently come back from some stint on a mission near the Badlands. It seems Shining Armour's head isn't entirely devoted to supporting the weight of his own horn, and can actually successfully utilise his own people too.'

Gloom took the lead, not letting show any of his reluctance and striding for the table with the four pony squad waiting for them. Prey and Crimson followed as they were supposed to.

To Gloom's mild surprise, Nimbus actually half rose from the table to offer his hoof:

"Staff Sargent Nimbus Feather, but I bet'cha already knew that." He introduced himself with a broad grin, teeth very white, "And don't worry, me and my guys will have your back out there. We're old hooves at this rodeo."

'Oh wonderful, he's got Lilly's old attitude. Just without most of the aggression.' Prey thought.

Gloom's first impression in those first few seconds wasn't much different, '-what is it with every Royal Guard I've got to work alongside being overconfident? No, I shouldn't judge yet, he's at least being friendly-'

"Thank you. I hope you won't need to have our backs though, if it’s all the same to you." Gloom replied, bumping his hoof with the muscled pegasus, who bumbled back rather a bit too hard.

"No worries, I get what'cha mean. Come on, sit, sit! I'll kick us off with the introductions-Huh? Who's this?" Nimbus started with an exclamation of surprise.

The rest of his team, two stallions and one mare, sat up to see what their Staff Sargent was looking at and added their own surprise as they spotted the unhappy Prey below table-top level. Prey'd been sticking close behind Gloom's legs, and what with all the tables and benches they wove around to get to this table, and with the attention firmly on Gloom as the thestral, and ponies generally being unobservant, well, he'd mostly been missed. They all tried to speak and think at once.

"Who's the foal-shee-uh, lamb?"
"Sir, there's a filly in the mess hall."
"I'm confused."

'-wait wait wait, that dumb story about the bat guards is actually true?-'
'-where are her parents? Or are we escorting her back to Haven Hay or something?-'
'-and which pony gave her that oversized ribbon? Sheep don't even have manes-'

In the face of their exclamations and thoughts, Prey smiled back up at all of them. 'I hate being a runt. And I hate all of you, too.'

Crimson moved just a half step to his right, not quite standing in front of Prey, but giving the impression that could change if he so chose. A nice gesture, but rather pointless, as they were going to be travelling alongside these four Guards very soon anyways.

'-the news still hasn't gotten around somehow, it seems-', Gloom thought, clearing his throat:

"No. This is Prey, a member of my squad, appointed by Princess Luna. And *he* is older than he looks."

Which of course got the same old first time reactions all over again.

'-so he's a colt, not a filly?-'
'-no way he's old enough, I'll eat my horseshoes if he's of age-'
'-what a nasty name, somepony should help him get that changed-'

All these were sentiments and misguided opinions that the ISND,

(and most especially Prey) had witnessed before on the lamb's behalf. What *was* new however, was how Nimbus Feather and his three subordinates, who hadn't yet been introduced, went on to openly share this. Most were usually too stuck-up to voice it.

"Hey little buddy, is your full name really Prey? Not short for anything more?" One of the two unnamed stallions, the one who for some reason didn't seem to have any eyebrows, asked.

"Like, how old are you even?" The mare nearly demanded.

"If I were to guess you're the youngest brother to a bunch of older sisters who liked to play dress up, how close would I be?" The other stallion snorted, amused.

"I didn't get told about any of this." Nimbus Feather stated looking at Gloom, nicely rounding up as the last member of his squad to add his two bits.

Prey kept smiling, only Crimson and Gloom standing alongside him knowing how fake it was, "Yes, no. Fourteen. Not close at all. And that wasn't a question, sir, so I'm very sorry, but I can't provide you an answer."

Gloom stepped in to try and put a halt to this before, '-it all spirals into a misunderstanding. Or I get too annoyed to stop Prey from whatever petty revenge he's planning-'

In the space of those few comments, the Royal Guards had genuinely managed to tick Gloom off, even though he himself knew he'd been little better when he'd first met Prey. It wasn't about him wanting to stand up for Prey, these Royal Guard's opinions weren't important enough for him to feel insulted, but in that moment, Gloom still experienced a moment of extreme annoyance before he got it under control. Because it wasn't that long ago Gloom remembered not knowing if he would ever see Prey alive again.

Prey and Crimson were part of Gloom's life now. He could not imagine it any other way, working alongside them and sharing so much with each other every day.

Prey and Crimson were members of *his* squad, not Nimbus Feather's. They didn't have to answer to these Royal Guards if they didn't want to.

'-Moon blight it, we're going to have to answer though. At least a bit. We're all being sent to Haven Hay together. We'll need at least a professional working relationship-'

"I will say it again, Prey is a member of my Night Guard squad, appointed by Princess Luna. Let's keep things professional please, Staff Sargent Nimbus."

The four ponies in Royal Guard armour exchanged looks amongst themselves. They each seemed to be able to get the gist of what the others meant by expression alone, so they'd obviously worked together quite a bit before.

Nimbus Feather's final look before he turned back to the ISND was supposed to convey to his subordinates; '-just fly with it for now. I'll take this up with Captain Armour about the foal later-'

He clapped his front hooves loudly together atop the table, "If a princess said so, then we've no worries over here. Tell you what, let's get this meet and greet going properly, huh? Captain Shining Armour said something about you guys working night shifts, so I'm betting you've got a date with your pillow that needs to be kept."

With a nod Gloom stepped up to the table, Crimson taking his left, with Prey hauling himself up onto the bench to the far right, still out of anyone's reach. "It is the end of our shift, yes, but it's more important to properly discuss what needs to be, instead of rushing."

Nimbus grinned cheerfully, white teeth sparking, "A go gett'um attitude, that's just the way we like things in the Border Rangers."

"Border... Rangers? Is that some division of the Border Guard or-?"

"Nah, we're Royal Guard through and through. Border Rangers is like what it says on the tin. We're Royal Guards who get lots of far ranging missions just inside Equestria's borders, but we don't guard the actual borders, that's the Border Guards job. We can't go making

them look bad by showing them up now can we?" Nimbus joked boisterously, his three squadmates joining in on the guffaws.

Prey hid a wince at their volume, 'So you're not actual Border Guards. Lucky. For *you*.'

"About those introductions...?" Gloom prompted.

"Oh yeah, of course. I'm Staff Sargent Nimbus Feather of course, not like you could forget in only five minutes, but still. And this here is-"

"Bravo, my name's Bravo Call." The big stallion lacking eyebrows beat Nimbus Feather to it, apparently informal enough to not be bothered by interrupting his immediate superior.

"Ink Stain, but all my friends call me Inky, so I expect you to too." The pegasus mare chimed in. She had a long lock of escaped wavy mane sticking out from under her the rim of her helmet, which bounced about in front of her face.

"And I'm Trail Blazer, nice day to you all." The last pegasus introduced himself with a casual wave of his scruffy wing. He had a tousled, rough look going for him. Prey had never seen Crimson's wings anything less than perfect however, and he could almost feel Crimson twitch beside him at seeing the state of the other pegasus' feathers.

Nimbus Feather, Bravo Call, Ink Stain or Inky, and Trail Blazer. Four brand new companions. Four pegasi. Four Royal Guards. 'Four *ponies*, to be exact. Even if they've got at least some real world experience under their belts.' Prey thought.

The four opposite them were grinning and waiting for the ISND to return their little song-and-dance routine. They weren't able to meet Gloom's yellow eyes, but they still grinned and looked back at him as; '-mostly a normal pony-'.

Crimson counted as a; '-full pony-', in their thoughts, however they were definitely still unsure if Prey's presence wasn't actually some prank, but were; '-going along with it for now-'.

Gloom blinked, looking between the four pegasi and wondering what they were waiting for. '-...we've already introduced ourselves, though-'

Prey cough-muttered, "Informal introductions." Loudly enough for Gloom to hear.

"Right, I'm Sargent Gloom, ah, Dusky Gloom. As I said. And this is Prey. Like I also already said. And this is Crimson Trace. As I might not have actually said? Did I introduce you yet?" He turned to Crimson.

"No sir, you didn't. Hello. My name is Crimson."

'-geeze, these guys are just a barrel of laughs, aren't they?-', Inky thought, blowing the wavy strand of mane out of her face with a huff.

'-probably very by the rulebook too, I bet-', Bravo Call himself thought.

Nimbus Feather quickly forced a laugh, not letting the awkward silence set in, "Pleasure to meet'cha all, I'm sure you'll do great alongside us. Tell you what, let's get down to brass shoe nails and start this. So, us and you guys are leaving and travelling out to Haven Hay tomorrow at twelve hundred hours sharp. Sorry guys-"

Nimbus turned to address his three 'guys' there; "But it’s going to be an overnight ride, so pack a pillow. I've gone ahead and posted a message out, so the town sheriff and mayor are expecting us. Me and my team will take charge of their weather problem lickety' split, we're used to wild weather so don't you worry none. We investigate, take witness statements, find out if this damage was caused by the weather tower ponies’ negligence, get everything back into shape, and round off the trip with a hero’s send off. What do ya' say, Sargent Gloom? Want to save the day?"

Gloom's lips soundlessly moved. He stared at Nimbus Feather. Prey and Crimson were doing the exact same.

Nimbus raised an eyebrow, "What?"

"You think it will all go that smoothly?" Gloom could only ask.

"Ahh, probably not," Nimbus waved his hoof like it was no big deal, "But hey, never give up hope. Sure, there'll be complications, if me and my team have learned anything, it's that something always comes up. But I'm just as confident in overcoming any obstacle. You can achieve anything you set your mind to."

"Where there's a will, there's a way." Trail Blazer echoed in confident agreement with his Staff Sargent.

What would it be like to have that kind of confidence? Or better yet, what was it like to have been lucky enough to only partake in missions which let you preserve that delusional belief? Prey was frankly jealous every bit as much as he was scornful of the handsome stallion's assurances.

'-I think Prey's paranoia has rubbed off on me-', Gloom thought, unable to help himself from saying:

"Sargent Nimbus, surely there is more to your plan than that?"

"There's only so much you can do without being there to see everything firsthoof. But seriously, you don't have to worry. We've done this loads of times, we know what we're doing. Bravo here has flown through the eye of tornados, Inky's flown off griffins all by her lonesome, don't let that pretty face fool you, and Trail Blazer here is the damn finest tracker and trail blazer, pun intended! Both in the sky and on land that I've ever had the pleasure of commanding. We're not just all talk and perfectly buffed armour shine, we've done all this plenty of times before."

Bravo, Inky, and Trail all nodded in pride along to Nimbus Feather's boastful claims.

Perhaps the Royal Guards were expecting Gloom to reply with a boast of his own and praise for the accomplishments of his two subordinates. They'd shared some self praise, and now it was the ISND's turn, so that together they could all feel more confident and positive.

They were disappointed. Gloom did no such thing. In fact, it hadn’t even occurred to him. What had the ISND done that any of them were proud of? All of their successes had come at heavy prices. Even the mostly successful if highly risky mission out to snatch Hafflow from Griffonia was now null and void, what with the griffin having vanished post-Discord's cleansing.

"Right," Gloom said instead, as if the last minute hadn't even been voiced, "Well, we've looked some more into Haven Hay with what little time we've had so far. Some facts about the town."

He fished out a folded bit of paper tucked inside his breastplate, because although his memory was good, it wasn't eidetic like Prey's and he actually had to write facts and numbers down. Still ignoring the hanging cue to pick up from Nimbus Feather, he instead started reciting off the sheet:

"Haven Hay has a population hovering just around the nine-thousand mark. The last three censuses show that number hasn't changed significantly. Predominantly an earth pony population, all well settled. Many families there reach back six or even seven generations, so there's few outsiders. It's a port town, but without much shipping. Its’ sea traffic is either all small local boats who harvest their only export, kelp, or are ships who come for repairs. Haven Hay's main industry is its’ dry docks for repairs and overhauls, not importing or exporting."

He trailed his hoof down the page, "Let's see, annual tourism is tiny, and there's only one historic attraction, the Cliffs of Dove. However, sea mists during all seasons but summer mean that's only a seasonal attraction. Fog, wind, and bad weather coming in off the sea are also all common."

Gloom refolded the creased note with a flick and tucked it back into his metallic purple breastplate, "And that's the little we've researched so far." He finished a bit brusquely.

A silence fell between the table, a silence Prey understood. 'Yes, it isn't much to be going on, but it's all we have for now.'

It wasn't anywhere the level of detail or focus Prey wanted, but

honestly, the three of them had known that would be the case before they even looked up Haven Hay. None of what they could research beforehoof while still here would solve this case. If the people who lived, breathed, and worked every day on the ground in Haven Hay hadn't been able to find a simple solution, then they certainly wouldn't be able to manage the feat from all the way back here in Canterlot.

While knowing things like population density, local history, and geography might help a bit going in, in the end those weren't the questions that really needed answering. The ISND was much more accustomed to asking questions such as; 'Who did it?', 'Why did they do it?', 'Who gained from this?', and 'Who lost out from this?'.

Trail Blazer broke the silence, scratching his scruffy mane which was bordering right on the edge of being against regulations, "The Cliffs of Dove? I'd put money on having heard of those before somewhere."

Prey thought Bravo Call's lack of eyebrows really made him look clueless as he answered, even though Prey also well knew not to judge a book by its cover:

"Yeah. Yeah I could've sworn that was something from ancient history class?"

"'Ancient' history class?" Inky snarked.

"Fine, just history class then, same difference. If it's that old though then it's still ancient history and trivia you regurgitate for the history test and then immediately forget." Bravo returned.

Without even needing any prompting from Prey, Gloom pointedly cleared his throat and said, "Perhaps you might look the cliffs up in your own time then. Preferably before we leave tomorrow."

"Great idea. Inky, I'm delegating that to you." Nimbus Feather cheerily agreed.

"Wha-why me?" Inky exclaimed in good humoured protest.

"Because you caught the teacher's eye." Bravo grinned beside her.

She shoved him with her wing, and he shoved her back. Trail Blazer smoothly slid along the bench and out of range of the two of their scuffle, until his Sargent joined in and shoved him back the way he'd come without even looking.

"Right, so, great work you guys did there, research is always good. Anyway, did you have anything else to bring up before we split?" Nimbus asked to Gloom while his three subordinates scuffled, Trail Blazer's feathers getting even more ruffled, Inky caught in the middle, and Bravo decidedly winning.

'-what? This meeting's barely started and they want to end?-', Gloom thought, trying not to let this unprofessional display annoy him. Petty rule infractions really weren't the kind of thing Gloom cared about, but when he, Crimson, and Prey were all already tired after a full shift and yet they were the only only ones who seemed to be taking this preparation meeting as seriously as needed...

'By all the dead in the mud, I can see the future,' Prey thought, despairing of his former sentiment of not judging a book by its cover, and wanting to let his forehead hit the table-top, 'And it's a future filled with four gold plated idiots.'

Somehow, Nimbus Feather seemed to see past his own easy-going ego and spotted the annoyed expression on Gloom's face. He grinned placatingly, white teeth brilliant, "Don't worry, and hey, I get it. But seriously, don't sweat, we do actually know what we're doing. Whatever comes, we'll all deal with together. Me and the Border Rangers, we've done missions like this loads of times. When you get to be old hooves like us, you learn it’s better to trust in the strength of your friends' shoulder rather than to try to overprepare for something you'd never have seen coming anyways."

Crimson shot a look across Gloom's back over to Prey, who had turned to send his red furred friend a look at the exact same time. It was a mutually joint look of something like; 'They're preaching to the choir here. Do they not know even what's on the public record about us'?

Had Shining Armour neglected to inform these four of his Guards just who he was partnering them with? 'Did that arrogant unicorn

actually listen enough to trust something Nighthawk said about secrecy, rather than only trusting in his own self-informed opinion above all else? Is the world coming to an end?'

What should have been a good thing and a turn up for the books immediately made Prey suspicious.

Gloom finally found something to say back to Nimbus Feather as Inky, Trail, and Bravo settled back down, "We don't... doubt you all have experience. However, it's better to be overprepared rather than underprepared, and knowledge weighs nothing to pack."

But the ISND's concern did not convince the Border Patrol. You could understand why that was if you thought about it, but it was still infuriating. From their perspective, they weren't taking this lightly, but realistically. They had their own experiences to draw from, and while experience was experience, those experiences were still very different from the ISND's own. They thought they were being reasonable, just as the ISND thought they were being reasonable.

But being able to see and understand both sides really wasn't helpful though, in fact it just served to doubled Prey's annoyance. Because he knew what Nimbus Feather was going to reply with before the white pegasus even did:

"It's ponies that win the fight against crime, not paperwork. And personally, I'm glad it's that way around and not the other. See these?", Nimbus half-jokingly, but also half-seriously, flexed his muscles while grinning:

"It means I can rely on my own two wings to win, that I can stand up and fight for what's right. Know what I'm saying?"

It was obvious. Deep down, these four were all unquestioning believers in Harmony. That light which would always vanquish the darkness.

The ISND were not so naïve. They stood on this side, the table dividing their two groups and perspective. How were you supposed to reconcile those two outlooks? Believing in the best, or preparing

for the worst?

It 'clicked' in Gloom's head.

'-wait a moon blighted second, I don't have to resolve this! Once we get to Haven Hay, Nimbus and his team are going to be busy fixing the weather and helping the civilians, while we are going to be investigating. Nighthawk already said so. We're only working alongside them, not *with* them-'

It was pushing off a potential problem for later, but it was obvious to them all by now that the problem, (Nimbus and his team), weren't interested in being 'solved'. Meaning it wasn't Gloom's responsibility to do Nimbus' job for him and correct their budding mistake.

The realisation lifted Gloom's flagging spirits to no end. He pushed himself back from the table and nodded to Nimbus Feather; Prey and Crimson following his lead in rising.

'-if this becomes a problem in the future, *if*, we'll deal with it *then*, because you're not going to cooperate now-'

"It looks like everypony has had enough. Since this meeting has run to its natural conclusion and there's nothing more to share, me and my squad will take our leave. At the train station tomorrow at midday, wasn't it?"

"At twelve hundred sharp, yeah. Find us on platform four, it's got a nice little kiosk stand, you can't miss it. See you then, Sargent Gloom." Nimbus actually rose to give Gloom a quick salute, his three doppelgangers swiftly doing the same. Their way of proving they could also be professional when it counted, no doubt.

'A mask might look good, but it's still just a mask hiding the truth.' However, Prey was fine with it this time around if it got him out of here sooner. Since trying to make any plan with the input of these Border Rangers was hopeless, it meant that time would be better spent preparing by themselves instead.

As always, time was the most valuable thing in the whole world.

Except to the immortal Sun Wolf and her dark sister, of course.

Of course, all of them were still inside the otherwise empty mess hall not having eaten, and lunch was shortly about to start. A last exchange of words was a lot less dramatic when all the two groups really did was each split up to a new table, and then sit around in the quiet to wait for the lunch hour to officially start and for Cookie to open the serving hatch.

Awkward was one word to describe it. Well, Nimbus and his boisterous trio didn't seem to care at all, so more like one-sided awkwardness.

Nimbus Feather really was rather arrogant, but in a cheerful, non-aggressive kind of way. Still aggravating, but not downright out-and-out offensive.

"...So we're being thrown at one of Equestria's problems again to see if we stick." Prey finished recounting to Lemon Pink. He tiredly rubbed at the scarred flesh under his eyes.

"I see, Prey." Lemon stated, almost tonelessly.

She shifted her stance, making the boards of the walkway under her hooves faintly crunch over the gravel.

In the light of the crystal lanterns, the quartz flecks mixed into sea of gravel making up the lair's floor glittered like stray fish scales, dotted here and there in the ring of illumination, like little reflective stars glinting in the dark. It wasn't warm down here under the mountain. Caves were, by nature, either cold and wet, or cold and dry. Either or. Unless you went very deep. Prey had been going to add some heating runic arrays down here eventually, but it was still far down the list of arrays he meant to build.

Warmth was nice, but not necessary when a blanket could do the job just as well.

'But it's still yet another thing that will have to be put off and delayed because of my brand new 'quest'.' Prey thought derisively.

Moodily, he stuck his hoof into the paper bag he'd brought and fished around for one of the few remaining candies left.

He briefly glanced at the one he snagged, before dropping it onto his tongue. Minty sugar and light sweetness. Prey paused, then shifted the hard sweet to the other side of his mouth and offered the crinkled paper bag to Lemon, "W'unt u'ne?"

"No thank you, Prey. I have discovered I am not overly fond of sweets."

"Oh?" Prey tilted his head. Another divergence between them, or was it a new development? Either way, it was further proof of her slowly developing individuality.

After a moment, Lemon added almost haltingly, "I like savoury more. Or spicy. Hot foods."

"'Kay." Prey withdrew the proffered bag, idly peering inside to see how many were left. The bag had been full when he'd come down here. He was tired, having served a long day at the Palace as always, so the sugar was definitely helping. Not that he wouldn't have eaten the delicious little orbs of sugary goodness even if he wasn't tired.

He bit down on the minty candy, chewing, and looking around the expanse of his lair, "This isn't going to go like Alfalfa Dale with Hard Baked. It has no reason to."

Lemon slowly blinked, one ear cocked. Unspoken into the stillness of the cavern air was the wordless; '...Buuuuuut?'

Prey put down the nearly empty bag of candy and stood up, the walkway and gravel crunching. He turned in place, taking in his hard-won lair and the things he had in it. If only he could snatch Crimson had live down here in perfect safety. "...But expect the worst, and you'll be halfway prepared. Some insurance never hurt. And neither does backup. So be prepared to come along to Haven Hay at a moment’s notice."

Lemon nodded, wispy silver and yellow mane parting and

reforming for a moment with the motion, "Yes, Prey. I will clear my schedule."

"And our plans, those are also going on hold."

"All of them, Prey?"

"All the new and practically complete ones, yes."

"Yes, Prey. I understand."

Prey looked past the stump of quartz where the pincushion still sat, secrets still yet to be uncovered, and at the half-finished construct which had been the focus of his and Lemon's secretive research and careful work. Prey had no idea how close it was to being completed either. It wasn't the sort of progress you could measure and judge 'half way', or 'three-quarters done'. There was only 'unfinished', and then the much anticipated point where it was 'finished'. Like a seed, buried under the earth. You watered it, tended to it, and waited, but until a leaf appeared, you had no way to tell if the seed was even alive down there.

And now, because of Luna and the Night Guard again, it would have to wait.

Prey bared his teeth in an unhappy smile, 'But patience is what separates good hunters from dead ones. And I've already seen the dead one's failures. How can I not learn from their example?'

Prey finished double checking the contents of the first aid kit, zipping it up and returning it to the correct place in his backpack, and finally yanked the pull cords shut to buckle the clasp. There.

Prey heaved his pack off the table top and dropped back to floor level, testing its weight. A bit too heavy to be comfortable, but that's how you knew you had everything you needed all packed.

Satisfied, Prey rolled the pack back off and let it plop to the floor. It didn't rattle as it settled with a soft *thump*, so that meant it was all packed in place properly too.

He heard the sound of Gloom flipping open the lids of cardboard boxes on the other side of the room. Crimson was checking if a sharpening stone from the pile on a shelf was actually better than the one he already had back at his flat.

Prey ignored the déjà vu he was getting from being here in the dimly lit Night Guard supply room again, packing up a backpack with whatever he felt they might need for the coming mission. Because the last time they'd been in here, it had before they left for Mayflower and the nightmare which awaited them there.

Prey recalled Gloom having to guide Scenic and Lilly on what and how to pack, the two not having a clue on what you needed to survive in the wilderness.

Being here in the dry dusty storeroom, with groaning shelves and crates of bits and pieces, it felt really ominous, and yet also not, because that was silly. It *was* the same room, and they *were* doing the same thing again, but that *didn't* also make it suddenly ominous.

Prey sat down atop his new khaki backpack, and spent a long minute thinking back to all of that. To Mayflower and that night huddling in the dark especially, but also beyond that. It wasn't a happy memory. And since then, so many new and horrible things had occurred, each one terrible and unique in its own right. The thieves, Luna, Discord, and most recently of all, the changelings.

'Some higher power out there definitely has it in for me. And I bet its name is Harmony.' Prey thought with a passing flicker of morbid humour. These and similar heavy thoughts cycled through Prey's mind as he sat there, ruminating, while Gloom and Crimson methodically organised and packed their own flight saddlebags.

Crimson came near, aiming to return a ration pack he wasn't a hundred percent certain was sealed properly, and exchange it for another one from the shelf. Prey spoke what was on his mind without really thinking:

"The things we regret often aren't the worst things we've done. Not even close. At a certain point, it's just... more of the same. Another meter or another mile of black ice, it hardly matters anymore. It's

all about the scale, but also not, because that's an illusion. People think that obviously the biggest wrong you've ever done that is the worst. And it *is* the worst, objectively. But to you, it isn't. It's the ones which you truly, deeply, regret that really... ah, never mind. Sorry, I was feeling philosophically melancholy and it got away from me, I didn't mean to say all of that."

"It's fine. I understood." Crimson said, holding up a new ration pack to make sure it was absolutely sealed correctly. Then his eyebrows drew together under his helmet. He half turned his head, blinking at Prey from the corner of one amber eye.

"I was supposed to understand that, wasn't I? You weren't… trying to hint towards something else?" Crimson carefully asked, concern showing as he tensed and untensed his wing muscles.

Prey let out a big huff of air, rubbing at his face with a fetlock, "No, it wasn't anything cryptic like that. Just annoyance at myself, sorry. And anyway, it's not one of the outcomes I regret in the end."

Prey finished rubbing at tired eyes and sighed, 'I don't regret the changelings. They attacked me, they brought their fate on themselves. All of them. I didn't even have a say in the matter.'

Crimson slowly went back to making sure he had the correct ration packs. "There was a time like that," He addressed Prey without turning, no outward visible indication showing how close attention he was showing Prey. Not even his tufted ears sticking out of the helmet's slits swivelled in the lamb's direction.

"I mean, I was such a fool about it. I didn't stop and think in time, only after, and I regret it. But you already already know about that. I mean, most of it..."

Prey added Crimson's words to the repertoire of what he already knew, and pondered on it all for another long minute.

"This whole mission really is feeling very same-y same-y, and ominous, and we haven't even started it yet. I'm not liking it." Prey finally declared to the room at large.

Gloom called from across the room; "I can assure you Prey, you're not alone. It's firmly set into my head too and I can't shake it. I swear to Luna Prey, that if you sing that creepy foal's rhyme at any point on this trip, so help me but I'm going to give you toilet cleaning duty or something."

Sun brightly glinted off spires. Golden domed mage towers brilliantly caught every ray of light. The massive, pearly white structure of Cloudsdale floated on the skyline, something out of a fairy tale, the scale making distance deceive and the tiny figures of pegasi little more than colourful ladybugs.

Canterlot glittered and preened in all its daytime radiant glory.

Flowers in pots and hanging baskets were shooting up in the influx of light and warmth everywhere. Mowed lawns, roadside grass verges, tended trees and rose bushes. The time of fresh growth was well and truly here, so plants of every shape and kind did what they do best. They reached for the light.

And within the thousand and one different houses, in both Upper and Lower Canterlot, up and down streets, cobble paths, and brick roads, the ponies of Canterlot moved, breathed, and lived. It was an accumulation of more lives, talents, and stories than you could ever listen to in any lifetime.

So *many* individuals, so *many* stories. So *many* beginnings, so *many* as of yet unreached endings.

Crimson rose through the air, strong downward strokes gaining him height with each wingbeat, and wind shivered around the ends of each pinion as Crimson overpowered gravity. The endlessness of the open sky lay above him, the prize and also the goal.

Below on the second story balcony of the apartment block, Prey craned his neck back and shielded his eyes to watch for a minute. The blue of the midday sky radiating the sun was a bit too bright for his damaged eyesight, and he wasted time wishing again that he had wings of his own.

He stifled a huge yawn, and then went back inside to sleep in the safety of his flat, for tomorrow the three of them would be leaving.

Back inside, Prey did a last few things before sleep that needed doing. Just things, the stuff that was in everyone's life. Non-important stuff, emptying the small garbage can he owned. And... also some important stuff. Just some precautions, double checks. He took a brief trip into Crimson's flat. Then he returned to his own, climbed up onto the mattress Gloom had taken him to buy, supported by the bedframe he and Crimson had built, pulled the blanket over his head to block out the sun and closed his eyes.

Things. Stuff. Small actions that might have long term consequences... or none whatsoever. Either or. Life was like that, filled with a hundred day to day choices that made up a life, and only when you looked back did you realise had also made up you.

"Uh, soooo... yeah. Please be safe." Scenic mumbled, looking down at the concrete of platform. By this point, all the goodbyes had already been said. This here? Coming to see them off? It was simply extra.

"We will try." Gloom nodded, having to shade his eyes in the sunlight. Prey wordlessly shifted his pack higher on his back, and too gave Scenic a nod. Crimson gravely repeated Gloom's words:

"We will try."

The large station clock set into the arch of the ticket office building read five-to-twelve. The noise and chatter of ponies up and down the platform made up a constant background hum, but around the ISND in particular, they had a cleared bubble of space. Gloom and Crimson's Night Guard armour was good for that, besides also blocking arrows and the like.

Carton Juice had come with Scenic, partly because he was her coltfriend and that was what a good marefriend was supposed to do, but also because the ISND were her friends too. Or at least, from her perspective they were. Privately, Prey had heard her wondering

if perhaps Scenic was making a bit too much fuss over this farewell.

'-they'll go and do their job, and then they'll come back in a week at most and we can all have tea together-'

Carton honestly couldn't foresee anything going wrong, and she was a pony. She always expected the best to happen. However, *however...*

Deep down, she couldn't forget about the disaster Scenic had ended up falling into when he was sent out on a mission, and for that reason, she was secretly very happy he was now out of the Night Guard. Not that she had anything against the Night Guard, no sir'ee! It was just that, as proven, it could sometimes be a dangerous profession.

'-one day, when dear Paint Spot is ready, he'll finally tell me the details of what really happened. I'm not sure I'll like hearing it, but I will be there for him-'

The massive earth pony mare looked like she was physically having to restrain her own hooves from reaching out to try to give a farewell hug to each of the ISND for good luck, "Travel safe, and I hope your job goes well. Maybe you'll even have time to take a break on the beach?"

The well-meaning sentiment was real but already stale by now. The goodbyes had already all been said multiple times. Once again, this was just extra. But here on the platform, last minute before they left, with all these other ponies around avoiding getting too close, it really wasn't conducive to the true sentiment. All the meaningful farewells, those had already been exchanged before even making it to the train station.

Lily hadn't been able to make it, and neither had Saffron, but they too had said their real farewells before yesterday evening. They'd all taken the time to have a last proper conversation together.

Gloom in particular had made time to take Lilly aside and sit down to have a long conversation with the grossly deformed mare. She was still aiming towards re-joining the Guard, but Gloom'd had to

tell her bluntly, if gently, that she wasn't going to be able to serve in the ISND anymore if or when she re-joined. Lilly had already known that, even if it hadn't ever been specifically said to her. She'd still been hurt and disappointed, but had always known inside that it'd never been an option. It wasn't anyone's fault. That wasn't all Lilly and Gloom had talked about by any means, when Prey had listened in on them, but it was one of the topics.

"My goal hasn't changed," Had been her exact words, "I am still going to re-join the Guard, and I'm going to get there through my own merits. You don't have to worry about me sir,-I mean Gloom, I'm not going to try to rush and do something stupid before I'm ready. I've had to learn patience."

Saffron had sent a bouquet of flowers. That had been a bit of a surprise and shock, and not just to the unfortunate delivery pony. Because what were you supposed to do with a bunch of cut flowers?

They weren't even the edible kind, meaning they were purely for decoration. Plus, the three of them were about to get on a train and leave, meaning they weren't even supposed to put them in a vase to look at. If they'd been a pot of still-living flowers, then you could at least water them and hope they'd still be alive when you got back, or ask someone to water them for you. Similar to what Prey himself had done, making arrangements for his collection of pot plants of very specific herbs. Crimson's blood fern would also be similarly tended to.

But a bouquet of flowers. Just... why? This was a Night Guard mission, how were flowers appropriate? Hopefully this wasn't a funeral they were being sent to. Who even thought when they were told last minute that some of their acquaintances were leaving literally the very next day; 'Yes, I will send them some flowers'?

A famous model, apparently. It was probably just their 'go-to' response for good or bad news where they couldn't come to say farewell in person.

'Actually, I should remember that, sending flowers. Most ponies haven't a clue what a flower is beyond that it looks pretty. I bet I could send a bouquet of Beladonna, Oleander, and Angel’s

Trumpets, and the first thing they'd do is bury their dumb face and take a deep breath.'

Prey made a note to do something to thank Saffron for that idea when he got back from this. Saffron wasn't a friend, nothing of the sort, and of the few who merely counted as 'acquaintances', she was by far the least of them. But when he had been mutilated by chaos, paralysed, and trapped in a circle of mirrors, Prey could remember with forever frozen clarity what he'd felt and thought during those hours, fully expecting to die.

As it turned out, Saffron Swirl was someone who... he wouldn't *miss* per-se, but who he would at least turn aside to quietly spend a few minutes mourning for if she died. There weren't many Prey could say the same about. Which wasn't a mark of strength on his part, but rather a mark of callousness, he could and did admit that.

For example, for any and all strangers off the street, Prey wouldn't even pause in eating his meal if they suddenly dropped dead in front of him. Like with the changelings. A massive number, more black encased bodies than he could count. The vast underground tunnels were still clogged with their rotting corpses, and Prey slept fine every night. Or at least, as well as he'd ever slept to begin with. The changelings had brought their fate on themselves. He wasn't going to lose his appetite over them forcing his hoof.

And there were too many still out there whose death would actively sweeten Prey's metaphorical meal. More than zero was too many when it came to The List.

But with that sentiment in mind... Prey's ear twitched. Then twitched again. He tugged at the backpack’s straps, but there was no distracting himself, 'Do it. You're trying to be better than you are. It's not a high bar to clear.'

Prey turned to fully give Scenic his attention, having been keeping an eye on all the untrustworthy ponies around them at all times, *especially* the unicorns. "Goodbye Scenic. Make sure to look after Carton. You are... you *aren't* as helpless as you think. If you've got something good, grab onto it with both hooves and never let go."

Scenic could only blink at him, mouth moving as he tried to find the words while also trying to figure out if he was offended or comforted.

Prey wasn't interested in hearing whatever sappy words he came up with, and so didn't wait to hear them. He stepped closer so he could talk up to Carton Juice, "Down here. Yes, goodbye, and thank you. Take care of Scenic. If something huge and bad happens again, listen to his advice. He'll say the smart thing, which is to run away. You're not as strong as you think you are. So don't try to do something brave."

"Umm. Thank you? You be safe too?" Carton half asked in bafflement, blinking down at the much smaller lamb who only came up to her knee. Well, even Crimson only came up to the huge mare's chin, so it wasn't the most accurate of measurements.

Mentioning Crimson, he didn't make any moves to disagree with anything Prey had just, merely gravely adding for himself; "Yes. Take care of each other. We will see you on our return. Night watch over you."

'-well, that's... sweet of them to say. I think? I'll ask Scenic once we go, he knows more about their strange thestral clan culture. Well, Prey's not actually, and he's too young, but basically-', Carton broke off her thought to smile fondly at both Prey and Crimson.

"Thank you for saying so. Hopefully you won't have to be gone so long you that have to write, but if you are, then please do write. We would all like to hear you're doing well." She said.

"I'm definitely hoping it isn't that long." Gloom said drily.

Over the thronging crowd on the platform, Prey heard the unmistakable sound of large, feathered wing beats. He looked up and around sharply. A pegasus shouldn't really be flying here, even if it wasn't illegal to land and take off from the train station, but the wing beats were definitely coming this way-

Inky came to a flapping stop above them, hovering in place, "You guys need to come and get on the train. It's leaving in, like, two

minutes. Sargent Nimbus sent me over to make sure you hadn't forgotten." She chirped, upbeat.

She didn't seem to care about the downdraft she was blowing into all of their eyes, nor that she was flying with the sun almost directly behind her so that her golden Royal Guard armour shone blindingly. Or perhaps she was aware about that second part, which was *why* she was proudly doing it. Also, the respected and famous gold armour Inky wore was probably a factor in why she was getting away with flying in here, and so close to head height of everyone. Ponies on the busy platform were all looking, but they weren't looking with any disgruntled annoyance, only interest when they saw that it was a Royal Guard.

'So long as the colour of the armour is gold, not silver, then apparently all social blunders are excused.' Prey observed. It wasn't a new observation by any means.

"We haven't forgotten. We'll be there in one minute. The train leaves in two." Gloom answered Inky calmly. Looking over, you could see Nimbus, Bravo, and Trail Blazer all casually standing with bulging saddlebags, resplendent in their gold armour standing directly in the sun, and being admired by passing ponies.

"Um, hello officer." Carton said, suddenly as nervous as when she'd first met the ISND. Beside her, Scenic wore a tiny, considering frown as he squinted up at the hovering pegasus:

'-so you're one of the ponies going to be working with them. You'd better not be a screwup like I was, for your own good-'

That stray strand of mane which again had carelessly escaped Inky's helmet bobbed as she nodded politely to Scenic and Carton, "Good afternoon, Mrs, Sir. If we had time, I'd ask Sargent Gloom to introduce us. Another time, then."

Over by the kiosk, Nimbus Feather made an impatient gesture, urging them all to hurry over. And just like that, the time for farewells had passed, the train was letting out loud gouts of steam, and it was time for them to leave. Ready or not. The future was here. Not enough time to say goodbye in case this was somehow

something final, and too long for something they would be coming back from. A feeling caused by nothing but déjà vu and superstition of course, but that's why it was déjà vu and superstition.

The Border Patrol, then the train, and finally Haven Hay awaited them.

"Come on, we need to go." Gloom waved his wing to Scenic and Carton, stepping away. They waved back, Inky gained height and banked around, Prey rolled his shoulders into the tight backpack straps, and Crimson took a deep breath.

'My lair, my runic defences. I'm leaving their safety yet again-'

The first train whistle sounded. No time for that. Only time to go. He hurried along with Crimson's longer strides, the sun beating down on the platform, and their next unwanted mission ahead.

A minute later, the train engine and the carriages it pulled behind it chuffed out of the station. It was to be an overnight trip, with a four hour layover on the way for carriages to be added and removed, and the engine refuelled. But the train was on its way, and the course of its passengers were now committed. To choose a path to follow, you must also choose which path you would not.

'I chose to come back. This is one of the possibilities I knew could happen when I chose.'

---<O>---

The ISND and Border Ranger's train had left hours ago. The sun was slowly being lowered towards the horizon, casting the platforms of the Canterlot train station in a pleasant orange tint.

It was already past the wind-down phase of the stations' day. There were still ponies on the platforms, but only a small number compared to the busy crowds at midday, and these ponies were quieter. The day was about to be over, they'd worked hard, and were either looking forwards to getting home or resigning themselves to a long, overnight trip.

In the train yard, resting on their metal tracks which had finished

humming for the day, many an engine now sat quiet in its couplings waiting for the morrow. Not all of them, there were still some trains which ran overnight, but most of them were done for Celestia's day.

However, one of those that ran throughout the quiet hours of Luna's night was even now pulling out of the station and slowly picking up speed, heading south-east. Only one of the carriages being pulled behind the engine was devoted to paying passengers, the other five were cargo. One was lumber, one filled with empty barrels on their way to be filled, the third held mixed farm produce, and the last two were empty. And they *were* empty, because a pony now had to double check before departure. Doing so was a new and annoying regulation following that unexplained accident where what should've been an empty train car exploded halfway down Mount Canter. But these two were empty.

It still took longer for the train to get up to speed than the driver had been expecting. Either they hadn't stoked the engine up enough, or somepony had forgotten to account for one of the three cars which actually had cargo. And definitely not the other two empty cars. Besides which, those cars smelled bad, like mould and stagnant pondwater filled with algae and weeds.

This train rolled out and on into the falling night.

---I---

Prey had not forgotten what he had once learned.

Author's Notes:

The editor and corrector of this chapter was: Panem et Circenses Thankyou!

If I've missed anything though that anyone spots, please do let me know.

Also, **QUESTION** as a sort of Poll: It has been suggested to me that, possibly, for the sake of new

readers, it might be an idea to split Prey and a Lamb into three books/stories, as the total length deters people.

Now, I am not trying to 'grab' for readers/likes, also although the story can claim 1mil words, I am not too attached to that title/achievement merely for the sake of having it. But what do people think?

89.7 She Sells Sea Shells on the Sandy Shore

The railroads of Equestria were a steadily expanding industry. Quite literally.

More tracks out to previously isolated little towns were laid every year, providing access, connections, and jobs. Not even taking into account transportation of goods, and instead only evaluating these new train lines on its use for passengers, to them it was still useful as a mostly reliable, cheapish, steady, and usually accessible service.

For two-thirds of the pony population, it was also much faster than travelling by hoof. For pegasi, it averaged about the same speed as when flying. But a train could also go much further than a pegasus could, provided the tracks reached somewhere you wanted to go.

Personally, Prey had been experiencing the Equestrian railroad industry an awful lot of late. It made Prey remember the tantalising descriptions of flight Crimson had wistfully shared, because that was all he could share, and made him wish again for wings of his own. But sheep don't have wings, and he was a runt besides. If he'd had any, his wings would've probably been undeveloped too or something.

Flying would also have meant he didn't have to experience the questionable pleasure of the Border Rangers' company.

They'd boarded the train at midday in Canterlot, and had been on it ever since. This was going to be an overnight journey. There was to be a four hour layover in the middle of the night at a station along the way, and various other train stops, but they would not be leaving the carriage until tomorrow morning when the train pulled into the port town of Haven Hay.

Not counting sleep, that still left a good nine to ten hours within their carriage apartment stuck in close proximity with the four self-

proclaimed 'Border Rangers'.

The Border Rangers were loud. All of them. Easy going, laid-back, boisterous, boastful, but definitely also loud. Their inconsiderate volume annoyed Prey with his sharper hearing to no end.

Gloom had broken out a map of Haven Hay and its surroundings, and tried to discuss the coming mission. Which, admittedly, had worked for the first hour. The ISND had gone over what they knew again, which wasn't much, and the Border Rangers had used the map to make some predictions about where and how the wild storms which were damaging Haven Hay were forming.

"With the coast right there though, most of this goes out the window. Nopony to maintain any weather control out at sea, see?" Nimbus Feather had shrugged, then laughed at his own pun.

But that hadn't lasted long, there'd only been so many times they could rehash the same old information they had without going round in circles. That, and the four Royal Guards hadn't been all that interested in even trying.

"We'll see what we see when we get there. Nothing else for it but to wait and see, see? See what I did there again?" Nimbus further joked, repeating the same uninspired pun yet again, getting outrageous groans from his three subordinates. And stares from each of the ISND.

That had still left eight plus hours to be filled. Gloom, Prey, and Crimson could have passed that in shared silence, with just the clack of the train tracks and rocking of the carriage, each to their own thoughts. Perhaps a quiet conversation or two, but they each knew the others well.

Nimbus, Inky, Bravo, and Trail Blazer didn't seem physically capable of sitting and doing nothing in silence.

Trail Blazer had pulled out a deck of well-worn cards within five minutes of their attempted planning session coming to an end, and

with a sly grin, challenged, "Who wants to lose? Come on, step right up, first round's bet-free."

The Border Rangers had seen nothing wrong with that, not seeing this time as "on duty", and more as "travelling *to* duty", and so were happy to indulge in a little game of betting.

The ISND had, of course, declined to join. Their reasoning had very little to do with upholding the rules, but that still got good natured jeers from the Royal Guards.

"Not afraid to lose, are you?"

"C'mon, join us, join us!"

Gloom was secretly tempted to tell Prey to play, as he was somehow sure the lamb could clean the four pegasi out, even if he had no basis for his assumption beyond simply knowing Prey as well as he did.

'-he can get into anypony's head given enough time-', Gloom had thought, ironically not knowing how accurate that was.

Nevertheless- Inky, Bravo, and Nimbus all joined in on Trail Blazer's game. The betting pool ended up only being a dozen bits in the end, on account of how often everyone kept winning and then losing, meaning the pot never actually ended up growing any bigger. Which was probably the point. They were obviously mostly playing to pass the hours.

Gloom, Crimson, and Prey sat there across the carriage apartment, forced into listening to the almost ceaseless banter and bad jokes. Crimson tried to quietly meditate, but was forced to give up after only fifteen minutes of trying. It was hopeless.

"What'cha got there?" Inky drawled, sprawled backwards over the seat, helmetless head dangling upside down over the seat's lip. She had her wings partly open bracing herself like that, and was seemingly immune to the discomfort of doing so while still in armour.

'The weapon of choice I'm going to use to slit your throat tonight with, runically enhanced to part your flesh like water.' Prey thought.

What he said was; "A pocketknife." Not bothering to try and pointlessly hide it.

"What'cha doing with it?"

Prey made a show of slowly and carefully folding the single bladed pocketknife, like he wasn't completely confident in what he was doing, before slipping it back into an outside pocket of his backpack. Then he answered; "Seeing if it was sharp."

"Where'd cha' get it from?" Was Inky's next drawled demand, that bouncy strand of mane dangling straight down from almost the middle of her forehead.

"The Guard storeroom."

"What, Bitter Carrot will give you a knife if you just ask?"

"The *Night* Guard storeroom."

Inky frowned upside down, perhaps not realising that even like that everyone could still clearly read her expression. She was recalling the conversation where Nimbus had returned from double checking with the Captain that, yes, Prey really was somehow part of the Night Guard.

Inky didn't agree with that since Prey was underage, and doubly didn't agree because it was the Night Guard he was in. If it had been the Royal Guard instead, she still wouldn't have been happy, but at least somewhat happier.

"So, like, why'd cha' join the Night Guard?"

Prey only answered the question she'd asked, not the one she'd implied, and made it the barest of answers too; "Because Princess Luna said so."

The upside-down frown grew, "But like, why? Don't cha' have

school at the very least? Why'd your mom and dad agree?"

Prey smiled sweetly and just repeated, "Because Princess Luna said so."

The train continued on, methodically chugging through Equestria. Fields, country roads, small towns and hamlets, trees, and countryside passed outside the window. The hours aboard the train however seemed to pass much slower than the pleasant scenery outside.

At the point where the four Border Rangers started chorusing a sing-song within the confines of the small apartment, Prey had to step out and take break. He left the sounds of; "~And we fly Oooh-oooh doooown!", behind him as the sliding door shut and cut off the racket.

He took a long walk up and down the swaying carriages, checking the windows and exits, and then did it again just to kill some more time. For a little while, the muted *Clack-clack, Clack-clack* of the wheels on the tracks was the only disturbance he had to listen to.

When he reluctantly returned and re-entered their compartment, Prey found that somehow, Trail Blazer had managed to draw Crimson into conversation. Maybe the scruffily groomed pegasus was just too annoying for Crimson to ignore?

"...No, that is not what happened. That isn't even close to what happened. Where did you even hear that?" Crimson was in the middle of flatly denying something. Prey saw Gloom bearing witness to whatever this conversation was, and was sent a longsuffering look as he stepped back in.

Trail Blazer shrugged his scruffily-kept wings, "Well, you didn't have any old Royal Guard records, I know, we looked, so duh, of course you could have been a spy."

"You looked at our records?" Crimson asked just as flatly.

"Of course we did," Trail Blazer answered, not repentant or

embarrassed in the slightest, "Not that it helped. Obviously. So tell me, what's the big secret?"

Bravo leaned in too, sharing his scruffy colleague's curiosity, "I already lost the bet on you being an intelligence operative, but I've still got an open bingo slot on a spy agency."

"We *are* intelligence. ISND. It stands for Intelligence and Secrecy Night Guard Division."

"Yeah, but you're not a *spy* spy. It's not the same at all." Trail Blazer grinned.

Prey was tempted to just turn around and go for another ten minute walk up and down the train. The gold-clad pegasi were obviously being purposefully obtuse, and were going to continue being annoying, he could just tell. Off to the side, Inky was eating a sandwich, and talking with her mouth full to Nimbus about something unimportant.

Crimson continued to give Bravo and Trail Blazer that flat, impassive look, not even the very tips of his tufted ears twitching to give anything away. "I come from clan Myrrdon. If you do not know who they are, then you should have been looking at different records. And I've never been part of the Royal Guard, so you were doubly looking in the wrong place."

Bracing himself for irritation, Prey slipped back in and quietly retook his seat beside his backpack on the bench, using the bag as an impromptu barrier as he settled into the corner. He sent a quick nod to Crimson, just to show he was listening in, and that if Crimson really needed a break then he could create a distraction.

"Ponyfeathers, that's me out of the bingo running then." Trail Blazer muttered, while Bravo's eyebrowless brow furrowed in thought.

"Meredon? Hmm, Meredon, oh, I remember now. That's one of those new thestral clans, ain't it?"

"Myrrdon." Crimson corrected evenly. "And new? No."

"New to Equestria, same thing." Bravo shrugged his broad

shoulders.

Utterly untrue. The thestral clans were older than Canterlot was. It was simply that ponykind had been ignorant of the clans until this year.

Crimson visibly decided it wasn't worth the effort to correct the other annoying pegasus' misconception, although you'd have had to have been Prey to read the tiny tic in Crimson's expression which said that.

"So does your clan have its own mini-Cloudsdale? Did you fly it around for years while staying really high up, and that's how you stopped anypony from noticing you for all those years?" Bravo asked. The question sounded incredibly moronic, however it wasn't actually as dumb as it sounded. Only mostly.

The sky was a vast and empty place, and it was everywhere, although usually, it wasn't any good for hiding. The sky was vast, but it was also clear. There's nowhere to hide from any eyes on the ground which were turned upwards. Much like the open ocean, there's nowhere to run out there. But with the cloudwalking abilities of pegasi, it changed the equation somewhat.

You look up and see a cloudbank rolling in. You see it, but you don't understand how gigantic it truly is. The cloud covers half the sky, a towering white fog miles high, and maybe hundreds of miles wide. And the higher the cloud is, the harder it would be to spot any distant specks living on it, especially if they only came out at night. Like the eagle and a sparrow. Because of the distance, both look the same size when viewed from the perspective of someone on the ground.

However, Bravo's question fell apart if you took more than two seconds to consider it. First, because of how controlling Equestria was about its weather. Any enormous cloud which drifted willy-nilly wherever it wanted? No way they wouldn't investigate that and discover the ruse immediately. While it might take a pegasus an hour to fly up that high to check, they would still check.

Second, was the timescale which Bravo was dismissing here. A

thousand years hiding up in the open sky? Someone over the many, many years would've spotted a thestral. Even if they only came out at night, stayed high, and were cautious, somewhere along the line someone would've slipped up and then the jig would've been up.

Thirdly, and most obviously, were the same logistics problems Cloudsdale itself ran into, but without all the benefits of having ground-based Equestrian support in the form of their pony brethren, earth ponies and unicorns. You couldn't farm on a cloud. Without either magic or lightning-forged cloud steel, you couldn't store even a single pebble on a cloud. Food, water, medicine, blankets, winter clothing, weapons, all of these and more would simply fall through the insubstantial material of condensed water vapour. That was why Bravo, as a pegasus, really should have known how poor of a question it was.

Crimson just looked at Bravo and stated simply, "No."

"Bugger, so that theory's a flop. No worries, that just narrows it down some more! How about a partnership with unicorns for magic-?"

"No." Crimson stated more firmly.

Trail Blazer tried to chime in with a ridiculous suggestion of his own that had been floating around the Guard mess hall; "Does it have anything to do with the Dragon Lands-?"

"No."

"Say, Griffonia has recently shut the border-?"

"*No*."

Trail Blazer was finding this all quite comedic to his sense of fun. "So, hypothetically, say if your clan or whatever was to-"

"No," It was Gloom who finally stepped in, looking up from sorting through one of his open saddlebags, "And please cut that out, it’s insulting. How would you feel if we were to repeat such obviously outlandish stories about Canterlot? All of them are completely fake, anyways."

Bravo and Trail Blazer both laughed, took it as a joke, and let the matter drop to move onto other things. Their probing had been without rancour, but that was not an excuse for poor manners.

"Hey, is that one of those fire message bottles in there?" Nimbus Feather suddenly cut in, half unfurling one large wing to point before deciding against it in the enclosed space and simply using his hoof instead.

Everyone's attention automatically shifted to see what the Staff Sargent was pointing at, which was the glow coming from inside the open flap of Gloom's saddlebags. Visible inside was the upper portion of a green glass bottle, a slowly curling flame floating inside being the glow's source.

"The term is message-in-a-bottle, and yes." Gloom answered. He almost flipped the saddlebag shut, but hesitated, not wanting to give the impression he had anything to hide, and so instead just turned the bag around to more clearly display the corked glass bottle snugly packed inside.

Nimbus let out a low whistle, "Your Captain let you bring one of those? That's cool, of course, but I wouldn't want to have to explain having to use one of them when I got back. Those things cost a fortune."

Inky cocked her ear and looked blank. Trail Blazer raised his hoof, "Uuuhh...?"

"Oh right, that there's a message bottle, and it can send any letter one time from anywhere, instantly. So, for really expensive emergencies only." Nimbus explained to Trail Blazer.

"Message-in-a-bottle," Gloom patiently corrected again, closing the flap now that everyone'd had a chance to look, "And yes, it's for emergency communication. Hopefully, it won't be needed at any point during this mission."

"How much is 'a fortune'?" Bravo asked in interest.

"Uhhh..." Nimbus looked to Gloom.

"They cost..." Gloom trailed off, couldn't quite recall, so looked over to Prey instead, "How much does one cost?"

Prey had been hoping to continue being ignored for however long he could, but he answered anyways, "To the Night Guard specifically, each has a budget value of one thousand and fifty bits. On the public market, one would probably go for at least two thousand or upwards."

"You just have that kind of stuff floating around in your head?" Trail Blazer asked Prey in surprise, "Are you one of those ponies who *likes* math?"

'-yikes, who actually wastes time memorising random trivia like that?-'

Prey pretended not to hear, or at least take it as a rhetorical question.

"Better not break the bottle then." Inky observed brightly.

'-not likely, it's enchanted-', Gloom thought, but didn't comment. He, much like Prey, was just going to treat it like a rhetorical statement and hope to let the conversation die.

Neither did he share the information that he had a second message-in-a-bottle in his other saddlebag. Or that Prey and Crimson each carried spares too. Gloom would have insisted on it, if Nighthawk hadn't already beaten him to it. There had been no chance of them risking going out anywhere without one, not with their experience of the unpredictable. But that information wasn't relevant to the Border Rangers in any way.

It wasn't the only emergency, worst case scenario supply Gloom, Crimson, and Prey had packed either.

In those grim moments of flashing memory- remembering the salt cellar, the lumberyard, Mayflower, and Griffonstone, each of them had quietly and individually packed something more. They hadn't talked about it, but that only meant there had been nothing to discuss.

Hope for the best, expect the worst, and you'll be halfway prepared.

Crimson had packed the dagger Prey had given him as an extra, and Gloom had too. In the rack overhead, the halves of the snap-together short spear Gloom had brought lay. And Crimson never went anywhere without his father's wingblades.

And in Prey's pack, bundled at the very bottom, carefully wrapped and hidden, sat a prepared bone rot mine. And courtesy of Prey, there was a second one in the bottom of Crimson's saddlebags too.

Crimson and Gloom might never have actually learnt the name of bone rot mines, but in the aftermath of Mayflower and their recovery in Canterlot hospital, both were certainly well aware of the utterly illegal and lethal nature of Prey's creation.

Prey had approached each of them separately, and had asked, hypothetically, if they wouldn't mind carrying something about this size, about this shape, something acidic in nature, and a certain poisonous viscous green in colour.

Bone rot mines were damned heavy things, especially to haul around all day long, and he was a runt.

Prey hasn't said the exact words, he hadn't needed to. He'd looked up at them and they'd looked back, and each had known the other knew exactly what he was talking about.

But he hadn't said it outright, pretending it was hypothetical, and leaving them each a flimsy excuse to protest; "I didn't know" afterwards if they wanted to.

Gloom had thought about it, he really had, but had answered no. He would not carry one of them for Prey.

Prey had accepted that, and thanked him for answering his hypothetical question.

Crimson had said yes after a long minute of hard thought, and Prey had accepted that too.

Fear mixed with bitter experience can make for a great motivator in

keeping a secret.

Prey was really, really, *really* hoping that it could stay a secret throughout this whole mission and not be needed too. The best contingency plans are ones you never had to test.

Prey turned the historical pamphlet's last leaf, and considered what he'd just read.

The Cliffs of Dove. A mysterious, twenty mile long rift cutting through the land, from coast to coast, and breaking off a chunk of Equestria to form an island. Or an isle, more accurately. Very inventively, it was named the Isle of Dove, although it was the Cliffs of Dove that were most famous.

The famous, magic-negating Cliffs of Dove.

Unicorn spells could not cross the rocky chasm of the rift. Spell matrixes just unravelled or exploded. Every element of spell had been tried, along with every school of magic across the many decades. Even the famously unreliable school of scrying spells had been attempted to see what lay on the island. But it wasn't to unicorns that it was so tragically famous.

It was rather the pegasi who'd tried to fly across the empty chasm.

No matter how high they flew, all had lost their innate magic and plummeted to their deaths. It was like an invisible shield rose straight out of the sea on all sides up to touch the sky. An airship crossing had been attempted once, and the whole thing had fallen apart halfway across before it could be turned around. Literally, fallen apart.

The Cliffs of Dove were a modern, unsolved mystery.

Unsurprisingly because of all this, no pony lived on the Isle of Dove. If any had ever even set hoof on it, they'd never returned to claim their feat. All recorded attempts to cross the rift and climb the Cliffs of Dove had ended in failure and or death.

Sea mists and fog hung over the bulk of the Isle of Dove all year round, although not always over the famous cliffs. Telescope and eye had never seen more than a mile or two inland, and there were all kinds of wild theories about a lush bountiful oasis, or an abandoned city of gold resting at the heart of the Isle of Dove. Trees, foliage, small animal life had been glimpsed, but that was all. As to what awaited in the very middle... wild and fantastical stories abounded.

Sailing out and around to land on the Isle of Dove wasn't an option either, and had brought about an equal measure of fatal failure, because the Cliffs of Dove was actually a title referring to *all* of the cliffs surrounding the Isle of Dove. All of them, three hundred and sixty degrees around the isle were just as cursed.

Besides, there were no beaches or bays to land at anyways. Sheer cliffs, hundreds of meters high, blocked all approaches from the sea, which would have been dissuading enough even with the null magical effect radiating off the cliffs from the sea side just as it did from the land approach. Stronger, even.

As such, ponies had given up even trying. In fact, it was now illegal to make the attempt, because of the incredibly high fatality rate. Tourists could come to view the cliffs in summer, but there was a fenced barrier set well back.

"Wow. That's some really boring bedtime literature. Especially for a foal." Inky commented. Outside of the closed blind on the train window, the twilight of dusk was deepening.

Prey didn't remember asking for the mare's uninformed opinion on the matter.

'Tear out her tongue, yez'?' Garrow's remnant jumped in to hiss out of nowhere.

'Shut up and stay dead where you belong! I didn't ask for your opinion either.' Prey mentally grabbed the irritating remnant and crushed it into a ball, shoving it back down.

Prey only had to concentrate inwards for a few seconds, but by the

time he next blinked, Bravo had already snatched up the conversation and run off with it; "I really want to see what's on the Isle of Dove now. It'd be a huge let down if it's just empty land with no treasure chests."

"You're not to try flying over the Cliffs of Dove, that's an order." Nimbus Feather swiftly cut in, voice serious. "At least, not until I've checked for any conveniently placed treasure first. Finders keepers, losers weepers."

"You aren't being serious, right?" Gloom checked.

"Of course not. Besides, if anypony here is going to be the first pony in history to set hoof on the Isle of Dove, it'll definitely be Trail Blazer. His special talent is all about finding the paths no one else can." Nimbus boasted, and Trail Blazer grinned.

'-so is mine, more or less, but you don't see me boasting about it-', Gloom thought.

An idea occurred to Trail Blazer, and he felt the need to be smart and share it to support the praise he'd just been given, '-this sort'a reminds me of that big bucking plateau situation in the bad lands-'

"I'm willing to bet ten bits that this feral weather that's damaging Haven Hay is blowing in from over the Isle, but nopony can get to it to disperse it before it turns into a storm. I can totally see that being the case." Trail Blazer suggested confidently.

"Naw, they've got the weather tower just outside their town, remember? And it's built between these weird anti-magic cliff thingies, and Haven Hay. They should totally be able to deal with naturally forming storms if that were the case." Inky disagreed.

"Key word there being 'naturally'." Trail Blazer smugly returned.

"I'll take that bet." Bravo interjected, "And I'll also bet you a further ten bits that it's actually because the weather tower ponies aren't doing their job properly."

The three Royal Guards swiftly devolved into a back and forth betting match mainly focused around disproving the other two’s

ideas, while having not a shred of evidence to base their theories off in the first place. If anything, that only encouraged them to be even wilder with their crazy predictions.

While that was going on, Nimbus Feather leaned across the aisle while his three subordinates were distracted to asked Gloom; "Hey, I've been meaning to ask, what's up with those scars under your eyes that ya' all have?"

Gloom could scarcely believe his ears. Had Nimbus really just asked that? Wasn't he supposed to be an experienced Guard and know better? That was against the unwritten rules to ask.

Unlike Gloom, Prey had no trouble believing his own ears. He also knew *exactly* what Nimbus was thinking, presumptuously asking that:

'-either really unlucky or really careless to all get injured in the exact same way. Better make sure it's the first-'

Gloom shot disbelieving looks to Crimson and Prey both, and then back to Nimbus Feather. For daring to ask so rudely, it was now doubly so none of Nimbus's damned business. Gloom took a certain amount of satisfaction in being able to use the excuse, "That relates to a classified mission. Sorry."

'You tell him.' Prey thought. Especially since it meant Prey didn't have to tell him. It was going to be a long night of trying to sleep, he could feel it.

clack-clack, clack-clack Went the train wheels in agreement in the falling night outside.

Prey did not get anywhere near as much rest as he wanted that night. And it wasn't just because Inky and Bravo snored. Although they definitely did. Nor was it because of the train clack-clacking on the tracks. Or the constant rocking of the carriage. The train compartment lights had all been dimmed, so it wasn't that either.

No, it was because Prey did not sleep in an unsecured area with

people he did not trust. He couldn't. The four slumbering shapes of the Border Rangers had passed out near immediately without a second thought. Prey could not, and would not, do that.

The presence of Crimson helped, someone he trusted, and someone who was lying between his dark corner and the other four pegasi. Gloom also helped, he counted as a protective barrier too. Plus Prey had his ribbon, a knife which had enough runic charge to part metal like paper next to his hoof, and the ability to mind-kill at a touch.

It was still not enough for him to truly rest, but only drift in and out of fitful sleep in the dark of the carriage, waking in sudden fits and starts.

'I swear... if I wake up with cramps in front of everyone... I'll kill you Stinger.' Prey drifted off into uneasy sleep yet again. '...and hate you too... Luna...'

It wasn't the magnitude of his most dire sins which usually kept Prey up at night, only the acts he actually regretted. And as he'd so firmly told himself, that list did not include the changelings.

Although on this night, it wasn't guilt but rather paranoia that disturbed his rest instead. Over the decades, simple paranoia had added its fair share of the trophies to the long shelves of sleepless nights. And that was what Prey's half-asleep, half-awake mind decided to abstractly dream about tonight. Because his mind apparently hated him.

The train pulled to a slow stop with a drawn-out metal squealing of brakes.

It was early morning. The sun had just finished clearing the distant horizon.

The Border Rangers were first down off the train’s step, saddlebags and golden armour securely attached, and eager to stretch their wings. The ISND had to wait their turn and exited last, shouldering

their own bags and blinking.

For that first moment in Haven Hay, it wasn't with his eyes that Prey experienced the moment, but with his other senses first.

It was the smell of the restless air that came first. Salt, and ocean.

Prey had never scented the sea before, but Snake had in his single crossing from the savannah of Zebrica. It was different, not exactly fresh, but definitely not foul either. Seaweed drying on a distant beach, salt, and sea, swirling in the near constant breeze.

Then it was the sounds reaching his sharp ears. A faint, far off, but constant rhythmic hissing *_ssssshh_ooff* of waves over sand. And every few seconds without fail, from either close or far, the strident wail of gulls.

Prey heard Crimson shifting his wings from behind him, feeling out the air, because the air was different. He could almost feel a tiny weight tugging on the tips of his fur and wool. The salt in the overcast air.

The sounds of Haven Hay filtered in over the noise of the train. Pony voices, hooves on stone, doors closing, a barrel lid being hammered shut, a foal, and general town life. This too was always interspersed with the omnipresent cawing of gulls.

'And I bet their droppings are everywhere, too.'

"Finally here." Gloom groaned with relief, rolling his neck around, "Sargent Nimbus Feather, you said somepony was going to be meeting us here. Who are we to expect?"

Last was actual sight as Prey turned about to fully take in his surroundings, looking for anyone obviously waiting for them, and also beyond at the port town of Haven Hay.

It was... well, it was a town, much like any other. Like any other *pony* town, anyway. You could compare it to another, and rather than define Haven Hay by all the similarities, perhaps instead spot the differences.

All the roofs were tiled here, no thatch anywhere in sight. Thatch would just moulder and rot in the damp sea air and rain.

Large storm drains and channels ran on both sides of every street, the bricks and cobbles slick.

Prey looked around, while also testing the surface of the platform under his hoof. Wherever his eyes fell, it looked like everything was either wet or damp, used to being subjected to weather and rain.

He noted few, if any, flowerpots on windowsills, and certainly no vegetable gardens. Copious quantities of seashell decorations seemed to be the replacement for the greenery, however.

The whole town of Haven Hay was built on a sloping hill on the coast, all streets leading down to or up from the harbour, depending on how you looked at it. From up here though, the train station was at the very top of Haven Hay, and Prey could look out on the bay, its choppy waters an unfriendly grey.

The shapes of the dry docks, with wooden skeletons and large crane contraptions, could be seen dominating one half of the harbour, the other half jammed haphazardly with a small maze of wooden jetties, moored boats creating a small, spindly forest of bare masts.

Prey squinted, his eyesight not great, but he could see enough to tell what he was looking at. He saw a blocky lighthouse, like three huge cubes stacked atop the next, banded red and white, rising tall and solid.

The lighthouse was the very last structure, planted right on the end of one of the two encircling arms of the harbour's walls, which protected the boats sheltering inside the bay within. Last of all, he looked at the overcast sea beyond the bay.

Outside of the bay, the sea looked angry. White froth-tipped sheets surged and fell, the water dark, murky, and cold looking. The sea didn't stretch out to the horizon as far as he could see, but that was only because of the reduced visibility. Out to sea beneath grey clouds, an equally grey fog of rain hid the distance. Squalls, Prey believed the term was.

Looking at the choppy water inside the harbour's mouth, and then out to the much more turbulent sea constantly shifting beyond it, Prey felt disturbed. There could be anything beneath those murky waves, and nature was ever merciless.

Prey had seen before a raging river sweeping away all in its path, violent and unstoppable. The sea was that, but infinitely more vast in reach. Out there, *everywhere* was the sea's path.

"I've decided I don't like the sea." Prey muttered to Crimson beside him.

"But we've only just arrived."

"My statement still stands."

"Wow, just look at that view. Isn't it magnificent?" Bravo declared loudly to Inky and Trail Blazer, staring out over the town and the bay.

Bravo Call liked to live up to his name. That is, brashly loud at all times. Prey was intensely glad to finally be off the train and out of the confined space with the bulky stallion.

Nimbus Feather pointed suddenly, "There! That's our pony."

A sooty coloured earth pony wearing a beaten looking raincoat was approaching them. The approaching stallion faltered somewhat when Gloom and Crimson also turned to regard him, and changed his course slightly so as to approach Nimbus and the Royal Guards, not them.

Which was futile, as Gloom and Crimson immediately stepped up so as to also meet their sooty-coloured welcomer.

"Staff Sargent Nimbus Feather, of Her Majesty's Royal Guard," Nimbus confidently introduced himself, smile very white, "And this is my squad, they're the best at what they do. And who do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"The ah, the pleasure is all mine. My ah, name is Jetson Float, Sargent. You ah, you are all Royal Guards...?" Jetson's eyes and ears

flicked not-so furtively towards Gloom and Crimson in their darker armour.

"Sargent Gloom, Princess Luna's Night Guard." Gloom more reservedly introduced himself.

'-I don't like, I do not like-', Jetson's thoughts rather damningly read as he avoided all eye contact with Gloom.

"The pleasure's all mine. I'm ah, sorry the sheriff was not able to meet you here in pony this morning. He sends his apologies, and hopes to ah, meet you later today instead. He had to go out to deal with-but ah, I'm sure sheriff Lumber can explain to you the details much better than I could."

"Oh ho? Trouble is it?" Nimbus asked, coming across both as friendly while yet forceful in his question.

"Just ah, just a local dispute that's been ongoing for far too long. Bad blood, and all that. Been a right nuisance."

'-everypony in the office is sick and tired of their antics by now-', Jetson thought, which Prey took note of.

"Well let's not stand around dilly-dallying then. You're here to be our guide, right?" Nimbus asked.

"I ah, I can be, however-"

"Splendid, let's get going then. Celestia's good sun is a-wasting. Although I'm not seeing much sun down here." Nimbus grinned, looking up at the grey, heavy looking sky, "But I can assure you, that no matter where or what, the sun is always shining above the clouds."

'Smooth. Indirectly demean everyone here born without wings, very smooth.' Prey bit back a snort. Not that it would've been heard, as a gull somewhere very nearby started up a wailing caw. Jetson didn't even seem to hear it, completely tuning the bird out:

"That's ah, a positive outlook to have on life. Where would you like me to show you around first, Sargent ah, Nimbus Feather? And you

too sir." He hastily added to Gloom and the ISND.

'-wait wait, is that a-? By golly, what's a lamb doing with them?-'

'One minute and forty seconds to notice me. Not too awful by the standards of the average pony I have the misfortune of meeting.' Prey idly thought, smiling vacantly back up at the sooty stallion.

Nimbus Feather didn't give Jetson long enough to begin forming a question. He and his three ponies were impatient to get stuck in.

"Right then, I think you'd better show us all this property damage everypony was getting so worked up about, hadn't you?" Nimbus asked/ordered, while behind him Bravo, Inky, and Trail Blazer were practically wagging their tails. For all their other failings, you couldn't accuse the Border Rangers of not being keen.

Jetson nodded, and then perked up and nodded more enthusiastically, "Ah, I can do that, and one better too. Please, if you'd all care to ah, just follow me? We can go see directly."

Nimbus and his Border Rangers didn't even stop to consider, or glance back, just assumed the ISND would be right behind them as they marched off.

And after a moment, but not without smothered annoyance, the three of them did, because they'd literally just pulled into the station, and didn't have any leads to start investigating yet. They left the cover of train station behind them, and descended the sloping streets of Haven Hay towards the bay.

It wasn't a long trot. Fifteen minutes to get to the bottom of Haven Hay, and then another fifteen minutes weaving around the harbour and docks to their destination. But in that short time, Prey still learnt a lot about the port town and life living there.

Seagulls were everywhere, and utterly unavoidable. They perched on every roof, squabbled over scraps or sometimes just nothing, and made a constant wailing racket. And a mess. Prey had been spot on in his prediction of bird droppings everywhere.

He also saw how any exposed metal, which hadn't been religiously painted over to preserve it, was stained with orange and brown rust without exception.

Another point was the constant rain and wet. Ten minutes in, those grey sheets of squall rain he'd seen obscuring the open sea from the top of the hill arrived at Haven Hay and blew over the town. It was a soft, cold, dripping kind of rain. Jetson didn't even slow, smoothly flipping up the hood of his raincoat and leading on.

And sure enough, ten minutes later, the squall had passed, leaving a slick layer of wet over everything, but otherwise not disrupting town life in the least.

Prey, Gloom and Crimson hadn't flinched from the cold rain as it plinked off their armour, or in Prey's case, pattered onto his wool. Their bags were waterproof, and they'd be fine. The temperatures weren't freezing, nor was it torrential, so there was no need to be concerned over a little rain. Droplets ran unheeded in small rivulets down Crimson's and Gloom's helmets, and dripped off the points of their crescent cheek guards.

And Nimbus and the Border Rangers didn't make any fuss either. They marched into the squall and paid it no heed, despite getting their fur and feathers just as wet as the ISND. But of course, the Border Rangers actually had some experience with 'roughing it'.

In its wake though, the squall left the weather just as grey and overcast as before. Evidently, a simple shower wasn't the property-damage-dealing storms they'd in part been sent out here to investigate. This was just rain, and from the looks of everyone getting on with their lives and work, they were completely used to this level of weather. Prey bet they could receive ten or even twenty such passing squalls in a day.

What Prey *also* saw, were the signs of damage. No destroyed houses and piles of rubble, but lots of low key, widespread damage instead. Broken windows boarded up where shutters had been blown open with such force that they'd broken free. Gutters snapped and dangling free, trickling water. Missing tiles and bits of roofs visibly sagging in places. Bricks missing from the tops of garden walls and

drains in the street sitting crooked where they'd been half lifted off by overflow.

'That's the property damage they were talking about.' Prey thought, making careful mental notes.

As they reached the bottom of the hill and set hoof onto the first thick and weathered planks of the docks, the smell of salt and sea spray in the air grew much stronger.

A scattering of ponies wearing battered raincoats were working in the area around the docks. Either carrying flat crates, rolling heavy barrels, or hauling on sodden lines, while around and behind them, the smaller moored sailing boats were, none two the exact same, bobbing and sloshing. The closest few workers turned to call greetings to Jetson, and did double takes on seeing the golden Royal Guards following, and then triple takes on spotting the ISND.

"What's going on?" One of the braver ponies called, a peaked hat protecting his face from the rain.

"Nothing's wrong, just ah, showing them the Boiling and the Breathless out on the point." Jetson shouted back.

The point in question here meant the blocky lighthouse, out on the end of the leftmost harbour wall. You could only get up onto this wall by climbing up a set of concrete stairs only reachable from the docks. That, or by being able to fly. Again, not something Prey could do, although he wasn't alone for once in this, as neither could Jetson.

Prey looked up the slick steps to the top of the harbour wall, and then traced the steps down to where they descended all the way into the sea below. Slimy seaweed and black barnacles studded the lower steps and wall of the harbour, showing where the water level would rise to with the tide.

Looking down at the murky water nosily slapping into the wall with not inconsiderable force, splashing over the stone and sharp barnacles, Prey decided he very much did not want to fall in. He could imagine getting slammed over and over into the massive

harbour wall and being slowly shredded to pulp on the vicious barnacles.

So he was very careful with his footing as he climbed the wet stairs up onto the wall. The top of the harbour wall was pitted and windswept, and Prey widened his stance against any strong gusts of wind, even though the top of the wall was a good ten hooves across.

"Come on, this way." Jetson said confidently, trotting along the wall top towards the lighthouse, not at all bothered by the waves splashing against the outside of the wall, much louder up here, and throwing fine sprays of salty water up to them.

Prey also decided, as he followed along behind everyone in single file, that he also couldn't imagine willingly living in the lighthouse they were approaching. No matter how solid-looking the lighthouse was, the harbour wall top was the only path back to Haven Hay. Imagine trying to navigate that in a howling storm and roaring waves in the middle of the night?

'Definitely a healthy 'no thanks' from me.'

Salty wind blew into Prey's ears, and he paused to squint out at the sea outside the harbour. It was even more uninviting and cold looking from up here, plumes of churned white breaking against the rocky cliffs. At points higher up these cliff faces, well out of the reach of the waves, the rocks were streaked with yet more gull droppings, the large birds wheeling around near the top.

Those weren't the famous Cliffs of Dove though, not even close. Those anti-magic cliffs, and the Isle of Dove they surrounded, were at least an hour's hard trot further East. If it weren't for the poor weather, you'd almost certainly be able to see the shape of the mysterious isle from here on the harbour's wall.

"Ah, here we are." Jetson announced.

Prey turned his attention forwards again to find the lighthouse rising above them, the red paint of the stripes banding it noticeably scoured and faded this close up. The base of the harbour wall here swelled much wider to support the building, giving Prey a measure

of comfort as it no longer felt like he was quite standing on a steep mountain peak, even if it was just him being paranoid.

Jetson banged on the very solid and tightly sealed lighthouse's door as everyone crowded round. "Flash Light! Sandy Shine! Please let us in."

Gloom loudly cleared his throat, "Who are Flash Light and Sandy Shine?"

"They're the ah, lighthouse keepers. It is their job, and they also live here." Jetson replied.

Bravo Call leaned sideways to peer past the corner of the lighthouse at the overcast horizon while they waited. '-the air is certainly bracing, but boy, that view is too dreary to wake up to everyday-'

"And this Breathless and this Boiling you spoke of? What are those?" Gloom pressed, flicking off a drop of cold sea water from the fine spray which'd collected at the end of his wingclaw.

"That's ah, those are what we're out here to see. From the top of the lighthouse. I assure you, it's the best way to see the view for yourself." Jetson hastily added to the end.

Gloom fought the urge, but still couldn't stop himself from raising an eyebrow under his helmet.

Nimbus coughed to cover an amused and condescending grin, thinking; '-obviously he doesn't have many pegasi friends, then-'

Trail Blazer tried for nonchalance as he pointedly stretched his wings wide, before refolding them. He failed, but Jetson finally got the point. He blinked at the six out of seven winged Guards, then up at the lighthouse, and then at his own hooves.

"Ah-"

But before the sooty earth pony could apologise or make an excuse, the thick, porthole like door to the lighthouse unlocked with a noisy sliding of bolts and swung outwards.

A grumpy looking unicorn with unkempt- almost all the way to shaggy, pale yellow fur greeted them. A unicorn, the first Prey had seen in Haven Hay. The pony naming conventions had hinted towards the two names Jetson had called being unicorns, and it made sense what with this being a lighthouse, but it still hadn't been a certain thing.

Prey took a step to the left and put the Border Rangers between himself and the unicorn's horn.

The unicorn's grumpy look hastily vanished as he saw all the armoured Guards behind Jetson, as he also just as hastily changed whatever it was he'd been about to say:

"Er, Jetson. And sirs. I wasn't expecting anypony this morning." An unhappy look was flashed at Jetson for that, "I'm Flash Light, a lighthouse keeper. Sandy is still inside."

"Who's at the door?" A hoarse voice yelled from inside the lighthouse before Jetson could explain who the Border Rangers and ISND were.

The shaggy stallion winched, "It's uh, it's uh, its Royal Guards, honey."

"What did you say?" The hoarse voice shouted again.

Flash Light reluctantly raised his voice, "It's Royal Guards. They've come all the way to Haven Hay."

From inside, much more quietly, Prey heard an "Oh." followed by sound of rushing hoofbeats on a staircase.

Nimbus Feather didn't seem able to hold back any longer, and moved up to introduce himself and his trio, smiling broadly. The Staff Sargent just wasn't the type to let anyone else introduce himself.

"Staff Sargent Nimbus Feather of Her Majesty's Royal Guard, and this here's my squad. We've just arrived, and Jetson here has been kindly giving us a tour of sorts of your town. It's got some great views, I'll give you that. Once we've gotten our bearings, we'll be

solving your most recent weather problems, don't you worry."

Flash Light opened his mouth, but a unicorn mare skidded around the corner of the door before he could, "Hello offic-sir? Officer? Thank you so much for coming. You're going to finally arrest the Heights family?" She asked in a breathless rush.

"Yes honey, and put a stop to the infernal weather while they're at it." Flash Light happily answered her, and Jetson chimed in with a "Yep."

'-a what now? What?-'

A cold spray of sea water from a wave below crested the wall high enough to splash Prey's hooves. He exchanged a wordless look with Gloom which said many things, as droplets of salt water beaded across the metal of the Sargent's helmet and on the tufts of his ears.

'-I think we've just stumbled upon our very first clue here-', Is what the look said. Because whatever Sandy and Flash Light here were talking about, it sounded like something the three of them should learn more about.

Nimbus slightly backpedalled, not knowing what it was they were talking about, "One thing at a time, one thing at a time if you please. As Guards, we have a procedure to follow. Sir, Ma'am, we'll get to this... Heights family? In a moment. Jetson here though insisted that first we needed to see something." He said, buying them a minute.

'-well this doesn't sound good-', Bravo thought, standing beside his Staff Sargent.

Sandy Shine and Flash Light both visibly had to stifle automatic protests, as everything Nimbus had just said sounded very proper and Guard-like to them, and they were certainly not going to disagree with anything the golden clad figure of authority on their doorstep said. Nimbus and his fellows were very impressive, the sea water and rain doing nothing to dim the golden gleam of their renowned Royal Guard armour.

So instead, they both turned their eyes on Jetson, wordlessly demanding; '-what have you been saying?-'

Jetson felt the edge in their stares, even though he obviously didn't quite know why he was suddenly the target of ire. His ears laid back and his tone became defensive, "We needed the use of the lighthouse to get high enough to see."

"We're not a ladder service." Flash Light shot at the earth pony out of the corner of his mouth, while trying to keep smiling for the Guards.

"Ah, yes, well, but then you wouldn't get to speak to them about the Weather Tower keepers, would you?" Jetson shot back, trying to keep up a smile to show that they weren't arguing, that they were all good friends here. Sandy Shine was busy copying his strategy, also trying to smile at everyone. Her eyes widened comically as they fell on Gloom and Crimson in their much less friendly Night Guard armour standing in the back, and she very openly stared.

'-I hate it when we get stuck playing piggy in the middle-', Inky thought with a frustrated eye roll to Trail Blazer and Bravo, as Nimbus Feather smiled his brilliant white smile and moved in to get everything straightened out while the gulls screeched and the wind blew.

Prey signalled Gloom that he had something to say, and Crimson leaned in to listen too, ignoring the minor drama happening on the lighthouse's doorstep, "Remember, we're not here to work *with* them. We can split off at any time and get on with doing our own job." He reminded them both in a low voice over the rolling of the waves.

"Sir, what is the plan if the Border Rangers are getting in our way?" Crimson asked quite bluntly, watching Jetson, Sandy, and Flash Light apologise to Nimbus in turns for taking up their time, while still trying to throw verbal jabs at each other.

"First and foremost, we're here to investigate if the weather damage caused here is the work of a pony. By the sound of it, this Height family are the ones running the weather Tower outside of town

unless I miss my guess. And it doesn't sound like anypony likes them very much, so they're probably doing a poor job of it." Gloom shared his thoughts quietly.

"Or everyone here could not have the slightest idea of what they're talking about and are simply blaming the Weather Tower." Prey pointed out.

"Everypony." Gloom corrected on instinct, "And that's the point. We're not taking anypony's word for anything. We'll find the truth for ourselves."

"And do we need Sargent Nimbus for that?" Crimson asked the important question. "Right now, I mean."

Gloom considered, "I think yes. We've only just arrived here. We'll let Jetson show us whatever it is that he thinks is important, then we'll go find the mayor and the sheriff and get this investigation properly started."

"Any idea what this Breathless and this Boiling that he wanted to show us so badly are?" Prey muttered, hiking the straps of his backpack higher and jerking his head towards Jetson.

"Yes, but it looks like we're finally going to find out for sure." Gloom answered as in front of them, Sandy led the way into the lighthouse, alternating between anxiously inviting the Royal Guards inside, and staring at the three out of place ISND members, who everyone else seemed to have half forgotten about.

Indeed, Flash Light nearly swung the heavy lighthouse door shut with his aura before Crimson stuck an unmoving hoof in the way. The shaggy unicorn's pale face reddened quite remarkably, and backed up, haltingly inviting them in.

After that incident of mortification, and smothered laughter from the Border Rangers was over with, they all trooped up the lighthouse's stairs to the roof three stories above.

"Tell me more about this Heights family you mentioned." Prey

heard Gloom ask the nervous Sandy from behind him, the wind buffeting them up here nearly tugging Gloom's words away, "And please try to only include facts, not speculation."

Prey listened in, but he was much more interested in looking out on what lay in front of him. There were three things Jetson had wanted to bring them up here to the balcony atop the lighthouse to show them. And while everybody else could've just taken to the air to see, Prey decided seeing for himself was worth having to bear the company of ponies on this one. Crimson and Gloom excluded, of course.

The Boiling that Jetson had mentioned earlier was actually the local abbreviation for the full name of the Boiling Bay. And the Breathless referred to the Breathless Sea. The third thing didn't have a nicely descriptive nickname like that.

It was only possible from standing up here, or perhaps on the cliffs, to get a good sense of the geography and unbridled scope it all encompassed.

'Is geography the right term when it's the ocean? Whatever, it doesn't matter.'

Prey shielded his eyes against the billowing salty wind, and studied first the Boiling Bay.

Spreading out from beyond the relative calm and safety provided by the harbour walls, the sea was a veritable cauldron. One that was roiling like it was boiling, hence the name.

The visuals were caused by waves and swells which didn't just flow in and out in one direction, but in every direction, white crested waves of dark water bashing into each other all the time.

This strange effect in the Boiling Bay was because of where it ran up against the Breathless Sea. The cause of this wasn't readily apparent from the surface, but where one met the other, the slight lightening of shade in the dark, violent waters gave Prey the clue. The Breathless Sea was over a higher ocean shelf, rather than the plunging depths of the Boiling Bay next to it.

'The sea deep in the Boiling Bay hits the wall of the ocean shelf, probably miles down, and is then forced rapidly upwards. That's what's causing all the violent, upwelling currents.'

Directly outside of Haven Hay's harbour was the vast cauldron of deep, turbulent sea. But to the left was the shallower Breathless Sea, which stretched on and on until Prey couldn't see any further in grey sky and mist.

There was a line between the two, about thirty meters broad. A change in the pitch of the water that divided the sea, on the one side the violent boiling, and then over the course of those thirty meters, calmed into an endless sheet of gentle, waveless lapping. A stark and startling contrast.

As an aside, if you were to trek further east along the cliffs following the coast of the Breathless Sea, Prey knew you'd come across first the Weather Tower, and then even further on, the Cliffs of Dove bringing your trip to an abrupt end. And further still beyond that divide, would be the uninhabited and mysterious Isle of Dove.

The Boiling Bay was the first site of importance, a testament to nature's untamed savagery.

The Breathless Sea was the second, a glimpse at the true enormity of the ocean.

And the third important sight that Prey squinted at as he stood up here on the lighthouse, braced against the wind, was the towering, massive storm-bank gathered not far off the coast, casting the waters of the Breathless Sea below it in perpetual eerie shadow.

'A warning of the violence nature can and will unleash.'

Behind him, Prey heard Sandy Shine answering Gloom; "The Heights are the featherbrains responsible for letting *that* build up."

Prey didn't turn, but he assumed she was pointing at the ominous, towering storm sitting unmovingly out there above the Breathless Sea.

Prey studied the storm, but really, 'study' was the wrong word. He beheld the vast, towering clouds, a dark, silent mix of titanic cloud peaks, the literal size of mountains, and all combined into one huge mountain range floating up there.

The four gold wearing Royal Guards were also staring out at the distant storm titan, not looking so perpetually cocky anymore.

'-that's a lot more than I was expecting-'

Prey let himself slowly take it all in. The Breathless Sea to the east of the Boiling Bay marked the end of any and all shipping/sailing routes. However to the west of it, or north-west if you wanted to be exact, the deep sea current flowed along the coast here until it too terminated in the Boiling Bay, and there laid the sailing route. Haven Hay was built right on this, the furthest point of land, making it an excellent spot for a port town. It was too bad there was so little here to be worth sailing for. The recent storms and dangerous weather had obviously cut those chances down even further.

Despite that, Prey could actually see the blurry outline of some ship hugging the coast coming up from the west, partly obscured by more squalls and grey weather. But that wasn't important, it was everything to the east which held Prey's attention.

Sandy was still going on to Gloom, wanting to get her 'testimony' heard as soon as possible.

"I went all the way up to the Weather Tower myself, had to climb all the way there and back, and you know what they said? What they keep telling everypony? Even to sheriff Lumber? That they're "dealing with it". That was two weeks ago, and now look. It's still there! Nearly every other day, another storm hits us as it passes over, and then joins that giant lightning bundle waiting to happen out there. They're not doing anything, or whatever they're doing, they're not doing it right."

The unicorn mare's voice was raw with weeks of frustration which had morphed into anger. Anger that was in all likelihood, being echoed by every resident in Haven Hay. It could only be so long

before they were sick and tired of having their homes and livelihoods damaged, and decided to take matters into their own hooves by forming a mob to deal with the 'problem' as they saw it. That problem being, the ineffectual weather team staffing the Weather Tower.

Sandy's husband Flash Light, as it had been confirmed that they were actually married, joined in, unable to help himself, "The boats can't leave, nopony can do anything because they can't harvest with that storm right overhead, and that family keeps shrugging off all responsibility. It's negligence of duty, it has to be. Everypony who's tried to talk to them just gets brushed off and nothing gets fixed."

"Harvest what?" Prey heard Crimson ask over the constant wind.

Prey tilted his head back, ribbon whipping against his cheek, as he felt the first spatters of cold rain strike him from above.

Yep, it looked like the next grey formless cloud in a sky of dark grey clouds had decided to release its payload as it blew across Haven Hay. Not that the gulls seemed to mind, they kept wheeling and cawing as loudly as ever. Looking back and down to the wooden docks inside the harbour, Prey could see the same figures of ponies they'd passed on their way to the stairs not pausing in their work either.

"What do you mean harvest-? Oh, right. Harvesting from the kelp fields, of course." Sandy Shine answered Crimson. Prey didn't like her impatience when speaking to his friend, even if she almost immediately tried to smother it out of apprehension of who she was talking to. It wasn't his fault they weren't locals and didn't immediately know the slang everyone here used.

"You harvest kelp?" Crimson asked slowly, waiting for her or Flash Light to further explain.

"Yes, the kelp beds. Not that they're growing at the moment, they need the sun just like any plant, and there's no sun with that storm blocking out the sky every single day. It grows up from the Breathless Sea. You need to row into it and back out once you leave the Boiling, but we harvest the kelp floating on the surface. Except

the boats can't even go out to do that anymore now, can they?"

Jetson also couldn't help but join in with his own rant, his frustration overcoming his aversion to Gloom and Crimson's appearances in the hopes that they, as Guards, would solve Haven Hay's problems.

"Everything's gone to pot. Three ships that were scheduled to come in for repairs have ah, cancelled and turned back. Three! Ponies' jobs are being affected, and the ah, the ah, the damage to the town! It keeps happening every time a storm comes. My roof leaks constantly by the bucket, upstairs is destroyed, but there's no point getting it fixed if it's just going to happen again tomorrow."

Prey listened to the problems of Haven Hay being voiced behind him, and didn't care. Really he didn't. He was only here because Nighthawk had seen fit to send them. The ISND was only here until they could find any evidence of any wrongdoing, and then arrest the culprit. And at the end of the day, these were only ponies complaining about nature being unfair.

If you believed the townsfolk, then by the sound of it the Weather Tower pegasi were the wrongdoers here. Prey didn't believe them. There are always two sides to every story, and this looked to him more like a Weather Team simply not being able to tame mother nature this time around, the storm being too vast, and now all the townsfolk were throwing a hissy fit.

But looking out at the veritable mountain range of slowly swirling storm clouds in the distance, he could well understand their worry at least. And it had been growing bigger for two weeks?

'If that thing breaks while we're still here, I'm insisting that we get out of Haven Hay and find cover up in the hills.' Prey thought.

"We've got our work cut out for us." Nimbus said, sucking in air over his pearly white teeth in that hissing inhale that meant the person doing it had a monumental task ahead of them.

Bravo wiped some rainwater from the brim of his helmet before it could drip onto his face, not looking away from the grim view,

"That we do sir, that we do."

'-I wouldn't bet on us dispersing that thing even if there were ten times as many of us-', Trail Blazer was meanwhile thinking, a deep grimace marring his usually carefree grin.

Inky was rubbing at her chin, staring hard out at the massive storm sitting over the sea, as if she stared hard enough, some hidden secret would suddenly become clear. She was drawing a blank, too. '-I've got nothing. Just nothing-'

'Of course you don't have anything. Bunch of Zoma'Grika fools, the lot of you. That storm sitting out there has the potential to be a full blown natural disaster.' Prey thought, snorting. You couldn't beat nature. The only question was, where would the storm finally break?

Over the Breathless Sea right where it was would be the best outcome they could hope for now. Since it had been sitting there building for a fortnight, it was probably pointless to hope that it would suddenly blow further east or even out to sea.

"The lightning that things gonna' to unleash when it pops is going to be celestial." Nimbus muttered to his colleagues.

"Please Gloom sir, you have to do something about the Weather Tower. Arrest them, make them put a stop to this. Sheriff Lumber will be only too happy to help." Sandy was trying to urge Gloom over the cawing of a flock of passing seagulls.

"They've been suspicious ever since they first arrived. Not that there's any ah, solid proof, but you can ask anypony. I don't put much stock in superstition, but I've simply always had a bad feeling about them." Jetson added his own testimony.

"We will investigate all parties involved. I will base any actions I take on the proof we find." Gloom assured, and also warned them.

"We don't like lies." Crimson agreed evenly. The audience missed his unvoiced warning in there.

"*Good*," Flash Light stated with surprising viciousness, "Then Gale

Heights will be behind bars the next time I have to see his face."

That sounded like there was something personal there.

'-all the more reason to get the other side of the story first-', Gloom decided as a strong gust of wind buffeted them.

Prey turned his head away, not so much because of the wind, but because of the stray raindrops hurled in it. The wind moaned around the lighthouse, and sounded like snatches of faint, distant shouts or screams.

"Wait, hold up. What was that?" Nimbus demanded, turning to the three pony residents of Haven Hay.

Jetson blinked, broken from addressing Gloom, "Ah, sorry what?"

"What was what?" Flash Light mimicked.

"Did you not hear that?"

"Oh, that's just the wind from the Wailing Crag, don't worry." Sandy answered as she drew the connection. She pointed out to the distant barren rocky spur out to sea that Prey had noted earlier.

"There's quite a few local ghost stories about the Wailing Crag being haunted, the foals come up with new twists to it every year, but it's just the wind. Me and Sandy have to listen to it the most out here." Flash Light explained, gesturing over the edge and down to the harbour's wall the lighthouse was built on below. The blocky, red and white building was indeed the farthest out structure by quite some way in all of Haven Hay, and so was closest, relatively speaking, to the Wailing Crag.

Prey would've taken any bet that Trail Blazer might've placed about there being probably a hundred such 'Wailing Crags' dotted about the coasts of Equestria.

It was one of those unimaginative stories that seemed to be part of every long term community out there whenever something natural, like an inland wind hitting a lone spur of eroded rock out at sea, produced a result which might be considered 'spooky'.

"Oh wonderful, here comes another storm cloud." Inky griped. And indeed there was, an angry black storm head rolling up from the west, over the sea. It was only as it had come closer that you could really differentiate it against the rest of the dark grey and clouds as being a separate storm cloud.

It was trailing in the wake of that distant ship that was slowly clawing its way up the coastline towards the bay, almost like the black cloud was getting pulled along on some huge leash. The captain of the ship, whoever they were, was keeping just ahead of the following storm.

'Or maybe, they're running from the storm.'

Prey's ear twitched, and he skipped smartly to the side and out of any hoof reach as Flash Light turned away from trying to persuade Gloom and Crimson and stepped up to the railing. He frowned out at the storm, shaggy brows drawing together.

'-they're cutting it a bit too close. Didn't the captain get the warning?-'

Not the storm then, but rather the ship was at fault it seemed. Flash Light's horn light up pale yellow, and he drew a small collapsible telescope from inside his coat, clicking it open. Prey watched him as he peered out for a long minute at the distant ship and storm through the scope, long fur flattening and shifting in odd patterns in the strong wind. He scowl was getting deeper and more worried.

"Flash Light?" Sandy called, sensing something amiss with her husband.

"I'm not sure..." Flash Light began.

"What?" Sandy asked, everyone else crowded on the lighthouse's top starting to take notice too.

"I'm not sure..." He repeated, "But why're they only sailing at half-mast?"

Wordlessly, Sandy demanded the small telescope from her husband and looked for herself. Down in the distance, the storm continued to

approach with the ship keeping just ahead. Gulls cawed. The wind wailed distantly.

'-the mizzen and the boom, they shouldn't be facing that way-', Sandy thought. '-and they're sitting too low in the water-'

"Horseapples." She loudly announced, voice flat with shock, "They're slowly sinking. And that storm is going to catch up and blow them into the cliffs."

There was a moment as everyone else processed those words and tried to comprehend the bad news, a moment which Prey took to hastily scoot back over to Gloom and Crimson's side.

Everything happened very quickly after that.

"Get down to the harbour!"

"Border Rangers, form on me."

"Have to warn the harbour master immediately."

"The chasing storm, we've got to get them out of there!"

"It's sinking, they won't make it in time."

"Sargent Nimbus, where are you going?"

"To help the ponies on that ship of course!"

"You can drive the chasing storm off?"

"Or just delay it, either will be good enough."

"The ship is sinking! It might not even reach the harbour!"

"Then get boats in the water already! Get ponies out there, get them moving."

"What if we're not in time-?"

"Then we'll fly them all off the boat, one at a time if we have to! Stop asking stupid questions."

"Let's go, Go, GO!"

---I---

The details change, but you never forget what it's like to survive through the disasters.

Author's Notes:

So here we are in Haven Hay, as the story begins! Where will it go? (I'm sure some people are going to guess in the comments, and a few will probably even be right, but I'm not saying)

Editor Panem et Circenses

90.7 Row, Row, Row Our Boat

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, there comes those who rush to try to prevent it once it's already too late.

A pointless effort, but along with this wave of useless people who just get in the way, there are also those who actually try to meaningfully help, or to save as many as they can; the real first responders. Whether they be a trained medic, a professional anti-fire unicorn spellcaster, or simply a passer-by who happened to be in the right place at the wrong time.

A damaged ship.

An onrushing storm.

A rising water level.

A hungry shoreline of jagged rocks.

A lighthouse keeper sprinting across the slick docks bellowing out his warning.

A flight of Royal Guards racing to beat the storm to the ship.

Prey had been in many disasters, and most importantly, had survived them all. Whether they'd been disasters caused by miserable, unlucky chance, or by the deliberate cruelty of others, there were some things he'd found which were consistent across the aftermaths of every type.

Such as the slowly mounting panic in your heart. "They're not going to make it. They're not going to make it." The earth pony harbour master muttered over and over, wearing a divot into the planking of the docks with his ceaseless pacing, staring fixedly out at the ship sluggishly fighting through each and every wave.

Spectators, that was always another constant factor, provided there was anybody alive to bear witness, of course. The alarm had only

just been sounded, but more and more ponies were pushing onto the docks with every moment, heedless of the cold and wet. They wanted to bear witness, they wanted to *see*.

Some of them were shouting, trying to coordinate, and attempting to get their moored boats untied and ready to sail out to try to help. But their boats were too small to do anything but maybe rescue one or two survivors each if the ship capsized. If even they could make it across the Boiling Bay in time without falling victim to the foul weather and rough sea themselves.

"You won't make it in time, don't make the problem worse!"
"They're going down, we have to help!"
"You can't help anypony if somepony has to rescue you instead!"
"We should try anyway! Those Guards are trying, so should we!"
"They've got weather magic, we don't. I want to help too, but this isn't the way!"

Seagulls were wheeling and cawing, aggravated by the hullabaloo. The cold, murky sea slapped against the docks, restless and uncaring. A cold exhale of wind came, the tidal breath blown before the storm and across the wave crests. Hooves stomped on the salt-worn planks, drowned under all the conflicting voices and suggestions.

Mainly though, the one feeling Prey would've used to identify all similarities across any disaster if he'd been forced to pick just the one was; helplessness.

The feeling of powerlessness, of being unable to do anything but stand there and watch helplessly. There was no exception found here in Haven Hay. Helplessness all around.

Because Prey couldn't fly, because he didn't have magic, because he wasn't strong or fast or swift. But those were just a part of the reason for the horrible feeling. Other people had those strengths, and yet they too suffered the same helplessness. Although it wasn't their fault, they still felt like it was, like they should've somehow done the impossible and stopped this from ever occurring.

Prey sat on the docks in the lee of some strapped-down crates, his

backpack removed and propped beside him. Sitting there unmoving, it was cold, even with the crates as a buffer against the wind's chill. It smelled strongly of salt and seagull droppings. His wool and fur were still damp from the rain.

He sat, nearly forgotten while the townsfolk rushed and panicked, and like them, helplessly watched the rough sea, the approaching storm, and the floundering ship inching its way closer.

Prey watched those things, and also the distant shapes of the winged figures swooping and circling the ship.

Those last were the most important to Prey. Not the flashes of white and gold dipping and diving, but the dull gleam of the two shapes sticking close to the side of the ship.

Because it's never a matter of 'if'. The next tragedy? It's never an *if*, only a *when*. The next tornado, the next plague, the next wave of fire pouring down the hill? It's already in the making, the only variable is the when.

Helplessness is not a good feeling, and it was one which just got stronger the longer you had to watch while stewing over all the ways you *couldn't* help. But caught up in the clamour, the fear, the panic, it was impossible to look away. Because what if you did, and you somehow missed whatever happened next? As if by watching with your whole attention fixed, you could prevent it getting any worse.

"The ship won't make it.", "It must make it in time.", "The storm will catch them.", "Those pegasi will hold the storm back, right?" All the ponies in their raincoats and worn jackets just kept saying and asking the same things over and over, as the storm bore down on the ship.

Prey wished they and the gulls both would all just shut up. He rubbed his forelegs together, shivering every now and then in the cold, but made no move to look away either.

The ship inched closer. The storm followed, rain and wind beneath its dark shadow whipping the already rough sea into a roiling fury.

One minute. Two minutes. "They're going to make it, see? See?", "No they won't, you're blind!", "It's too close, it's too bucking close."

Distant figures crawling like insects over the deck. The ship's sails slapped as they weren't reefed properly in time. A massive groan went up around the whole docks at the mistake and the delay it caused the ship.

Closer, and yet the storm and waves grow ever closer too. Blink dry the eyes. Hold the breath. Stare out across the Boiling Bay.

With the approaching storm, the already-overcast sky was steadily growing even darker. The docks began to descend into deeper shadow. Gusts of wind blew in the distant almost-screams of the Wailing Crag, howling and moaning for help. It was a bad omen.

Another minute. And another. Prey restlessly tugged at the end of his ribbon. It was going to be a close-run thing.

"What are they doing?", "That's costing them headway!", "Why aren't those ropes ready yet!?" The ship now was trying to beat out further from the shore, to have more leeway once the storm finally caught it.

Watch and wait. The ship was close now. Up above, the Border Rangers were trying to delay the stormclouds as best as Prey could tell, their white and gold figures often lost in the swirling rain and whipping cloudbanks. Prey started tapping his hoof against the crate.

And closer. The second of the ship's two masts was broken in half, you could clearly see that now. There was a massive tangle of ropes and rigging covering the deck. The missing part of the mast and sails were gone, cut away and thrown overboard.

Ponies started shouting out encouragement over the wind as the ship and storm both got even closer.

"Come on, come on!", "You can make it!", "Keep going, keep coming!"

The sea inside the harbour was rocking the moored boats more and

more. Tap-tap-tap went Prey's hoof. The outer edge of the storm's rain was falling on the ship now. What had looked so slow from a distance was actually the ship ploughing forwards fast enough to drive a bow wave. Both were nearly at the harbour.

Prey saw Gloom for a moment, Crimson too near the top of the one remaining mast, and then-

And then the storm overtook the ship. A roar of rain on the waves, growing louder as it swept into the harbour. A curtain of rain passed the lighthouse and drove towards the docks.

Prey took a deep breath, seeing and hearing the pouring rain of the storm bearing down on all of them. There wasn't time for a second breath. It was something else to see the approaching deluge of water sweeping towards you. It was only rain, but you couldn't outrun it even if you tried.

Prey raised a hoof to shield his eyes, and the rain hammered down onto him, soaking him in an instant. Water and hooves drummed on the docks, all the ponies suddenly only blurry figures.

He tried to squint, still shielding his eyes. What was happening in the mouth of the harbour? What if the ship ran into the walls instead of clearing the mouth? What could and what had gone wrong?

"Get ready!" "Here they come!" People shouted, muffled. Or that's what Prey thought they were shouting, at any rate.

A white flash, and an instant roll of thunder reverberated in Prey's lungs, water streaming down his face and ears. He strained to see, there was a big dark shape in the harbour's mouth-

And the next flash of lightning lit up the harbour and showed Prey the ship wallowing in the water, but just inside the harbour's mouth! It had made it.

Ponies were jumping into their boats, pushing off, heedless of the hammering rain. They had lines trailing behind, making for the ship as it fought to get its flapping sails down.

Prey kept having to blink streaming water out of his eyes, since it was out into the bay he kept trying to anxiously peer, and it was from there that the storm was blowing in. *Flash*, a reverberating *__Rumble__*.

Hooves splashed. Lightning flashed, thunder beckoned.

Boats rowed frantically back towards the docks, heavy ropes weighing them down.

But the danger had passed. The ship was inside the sheltering walls of the harbour. Even if it were to sink right now, there were multiple people ready to set out and rescue anyone who fell in.

Almost immediately now that the mortal danger to pony life had passed, the attitude of the soaked townsfolk gathered on the docks changed, like a shift of the wind:

"Ponyfeathers, if that hulk sinks now it could block the mouth.", "What kind of fool captain lets himself get caught out on the water like that?", "Now we've got to find extra shelter for everypony on board. Bugger that."

Now that the reason for fear was passed, the worry came. The worst possible outcome hadn't happened, but that only meant there was plenty of other stuff about the situation left over to complain about.

Haven Hay was a port town that'd been experiencing these battering storms for the last fortnight, their livelihoods grinding to a halt- and with the other, much more massive storm still building up over the Breathless Sea, now all the stress and worry caused by all that had come right back to the forefront.

Hoof stamping. Snorts. Angry muttering.

"As if we didn't have enough to put up with already!", "What's the bet the ship gets written off instead of repaired?", "That there's more work slipping through our hooves. What good is a dry dock if no ships can even make it here for repairs?"

How fickle they were. If something awful had happened, they'd be struck silent in mute horror, but because it hadn't, they somehow

felt they had a right to complain. 'How utterly, utterly typical. Don't they realise that-?'

A huge flash of lightning, brighter than all the others so far, a blinding bolt of white connecting the raging sea and broken sky for an instant. The rest of the lightning and thunder so far had been confined to the stormfront, but this one had struck as an actual bolt inside of the harbour.

Prey's ears rang with the aftershock of the boom.

Suddenly, the danger was back in full force. Ponies stomped and neighed, turning, pushing to get off the docks and out of the pouring rain.

Prey blinked lingering white stars and water from his eyes, trying to get the lightning bolt to un-sear itself from the underside of his eyelids. Even as it plastered his fur down, the rain also made it so hard to see precisely what was going on, the constant noise being caused by the storm further denying him a clear picture.

"..'e.." He didn't catch what it was someone had shouted.

"...'el.." There it was again.

White, gold, and feathers dived out of the storm, striking the dock’s thick planks hard. Raindrops flew everywhere as Nimbus and Bravo beat their wings.

"Help!" Nimbus shouted, twisting his head around, "Pony hit, help!"

Bravo separated, stepping out from behind Nimbus and Prey saw then that they had a limp pegasus held between them.

"Get a medic, the doctor! You there, who knows where a doctor is?" Bravo whirled on one of the surprised ponies, singling them out. He didn't let go of the comrade he was supporting.

Slack, orange wings trailed in the wet planks of the docks, not the white of the Guard armour colour-changing enchantment. Rain pattered and pinged off the soot-stained golden chestplate. There didn't seem to be enough feathers or fur on the unmoving orange

pony, even through the obscuring rain.

Inky swooped out of the sky and landed awkwardly on the docks in a spray of water and feathers, nearly skidding and going over the side into the harbour.

"Trail Blazer was hit by that lightning! We need medical assistance. Now!"

Prey shoved himself away from the shelter of the crates, the wind immediately hurling rain into his eyes, "What about Crimson and Gloom-?"

"Find a medic!", "Who has any first aid supplies?" "Get Doctor Doodle!", "Where is-?", "Why isn't-?", "Why didn't-?"

Prey took a step back. No one was listening, no one noticed him. The dock was a mess of moving and shouting voices, and the cacophony of swirling thoughts was just as bad, battering at Prey's ears and mind as he sought to find the two people he was looking for.

He turned his eyes skywards to the rolling storm above, trying to see any flying shapes against the hammering rain.

" 'rey?" 'rey." Prey!"

"Over here!" Prey shouted.

No one heard him over the noise. No one saw him below everyone else's head-height.

He pulled himself up onto the stack of slick crates, only narrowly missing a rusty nail in the rain. He wobbled for balance, the shouting still ongoing all around, trying to spot Gloom or Crimson.

"Over here. Up here!" His shout was lost in the mix of others, the thunder, and the rain.

"Lightning struck. Where's the-?", "I don't know first aid!", "Who knows first aid?", "I'm not sticking around here!"

Prey ignored the expanding chaos centred on the unmoving Trail Blazer, swinging his head around to try to spot his two companions. Rain half drove his eyes shut and trickled in streams from the ends of his ears and ribbon.

"Crimson, Gloom! Gloom? Crimson? Up here!"

"Here, Prey. We're here." Came Gloom's answering shout. Prey turned to the right on his rather precarious stack of crates in the sound's direction.

Gloom emerged from the curtain of rain, pushing through the crowd with Crimson right behind him, townsfolk not needing much encouragement once they realised who was trying to get past.

Just like everyone and everything, they were both soaked, longer warrior's manes dripping out from under their close-fitting helmets. Crimson was breathing less heavily than Gloom, Prey's electrite gift strengthening him.

"Prey, Trail Blazer was hit by lightning. Can you help?" Gloom shouted, not wasting any time as the two of them pushed closer to the crate pile.

Prey halted in trying to climb down, "What?"

"I said, Trail Blazer's been hit by lightning, can you help?"

Prey hesitated, rain running down his face, "Not really, no. "

"Why not?" Crimson asked, closer now.

"Because it's lightning. It burns organs and muscles from the inside out. If he's still alive, then get him into shelter, treat any exterior burns, and keep him warm. That's all you can really do." Prey explained, raising his voice to make sure he could be heard, cautiously beginning to climb down the crates, making sure to watch out for any more nails.

At hearing Prey's words, Gloom spun back around, "Staff Sargent Nimbus! Get Trail Blazer inside! Keep him dry and warm."

Somehow over everyone else shouting and panicking, the other stallion heard Gloom, "If we move him we further risk-!"

Gloom pushed closer, "No time, move him now. If he stays in this rain he's going to die of shock and exposure."

The three Royal Guards hesitated, but another blinking flash and then crack of lightning made up their minds sharpish. "Bravo, carry him. Inky, support his head, keep his wings in. Make way, make way!"

Prey watched them, Crimson unsure whether to go after Gloom or stay with Prey. Prey watched Inky trying not to let Trail Blazer's limp orange wings drag as he was pulled over Bravo's broad shoulders.

'The lightning must've burned out the colour changing enchantment. Gold's a good conductor, however it's only gold-plated over steel. Even so, if he survives this, it'll likely only be thanks to the minor protection enchantments on that armour.' Prey's mind emotionlessly analysed the facts.

Prey asked himself whether he should be upset by this tragedy, or if he should be more affected by Trail Blazer's plight.

'No. Not really.' Was the conclusion he reached. It wasn't any sort of grudge Prey was carrying against the pegasus, being annoying wasn't a good reason for anyone's death, but nor did he really care about Trail Blazer's unhappy fate.

It was an accident, a freak disaster. It wasn't anyone's fault. Trail Blazer had been a first responder, one of those who'd tried to rush out and help. And this was what could happen to those who selflessly tried to help. A fire burns whoever gets to close, heedless of their motivation.

'And the smoke. Smoke is the real killer. All it takes is one or two breaths.' Prey shook his head, rain drumming atop his head and back.

"What?" Crimson asked, casting around them.

"Nothing, just... nothing." Prey answered, then winced at another deafening crack and blinding flash. In the stark moment of white illumination, Prey spotted more victims of this disaster arriving and being hauled up onto the docks out of the waterlogged boats which had put out. The first batch of exhausted sailors from the ship.

The ponies on the bobbing boats pushed the sailors up from beneath, while hasty offered hooves from above pulled them up to flop onto the docks like stranded fish. They barely had enough strength left to move, it seemed. How long had they been trying to outrun this storm? And what had originally caused the damage to their ship?

One of the rescued sailors was trying to tell the ponies on boats to go back for the rest of the crew, another was weakly raging against the storm, swearing up and down there had been devils flying with the storm, chasing them down.

"Devils! Demons, devil and demons! Winged devil-", "You're okay, we've got you.", "The bosun, the ship's bosun. Did you bring back the bosun?", "We'll get them, don't worry. Calm down, you're safe now."

"What happened out there?" Prey asked.

"We tried to help. They tried to delay the storm. The ship tried to sail faster. No one succeeded." Crimson answered. Prey saw he was looking out to the blurred shape of the ship in the harbour.

A boom of thunder stole Crimson's next words.

"What?" Prey repeated, wincing.

Prey thought he heard Crimson sigh through the pouring rain soaking them all to the bone, "They said they'd lost two ponies overboard when their mast broke. Hours ago, I mean. Our help was always going to be too late."

Prey said nothing. He looked out at what little he could see of the raging sea. He couldn't imagine surviving in that water for even minutes, let alone hours.

Crimson mourned for the two further lost lives, Prey could tell. But at most you could only mourn for the loss of a stranger, not someone you'd known. This is what happened in any disaster. People died. Here one minute, snatched away by the cruel whims of fate the next.

Above, the storm rolled onwards across the bay. Below, down here, more sailors were being hauled out of boats as the rain continued to lance down and the waves crashed against the harbour walls.

Prey had done nothing. He had contributed nothing. This time, he had just been one of the helpless spectators.

"Let's go Prey." Crimson said, meaning; let's go after Gloom and the Border Rangers to find out what was to be done next.

Prey turned back to grab his backpack, still right where he'd left it beside the crates. He shrugged into the wet straps, pulling it on tight. His wool was plastered flat to his skin, but he felt like he'd gained five pounds of mass in water, even if he'd lost body volume. But his pack was still done up tight and waterproof, and there was plenty of shelter in Haven Hay to seek.

Prey spared a glance towards the blocky outline of the lighthouse at the end of the harbour's wall, where Gloom and Crimson's own saddlebags had been dropped inside the lighthouse when they took off to reach the ship, just excess weight.

The white tops of waves were crashing over the top of the wall, which was also the only walkway out to reach the lighthouse.

Retrieving their saddlebags would have to wait until the storm passed.

"Let's go."

Crimson stepped in close to Prey, as close as Prey would allow, putting himself between Prey and the direction of the howling wind. Heads down, they pushed through the rain and back up the slope into Haven Hay.

What a beginning. The overnight train had barely deposited them on the station platform this morning. That had been little more than three hours ago.

And in only three hours, one of their number was already down. A storm, a shipwreck, and a disaster all in that short space of time. Prey wished he could say he was surprised, but it had always been apparent something was immediately going to go wrong.

Because they were the ISND. Of course this had happened. Why wouldn't it? Why wouldn't fate get in its kicks with its favourite bucking bag?

Helpless frustration. Resigned anger. Hopeless resentment. Take your pick, any and all of those emotions could be used to explain how it felt to be in this position yet again. 'And what will go wrong next?'

They found Gloom and the Border Rangers in one of the first houses they came to, the earth pony owner having thrown open the door to let them haul Trail Blazer inside out of the storm.

Prey pointed out the house, and Crimson forced the front door open, and then forced it back closed against the driving rain. Immediately, the din of the storm halved, but it did not fade. It still moaned through the cracked windows, under the door, and down through the leaking rafters.

And there was plenty of other noise to make up for the missing half. That of Nimbus, Inky, Bravo, Gloom, and the house's owner all trying to talk and rush at once, Trail Blazer laid across the hastily cleared table.

Prey and Crimson stood there on the doormat, and dripped more water into the already present puddle.

"Towels, do you have any dry towels?", "Ah, no. Nothing's been dry in weeks, I'm sorry.", "Blankets then-Celestia damn it! We left our bags in the lighthouse!", "Get the last of his armour off. *Carefully*. He's burned."

More noise, more panic, so similar to what they'd left behind on the docks not five minutes ago.

On the table, his head cushioned and held still by a balled up cloak, Trail Blazer lay unmoving. His fur and mane was both soaked, and also sticking out unnaturally. And in some places, patches were missing entirely, the exposed skin an ugly red. Or worse, a greyish white.

His wings were motionless and slack on the table, orange feathers an uneven mess. Also not a good sign.

Crimson and Prey's arrival was noticed, but no one had any time to address them. Not when there was someone here injured, and quite likely teetering on the brink of death. There was precious little they could do to stop Trail Blazer from slipping over that edge, the damage had already been done, but that just made their efforts all the more urgent. They had to do all they could right now, and hope their meagre efforts proved to be enough to blunt the edge of the knife he balanced on.

Prey took a judgement of Trail Blazer's condition based entirely off outwards appearances, and despite the limitations of an external inspection, he still quickly came to an estimate of the pegasus' chances. He decided it best not to share those odds out loud.

'-you better get back up, you'd better. I'm not going to tell your pops. Get up, I've taken worse static shocks off the carpet-', Prey overheard Inky angrily thinking, while working as fast as she could.

'Anger, a predictable, tried, and true go-to reaction.' Prey thought, seeing Nimbus Feather taking Trail Blazer's pulse, surprisingly doing it correctly on the first try. Must have finally remembered his Guard first aid training. Inky was merely the first to move on to anger, he wondered how long it would take the other two Royal Guards.

Anger was one of the two possible feelings which came after the helplessness. The other was despair.

Water dripped off Prey's face and ears. He unshouldered his

backpack and let it slip to the floor beside the door. Outside, the storm continued to moan and howl. He wasn't going to get involved with this. There were enough people crowding around and panicking over the downed pegasus already. There was little Prey could do to help. Or little he *would* do at least.

Part of it was that lightning didn't just burn the flesh, it burnt a person's organs from within. That was a major complicating factor. But even if he was to put aside that and still try, Prey wasn't about to display some very illegal skills to try to save Trail Blazer. So no, he'd be keeping his, admittedly, very limited blood magic knowledge to himself.

Prey stopped, backpack halfway off. He twitched his head towards the door. Crimson almost immediately noticed and began to turn, just as Prey smartly scooted away.

The door slammed open, the force of the wind yanking it from the pony's grip to bounce off the wall with considerable force. "Sour Grape? Are the Royal Guards here?" One of the three ponies standing outside shouted into the crowded house.
The question was answered by everyone inside instinctively turning their faces towards the open portal of the door. Prey spotted Jetson as one of the trio of ponies clustered outside.

"Come in, and close the door. Quickly!"

The lead earth pony -a heavyset red-maned stallion- did just that, water and smears of mud clinging to his hooves. He was in too much of a hurry to scrape them off on the doormat.

"Guards, I'm Sheriff Lumber, we must to speak-Where'd you spring from?" He jumped in surprise as he found Crimson and Prey waiting beside the door, not having been able to see them from outside. Prey gave the self-identified sheriff an empty smile, and Crimson just blinked blankly.

"I'm Staff Sargent Nimbus Feather. Sorry, but I'm a bit busy at the moment, yeah? What do you want?" Nimbus Feather asked, barely looking up from Trail Blazer, all of the limp pegasus' scorched armour removed and discarded by this point.

Behind the newly identified sheriff, Jetson and the other earth pony crowded in through the door, hastily fighting to get the abused door shut again after them. Prey gave the third and last pony a once over with his eyes for any weapons or an obvious threat, but neither that nor their thoughts warned him of anything. They, much like every other pony he'd gotten a headache from at the docks, were a mix of worry, anger, and helpless frustration. He noticed Jetson was anxiously checking the pockets of his raincoat for something.

"Of course. Is he, will your Guard be okay?" Lumber coughed into his hoof.

"He'll pull through." Nimbus immediately answered, as if doubting it would be a crime, "...It's just gonna' take a while to get him back on his hooves."

"Let me see." The third and last earth pony pushed forwards in the room.

Bravo didn't stop them, but he didn't move to get out of their path either, "I'm sorry, you are?" He asked looking down at the smaller stallion.

"I'm the town doctor. Well, doctor in training. Doctor Doodle is out trying to help with-Not important. Look, I can help. Will you please let me through? Sir." The earth pony hastily tacked on.

Bravo got out of their way at record speeds, throwing a wing around their shoulders to physically drag them closer to the table, "Yes, *please* help if you can."

Meanwhile, Sheriff Lumber was fighting to control his expression at meeting a yellow eyed thestral for the first time, while also being too worked up to really care as he spoke to Nimbus and Gloom, "I'll cut to the chase. Ya' must've been told about those bucking useless weather ponies already, Jetson said as much."

He gesticulated angrily, raindrops flying, "I know you've just arrived, but do you see what's happened? What's *been* happening? Like today, we got no warning whatsoever from the Tower about that storm. And now-"

Lumber's gaze shifted to Trail Blazer on the table, the doctor checking him over and taking his vitals. Lumber's throat bobbed, "...And now ponies have been hurt. Not just him, but the poor ponies on that ship. It's disgusting, immoral, and even more it's flat out illegal. The Heights family have been negligent, but this is now basically indirect ponyslaughter!"

"I am not disagreeing in any way," Nimbus stated loudly, "But everypony here already knows all this, or they do now. What's your point?"

Lumber paused, as he realised that all the other ponies in the room were already on the same page as him and didn't need any further convincing of the magnitude of this buck up. The helplessness had sat for long enough that the shock had faded into the anger Prey was expecting. A bubbling, resentful sort of anger. And it was slowly rising higher inside of everyone here, the storm battering the house from outside only further reminding everyone of what had gone wrong.

And the target their fresh anger locked onto was the Weather Tower ponies, the Heights family. Again, the ISND and Border Rangers had only arrived in Haven Hay this morning, as impossible as that sounded, but already Prey had heard a lot of anger and blame being directed at these Heights.

From the townsfolks perspective, the storm, and therefore the disaster it'd just caused, should have been entirely preventable by Haven Hay's only weather team.

'Oh, but what we wouldn't have given for even just five days of weather control a year on the border. And after only two weeks without, Haven Hay is already coming apart.' Prey thought cynically. But nothing was crueller than the forces of nature, he couldn't deny that.

Sheriff Lumber re-centred himself, "The Weather Tower ponies must be brought to justice. They didn't even try to help today. Where were they? I didn't see any of those airheads battling that storm. Staff Sergeant Nimbus, and, uh, Sargent Gloom, I want your help to arrest all of them, and arrest them today!"

Nimbus Feather didn't even stop to think, nevermind that this task was supposed to be the ISND's, "Yes. In fact, why haven't you done so already? You said they've been sitting on their tails and doing nothing for two weeks, yeah? Why haven't you done anything about them yet?"

Gone was the previous stance of getting all the facts first, Prey saw. 'Because suddenly it's personal. Because suddenly it's no longer black and white, and you want revenge.'

Three measly hours. The Border Rangers had been in Haven Hay for only three hours, and it had all already gone wrong. From hero to just another one of the victims.

'The ISND is cursed. We must be. How else can this keep happening?' Prey meant that seriously. Could they really be cursed? He didn't know, but it certainly seemed like they must be.

The sheriff answered Nimbus' question, unhappily grinding the admission out, "Because we, because I, haven't been able to arrest them."

"Why not?" Nimbus demanded hotly.

"Technically, they hadn't broken any law that could be proved. And the Weather Tower isn't theirs, but government property. I didn't have any authority to inspect it, only a trained weather specialist can. An' guess what? The Heights are the only trained weather specialists. That, or they just flap off or don't unlock the bucking door so I can't get in or put them in cuffs!" Lumber almost snarled. He tried to take a calming breath, but all it did was fuel the fire of anger with more air:

"There ain't no more pegasi in all of Haven Hay, and what with them and the lighthouse arguing all the time-Forget that. The short and the long of it is, they've been uncooperative bastards, but until now the due process of law has been keeping my hooves off 'em, and that smug featherbrain Gale knows it too!"

Gloom cleared his throat, cutting in for the first time, "Has there been any other evidence before now? Anything which in the light of

their inaction today could now count as evidence?"

"Isn't today enough proof of everything? That giant storm just waiting to break out on the Breathless?"

"Yes, but do you have anything *definite*?" Gloom stressed, "Because I'm sure that this Heights family could come up with a reasonable excuse, given time."

'-and the word family, does that mean there are foals? This is about to get very messy-'

Gloom was getting a lot of disbelieving looks, as if no one could quite believe he was trying to defend the clear wrongdoers in this situation. Even the doctor paused for a moment in shifting Trail Blazer with Bravo's careful help to give Gloom the eye.

Lumber chewed his words, like he wanted each one of them thoroughly crushed before he let them out, "Nothing they couldn'tah' argued, but once they're in my custody, then yes. I'll make the charges stick and make sure they get locked up, and we get a replacement weather team. A *real* weather team this time."

As if to punctuate his words, a particularly loud howl of wind made the roof tiles of the whole house rattle. A brief burst of increased water trickled in, caught by one of the placed buckets collecting the leaks.

"There is a difference between thinking and knowing there has been a crime committed. The courts hold a pony innocent until proven guilty. So are you absolutely sure this is the Heights family's fault, and theirs alone?" Gloom insisted. It wasn't that he hadn't heard all that'd been said, but he was well aware of how high tempers were running, and he refused to let this descend into any sort of mob justice.

"Yeah, I've already told you-"

"Sheriff Lumber, we do not prosecute a pony who is not present to offer their own defence. We will help you arrest them on suspicion of criminal conduct, but that does not automatically mean they are

guilty. We will interrogate them, and find out the truth first. Then we will decide if there is anything to be punished for."

Again there was that mass look of disbelief, but Gloom flatly stared all of them down:

"You may be unawares, but weather control problems have been ongoing all across Equestria since Discord's return. This is the worst and most long term, yes, but that doesn't prove a crime. It might be they've requested backup for these storms, but nopony was available for all we know. Perhaps, perhaps not. But I won't stand for jumping to conclusions. Is that clear?"

'-thestrals have been judged on hearsay all the time. I won't allow it to repeat here-'

Prey agreed completely with Gloom. There are two sides to every story, and he himself had seen how quickly and seemingly without reason a mob could escalate out of all control. He'd seen what depths of cruelty the Resistance could sink to when led by just one insane individual.

Lumber snorted, but couldn't win a staring match with Gloom. Nimbus turned his head sharply away rather than continuing to try. In the brief following silence, or relative silence with the rain hammering away, Prey carefully looked each person over and observed their thoughts.

"Fine, sure. I will, we will do it your way. You can try interrogating them for all you're worth, it's not like you'll get anything new or useful out of them idiots. They've got nothing but clouds on the bucking brain." Lumber snorted, wet tail snapping to and fro.

Jetson let out a bark of humourless laughter, before quickly smothering it as they looked at him.

Nimbus twisted round, looking between Lumber and Jetson, "Hoy. Explain that. Is there a problem going on with them we should know about?"

"No no, it's ah, well sort of yes, but no." Jetson hedged, before

Lumber rolled his eyes and angrily spoke:

"You'll see what we all mean after speaking with any of them for more than five minutes. Their nickname around the town is airheads for a damned good reason."

"Care to elaborate?" Gloom asked calmly, his eyes briefly shifting to Prey and Crimson just to check on them.

"You'll see." Lumber just repeated with a knowing, spiteful nod.

"Well, seeing is going to have to wait for a bit." Prey cheerily announced to the room.

Everyone looked over to see the lamb standing up against the cracked window, forehooves resting up on the slightly rotten windowsill, and looking out. Heavy raindrops were streaking the window panes, and the street outside was running with water, the storm still loudly lashing the town.

"Nobody is going anywhere until it's safe. Unless you're prepared to risk the path to the Weather Tower...? Then go right ahead. It's, what? Nearly an hour by hoof up rocky, wet, slippery slopes to get there? I'm happy to wait for the storm to blow over first." Prey finished, nodding out the window to what he was talking about.

"Prey's absolutely right." Gloom smoothly carried on, "Enough ponies have been hurt already by this storm. Or worse. There's nothing to gain by rushing into this and breaking a leg, or getting blown off a cliff. So we *all* are going to wait."

The storm was strong, its' dark clouds heavy with rain, and driven by strong winds. Out on the angry grey sea, the waves it churned up in its wake were frighteningly loud and high.

However, compared to the vast mountain range squatting over the Breathless Sea, waiting to break, this storm was small. It also happened to be just passing over. Those strong winds served to speed its passage across the sky and past the battered Haven Hay. After an hour and a bit, the storm passed.

The sun didn't come out, the sky remained a formless grey instead. The ground stayed just as soaked, and the biting wind continued to blow, but now you could at least set hoof outside again without immediately being drenched to the bone.

An hour was not a long time. And this storm had caused a lot of damage and strife. Now it was time for everyone to emerge and face up to the change.

The half-wrecked ship was still sitting right in the harbour's mouth, far too low in the water to move, and listing subtly to the side. All the exhausted sailors who'd been hastily rescued and rushed inside the closest house with space were still here, and now a brand new strain on Haven Hay's population.

And then there were the two ponies who'd gone over the ship's side in the storm and lost at sea.

Trail Blazer was a limp, unmoving pile of lightning-struck flesh. The Royal Guard pegasus was still alive, so there was that, but from the examination he'd performed, the doctor was hesitant to give any sort of prognosis. Every time Nimbus or the other two Border Rangers pushed him for an answer, the earth pony doctor had hummed and hawed and not given a straight yes or no. Which was an answer in and of itself, really. Trail Blazer was now lying unmoving in a bed borrowed from the house's owner.

An hour had not been long enough for anything to change, or for someone to hit upon a solution to everything. Nothing had improved, it had only gotten that bit worse. So as the ponies of Haven Hay started to emerge by some unspoken signal in the storm’s wake, it was to an ugly mood.

'At least an hour was long enough to dry off.' Prey thought, swinging his pack onto his back as they stepped out the door. Gloom and Crimson still needed to go by and fetch their saddlebags from the lighthouse. He suspiciously wondered if Flash Light, or his wife Sandy Shine, had dared to try stealing from their bags. If so, they were going to regret it.

Outside, seagulls were already cawing everywhere again, carried on

the moaning wind.

"You need to stay in control of this one." Prey muttered to Gloom as the three of them moved into the street. They were the first ones out, Jetson, Sheriff Lumber, and the Border Rangers still at the door.

"What do you mean?" Gloom asked, eyeing the resident ponies emerging from houses.

"The whole town is angry. This is close to being the last straw. If Lumber starts throwing around more accusations at the weather team, these lot might turn into a mob." Prey said, eyes roving over the congregating ponies.

He saw scowls, ears back, angry expressions, and heard the hot words starting to flow. One pony complaining to the next, and that one reciprocating with their own bitterness, building up the other's discontent. Then another pony would join in, or they'd join a different huddle, and the anger would spread and grow. It was already happening right in front of them.

"Ah. Right. That." Gloom looked, and he saw what Prey meant. A potential mob.

'-they've all privately been blaming the Heights family for the last two weeks. Now they're doing it all openly together. It's the last straw for them-'

And the potential mob was steadily growing even as they looked on.

Crimson glanced back over his shoulder. His wing flicked, and he quietly warned; "The sheriff is coming out now. What do we do?"

They needed to make a decision quickly. They had less than a minute to settle on a course of action. Already the closest ponies had noticed the emergence of their sheriff, their town's law figure, and their moods were shifting. They wanted more than answers this time, they already *had* their answer. It was the Weather Tower ponies' faults.

What they wanted now was action.

"We could fly ahead to the Weather Tower, take the Heights into custody ourselves before anyone else reaches them." Crimson suggested, tilting his head skywards.

"Or stop Lumber before he can doing something stupid." Prey put forth, eyeing the swelling crowd on the streets. There had been no agreement or signal to congregate, but this was also what happened after a disaster. Those who had witnessed gathered in its wake. Angry voices were starting to rise above the wind and the gulls.

Gloom thought furiously, trying to find a path to the solution. He hissed through his fangs, "Moon blast it. This could all go so wrong."

Gloom swiftly turned to intercept Lumber before he could incite anything, "Sheriff-"

It turned out, it wasn't the town's sheriff they should've been on guard against. They should have been watching their own first.

Lumber paused at the thestral's call, but Nimbus Feather didn't. The Pegasus strode forwards gathering speed, wings spreading, and jumped into the air with a powerful clap of wings.

"Crimson, quickly, block him-", Prey's warning was too late. Nimbus taking to the air, and resplendent in his gold Royal Guard armour, had already drawn every pony's eyes up to him.

"-Too late." Prey sighed, and Crimson stalled in the action of taking off after Nimbus.

Nimbus was an impressive stallion; large wings, strong, brilliant white teeth, and most importantly, had the confidence and ego to go with it. It was that confidence which allowed him to catch the attention of every angry resident in the crowd, just for that first moment as they all waited for the important and confident looking pony to address them.

"He isn't going to, is he?" Gloom asked, but no one aside from Prey and Crimson were listening.

"I'm Staff Sargent Nimbus Feather of Her Royal Majesty's Guard!" Nimbus shouted above the heads of the crowd, strong voice easily carrying over the wind, "Yeah, the same one who was out trying to fight that storm an hour ago, just in case you missed it. Me and my squad came here to put a stop to all this wild weather. We touched down in your town like, literally just this morning. And already we've had to fight a rogue storm. I didn't see your supposed weather ponies out there helping, did you?"

Nimbus Feather exaggeratedly swept his gaze over the crowd as if searching for the absent weather team, as loud denials came those who weren't afraid of speaking up echoed back the answers.

"That's what I thought! So nopony here is gonna' have any problem when we arrest them, yeah?"

A surge of eager anger answered back, "About time!", "The sheriff has taken too long!", "Arrest them warts them all!", "Break down their home!", "See how they like it!", "That'll be fair!"

The sudden fervour with which the whole crowd was gripped was alarming. It was shocking how quickly they willingly let their emotions take control. Prey looked around, looking for an escape route in case they needed to run. Gloom was gritting his teeth, fangs showing:

'-that absolute fool traitor idiot!-'

Nimbus hovered in place, "Hey, I've got this, don't worry. They *will* be punished. We're about to go up to their tower right now and arrest them."

The surge of excited anger was spreading, rising higher. They'd been a dry tinderbox, all they'd needed was that last spark, "Break the tower.", "Throw away the key!", "Get rid of them.", "I'm going. Who's with me?!", "Let's go get them already!"

Nimbus crossed his forehooves in an 'X' of negation over his chest, "Hold on a second there!"

"Kick some sense into that empty airhead!", "Justice for Haven

Hay!", "Justice! Law! Order!", "Bucking airheads!"

"Hoy! I said hold on a second there!" Nimbus bellowed, for a second drowning the crowd out. A few moments later, and it would have been too late, the crowd had been right on the tipping point of boiling over into becoming a mob.

In the surprised moment of relative quiet as the still crowd, not quite a mob yet but very almost, paused to wonder why their leader was telling them to wait, Nimbus gestured:

"This is about justice! Not revenge. Justice! Let's get that one fact straight, this is justice. One of my guys was hit by lightning! He's in there now, fighting for his life. But I'm not going up there to take revenge. I am the Royal Guard, so I am justice! I represent the law. There is no place for 'I' in team, and same here!"

"Well, I honestly wasn't expecting that. Let's see if he gets away with it or if we're about to have a riot on our hooves." Prey muttered loudly enough for only Gloom and Crimson to hear.

Someone in the crowd, someone even more disenfranchised than their fellows, shouted out against the golden-armoured figure of Celestia's authority hovering above them; "That just means they're going to get away with it! *Again*!"

"And what's revenge got to do with that, huh?", Nimbus immediately shot back, even louder, "You're the bigger pony, aren't you? So tighten your buckles and pony up! But yeah, I get where you're coming from. So here's my offer to you, to all of you! You all listening? Good and proper? Well here's my offer!"

Nimbus had the flow of the crowd. He rode it, always just ahead of the wave, a precarious balance that if he lost, the crowd would turn on him next. But right now, he controlled the flow. With a powerful down beat, he rose another few hooves higher, making the ponies below look up to him even more with bated breath, just waiting to see what he was about to say:

"You wanna' make sure justice is done? Good! I invite every single pony here to come on up to the weather tower, and see us arrest the

Heights family for yourselves. They're not gonna' fly off anywhere with me there ready to catch them, and I'll dunk them into the ground like a hoofball if they even try. So you wanna' see justice? Then come along and make sure for yourselves. But only justice! *Not* revenge."

"That idiot." Gloom stated. Not angrily, or loudly, but tiredly. Only Prey and Crimson understood.

"Well, that's one way of managing the situation. Annnnd potentially making it twice as bad." Prey observed, almost awed by the cocktail of brash and stupid that was Nimbus Feather at this moment. But awed was not the same as impressed at all. He turned to Crimson.

"Crimson." Prey caught the pegasus' attention, snapping him away from blankly staring Nimbus Feather. The crowd milled about for a second, trying to decide what they wanted more, and then swelled with a roar of agreement of Nimbus' words.

"What?" Gloom also twisted, one eye on the crowd and the other on Prey and Crimson.

Prey gestured, "Fly ahead. Get to the weather tower first. Make sure they don't fly away the moment they see this huge mob tramping up the hill. If they run, it'll be like blood in the water. This mob will turn into a true mob if that happens."

Prey was not the one supposed to be giving orders, Gloom was the Sargent, but they were all three of them beyond that. Back in Canterlot, where they had to stick to their roles in the Night Guard, it was different. But that was there, and this was here. After all they'd done together, how could they not have learned trust, and have had that trust reinforced time and again? If one of them thought they knew best in any given situation, especially when time was precious, then the other two would snap default to following their lead. If there was time to discuss and raise a counter argument, then that was fine too, but not when it was an emergency.

Besides which, Gloom caught on to what Prey meant immediately himself, "Yes, you're the fastest flyer Crimson. Me and Prey will take

the ground route with all these ponies. You get there, make sure the Heights are there, and make sure they don't run."

Crimson flexed his wings, looking up at the grey and overcast sky, "Which way is the Weather Tower?"

That was his way of agreement, immediately asking how to implement their plan.

Gloom looked to Prey, expecting him to know the answer. With hastily called up memories of all the maps he'd memorised before coming here, Prey orientated and pointed in a direction to the east, "That way. Fly for just over four miles, but if you don't see it or it's too foggy, stop flying and land. Do not keep going in the sky under any circumstances. Because if you somehow miss the Weather Tower, the Cliffs of Dove are further on."

Prey stressed that part, making sure Crimson understood the potential danger if he overshot. Crimson was far from incompetent, but it only took one mistake.

"I've got it. Thank you for the warning." Crimson said, backing up a few steps to get enough take-off space. "I will see you both there."

Prey covered his eyes from any sand kicked up as Crimson took off almost vertically, passing seagulls which shrieked angrily and ungracefully as they flapped out of the way. Prey uncovered his eyes and looked up just in time to see Crimson give them both a nod, and then he was off.

Over with Nimbus and the crowd/possible mob, they hadn't even noticed Crimson's departure, or at least didn't care. The ponies were gearing up to go, mostly mentally, but some were grabbing thick coats, waterproof travel cloaks, or rain hats. No pitchforks and torches, yet. But it wasn't even midday yet, so a torch for light was redundant, and carrying one for a more violent purpose was pointless. It was four miles to the Weather Tower, uphill in the wind, wet, and possibly rain. How were you going to keep any torch burning for that long?

Prey actually even spotted and overheard a few telling family where

they were going, and not to worry as they'd be back soon. 'How very responsible and conscientious of them. Don't want the wife to worry. Or husband.'

But an angry crowd of over five hundred ponies out for revenge, or justice if you believed Nimbus' words, was anything but reasonable and conscientious.

Prey saw Sheriff Lumber going right along with the swelling crowd, standing in the front, shouting his agreement to Nimbus Feather. The perfect example of an upright, unbiased, law-abiding official.

Nimbus turned himself about mid-air, and shouted over their heads, "Let's go!"

Prey and Gloom followed just behind the marching crowd on hoof, but at a hoof removed. They weren't part of the potential mob.

This was wrong, against the law, and flat-out dumb, but Nimbus Feather had thrown that all out the window by taking the lead. Of course, he'd probably argue the mob had already formed and he was actually acting to try to minimise the damage by directing them instead.

'-but he's still going to have to face up to this once we get back to Canterlot-'

Outside of the port town, the sea wind whipped over the rocky hilltops, the grass and plants tough and spiky. But for all that, it had a capturing, undeniable rugged beauty. Open, stretching hilltops blurred by grey rain squalls and low hanging cloud. And taking up one half of the world, the unending view of the restless sea.

The smell of the sea was a constant, as was the sound of distant waves and wind blowing in your face. And the seagulls too, of course.

There was a trail of sorts leading the four miles to the Weather Tower, but not much of one. Few who came this way couldn't simply fly, after all. But nevertheless, the angry crowd of over five-

hundred marched up it, moving in a swell rather than in winding single file.

Nor were they silent for the trip. They were loud, angry, and working to maintain their anger. If Nimbus' plan had been to wear them out over a four plus mile trot and give them time to cool off, well it was obviously failing.

Prey sent a dirty look over the heads of the crowd to the figure in question flying at the front, cheerfully leading the potential mob onwards. Inky was up there too, flying right behind him. Bravo had been left behind to stay at Trail Blazer's bedside.

After the first mile, the hilltops and path took a definite turn towards the rockier, the wet ground hard and studded with the tops of wind-scoured boulders, the bulk of the rock still buried beneath their hooves. The rockier terrain didn't slow the marching ponies though.

Prey just kept putting one hoof in front of the other, keeping pace with Gloom here at the back. The thestral was worrying about the report he was going to have to send back to Nighthawk, and wondering how condemning of Nimbus Feather he should be in it.

'-there's unprofessional, and then there's this-'

"If this turns into a lynch mob, what's the plan?" Prey asked, eyes looking ahead.

"It won't."

"Right, but if it does?"

Gloom was silent for a moment, "Stay far out of the way. Me and Crimson can fly, and so can the Heights family. We'll get them into the sky. Sargent Nimbus won't actually try to fight us, or he'd better not. If it comes down to it, one of us can carry you with us."

"Don't touch me." Prey immediately muttered.

"It's not going to come to that, so don't worry, we won't have to." Gloom said firmly.

First it was the distant shape of a lone tree. Then it became dark spire of rock. And finally it was too large for any of that and became a tower. And then larger still as the Weather Tower finally came into focus and they arrived at their destination.

The Weather Tower, designed by highly skilled architects, and built by a contingent of unicorns to exact specifications who'd travelled all the way out here from Cloudsdale and Canterlot. It was equipped with magical equipment to generate weather, and reinforced enough to survive tornado force winds.

It didn't remind Prey so much as a giant nail hammered into the bedrock of the hilltop.

A giant, pale white nail. Craning your head back from the ground level, it was difficult to accurately judge size, but it was big, and Prey was guessing forty or fifty meters high at least. Its walls were perfectly smooth and round, not enough space between white blocks to force even the tip of a knife. The tower was completely vertical, no narrowing or widening of the column until you hit the 'nail head' at the top, which was actually a circular observatory room.

The walls and stone didn't show the wear of the salt or weather. In fact, the smooth, pale walls almost gleamed. 'So it's magically enhanced, then.'

The Weather Tower was certainly impressive, but Prey had also seen the Mage Towers of Canterlot, and so this rather paled in comparison. Maybe that's why they'd gone for the pale white colour scheme?

Of course, that was only when comparing it to a Mage Tower. In and of itself, the Weather Tower rising before him was still without a doubt the best built, and likely most near-unbreakable structure within three hundred miles. And only three hundred, because Prey knew that was the distance to the next closest Weather Tower. This one had been built here ninety-eight years ago, and received full maintenance visits every three years, Prey further knew from his background research.

'So when the sheriff said he couldn't gain access, he probably meant it quite literally. As in, he couldn't force entry in.' For a moment, Prey imagined Lumber trying to beat down the impregnable, magically-reinforced steel door with his bare hooves.

'Hah. May as well try to chop down a tree with a slice of bread.'

The people of Haven Hay weren't anywhere near as impressed with the reinforced and pristine appearance of the Weather Tower. They weren't here for that, they were here to punish the tower's keepers! They didn't care about the impressive visage of the tower, not when it wasn't doing its damned job!

But just as none of the five hundred ponies were interested in that, Prey was not interested in any of them or what they were shouting about. Aside from the top of the 'nail head', there were no windows set into the Weather Tower. Prey squinted up, trying to see any shadow of movement behind the glass. He turned around in a slow circle, methodically scanning the grey, heavy, hanging sky and open air. Nimbus, Lumber, and some other big earth pony Prey hadn't seen before were all hammering on the tower's door, ordering:

"Windy Heights! Gale Heights! By the authority of the Royal Guard, unlock this door!"

The crowd of angry ponies were pressing in around the door too, hundreds of hooves stamping and stomping, the heavy drumming raising a din more intimidating than what they were shouting. Prey had heard the saying, "The safest place to be in an elephant stampede is directly behind it". The elephant was this mob, and so long as Gloom and Prey didn't get in their way, it was actually better to be here than waiting without any information back in Haven Hay.

"It's too late to hide now!", "Gale Heights!", "Not so fun on the other end, huh? Huh?!", "Windy!", "Cowardly buckers!", "Gale! Windy!" And so on and so forth trumpeted the elephant, the mass an angry animal.

Prey and Gloom were standing well back, but the door the crowd was banging and kicking didn't budge. There was no movement

behind the windows above, nor any light in the tower. Prey looked all around the grey hilltop, ignoring the biting chill of the wind, and didn't see what he was looking for.

Gloom asked what Prey was thinking, "Where's Crimson?"

Unease rose unpleasantly in the back of Prey's throat. He tried to swallow it down. Where was Crimson? He'd gone ahead, so he should be here already.

Hastily, Prey shut his eyes, blocking out the hill, crowd, and tower, and focused inwards. He reached out for the link he knew was there, blindly feeling out after it.

The electrite feather. Prey opened his eyes, 'There.'

Fifty odd meters away, another barren, rocky hill rose. It took Prey a long minute to spot the slightly larger boulder, which just so happened to have a tiny gully overgrown with scraggly plants behind it. Prey stared hard at it, until abruptly the plants shifted and for a moment Crimson looked back across the hilltop, letting himself be seen.

He didn't give any signal, just waited long enough to be sure Prey had spotted him. Then he pulled back behind the boulder and returned to hiding.

"What's he doing hiding over there?" Gloom asked worriedly. Prey realised the thestral followed where he was looking to spot Crimson too.

Prey quickly looked away from the other hilltop, "I don't know, but he obviously doesn't want to draw the mob’s attention." He muttered out of the side of his mouth.

Gloom swiftly turned his gaze away from the hill too, "Give nothing away. We'll wait and meet back up after they leave." He ordered, rather unnecessarily. Obviously, Crimson didn't want to be spotted, so what else were they going to do?

'-damn damn and double damn. Is there danger? No, he would've warned us, not merely hidden. But why? What else could it be?-'

'Why? Because he's found something the mob shouldn't see.' Prey thought, but he couldn't very well tell Gloom that. They just had to stand here as they had been doing, and not raise any suspicions.

The trumpeting of the crowd was getting louder, angrier. The door wasn't being opened, but there was no way they were getting through that reinforced steel with brute force alone, not when not a single one of them were unicorns.

"GALE!", "WINDY!", "JUSTICE!"

Their inability to break in wasn't necessarily a good thing. If they couldn't break in, what might they do instead to express their anger? A mob was not a logical animal. If it couldn't trample whoever got in its way, it might just instead start lashing out at everyone else regardless of where they stood.

Logic didn't factor in at all. A mob was only as intelligent as its stupidest member. It wouldn't be until afterwards that they'd even feel any guilt and it was far too late by then.

Prey's hoof warily started creeping for the pack on his back. Inside, at the bottom, the bone rot mine sat. No, Prey caught himself, that was not the answer at all. It had merely been instinct.

"Gloom..." He began warily.

"Hold. We stay here." Gloom stated.

The mob was surrounding the whole tower, not just the door. Stomp, stomp, stomp! The rumbling was a constant now, thrumming in the ground with anger.

"GALE!", "WINDY!", "JUSTICE!"

Prey didn't spot the moment when either Nimbus or Inky finally recalled that they could fly, or if it was one of the raging crowd who reminded them, he was too busy worrying what was going to happen and trying to plan out his escape route on hoof.

Whichever it had been, Nimbus and Inky left banging on the impenetrable door to the mob, and it *was* entirely a mob now, and

flew up to the tower's observation deck, and then disappeared over the top.

Prey and Gloom anxiously waited. The crowd, not so much. Mixed into the angry shouting, there were some very vile threats starting to be howled. In the mob, it was impossible to tell from who, and that emboldened them.

Prey's eyes snapped up to the tower top as he saw the gold-plated figure of Nimbus reappear and tip forwards off the edge. His wings snapped open and he wheeled around the tower in a fast descending spiral.

He drew up, flapping hard in place and shouted down at the mob.

"It's empty. They're not here!"

The seething crowd didn't seem to hear him.

He shouted again, louder, "They're gone! There's nopony here!"

And did the mob care? No. It only made them angrier. They wanted vengeance! Nimbus had tried to lead them with the promise of justice instead, but now he couldn't deliver.

"Oh that utter fool." Prey heard Gloom growl.

Only now did the hovering Nimbus realise he'd never really been in control, that all his efforts had only stirred things up further. The mob of raging ponies, all lost in the grip of herd anger, would not be satisfied until they'd taken something back from the unfairness of this.

It was Nimbus' subordinate, Inky, who realised what her Staff Sargent obviously had not, and acted. She made the choice to give the townsponies an outlet for that anger. From inside, the reinforced door of the Weather Tower unlocked and swung open.

Prey only saw inside for a moment, Inky hastily taking off and flying up to the ceiling to get out of the way, and then the mob was surging inside, fighting to get through the door, and eager to destroy.

"Let me rephrase that," Gloom said tightly, "Those utter fools."

"The Weather Tower doesn't belong to the Heights family. It's government property." Prey very calmly observed as the mob poured in. And its interior and weather instruments were all about to be gutted and destroyed.

Gloom just covered his face with a leathery wing, unable to watch the stupidity taking place in front of them.

Prey and Gloom stood outside on the windy hilltop. They didn't move, not towards Crimson's hiding place, nor to find any shelter, even when a small rain shower blew over them.

They just stood far back from the Weather Tower, and listened to the shouts and sounds of breaking echoing from time to time.

It took half an hour for the mob's fires of anger to finally simmer down, and for them to finish rampaging.

It was almost interesting, in a way, to see who came back outside when. Which groups of ponies were satisfied after only ten minutes of mindless vandalism, which kept going for the entire time, and which were somewhere in the middle.

Last out of the thrown-open door, by some agreed design, was Sheriff Lumber, Nimbus, and Inky, even if it was unlikely they'd been joining in for that full half an hour. No, they'd just overseen everything instead. Real coat holders.

Then, and *only* then, as the much quieter ponies milled about in groups and tried to decide what to do now, did Prey and Gloom approach.

Very cautiously, Prey followed closely behind Gloom in approaching the tower door. He eyed every earth pony they passed with the deepest suspicion, just waiting for one of them to snap back to unreasoning anger at the drop of a hat. Prey was very aware of the weight of where his ribbon hung, and where the three knives were he'd hidden about his person and backpack straps.

'Any of you try touching *me*, and I'll kill you by touching *you*.' Prey silently warned them.

Prey neither saw, nor heard, any contrition or guilt in the ponies he passed. Maybe that would come later, but there was none right now. Those ponies who'd remained behind in Haven Hay were the reasonable ones. But these five hundred? They'd come out here looking for a fight.

A blue furred mare, proudly relating smashing; "-That table in one buck." The stallion next to her showing off the silver spoon he'd crumpled into a ball from out of his pocket. Another lamenting how it was too wet for a good fire.

Lumber, Inky, and Nimbus stood just outside the door. The sheriff looked grimly pleased. Nimbus was unusually quiet, not smiling. Inky was frowning and muttering darkly to herself. All three turned to look at Gloom and Prey as they quietly stepped up.

Gloom looked coolly back, and Prey smiled brightly.

"So they weren't here, were they?" Gloom asked flatly.

"Aye, that they weren't." Lumber nodded, brushing a splinter off his worn raincoat.

"So they wrecked the building instead?" Gloom needlessly asked. He didn't add, 'And *you* let them'.

Nimbus' feathers bristled, "They went out of control." He defended.

"They weren't going to listen to reason." Inky put in, very aware that she was the one who'd unlocked the door. But Inky's guilt didn't matter to her nearly as much over her anxiety for the lightning-struck Trail Blazer.

'-Bravo's waiting with him, but anything could happen while I'm out here, and not back there-'

"What's done is done." Lumber stated, not sounding very repentant at all, despite him being supposed to be the sheriff.

'-right or wrong, they all feel they've endured attacks at the hooves of the weather ponies-', Gloom reminded himself. He very carefully kept his voice an even calm:

"The Weather Tower is necessary to managing the weather, regardless of whether the Heights were doing their job or not. It didn't belong to them, it belonged to the government. And now it's been destroyed."

"It's not like we gave them permission. They weren't listening to anypony." Nimbus snapped back. His accusing glare said what his voice didn't:

'-I didn't see you bravely trying to block the door with your own body, either-'

'-that's because you're the one who merrily led them up here in the first place-', Gloom's accusing look answered right back.

Lumber snorted, but he couldn't deny that. Inky however did, "Hey! Take that back and shove it. The tower's still standing, and it'll still work."

Gloom very deliberately turned his head to stare at her, "Oh? Please explain that."

Inky glared over Gloom's shoulder, tail swishing, and huffed the strand of her mane out of her eyes, "Unlike you, sir, I've worked shifts in a weather factory. I know the basics of what machines you still need to work a tower with."

Inky's words were a lot more confident than her posture indicated. And a weather factory and a weather tower were two different things.

But Gloom didn't bother pointing that out, instead merely repeating himself in the exact same even tone of voice, "Oh? Which means....?"

"It means that Private Ink Stain thought to lock the door to the enchanted weather equipment before she unlocked the front door to let the luddites in." Prey spoke up cheerily. There was a jingle, and

everyone stared in surprise at the lamb as he held up a laden keyring. Everyone but Gloom, that is.

"How did-?" Inky fumbled for keys which were no longer there.

"*Hey*." Nimbus reached for Prey, and Gloom smoothly stepped in his path.

"Let's go have a look at what's not broken, shall we?" Gloom enquired politely, but yellow eyes hard, "Inside? In private? You know, perhaps where certain ponies won't hear, and won't come back for a second go at it?"

Without waiting for the answer, Gloom entered, following after Prey who'd already gone on in.

The constant, never ceasing low sound of wind and waves cut off behind Prey as he entered the recently vacated Weather Tower. Two things immediately jumped out to Prey, closely followed by a third.

The first was the most visibly obvious; the mess. Shattered picture frames, the glass kicked everywhere, logbooks and weather charts torn to shreds and stamped into the rugs. The tables and chairs were now only so much kindling. Mud, horseshoe-shaped dents in the wall, and cracked plaster was everywhere.

The second thing was only obvious to Prey; the painful prickling of needles starting up in his hooves, signalling the presence of magic. But since it wasn't a shooting pain, he could deduce it wasn't active, but rather likely passive enchantments throughout portions of the Weather Tower.

Nothing had been left untouched, which was where the third observation came in.

As Prey looked around, he realised this bottom floor of the Weather Tower had actually been a home, since ponies who worked at a Weather Tower were expected to live at their work, and they needed somewhere to live.

Had been a home very much like the lighthouse they'd passed through earlier today, actually. Had. Except a fair bit wider, since the Weather Tower was about double the size of Haven Hay's lighthouse.

Which gave a pointed insight into one of the reasons why the lighthouse keepers, Flash Light and Sandy, probably disliked the Weather Tower's keepers so much. They thought the pegasi, who didn't even seem to do their jobs, didn't deserve the better tower.

It wasn't a home any longer, though. There was not a single fixture which might make a house a 'home' left. Prey idly wondered what the mob had done in the bathroom.

In their destruction, the mob had also inadvertently destroyed any possible clues the ISND had been hoping to find here. Just wonderful.

Gloom stepped in behind him and also looked over the vandalism. "It's the same all the way up the tower too, isn't it?" He guessed.

"Let's find out." Prey said, making for the stairs in which the railings had been torn out of the wall, bricks and sharp screws sticking up.

Prey didn't have to worry about any traps, not with how hundreds of ponies had been tearing up and down here not five minutes ago. Since they were all still alive, he climbed the freshly broken stairs up to the second level only having to worry about the blanket covering of splinters everywhere and the odd nail.

More of the same greeted him at the top of the first staircase; smashed crystal lights, and some sort of storage room for tools and boxes which'd been thoroughly and methodically broken.

Prey didn't stop, he kept going up onto the third floor, also similarly wrecked, except this one had every surface covered with feathers from mattresses, blankets, and pillows ripped to bits. Had those beds even been used, Prey wondered, and not cloud beds instead?

Where had the Heights gone? Where were they now? And would they be coming back?

After the third trashed floor however, came the actual Weather Tower rooms. At forty plus meters of height, the Weather Tower had a lot more vertical space in it to go.

The feeling of 'house' to 'working building' was a sharp contrast the moment your head cleared the third floor. It would have been far more jarring if you weren't in reality just changing one type of destroyed room for the next. All that actually changed was *what* the mob had destroyed.

Prey carefully stepped over the mangled mess of a metal cabinet which had been filled with delicate crystal components. *Had* been. The colony of fire ants stinging his hooves as he stepped in told him all he needed to know about the shattered and broken equipment strewn against the walls everywhere.

'-how many thousands of bits worth of damage is just this room alone?-', Prey heard Gloom think as the thestral ascended the stairs behind him.

"Personally, I'm wondering how much in fines those law-abiding and upstanding townsfolk, who so bravely stood up to take justice into their own hooves, are each going to have to pay." Prey joked, already making for the next set of trashed stairs up onto the tower's fifth floor.

It turned out the fifth section was not like the previous four, compact floors. It was here that the interior of the tower really changed. A deep hum filled the air, which also changed to a moving, noticeable air current shifting the air.

Here, the roof abruptly shot straight up, maybe twenty meters, until you hit the floor of the observatory room right at the top.

Looking up, it felt like you were a little sparrow who'd fallen down a massive, concrete-white chimney, the circular walls curving in all around you. The centre of the tower here however was not empty air, but filled with rods and bars, supporting struts securely bolted to the wall every few hooves up, all to support the huge contraption hanging in the middle of the tower.

Prey looked up at the giant metal puzzle of pipes and rods, and saw what was filling the air with that low, thrumming hum. Supported in the air, the machine was made up of a stack of huge, horizontal fan blades, stacked on top of one another, slowly turning.

Some of the fans had three blades, some four, some five, and some ten or more. Each was slowly spinning at a different speed, constantly shifting how deep into the fans you could see as gaps in the huge blades lined up or overlapped.

Prey looked up at it all, as Gloom entered behind him.

"I guess that was a bit too big for them to destroy with bare hooves." Gloom said, voice echoing slightly up the tower.

"They still got whatever those were on the ground," Prey said, pointing to the wreckage of some more instruments which were never going to work again, "But who was going to be dumb enough to try to climb up there? Okay, stupid question, they were a mob, but it seems they were at least scared of heights."

There was no maintenance ladder going up the side of the weather-machine-turbine-thing, and the stairs which circled the tower up to the observation room above didn't touch the huge machine filling the airspace of the tower's centre.

Without wings, you'd have to risk jumping off the stairs to catch onto one of the metal struts, and hope you didn't miss.

'This whole building was built with pegasi in mind. Not angry, disgruntled earth ponies.'

"So where's this equipment Inky said was still intact? Because none of that looks intact in the slightest." Gloom asked, wing flicking towards the broken and gutted components strewn across the floor and walls.

"Assuming she wasn't talking about these fans, but something else, then by process of elimination, right up the top in the observation room." Prey guessed. He gave the keys he still carried a jingle, "Let's see if she was telling the truth."

Together, they started up the winding staircase, hoofsteps echoing slightly on the concrete as the thrumming hum of the slowly spinning fans filled the air.

Gloom could have flown up directly, but he chose to take the stairs after Prey.

The stairs circled the inside of the tower four times before they got to the top. Once there, Prey was finally presented with the locked door Inky had been talking about. It seemed at least a few enterprising mob ponies had climbed all the way up here, as evidenced by the cosmetic damage easily visible to the door and frame, but that was as far as they'd gotten in.

The door was a solid metal hatch affair, meant to be firmly sealed, and unless Prey missed his guess, was further enchanted to help protect any occupants in the observatory while the weather machine below was producing possibly dangerous weather. Like lightning, as Trail Blazer could have attested if he were here. The door hatch didn't have a handle, rather it had a solid metal lever, one which was mildly scuffed and deformed from repeated hammer blows, but still worked fine once Prey unlocked the door.

He spun the key into the lock, and then stretched up as high as he could to hook the lever and pull it down with a heavy metal **clunk** of unlocking internal bolts. The thick door swung outwards on balanced hinges, and a short stairwell let you climb up and out into the observatory room above. Which they did.

Prey turned in a slow circle on the floor. Every side of the circular observatory room was filled in with glass windows, making it into a giant fishbowl.

There was surprisingly little machinery in here. Nor did the controls of the huge weather turbines below look that complicated. Just one circular control board with levers in the dead centre of the room, and that was it. That left the rest of the observatory room rather bare and uncluttered. There was however a massive pair of binoculars on an arm suspended from the ceiling. But otherwise, the whole room was remarkably bare.

Prey spotted a clipboard hanging from a peg with sheets of scrawl-covered papers haphazardly attached, and went over to take it down.

He flipped through the pages of badly scrawled numbers and weather observations, but found nothing else. Certainly no helpful and convenient clues about why the Heights family hadn't been doing their job, or when everything had started to go wrong, or where they might've mysteriously disappeared to.

Gloom slowly paced around the room, peering out the thick windows. It was hard to judge from the inside how thick the glass actually was, but thick was the answer. Gloom stopped by the suspended binoculars, pushing his helmet up on his head so he could bring his eyes to the stocks. He deliberately did not touch or adjust the oversized binoculars, wanting to see exactly where the last person to use them had been looking.

Prey's droopy ear twitched as he caught the sound of flapping over the thrum of the fans coming from below. He ignored Nimbus and Inky as they alighted at the recessed metal door, and trotted on up the last set of stairs. Instead, Prey looked upwards.

He'd had a question from the moment he'd seen the two Royal Guards disappear over the top of the Weather Tower's roof. How had they gotten in?

The answer was a circular hatch above Prey's head in the roof, just as heavy and reinforced as every other outer door leading into and out of the weather tower. There was no ladder or set of stairs leading up to the hatch, meaning it was only for maintenance, or only expected to be used by pegasi.

Nimbus stomped up the stairs and back into the observatory room, face fixed in a scowl. "There's nothing here I tell ya'. We already looked on our way through."

Gloom's tufted ears flicked, but he didn't look away from peering through the binoculars, "Nothing that you saw. Now it's our turn to check."

Inky stalked up to one of the windows, tail and wings unable to sit still. Now that the rush had passed, she was finding it increasingly difficult not to think about Trail Blazer's condition back in Haven Hay.

'-sun smile on him, let him be okay. No, I don't need to worry, of course he's going to pull through. Stop worrying. Stop worrying-'

"Where did they run off to? Where d'you think they're hiding?" Inky blurted the first question that came to her, desperate for a distraction.

"Who knows? But we're going to find out. They'll have to return eventually, and they'll answer for themselves too." Nimbus stated unnecessarily loudly.

That was false. The Heights didn't *have* to return here for any reason whatsoever. They could fly off into the sunset, or more likely a raincloud, and no one from Haven Hay would ever see them again. Or it might be simpler than that, and they couldn't return. It's a bit hard to undertake any journey if you're dead.

'-are we too late this time too? Is there going to be another salt cellar out there waiting for us to stumble across?-', Gloom thought darkly, unable to help the morbid flash striking him. The unobservant Inky and Nimbus still hadn't questioned why Crimson was absent yet. They hadn't noticed him taking off ahead of them back at Haven Hay, either. They probably assumed he'd been left behind in town.

Inky and Nimbus' restless agitation grew when Gloom didn't comment or look away from the binocular's view.

Nimbus pawed the floor with one forehoof, "What's so riveting about that pair of giant specs?"

"I have a question." Prey interrupted. He pointed straight up at the roof hatch.

"How did you get in? Was it unlocked, or was there an emergency access bar on the outside?"

"How does that matter?" Nimbus frowned, the frustration at Gloom for not having the courtesy to look at them when addressed piling on top of everything else.

His tone was enough to get Gloom to turn away from the binoculars, "If Prey's asking, it usually does matter. So how did you get inside?"

Nimbus snorted, neither him nor Inky willing to believe the notion. At any other time, they would've been much more reasonable, but this wasn't any other time. Especially when it was a precocious foal asking them. "Tch. It was unlocked, because that's obviously how they left, duh. Because the front door was locked, *remember*? How does any of that matter?"

"So there was no emergency access lever or anything?" Prey pressed.

"That's what I just *said*. No, there was nothing of the sort."

"I trust Prey to know what he's doing." Gloom stated firmly, biting back from adding:

'-and what little trust I had in you is all gone. Prey always comes through. You've crumbled the moment you've seen what the ISND runs up against all the time-'

Nimbus' hoof pawed along the floor again, "Fine. I'm stallion enough to admit I might be wrong about this one thing. So tell me, why does it matter so much that the door was unlocked? So what? That's just how they flew out of here before we could catch them."

Prey was very tempted to shrug and say, 'Oh, no reason' simply to spite the angry stallion, but not after Gloom had just stood up for him. "Because it means they opened the hatch from in here. And not that someone, or something, forced entry from the outside. That could make a big difference."

"Yeaaaaah, I'm not seeing it. So what? They left. What of it?"

"It might mean nothing, but why not then take the keys with them? Why not lock the hatch behind themselves?" Prey held up the

keyring in question again.

Inky rolled her eyes, sarcastically answering before Nimbus could, "Caus' they forgot? Because they didn't need to? Because only they can fly up there? Because you can't lock the door from the outside? Any of those."

"All certainly possibilities." Prey admitted.

Nimbus impatiently gestured with a half unfolded wing when Prey didn't go on, "And? What?"

"And those are all certainly possibilities." Prey simply repeated.

Nimbus stared. Then his thin temper snapped and he threw up his wings, "That's it?! Important my left flank! We're flying back to Haven Hay, where there's ponies we might actually be able to help! When you're done wasting time you can join us."

Nimbus Feather whirled around in a display of gold armour and feathers, and stomped down the stairs. Inky gave Prey a withering look and stomped after her Sargent. Prey just gave them a departing smile.

Gloom glowered after them, yellow eyes narrowed. Only once they were definitely gone did Gloom give his wings a shake and turn to Prey.

"Was that actually important, Prey?" He checked.

"In the grand scheme of this investigation, I don't know yet. But since Inky confirmed it can't be relocked from the outside, it does prove something, though. Assuming it wasn't plain forgetfulness, and that they don't just always leave the hatch unlocked, then either they left in a great hurry, or were expecting to return. One of those two."

"Which begs the question that we don't know the answer to; which one was it?" Gloom muttered. He closed his eyes and rubbed wearily at the poison burn scarring underneath.

'-by the moon, I pray to Luna that wherever they went, they're at

least still alive to regret their choices-'

"What did you see out of the binoculars?" Prey asked, changing the subject.

Gloom reopened his slitted eyes to glance at the ocular enhancers in question, "Oh, the stormfront. The big one over the Breathless Sea. It seems the Heights, despite what everypony else says, weren't blind to what's building up out there off the coast."

Prey would have taken a look for himself, if the binoculars weren't suspended above his reach, and he didn't see any stool around to stand on.

"So what's the plan now?" Prey asked into the silence of the observation room, "Talk to and find out what Crimson saw, and why he's hiding, obviously, but what about after that?"

"Reunite with Crimson, yes. After that, I don't rightly know. We'll go from there." Gloom agreed. He stepped up close to the window and peered down, or as sharply down as the angle would allow. You couldn't see anyone standing directly at the tower's base, the mob of five hundred weren't inclined to cluster near the target of their recent vandalism.

'-let's not flit about the cloud. I'm looking down at a desperate group of ponies who all recently crossed the line into criminals. And there's nothing I can do about it-'

"And we hopefully won't have long to wait. Looks like the mob is starting to move. They're on their way back to Haven Hay. Good riddance."

"Better and better." Prey was eager to reunite with Crimson, just like Gloom had said. It could be all this speculation was pointless, and Crimson already held all their answers.

'Right, and hydras can sing a four-part harmony. When are things ever that easy?'

Prey looked back up at the metal hatch in the ceiling. He considered leaving it open, but... "Unless you have any objections, I

think we should lock up the whole tower before we leave, and take the keys too. So, would you mind?"

Prey held up the keyring and gave them a jingling shake.

"No, that's a good idea. Nopony but us is going to come back in here and possibly do even more damage." Gloom agreed, holding out his wing for the keys.

He let Prey drop the ring onto his wing instead of passing them, scooping up the keys with a deft flick. A short hop and flight later, Gloom had the hatch firmly shut and locked, and dropped back to the floor.

Gloom went to tuck the keys away inside his chestplate, but then stopped and held them out, the keyring hooked over the end of a blunt wingclaw. "You want? Or should I hold onto them for now?"

"I'll take them." Prey stuck out his hoof below Gloom's wing, and the thestral let the keys fall off for Prey to catch. Prey didn't even have to avoid getting close enough to touch with Gloom politely doing it for him.

Prey took one last long look around the observatory room. Unless you purposefully looked down, outside of the reinforced windows, at this height the formless sky seemed to be an endless void of cloudy grey.

"Okay. I'm ready when you are."

Gloom rolled his shoulders under his armour, "After you, Prey."

They locked the thick observation room door before descending the stairs, past the huge fan blades, and then further descended through the destroyed private residence rooms. It didn't look any better going down than it had going up. Quietly, and making sure not to draw attention, they exited the Weather Tower and locked the last door behind them for good measure.

Wind, a smattering of raindrops, distant gulls, and ever the sound of

breaking waves awaited them.

'-and now I've got to report the damage and request a repairs team too-', Gloom thought while Prey tucked the keys away into his backpack. Gloom pushed that aside, it was merely something more on the already depressingly long list. It was far below finding the Heights family though, which was also below finding the Heights family alive.

'-Luna, please let them still be alive wherever they are. Please. For once, I want us to be there in time-'

Prey finished re-shouldering his backpack comfortably and looked after the departing mob with disdain.

"Don't think too badly of them, Prey." Gloom said without missing a beat.

Prey tilted his head to the side with his ribbon, giving Gloom a very eloquent, slow, wide blue-eyed blink. He didn't have to say a thing.

Gloom didn't smile, "It's not worth it for one, and they don't regret it for another. None of us know what each of their individual situations are. Besides, we're the Night Guards, they aren't. They not used to anything like we are."

Gloom's yellow eyes narrowed fractionally as he stared after the five hundred or so departing ponies, "It's foolish to hold them up to our standards." He sounded disappointed, like after watching other ponies from Haven Hay rush out to rescue the sailors off the ship, he couldn't reconcile these ponies as ones from the same town, some of them even the self-same ponies, joining a mob.

'Yeeeeah, I'm still going to think badly of them.' Prey thought, sniffing. Or at least, badly of those departing ponies. They were not representative of the many residents who'd stayed behind in Haven Hay, and had not let their anger overwhelm them, after all. But those odd five hundred?

In a moment of distraction, thinking about that triggered a sudden bout of self-reflection. Like a mirror. Prey never looked in a mirror.

Prey blamed his surroundings for the slip. He'd been distracted considering that, glancing furtively towards Crimson's hiding spot on the other hill at the same time, also brushing back his ribbon as a gust fluttered it in his face, and twitching in annoyance at a laughing seagull. So for just a moment there, he was distracted enough by the sight of the departing mob to let it spark off a corresponding thought.

Prey leapt on the spark and smothered it before it could spread, but even snuffing a spark brings a red hot pinprick of pain for those few seconds.

Five hundred, so what? What right did he have to let himself become aggravated, when it was so petty into comparison to the unnumbered changelings?

'That was their fault, theirs, not mine! They attacked me, they brought their fate on themselves.' Prey firmly re-established in his mind and nailed it down with spikes of iron will.

"Lieutenant Gloom."

"It's Sargent Gloom."

Prey started. He looked up to find that Sheriff Lumber hadn't left with the rest of the trailing mob but instead waited behind, and was now approaching Gloom.

Gloom shifted to fully face the earth pony, expression stony. Prey saw the step Lumber fumbled, even if the stallion quickly tried to hide it. Not being able to look Gloom in the face and staying out of reach were other clues though.

Prey heard Lumber himself defensively thinking, '-don't give me that look. You were just as useless as the bucking airhead Heights in doing anything today, freakin' batpony-'

After a moment of silent staring as the sea wind continued to blow against them, Gloom curtly asked, "What is it, 'Sheriff' Lumber?" He stressed the law enforcement title.

Lumber's ears went back in anger, unable to stop himself.

Nevertheless, it seemed he wasn't confident enough to try forcing the issue, "I want to know what you're going to do now. Ah mean, you and your ponies. Sargent Nimbus told me just now you and he are each here for a different job. As sheriff of Haven Hay, I want ta' know what you're planning on in our town."

"We're here to do our duty. Sargent Nimbus and his squad are here to assist you in managing your weather, although that looks to be a bit of a tall order at the moment. We are here to investigate."

"Investigate? Investigate what? Investigate the Heights, ya' mean right?"

"We are here to investigate *any* crime we come across, yes." Gloom stated.

Prey knew that Lumber heard the unspoken but very clearly pointed implications there, but the stallion wilfully chose to only hear what he wanted to hear.

"Well if'n you can find where they've run off to hide, then that'd be a great start. If'n they don't come back at all and we get replacements who'll actually do something about all these storms, then I'll take that as a win too."

Both Prey and Gloom silently looked at him, then back to the Weather Tower, and then back to him.

"Once somepony's come out and gotten it all fixed up, of course." Lumber added, again not outwardly expressing any contrition.

"Yes. I will need to make 'extra' mention of that fact in my report."

'-if you are still this town's sheriff by the time it takes for us to send a message back to Canterlot and them to appoint a replacement weather team, I'll eat my spear-', Gloom thought.

Down the hill, the tail end of the departing mob were making good time, eager to be away from here before any feelings of regret seeped back in, or just to get back to their jobs and homes. Time waited for no one. Prey judged they'd be back inside Haven Hay in about an hour. It was downhill almost all the way back with the

wind at their backs. Made it even easier to trot away from your wrongdoings.

'Assuming shame even sets in at all. I've done worse myself, haven't I? And I don't feel any guilt over the changelings. Besides, they're ponies. They let themselves get caught up in their herd mentality, and just went with the flow willingly.'

Lumber was chewing over something, wondering if he should even bother saying it after Gloom's coldness; '-he ain't no normal pony for one, an' all of them are outsiders for another-'

Prey's hoof started inching up towards his ribbon, 'I don't have the patience for this. Crimson is waiting in hiding to tell us something important. Either speak and go, or shut up and go. Or I'll choose for you.'

"You might want to take a minute to have yourselves a look-see at the Cliffs of Dove while you're up here." Lumber said, the nonsensical suggestion coming from out of left field.

Lumber twitched at the looks they gave him, brows snapping together defensively:

"You might want to look because that's where your trail might end. If'n the Heights are truly gone... well that's where they might've gone, let's just say. They lived up here all that time, so close to the cliffs, maybe they listened to a song they weren't supposed to. You get me?"

"No." Gloom stated bluntly.

Lumber grumbled something darkly, unconsciously tugging at the collar of his coat and checking for something underneath.

Prey had heard what he'd said though, "Marefolk?" He echoed.

Lumber jerked in surprise at being overheard, and then scowled, "Aye, marefolk. What of it? There's plenty of things under Celestia's sun that nopony understands. Something tempts good stallions to those cliffs. It's the same out on the sea if you sail too close to the Isle of Dove. Some of them said they've heard singing in the waves.

Sounds ridiculous, but it's not ridiculous if'n it really happens, is it? Marefolk is as good an explanation as any for whatever madness them damn cliffs bring."

"Don't speak to me of madness." Prey smiled pleasantly, just a foal who didn't know what he was talking about in the sheriff's eyes.

Lumber snorted rudely and dismissed him. He turned back toward Haven Hay and the trail of dwindling ponies, tail swishing irritably, "Believe whatever you want, what do I care? You go do your job, but be warned, you might already be too late. Those airheads were too stupid for self-preservation, so if'n it ends in the cliffs, I won't be surprised. You'll see."

"That is interesting to hear." Crimson said, from behind and to the side where he'd silently approached.

"What in the bucking-!" Lumber reared, spinning around.

Crimson stood in his dark-tinted Night Guard armour, stance and face unfriendly.

"Crimson. Why'd you come out now?" Gloom asked, meaning; 'while this oaf is still here to see?', "And who is that?"

"Because he is still the sheriff, for now I mean. He should know about this. And this is Alto Heights." Crimson stepped aside.

Prey finally got a clear look at the lanky pegasus colt who'd been following so closely behind Crimson as he'd come up the hill.

"Alto Heights? As in, the youngest child of Gale and Windy Heights?"

The colt blinked around at them all. He was nearly pure white-mane and tail too, with only a dark sooty patch softening the end of his muzzle and a dark sock up to each fetlock. Someday he'd probably be photo-magazine-worthy levels of gorgeous, by pony standards anyway. Pity he was looking around so emptily like there was little going on behind those eyes.

"Hello. Oh, hello Sheriff Lumber. Sorry, mom and dad aren't home

at the moment. I'm not supposed to let strangers into our tower. But can I help you?"

---I---

Author's Notes:

Here is who edited: Panem et Circenses

HexoRequiem in the comments also made this fun little drawing of the proto-scarecrow back from Mayflower HERE

91.7 The Stream is but a Dream

"...eighteen... nineteen.....", Lilly's leg shook as she strained to make it rise one last time to complete her set. Blood throbbed behind her eyes with the strain, "...t...t...t-twenty!"

With a gasp, Lilly dropped the curling weight off her good forehoof. Her only forehoof. She ignored the damage it might do to the floorboards and hobbled towards the bathroom, panting heavily.

She wasn't supposed to be doing these exercises alone. She was supposed to have somepony nearby in case something went wrong. But she was tired of bothering Saffron, Carton, or Scenic every single day. And this was something she could do herself now. She didn't need help for this anymore.

In the bathroom she fumbled for the tap handle, having to balance precariously for a second on just her meldwood peg-leg until the tap started gushing.

Heedless of the mess, she stuck her whole head under the cold tap, and stayed there until she had to come up with a gasp for air.

Streaks of mane clung to her wet fur and down her muzzle, tangling also around the roots growing from the side of her face. It was difficult for her without magic, and even after all these months she still then instinctively reached for her telekinesis only to find nothing, and awkwardly tried with a fetlock to slick back her streaming mane from out of her eyes.

Unfortunately, she caught a glimpse of her face in the mirror, and her disfigurement. Her eyes immediately darted away before she caught herself.

'No.' She made herself look back at the mirror. She glared her reflection into submission. Or at least glared until she could convince herself not to flinch.

'Yeah, that's right. That's you Lilly Blossom. That's me.' She'd been

having a good day, one where she was being productive and actively improving herself. She wasn't going to spoil it now.

There were bad days, but today was a good day, and she was going to make it stay that way, Celestia damn it!

"Today is a good day." She loudly informed herself in the mirror, water still dripping from her face. She felt much better.

Lilly told herself of all the reasons she had to be happy today again, because that also helped. She'd gotten out of bed for a start. She hadn't caught any of her sticking-out meldwood twigs on anything hobbling around the house, which really hurt every time she got careless, and that was also good. She had exercised and eaten a healthy breakfast, and so she was that little bit closer to getting fit enough to rejoin the Night Guard. And while she hadn't been able to put on any more weight when she checked the scales, she hadn't lost any weight either, so that was another reason to be happy.

"Today is a good day." She repeated to herself with a firm nod. Like the doctor had said, it helped to be positive out loud.

Maybe she wasn't ever going to be fit enough to rejoin Gloom, Crimson, and Prey in the ISND, but by golly-geeze, there was a place waiting for her in the Night Guard if she could get herself there.

"*When* I get myself there." Because today is a good day. Not a bad day.

Once she'd lightly toweled off her mane and face as best she could, Lilly made it to the kitchen with her hobbling gait, the door held open now permanently by a doorstop. And that was another good thing to make sure she remembered to list. Some kind pony had anonymously ordered a bunch of doorstops for her in the post. They were probably from Saffron Swirl, the mare didn't like flaunting her relative wealth when compared to the rest of them, but it could have been any of the others too.

Celestia knew the group was small. What was sad was that it was only now that she realised that even before the accident, there hadn't been a bigger group. 'And whose bucking fault is that?'

"No, today is a good day. Suck it up and stop whining."

Lilly was pondering the cupboards and wondering what she wanted to eat for a healthy snack when she heard the flap of the letterbox go.

Abandoning food for now, she hobbled out to the front door to see what had arrived. Below the letter flap and attached to the back of the door, kindly installed by Scenic, was a small basket to catch the letters so they didn't end up on the floor anymore.

She went for her magic, then remembered, and carefully bit the edges of the letters sticking out of the basket, taking them back with her to the kitchen table. She'd worked out how to press an envelope to the table top under her meldwood leg, and get the letter opener under the flap with her remaining hoof to open them.

There was the next rent bill, (like she'd been expecting) a discount offer for any future work by the small plumbing firm she'd had to hire to fit a shower she could actually use, (she'd try to remember that) and last of all... a letter from her older brother, Tallow.

Lilly's good-day mood crumbled before she even realised it. Awkwardly, she got the folded letter out of the envelope and held it flat on the table. It took a long second before she gathered enough confidence to let her eyes focus on what the written words said.

It was a short letter, only six lines, if you included the 'Dear Lilly Blossom; and 'Regards, Tallow' at the beginning and end. Why was he even writing to her? They all lived in Canterlot, surely it couldn't be so difficult as to visit instead of sending a letter?

And only six lines too. What was the point of that? Was he really so busy he only had time to write six lines and stick a letter in the post instead of walking here, but not so busy that he didn't mind waiting the day it would take to arrive, and another day for her to post back an answer? The familiar anger bubbled up, making her shoulder

begin to ache as the feeling filled her chest.

"No, today is a good day." Lilly forced the anger out along with her breath. And when that didn't work, she repeated the action until it did and she could read the letter properly.

'Dear Lilly Blossom;

Sorry, won't be able to make it to the luncheon with you and your earth pony friends, got a new breakthrough at work.

We'll make it up though. Are you free next week Wednesday for dinner? You can come around my place at six?

Please come, I've made up with Myrtle and things are starting to work out again, so I'd appreciate it. See you there.

P.S. Ma and Da didn't want to come, but I did tell them like you asked. I told you so.

Regards, Tallow.'

Lilly closed her eyes and focused on breathing for a long minute. Getting angry just made her shoulder hurt. And it wasn't like Tallow was doing this on purpose, he was just... indecisive. A bit selfish. And oblivious.

And yet he was still the only one of the rest of her family who'd yet reached out and made the effort. And for that, Lilly was prepared to be the bigger pony, (even if she was the youngest), show some of that hard-learned patience, and make up the shortfall. Because that was the lesson she had learned from Sargent Gloom.

If you wanted something, you had to be prepared to work for it. *Really* work for it, not like she used to 'work' for what she thought she already deserved.

That was the lesson she'd learnt from Prey. That there is no inherent justice. Sometimes things are unfair, but kicking and screaming won't change a single thing.

And what she'd learnt from the Night Guard as a whole, was what

duty really meant. It was about being prepared to sacrifice. And since she now knew what duty to family meant after hearing Crimson's few recollections that he was willing to share, she had to be prepared to sacrifice to reconnect with her family. It didn't matter if they were in the wrong to start with, because the world isn't fair.

Maybe one day Tallow would realise, maybe he wouldn't. But if her family never all reconnected, it certainly wouldn't be because she was the one who never put in the effort.

"Today is a good day. And every day I am a better pony than I was yesterday." Lilly declared. And so saying, she got up and went to get a pencil and paper to begin the long, laborious, painful task of slowly writing out her acceptance in mismatching letters. And she didn't let herself be ashamed of that either.

Her writing was a little better than it was yesterday, and tomorrow it would be that bit better too.

Atop a windy crag high on a hill, the clouds hanging grey and low overhead with the recently vandalised Weather Tower at their backs, four ponies and one lamb stood.

The youngest person there, the gangly pegasus colt, blinked around at all of them from his position at Crimson's side. He didn't seem very worried or afraid, his white wings folded comfortably at his sides.

"Alto Heights." Sheriff Lumber repeated in dumbfounded surprise. Then, in anger; "*Alto Heights*, where in Tartarus have your parents run away to?"

"Calm down." Gloom snapped at the other stallion at the same time Crimson interjected; "He doesn't know." And the lanky pegasus colt answered, "Run away? Oh, you mean *flown* away. I get it."

In an effort to forestall everyone interrupting and talking at once, Prey hastily spoke up into that moment of confusion as everyone

processed what the others had said:

"One at a time, and most important questions first. Crimson, is there any danger we need to know about?"

"No, nothing immediate. I arrived to find Alto was the only person in the whole area. He was sitting on top of the tower just waiting-"

"Wait a bleedin' second, how'd you get here? You were supposed to be in Haven Hay!" Lumber interrupted.

The blank look Crimson gave the sheriff seemed to ask if Lumber was an idiot, "No. I am supposed to be wherever Sargent Gloom orders me to be."

"Did you warn them? Is that where they went? Did ya' scare them off?" Lumber demanded.

Crimson stared down the angry stallion, unimpressed, "No. Weren't you listening? Only young Alto was here when I arrived." He answered, gesturing a wing over to Alto Heights.

The white pegasus youth seemed to be only half paying attention, ears turning to follow whoever was talking at the time, but his long-lashed eyes were instead upturned towards the sky. Prey sidled a few steps over to get Alto better into his mental perception range.

Here was one of the witnesses, a possible survivor of whatever had happened here, Lumber's superstition about marefolk aside. For once, they had an *actual* witness to whatever the hell had happened.

'-the wind's set like that. The sky's like this. That cloud there-',

But what Prey heard from Alto's mind wasn't a flow of logical consciousness. Instead, there were few words, but many impressions in their place. Some people's minds were like this, they thought more in images and feelings than in words or sentences. In abstracts, able to represent a whole situation and concept and their thoughts on it as one total sensation. A sum to infinity of any given line of thought. Useful in some areas, a hindrance in others. Prey hadn’t found any correlation with it and how intelligent someone

was, though, no matter where Alto may lie.

"Alto. Alto Heights? That is your name, yes?" Gloom repeated himself, trying to catch the lanky colt's attention.

"What? Oh yeah, that's me." Alto looked away from gazing at the grey sky to briefly nod, and then went right back to it.

"I'm Sargent Gloom of Princess Luna's Night Guard. I've come here from Canterlot to find out what has been happening in Haven Hay, and at the Weather Tower-" Gloom shot Lumber a really disdainful look, "-And we're going to need to find you a new place to stay. Temporarily. But I really need to ask you some questions. Any information you can give could be of grave importance."

"Sure." Alto nodded, unconcerned.

"Did your, do your parents know anypony in Haven Hay who might be willing to look after you? Just for a while?" Gloom asked.

"Huh? No. None of them are pegasi." Alto shrugged easily, not unnerved by Gloom being a thestral at all it seemed.

Gloom's eyes flicked up to Crimson, who gave a tired shrug of his wings as if to say; 'Yes, he was like this when I found him.'

"What has not being a pegasus got to do with it?" Gloom asked carefully.

Alto looked at him in surprise, "Caus' they're not weather ponies. You need to be a pegasus to be a weather pony." He stated as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Prey was getting an idea of where this was going. Over to the side, the sheriff snorted in disgust and stomped his hoof, "Why do ya' think we call them airheads? They don't care about anypony or anything if it doesn't have to do with the weather. If you don't have a weather cutie mark, they won't even give you the time of day."

There were ponies who lived their lives devoted to their special talent. They immersed themselves so completely and shunned everything else that they slowly lost sight of the world. All that

mattered to them was the pursuit of their Harmony-gifted talent. Everything else was just an annoying distraction to their pure and noble pursuit of perfection. It seemed the Heights were one such family.

All of the ISND exchanged long looks.

Crimson cleared his throat, "I asked him about where his family is. And he said-"

"-Oh, mom and dad and Lofty all left last night. But I couldn't come." Alto's sooty muzzle scrunched up into a pout. What was he, five? He physically looked to be at least thirteen or fourteen years old, but he was behaving like an easily-distracted foal.

"Went out where?" Gloom asked with Prey closely on his tail with; "Why were you left behind?"

Alto made another face, "Caus' I've been sick. But that was ages ago, though mom and dad still wouldn't let me out, not at all. Like, at least two weeks. I'm all better but they wouldn't let me go out at all."

Two weeks was roughly the same timeframe that all this seemed to have kicked off within. Was it just a coincidence that Gale and Windy Heights started confining their youngest to the tower? Why didn't they want him to go outside even once he was better? From the sound of it, they lived for their weather talent, so it certainly couldn't have been to stop Alto flying in bad conditions.

To Prey, it seemed very much like they'd been trying to hide Alto from something. It wasn't a hard deduction to make, and a worrying one too.

"Did they let your brother out and about?" Prey asked.

"Yeah, it was so unfair." Alto whined. He tore his eyes away from the sky again to give Prey a vaguely uninterested look.

'-what is she? No wings, can't fly in the wind. Oh, I remember mom's lessons, it's a sheep. But sheep can't fly-', And like that, Alto's gaze slipped off Prey again.

"And do you know where your parents and brother disappeared to last night?" Gloom prompted again after a long moment.

Alto didn't seem to hear. He began unfolding his wings, until Crimson smartly pressed a wing of his own down on Alto's back, making the colt start, "Eh, what? Oh, right. What'd you say?"

"It was a bit of a task to keep him hidden with me. He almost flew off four times." Crimson muttered to Prey and Gloom.

"Why were you hiding him in the first place?" Lumber demanded of Crimson.

"Because of the mob. And you."

"We would never have-!"

"I'm not interested in hearing it." Crimson turned away from the sheriff, "Please answer Sargent Gloom, Alto."

"Oh. What did he say again? I forgot."

'-you forgot? Your family has vanished and you forgot?!-', Gloom struggled for a moment to mask his emotions. Though the unfocused colt probably wouldn't even have noticed if Gloom hadn't masked them at all.

"Where did your parents and older brother go last night?"

"Dunno'." Alto's wings shrugged casually.

Prey could barely keep looking at the idiotic colt. The pony was nearly twice the age Prey had been when he'd given up his life to follow Breaker into the Resistance because he couldn't abandon his older brother. But Alto Heights? He barely cared, and only in a, 'Oh-I'm-sure-they're-fine-and-will-turn-up-soon' sort of way.

'How sickening.'

"Told you. Like father like son." Lumber huffed smugly again.

Gloom ignored him, intending to deal with that failure of a sheriff

later. "Don't you have any ideas, Alto? Places you visited as a family? Do you remember them talking about anywhere recently? Has there been anything strange that happened?"

"The weather's been strange." Alto promptly answered.

"Yes, we know that. But has there been anything else strange? Around the Weather Tower in particular?" Gloom tried.

"Uuuuuuhh... hmmm...." Alto had to think hard, as the subject was something other than the weather and flying, "Oh, I suppose there's whoever's been visiting mom and dad after dark."

Prey leant in despite himself, as Gloom hurriedly nodded encouragingly, "Yes, yes exactly like that. Who were they?"

"Dunno'. Mom and dad always made me go and be quiet in my room whenever the knocking came."

"Knocking?"

"Yeah, knocking. Every other night or so. Dad never mentioned who they were."

"And... you never thought to ask?" Crimson asked in flat disbelief.

"Uh, no? Why? Was I supposed to? Nopony told me. It's got nothing to do with my cutie mark."

'So what if it doesn't? Who cares! Actually, that's a stupid question, because obviously not you.' Prey bit down.

"Which door did the knocking come from?" Prey asked instead.

"On the front door. Weird. Why would you knock on the door down there? There's a perfectly good door up top." Alto trailed off, staring wistfully up at the sky.

'-wind current there. Could go up here. Dip and bank around there and there-'

Listening to this, Prey could barely believe Alto wasn't mentally

handicapped. If he was, then Prey could've understood, but the teenager was just completely self-absorbed. Prey decided he didn't want to see the pegasus' face ever again after today. He could scarcely stomach looking at Alto as it was. He was no murderer, terrorist, or warlock, but Prey just couldn't stand his narcissistic, selfish, blind attitude.

"Mysterious knocking at night, they made him hide, they stop doing their job, and then they disappear the night before we get here," Lumber grunted, shooting a dark look towards the fog in the East. "I'm calling it like I see it; marefolk."

"Marefolk? Are those a real thing?" Crimson asked, looking sharply to Prey.

"No. But-", Prey went on before Lumber could start up, "-There are plenty of other things out there which nobody understands."

Lumber harrumphed, "Surprised to see a foal can so easily get it, where certain *others* can't." He finished pointedly.

"Sheriff Lumber. Shut up. I am all out of patience for you and your assumptions. Did I ever discount your wild theory entirely? You know nothing about what we've had to see to believe. And for your sake, I hope you never do."

Lumber glowered. Crimson took one precise step closer to the earth pony, nothing threatening, but a reminder of his armour. Lumber shifted away, but finally bit his tongue and held his peace.

Seagulls cawed, and the sea wind blew over them, the rocky ground wet from recent rain. Off in the grey distance, Prey saw what was probably another squall approaching from the sea, even if the ocean was below his line of sight.

"What next?" Gloom finally asked.

"I think..." Prey began, "That we need more information. And need to report back to Captain Nighthawk."

"Yes. Yes you're right. First things first, we need to return to Haven Hay. We can make a proper plan there." Gloom agreed.

"And Alto Heights? I mean, the tower is, was, his house, but after the mob.... and I don't think it would be a good idea to leave him alone-Alto stop!" Crimson snapped.

Alto didn't stop, spreading his wings. Crimson was there half a step before Gloom, jabbing the white pegasus' wing shut, preventing him from flapping.

"What? What's the matter?" Alto asked in bewilderment, "I was just taking off."

"No. You're coming back to stay in Haven Hay." Gloom ordered.

"But-"

"It isn't an option. You will not be remaining where the rest of your family vanished from. You will be kept safe by sheriff Lumber."

"What?! What'cha mean-?"

"You have the watch house. You will keep Alto there, and keep him safe. That's what the watch is for, isn't it? Protecting its' citizens?" Gloom smiled thinly at Lumber with no warmth, "By the way, this isn't an option either."

"I don't agree to this, and ya' can't give me orders." Lumber hotly denied.

"Sheriff Lumber, I will be clear. If you don't start doing your job, then at my recommendation you will be stripped of your position and fired. I will be reporting to the Captain of the Night Guard tonight. Which will it be?"

When put like that, Lumber found he didn't have a lot of choice. Something for which he got zero sympathy for by both Prey and Crimson.

Gloom was of course going to recommend Lumber be replaced no matter what, but the sheriff didn't need to know that. It was usually beneath Gloom to use his authority like this, or lie, but the earth pony had earned his ire. It was just too bad that Lumber was still the sheriff, and so they needed him for now.

Lumber's jaw clenched and his eyes burned, ears straight back. He refused to speak, but still tightly nodded in the end. He felt betrayed. Prey really couldn't see why. He'd stayed behind to talk to them, but how in any way did that buy him amnesty, when as sheriff, he was more guilty than any of the mob?

"Alto, did you listen to that? You will be staying at the watch house. You're not in trouble, but that's where it's safest for you. We're going back to Haven Hay now." Gloom addressed their errant witness.

"I am? Okay."

"No." Gloom firmly stopped him, "We're going back *together*. Don't just fly off."

Alto gawked, "What? But-what? But I can fly."

"And some of us can't. We're staying as a group."

"Walk? No way, that's stupid! I'm a pegasus, I'm not made to walk."

"We need to stay as a group-"

"No, no! You can't make me! I need to fly!" Alto shouted petulantly.

Crimson's wings twitched violently at his sides, like he was just waiting for the order to smack the uncooperative colt upside the head.

Gloom stepped up and stood over Alto, glaring down at him. "I can make you, and I will. Are you going to be a good boy, or not?" He asked quietly.

Prey almost laughed at Alto, at how presumptuous the bratty colt was, and what Lumber was going to have to babysit. 'If he locks Alto up in a cell to keep the brat from flying away, I won't even protest.'

The sour glare Lumber turned on the teenage pegasus was deeply cathartic to bear witness to.

The moment of spiteful satisfaction didn't last long however, and once it passed, they were still left with a disaster on their hooves. None of the problems waiting back in Haven Hay had been solved.

Silently they began the cold, windy walk back down towards the town as gulls cried, and the mountainous stormfront ever so slowly continued to build in the far distance.

A very unhappy and reticent Lumber took Alto straight back to the town's watch house. Prey had no doubt word would spread quickly that one of the Heights family had turned up, no matter how much Lumber might try to keep it on the down low.

"Another good reason to house Alto in the watch house, where there are ponies to watch and guard him twenty-four-seven." Gloom had replied when Prey said as much.

Then they'd gone back down to the harbour, and Prey had waited down on the dock, watching the cold grey waves slapping at the moored boats as Gloom and Crimson flew over to the lighthouse to finally retrieve their saddlebags.

Was it only this morning that the ship currently listing on its side blocking the harbour's mouth had been spotted, and all the fliers had flown out to try to help? And then the storm, lightning strike, disaster, and mob which had followed it? Yes, it had only been this morning.

'And of course, everything went wrong the moment we got here. Because why in Tartarus wouldn't it?'

Prey cautiously leaned over the edge of the dock, and observed the deep level of the rainwater sitting in the tied-up boats while he waited. There was a thick dock post going down into the sea water just here. From the half-hoof distance Prey could see beneath the murky water's restless surface, it was just enough to make out the multitude of little things crawling and living all over the submerged part of sodden post.

The air here around the docks smelled very strongly of rot and seaweed. Prey sniffed and drew back, wiping at his nose. He hoped he didn't catch a cold from all the wind, rain, and damp. Getting sick on top of everything else would be just typical. Doubly so, because he would still be expected to work as hard as ever.

'But work hard doing what, precisely? Where are we going to go from here in solving what's happened? What's our next step?' Prey thought, looking around the harbour and also up to the town behind him.

Prey pondered on that, and what options he could present to Gloom when the Sargent inevitably asked. At least so far there hadn't been much active danger to any of them, barring the storm. This wasn't like Mayflower, and thank all the dead for that.

While Prey thought, he of course kept methodically scanning his surroundings, making observations about the town and the working ponies he could see coming and going.

He saw three earth ponies ineffectively trying to salvage a woodshed, which had collapsed under the battery of constant wind and rain. He saw more ragged holes revealing soaked beams in rooves, where tiles had been yanked off. More seagulls, some metal frameworks which had purposefully been painted over to try to protect against rust, and a street gutter half plugged up with gritty sand.

Prey was honestly surprised not to see more sand getting everywhere. He supposed that would be the case past the harbour's two walls, where there was an actual strip of a sort of beach, and the wind could catch the sand. Here in the harbour though, the dock and wharf directly met the sea.

Carried to his ears by the wind and over the crying of gulls, the strings of shells which most houses seemed to have strung outside of their doors rattled and clicked.

Was there a story behind the shell decorations, or was it simply a local decoration? Prey would bet that all the foals had competitions to see who could collect the best or just most shells, and of course

that meant proudly showing their parents, who then had to grin and do something with all the unneeded shells their offspring had collected.

Prey squinted at the closest string of clacking shells. His mildly damaged vision was just a bit too blurry, so he wiped his eyes and squinted harder. There was some non-shell item attached at the end of the twine there. A stone, with a bright blue squiggle painted on it.

He peered hard at it until he was sure. It was the exact same as that amulet he'd seen Lumber wearing.

Prey thought back, examining his near eidetic memory to check that, yes, most houses in Haven Hay had that same blue painted squiggle implemented in various forms. He'd seen it on doorknockers, on gate posts, or as part of a house's paint. In various sizes, and sometimes more detailed than others, but all the same bright blue. Was it a local good luck charm?

'I think I would have noticed if everyone here was actually part of a cult, so I'm almost certain it's harmless. Almost.' Prey thought. Well, all he had to do was ask, and he'd have his answer.

Prey heard the sound of approaching wings over the seagulls and waves and rattling shells. Gloom and Crimson flew the short way down after jumping off the harbour's wall from the lighthouse to land on the docks.

"Did you check there was nothing missing?" Prey immediately asked, indicating their retrieved saddlebags.

"I don't think they would've stolen from us. I mean, we're Night Guards." Crimson said, carefully checking over one of his pinions before folding the wing.

Prey raised an eyebrow, "Well, did you check anyways?"

"Our saddlebags were right where we dropped them at the top of the tower, there's no need to worry." Gloom confirmed dully, already thinking about what they should do next.

'-don't have a clue how to track down the Heights family. Need to send that report to Captain Nighthawk, too. Mustn't forget to formally request aid for the rescued sailors as well-'

The three of them stood in a rough triangle on the creaking docks for a long, silent moment, looking between each other.

"So. That happened. Now what?" Prey bluntly asked.

Gloom absentmindedly tried to scratch at his chest scar, the armour blocking him, "What we always do, I suppose."

"Make it up as we stumble blindly along? I mean, that's what it feels like we always do." Crimson muttered.

Prey shrugged at Gloom, "Well, you can't say he's wrong, can you?"

"We just need to find our angle into all of this. That's the first step, that's how we always start." Gloom tapped his hoof for emphasis on the wet planks.

"So we find people to interrogate" Crimson nodded, "I mean, interview. Interrogate if we think they are guilty of anything, but interview first."

"Well, Alto was our only potential witness, and he was useless. That means the question now is; where shall we start our interview-interrogations first?" Prey asked.

"No idea. Just ask whoever we can I guess, and then work our way up from there, from one pony to the next. There's a lot of them in Haven Hay after all." Gloom answered, "Also, we've got to find somewhere to sleep tonight. And write up our report. And eat. Actually, all that first bit can wait, we need to eat something."

None of them had sat down, rested, or eaten since they exited the train this morning. They'd been persevering and pushing through it up until now. All three of them had kept going for longer and in harsher conditions before, much harsher, but that was just all the more reason to take the opportunity now when it presented itself.

"Let's find somewhere dry to sit. Or dry-ish. Or at least with

something overhead for if it starts raining again. *When* it starts raining again."

Haven Hay, with its disgruntled residents, the still-stunned sailors who'd been rescued, and just the everyday ponies who'd lived here, been born here, or moved here; all of them were pieces which made up the larger puzzle of what was going on. Unfortunately, the only way to know if you had all the pieces was to sit down, and try to arrange it.

Prey was the one who ended up taking the notes of who they interviewed the rest of the day and what they answered. And though the notes were only mental ones, and therefore existed only in his head, Gloom and Crimson trusted him to remember everything.

---O---

Interviews such as one with a middle-aged mare, a mother of two, housewife, with the name of Jubilee. She had visibly been too nervous to let them in past the door's security chain, but *had* been frustrated enough to still want to express her feelings to the scary thestral Night Guard outside.

"It's just been getting worse and worse and nopony does anything! I only have one room left in my house which doesn't leak, and we all have to squash in there at night. These conditions are beneath what anypony should haf'ta' live in. And I'm afraid, for my family, you understand? Afraid of what might happen if that evil storm-ball out there over the Breathless isn't dealt with."

A dock worker, who until recently used to harvest kelp and work in the dry docks whenever there was a ship to service. Name of Cranberry, with a perpetually sour expression on his face. He told them:

"Ain't nopony going to risk their tails or boats trying to get over the

Boiling Bay to get to the kelp, not like it is right now. An' even if ya' did, what with that there giant bucking storm just waiting for some foolhardy pony to venture close enough, it'd be suicide. I haven't had more than two full days of work in the past fortnight. How is a stallion supposed to earn a living? Marefolk? Pha! No such thing."

Phanto, the town's mayor, who they finally got to meet in the haggard-looking stallion's drafty office. He'd been holding out a lot of hope on the ISND and Border Rangers' arrival fixing things, and then Trail Blazer had been taken out by a freak lightning bolt almost immediately.

"It isn't just all the damage, and if the case I've filed against the Weather Factories goes through, mayhaps everypony can get reimbursed for that. But it's our economy. Everywhere is bleeding bits for outside supplies, and these weeks are going to near-bankrupt Haven Hay for years to come. You must do *something*. This can't be allowed to happen to us."

An old stallion, one with grey in his fur and who had trouble walking. He'd looked as weathered as the nearby cliffs. Name of Mustard, and had lived in Haven Hay his whole life. He'd said:

"Marefolk are out there, don't you ever doubt it. I've seen enough flashes of sliver and heard them singing to know it. Remember, not all waters are friendly. What? Speak up. The sigil? It's for protection against the sea. Only a fool would go out on the waves without one to ward em' off. Remember, not all waters are friendly, I tell you."

A reddish mare from a group of four, being the only one of them brave enough to speak up while her friends huddled and whispered. She'd been hesitant to give her name, but Prey had deduced it was Pepper Howls:

"The necklace and the charms? Oh, those are just for good luck. I

don't know where the blue symbol comes from, no. It's just been around forever I think. Marefolk don't exist, everypony knows that. It's just big fish and fantastical thinking. But the storms, you're here to stop that right? Well, the airhead Heights are gone, so you've got the way clear for you now, right?"

Over the course of those and the other interviews they managed to get, either by knocking on doors or just going from one pony to the next, the three of them gradually picked up information about Haven Hay and the land around it.

Things like the uses of kelp, how it was cut, how often, and when in the year. About the local fish shoals each year, how deep the cauldron of the Boiling Bay was theorised to be, what time of year the seagulls nested and how you had to clear your chimney or they'd simply nest again. Ships, sails, coils of rope, the multitude of names for a dizzying array of only slightly different knots and paddles.

The ISND were given a multitude of puzzle pieces to sort through, but were any of the pieces even for the puzzle they were trying to solve?

By the time darkness fell, (with the constantly overcast sky, there was no sunset to see), none of them were any closer to even finding a clue about where the weather ponies might've disappeared to, or why.

They double-checked Alto Heights was safely situated, (contained), in the watch house, and that Lumber wasn't doing anything stupid, before retiring to the small room at one of the only open inns they'd been able to find. Or rather, one of the only non-damaged or leaking rooms they'd been able to find.

The inn owner was caught between being thrilled that he actually had a source of income, and afraid of the; '-vampire bat pony staying under my roof during the night-'

Before that though, came checking in with Nimbus Feather and his

squad.

Of the four pegasi of the self-named Border Rangers, those who were still able bodied had been rotating watches over Trail Blazer, and meant to do so throughout the coming night. Trail Blazer had not stirred even once so far. Nimbus, Bravo, and Inky's moods were at rock bottom. And if anything, it only fell lower when the harried earth pony homeowner let the ISND in to see their fellow Guards.

Prey wondered if the owner was regretting their act of charity for being the first to usher the Border Rangers inside, now that they were going to be forced to play host for who knew how long? The doctor had insisted that while moving Trail Blazer would be possible, he definitely should not be moved unless there was no other choice.

The atmosphere was awkward, cold, stilted, and nothing at all like the boisterous carefree attitude the four pegasi had exuded on the entire long train ride down here, and indeed even right up until this morning.

'It's not fun when reality rears its' ugly head and kicks you broken and bloodied into the gutter, is it?' Prey silently questioned as he hung back in the corner of the room.

He spotted a tab of wood with the blue squiggle symbol painted on it dangling over the window, still beaded with water from the latest bout of rain.

As it turned out, depending on who you asked, the painted sigil was either a good luck charm or a ward against evil, not that anybody whose thoughts he'd listened in on had seriously believed in either option. It was just a local custom, like knocking on wood. Nevertheless, Prey had felt it prudent to double check. Runes were also symbols after all, but he could now rest assured that there was nothing magical about the symbol itself. It looked a bit like a small painted spiral, with a dash and a dot under it.

However, Prey doubted Nimbus or his two remaining subordinates

would be appreciative of being told not to worry, because they had a good luck charm in here keeping misfortune away.

"What have you been doing all day Sargent? You and your squad?" Nimbus asked distractedly.

"Our job. Investigating." Gloom answered, keeping it short and brief.

Nimbus snorted, "If you can find anything, then all the more power to ya'. But it's pretty much pointless now, don't you think?"

"How so? I don't follow."

The pegasus waved a hoof at the spare room behind him, Trail Blazer visible through the open door, prone on the bed. "That, the storm, all the damages, we already know who's guilty. Ergo, further investigation is pointless." There was no sign of the Staff Sargent's trademark brilliant-white smile anymore.

Gloom stepped around a bowl set on the floor to catch a drip from the roof, "Investigating could help find where the Heights family disappeared to. They're now officially missing ponies." He pointed out.

Prey watched the facial struggle as Nimbus tried to control his anger at hearing the surname, "You know what? You've actually got yourselves a point there. Justice can't be served if they're still flying free."

Prey saw the curt flick of distaste Crimson made with his wing. The ISND had discussed it together, and decided the Border Rangers would not be involved, nor informed, of where their investigation took them. Nimbus was at least partly responsible for the mob which had trashed the Weather Tower, his ill-thought-out actions giving the angry ponies of Haven Hay the illusion of legitimacy and legality in their destruction of property.

Gloom refrained from sharing any of what they'd discussed earlier with Nimbus Feather. Instead, all he said was; "Yes. That is why we are investigating. Maybe we will find a clue, maybe we won't. But

either way, Haven Hay is now left without any weather control."

Nimbus twitched, looking back at Gloom. He narrowed his eyes, his instincts sensing where Gloom was going even if he was still following the thought through.

'-no other weather team. No other Weather Tower. Wait, hang on-'

"You're kidding. Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?"

"Your squad originally came to Haven Hay to assist with managing their dangerous weather in the first place, and there are now no other pegasi capable of doing so in the entire town. You, Bravo, and Inky are the only ponies who can." Gloom laid out the facts concisely.

"Yeah, but that was *before* Trail Blazer." Nimbus growled.

Gloom grimaced, he didn't want to sound callous or dismissive, but this was his duty- just as it was Nimbus Feather's duty. "Yes. And I'm sorry. But Haven Hay is in need, and you can't help Trail Blazer any more than you already have. Only the doctors can. But you can, perhaps, help the ponies here if another storm comes."

"If you think that-!"

"Sargent Nimbus Feather, please let me finish. I am not going to dictate what you or your squad do. That's not up to me. What I'm asking, is what will *you* choose to do? That's all." Gloom assured him. He was about to continue trying to reassure and reason with the other Sargent, but he caught the rapid head shake Prey was giving him.

'No more right now. He needs to decide to help by himself.' The runt mouthed at Gloom.

Prey had suggested he could convince Nimbus to do his job before they came here, but Gloom had winced and tactfully suggested that perhaps a bit of sympathy for the Border Rangers was more in order. "I'll try first. If by tomorrow he hasn't come around... then it'll be your turn, Prey." Gloom had said.

Now, Gloom just nodded and backed off, "I'm sorry again for what happened, nopony could have predicted it, and I pray to Luna for Trail Blazer's recovery."

Re-donning his helmet, with Prey and Crimson taking their cue to fall in behind him, Gloom nodded heavily to Nimbus, "We will come by to check in tomorrow. Night watch over you."

They quietly left the house with its leaks, storm damage, and storm-damaged occupants behind.

Outside the single window of their rented room, yet another shower of rain tapped relentlessly against the glass. At least the gulls had shut up with the fall of darkness.

Prey gratefully unslung his backpack and dumped it beside the rented bed, rubbing at his stiff shoulders from where the straps had dug in. His pack wasn't overly heavy, but carrying it around as well as up and down all day made it heavy.

Prey rubbed circles into his scarred cheeks, tired eyes already half shut, as Gloom and Crimson began divesting themselves of their own armour and saddlebags. Their rented room was small. There really wasn't much space in here, just enough for the three beds, a slim gap between each, and a path to walk at the foot of each bed. Prey wanted a shower, with nice hot water, but that wasn't going to be happening.

It was dry though, which hadn't been an automatic guarantee from any inn’s rooms, what with all the damage going around in Haven Hay.

Crimson already had the metallic shell of his upper armour off and stacked on the bed he'd claimed, and was now methodically undoing the bands tying back his lanky warrior's braid. Those would've been a real pain in the neck to try to sleep with still on. Prey well knew that the next of Crimson's nightly before-bed rituals would be, in order; running through the forms of a training kata, cleaning his father's wingblades and/or sharpening them if

necessary, and lastly seeing to his wings and feathers with near obsessive attention to detail.

Although, looking around the close-pressed and bare walls of their room, Prey didn't see enough room to perform his kata. Not unless Crimson meant to stand on the bed all the while. Which reminded Prey.

Gloom paused in undoing the buckle of his left shin guard, craning his neck to see. "What're you doing, Prey?"

Prey stopped carefully poking at his bed to answer, but Crimson absently blurted it out before he could; "He's checking for poison or traps."

Gloom looked from Crimson to Prey, "Is that true? You check for that before you sleep?" He asked in a careful, considering tone.

"That's right."

Gloom thought about the poisoning attempt that had happened back in Canterlot. Before, he would've sighed in exasperation and said this was a step too paranoid even for Prey. Not anymore.

'-it rattled Prey more than I realised. It certainly rattled me. Or has he always checked his bed every single night? Have I just been too unobservant to notice?-'

Prey's bed in their rented room was his by dint of one very simple reason. It was a foals' bed. Which was morally humiliating with its puppy-patterned sheets, but being practical, it didn't matter since he was the only one out of the three who'd fit in it. Prey gingerly depressed the mattress with just his hoof, feeling if there were any poisoned needles embedded in the mattress, and to his satisfaction discovered it was needle-free.

Gloom quietly went back to unbuckling his shin-guard. Once done with his bed, Prey checked under it. Then went over and checked the window, and that it was firmly latched. He didn't even try to hide the small sheathed dagger he removed from his backpack and tucked under his pillow.

Gloom stopped carefully stacking his armour on the floor and raised an eyebrow. Prey matched him and raised one back. Then with a delicate cough, he pointedly indicated the snap-together halves of the short spear Gloom had unthinkingly rested beside the head of his bed, and then over to Crimson's own wingblades.

"Hey, I wasn't pointing hooves." Gloom mildly protested.

"Isn't the term, throwing glass in a rock house?" Crimson asked, pausing.

"I *think* you mean, don't throw stones if you live in a greenhouse. Although really, don't throw glass in a rock house is still accurate." Prey allowed, thinking about it.

"I mean that, then." Crimson decided.

"I'll agree to that too." Gloom joined in, sitting back on his bed with a groaning sigh. Then he grimaced, fished around beneath himself, and pulled out the object he'd forgotten and sat on.

It was that little hoof knife Prey had given him at Hearth's Warming. It was both a perfect size for and flat enough to be able to sit strapped, hidden under a leg or armour. With exaggerated motions, Gloom turned and tucked it away under his own pillow, and then smiled innocently at Prey.

Prey snorted, "That's not how you do it. Here, see?" He said, and whipped up his most perfectly innocent smile; head tilted just so, blue eyes big and guileless, ribbon presented, and positively brimming with light.

Gloom's smile turned briefly into a real one in amusement. A tired one, with his fangs showing, but it reached all the way to his slitted eyes. '-aah. All those times I worried about or hated that fake smile. And now I laugh because it's so fake-'

"Let me try. Do you do it like this?" Crimson joined in, ceasing trying to find room to stretch, and pulling his lips into his own attempt at a smile.

Gloom hastily covered a cough with the crook of a wing.

"... You're getting there? Keep practicing?" Prey generously offered.

It was a much needed moment of unforced levity, a reminder, or perhaps a reconfirmation. It was just a little thing, a brief moment, but it was one that Gloom could fondly look back on. They were stuck on a mission in a foreign town without any leads to go on yet, but since the threat of imminent death wasn't hanging over them, it counted as a good moment.

Prey dug in his backpack and pulled out a paper bag of candy from somewhere, then shared his sugary treats around.

Crimson got the few liquorice ones from the mix. Gloom found, to his mild surprise, that the sweets weren't actually bad, even if he didn't take more than a few. He discovered he liked the green, watermelon flavoured ones best.

Crimson, having begrudgingly given up on finding enough space to practice his katas but unwilling to leave the room, wondered out loud how a noble or lord from back in Canterlot would've dealt with sleeping in a bed with a leaking roof. Prey had suggested they'd buy the whole of Haven Hay, fix it up, and then rent it back to the people living there for double the price. The runt lamb was sprawled lazily across his pillow, idly retying his ribbon behind his ear, but in no hurry, even pausing in doing so to add gestures to better emphasise.

Gloom rubbed at his chest scars, *not* the ones under his eyes, and felt warm. '-I'm really looking forwards to showing Prey around my clan. Crimson too, but Prey's reactions will be a treat-'

Prey, hearing Gloom's thoughts, decided to be nice and not ruin the moment for the thestral. He wasn't finding this a bad moment either. He ignored the dull glint of gold on his forelegs, and instead let himself just relax for a moment. He was the one who'd chosen to come back, and this here was one of the very few reasons why. Which was fine, as it turned out, because Gloom ruined it for himself as his sense of duty guiltily kicked in.

Gloom sat up with a sigh and stretched for his saddlebags. He pulled out from its packing the green glass message-in-a-bottle. The

slowly-flickering flame of spellfire inside added to the low illumination cast on the bare walls by their hanging lamp.

"Right. Time to write this report to Captain Nighthawk. Chip in, and help me make sure I leave nothing out." Gloom sighed, searching for paper and pencil.

With Prey and Crimson adding their thoughts, making sure nothing was forgotten, they wrote out an in-depth report covering all they'd discovered and suspected so far.

About the storm-damaged Haven Hay, the mayor's words and worries, the sudden arrival of the sinking ship, and the disaster that had taken place straight after. The destruction of the rooms inside the Weather Tower, the missing pegasi family, Alto Heights, and the poor actions of sheriff Lumber.

Gloom asked for a pegasus doctor familiar with lightning strikes, if there were any, to be sent, with additional aid for the stranded sailors to be included, plus stating how the Weather Tower would be needing repairs following the mob's riot.

"...and I formally request for additional backup to be sent to us. Signed, Sargent Dusky Gloom."

Gloom put down the pencil from his wingclaw, "There. And done." He began tightly rolling up the sheets of paper containing their report so they could fit it through the neck of the bottle.

Prey flopped onto his back on the bed, "I must say, this is feels rather novel."

"What does? Oh, right. You mean getting to ask for help." Crimson nodded.

"Yes. Backup. Assistance. Reinforcements. When was the last time we ever got any of that?"

"It wasn't on purpose. That's just the way things went. Unfortunately. Every time." Gloom said, grimacing in memory.

"But not this time. This time, we're asking in time. If that makes sense." Crimson said.

Prey turned his head to stare at the glowing message-in-a-bottle, "Instant communication. It's so damned valuable, I can't even put a number on it." He mused out loud.

"Yes. These things have saved our tails so many times now." Gloom agreed in utter seriousness, tapping the green glass of the incredibly expensive one-use spell. He could not have overstated the value of these message-in-a-bottles to the ISND even if he'd tried.

The ISND were not static. They had well learned the harsh lessons. *This* time, just this *one* time, they wanted to go into this with a full squad of Night Guards, skills, help, and expertise behind them.

This time, they could afford not to rush in blind. And there was no ongoing Royal Inspections back in Canterlot to delay help arriving this time around.

"We'll see what response Captain Nighthawk has sent in the morning."

Prey lay in his rented bed in the dark. He was comfortably hazy with sleep, barely aware but not aware of the dark room, Crimson, and Gloom beyond his eyelids.

His own ear was flopped across his face, head turned into the pillow, but moving was too much effort and would mean not drifting back to sleep. And then the warning from the runic array, which had only been tickling his senses before, flared into life as something stopped merely poking and actually tried to force the window open.

Prey was wide awake in an instant, heart a mile a minute.

He didn't dare move, he didn't change his breathing, he just barely cracked his eye open in the dark.

The window was in the opposite corner of the room to where Prey's

foals' bed sat. Prey strained, trying to see. In the dark, something was at the window, but he couldn't see it.

Outside, the night was utterly black. There were no stars, no moon, the clouds were shrouding the sky. Prey stared in the dark. The rhythm of Gloom and Crimson's breathing didn't change, it was just him and whatever was at the window.

It was looking in, he could feel it. Prey couldn't see anything, he didn't have the others' night vision.

Very quietly in the dark room, the latch *clicked*.

"Intruder!" Prey shouted, going for his dagger under the pillow.

Gloom jerked upwards on his bed, blanket tangling over him, and not knowing what was going on or where he was in that moment, "Nrk?"

Crimson was faster. He was rolling out of his bed, going for his wingblades even before his eyes were open, practised and honed instinct overriding conscious thought.

Prey threw away the dagger's sheath and ran the two steps needed to reach the wall, breaking immediate line of sight from the window.

"At the window!"

There was no way for Crimson to strap on his wingblades in time, and after only a moment's hesitation, he gave up and rushed the window instead.

Gloom finally staggered upright, forgetting in the heat of the moment about his own dagger, snatching up the sharp half of his snap-together short spear instead. He pointed it in the direction of the window, "Where? What?"

Crimson yanked the window fully open, the silent runic alarm shrieking in only Prey's head, wings raised to strike and legs bent to dodge. Prey was sliding along the wall, dagger up, to reach him.

Crimson stared out into the night, and then very cautiously stepped closer to peer to either side, then below the sill, and finally up to the overhanging gutter above.

"What?" Gloom demanded again into the pounding silence, leathery wings flared.

Crimson never took his eyes of the square of open night air, "There's nothing. Are you sure, Prey?"

"Yes. I heard the window open, but I didn't see anything." Prey anxiously recounted, the dagger feeling very flimsy all of a sudden.

He hadn't imagined it, but there was no sign of whoever it was now. His hooves weren't stinging to signal any magic or illusions, and he hadn't heard any thoughts, but that could've just been because he was in the far corner of the room, away from the window.

That was assuming it had been a person, or that there'd ever been any thoughts to overhear in the first place. 'Zoma'Grika, please say it's not the changelings again. Not again.'

"You double checked it was locked, I saw you. But it opened when I pulled it." Crimson realised.

"Moon blight." Gloom hissed. '-that proves it!-'

There was a moment of silence between them. From outside in the night, the distant sound of the cold sea drifted through the open window.

"Who was it? One of the townsfolk?" Gloom finally asked.

A stupid question, since none of them knew anything more than the other two.

"A thief. I mean, it could just have been a thief. Nothing worse than that." Crimson suggested quietly.

He didn't say it might've easily been something worse, although it would've had to have been a confident assassin to so brazenly try, and think they would succeed.

Prey didn't have any answers for once. What more could they do? There was nothing, no clues or evidence left behind.

Gloom backed up and retrieved the bottom half of his spear, slotting it into place and twisting it to lock with a sharp click, "Crimson. Get your wingblades on. We're setting a watch for the rest of the night."

"Yes sir."

Whoever or whatever it had been was gone. Whatever their goal had been, they'd wanted or needed to do in secret. For now, their goal had become impossible with the ISND alerted. As long as they stayed that way, they'd probably be fine. But aside from that, they were helpless to stop whoever or whatever from trying again.

This was not the first time they'd had to sit tight in a room, on guard from some unknown threat while trying to rest.

'-but Luna willing, it will be the last-', Gloom thought.

It meant nothing, but Prey couldn't help but note as the window was pulled shut that it was one of the few without one of the blue-painted good luck symbols anywhere in sight. Which again, meant absolutely nothing. Prey wasn't being dismissive of superstition, he knew far better than to do that, though this time it was just superstition. He was confident this time it was nothing.

Yet he still noted it.

Crimson would take the first watch. Gloom leant his short spear beside his bed, not undoing it. He lay facing the ceiling though, his faintly luminous yellow eyes showing they were still open. Prey returned the dagger to under his pillow. Then he pulled the blankets up, closed his eyes, and tried to fall back to sleep in the deafening silence which followed.

It never grew stale. That taste of sudden unlooked-for and unwanted danger, it was just as rancid and gut-churning as ever.

It was never fun, learning you were part of a hunt.

Some things people forget given enough time, a haze overtaking the memory. Others you never forgot. Prey never forgot.

In the dark hours of the early morning, a train pulled up to the rain-slicked platform at the top of the hill of Haven Hay.

The tired engine drivers shut off the furnace, then left to make use of the small staff bunk hut until the grey morning came. This wasn't a delivery, or a passenger run. Rather, the engine was here to link up and take those very same things back with it come the evening.

There was only one cargo carriage attached to the train, and it was empty. The two ponies remembered it to be empty, and thus they could forget about it. If they'd brought an empty carriage here, then obviously it was because somepony had decided it needed to be delivered here. Whatever, it wasn't their problem.

The carriage sat on the tracks, unmoving in the dark. It had been shunted around and had changed train no less than three different times from its original starting point before it arrived here at Haven Hay. If you were close enough, the locked and silent train car smelled faintly. It smelled faintly of ripe marsh water, and pondweed.

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Author's Notes:

Bit of a side story right at the start, a brief insight into another characters life.

Editor here: Panem et Circenses

92.7 Tumbling Bones in The Deeps

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"To the left now, darling."

Flash, **poomf** went the camera.

"Perfect, perfect. To the right, now."

Flash, **poomf**. Another puff of smoke went up from the camera, and was just as swiftly blown away by the unicorn using it.

"Wonderful, wonderful. To the left again, but mid-step this time."

Flash, **poomf**.

Saffron hadn't been able to see anything but dancing spots for the last ten minutes because of all the bright camera flashes. She didn't let that impede her. Her perfect smile and posture were just as composed and serene as when they'd begun shooting.

"Wonderful! Now- can you tilt your head just so for us-? Aha! I see I don't have to instruct the master, you know it all already."

Flash, **poomf** went the bulky camera again with another puff of smoke Saffron could barely see. But being blinded by cameras was just part of the job. In fact, it was even an envied part of her profession by the many mares who perhaps didn't quite understand what being a model really meant.

Saffron continued to smile, alter her expression, and change poses as asked to in her richly embroidered gold-sequined dress. Out of the fifty or sixty or so photos taken, she knew only one would get selected and the rest would be thrown away in the end. Then, she'd change into a new dress and new makeup, and do it all over again.

To the left, to the right. Stand there, twist here. Flash, **poomf**,

flash, **poomf**.

But for all that, and all her smiles and compliance (many a time in the past she'd been praised as one of the easiest models to work with), Saffron didn't give her manager, the photographer, or the director anything more than a professional working relationship.

She was being paid well for her time, but only for her time and nothing more. She'd made the mistake of trying to please everypony once, and all it had led to was a breakdown which had nearly driven her to...

Saffron carefully packed the thought back away, then smiled off into the distance. Flash,**poomf** went the blinding camera again.

Saffron didn't like to think about how close she'd been. The shame burned deep in her stomach even to this day. She wasn't a strong pony; not like dear Lilly, or Scenic Paint, or any of the others with who she had a real relationship.

That was why it had been hard to hear, so hard, when Dusky Gloom had politely taken her aside at one of those precious few dinners at Carton Juice's home, to speak to her about that.

It had been hard, because she'd been so ashamed. Was *still* so ashamed. Gloom had tried his best though, the kind stallion.

'I've been so privileged in life and my upbringing. And I almost threw it all away out of weakness. Oh, what a fool I was.' Saffron's face and body continued to move on autopilot, smiling and posing while her mind thought.

Flash, **poomf**.

She could think and work at the same time, and the photoshoot crew never knew. In all honesty, being constantly flash-dazzled made it easier to focus on other things since you couldn't actually see. You had to be a good actor to be a model. The best. So good, she'd even managed to fool herself into thinking she was okay for the longest time.

Flash, **poomf**.

'But I'm all the better off now for learning that I was wrong. I now have friends, and ponies I can look up to. I can rely on their strength. This? This is just my job. I will never let it become my whole life again.' If Lilly Blossom could manage to bounce back in such a short space of time, then by golly, she had no excuse.

And she would do it. She owed it to them all. Even to her estranged mother and father. They'd not kicked her to the curb penniless when they'd cast her out, if nothing else.

Flash, **poomf**.

Dusky Gloom had been so serious when he'd taken her aside, but polite too. It was another source of private shame that it was always so difficult to hold direct eye contact with him. She would not excuse herself by saying that those yellow, slitted eyes were just too creepy- because that was rude, and she should be better than that.

Saffron let herself remember the conversation again. It was a source of encouraging strength, now that she'd gotten over the dreadful embarrassment she felt at the time. At least being such a good actor meant she'd been able to stand there and have the conversation, rather than making an excuse and fleeing. She acted as if she were someone brave, and it helped.

They'd... they'd talked. Saffron didn't actually remember all the words, but she remembered the tone, and the relief of the weight she didn't know she'd been carrying lifting off her withers after. That was the most important bit.

However, she did remember some of what Gloom had said word-for-word, it burning brightly in her memory. She'd even written them down later that night in her diary to look back on in years to come.

Gloom had told her; "You've freely given so much of your time to help Lilly, for no other reason than she was in the hospital. You're even still volunteering at the hospital, I checked. Thank you. But you need to work on supporting yourself, too."

She'd answered that she was a model, and so spent a lot of time

every single day looking in the mirror doing just that, building herself up. What he'd then replied with had cut her right to the heart.

"That's a lie. That's not Saffron Swirl, that's a mask. Can you even see the real Saffron Swirl when you look in that mirror?"

And she, a pony who'd been drilled in ladylike etiquette for nearly all of her foalhood, a pony who always made so carefully sure to have a polite, memorised response for any situation, opened her mouth and found nothing coming out.

It had been the way Gloom asked. Blunt, to the point, and without a hint of accusation. Not like those less successful models who called her horrible names and swore her beauty was only skin deep. The Guard in front of her couldn't have cared less about surface appearances.

He'd patiently waited while she composed herself with difficulty, before she'd tremulously asked; "How did you know?"

"I had some help. I'm not nearly as perceptive as some pon-people, some people that I know." He'd admitted.

It had taken her far too long to make the obvious connection. "You mean, Prey?" How she disliked that, even now. Not the lamb, just the connotations of his unfortunate name. Nopony should be called the word 'prey', like some sort of wild animal.

"Prey is smart. You've seen that, but you also haven't... seen it, not really. Prey's very smart. Ponies never quite understand what it means when I tell them he's part of the ISND. And he told me that you were wearing a mask."

She'd drawn a breath to apologise, to say that she just had to wear it, that it wasn't because of them, that it wasn't anything personal, that she just couldn't be that Saffron- but Gloom hadn't finished speaking.

"And that's fine. You don't owe us anything more than who you're comfortable being."

"Why?" She'd barely whispered, stunned.

He'd then cleared his throat uncomfortably, "Well, for one it would be incredibly hypocritical of me to tell you how to act after the way Prey's always refused to, er, never mind. That's private to him. What I mean is, I wanted to say that if you ever want to be a different Saffron Swirl, you can be. If that makes sense. We won't judge you."

Saffron had heard those words before, heard them from unicorns that day after day pretend to her face that they don't secretly look down on her for being a magical cripple. Reflexively, she had almost reached for an empty platitude to give Gloom, a smile and a kind but empty thank you. But then she had looked into those disquieting yellow eyes and had been stopped.

Gloom was a Guard. He served the princesses. He'd overcome things she couldn't imagine even surviving, she just had to look at the scars on his chest and face to know that. He'd also told them some stories of his clan around the dinner table, and she knew they'd all lived a life far harsher than any single pony here in Canterlot had.

She hadn't been able to lie in the face of those piercing yellow eyes.

"That means more to me than I thought it would. I, I wasn't expecting this." Her mother, a duchess, would've roared to hear her stutter like that, but propriety had been the furthest thing from her mind at the time.

Gloom's next words had stopped her yet again. "I don't promise it will be easy though. Not easy for you, I mean. Wear a mask long enough, and you forget what of you is real and what of you is the mask."

No comfort or reassurance offered, just the blunt truth. Somehow that made it stick even more. She remembered asking, "Back home, you never had this sort of problem in your clan, did you? This is a modern pony problem I suppose."

"No, just something I've observed for myself," He'd answered, stepping back, "You really should try one time to talk to Prey seriously when he's in a good mood. Only if it's a good mood,

though. Otherwise, really, don't bother. I'll leave you to it now. It's hard to ask, and I don't know if you'll ever want it, but our help is always here."

'To be a different Saffron Swirl?' What a frightening thought. What an alluring thought.

She wouldn't think about it later, because she'd already been thinking about it all this time. And Saffron also thought she might muster up her courage and give Gloom's suggestion a try. She'd talk to the secretive lamb.

It wasn't until recently, after many interactions with Prey and others who'd also interacted with the cute lamb, that she'd even realised he was being secretive in the first place. He'd given her a knife for Hearth's Warming.

'I will definitely give Gloom's advice an honest try next time I see them all.'

Flash, **poomf**.

"Aaand done. Simply magnifique! Thank you darling, you were wonderful."

Saffron smiled politely, even though she was still too dazzled by the flashes to see straight yet. "You're very generous miss, but it is simply my profession. Let me get changed into another dress, and I'll be ready for the next shoot straight away."

When morning finally came to the port town of Haven Hay, it was visually much the same as the one before.

Grey, overcast, windy, and with the ever-present promise of more rain.

Seagulls shrieked and guffawed, wheeling above the thin strip of cold, grey sand that made up Haven Hay's beach. The sand was

dark, wet with rain, and uninviting to trot upon. It clung to your hooves and somehow always ended up under your fur.

The cold waves breaking upon the dark sand hissed as they rushed up the beach's incline, before reluctantly sliding back out to rejoin the restless, murky sea. Even here, where it wasn't violently breaking against sheer cliffs, the water looked angry and moody.

Prey stood watching the sea from behind the high-tide detritus line. He didn't sit, not wanting to get wet sand stuck in his wool. He also eyed the wads of black, slimy seaweed the sea had cast up onto the beach. The tangled bundles of slimy fronds smelled strongly of salt and rot.

Prey stood there alone on the grey sand, looking over what passed for a view. It served to reinforce to him that he really didn't want to ever go swimming in the sea. Anything could be lurking down there.

The overcast sky brightened a bit as the sun rose from somewhere behind the endless blanket of cloud, but all it really achieved was changing the dark grey to a more medium grey. Prey kept looking out over the ceaseless waves, seemingly lost in thought and not paying attention to his surroundings or the town waking up behind him.

The gulls cawed and the sea hissed. Prey continued to watch.

'I wonder what Fallen Leaf and the deer holt are doing now? Assuming they're still alive.'

More waves rolled up and hissed over the grey sand. Wind kicked a white spray off the tips of the breaking waves.

Eventually Prey shook himself, turned, and walked up the narrow beach back into Haven Hay.

He turned a couple of corners, avoiding the few ponies up and about, then stopped behind a mostly-collapsed shed. A few seconds later, with the sound of wings, Gloom and Crimson dropped off the roof above and landed on the street.

"Nothing. Nopony took the bait." Gloom said, refolding his wings.

"I'd like to say again how much I hate being the bait." Prey repeated for the fifth time.

"It didn't work, so what does it matter?" Crimson asked, "I mean, obviously I'm glad nobody tried to kidnap you, but nobody tried to kidnap you, so our idea also didn't work."

"It was a long shot anyway. If they ran away in the middle of the night the minute we woke up, then they probably weren't going to try again in the day." Gloom grumbled.

"You're welcome by the way. You know, because you used me as unwilling bait." Prey said.

"Sorry Prey, but you're the only pony out of us three that somepony might think they'd be able to... well, snatch and carry off." Gloom coughed.

"Not a pony. Runt lamb. Repeat after me sir, 'runt' and 'lamb'."

"You could've said no." Crimson diplomatically pointed out, because Prey hadn't refused to at least try this little trap in the end.

"Only because I was ninety-seven percent sure nobody was actually going to risk trying," Prey grumbled, scraping some lingering traces of wet sand off his hoof onto the cobbles, "But I still hate being the bait on principle."

"Well thank you for going along with it and trying anyway." Gloom told him.

"Next time *you* can be the bait. And you didn't spot even one person looking in the direction of the beach suspiciously?" Prey checked.

"No, not even a glance." Gloom answered as Crimson just shook his head to say, 'Me neither'.

"Right. So that plan was a bust. Not exactly unexpected, though. What's next?" Prey asked.

"You mean, besides waiting for tomorrow?" Gloom checked.

Tomorrow, reinforcements and help were going to be arriving from Canterlot. The reply in the bottle had been waiting for them this morning. In answer to their request for aid, not just for themselves, but also for Haven Hay, the rescued sailors, and to repair the weather Tower, Captain Nighthawk had unequivocally promised to send some along immediately. Extra Night Guards, specialists, a doctor, and supplies would be arriving tomorrow morning by train.

'Where have I heard that promise before though? Oh that's right, Mayflower.'

Nighthawk had sworn on his name to deliver this time around though, and had even said that if their reinforcements did not manage to depart on the train for whatever reason, he'd dispatch a squad to fly all the way out here instead. They'd be a bit slower than the train, wouldn't be able to bring extra supplies, and would arrive exhausted from the non-stop flight, but this time the ISND *would* receive its promised backup no matter what.

'You'd better keep that promise. I haven't forgiven last time. If it happens again, I will take matters into my own hooves.' Prey darkly thought. What he said out loud instead was:

"Yes, I mean besides waiting for the train to arrive tomorrow."

"Breakfast?" Crimson suggested. They hadn't eaten yet, and none of them had gotten much sleep either after their event last night.

"Food, yes," Gloom agreed without needing any convincing, "Then we'll do the same as yesterday. Continue to interview residents and look for any clues. And check in with Sargent Nimbus. And on Trail Blazer..."

Gloom trailed off as his thoughts turned to the downed Royal Guard.

'-and those two sailors lost overboard. They're not coming back either-'

"Yes. We'll check in with them," Gloom said quietly, "But after we

eat. Food first, then our job."

"Mentioning food, or rather, drinks... you'll both be good for a while yet, right?" Prey checked, giving Gloom and Crimson each a significant look.

Neither stallion liked being asked about their blood intake requirements, even if Prey had been circumspect in his wording, but it was a pertinent question.

"Yes. I mean, for a good while yet." Crimson refolded his wings to his armoured sides, looking straight ahead.

"You don't need to worry about that at all, Prey. It's our job to manage ourselves." Gloom said, also looking off at an angle.

Prey twiddled the end of his silk ribbon, "Right, sorry. So, breakfast?" He asked brightly, changing the topic back.

"Yes, c'mon. We need to pick up our bags, and then we can eat." Gloom said, stepping around a puddle and leading the way.

A disgruntled seagull flapped up into the air to get out of their path as they rounded the corner, and cawed angrily at them to make sure they knew it.

"Looks like more rain. I mean, more rain within the next fifteen minutes. Because there's always rain." Crimson amended, nodding his helmet towards the sea.

A street leading down the hill made for a gap in the houses, providing a straight line of sight over the harbour and the Boiling Bay. You couldn't see much further out than the seething dark waters of the Boiling Bay, because of the misty grey curtain of rain blowing in.

"At least it's not another storm." Gloom muttered, head swivelling towards the east, where they all knew that gigantic ball of stormclouds were sitting above the kelp beds of the Breathless Sea, just waiting to break in an apocalyptic display.

All three of them kept looking in that direction as they trotted along

the next street, each silently thinking about it. A pony resident struggling to reach a soaked sheet, which had blown up onto the eaves of a roof and had gotten caught, hastily refused their offer of help when they passed.

"I'm fine sirs, really. I've got this, it's fine!"

"That was one of the rioters from yesterday who trashed the Weather Tower. I remember the face." Prey conversationally pointed out once they had passed.

"Really?" Gloom stopped to shoot a dark scowl over his shoulder, making sure to remember the house, "Well that explains his attitude. He's guilty."

Prey stopped himself from voicing the truth, that the real reason for that pony's attitude had been because Gloom was a thestral. That, and he and Crimson were both fully suited in their dark armour.

"Can you actually remember all of, what was it? Five hundred or so ponies from yesterday?" Crimson asked Prey, cocking one tufted ear.

"No, they were all in a mob, and we didn't get close enough, but I could pick out maybe eighty or so of them from a lineup." Prey estimated as they drew closer to the lonely inn where they'd rented a room.

"That is still an impressive number. I mean, I can remember maybe five. And one of those is sheriff Lumber." Crimson admitted.

"Which reminds me, that's another pony we have to check in with. To make sure he hasn't reneged on doing his duty again." Gloom scowled.

Crimson unconsciously made a curt downwards flick with his wing, signalling disgust, "As long as he can watch over Alto Heights, and keep him safe inside the Watch House until our reinforcements arrive tomorrow, that's all we need. I mean, after that, we can just arrest him."

They were almost back to the rundown and storm-battered inn. It

was set about five or six streets up from the docks, meaning that although you couldn't quite see them, you could still see the harbour and its walls. And right slap-bang in the middle of the harbour's mouth, the now completely abandoned ship from yesterday wallowed.

Prey wondered if the townsfolk were going to try and tow the heavy, waterlogged hulk out of the way, or if they were going to wait for it to sink to the bottom of the harbour and become completely unsalvageable. Well whatever, that was their problem to work out, not his.

Unexpectedly, Gloom slowed in leading the way. Prey looked up questioningly. He turned his head to the right, brushing back an ear to follow the thestral's gaze.

Gloom was looking at the dark harbour wall, small swells of murky water slapping against the sloping, limpet and weed-encrusted concrete. No, actually not quite. Gloom was looking at the building at the end of the wall, the blocky red and white lighthouse.

Prey squinted, trying to work out what was bothering Gloom. His eyesight wasn't perfect by any means, no thanks to both Snake and the Reaper King, but he still couldn't spot anything out of place.

"Is something wrong, sir?" Crimson asked, yellow eyes also squinting to try and spot what had caught their Sargent's attention.

Gloom took a long moment in answering, pursing his lips, "I'm not sure, but... no, I'm nearly certain. I'm getting a hint from my cutie mark that we should go there. Or rather, that it isn't the *wrong* path to go there."

Prey felt a stab of bitter annoyance that once again they were getting esoteric directions out of nowhere, and that as a pony Gloom could even get them, before it was trampled under the cold hooves of creeping alarm.

"That... is either a good thing or a bad thing." Crimson said carefully. It wasn't going to be somewhere in the middle.

"It's probably nothing. My talent doesn't tell me the correct path to follow, just if it’s not the wrong one." Gloom said, but he was still staring out at the distant lighthouse with a drawn expression.

'-we were just there yesterday. What's new that could've appeared?-'

A baseless suspicion about the what in question had already come to Prey. There was no proof, and he had no reason to either believe or disbelieve the unfounded guess, but somehow that just served to make the event of it being true seem all the more likely.

He glanced back and forth between Gloom and Crimson's faces, each framed by the curving silvery-purple metal helmet’s cheek guards.

"Just so we're all aware, this could be a trap of some kind, you know that right?"

"That seems very unlikely. But still..." Crimson didn't finish.

"I don't think it's a trap. That would definitely make it the wrong path." Gloom said, but he still didn't look away from the distant lighthouse.

"That's hardly foolproof, and it could still just as easily be a trap but one which also gives some kind of hint or clue. But you can't get the clue if you're dead." Prey stressed. Crimson also looked to Gloom to wait for his reply.

"Believe me, I know better than anypony my cutie mark isn't infallible. We're not going to march in there blindly, but I still don't think it's some sort of trap. Just, as I'm getting a feeling that it isn’t the wrong path, I get a feeling of it not being a trap too." Gloom assured them, or maybe himself.

"And if it is still a trap?" Prey insisted, not letting it go.

"Prey, you're being over-the-top paranoid again. It's just the lighthouse, we went in there yesterday. It's only Flash Light and his wife Sandy in there. But don't worry, we'll still be extra cautious and double-check everything."

'I am not being overly paranoid.' Prey scowled. But Gloom wasn't wrong either, they would have to go out to the lighthouse, at least if they wanted to see where this mysterious hint from Gloom's flanks was trying to lead them.

'Ponies and their ridiculous, temperamental, fickle special talents.' And Prey hated that it actually worked, yet more blatant favouritism by Harmony to the pony race. He'd come to expect it by now, though.

"So do we go see, or decide not to?" Prey asked the question. It wasn't rhetorical either.

The grey, foggy curtain of rain was steadily coming closer across the wave crests the longer they stood here, undecided and hesitating. Soon it would reach the blocked harbour's mouth, and therefore the lighthouse too. It wasn't heavy rain, not like the storm yesterday by any means, but it still meant they were soon going to have to get wet if they wanted to reach the red-and-white-striped lighthouse.

"I trust my cutie mark to at least not march me, us, into a trap." Gloom said, giving his vote.

Gloom was the Sargent, but again, this wasn't the Night Guard back in Canterlot. Here, in this, they were equals. Crimson nodded forwards, towards the harbour wall, "It might be important. And I mean, it isn't as if we have any other solid clues to follow instead."

Tiebreaker thrown, the consensus taken. They were going in.

"Alright, but how about you fly there first and have a look around? Make sure it's safe, you know?" Prey suggested.

"Of course. Let's get down to the docks first though. I'll fly across then." Gloom said.

How dearly Prey wished he too had wings. Not having to approach from the ground, not having to risk hitting most tripwires or traps; flying wasn't just convenient, it was literally a lifesaving tool. Not

just because it let you skip possible traps, but because it also allowed one to overcome the obstacle of having to trot across the top of the uneven harbour wall as the sea broke loudly against its pitted surface.

With wings, you didn't have to worry about falling into the churning saltwater below. With wings, you weren't limited to the one and only solid ground approach. With wings, you could safely fly all around the lighthouse and examine it from every side for anything out of place. Which was exactly what Gloom did.

'I hate being a runt. I hate this body. I wish I had wings.' Prey could only jealously think for the thousand-and-somethingth time as he watched Gloom whirl around the square, blocky tower of the lighthouse in a slow arc. Gloom was having to beat his wings steadily, as there wasn't anything like an updraft over the sea, and the first outstretched feelers from the approaching curtain of rain had arrived to further weigh him down, but it wasn't any great challenge for Gloom.

Prey had seen the thestral and Crimson flying so often, but still every single time he watched them beat their wings and break free of gravity, it was amazing all over again.

Crimson stood beside Prey, also carefully watching Gloom's reconnaissance with hawklike attention. If something suddenly went wrong, such as some sudden magical attack from within the lighthouse, Crimson was the backup ready to rush in and help Gloom. And because if it *was* a trap, cold harsh logic dictated you didn't send two people into it, but only risked losing one.

Although the chances of it being a trap, despite all of Prey's paranoia, really were slim.

Gloom stopped beating his wings and let himself glide down. Prey tensed as Gloom's hooves touched down on the wet concrete outside the tightly sealed door, but nothing happened.

"It seems to be fine. Probably." Crimson said, starting towards the hewn stone stairs at the base of the harbour wall. He could have made the short flight up to the lighthouse easily, but Prey was

going to have to leave the dock and climb up the sea-slicked stairs by hoof, so Crimson was sticking with him.

Prey bent his head to shield his eyes as the wind started to drive the rain into his face. He braced his legs and adopted a lower, stronger stance once they were atop the harbour wall, the sound of the sea breaking against either side of it suddenly much louder and closer.

Prey hurriedly grabbed at his ribbon out of pure habit to check that, yes, it was still firmly tied on like it was supposed to be. He gingerly stuck to the very middle of the wall's top as he walked across, trying to ignore the bite of the wind digging into his wool and the feel of rain already dripping off the sodden ends of his ears.

Crimson craned his head back as they got closer and closer to the lighthouse, looking up to the top of the smallest cube making up the blocky tower.

"Haven't you knocked yet?" Prey asked Gloom, stepping towards the base of the lighthouse for a bit more shelter against the wind and rain.

Gloom shook his head, dribbles of rain running off the end of each woven strand of his warrior's braid, the length of it poking out from under the back of his helmet. "I did knock already. Twice. They haven't answered the door yet."

Gloom gave it a third try, loudly striking the sealed metal door with his cloud-steel-shod hoof. As they weren't in the middle of a raging storm, there was no way Gloom's banging hadn't been heard throughout the lighthouse's interior.

The way Crimson had his head back, softly tilting to one side and then the other made Prey look up at him. Prey blinked- at him, and also to get the rain out of his eyes.

"Oh no." Prey sagged and sat down right there, heedless of the enervating cold puddles. He covered his eyes with his forelegs in frustration, the golden bands mocking him.

"Really? I mean, just really?" Prey whined to the world.

"What?" Gloom asked. Then he saw as well. His ears went back against the smooth metal of his helmet.

"Crimson...?" Gloom asked, already knowing the answer.

"I'm sorry." Crimson said, as if it were somehow his fault he only had bad news. "But... yes. I mean, it's faint, and it might not be pony blood, but..."

Prey massaged the scars on his cheeks, not uncovering his eyes, "Just, just wonderful." He sighed.

'First Gloom's special talent, and now yours in quick succession. If I were a pony instead of a runt lamb, I bet I'd be next up for show and tell.'

Gloom swallowed, eyes fixed on the sealed door. His mind was loudly running through nightmares about what they might find waiting on the other side just a few hooves away. Though was it a nightmare if you'd actually seen it happen once before?

'-rats chewing away in the dark, all those little eyes and teeth-'

"Crimson, are you saying that inside we're going to find a, a, a-" Gloom gesticulated with a wingclaw, voice thick, "-A body? Bodies?"

When Crimson couldn't immediately answer in the negative Gloom jumped to the worst conclusion, "Oh *Luna*."

"I don't know sir," Crimson hastily cut him off, "I can't smell enough blood for that. But, the door's closed, and it's so windy out here, and what with the salt..." He trailed off again.

"If you can't tell for definite, then let's not jump to conclusions," Gloom said, rather hypocritically, "Let's, let's go inside and check first."

Prey choked on an inappropriate giggle, unable to deny the morbid ironic humour, "Khe-he, here we go again, breaking into first that tower, now this one. Fly up, go in, come down, and unlock the front door. Why change a winning strategy, heh?"

His moment of dark humour was not appreciated, Prey knew that, but all of this was just so, so... déjà vu inducing. They'd done this same song and dance literally just yesterday.

'First the Heights family, and now the lighthouse couple.' Prey stood back on his hooves, pushing off the lighthouse's wall as a boost. The light rain hadn't stopped falling, and although the sea wasn't raging at the moment, it was still the sea. Treacherous, and prone to violent mood swings. They shouldn't linger out here exposed on the wall. Best to get this over with.

Of course, he wasn't the one who was going to have to fly up and go in first.

"We could just not?" Prey suggested weakly, and like Gloom just now he already knew the answer he was going to receive. "Let's go get the good-for-nothing sheriff. Make him go in first. Someone must have a spare key to the lighthouse in Haven Hay. Or how about Sargent Nimbus Feather, or any of his team? They've got wings too if we're not going the spare key route."

Gloom's lips turned down, "Prey. Are you seriously suggesting we have other ponies take the risks we don't want to? No, I *know* that's what you're suggesting."

Prey widened his weak grin in the face of Gloom and Crimson's strong disapproval, "Well yes. But come on, you can't honestly say that surprises you? I care much more about our continued wellbeing than theirs. Haven't we done our fair share, unlike them? We don't have to take this approach, we do have other options."

"This is our duty." Gloom stated, and there was so much more he could've added to that.

"We are the best suited for this. We've done this before. Nobody else has." Crimson also added that simple, irrefutable logic.

"We've had this exact argument before too." Prey sighed, conceding defeat, knowing this wasn't going to go anywhere that it hadn't before. But it had at least been worth a try.

Crimson unfolded his wings, shaking off rain in a small cascade of droplets, "We don't actually know if anything's wrong yet. It could be nothing. I mean, my cutie mark isn't picking up any smell really strongly." He tried to reassure Prey.

"I could go first-" Gloom started.

"No. I mean, it's my turn sir. You flew here first, so I should go in first now." So saying, Crimson backed up a few steps, wings spreading wide. He crouched down, and then launched himself upwards in one smooth, powerful motion.

It took him mere moments to reach the railing of the lighthouse's platform above, and then Prey got a raindrop right in the eye and had to look back down, so he missed Crimson landing on the balcony.

The front door down here at ground level may have been a reinforced and watertight steel affair, but not so all the way at the top of the lighthouse. The sea could be rough and angry, but this close to land the waves didn't quite stretch to that height. Splashes carried from the wave crests by the wind didn't count. If a solid wave reaching the top of the lighthouse were hitting the structure, then it was a particularly large tsunami and the lighthouse couldn't be expected to survive anyways. And nor would the rest of the town.

Prey couldn't help it. He turned to look east, even though he couldn't see the storm hanging over the Breathless Sea. But he knew it was out there, beyond the rain and fog. Waiting.

'If that thing breaks without being dispersed... no, even then it'll just cause a storm surge, not a tsunami. A storm surge, there is a difference.'

And then there was a metal clunk from behind him, and he turned back to see Crimson pushing open the door.

"That was fast." Gloom said hesitantly, but hopefully.

'-if he got to the door so fast then that means he didn't find any rats

or... other things inside. I hope-'

"I have good news. And bad news." Crimson said flatly, stepping aside.

Prey had climbed up through the lighthouse just yesterday, and had seen the living space of Flash Light and Sandy Shine. Ponies seemed to need so much stuff to live, and the lighthouse had been rather cramped in accommodating all the things that the married couple had accumulated over the years. Prey had remembered seeing an overcrowded coat rack, the dining table crammed against the wall and half covered with old newspapers, and a stack of well-worn romance novels used to prop up a cabinet to give just a few such examples of the overall 'theme' of the house. Or rather, the lighthouse.

"The good news is that there isn't, well, that this isn't another salt cellar incident. The good news is that they're not in here." Crimson said.

"The bad news is also that they're not in here. And it's definitely pony blood I found."

The table had been overturned. Oh, it was standing back upright now, but the newspapers must have fallen and were splayed out over the floor. A plate had been knocked off the cabinet and shattered, all but the smallest shards hastily shoved in a drawer. And all the coats were still on the rack, meaning neither Flash Light nor Sandy Shine had the option to put one on when they left. It only took a glance for Prey to spot these signs.

The lighthouse keepers had vanished. Just like the Heights family.

"How much blood are we talking?" Gloom asked.

Crimson showed them. It was just a dried brown smear at the top of the stairs, something that anyone else would've missed, or dismissed as just a stain or mud. Not Crimson though.

Prey crouched right down until his eyes were level with the step. "It was bigger. Someone wiped the rest of the splash away."

"Yes." Crimson agreed, "I can smell that."

"But it wasn't a huge puddle, right? Not enough for anypony to have been seriously hurt, right?" Gloom pressed, despite knowing that the absence of blood didn't necessarily mean there couldn't be a body.

'-broken bones or a snapped neck don't spread blood-'

Crimson hesitated, "I don't think there was enough for that, but... it wasn't some small accidental injury. It's too strong for that."

"But not fatally so?" Gloom double-checked.

"No. Not enough blood for that. And it's all from one pony too."

"Can you tell who? Was it from Flash Light or Sandy?" Prey asked, straightening back up.

"Sorry, but I can't tell. I haven't smelled either of their blood before, so I just don't know. Maybe though? But it could just as easily be someone, no, somepony else's. It's definitely *pony* blood."

This wasn't a comfortable topic for Crimson. Even after all this time it was still something he and Gloom avoided discussing in Prey's presence if possible, but this was much more serious than personal discomfort. Prey saw that Crimson was breathing mostly through his mouth, but not unevenly or heavily.

"I see." Was all Gloom could mutter, casting his eyes over the lighthouse's interior, trying to spot any clue as to what had taken place here.

"I'd say the blood is somewhere in the range of four to eight hours old. But we already knew that they disappeared sometime in the night." Prey said.

Gloom shut his eyes for a moment, muttering out a list more to himself than either of them, "We're going to have to report this to Captain Nighthawk. And Sargent Nimbus. And Lumber while he's still the sheriff. By Luna, it never ends, does it?"

"The smell isn't too bad for you Crimson? Not overwhelming? Well there's not as much spilled blood as back in the, ah, you know, so obviously not, but I just meant it's not too bad, right?" Prey bit his tongue, stopping himself from rambling any further.

"No. I mean, yes, it's not too bad. It could be worse. For this level, I've sort of gotten used to it." Crimson answered quietly, his eyes too roaming the lighthouse for sudden clues.

"Gotten used to this level?" Prey asked before he caught up with himself, "Actually never mind."

Crimson still answered, "From you."

"I, pardon?"

"You. I mean, you smell of old blood a lot Prey."

"I do?" Prey asked carefully.

"Yes, you do." Crimson confirmed blandly, still looking around while Gloom muttered about having to use another message-in-a-bottle.

'And I always thought I was so careful about washing my hooves properly when I came back up from the lair.' Prey thought. He eyed Crimson, worried that his friend was going to try and pry deeper.

How long had Crimson known something was off? 'Daft question, how many times have I been in contact with blood or dead bodies since we've met is a better question. With how sensitive his nose is for blood, he must've been able to at least faintly tell nearly every single time.'

But Crimson had never asked, or even brought it up. He wasn't asking now either, just informing Prey that he knew.

'If he hasn't asked yet, that means he doesn't want to know either. Alright, I won't bring it up if he doesn't.' Prey decided, putting off the topic for now. They had other things to focus on.

"We need to search every room. Unlike with the Weather Tower,

this place is still intact. This is our chance. Leave no stone unturned." Gloom announced, snapping back into Sargent mode.

"We don't know if both of these disappearances are connected." Prey pointed out.

"My gut says they are." Gloom said.

"It seems very likely," Prey agreed, "But we shouldn't blind ourselves with presuppositions is all I'm saying. We could miss things if we blinker ourselves."

"You're right of course. Our goal is the same for both them and the Heights however." Gloom straightened his shoulders, as if preparing himself to receive a burden.

"To find them. And save them before it's too late." Crimson finished without any question in his statement.

"I hate it here. I can't fly. Where's the sky? I want to fly. This is cruelll*llll*." Alto Heights whined piteously, rocking back and forth on a stool in the corner.

Lumber and his deputy ignored him. From the looks on their faces, it seemed they'd been enduring constant whining from the pegasus colt since they got in this morning.

Now, the two law enforcement officers had something else to worry about. They hadn't been very concerned when the Heights vanished yesterday, the whole port town having hated the weather ponies, but now the lighthouse keepers were gone on top of that?

This was a very worrying pattern.

'-who else might get snatched in the middle of the night?-', Was the alarmed thought that had immediately gone around the room when they heard the bad news the ISND bore.

"But, where could they have gone?" Lumber asked, looking lost.

"That's why we're asking you, sheriff," Gloom snapped, "This is your town, your lighthouse, and there are pony residents living in your jurisdiction who might know something. Go out there and ask around until you find them."

"I want to flyyyyy. Let me fly. Are you ignoring me? Stop ignoring me!" Came loud whining from the background.

Prey gave the white pegasus colt a disgusted look. Alto still wasn't concerned about anything but his own cutie mark's satisfaction, not even concerned for his missing brother and parents. All he cared about was his selfish need to fly. All Prey believed Alto actually needed was a good thrashing.

Lumber shot Gloom a mulish glare, before sharing a worried glance with his deputy. "There's no place they could've gone. They weren't cloud buckers, er, pegasi, like the Heights were. They weren't one of those flashy teleporting types either. The only way off the lighthouse is along the harbour wall."

"Or by jumping into the sea." The deputy added unhappily.

Privately, Lumber was worrying about that very thing. Specifically, about whether this could've been caused by those sea-dwelling marefolk he superstitiously believed in:

'-the lighthouse is right on the sea, and the wailing from the crag blows in right to where they were. But Flash and Sandy were sensible ponies, not bucking airheads. They wouldn't follow any singing-'

"I don't really care what it takes, as long as they get found." Gloom ordered, leaning over Lumber and the deputy, "Organise search parties, check houses, ask everypony. They couldn’t have gone far on hoof by themselves."

Prey helpfully chimed in, smiling cheerily at the two earth ponies despite it being completely at odds with the dark topic, "Check there are no boats missing in the harbour. No trains have left Haven Hay since yesterday evening, at least not by the train timetable, so that's out too."

"Like Prey says, if they're still here, then they can't have gotten far. *If*. But if not, then it's because they were taken, just like the Heights were. We're going to search for any clue as to why they've both been targeted. But you need to get out there and start looking. Understand?"

"Hey, are you going flying? I'm coming too, I hate it in here." Alto butted in, jumping off his stool in the corner.

"For the last time, no!" Lumber rounded on Alto, the remainder of his dwindling patience gone, "You ain't going anywhere you jumped-up seagull! No means no! So-help-me Celestia, you're staying right here!"

The white colt blinked, utterly unable to understand why they weren't letting him out to fly off and potentially, if trends continued, never come back. "That's not fair! I'm a weather pegasus, you can't do this to me!" He protested.

"Put him in a cell. Make sure he's comfortable and that he has food, but lock him in there." Gloom ordered.

"I was already gonna' do that. I know how to do my job." Lumber shot back as the deputy started grimly herding the upset Alto away.

Crimson snorted in disbelief at Lumber's claim as Gloom simply stared, brow drawing in thunderously.

'-how you can say that with a straight face after your abysmal performance yesterday, I really don't know-', Gloom thought. Prey agreed completely with the sentiment.

"If I thought you could do your job without being foalsat, I wouldn't be here now would I? Stop wasting time, get out there, get ponies searching, and do it now!"

Lumber and his deputy roped in a couple of ponies to help, who each roped in a couple more, who also asked a few extra themselves, and in short order about forty search groups of two to three residents had been gathered.

Unlike with them being uncaring of the missing Heights family, they were much more willing to search for the port town's only unicorn couple, donning raincoats and wide-brimmed hats as they spread out. It was not with purpose and hope the searchers set out however, but alarm and worry.

Prey had been watching their faces and listening to their thoughts. The Heights' vanishing had been welcomed, but the lighthouse keepers going missing so soon after had finally shaken them enough to realise how serious an event that people had disappeared actually was. Those they perceived as actual people, not just abstracts they didn't like. Finally, the reality of the situation seemed to have sunken through their thick skulls.

'-what if my child is next?-'
'-or what if it's my neighbour?-'
'-it could even be me next-'

By the end of the day, Prey judged that most of Haven Hay would know about Flash Light and Sandy Shine vanishing. It was going to serve as a nasty wake-up call to them all. They'd been stuck in the rut of their own misfortunes, like the storm damage and loss of jobs, or the empty dry docks and non-existent kelp harvesting. 'But things can always get worse.'

"I'm not actually sure this was the right thing to do." Gloom unexpectedly confided.

Both Prey and Crimson looked at him questioningly.

"Announcing it to the town," Gloom clarified, "This could well cause a lot of panic. Some ponies here are going to completely overreact. What I'm worried about is if others join in. Ponies do stupid things when they're scared."

All too true, especially when it was ponies. They'd seen the proof of that just yesterday with the mob. Ponies were all too willing to cast aside their individual conscience and surrender to the will of the herd.

"A fair point." Prey agreed.

"But it's too late now." Crimson finished.

Alarm was already out there and spreading. It would spread from mouth to mouth, neighbour to neighbour. From the baker to the mayor, all were going to find out through one channel or the other. Ponies would hastily usher their unhappy foals back inside, look worriedly towards the sea, and maybe then check that all entrances had the sigil against bad luck painted above them.

"I think it's better this way. I mean, at least now everyone has been warned." Crimson said, as a seagull started yelling from what sounded like right above them.

Prey scowled at the volume, shooting a useless glare up at the roof, the guttering there leaking, "It's not like they weren't going to find out they'd vanished. Someone was going to go knock on the lighthouse door sooner rather than later."

"Somepony," Gloom corrected automatically, pursing his lips with worry as they watched the groups disperse down the rain-slicked streets, "Luna take it all, but everything's starting to spiral out of control."

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"The last time I saw Sandy was a week ago. Gone? Gone where?"

"What do ya' mean? Vanished? Are more ponies vanishing?!"

"I don't know nothin'. Celestia, I hope they're okay."

"Are we in danger? Is somepony snatching us from our homes?!"

"Lock your doors and windows at night, I tell you, lock 'em tight!"

"I ain't seen mane nor tail of either of 'em, now leave me alone."

Nobody in Haven Hay could find the lighthouse keepers. They had vanished with almost as little trace as the Heights had. *Almost*, as they had left that spilt blood, which the ISND had decided it best to keep to themselves. It only took four hours before the truth was confirmed, barring the existence of some secret bunker hidden

under the town.

Flash Light and Sandy Shine were gone from Haven Hay.

And then to top it all off, another storm rolled in from the west. It brought more lashing rains and piercing winds, forcing the still-searching residents back inside as the already battered Haven Hay was battered yet again.

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The cracked windowpane shook in its frame, and leaked the rain that was falling almost horizontally beyond it. Outside of the rented room they'd returned to shelter in, the wind wailed and howled.

It was impossible to see the bay through the pouring rain, but Prey could still hear even over the hammering raindrops and groaning winds how the sea had been kicked up into a roaring fury.

"Where do these storms keep coming from?" Gloom voiced the question.

Prey turned away from peering out the single window, "From out at sea? Or were you asking for something specifically?"

"No, not quite. Haven Hay's been suffering storms nearly constantly. That's not natural." Gloom stated, restlessly shifting from hoof to hoof, unwilling to sit down on the bed.

Not natural, and Gloom wasn't misguidedly spouting those words like a sheltered pony who was used to perfectly controlled weather would've. Gloom actually meant 'not natural', and Prey had to agree.

Storms don't just come out of nowhere. They form and build up over a number of days, slowly accumulating water vapour, building until they reach the point of oversaturation and burst. While rain and other bad weather was more common where the sea met the coast, it shouldn't be common to this extent.

Crimson minutely flexed first one wing, then the other, "I do not know the why, but something is making these storms. The land

can't take many more. It's wrong, too much. You can feel it in the atmosphere."

"And all the storms consistently add whatever's left of themselves to that huge time-bomb squatting over the Breathless." Prey nodded. Something was definitely wrong, and it was making his stomach squirm.

"Do you remember before? The Weather Factories back in Cloudsdale, they predicted it was just leftover disruption caused by Discord's tampering all gathering in one place, which just happened to be here. And that it would stop once everything straightened back out. I think they were way off the mark. Something else is happening here." Gloom's face was drawn in worry, as rain continued to pound on the roof.

Crimson wordlessly nodded.

"Reinforcements are arriving tomorrow," Prey reminded them, "We just need to hold out until tomorrow. Which means hunkering down, and not doing anything stupid and reckless until then. We just have to wait."

Nighthawk had *promised* reinforcements. Promised on his clan name. He was determined to make up for the Night Guard failing to assist the ISND back in Mayflower.

Prey wasn't concerned about Nighthawk not keeping his word, although he would only believe reinforcements were coming when he saw the reinforcements with his own two eyes. It wasn't worry over Nighthawk's vow, but rather that Prey just expected the worst to happen. Like sudden and spontaneous combustion of the train with all the reinforcements still inside, or a freak earthquake swallowing the tracks.

No, what Prey was concerned about was Luna taking an active interest in what they were doing out here.

Every single time, without fail, when Luna tried to meddle or follow a flight of fancy, it was always them, the helpless mortals, who suffered.

"Tomorrow morning. They'll be here tomorrow."

The wind and rain continued to lash the walls and window for almost a solid hour more. Prey, Gloom, and Crimson couldn't do much but pace around the cramped room and wait for it to eventually pass.

Nimbus Feather had declined to try stopping this storm. He'd stayed on the ground, still watching over the unconscious Trail Blazer along with his remaining two subordinates.

The Royal Guard Staff Sargent had refused to risk it again. Once stung, twice wary. He'd refused on the grounds that there was no ship in danger this time, that there was one less of them now, and that the storm was too far along to be broken up before finishing its damage anyways.

They'd just been excuses though, not reasons. All of those points were also valid reasons, but in his heart that was not why Nimbus was refusing. Not because it was the sensible choice, but because he was afraid.

'And deep down, he hates himself for being a coward. What a monumental moron. Being afraid of a storm is sensible, not cowardice, even if you're a weather pegasus.' Prey mentally disparaged the previously bold and brash stallion.

Confined to their room as they waited for the storm to pass, Prey secretly worked on inscribing a few more runes into some of the gear he'd brought. Killing time. Busy work. Waiting for tomorrow.

Tomorrow was still a while away yet though, a full afternoon and full night left to get through. When the storm finally passed, they emerged back out into the dripping town, it being just that little bit more noticeably damaged, more strained, and more run-down than it had been before.

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It was actually another hour after the storm finally ended that anyone realised anything was wrong. *More* wrong.

The pony residents reluctantly emerged, sullen from repeating this cycle for the last fortnight. Wherever there existed a dip in the streets, or even on flat areas of ground where the earth was just too sodden to absorb any more, deep puddles of rain sat. These mixed with lingering traces of seawater, creating a tinge around the edges where salt gathered.

There was one such puddle just to the side of the entrance of Haven Hay's Watch House.

There was no sun visible through the brooding clouds, but even if there had been, Prey doubted the dull water would've reflected anything back. You couldn't see the Watch House in the puddle. All Prey could see when he looked down into it was the same shapeless dark grey as that of the sky above.

There were no lights on inside the Watch House. Nobody home. Not sheriff Lumber, not his deputy, nor the stand-in deputy, nor even Alto Heights who should have been safely tucked away in one of the cells for his own good.

They stood outside the completely empty Watch House.

Prey shivered. It had very little to do with the cold. Crimson was staring dead ahead, wings utterly still at his side. The wind carried a constant muffled roar of distant waves to their ears. Gloom stood like a person who'd suffered a hammer blow, unsteady on his hooves.

The smell of salt and mouldering seaweed blew across their faces. It was the smell of failure and creeping rot.

How had everything started happening so fast? The race had started, but no one had told the ISND when to run.

The Weather Tower. The lighthouse. And now the Watch House. One, two, three, like dominos they fell.

None of this was mere chance and bad luck. Something was connecting them all. Was it the Heights? Alto, the last of their family, was now gone too. Every single target had been taken for a

purpose, whatever the mysterious method of removal was. Maybe they were already dead. After all, the villagers of Mayflower had been kidnapped to make living sacrifices for wicker parasites. And those of Alfalfa Dale as just sacrifices.

'But I was the one who threw the egg in.' Prey's consciousness hissed. 'They were already as good as dead anyways. I had a choice, and I made it.' He mentally hissed back.

But still he regretted it. It was one of the guilts that he actually felt regret over. Not like the mimics.

'They brought their fate on themselves.' He reminded, *reassured*, himself.

But here and now, for this issue in Haven Hay, the future was still dangerously open. Weather Tower, lighthouse, Watch House. Why had the people been taken from each of these places? How had they been taken? What might they have seen that they shouldn't've? Or known that no one else did? There were invisible strings connecting all of it together.

Yet Prey didn't know what the connection was. He just didn't know.

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Those who forget their past are doomed to repeat it. Prey hadn't forgotten. But nobody can know the future.

Author's Notes:

'*For ti's, Merry Christmasss ev-ery bodies 'aving fun!*~'
🎄

And big thank you to the kind editor who did it in time for Dec 25th: Panem et Circenses 🎁

93.7 No Matter How Far We Go...

The book was a decently old one. Not ancient by any means, but still old. The pages were yellowing, and the spine was full of deeply-ingrained dust. Nor had it been carefully preserved down the years.

It wasn't a big, thick tome either, rather short at barely over a hundred pages actually. It contained a collection of essays and theories written by a number of young scholars graduating all in the same year, and published by the university afterwards. The book had no doubt been intended as reference material for the next few years' graduates, and nothing more. An updated version of the book was probably complied every year, kept for about ten or even twenty years by the university for proprietary's sake, and then... simply phased out.

This copy was probably one of the few surviving from that year, but while its' scarcity therefore technically made it rare, nobody out there would be bidding gold for it. There were a thousand-and-one similar books produced and forgotten every single year.

This particular one in question was ninety-four years old. Not new, but not truly old either, and so existed in a limbo of being unsought-after, and also unstudied.

But for all that, within its pages, there existed a written dissertation amongst all the rest which held one short section that made the book of interest to a very select few individuals in the know.

-In that year of After Celestia, as to the continual incursions of a vile and despicable witch coven inflicting their oppressive craft upon those rural villages and border towns, the farming ponies begged protection from the Lord of the land. But within a few short months, the earth pony Lord was laid low in his sick bed, poisoned

by the vile witches, and had to beg further aid from experts in the Border Guard against the dark arts.

Historical records and available reports regarding the proceedings grow spotty. There is evidence both to support and contradict that this reprehensible witch coven was led by an infamous name of the time, the White Witch Selenia, while other reports claim she was actually in conflict with the coven, not leading them.

The frustratingly missing name of the coven does not help uncomplicate the matter.

Again, there are few preserved or reliable reports, but of those that I judge as somewhat valid, they all follow either one of two threads:

One, that the Border Guard successfully apprehended the coven, and then either the White Witch Selenia escaped or was slain in her lair.

Two, that Selenia was the coven's enemy, and that it was her who destroyed them first, before later being cornered by the Guard as she attempted to escape justice for her many crimes, but was not slain and instead through her dark arts evaded capture.

The first thread- although lacking any definitive proof to certify it, I judge the more likely for what little it matters. I can find no further records of any ponies encountering the White Witch Selenia after this date, and it is far more believable that the vile witch finally met her long overdue end than she would settle to retire into ignominy.

Why this is important, is that in the following year these events greatly contributed to local pressure, cascading into the creation of the trade agreement of 895 A.C., which was of paramount importance because of-"

Lemon Pink shut the book and put it back into her pack. The extract didn't mention Selenia the Great White Witch again, which was the only useful information to her in the whole book.

'Annoying. Why couldn't better records have been kept at the time?'

Lemon thought, shifting on the bundle of sacks she'd taken as her seat, trying to find something more comfortable.

Information on the elusive witch Selenia from nearly a hundred years ago was far more important than drivel about the trade agreement the rich earth pony lords hammered out afterwards. Especially because the treaty basically amounted to them bleeding their non-pony tenants dry in a different manner to normal, rather than actually improving anything.

'Aggravating. Another dead end. And no mention of any pincushion whatsoever.' And that was the real reason she and Prey had been searching so avidly for any scrap of history about the witch Selenia.

Because they had her old pincushion locked away behind runes and tonnes of rock under Mount Canter. And they weren't sure that was enough to stop it from going walkabouts, either.

The little rag bundle with its three pins, and one stolen sewing needle, scared the both of them. Not just because they didn't know all of what it could do, but because they knew *some* of what it could.

Because they had hints, because it wasn't plain voodoo magic, and because the unknown promised to be horrifically dangerous. Not dangerous like a fireball. Dangerous like a plague.

'Deeply concerning. Prey survived its twisted magic twice, but the memory of what happened is a cognitive hazard to even know. I only have the verbal description of what happened. Of hunger.'

They just didn't know when the small, inconspicuous pincushion might suddenly sprout legs and create some fresh monstrosity.

'And it is so difficult to find any history on Selenia. Frustrating.'

It wasn't possible for Lemon to go back to searching reference texts right now, however. She leant her head back against the wall behind her pile of sacks, and let the silver glow of her light spell wink out. She closed her eyes in the darkness, and attempted to get some rest. It was important to get an adequate amount of sleep, and

there was little else productive she could do right now. She could ignore the smell. And the contents of her surroundings had never bothered her to begin with.

Lemon briefly thought about Randy, probably going about his ordinary life back in Canterlot. He would be working in the park right now, most likely. There was no reason for her to worry about his health. No more reason than normal, at least. Life was as ever unpredictable and unfair, but Randy was in considerably less danger than she and Prey were always in.

As long as Discord didn't make another sudden return. There was little danger of the mimics returning from whatever dark corner they'd crawled into for another doomed invasion attempt. But still, you couldn't ever let your guard down.

But after this mission was done, she'd be back and able to quietly enjoy Randy's awkward, normal, mundane, and overall ordinary company again. Hopefully soon, because that would mean this mission would be over soon.

The storm-ravaged Haven Hay, where puddles of rainwater lay atop dirt too saturated to absorb anything else.

The ever-grey and overcast sky sitting over an angry sea, a huge dark mountain of storm clouds still anchored off the coast over the Breathless.

And most recently, over the course of just about thirty hours, now there were sites of sudden and unexplainable disappearances.

The Weather Tower. The lighthouse. The local Watch House.

The ISND hadn't been able to do anything.

"The link is the weather, it's got to be." Prey stated, having to raise his voice.

"Why has it 'got to be'? At this point, I'm prepared to humour the stupid idea of sirens and marefolk." Nimbus Feather demanded.

Gloom didn't look up from furiously scribbling out the report to Nighthawk laid on the table, "We agree with Prey. It just makes sense."

"Yeah, right. You guys have found nothing. And with all that nothing, I say again, it may as well be marefolk with all the evidence you don't have." Nimbus snorted, understandably angry at events, but focusing it in entirely the wrong direction.

"Because-" Gloom started, still scribbling.

"This is over our heads. Celestia, we can't do anything!" Inky exclaimed.

"Not if you panic, no." Crimson told her bluntly.

"I am *not* panicking-!"

Nimbus Feather slammed a hoof onto the table for quiet. Gloom glared at him reproachfully for making his pencil jump, and Prey just glared because of the loud noise the Staff Sargent had caused.

"We're going to be the next ponies to vanish unless we do something, so pull your bucking thinking caps on everypony! We need a solution yesterday!"

"Why do you say that, sir?" Bravo ground out, the bulky pegasus' voice gravelly with worry.

"Think. The sheriff and the entire Watch House were attacked. Who are the only ponies with Guard authority left in this town? Us! And with Trail Blazer down and out, we're locked down. We can only go as far and as fast as we can carry him, and he's in no fit state to be moved anyways because of the Celestia-damned storm!" Nimbus raged, his ears laid back and every feather bristling fiercely.

"How about-" Gloom started again.

"And when the mayor hears, he's going to flip, and then the whole

of Haven Hay is going to panic and copy his example-!"

Prey pressed his hooves over his drooping ears just in time to block the horrible metallic shriek that cut across the room, sounding as if a nail were dragged down glass.

Crimson stopped dragging the blunt side of an extended wingblade down the polished metal of his raised shin guard. He calmly lowered his hoof back to the floorboards, "Sargent Gloom was trying to speak."

"Thank you Crimson," Gloom swiftly took over before any of the angry Border Rangers could start back up, "I was about to suggest that it would be best to let Prey explain. If he has something to say, then it's something important."

Nimbus Feather was not swayed. In fact, Prey both saw and mentally heard that the stallion was anything but, so he just as swiftly picked up where Gloom left off, not giving the other Sargent time to interrupt again.

"The link between all of these disappearances is the weather. The Weather Tower is self-explanatory, it wasn't doing its job and driving off storms this past fortnight, or rather the people running it weren't doing their job. The Heights family. Alto somehow got missed when the rest of his family were taken. He was sick before this, and his parents were making him stay inside, so it's possible whoever kidnapped the rest of them missed Alto's presence when observing the family. But Alto is probably why the Watch House was hit just now. Because Alto Heights was the last Heights left, and the Watch House just happened to be where he was staying."

"So where does the lighthouse, and Flash Light and Sandy Shine factor into that grand scheme, huh?" Nimbus challenged.

"And you're talking like it was some pony kidnapper when you don't know any such thing for sure." Inky joined in, almost accusingly; "The Weather Tower was locked, remember? Except for the hatch at the very top. But there's no other pegasi here than those in this very room, so nopony could've gotten up there."

Bravo rounded off the trio of critics, "No pony in Haven Hay has seen anything. If it were pony kidnappers, somepony should've seen something by now. Maybe not marefolk, because those are just a foals' tale, but, it could be some other kind of stealthy monster, easy."

Prey waited a beat to see if Trail Blazer himself was going to miraculously rise out of his sick bed, just so he could join in with these narrow minded idiots, before answering the original question.

Panic or no panic, under pressure or not, Prey was not the sort to make excuses for another's behaviour. You were who you were at your worst just as much as at your best.

"The lighthouse also has to a lot to do with the weather, remember? What is a lighthouse for, but being a light in the storm? The link between it all has something to do with the weather."

"That's 'a' possible link. Doesn't mean it's 'the' link." Nimbus Feather disagreed, not impressed.

"Then come up with a better hypothesis. We're all ears." Gloom challenged coolly.

"...Fine, let's say the link between all three of these attacks is the weather. How does any of that help us in the least?" Nimbus asked, leaning forwards across the table aggressively.

"As I was just about to explain, it doesn't immediately. However, where did all of this start? With the Heights and the Weather Tower. It's in the name, the 'Weather' Tower. With its equipment, it's supposed to be able to at least somewhat dissipate bad weather in the area. But it hasn't been doing so. Storms have been hitting and rolling in nearly every other day without pause. Why weren't the Heights doing their job to prevent that?"

"A Weather Tower can't deal with everything. If a storm is too big, it can still roll in, and that's what you need proper weather teams for. The Heights only had three ponies old enough to be doing that. That's not enough pony power." Bravo said, surprisingly being partly reasonable.

"Then why didn't they send a message for additional assistance when it became clear it was too much for them to handle by themselves?" Gloom pointed out, while putting the final touches to his written report.

"How should I know?" Bravo shot back, getting defensive.

"Someone didn't want them to. Someone came knocking on their door, like Alto said, someone his parents didn't speak about."

"You can't take a colt's word at face value. And why didn't you inform us about Alto Heights' recovery? We should've been told." Nimbus shot that last accusation at Gloom.

"Because at the time, he'd just seen you leading a mob on his house." Gloom answered, rolling up the papers.

"I did not lead-!"

"That's what he saw, true or not, that's how he would've seen it. And that's not counting the possible hostile reaction of mob themselves, who will be prosecuted when this is all over with, by-the-by. I therefore judged it best to keep Alto's recovery quiet, at least until tempers had cooled a bit." Gloom answered, laying out his reasoning in a clipped, brisk tone.

It wasn't the whole truth, that being that none of the ISND trusted the Border Rangers to be competent, but Gloom was being diplomatic. Surprisingly, it had been Prey's suggestion.

'-or not that surprising, since it's to do with manipulating ponies. Luna, this town is such a moon-blighted mess-'

"Well, reinforcements are coming tomorrow, aren't they? We just need to keep ourselves safe and un-foalnapped until then don't we?" Inky cut in, eyes just slightly too wide.

Nimbus turned on her, "You mean, hide and wait to be rescued? Us? We're the Royal Guard's very own Border Rangers!"

Inky shut her mouth sharply. Prey thought that she'd actually been speaking sense for the first time.

Crimson flexed a wing, his wingblade correspondingly flexing in its sheath, "It is a valid option. Not a nice one, but still valid if it lets us win."

"We're winning nothing by hiding like cowards." Nimbus immediately disagreed, rising to his hooves.

"You're right, there. The three of us already discussed it. But see, the thing is, we don't know what 'winning' in this situation is. We don't know what's happening, we don't know how it's happening, we don't know what the end goal is, and we don't know how we factor into all of this. If we even factor in at all. It could be that we aren't important at all to the goal of whichever pony is behind this."

"Again, you don't know for certain it's a pony and not a monster." Nimbus muttered, but after Prey had just pointed out the targeted nature of these abductions, even to him it was seeming less and less like it could be anything else.

'-but why though? Just why? I can't see any reason for why-'

'So just because you're too short sighted to see a possible reason, it means there can't possibly be one since the great Nimbus Feather can't do it. There's no I in team, but there is one in Nimbus.' Prey scoffed inside his head, utterly sick of that Ranger's stubbornness.

"Alright, I'll concede we don't have definite proof it's ponies. But please humour us and proceed under the assumption it is a pony attack anyway. As Prey has pointed out to me, powerful or skilled unicorns would be capable of everything we've seen so far." Gloom said, having to fight to keep his tone professional, and not sarcastic as he really felt like doing.

The unhorned portion of ponykind always seemed to be so forgetful of the power another third of their race were born to wield. Or born to abuse, depending on how you looked at it. And you couldn't even argue with Prey about that, because he'd just point to unicorn criminals.

Inky, Bravo, and Nimbus all stopped to think about that, trying to find any counterargument. They'd inherently much rather blame a

wild monster than blame a pony.

Crimson quietly spoke up as they chewed on that, matter-of-factly, "Perhaps you haven't seen what even one warlock with magic is capable of achieving, but the three of us have. Do not underestimate what one evil individual can and will do with magic."

'Or runes.' Prey added in his head before he could stop himself.

"A warlock?" Nimbus demanded, sucking in his breath sharply.

"Where was there a warlock?" Inky also exclaimed, unable to help herself.

"That doesn't matter. I was just using it as an example." Crimson responded.

Bravo narrowed his eyes at the ISND, thinking he wasn't being observed at that moment since he was mostly keeping quiet. However, his wings were still settling back fully against his sides after flaring up at the word 'warlock'.

'-maybe those tall tales going around the mess hall about the ISND weren't all baloney. Turns out they arrested a bucking griffin warlock after all-'

At some other time, Prey might've been mildly amused at the inaccuracy of that, but it wasn't funny in the slightest right now. Prey hated magic, and now someone might be out there, striking from the shadows and vanishing into thin air? He wasn't amused, he was sensibly afraid.

'But reinforcements are arriving tomorrow.' He reminded himself.

"Our Captain is arriving in the morning with backup and pony specialists." Gloom reminded them all, unknowingly echoing what Prey had just been thinking.

"Come tomorrow, we'll be in a much better position to solve this crime. Help is coming for the shipwrecked sailors, and also for Trail Blazer." Gloom emphasised.

"Thank you for that." Nimbus said, his disagreements and hostility not stopping him from thanking Gloom for his help with what preyed on the Staff Sargent's mind the most; his injured and unconscious subordinate.

"However, we can't hide and wait. Other ponies could vanish between now and tomorrow. That is unacceptable."

"If you have a valid suggestion to any of what we've just discussed, please, share. I'm willing to at least hear out any plan of action at the moment." Gloom said tiredly, digging for the last message-in-a-bottle he'd carried in his saddlebags.

"Patience is a virtue, but sometimes the worst thing you can do is to do nothing at all. But which is it here? We need to focus and decide what each of our squads will do now that-"

Prey twitched his head towards the door a second before someone started banging on it frantically.

Nimbus and Gloom both shouted "Come in" at more or less the same time, overlapping.

A visibly alarmed Jetson yanked the door open, the grey outside framing him in the doorway. The earth pony's ears were straight back, his raincoat askew, and he was breathing hard from running.

Seeing him, a thought flashed around the room, jumping through all the minds Prey could hear into. '-what more could have gone wrong now?-'

"The ah, the storm. It's coming." Jetson panted.

"Another storm is rolling in already? Again? After only just a few hours?" Nimbus demanded, stunned. Two storms in one day? How? They had to be forming somewhere. Inky and Bravo were just as disbelieving as their squad leader.

But Prey instinctively knew that was incorrect, he could sense it. After all the storms Haven Hay had just weathered, Jetson wouldn't have raced here in such alarm to warn them. It had to be something worse.

"No, no, not just another storm, THE storm! The big one! The ah, the, the one over the Breathless Sea. It's starting to break down and come this way!"

The mountain of stormclouds. The towering mass of black. The force of nature which had been building for weeks. *That* storm. And now it was finally about to burst?

What followed was a mad scramble as everyone tried to get out of the door at once.

Down through the slick streets and onto the docks, they moved in a rush. Prey barely managed to keep up as Jetson led the way.

A dozen ponies were already gathered there on the wet planks: sailors who'd come to check on their tied up boats, passers-by, and finally the panting mayor who'd just arrived. They'd all halted in whatever they'd been doing, unable to not stop and stare.

A brittle silence gripped every watcher. Gulls shrieked and circled, the moody sea grumbled and hissed, but the people, they were all still and silent.

Prey cantered to a stop last on the docks, blowing hard. He hadn't even for a moment considered leaving his backpack behind, not when they might have to flee Haven Hay at any moment. He sucked in a gulp of air, pushed his dangling ears back, and finally looked up. He didn't have to climb on top of any crate this time to see.

Out past the murky sea, past the partly-blocked harbour mouth, past the dark swirling cauldron of the Boiling Bay, past the tiny blob that was the Wailing Crag, and out in the distance over the Breathless Sea, the stormfront had changed.

Last time Prey had seen it, the miles-high and who-knew-how-many-wide storm had stretched from sea to sky. A gigantic, dark, brooding ball of sluggishly rotating storm clouds. It had been compact, not raining or storming away itself, just growing steadily darker and more foreboding day by day. Purple-black in places, so

heavily pregnant with lightning it had been.

But now the storm had changed. Before, because of the distance, it was possible to see and roughly describe the mountainous stormfront's edges as a smooth, contained sphere, rotating back in on itself constantly.

Not anymore. That sphere, the contained border of clouds, had begun to break.

Small when compared to the vast bulk of the dark mass, but in actuality as big as every individual storm which had so recently battered Haven Hay were the several rough 'arms' of the storm beginning to unfold from the tight sphere.

Everything had been compressed, the lightning and rain bound together. But now, it was unravelling and slowly spreading back out to its true, titanic size.

How far would it reach when expanded to its full size? Would it blot out the entire sky?

It was like watching a distant volcano spewing smoke, or a slowly moving landslide grinding its way unstoppably forwards. Too large to do anything about. Haven Hay had a few precious hours before that force of nature arrived, but there was absolutely nothing which could be done to halt its eventual arrival.

'All we can do is pack up and leave. There's no stopping that.'

'-Luna's mane, there's no way to stop that. It's too late, too large, it can't be... it can be! Deflect it, not stop it, but there *is* a chance-'

"The Weather Tower, maybe it can deflect or delay that. Sargent Nimbus, we have to get to the Weather Tower." Gloom suddenly shouted, startling everyone.

Nimbus Feather blinked, dazed, tearing his eyes away from the distant storm, "Wait, will that even work?"

"Maybe, I don't know. But it's worth a shot. We have to at least try." Gloom insisted.

"And as for Haven Hay," Gloom pivoted and pointed at the mayor, "Start everypony evacuating immediately."

The mayor drew back, "Evacuate? You mean, leave? After we stuck through so many storms already?!"

Around them, the other ponies instinctively followed the mayor's lead in rejecting the idea to evacuate. It was the sunk-cost fallacy, they'd already gotten through so much, and this was their home. If they left now, it would make it all pointless.

"Yes, evacuate! Everypony, get them out of Haven Hay, leave no pony behind. Only pack what they can carry, food and water. Follow the train tracks, get up to higher ground." Gloom raised his voice.

"But the shelter is here. If we're caught out in the open..." They looked in fear at the distant storm that would nevertheless eventually arrive.

That was true. Here they would at least have the shelter of the town. Gloom faltered for a moment, but then he looked at the storm, and the sea. "No, you need to leave. The sea is going to swell and flood the whole town. The entire coastline here may collapse. We have to take our chances out on the train tracks."

A chorus of distressed whinnies went up.

"Haven Hay is going to be destroyed?!"
"But it's my home!"
"This is all that I have! It's everything that I own..."

"We're going to the Weather Tower to try and use it to deflect that. I pray to Luna we'll succeed, but if we don't, then every second matters. You have to leave, all of you! Spread the word! Mayor, do your duty!"

The mayor stared, gulped, but then he looked behind himself up at the storm-battered town, which was already struggling to stay standing. And then he looked out across the waves at what was approaching, coming to a very simple realisation:

'-I don't want to be here when that arrives-'

"Yes, yes you're right. But please, try. Jetson, Harvey Drops, Quarter Turn! Everypony must be told! You take Orange Street, and you sweep down Mane Avenue, everypony warn their neighbours! Get to the elderly first!" The mayor started shouting at the ponies he recognised in his immediate vicinity, desperately trying to organise an evacuation while inside he was very obviously teetering on the brink of full-blown panic.

Would he manage, or would he break? Would another step up and take the role if that happened? Was a family going to be missed in the rush?

No time to waste asking what couldn't be answered. Nimbus Feather stepped closer, raising his voice to make himself heard to the ISND, "Gloom, Sargent Gloom. Will this plan with the Weather Tower even work?"

"Do you have any alternatives? We've got to try, so let's get moving." Gloom responded.

"That's not what I meant. None of my squad knows how to work the Weather Tower controls. Do either of you know?" Nimbus stressed, turning his head between Gloom and Crimson.

Gloom gritted his fangs in worry, still thinking on the fly, just reacting, not really planning.

He snapped his head towards Prey, the one Nimbus had completely dismissed for this, "Prey, can we do it? You saw what was there in the observation room. Could you figure it out?"

Prey felt the unseen leaden weight settling around his shoulders.

'Why is this our job? Why, for once, can't some other poor sods be saddled with fixing everyone else's problems?' He silently asked the dark, brooding heavens. But Prey drew in a breath and gave Gloom the answer he didn't want to give.

"It's, it's possible. There was a service manual I saw up in the tower, in one of the drawers. I can *probably* figure out the basics."

"Him, the foal-? You serious-? What if you get it wrong?" Nimbus spluttered.

Gloom stepped up, physically making Nimbus Feather turn with him until they were both facing the sea again. Gloom pointed with a flung out wing, "Then that arrives anyway! I don't have all the answers, but at this point we can hardly make it any worse."

"Sir, I think Sargent Gloom is right. There's no better option to try to save Haven Hay." Bravo spoke up. At a hard nudge from Bravo, Inky snapped out of staring at the distant storm and nodded vigorously in agreement.

Nimbus Feather looked out at the natural disaster which was coming, and realised he was out of ideas. There was no time to second guess or come up with alternatives. There was not a single person here on the docks whose hackles didn't rise in solemn fear at the dark force of nature out there.

"The Weather Tower it is then. What are we standing around for? You guys had the keys, let's go!"

Prey'd had his own plans. Nothing complicated, but it had been *his* plan. He didn't want to be in Haven Hay when the terrifying storm hit any more than Gloom did, but running out to the Weather Tower to try to save the port town, or at least deflect some of it, had certainly not been the plan. He'd instead meant for the three of them to get out of Haven Hay and away up to higher ground.

But now thinking twice, the Weather Tower might actually be a good fort to weather the storm in. The tower was magically reinforced and specifically designed to survive extreme weather. The emergency retreat he'd been planning on leading Gloom and Crimson to wouldn't necessarily be better now that he thought about it.

Gloom spun back to Prey, "You've got the keys still?"

"Yes, in my bag."

"Good. But we need to move as fast as possible." Gloom sounded

almost apologetic.

Prey blinked, and then realised what Gloom had meant.

"No, hell no. Don't touch me." Prey immediately backed away up the dock.

Gloom quickly dipped his head and stepped closer, lowering his voice. Crimson also moved closer, cutting Nimbus and the others out of this conversation.

"Prey, *please*. This is an emergency situation. We don't have time to waste going by hoof, but we can be there in thirty minutes by wing. Less, even."

"No. Nobody's touching me." Prey vehemently shook his head, backing up even further.

Gloom stopped coming closer, holding up his hoof. His fangs showed in a pained grimace as he looked in indecision between Prey and Crimson, "Prey, look. I don't, whatever the reason is... is there any way we can deal with it at some other time? Please. But right now, there just isn't time."

"You guys go on, then. I'll evacuate along with the townsfolk. Here, take the keys." Prey shook his head emphatically, going to pull the backpack off his shoulders to hoof over the bundle of keys.

"There is no way under the moon we are splitting up. We need each other." Gloom forcefully denied, tufted ears going straight up in alarm at the mere suggestion, "But even if I, if we, were willing to risk you going off alone into a possible storm, we still need you to figure out the Weather Tower controls. You've got the talent for stuff like this, not us. I'm not confident at all we can figure it out without your help."

Next to Gloom, Crimson seriously nodded his complete agreement, silently imploring Prey.

Prey hated his own fearful weakness, but his breath started to come quicker and his tone rose in childish pitch, "Nobody touches me, and don't try to carry me. I'm warning you for your own good."

'-there's no time for this. Damn me, why didn't I ever make time when there *was* time to finally sit Prey down and ask why?-'

"I promise Prey, you know we won't, that we'd never hurt..." Gloom shot a pleading look at Crimson, "Is there any way you can convince him?"

There was a storm on the horizon, the sire of all storms, time was running out, the Border Rangers were already impatiently calling out and asking what the problem was, and Prey's issues with touch really shouldn't have been a priority! But Gloom refused to risk splitting up, a deep seated fear in his heart that the second they did, something would go wrong. And he also couldn't forcibly grab Prey to carry him, or at least not anymore. In the past Gloom might've tried, but not now. And Crimson?

Prey hastily blurted out the reminder, "There are only two things-"

"-Two things you won't do for me. I hadn't forgotten Prey." Crimson said almost reproachfully, then to Gloom, "No sir."

'-two things? What two things?-', But Gloom had no time to waste getting sidetracked. Later, if they had a later, but definitely not now.

"Moon blight and endless night!" Gloom cursed with shocking vehemence, "We are *not* splitting up. C'mon Prey, there's got to be something-"

Gloom abruptly paused, "How about if we carried you-"

"-Don't touch me."

"-In that?" Gloom finished. He was pointing at a medium sized empty wooden crate without a lid, sitting discarded on the edge of the docks.

Prey stared, mouth opening and closing like a fish. Why hadn't he ever thought of that?

Gloom seized upon Prey's stunned quiet, hastily going on, "A box is too bulky to hold in flight, and if you're not going to cling on to our

backs, then how about if we get some rope, make some loops on each corner, and carry you in it like that?"

"If you think I'm going to hang on for dear life while I swing about a hundred meters off the ground-"

"-No no, nothing of the sort. I know the idea of flying isn't appealing to ponies without wings. Sheep! Lambs! Whatever. Look, I can carry your pack, and Crimson can carry you. He'll only fly close to the ground, you'll only ever be a few hooves off the ground in case he drops you. He won't drop you, I'm sure, but that way you'll be safe. You trust Crimson not to fly any higher than that, don't you?"

"That's not, it's not about..." Prey looked nervously up at Crimson. He deflated, sagging in his wool, "Of course I trust Crimson. As long as, as long as it's no higher than that, then just this once..."

"I promise." Crimson said, with all the complete unwavering honesty Prey knew him for.

"…Then just this once, okay. Okay." Prey sighed miserably. What was he doing? He shouldn't be going along with this madness, this was *his* life and safety they were talking about. But for some reason, he was going to go along with it. He was scared, curse him three ways as a zoma'grika fool, but he was still going to do it.

The un-aerodynamic crate wobbled in the wind as it was dragged along beneath Crimson. Wet stone, sodden earth, and rain-flattened grass zipped by beneath the crate in a rush.

The crate only dangled about a hoof beneath Crimson, but even within that short span of rope it still tried to twist every which way as the air blasted against it.

Air whooshed in through gaps in the imperfect slats and billowed in Prey’s ears. Crimson expertly skimmed the ground, never lifting the crate any higher than a few hooves off the ground as he darted to and fro, up and down. Even if he dropped Prey or the ropes somehow came undone, it was only a short tumble.

Prey had always wanted wings of his own to fly. This however, this was most definitely *not* flying. Prey clung on to the inside of the crate, huddled down, and held on like his life depended on it.

Gloom and the three other fliers were higher up, not skimming the ground like Crimson. Prey heard snippets of a shouted question to Gloom, asking what by Celestia they were doing. If Gloom gave an answer, Prey lost it in the wind, instead trying to focus entirely on breathing.

Prey didn't imagine flying with an awkward weight beneath was much fun for Crimson either, but what with the extra stamina from the electrite feather in addition to his superb flying skills, Crimson kept up with the others just fine.

Rushing wind noisily droned in Prey's ears, extra gusts buffeting him from above with each beat of Crimson's powerful wings. The uncomfortable crate swayed, the grey clouds in the cold sky continued to shroud the world, and Prey really, *really* hated every one of the twenty-seven-and-a-half minutes it took to reach the Weather Tower.

With impeccable control, Crimson pulled back and lowered the crate to the ground without so much as a bump, letting go of the rope and lifting clear of it before subsequently touching down, himself.

With no control whatsoever, Prey tipped the crate over and spilled out onto solid ground. Cold and wet gritty sand clung to his wool, but he didn't care.

"Come on, where are the keys? Let's get in there already." Nimbus snorted impatiently. He well had reason to be impatient.

The smooth white spire of the Weather Tower now looming over them was built higher up on the hills. It meant they all had an even better view over the cliffs and dark sea to the giant storm. It was still expanding, throwing the ocean below even further into shadow as it pushed outwards.

"Prey? Which pocket are the keys in?" Gloom asked, hurrying over. He'd taken Prey's backpack to carry, while Crimson had taken Prey. Gloom didn't dig in Prey's pack, though. He probably sensed it would be a bad idea. Prey could have nearly anything hidden in there.

"Hurry up, hurry up!" Nimbus called, his group glancing anxiously between the sealed tower's door and back out at the storm, eyeing its inexorable spread. It was like ink had been spilled in water, slowly swirling and filling all the sky it touched with itself.

Prey wanted to lay there for a minute longer but he rolled back onto his hooves and forced himself upright, not before shooting a dirty look at Nimbus though. He sent a much more thankful look and nod to Crimson for not dropping him.

He took his backpack and swung it onto the ground, reaching for the buckles, "I'll get them. Here, hold this a second-"

A flicker of light played across the tower's base and their surroundings, pale white. Prey turned as he heard the quiet drawing of breath all around him.

Way out above the ocean, another bright white flicker lit up a patch of the storm from inside.

They all stared. Another distant flash of lightning sparked brilliantly for an instant. The patches of dark cloud that they lit up seemed so small when painted on the vast scale of the storm, but each flash was anything but small. Another flash.

The first distant rumble of lightning arrived. A distant bass rippling on the end of your fur, the precursor and promise of so much worse to come.

Flicker. Flash. Rumble. Rumble.

"Where are those keys, Prey?" Gloom asked, tone strained. The poison scars made the worry in his slitted eyes stand out starkly in the brief flashes of light.

"Right here." Prey whipped out the keyring with a jangle.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon." Inky was muttering, nervously shifting from hoof to hoof.

Gloom got the right key and turned it in the heavy lock. Nimbus and Bravo almost wrenched the keyring from his claw as they hauled the door open without waiting, rushing inside.

Flicker. Flash... and a while later, rumble. Prey swung his backpack back onto himself as the ominous storm in the distance continued to make its presence known. He saw Crimson wet his lips, even as he turned away from the sight and towards the open door instead.

The dim interior of the tower's first floor welcomed them back, just as they'd left it when sealing it shut. The broken and splintered pieces left by the mob sat steeped in shadow, acting as a disturbing reminder of the now broken life of the taken Heights. Or as their cenotaph.

Ahead in the gloom, the three Royal Guards stumbled over the wreckage as they made for the stairs. The enchantments laid into the tower pricked at the runes in Prey's hooves as his group similarly rushed, kicking aside splinters and scraps. The second and third floors were also just as they'd left them, trashed and broken. Prey brought up the rear, hauling along his backpack, until they emerged into the turbine room.

The air in this room was immediately different, not so silent and stale. The column of huge, slowly moving, shadowy blades filled the room with a constant breeze and thrum. The spiral stairs wound around the outside of the open space, the clatter of armour and hooves on concrete adding to the hollow atmosphere as they rushed upwards.

At the very top, Nimbus and the other two pegasi who'd rushed ahead were stopped by the locked metal door of the observation room. "Hurry up, hurry up! Why'd you even waste time locking this darned door too?"

"To be safe." Gloom pushed through, managing to get the right key on the second try, all then piling inside in a rush. Prey came in last, breathing quickly. He pushed the door shut on its reinforced hinges

with a deep, metal *dun*.

"Can you lock the door again please?" Prey called to Gloom, dropping his pack against the wall.

"Forget that, we need to start figuring out how to work these controls." Nimbus ordered, pulling open the top drawer of the only desk in the room, "You said there was a manual or something around here? Where?"

Prey bared his teeth in a smile, "Oh, pardon me. Do you want the door open when those huge turbines start spinning at full speed?"

Nimbus didn't seem to hear him, busy tipping out the last of the drawers and snatching up a worn and dog-eared logbook, "Ah-ha!"

Gloom tossed the keys at Crimson, who snapped out a wing and caught them without blinking, moving to reseal the door.

Inky and Bravo crowded around their Sargent and the book, as if they'd all be able to read it and figure out what to do simultaneously.

'-c'mon, c'mon! Wait, what's this annotation here? Off-pipe twelve must be on half gauge with in-pipe thirteen? What?-'

Those thoughts did not sound promising. An observation of Nimbus which wasn't limited just to Prey as the pegasus in question began noisily flicking through the logbook and folders of complicated diagrams from the drawers with increasingly frantic speed, though said observation was gained through far more normal means by others.

"Here, let me try." Inky exclaimed, trying to take hold of the book.

Prey moved away and looked around the observation room instead. The thick glass windows circling them showed nothing but the near-formless grey of the sky beyond. Except, if Prey wasn't imagining things, it was darker than it had been the last time he'd been up here. The sky had a tinge to it, an ominous dusting of almost-purple.

Far out over the Breathless Sea sat the nucleus of the encroaching storm. Its trailing reaches were gradually covering more and more of the sky over the Boiling Bay every time Prey looked.

"Prey," Gloom's sharp call snapped his attention back to the inside of the observation room. The thestral pointed a hoof urgently at the circular control deck in the middle of the room, surrounded on all sides with gauges and levers, an open wedge in the back allowing for an operator to step inside.

"Can you work any of that? Does any of it make sense?"

"No, it doesn't! This is all jargon." Nimbus Feather shouted in frustration, not stopping his efforts to interpret the inscrutable jumble with Bravo and Inky's useless help.

Prey ignored the pegasus, and hurried around to slip in through the ring's opening. Of course, he was then immediately faced with the constant issue of being a runt yet again. He reared up to get high enough, resting his forehooves on the metal table, then cast his eyes over what he could see.

Crimson and Gloom didn't step into the ring, staying on the outside of the controls so as to not crowd him. But they were every bit as frantic to hurry Prey up as Inky and Bravo had been. They just knew it wouldn't help.

"Can you figure anything out?" Gloom asked after a moment, unable to stop himself. Crimson gave Gloom a sideways look in place of Prey, the lamb not taking his eyes off the levers and gauges even for a moment.

Only a few of the levers were helpfully labelled, and all the others only meant anything to someone who'd been trained here. 'B1', 'B2', and 'B3a' didn't help Prey one bit.

He looked at the gauges, seeing which needles were at zero, which were nearly full, and more importantly which looked like duplicated gauges made to measure sets of the same things. Like for each of the huge fan blades in the room below.

"Prey?" Gloom tried again, shooting a worried look at the binoculars he'd looked through the last time they were there. They still pointed resolutely towards the Breathless Sea and storm, in exactly the same position as either Gale or Windy Heights had left them in.

"Let me concentrate." Prey's eyes flickered over everything, committing the controls' positions to memory.

'I think that lever should link to this one. Assuming I'm correct, then that gauge shows the torque. And that one goes across to this one. Don't know that lever, just skip for now. Come back to it later. That one is a mirror of the one across on the other side. That means the split in the control panel is down the middle here.'

Prey closed his eyes. The position of the levers, gauges, and switches hung in his head. Prey concentrated. The pressure to hurry was most certainly not helping. He shut out the outside world. He focused inwards. Deeper.

Then he split his mind onto the paths of parallel thought. He didn't know what everything in here did, but he didn't need to. He only needed to work out enough. You didn't need to know to play a piano to just create a rough tune.

'Those ones make it go faster.' 'And these slow the spin.'

'To reverse the rotation right...' 'To increase the rotation to the left...'

Prey snapped his eyes open, his mindscape falling away. He immediately turned to his left, stretched out, and shoved a lever two slots forwards. Then without missing a beat, he turned to his right, and pulled another lever two slots backwards.

"You've got it?" Gloom asked, eyes fixed to Prey's every move.

"You've figured it out." Crimson echoed.

"Maybe. Mostly. Sort of." Prey answered, staring unblinking at the needle of a gauge. If he was right, then it should go up...

Oh so slowly, it began to tick upwards. Too slowly. Prey reached

out, briefly hesitated, then pulled another lever and repeated the reverse on the opposite side of the control table.

That needle sped up, and the one in the gauge next it started moving as well. Which he believed had something to do with air pressure.

Prey stared for another long second, while Gloom and Crimson both held their breath, and the three Border Rangers in the background still hadn't noticed that Prey had started.

"Oh." Prey sucked in his breath.

"Oh? Oh what?" Gloom demanded.

"That did not sound like a good oh." Crimson stated.

"Okay, good news and bad news. Good news, I roughly know what to do, and can at least try to deflect the storm away, but only once it gets closer. The Weather Tower's range is limited.

"And the bad?"

"As I said, I roughly know what I'm doing. As in, I'm being very rough with the Weather Tower. Because I'm no expert, and I'm betting that anything but redlining every gauge won't be enough to deflect the storm. So after I'm done, this tower's machinery is probably going to be wrecked."

"If it works, then that's fine. Captain Nighthawk will approve it."

"Well, that's the thing. I don't know when the machinery is going to fail, do I? It might be halfway through doing this. Or what if the storm keeps trying to push in and isn't deflected? Then it still breaks down halfway through."

Gloom only hesitated a moment, "There isn't any better alternative. Do it anyway."

"I already am."

Prey pulled down one of the few fully labelled levers, titled 'Vent

Shutters'.

There was a dull clunk from below which travelled through all of their hooves and up their legs. There was a change in the constant noise coming from the massive turbines, noticeable even through the thick metal of the sealed door.

It couldn't be seen from in the overhanging observation room, but right below the jutting out lip, vent slots in the top of the tower retracted, allowing the spinning air being churned up by the turbines inside the tower access to the world outside. A faint whistling began to fill the observation room, as the turbines continued to gather speed.

"What was that?" Nimbus demanded, finally looking up from failing to interpret the logbook.

He and his two subordinates finally noticed Prey in the middle of the control deck, reared up to reach the panels.

"What in Celestia d'you think you're doing? You can’t just guess!"

"Prey's not guessing. He's got a good idea what he's doing-"

"You could make it even worse if you just randomly guess!" Nimbus interrupted Gloom, rushing forwards to try and stop them doing something wrong.

Crimson immediately barred his, and Inky and Bravo's way. "Take your own advice. Just guessing could make the storm even worse."

"Move!"

Gloom had more than had enough. Stress and pressure was high, and the three Border Rangers had proved themselves completely useless in every regard that mattered.

"You three shut up and stay out of our way!" Gloom snarled, pointing aggressively with a wingclaw, "Prey knows what to do, or knows better than anypony else does at the very least! Don't try anything, or else!"

"Or else? Or else?!" Inky puffed up in outrage like an angry cat.

"Or else what?" Nimbus snapped.

Gloom took a deep breath, realising he'd just escalated everything. But he wasn't about to back down. Out of the corner of his eye, the thestral saw Prey glance up from the controls at him and Crimson for half a second, then turn back to watching the gauges without a word. He was trusting Gloom and Crimson to keep the three Royal Guards from misguidedly interfering.

"Either stop, or else be stopped." Gloom answered, struggling to keep his voice level.

Bravo rumbled in anger, snorting as he rolled his broad shoulders. Inky puffed up even more, wings now fully flared at her sides, and Nimbus had to take a second to find his flabbergasted voice.

"Be stopped-? Have you gone off your rocker, you bat twat?! That's Haven Hay out there, with civilians evacuating right now! They're counting on us to do something here, *not* throw a bucking foal at the controls with a hope and a prayer!"

"That's *exactly* why Prey's the one doing this, and not *you*. He's Haven Hay's best chance at this point-*Don't even think about it.* Crimson!"

Crimson stepped into Bravo's path as he made to go around the back of the control deck. "Sargent Gloom wasn't making a suggestion. Stop."

Bravo snorted and simply kept going, trying to barge past.

Crimson very precisely swept an angled wing into Bravo's side, mid-step, while he was only on three legs, just below his centre of gravity.

Bravo found himself stumbling backwards to avoid having to fall over.

The big armoured pegasus bristled fiercely, "I'm not here to-"

Crimson batted back the larger stallion for a second time, as Bravo misguidedly tried to push through again while blocking with his own wings. His block failed. Bravo found himself tripping backwards over his own hooves for the second time.

Cool as you like, Crimson levelled Bravo with an impassive stare, flexing his wings pointedly. His wingblades were still sheathed, and although Crimson made no threatening motion to change that, somehow the fact that he had sheathed wingblades came to the forefront of everyone's minds.

The atmosphere in the observation room shifted on a dime.

Bravo immediately backed up defensively. Inky glared in absolute speechless outrage, and Nimbus' wings flared up without his control.

"Are you, are you threatening us? You're threatening violence against your fellow Guards?" Nimbus asked, voice rough with disbelief. Disbelief, outrage, and alarm.

It was like finding out that the dog who'd been sitting quietly in the corner of the room was actually rabid, and not leashed at all.

Was Sargent Gloom actually threatening violence? Actual violence, here and now?

'-has he gone completely mad under the pressure?-'

"Let's all take a step back and calm this down." Gloom said carefully over the distant rushing and whistling of fan blades.

"Yes, let's do that," Nimbus Feather said just as carefully, trying not to provoke the rabid dog, "Please explain, what on Equus do you think you're doing?"

Crimson flicked his wing in a gesture that somehow conveyed he was rolling his eyes at the Border Rangers' inability to listen to what they'd been saying over and over, but let Gloom answer as the Sargent and the one most likely to be listened to.

"Because, as I said three times already, Prey's working on it. I don't

care if you think you know better, because he's the one doing it. So don't get in the way."

"He's a foal." Nimbus stated, because to him it bore repeating just in case the point wasn't obvious. Because suddenly it wasn't clear to him if the ISND were completely sane.

For a moment Gloom just didn't understand. What did that matter? Age had nothing do to with proven ability. And then it hit him. He'd forgotten for a moment, since he was so used to Prey and Crimson that he could scarcely remember the time before, when he too had treated Prey as just a foal. But to these Rangers, nothing had been proven.

"Luna damn it," Gloom sighed, "Look, age doesn't matter. Prey has been hoof picked by Princess Luna herself. He's a full member of the Night Guard, okay? Don't treat him as incapable."

"Yeah, but he's still a foal! He didn't even try to read the book, he just started pulling levers." Nimbus' voice kept rising, overpowering the muted noise of the turbines, "You're irrational, all of you! Buck, can't you see how stupid this is? And you threatened us! You literally, *literally*, just bucking threatened to bucking stab us you crazy bat-brained bucker!"

Crimson twitched at the racial insults, and although as Night Guards he and Gloom both had been shrugging off much worse since first arriving in Canterlot, right now this second with the mother of all storms bearing down on the port town while they desperately tried to do everything they could and the Border Rangers, instead of helping, just stood there insulting them... now was not the time.

Gloom's slitted eyes narrowed, his ears went back, and without even realising it he bared his fangs as he gritted his teeth. He almost hissed, "I trust all of you as far as I can throw you. I'd trust Crimson and Prey with my life in the middle of Tartarus. You have no idea what we've done for Equestria, for you ungrateful ponies, as soldiers of the Night."

Gloom was not helping de-escalate the standoff at all, no matter the

conviction behind his words. Which was one argument in favour of deterring the three Royal Guard pegasi with the threat of violence. The problem was as Prey well knew, once you'd made the threat, if the other party didn't back down, then you had to be prepared to actually follow through.

Especially because some ponies were incapable of leaving well alone, and wouldn't stop poking the rattlesnake until it finally stopped merely rattling and actually bit them. Doubly so for the prideful Nimbus Feather, who was used to always being in the right as a member of the Royal Guard. If things weren't white, then they were black!

Prey stared cursing out a long string of Zebrican profanity inside his head, hoof hovering over a lever as he tried to judge if it were the right time to move it up a gear or not yet. He didn't have the time to spare to help deal with the standoff, and it had already escalated too far. Gloom was threatening to stop the Border Rangers by force if necessary, and while Prey thought they'd win, you never took a fight head on if at all possible. You stabbed them from behind, poisoned them, or shot them from range!

Why did they have to fight tooth and hoof every step of the way even when they were trying to do what was right for once?!

'I've got my ribbon, I can use it to-No, Gloom and Crimson will see. But then, if I don't, what if...?'

Prey's thought trailed off, and his hoof froze over the lever.

The whistling of the massive turbines driving air through slits below the observation room was abruptly dying away.

Everyone stopped for a second as their brains caught up with what their ears were telling them. The turbine fans had stopped.

"Prey?" Gloom asked, neither him nor Crimson looking away from locking eyes with the Border Rangers.

"I told you, I told you! What did I bucking tell you, a foal doesn't know how to work a Weather Tower!" Nimbus seethed, in that

moment just as infuriated as he was vindicated.

On the dials and gauges under Prey's nose, briefly highlighted in flickers of distant lightning, the needles showed that the speed of the individual blades were all rapidly decreasing.

"Did it... break already?" Crimson asked cautiously.

"You bucking broke the Weather Tower! Do you have any idea what you've done?"

"All of Haven Hay is going to be destroyed!" Inky yelled out.

"I hope to Celestia when you get locked up, it's somewhere dark." Bravo smashed his hoof into the floor.

And then there came a knocking as the turbines died. It was coming from the door.

The knocking came again.

Trat-Trat-Trat

Brisk, impatient, and hard enough to echo up through the thick metal of the locked door.

Trat-Trat-Trat-Trat

Against his will, Prey found his head swivelling to face the recessed door. It felt like two massive hooves were gripping each side of his head and forcing it to turn.

Trat-Trat-Trat-Trat-Trat-Trat!

From down the five steps to the door, the knocking came- louder, more impatient. Nobody moved. Beyond the reinforced plates of glass, the brooding grey of the ever-darkening sky peered in to see what they would do.

"I'm, I'm not the only pony hearing that, right?" Inky asked, her

breathing coming loud and too fast. Neither of her comrades answered her.

'Someone came knocking on the door.' Prey remembered Alto had said. Someone who was now inside the Weather Tower, who'd somehow followed them in flight all the way here, or worse, had been patiently waiting for them to arrive, and who had shut down the turbines with the emergency cut-off below.

If Prey hadn't insisted on re-locking the door behind them...

*Trat-Trat-Trat-Trat-Trat-*Rata*-Trat-Tat-Trat!*

'-this is who took the Heights family, the lighthouse ponies, and those in the Watch House-', Gloom realised, the sluggish thought finally crystallizing in his head, and all the consequences it entailed.

Snk With a flick and a metallic whisper, Crimson's wingblades extended and locked into place. He looked around at them all.

"Well, shall we see who's at the door? I doubt they're going to go away." He asked matter-of-factly.

Prey pushed away from the now useless control deck and dropped back to all fours. His stomach was awash with crawling worms. He couldn't keep the shivers from racing up and down his legs.

"The only other exit out of here is through the trapdoor up onto the tower. And they might be waiting up there already." His voice came out shamefully reedy and high.

Gloom snapped his spear together and locked the two halves with a click. It wasn't a flashy action of defiance. Gloom was arming himself because they were in danger. A spear might not even be any use against whatever was coming next.

"It's not like we have much choice, then. Let's find out who is behind all of this."

They approached the stairs down to the recessed door with all the reluctance of entering a quarry eel's burrow. The sealed door seemed to be waiting for them, the pounding ringing out.

Gloom and Crimson stepped into the stairwell, and slowly descended the five steps. The Border Rangers were hanging back, for once with nothing to say or opinions to offer.

Gloom and Crimson stood next to each other, filling the stairwell, and faced the door. Prey crouched behind them up on the topmost step, peering unblinkingly past their legs at the metal barrier dividing them from whoever was waiting on the other side.

'-here goes nothing. Nothing good-'

Gloom shifted his spear to under his wing, and then reached out and struck the door with the flat of his horseshoe, sending out a loud clang. Just like they could from this side, so too could their enemy hear from the other side.

There was no way they were about to unlock the door to see who it was face to face.

The aggressive knocking stopped. Then it rapped out a three tap beat.

Gloom scowled and kicked the door again, repeating the loud clang, "We're not playing some horseapple game here. Who are you and what do you want?" He barked out.

Who could it be? How many of them were there? And was this all going to end in blood?

Then the answer came back through the door.

The voice was raised like Gloom's had been, loud enough to filter through the solid metal, but still muffled by the time it arrived at their ears.

Words. In Equestrian. Not singing or some foreign dialect. Not marefolk or some unknown monster. Just the common variety of cruel monster; people.

"Surrender the tower. There is no escape."

First contact with their mysterious enemy, and it was immediately

hostile. Gloom didn't even have to consult with Prey or Crimson, he just immediately shouted back:

"No way in Tartarus! Who are you, and what do you want?"

The muffled answer repeated, "Surrender the Weather Tower. There is no hope of escape."

"Yeah, no. Not a chance." Gloom responded, kicking the solid door loudly to emphasise his point.

"You are all trapped. We have you surrounded. There is no escape. Surrender is your only choice."

Prey immediately grabbed hold of that, "He said 'we'. There's a group of them, and it must be big. They're confident in outnumbering us." He hastily spoke up, not loud enough for whoever was on the other side to hear, but so everyone in the room could. Standing here at the top of the stairwell, he was too far away to hear any thoughts from beyond the door, and Gloom and Crimson were filling up all the space to get close. But no one knew he was a mind leech, he didn't have an excuse to squeeze past. And he didn't want to get closer to the door.

Gloom shot Prey a look to show he'd heard, gesturing hurriedly to indicate he should keep listening in. "Oh really? Funny that, because as far as I can tell, it's us who are safe in here and you who can't get in!" Gloom shouted back through the door.

"You are rabbits trapped in your burrow. You have nowhere to go. We have you surrounded." The voice from the other side reiterated. They were shouting to be heard, but Prey wasn't picking up any anger in the tone. They were simply dictating terms.

They were calm. They were confident. And that was bad.

"They've got something over us. They're too confident that they can make us surrender." Prey spoke as swiftly as he could to fill Gloom in before the Sargent shouted back their next answer. He bit his lip.

'What do they have? What do they know that I don't?!'

Gloom glared at the door, teeth grinding audibly, "Why would we surrender to you after all you've done, the ponies you've stolen?! Give me one good reason."

"Because this is not a negotiation. You have no choice." The answer was as cold as it was calm, even muted by solid steel.

Inky, Bravo, and Nimbus were simply standing and staring. This was beyond anything they had experienced before, they didn't know what to do, and worse, they were letting the indecision paralyse them. It was the ISND who were having to wrestle for any control over their degenerating situation. They were trapped in here, that was the chilling truth. There were almost certainly enemies on the roof above them, watching the hatch, what had been their last emergency escape route.

That meant most likely fliers, armed, and capable of stealthy flight.

Gloom looked to Prey and Crimson. "What do I say now?" He hissed.

"Don't give in." Crimson immediately stated.

"Yes, don't verbally give any acknowledgement of his point. Pretend we're just as confident. We can't get out, but they can't get in."

"It doesn't matter if we can't get out, because you can't get in." Gloom immediately shouted back through the door.

"There's nothing you can do in there. We can shut down this tower's workings at any time-"

"Yeah, and you still can't get in. I'm perfectly happy to sit snug here and wait you out." Gloom interrupted, kicking the door to send another loud reverberating **clang** through the metal.

"Not with the incoming storm, you can't." Came the ominous reply. However, the threat didn't actually make that much sense.

"And?" Gloom shot back derisively, "All the more reason to sit nice and snug in here."

Perhaps it also occurred to their unidentified enemy outside that they were going about this the wrong way if they wanted the ISND to give up, because a worrying pause followed.

In that tense silence, with the observation room slowly growing dimmer every minute, Prey's mind raced.

'Do they just want access to the Weather Tower control room? But then why let us go in first? Why didn't they take the Weather Tower for themselves while it was unoccupied? It doesn't make any sense! Maybe it's us they're after, then?'

Gloom shifted the balance of his spear back and forth, unable to hold still. In the shadowed stairwell, there wasn't enough light to catch the sharpened edges of Crimson's wingblades. Prey's left forehoof clutched at the end of his ribbon, frozen as they all held their breath.

With no sort of prelude, the muffled voice from outside just started up again. It now held an edge to it.

"You will surrender because of the storm. We will not permit you to use the tower's weather magic to deflect the storm, only we are allowed to do that now."

"Double the reason not to let you in, then!" Gloom shouted back.

The person on the other side wasn't done yet however, "And because if you don't surrender, the Equestrian town of Haven Hay will be caught in this storm. That is why we stopped corralling the storm and let it slip free, that you would fly here in reaction to this threat. We knew you would have no other option to turn to but the Weather Tower."

"We're dealing with pegasi or griffins. Or maybe weather special talent based unicorns." Prey immediately deduced. That knowledge wasn't going to help them get out of this situation, though. They'd walked into a box and now the lid had been slammed shut.

"You made the storm? You're guilty of all this destruction, damage, those innocent sailors who drowned?" Gloom furiously shouted

through the door, anger controlling his tongue. He wasn't alone in his anger, the spark of rage leapt around the room. But it was helpless anger, because they were the ones trapped.

Gloom's accusation received no response, instead their captors just glossed over it without a care, "If you do not surrender and give us control of the tower, then the storm will strike Haven Hay as its ponies are yet evacuating. They will be caught helpless. Nopony wants that. Let us take control, and we will use the tower to drag the worst of the storm away instead. Portions of storm will no doubt break free, but the main hammer blow will fall elsewhere. That is why you have no choice but to surrender the tower to us."

'-did I just hear...? I did. But did they really actually just say...? They said...? They did, they really just said that-'

"You... you... you would murder every pony in Haven Hay? Just to get what you want?!"

Gloom couldn't find the words to express himself. He could only repeat the obvious, his mind struggling to keep up with the insanity his ears were relaying to him. Gloom wanted to see their adversaries face to face, he wanted to know who stood on the other side of this door, so he could stab them with his spear. Next to him, Crimson's mental walls were churning, dark and black.

"You would murder everypony over-? Over? Over what?!"

"We take no pleasure in this. Blame yourselves for leaving us with no other choice. The family of this tower were removed but not harmed for no longer complying. If you had stayed away, then nothing further would've been forced to occur. But you chose to interfere and steal the keys. You removed all other choices but this one."

'*The keys*.' The Weather Tower keys. The keys Inky had found and used when she first flew in through the roof hatch. The hatch which had been left open, because it couldn't be locked from the outside, only the inside. But the front door into the tower *had* been locked, keeping the angry mob out.

Like one of the sickly flashes of lightning flickering outside, in an instant it all lined up in Prey's head.

The reinforced and locked door to keep the townsfolk out. A town full of earth ponies who couldn't fly. The hatch which could only be accessed by pegasi, left unlocked at the top. The hatch that Inky and Nimbus had accessed, two of the unexpected new arrivals to Haven Hay. Inky had then gone down and opened the front door using the keys which had been stored safe inside the locked tower.

The same keys which Prey had taken with him when they left.

But why hadn't their captors just taken the keyring with them in the first place? Why had they so foolishly left the means of sealing up the tower behind for anyone to just wander in and make off with? Arrogance, or maybe a moment of short-sightedness, or perhaps just plain forgetfulness?

One and one is two, and two and two make four. The pieces rattled around and slotted into place inside Prey's head.

'We only found one set of keys in the whole tower. Surely the Heights would've had at least one spare set. But a spare set which wasn't an exact full copy, and was maybe missing the key to the observation room's door. And what if they took the wrong set of keys with them by mistake? Inky did say she found this set in a drawer, and if the other keyring was, say, obviously hanging from a hook in plain view, like the one just to the side of the door there, and the invaders thought those were the right keys...'

Prey stared at the solid metal of the locked door. A door that the people on the other side obviously couldn't unlock, since if so, they wouldn't even be having this standoff in the first place.

'And what are the chances airheads like Windy or Gale Heights ever bothered to lock this door normally? Because why would they? It was just their family living in this tower, and only them with wings who could fly in through the roof hatch which they always left open. They were the only ponies gifted with wings in the whole of Haven Hay, after all. The only door they ever needed to lock was the tower's front door.'

And if a second ring composed of a not-quite-complete set of keys, like the ones their abductors might've grabbed, had still locked and unlocked the front door when then they tested them...

And the roof hatch could only be locked from the inside, not the outside, and if they'd purposefully left it open to have an easy way back inside, and a front door key just to be sure...

And hadn't thought to check if they had a key for this here internal door, and just assumed...

Then this situation suddenly made a whole lot more sense.

Not even a string of coincidences, just one mistaken assumption, which had perpetuated the rest. You stole the keys, you locked the front door, and you left the roof hatch open. And then the very next morning, with no warning, the train had pulled into the station, and the ISND and the Border Rangers had disembarked. The kidnappers couldn't have predicted their arrival, nor the mob, nor that the ISND would take the one complete set of keys with them and fully lock up behind themselves.

But that still left the why? Just why? What did they want the Weather Tower to direct the storm for so badly?

They'd been containing and building the huge storm up bit by bit just fine, either bribing or threatening the Heights family into not dispersing the smaller storms as they rolled in and joined up. So why? Just why? Why did they need the Weather Tower and this giant storm? Why?!

Gloom did not ask why. Gloom did not care about why. The why was so much less important than all the people who had been harmed by this, and those who were about to be harmed.

"You had no choi-? No CHOICE?! You had every other choice in the world!" Gloom yelled hoarsely back. "No choice but to hurt others? No other choice than to be selfish? No choice but evil? You chose to do this, you! You and nopony else! You can't hide behind excuses, YOU chose YOUR actions!"

And the voice of the hidden person outside completely disregarded every one of Gloom's accusations. They refused any responsibility.

"Either we direct the storm to turn aside, or nopony does. We have the emergency shutdown switch out here. You gave us no choice. So now we leave you no choice. Surrender if you want to save Haven Hay, and the other ponies."

Others? And just like that, they were thrown off balance again, scrambling to keep from falling off the crumbling cliff edge. Crimson's wings and ears were each twitching erratically, each out of sync with the other. Short, jagged twitches of the off-kilter desire to shake sense into the ones responsible until they bit their tongue off and bled from their eyes.

"What others?" Crimson growled, but he hadn't been loud enough.

Gloom shouted the furious question through the door in Crimson's stead; "What others?!"

"The others. The ponies who had to be removed for their own good and kept out of the way. They are being held on what they call the Wailing Crag. If you surrender the tower to us and are swift, you can reach and release them before the storm overshadows their prison."

"What?" It wasn't clear who repeated the stunned exclamation, but it was more than one of them. All of them even? But it was Gloom who after gaping, found his voice and shouted the word through the uncaring metal, "*What*?"

But Prey's mind was already racing ahead before the perfunctory answer could even come back, unable to help but slot pieces together.

Prey recalled the distant spire of weathered stone rising out of the dark sea, the top more than high enough to be well away from even the highest waves. But so sheer that there was no way up the sides. The only way to access it was by air. But the very top of the crag narrowed to just a jagged point, not enough space for even one person to stand, so where could all the kidnapped victims be held?

He reasoned there must be a deep crevice or crack, one into which the captured ponies were shoved.

But the Heights family were all pegasi, they could just fly away. No, that was easy enough to solve. A guard, or an iron grate hammered over the crevice with a lock, or chaining them up, or breaking one of their wings each.

'It could be a lie. But if you're not going to just kill your prisoners, then the Wailing Crag is as good a prison as any. The constant storms had grounded all boats inside the harbour, no one was going to be sailing out near it, especially not when it's supposed to be haunted.'

Dreverton. What had that been but an inactive, grey and lifeless volcano in the middle of the sea? A Wailing Crag filled with miserable prisoners all of its own.

"The ponies we had no choice but to quietly remove. We are not murderers. But if you do not retrieve them before the storm arrives at the crag, you will be. The Heights family, and those who were in the Watch House when we were forced to retrieve their son who they pointlessly hid from our agreement."

"And Sandy Shine? Flash Light? What 'crime' did they commit to deserve being murdered?" Gloom shouted through the door, words spitting a tone of alternating hot and cold fury.

"No." The heated reply crawled back through the door, "We are not murderers, unlike some, Dusky Gloom of the Nightmare Guard. The risk was simply that they would see what they shouldn't when we went to retrieve Alto Heights and returned him to his parents. As such, there was no choice."

In a flash Prey jumped to the conclusion which should already have been obvious, "They know your full name, they've been watching you. I don't know from where or how, I never saw anyone at any point, but they've been observing us."

"Last night. At the window I mean." Crimson got out from his clenched jaw.

'We're they watching us the entire day? Stalking us all along? Damn, damn, damn! How didn't I feel anything? Why did my instincts fail me now? Zoma'Grika.' Cold sweat sprung up across the whip scars on Prey's back. But the revelation that they'd been watched all along changed nothing really. It only made the stark reality of their dire situation all the clearer.

"Surrender the tower, and we will let you go rescue them from the Wailing Crag." The ultimatum came through the door.

"They've got to be lying. This is just all a trick." Nimbus Feather muttered, getting louder, "A trick, there's no proof!"

Gloom pressed his face up right close to the door, "Why would we believe a single word you say?"

"Because you have no choice. Either gamble that we will save Haven Hay and let you go to save the others from off the crag, or don't. But if you do nothing then this tower will definitely sit idle throughout and do nothing to help. You had best hurry. If you do not act soon, the storm will reach the crag before you can."

It was bait. It was so obviously bait. And it was so obviously true too. They were trapped in here, but the townsfolk were trapped out there. They had to choose whether to take the bait or sit here idle. According to their smug captors, they had no choice. Maybe these people would deflect the storm, maybe they wouldn't. But if they weren't the ones to use the Weather Tower, then it was going to remain shut down and doing nothing. It was pure spitefulness.

It was their way, or no way. And they were dangling Haven Hay and the Wailing Crag as the bait.

You have no choice indeed. But there was always a choice, and Prey knew which one he chose. All those uninformed, ungrateful, and careless townsfolk, they could go hang.

Why should it always have to be the ISND who had to sacrifice on behalf of ponies who wouldn't even cross the road for them if it were reversed? It *shouldn't* have to be them, it *didn't* have to be them. For once, why couldn't they get to walk away instead of

having to be the hoofstool, and let everyone else hang?

Just like Mayflower all over again, he would choose himself. Himself, and Gloom, and Crimson.

'Please, just this once, say no.' Prey stared imploringly at Gloom, and at Crimson as they looked back to him, then to the door. And his stomach fell away.

Gloom sagged. He rested his helmeted forehead against the door with a quiet *dink*. He was silent for a long moment.

"And where are you going to send the storm? Why do this? Why do any of this?"

"The reason does not matter to you." Came the cold reply.

Prey heard the thoughts that no one spoke, as loud as hidden alarm bells resounding throughout the darkening room.

'-Are they lying? Is this just a trap?-'
'The moment we open that door, will they just kill us?-'
'-but what choice do we have?-'
'-I don't know I don't know I don't know! What do we do?-'

And Crimson. His mental walls were shaking, twisting, as unstable as Prey had ever felt them. So thin that Prey felt the shape of the thoughts stretching his friend's normally unyielding and ironlike control to the breaking point. Prey thought he heard through the buckling walls, just as muffled as through the metal door they were all facing, what might have been:

'-...should have obeyed Luna's command...-'

Luna? What did that hated alicorn have to do with anything? He must've misunderstood the context. Prey's breath froze in his throat, the rest of his body locking up in following suit.

Crimson still had the keys. He'd never returned them after relocking the door. He'd pulled them out, balanced on the flat of his upturned hoof, and was now staring down at them.

Prey forced his lungs to contract and push the air out his chest so he could speak, "Hey..." It came out weak.

"Hey," He tried again, "Hey, we're not actually going to trust...?"

Crimson didn't seem to hear, nobody seemed to hear. Crimson raised the keyring up to the lock, with a flip and a push slotting the correct one in.

"Hey, hey wait! Just, just hang on a second."

"That piece of utter slime is right," Nimbus' unexpected words jolted Prey. The stallion's perfect white teeth were showing in his pale face as he tried and failed to cover up how shaken he was, "We really don't have any choice. The lives of ponies come first."

"Wait, wait! Are we all forgetting something here? What about *our* lives? Our lives are important too!" Prey frantically waved his hoof about the observation room.

Gloom straightened his shoulders, and with great effort raised his head again, "Nimbus is right, Prey. If there's a chance to save the hostages' lives..."

"Let's, let's lay this out logically-"

"Logically, we take the option to save the hostages." Gloom repeated, tone defeated.

"I and my ponies agree. We're prepared to take the risk. Fortune favours the bold, after all." Nimbus said, looking searchingly between Inky and Bravo, who each nodded with different degrees of certainty back at their Sargent. They stood up straighter in their Royal Guard armour, "We're prepared."

"I'm not! What about me? I'm not." Prey scrambled back from the top step, tripping over his backpack, "Look, j-just give me a minute to come up with a different plan, and I'll get us out of this. Just wait!"

"The hostages might not have another minute, Prey. The storm must nearly be to the crag by now." Gloom said, almost apologising such

was his tone, lifting the point of his spear away from the door.

It was Crimson with the keys though, and Crimson who spoke last. Not to Prey, but shouting at those waiting for them on the other side of the steel.

"Do you swear to uphold those terms?"

A pause came, as Prey struggled to get a strap untangled, "I do so promise."

"Do you swear on the unlit moon?" Gloom's head came up, ears straight up and rigid. Prey had not ever heard that turn of phrase before, not even from Crimson, or any thestral.

A longer pause. Prey stared, eyes stinging as he didn't even blink, frozen with one gold-ringed hoof inside his pack. What had that meant?

"I do so swear." Came the muffled answer.

Gloom did not stop Crimson as he turned the key.

Prey's stomach passed through his heart and leapt into his mouth. He tasted the caustic tinge of bile in the back of his throat. The taste of fear.

"Wait-"

Scarcely had the key completed its final turn, before the heavy steel door was yanked away from Crimson and pulled open.

The slow thrum of blades weakly turning filled the room. For a heart-stopping moment, only a den of shadows waited on the other side of the door. Then, from the dregs of waning light coming in from the observation room's windows before even that was snuffed out by the coming storm, the eyes waiting for them became visible.

Yellow, slitted eyes. So familiar in the dark-furred unmoving faces. Thestrals of the rogue Clan, Myrrdon.

Run away, leave behind, or abandon, but do not forget your past. Remember why you ran so far and so fast in the first place.

---I---

Author's Notes:

(Sorry for the slight delay in posting this Sunday)

Editor: Panem et Circenses

So, Clan Myrrdon. Who saw this coming? I'm honestly interested.

94.7 We Always End Up Back Here.

Author's Notes:

Hello all. As a heads up, I lost track of time, and so this chapter hasn't been fully edited just yet. It will be, and I'll take down this Author's Note once it's been done. That is all. Enjoy. 👍

It finally came to Scenic as he was emptying his waste paper bin, filled with paint stained scraps of discarded water colours.

It was hardly the most glamourous moment for this particular realisation, standing out the back, with the open bin wafting the disagreeable smell of rotting vegetables into his face, but that was how life worked.

Maybe it was his own fault for having been so slow to internalise the realisation, because as he stood there, frozen in the act of emptying the paper bin, he also realised that it had taken him a year and a half to hear what his subconsciousness had been telling him all along. The realisation was this:

'Someday, I'm going to have to finally ask Carton to marry me.'

It stunned Scenic. He'd always thought, but also not thought-! But he wasn't ready to propose! Not even close! Carton was much too good for him for one thing, and he wasn't nearly responsible enough to be a husband for another.

But Scenic realised that whenever he thought about the future, of where he'd been in five years time, in every scenario he foresaw, it was standing alongside Carton Juice.

It had never been a question of love, because he already loved

Carton, Scenic knew that. And she loved him, they'd told each other so often enough already. He loved Carton. She loved him. Marriage was just what came next. He wanted to spend his life, his time, his successes and failures with Carton. And even more, he wanted her to share the same with him.

It was a wonderful, scary realisation.

'I'm going to marry Carton Juice one day,' Scenic thought in a daze, heedless of the smelly bin open in front of him, 'Oh buck, I'm going to marry Carton! I'm nowhere near ready! I've got so much improving to do!'

They weren't going to be married immedidetly, heck, he hadn't even proposed yet, so it'd probably be at least a year, but that suddenly seemed like such a short length of time.

Scenic's head began to whirl.

The magnitude of the future was sinking rapidly in. He had to get a proper job, find the gold earring, or bracelet, Celestia, he didn't even know which type Carton preferred, then propose, and make Carton happy. Preparing a guest list, getting a venue, the best stallion, brides maids, flowers, and that was just the wedding. The actual day itself was only going to be one day out of many. Much more important was the before and after the wedding. That was when the important stuff would really happen.

Scenic could panic about all of that later, and oh, he was definitely going to.

But after the realisation that he was going to ask Carton to marry him, came two additional things.

The first was a massive goofy grin that he just couldn't suppress. It rose up from his stomach, filled his whole chest with warmth and excitement, and made his face hurt it stretched so wide, but he couldn't have stopped smiling even if he'd wanted to.

The second thing was; 'We're going to have to go house shopping. Neither of our houses are quite big enough for a couple to live in

together.' Which all went doubly so for Carton, who had to duck more than unicorns did to enter any doorway.

But they'd need a bigger home for a much more important reason in the future than Carton's height.

Carton Juice wanted foals. She'd always made that clear. Every week, she'd say things like; "I want to teach my foals how to play the flute", or, "I can't wait to have a filly whose mane I can braid."

Carton loved foals, even just seeing them trotting down the street to preschool in the mornings brought her such honest excitement. It was so obvious that she would want a family of her own to love and cherish. Personally, the mere thought of having foals terrified Scenic.

Every single time Carton saw Prey, he knew that for just a moment his dear marefriend had to fight off the urge to try sweeping the little white lamb up into a big hug. She wanted to spoil and fuss over the "poor cute colt who's so far away from his mommy".

Carton's actual words, not his. Scenic did not think any such thing about the vicious little runt. But Carton didn't know that, because she hadn't seen. She thought Prey's barbed tongue and insults came from hardships, and that he just needed all the more love to come around, even if it didn't always work.

'I know better.' Scenic had been there in Mayflower, that dark, dark night. He'd been there with them, and he'd survived the forest, the scarecrow, the kindersnatches, and all the terrifying horror. And he never, ever, *ever* wanted to go back. Scenic had seen what Crimson, Gloom, and Prey were capable of.

Prey wasn't a misunderstood and lonely foal like Carton saw. He was a Night Guard every bit as much as Crimson and Gloom where. The three of them together were capable of making choices that no pony should be able to make. And for that reason, Scenic was glad to be quit of the Guard. Not that he distrusted the three of them, he was very grateful to them for what they did! Celestia knew, he'd proven he wasn't capable of doing it in their stead.

But that was because he *had* seen what Crimson, Gloom, and lastly Prey were capable of doing. And it disgusted him. He deeply respected each of them, and was deeply grateful for what they sacrificed. But he never, ever, *ever* wanted to become capable of following in their hoofsteps.

Scenic looked up at the sun, at the beautiful city, at the happy ponies trotting gaily down the street. Yes, that was what life was about, that was what was worth living for. Scenic wanted to be happy in life, and to make Carton happy too. Whatever else Gloom, Crimson, and lastly Prey were, it was rarely happy.

'I'm going to propose to Carton. I'm going to live my life with love and happiness. I choose love and Harmony.'

The doofus grin came back full force, "I'm gonna' propose to Carton!" He squeed to the smelly garbage bin.

Perhaps Prey should have thought to press Crimson for more details about his previous clan's old prophecies. However, he didn't believe in predictions of the future.

Yet other people obviously did. He'd seen the reactions of the thestrals who'd been there on that night, when Luna had referenced a centuries old prediction about the next time Harmony's comet was seen in the sky. Prey had noted how captivated by the 'evidence' the thestrals had been.

So perhaps if Prey had questioned Crimson, he might've had a warning of what was to come.

Because Clan Myrrdon had also seen Harmony's comet in the night sky, and had also interpreted it the same way; as a sign.

And with the proof of one sign, why wouldn't they then look for other signs to their most closely held prophecies which hadn't yet come to pass? Because there was one prophecy, one of the big ones, which was well known in Clan Myrrdon. If it had been one of the utterly obscure ones, maybe it would have been forgotten a hundred years ago, but it wasn't. It happened to be one of those that

actually was repeated at story time around the fires, when there was nothing else to do.

And so, this prophecy had snuck into the back of every Myrrdon's head by dint of repetition over the years, even if they personally didn't put much stock in it. But then the comet had come, the clan elders had taken it as a sign, and after declaring it a sign, suddenly everyone was thinking about prophecies, and which one would be the most prevalent in everyone's minds? The one they'd heard over and over.

And why would it be told over and over, unless it was a good prophecy for Clan Myrrdon? One of hope and motivation when times were hard, even if at the time they'd not believed it, just taking it as comforting words. But now, what if it was real? What if it was more than just comforting words?

And so, after months of hard debate and planning by the elders, Clan Myrrdon had made a choice.

'For a dove of peace, the third-of-the-last-third shall seek.

And the third-of-the-last-third descendants of Myrr shall find the last promised land.

What is given shall no more be taken from Myrr's descendants. So it is written by the passing stars.

For as surely as night comes out of day, the hoof of both day and night must no longer bare sway over the third-of-the-last-third.

A promised land where wealth follows storms, and gaia gladly gives. There they shall rest from every toil and care.'

In a hijacked Weather Tower.

On a overshadowed barren hilltop.

Beneath a sky rapidly filling with an oncoming typhoon.

Set before a churning sea, where out in the middle of the dark

waters, a weathered spire held eight prisoners trapped.

Situated above a small port side town, which was being frantically evacuated, its harbour and boats abandoned.

Clan Myrrdon, after all this time in hiding had finally re-emerged and made their move. When Princess Luna of Equestria had returned from her banishment on the moon and been reinstated into power, she had swiftly reached out to the three hidden thestral clans, offering support in reintegrating back into Equestria in return for service.

Each clan was small, only six to seven hundred thestrals each, including the elderly and young. They had been forgotten by Equestria as nothing more than tales of vamponies.

Two of the clans had immediately accepted Luna's call to return to serve in Her Majesty's Night Guard after generations in hiding. They sent their warriors and those who could be spared, while the rest stayed home in their ancestral clan caves. Clans Felion and Cilldara had accepted.

Clan Myrrdon had not only refused, but also immediately abandoned their home and vanished into the wild night to hide. But not before an internal feud had left one estranged clan elder dead via ritual combat, and his orphaned throwback son exiled for seeking revenge also through the same ritual combat.

Only rumours and distant unconfirmed sightings of the reticent clan had been seen since.

Clan Myrrdon had vanished to who knew where. And the exiled orphan had surrendered himself to Equestria and the new Night Guard. Crimson.

It sounded so impersonal like that, just a list of facts recorded and recited. It didn't convey any of the deep, bitter, everlasting enmity of betrayal.

In the shadows beyond the open door, as the huge fans of the

Weather Tower slowly spun in the background, the warriors of the invading Clan Myrrdon waited for them.

Behind Prey at the top of the stairwell somewhere, the self titled Border Rangers stood frozen. Prey barely registered their continued presence. He too was frozen, in the act of searching inside his backpack. Gloom had his short spear withdrawn, pointed upwards non-threateningly in keeping with their surrender bargain. But under his armour, the Sargent was as stiff as a board.

Prey's breathing was loud in his long ears. The fan blades lazily thrummed. The heavy air pressed down.

He swivelled his eyes and *only* his eyes to Crimson. He was behind his friend on the stairs, and could only partly see Crimson's face. But from behind, he could see the tightly braided end of Crimson mane where it poked out from under his helmet. And the braids' end, past the wooden ring, the end was trembling fiercely.

So were the very tips of his tufted ears. And the points of his pinion feathers. Crimson was held so ridged, that he couldn't actually hold still.

Like a drawn long bow, the string was thrumming with stored tension nine-tenths of the way to snapping.

One of the waiting Myrrdon thestrals moved. Everyone tensed to spring as he held out his hoof, unshod, "The keys." He stated.

The thestral wore some kind of light, tight fitting dark armour. However it was to the bared wingblade that Prey's eyes were inevitably drawn. Each and every one of the waiting Myrrdon thestrals were also armed with personally favoured weapons.

Three stood on the small landing directly outside of the opened door. Another two perched like a yellow-eyed gargoyles on the railings, utterly unworried about the drop behind them. And a further five thestrals hovered in place above the drop, spread out. One of them dipped lower, and Prey realised from the way she moved for a better angle, that the shadowy object in her forehooves was a crossbow.

Prey tried and failed to get control of his breathing. They were outnumbered, and bottlenecked in the stairwell.

"The keys. Now. Then you will be allowed to leave." The thestral repeated, voice level. Now not muffled by a steel door, the familiar accent was so much clearer.

Gloom nudged Crimson, hastily whispering, "Give them to him. We're trapped, there's nothing we can do."

Crimson raised his hoof with the ring of keys. Prey held his breath. He could feel the rage radiating off every taut line of Crimson's body.

The thestrals weren't blind, they could see it just as clearly. "Don't try it, exile. I gave you my word, but if you break it, then you will die here. You're a traitor to Myrrdon, and there will be no mercy for you."

"Crimson don't! They've got crossbows." Prey hissed frantically, "They'll shoot you!"

Magic beats all else, but in its absence, range beats close range. Maybe Crimson could take down one, or perhaps even two of these warriors in an initial rush, but then the flying thestrals would then just shoot him, and shoot the rest of them too for good measure. It would be suicide.

But these were the people who had betrayed Crimson. Who had abandoned him, and murdered his father.

Prey's heart pounded, "Please Crimson, don't do anything! We'll all die."

Crimson didn't move for a long terrible second. Just the tips of his wings quivering with the bursting desire for violence.

Finally he spoke, voice coming out a strangled croak; "Where is Nexus?"

Nexus Fate. The one Crimson said who killed his father in the duel. It had been the clan's elders who'd twisted the duel into a never

ending gauntlet, but it was Nexus who'd been the one to kill Crimson's father in the end, after he was too exhausted to defend himself after fending off the previous challengers.

"That doesn't matter to you. This is your last chance, as sworn by the moon." A second thestral answered, just as flatly as the first. And he meant it. The steel in his voice and eyes told the truth, that they would kill Crimson if he gave them an excuse. Prey could almost heard the crossbow triggers creaking right on the brink of being pulled that last millimetre.

"Crimson, don't do it! We've got a chance to live and run away!"

Prey didn't hear what Crimson thought. Nor did Crimson say anything. He finished haltingly holding out the keys, and dropped them onto the other stallion's waiting hoof.

The thestral withdrew his hoof, never breaking eye contact with Crimson. He did not speak, did not say anything in gloating. And he didn't let his guard down either. He just stepped back, and ten pairs of luminous slitted eyes waited for them to leave.

Thestrals were competent. And these here were all thestrals too. And just like Gloom, or Nighthawk, or Vivid Edge, or any thestral Night Guard back in Canterlot, they were warriors. There was no chance of outsmarting them, because they wouldn't wait to strike if Prey started to try something. They would shoot first and ask questions never.

The strong take, and the weak suffer. Right now, the ISND were in the weaker position, outnumbered over three-to-one. The three Border Rangers up in the observation room behind them didn't count. They would be useless in a real fight against these warriors.

The ISND had already lost any fight before it even began.

Gloom gripped Crimson to his side with a wing, physically trying to make sure he didn't snap. He glared at the Myrrdon thestrals, "We already gave up. We'll leave now. I don't know what you're trying to achieve here with this madness, but I hope it was worth selling your souls for."

He pulled Crimson with him as he stepped out, trying to watch every angle, "Keep it together until we get out of here," Gloom muttered, "And you stay right on my tail Prey."

Prey scrambled after them, without even a backwards glance at Nimbus, Inky, and Bravo to see if the trio froze up or followed to. They didn't matter. Getting out of this tower alive mattered.

As Prey stepped out of door, and the eyes of all those taller, stronger, and faster people looked down at him, he felt utterly exposed. His contingency plan was utterly useless now.

These thestrals had been watching them when the arrived on the train, when they tried to interfere, when they slept, and when they mistakenly came here. They'd known what the ISND was doing every step of the way.

On his first step, Prey cringed in expectation of betrayal and an iron-tipped crossbow bolt shattering his ribcage. As he reached the top of the long flight of stairs down, he was still expecting the crossbow bolt. He expected it every single stair on the way down, as the flying crossbow ponies kept level with them in the air.

The thrumming of the fan blades pulsed rhythmically in his ears. Would he even hear the click of the crossbow's trigger lever being pulled? Yellow slitted eyes burned on his back.

'I've survived worse situations than this. We'll make it out alive.' He clung on to that hope.

But just because he'd survived worse before didn't mean he wasn't going to die now.

A nameless terror in the dark, a baloth, a war swarm of changelings, a mad griffin, a fire, a storm, an arrow, or just an inch of water in a muddy ditch. There was no restrictions on death. Prey didn't dare raise his head, just locked onto following Gloom and Crimson's tails and not giving their watchers any reason to kill him. Prey prayed to the uncaring world which wasn't listening, that for once he would just be seen as a child, and that these people had self-imposed limitations against killing children.

But the Border Guard hadn't. The Resistance hadn't. So why would Clan Myrrdon?

Prey was shocked when he took the next step and found they'd reached the bottom of the turbine room. Reflexively, he looked back up at the rising stacks of huge fan blades to the shadowy doorway. It showed him that the five crossbow wielding thestrals were still hovering just above them, no, four crossbows, one of them was an actual bow. Prey cringed and hunched smaller as the closest one looked down at him.

'I'm small, I'm harmless, please don't shoot me.'

He was almost surprised when Nimbus and his two subordinates were the last ones to shuffle off the staircase. He hadn't even realised they'd followed, instead of staying behind to be captured or executed like idiots. Prey'd been too focused on not wanting to die.

Gloom turned to glower darkly up at the traitor thestrals, flying out of his reach. He didn't take his wing off from around Crimson's armoured shoulders. It was not just a gesture of support. It was more one of restriction.

Crimson wasn't looking up at their trailing guards. He was staring rigidly straight ahead, not letting himself look.

"Now what? Do we just go down? Do we have to expect a spear in the face the moment we step out the front door?" Gloom called up challengingly. There were still three trashed floors to descend through, which used to be the living quarters of the Heights family, before they got to the front door.

A large thestral, who didn't just have a crossbow but also a brace of javelins strapped to his sides, motioned with the sharp point of his loaded crossbow. It was an incredibly eloquent motion, encapsulating perfectly everything the thestral meant to convey with it.

'-step out, or stay in here and die. I don't care what you do once we've closed the door-'

"If you hurry, you will still make it to the Wailing Crag in time," A hovering mare dispassionately said, freely speaking about the hostages she'd helped kidnap without any guilt, "Their lives are now your responsibility."

"Move, move," Nimbus shoved forwards, "That's why we surrendered, so we could save them. So let's move!"

The pegasus was right for once. There was no time. Not if they intended to beat the advance of massive storm to the crag. But Prey had no wings. He couldn't fly out with them. So he was going to be left behind, alone.

It was simple math.

There were eight captured hostages tied up or trapped on the crag. Four of them could fly, being the Heights family. They consisted of two pegasi adults, and two young teenagers. The other four prisoners were adult ponies, and couldn't fly. Sheriff Lumber and his deputy, and then Sandy Shine and Flash Light from the lighthouse.

Prey could do the harsh, uncompromising math. It would take two fliers to carry each adult non-flier back across the angry sea. Only Gloom and Crimson could fly from the ISND. There were three Border Rangers left here. Plus Gale and Windy if both could be freed, that made seven flight capable adults. One short.

Maybe the two younger Heights pegasi could at least provide a bit of helping lift? Switch the load mid-flight? Bravo was big and looked strong, and desperation could drive people to incredible feats. They were going to have to struggle and improvise. Or fail. Failure was always an unwanted option.

Or they could just leave the hostages to die to the storm.

If they went to rescue the hostages, it meant they were giving up any further chance of stopping clan Myrrdon. Again, it was simple math. Like a scale. If one side went up, then the other must go down.

'And I'm going to be left behind. Alone.'

Prey made no move to stop them or speak up as the three Border Rangers charged ahead down into the trashed tower rooms first. Let them die first if this was some kind of double-cross or trap. Prey knew for a fact there were more thestrals in the sky up above the Weather Tower. What if those thestrals hadn't gotten the message about the deal they'd reached?

The air reached out and grabbed Prey by the throat as soon as they stumbled out from the Weather Tower.

"By Celestia." Prey heard either Nimbus or Bravo gasp.

The very air seemed to coat his tongue as he sucked in a lungful. It was heavy, charged and volatile. It was a pressure in Prey's ears that wouldn't pop. And everything sounded very subtly wrong, just the edge of every sound muted. It was all just that bit too muffled, even the distant thunder.

And dark. Far too dark. Prey twisted his head back and looked up. He blinked watering eyes, squinting. The air pressure was making his eyes sting too.

Directly above, Prey saw a number of Myrrdon thestrals looking down at them from over the edge of the tower, just dark shapes against a darker sky. The deep rumbling was frightening.

"Luna's mane." He heard Gloom breathe.

Prey saw the storm. It was a solid shadow, filling half of the sky. Those internal flashes of stark white lightening inside the mountain of cloud were coming more frequently too, dancing all across the interior of the storm.

Tens of flashes strobed every single second. The rumble of thunder was a vibrating constant. That was what was making the air in Prey's lungs feel too heavy. And the sky and sea beneath the storm... Prey realised he couldn't see it. There *was* no sea beneath the storm. Just a churning black mass, there was no way to differentiate between where cloud, rain, and sea ended and the rest

began.

And the storm was even closer than last time.

The danger felt so surreal, and yet also right there. Because it really was right there. But it wasn't here yet. But it *would* be here.

'I cannot be here when that hits.' Prey thought yet again.

The storm boomed.

The moment of shared stunned silence wore off. The Weather Tower was now out of their hooves, the danger of Clan Myrrdon suddenly no longer the most terrifying thing in the face of what was coming.

Clan Myrrdorn had what they wanted, and would hopefully leave them alone now. The storm wouldn't.

"Are we still going towards that?" Bravo asked in a small voice.

Nimbus jumped, "What do ya even-? Of course we are! What are we doing standing here? We need to get out to the crag right now!"

Gloom surged forwards, trying to catch the pegasus before he could take to the air, "Wait, we need to think this through-!"

"Buck that and your thinking, there is no time." Nimbus beat his way into the air, kicking up wind.

With a start, Inky realised she was getting left behind and followed. Bravo hesitated, looked at the storm, but he too opened his wings to take off.

"There's not enough of us! We need a plan. There's four ponies to fly back and only five of us, seven with Windy and Gale when we free them. If they can even fly still. How are we going to carry-?"

"Too late now. There's no time for thinking. Only action. Or are you going to run away?" Nimbus challenged, looking over his shoulder back down at them still on the ground.

In a way, the brash stallion was right. Their time was up. Those who rushed blindly into a disaster scenarios were likely to just become more victims. But now there was no time to plan, only to act. They wouldn't make it to the Wailing Crag in time if they delayed any longer.

There was no time, no time, no time! No time left for anything else.

There was only the *now*, to act and react. Move, or be crushed under the millwheel of time as it caught up and dragged you under.

'-since when did I let fear stay my hoof from what was right?-'

"Right, of course. We need to leave-", Gloom spun, wings already opening. Clan Myrrdon didn't matter now, only the hostages did. He saw Prey and Crimson standing close together.

"-We'll be right behind you."

Gloom didn't pause to see if Nimbus answered or not. He sprinted the short distance back to Prey and Crimson. The lamb was standing close to Crimson, as close as he ever got, frantically trying to explain something.

And it was only then that Gloom remembered, somehow the obvious only just hitting him; '-we'll have to leave Prey behind again-'

How had he forgotten? But in the frantic moment, he had. How did it always slip away from his brain that Prey wasn't like the two of them and he. Could. Not. Fly?

'-stupid stupid!-', Gloom wanted to rip his mane out. But there was no changing harsh reality, just as surely as the storm was coming this way. There was no time.

Gloom stumbled over words, trying to go in two different directions at once, "Can't fly, you Prey. The crag, we need to fly them, but you can't-We can, so we need to-There's no time."

Gloom heaved in a breath, clenched his eyes shut, and forced out a full sentence, "Prey you have to stay behind. You can't fly. We, we

both have to go. It'll take all of us to carry them back across the sea."

Prey spared one single second to glance at Gloom, and then he was back to Crimson. Prey didn't care about the eight people relying on rescue trapped out on the Wailing Crag. Crimson's wants, needs, and feelings took priority. Justified? Fair? Reasonable?

'Who cares about any of that?' Because Prey didn't. Prey was selfish, and he only cared if Crimson was alright first.

It was too bad, then, that he'd had nothing to say Crimson had wanted to hear. But he'd been trying.

---Moments Previous---

The storm boomed.

Prey looked up at his friend. He was silent, his face closed and hard, yet the tips of his tightly folded wings were still shaking. A bit out of fear. Mostly out of hate. And all mixed up into dreadful thirst for revenge. How could he not when his old tormentors were right there! Prey could tell. He knew what it was like. To hate someone so much that you didn't care about the odds, you only wanted to make them hurt.

Crimson wanted to hurt them, to punish them. But they'd been out numbered, and overpowered.

So instead, Crimson had been forced to surrender the keys, bow his head to his tormentors, and slink away. And Prey knew what that was like, too. He had to do it every single time he saw Luna.

The strong take, and the weak suffer. The same old law of the world.

"Crimson, Crimson listen to me. Nighthawk and reinforcements are coming. Nobody but us knows about the message bottles we've been using," Prey spoke fast, "The Night Guards on their way right now, and once they arrive, then you'll, then *we'll* have a chance at Myrrdon."

Crimson clenched his jaw. Prey hurried on, thunder and lightning flickering in the background as Gloom and the Border Rangers shouted at each other to be heard.

"Sure they'll have fled by then, probably, but we'll be close behind. This time, they won't have an insurmountable head start. Nighthawk is bringing unicorns and specialists. We'll be able to track them down. Let them walk away today, so we can stab them in the back tomorrow."

"I wanted to fight Nexus Fate." Crimson spoke in a rush, spitting the words out like pebbles, "I wanted, I wanted to challenge him myself. I wanted to finish it."

"He won't accept, don't try and fight him fairly in a duel. Cut his throat in his sleep." Prey pleaded.

"I know that, I know! I hate it. I know he'd never accept a challenge! Just a naïve daydream. He'd just laugh. I'd never get the chance." Crimson spat, now that he'd started, unable to stop speaking:

"I want, I just wanted, just a chance. I thought about this for so long-but now nothing. Nothing. Why did I think for even a second-? Of course Nexus wasn't going to come find me, wasn't going to give me the chance! How stupid am I Prey?" His hoof was digging a grove into the hard rocky ground, pushing at the resistance, desperate for something to fight against, even if it was just the ground.

That was when Gloom had rushed over, and raspily panted out, "Prey you have to stay behind. You can't fly. We, we both have to go. It'll take all of us to carry them back across the sea."

"*Wait.*" The way Prey nearly snatched after them made Gloom wait. Prey's hoof had flitted out, but then jerked back a few inches short. But the instinctive action and counter-reaction made Gloom stop.

Because there was no spare time, but for this, they would have to sacrifice the time. Nimbus and the other two pegasi were already winging away, racing through the darkening sky for the blob of the

Wailing Crag out on the far edge of the Boiling Bay. But for one minute, maybe not even that, Gloom would wait.

Prey was already speaking, voice a breathless rush, "I know what they want to do with this storm, why they gathered it, Clan Myrrdon."

His voice dropped, and he leaned in, even though the thestrals who'd driven them out had sealed the tower door, and their watchers atop the tower were fifty meters above. Clan Myrrdon obviously didn't care what the ISND did now that they'd lost the tower, and after today, they'd never see them again either. If the ISND made a suicidal attempt to somehow retake the tower, they'd be killed, but beyond that, now that they'd given up the tower's keys, there were worth nothing to clan Myrrdon.

"What's their plan? Hurry, hurry!"

Prey had to share this, had to make sure they knew what he'd pieced together from stolen snatches of thought as the Myrrdon thestrals had driven them out.

Because the ISND was about to split up. Crimson and Gloom were going to fly away, and Prey couldn't fly.

Prey was going to be left behind in a few seconds time. There was no changing the fact. Accept it, or rebel against the idea. Either way, in a few moments it was going to happen, and he was going to be left standing here on this hilltop as thunder rumbled and the world held its breath.

Those were the cold hard facts.

Gloom hated it. Prey hated it. Crimson hated it. Yet that was what was about to happen.

Everything was teetering on the brink, trying to overbalance and come crashing down. But there was no time to stabilise the tipping, and they were about to split up. And predicting what would come after that was just frighteningly jagged blur.

Which made it all the more vitally important that Prey imparted

what he'd learned now, because there was never going to be another chance. Prey spoke in one breath:

"They've been building this massive storm and artificially stopping it from dispersing because they're going to use it as a bridge to break through the anti-magic of the Cliffs of Dove. They mean to take the Isle of Dove for their new home, to leave Equestria and never come back."

Gloom drew breath to exclaim "Impossible", but an enormous crack of thunder boomed and pale flashes kept flickering across all of them. Impossible or not didn't matter, because here and now Clan Myrrdon was attempting it anyway.

Not impossible. Just insane.

Crimson's mouth worked, "How?" He managed, half-drowned out.

"They're going to use the Weather Tower to smash the storm into the Cliffs of Dove. Some bits of the weather can still make it across into the skies over the Isle if there's enough of it. They believe it will work, so they must have a reason, perhaps they tested it somehow, I don't know." Prey ran out of breath and had to breathe. The very air was starting to gain a taste, an acrid tang of copper on the tip of Prey's tongue.

He ploughed on, words garbled in his haste, "They want to leave, sever all ties from Equestria, go beyond Luna's reach for good. It doesn't matter if it'll work or not, they believe that it will, so they're going to try. They think the storm will carry them safely across the anti-magic divide. The wind, the updrafts, if they start high enough up in the sky, they think they'll be able to glide far enough even without their flight magic."

Did Clan Myrrdon have some kind of further plan for when they reached the Isle? *If* they reached the Isle? Did they know if they could even survive out there? No one knew what lay in the heart of the misty island, or if the anti-magic effects extended over the whole area.

What about supplies? How much were they bringing with them?

And how were they planning to transport it all? Seeds for crops? Tools? What about metals and blacksmiting more? How? How did they intend for this to work? Prey didn't know, he'd only had enough time to see snatches, but they must have some in-depth plan.

They'd been preparing for this for who knew how long. Perhaps ever since Luna returned, and tried to make them serve her.

They just wanted to be left alone. Prey could understand that. It was the exact same goal Prey wanted so badly. So badly it hurt. But they'd attacked and alienated Crimson. For that, Clan Myrrdon would ever be Prey's enemy.

"How do you know this for certain?" Gloom asked. A wasted question. There wasn't time.

"I-You don't want to know." Prey answered.

Gloom took Prey's answer as truth. If Prey said so, then he really must not want to know.

'-doesn't matter anyway-',

It didn't matter because there was no time.

Rumble. Flickering lightning. The coming storm.

"We have to leave."

A bleak statement of surrender. Of the moment having finally come. No more time to sacrifice on thinking. From here on, it was swim or drown.

..., eight, nine, ten. Gloom and Crimson both yet lingered for that long, the last moment about to break between the three of them. Because now the moment was here, and there was no more time.

No time.

"Be safe Prey. Night watch over you."

Prey didn't have any parting phrase or blessing. He wracked his mind to find one, but by the time he found it, air was buffeting his face, and Gloom and Crimson were taking off. Gloom looked back down at him, and so did Crimson, even as they gained height. Crimson pointed back towards Haven Hay, telling him to make for safety.

Belatedly and instinctively, Prey waved back. And then felt like the most insensitive fool.

He was waving goodbye? Now?! He hadn't meant to, instincts had just taken over. What by all the dead made him think that was appropriate right now? He was an utter fool.

...A fool for standing here instead of running!

The roaring storm was still coming! He didn't have wings, he couldn't cover the ground back to the port town in only ten minutes, and there was no Crimson to fly him carried in a box this time.

It was just him, left alone, on this hilltop, outside of the commandeered Weather Tower. Just him, just like the old days and the Deeper Green. Which meant if he was standing still, and out in the open, he was in the wrong place.

Panicked energy surged into Prey's veins, the moment finally hitting him full force. The storm was coming, and he had to get to shelter, reinforced shelter, as anything else wasn't going to survive.

He moved. He started running over the wet ground. He couldn't sprint, he'd collapse before he made it back to Haven Hay if he did. The backpack was going to weigh him down, was *already* weighing him down, but he needed it, and he'd already purposefully lightened it as much as he could.

'It's downhill all the way, that's my biggest hope.' Uneven stones and wet ground were going to be his biggest hindrances. And his runt body's endurance.

But fear can make the most excellent motivator. Prey ran towards

Haven Hay, the sky darkening, the sea rising, the winds' howls growing, and all of that a mere prelude to the coming real storm.

The experience of running for your life never got old or less dreadful.

The knowledge thudding away inside your skull that if you were too slow, you would die. That sensation of fear as you fled the danger chasing you, it was as horrible as it ever had been.

The uninformed observer might think that running for your life would lend you speed and endurance.

They uninformed thought wrong. The heart thumping dread, the mounting exhaustion in your muscles and rising burn in your lungs, the sick fear, it sapped your strength even faster.

All running for your life gave you was the motivation to keep going past the point where a sensible person would stop, to mistakenly speed your pace past what you could sustain.

Prey had not been able to pace himself properly. The static air clung to his sweat. He wanted to stop. The tendons in the backs of his legs burned savagely from running downhill. But he couldn't stop.

The storm was coming. It was coming faster than he could run. He'd stopped glancing back. He'd slipped and fallen the last time he'd tried. And seeing the black wall of the storm bearing down on him didn't help anything.

Hearing the constant rumbling booms of thunder getting louder and louder was already bad enough. A slow building crescendo towards his own doom.

A rivet in the ground ahead that he'd have to break stride to jump. The rent came up much too slowly, not at all matching with the frantic pace his heart was going at. He was going too slowly.

Prey slowed, jumped over the long crack, stumbled on the other side, then gritted his teeth and with a groan, forced his shaking legs to get back up to speed.

--

Prey panted for each breath, mouth as dry as cracked paper. He was running, not galloping, and right now he couldn't have gone any faster even if he wanted to. And he did want to.

A stretch of hill that was steeper than the rest, the soaked dirt muddy. Prey tried to run faster once past the slippery mud to make up for the briefly lost speed. He managed it for maybe thirty seconds, then his legs slowed on him again.

And at his back, every single step of the way and each not covering enough distance, the rumbling storm was rolling ever closer. It was going to overtake him. It was going to catch and overtake him, and he wasn't going to make it to shelter in time.

It was horrible, the feeling of running for your life. And the sick certainty you were not going fast enough.

Of the weakness of your own body betraying you. Of slowing down. Of the leaden exhaustion you couldn't push past. Of not being able to pace yourself. Of failing to run properly. Of tripping and stumbling. Of panting instead of breathing through your nose like you were supposed to. Of your own ears swinging and hitting you in the face. Of a stone almost turning your hoof as it came down wrong. Of your light backpack still weighing too much. Of desperately needing a drink but not having time to stop.

Running for your life, not a burst sprint to escape immediate danger, but having to continuously run from your death was exhausting. Actually, that could be taken as a metaphor for Prey's whole life to date. He drove the useless observation from his mind.

Run. Just keep running. You can make it, you had to make it. Don't

doubt it, even though you were already doubting it, because doubt slowed you, and you were already slow, and it was a spiralling loop, and Prey's hooves hurt, but not as much as his lungs, and the storm with it's rain and lightning was right on his tail!

He'd only covered half of the distance back. Prey hated, hated, *hated* his runt body. Crimson and Gloom had made the swift flight in a fraction over ten minutes. If only he'd been born with wings, then-!

Someone else had been born with wings though. Two someone's. And they weren't Gloom and Crimson. Because the pair had one thestral too many and one pegasus too few as they swooped out of the sky.

Panic flared in Prey's heaving chest at the whoosh of wings. He staggered to a stop as the two dark winged shapes effortlessly banked around him, bleeding off speed, before alighting gracefully in front of him.

Prey stared, eyes darting between the two Myrrdon thestrals in front of him.

Their dark fur, light armour, and clothing against the dark sky made them seem not entirely solid, like upright shadows while their owners fully settled their wings. Those slitted yellow eyes, coolly looking down on him, they flickered and glowed with the flashing illumination of lightening in the background.

'Oh Zoma'Grika.'

Why were they here? Why had they stopped him? Had they been sent to take him hostage now?

Prey backed up, "W-What do you,*_gasp_* want?" He panted out.

"What are you doing out here?" The thestral on the left asked, his eyes hooded. He was armed with viciously hooked griffinclaw boots. Prey could barely tear his eyes away from the sharpened points.

"Why were you, a foal, even brought out here in the first place?"

The second thestral demanded. He carried an extra long wingblade. The metal did not shine with mirror brightness, instead it was a well worn silver-grey of many years of use.

Prey dropped onto his haunches, unable to keep standing now that he'd stopped running. He heaved for breath, "Why, why're you asking?" He stalled.

'-how low they sink to abandon their duty to protect a foal, even to follow another duty-'

'-something strange is ahoof here. But I would prefer not to see a young filly drown in the coming storm-'

'Ah, I see. So that's how it is.' Prey realised.

He didn't know what last-minute task these two had been performing, likely bearing a message from the leader at the Weather Tower, when they'd spied him running along below them. And for a moment, they'd felt compelled to stop, because they weren't child murderers.

They were perfectly willing to risk the hundreds of children and babies evacuating from Haven Hay, because they believed they could use the Weather Tower to direct the storm. There would still be some risk to the evacuating ponies, but in their heads, the worst of the storm would be successfully aimed at the Isle of Dove. They were confident of their elders claims of knowing what they were doing.

They couldn't know for certain however, they were basing their prediction on a best case scenario and complete guess work. Their reasoning was despicable, a discharge of all responsibility onto their superiors. Just 'following orders'.

All the Border Guards in the Deeper Green had given the same excuse; 'I was just following orders.'

"Answer, and perhaps we'll carry you to safety. Speak quickly, there is little time."

Prey panted as he sat, leaning back and pushing sweat streaked ears

back over his shoulder, "How chivalrous. And you, **huff** even believe those words."

The second thestral silenced him with a sharp flick of his wing. It was so similar to the motion Crimson might make.

"Mind your manners, or I will mind them for you. This is not a game of hide and seek. Where are you going, and why did they leave you to fend for yourself?"

Prey dug his right hoof into the stitch in his side, "Oh, I don't know. **gasp** M-maybe because there's hostages on the Wailing, **huff** Crag, who're gonna' die if they aren't freed?"

The first thestral however with the hooded eyes and vicious claw boots, wasn't as sanguine. It seemed at least a splinter of regret existed in his heart. But not enough to doubt the elders of his beloved clan, not even for an instant. Duty before all else. But still a splinter.

"It is fine for you to despise us, young one. I do not expect you to understand. When you are older, maybe then you will be capable. You may call me Reach. I would tell you to seek me in the future if you still hold onto this grudge, but-It matters not. After tonight, we will forever be safe from Luna's reach."

Prey's left hoof came away, as he let his ear drop. His hoof bore the dull golden band, and now, a ribbon too. He smiled through his panting up at the thestral.

"Free of Luna? You have *no* idea what you're talking about."

It was one of Prey's real smiles, the uncensored, broken ones. But the two thestral warrior's didn't see that. They only saw a tired, angry, and petulant lamb. A child trying to be intimidating isn't scary. It was honestly laughable, not that they would stoop to laughing at a foal. They were more powerful, much larger, stronger, and skilled warriors to hoof. A lion isn't intimidated by the yowling of a house cat.

At best, all the annoying cat would achieve is aggravating the lion

into having its lesser kin for dinner.

Prey's words and petulance annoyed them, nothing more.

"Spoken like the foal of a true, sun loving father." They looked down on him.

Prey's broken smile began to fade, "Are you gonna' *puff*, be changelings or diamond dogs? Hmm. Changelings. Definitely changelings." He decided with a nod to himself:

"I'm not gonna' *huff*, regret you like the diamond dogs. You attacked us first."

"Reach, this is going nowhere fast. There is no time to keep wasting-"

Prey didn't interrupt, because he wasn't listening to what the stallion was attempting to say in the first place. Prey just kept talking, "But really, *_huff_* Your timing is spectacular. So thanks for that."

The thestral named Reach's yellow eyes narrowed fractionally, a shift in his weight betraying his flash of annoyance. It was just a tired lamb. It was just a bitter smile. It was just a harmless ribbon.

'-a foal will be foalish, even at a time like this. I shouldn't have bothered holding a sun raised filly to the same standards of intelligence as I would a thestral foal-'

The thought only took the thestral half a moment, as did his snap decision. He stepped swiftly forwards, not wasting anymore time, "For your own good, we will be carrying you back with us. Don't worry. You will be left at the Tower when we depart for... greener pastures."

Prey flinched away from the reaching wing, and then just let himself flop over backwards atop his pack, all four legs splayed out childishly, "Stupid. I already said, *_puff_*, perfect timing didn't I? *huff*, Caus' I'm not walking all that way. So hurry up and carry me."

Neither of them knew Prey. Just like he didn't know them. But the second thestral, the one with the well used wingblade, he was still wise enough to know something was off.

His wing twitched to ward away a phantom enemy on instinct, but an instant later an especially loud rumble of thunder rolled threateningly across the dark landscape. Myrrdon had crafted this storm, they knew and respected the danger of wild weather, so what kind of fool would he be not to heed such a warning?

What was a little lamb in comparison to the threat of not being safely in position when the storm arrived at this position? There wasn't any time to waste, even for them who could fly.

"I demand to be carried." Prey huffed out, still breathless. His pulse was pounding in his skull.

Reach bent and roughly scooped him up, hooking a wingclaw under each of Prey's shoulders, keeping his dangerous claw boots well clear.

Prey had mentally braced himself, but he couldn't help it. The thestral was touching him! The reaction just slipped out, "Don't touch me!"

But Prey was also touching the stallion. His hoof was wrapped up in the coiled ribbon. He flung it out at the second thestral.

Momentarily distracted, thunder and lightning flickering, the thestral warrior still reacted on instinct. He cut the ribbon right out of the air, long wingblade flashing up too fast to follow.

No, he missed.

The ribbon twisted on the wind, propelled by momentum mere silk shouldn't have the weight to carry. It flicked out like a live tongue, and slapped onto his face.

"Freeze." Prey ordered, reaching out for Reach's mind simultaneously, '*Freeze*.'

Grey ash. A burnt out forest. The agonizing touch of a broken glass

coated in acid biting deep into a fragile mindscape of melded clouds and caves.

There was no mind breaking, no irrevocable shattering. While Reach's partner was paralysed by the terrible freezing touch of the ribbon, Prey took the time necessary to encircle, overwhelm, and methodically strangle the life out of all Reach's mental resistance. No volatile and horrifically dangerous absorption, no useless destruction of a mind which could yet be mined for its resources.

Smash the egg with a hammer, or instead take the time to properly crack and cook it.

Prey spent the time necessary to carefully crack open the mind of Swift Reach, oldest son of Far Reach, obedient child of loving the Myra Drift, and loyal warrior of Clan Myrrdon, who used to rub his old senile uncles wings one at a time when they cramped up in cold weather, who used to specially save the ripest starburst berries for his younger brother as the colts favourite, and who'd had an irrational fear of frogs growing up. Prey harpooned the screaming stallion's mind with barbed hooks from every direction, and *pulled* it to pieces.

In the end Prey did not have to run himself into the ground to make it back to the evacuating Haven Hay. He found his own means of transportation to outrun the storm in the end. Or rather, outfly.

Jerkily, broken, brushing the ground and as sloppy as a newly launched pegasus foal, but fly back to Haven Hay on stolen wings Prey did.

The sky was booming, lightning was flickering, the very air was waiting to break, and the distant roar of rain beating atop the raging sea made up the backdrop of what Prey found when he arrived.

He dismounted his lone thestral carrier a ways away from Haven Hay's train station, having made use of the darkening sky and worsening visibility to get himself as close as possible to the upper

edge of the town without being seen. Because after this was over, if he survived, he would not be able to explain where an obedient and near brain dead former warrior of Clan Myrrdon had come from.

Just the one thestral clan warrior, though. The other had been dispatched on a certain other errand. Or what was left of him, once Prey had finally removed his ribbon.

With the storm bearing down on the coast, its arrival only minutes away, a panicking packed mass of equine bodies was what greeted Prey.

The train-tacks and station were the highest point of Haven Hay, right at the top of the slope, and the very bottom being down in the harbour. That made it, relatively speaking, the safest area of Haven Hay, being the furthest and highest point from the sea.

It was still far, far too close to the rest of the town, but it was also the last bit of hoof-built shelter left. You could continue fleeing inland, making for the higher hills, but then you would be caught out in the open by the full force of the storm.

Which was better? To stay here, or to try and get higher? None of the shouting, crying, panicking, or outright screaming ponies knew the answer either. Mothers were cradling crying foals, fathers shouting and trying to make an impossible choice, teenagers which had wanted to be treated as adults were now white faced and mute with fear.

They'd fled up to the train station, but now they were stuck on going any further or not. Here should be high enough and far enough away from the sea. 'Should' sounded very weak and small in the face of the coming storm.

And the train station was nowhere near big enough to hold the nearly ten thousand residents. The two station buildings were already packed, literally packed with a crush of bodies, not able to accommodate even one more. Were ponies being trampled to death inside of that crush? Quite possibly. Quite likely even.

More were trying to shove inside, digging in their hooves and

driving with their shoulders, but even the stoutest dock workers couldn't force themselves in. There was simply no more space.

Ponies had climbed under the disconnected train cars, inside already full, trying to take shelter there instead. Prey saw one's and two's breaking off from the herd, whether out of bravery of blind panic he had no way of knowing, but they were making the choice to race for the hills and higher ground. They almost certainly weren't going to make it in time.

Terror and panic swirled in the heavy air, and choked in the back of Prey's throat as he looked upon the town of Haven Hay.

Fear and panic was so much more visceral and horribly real when you saw it for yourself. Knowing that a crowd was panicking, and that people were going to die was nothing compared to *being* there and *being* one of those people.

All that advise to stay calm in a crisis and keep your head was the first thing to vanish when people were fighting, kicking, begging for help, uselessly threatening, and you could think because of the noise and the stink of panic was clogging your nose and *oh please just let me get through this-!*

It's real, it's happening right there, and the storm was coming! The roaring of the waves could be heard even above the thunder, shouting, and screaming. It was deafening, ringing in Prey's abused ears.

The purple tint and static in the air was even stronger now, pushed beyond what felt like should have been the breaking point, yet it was just climbing higher and higher.

Prey was not so different from these deteriorating townsfolk. He was not immune to panic, certainly not to fear, and definitely not to the coming wrath of nature.

And just like them, within seconds of arriving on scene, he was doing what too many of them were already doing. Trying to find lost loved ones.

"Crimson! Gloom!" Prey shouted. He was completely drowned out by the mob shoving into the train station, the mob he didn't dare get too close to lest he be dragged in and crushed underhoof.

"Crimson?! Gloom!" His voice was just part of the deafening roar.

They *had* to be around here. The storm was bearing down on them, if they hadn't made it to the Wailing Crag and back by now, then-

'No, no they *must* be back. Oh zoma'Grika, are they now out looking for me? Flying back up the trail?' Because of the courier he'd taken, they wouldn't find him back along the path. What if they panicked, thought he couldn't have made it in time, and even flew all the way back to the Weather Tower?

He hadn't thought of that, how was he supposed to foresee something like that? But he should've, and now Gloom and Crimson weren't here, but the storm shortly would be.

"Crimson! Crimson? Are you there? Gloom!"

They weren't here. The storm was coming, and he couldn't see them. The thestral who had once been called Reach crouched off in the shadows behind a tussock of tough grasses, a mindless puppet but one now useless to Prey. The thestral couldn't help him find Gloom and Crimson, couldn't fight off the coming storm.

So Prey left him. Left him to crouch in the shadows until the storm came and he was swept away, or drowned in the rain, or died in any number of ways to the elements. A broken tool of no more use. Reach had brought his death upon himself when he refused to leave Prey alone!

An earth pony ran up towards Prey, overstuffed saddles bags on their flanks bulging and desperation in every panted gasp. "You! You were with those Guards, where are they?! They've got to save us! Please!"

"Don't touch me!" Prey recoiled, flashes of lightning making the pony hard to both see or hear clearly.

"Where are they? Tell ME!"

"Be quiet, don't let anyone else hear!" Prey tried to silence the stallion, suddenly afraid that the herd would somehow hear and blindly stampede over here, and blindly over them too.

Prey raised his hoof threateningly, a threat the stallion couldn't understand, "Leave me alone. Touch me and you die."

What would be one body after all this was over? No one would know the difference. Prey would do it, too. The pony was desperate, and desperate people do desperate things, but so would he.

"Where are they?!"

"Last warning-"

Kraash A thunder clap.

"Please, my family needs-!"

A twang on Prey's sense, coming from the direction of Haven Hay. It was one that he recognised, and had been actively looking out for, but without a focusing array of runes he could only pinpoint it now that it was this close. Crimson's electrite feather.

"Just go away." Prey spat at the pony, turning his head to frantically scan the dark, almost boiling sky. Which had him looking right into the lightning flashes, and the storm.

Prey felt very, very small as he looked up. The storm had eaten up nearly all of the sea. There was just a thin band of roaring waves left. Beyond that, the rest of the ocean was lost beneath the solid wall of the storm. From east to west, the flickering, rumbling storm wall stretched as far as the eye could see.

Prey could not see the top. It looked as if the entire ocean had risen from the depths, and formed a tidal wave stretching to the sky, just waiting to come crashing down and wash away the world.

Against the vast blackness, and being blinded by white lightning, the flying shapes the returning rescue mission were naught but tiny smudges, so much so that the flight group was almost upon the train station before Prey's hazy eyesight finally picked them out.

"Here, over here! Crimson" Prey shouted, jumping and waving.

He may as well not have bothered. His shout was instantly lost in the thunder, the howling wind, and the ten thousand panicking townsponys' swamping the station.

Four bundles of flying shapes frantically beating at the air, two each to a flightless passenger gripped between them. Each flying pair was straining, having had to fly all the way back here at a difficult angle, leg muscles cramping as they struggled to hold up the weight of their panicking passenger, and only ever a moment away from mistiming their wing beats and colliding with their partner.

They dropped out of the sky fast, racing for the ground at unsafe speeds. But they'd made it! They'd made it back before the storm!

Prey's eyes sort and found the only two he cared about, the darker armoured figures of Gloom and Crimson, much harder to spot against the storm. Crimson's wings were a blur, he was having to carry a pony all by himself. Prey didn't see their saddle bags, so they must've ditched them to lose weight.

For a moment, even in the face of the storm about to hit them, Prey felt hope, or just relief. Because they'd made it back!

The storm would have torn their wings off if they'd been caught mid-air, but they were just about to land, and then once they met up he and them would have two minutes to find shelter before-!

"-you doing?! Where have they gone? Where's their cover?" The desperate pony from before roughly shoved Prey, or tried to shake him, but misjudged the much smaller lamb.

Prey stumbled and lashed out with a cloven hoof.

"Don't touch me!"

Prey whipped his head around, trying to so spot if anyone from the panicking and rioting ponies had seen, then jumped over the stallion's still body and ran towards where Gloom and the others were about to land.

All it takes is a touch. In the chaos, din, and terror, nobody was focusing on anything but their own survival. No one was going to stop to try and help another competitor for that survival, even if they did see the unmoving slumped shape of what had been a sentient pony in the bad light.

Prey ran away from his mind murder. Because who was going to notice one more death when this was over? Life isn't fair.

Nimbus and Inky landed heavily on the wet earth, the later ending up on her face, the ex-sheriff Lumber they'd been carrying folding up with a moan completely drowned out under the thunder.

A panting Bravo and Gloom had the kidnapped deputy between them. Flash Light was deposited by a pair of heaving and badly dishevelled adult pegasi, the elusive husband and wife due, Gale and Windy Heights. In the lightning flashes, Prey saw matted bands of fur around their forelegs, like they'd been manacled.

It may have been that these two pegasus's right here in front of Prey were the cause of this whole disaster. Maybe they'd been blackmailed, maybe they'd just been too airheaded lackadaisical to care, but the truth didn't matter now. Survival mattered. Judgement and punishment could come if they survived.

Their two teenage offspring didn't land, but flew around their parents, not showing much concern about the storm titan about to hit them. They seemed too engrossed with being able to fly again after being locked up for two days.

Alto and his brother would probably be amongst the first to die, Prey thought as he ran forwards, because they'd try to fly in the face of the storm. He didn't care if their parents had enough sense to stop them or not. Right now, their lives mattered to Prey as much as the earth pony he'd left lying on the ground behind him.

The Border Ranger trio were casting around, trying to spy their convalesced team mate. Jetson had been set the task of transporting the unconscious Trail Blazer out with the evacuation, but where was he? But in the churning mess of bodies, onrushing darkness, and blinding flashes, it was impossible to pick anyone out.

"Over here." Prey tried to shout, as Crimson dropped the fourth and last rescued pony, Sandy Shine, the lightest of the four rescuees. Crimson staggered as he finally found his hooves, head down and sides heaving for every breath, while Sandy Shine clutched at the ground, actually crying messily.

"Here, over here! We need to get under cover!" Prey yelled again, but again he was drowned out. But he was almost there.

Flash *__Kroom!__*

Light and an instant thunderclap. Prey was a runt, forever frozen as a child. He was always having to angle his head upwards. He saw the diving cluster of shapes, backlit for one instant.

People never remember to look up. They'd been flying high, higher than the stops roof, thousands of hooves up, patiently trailing the low flying rescuers struggling with their living burdens.

Why would they have looked up at a dark sky, when the storm lay behind them, not up? People never remember to look up.

Prey's lungs screamed a warning before his mind could unfreeze. They didn't hear him, they hadn't even spotted him yet.

He screamed again, for all he was worth, "Above you!"

The uncaring world swallowed his high pitched screech without even noticing.

Gloom was exhaustedly staring at the shoving mass of shouting bodies, all fighting for a place inside the train station. Crimson was still heaving for breath, head down and legs braced. Gloom stumbled over and bent to shout something in Crimson's ear. The air felt like thick honey.

"*Above you!*"

A flight of black lightning streaked overhead. They were travelling so fast, having dived for thousands of hooves and only levelling out for the last thousand, that they were there and gone in a single blink.

Just an inky after image, the crack at the end of the whip as it snapped back up into the sky.

Prey's heart couldn't stop beating, the jaw of hearts would not permit it. Yet Prey could no longer feel it.

Flash *_Krack!_*

Nimbus Feather looked around, and blinked in dumb shock at the patch of spines which had sprouted in a patch to his left.

Lightning basked bathed the ground. Not spines. Arrows, and a brace of javelins.

Gale and Windy Heights stared, then reared up in fright, beating their wings to take to the air and flee, abandoning their saviours and flying away.

Sandy Shine didn't even notice, still clutching the ground. Lumber rolled to his hooves, blearily looking around, not understanding.

Prey's hooves were running. Thunder was ringing in his head.

Crimson had been their target. A pegasus throwback exiled from Clan Myrrdon on pain of death. Gloom had been standing next to him. Both had gone straight down.

Flash. In the after-shadow, the spines, those arrows and smattering of javelins, stuck up from the two bodies.

Prey was almost there. He was running. Not fast enough.

This wasn't right. This *wasn't* right.

Karma. Vengeance. Was this the worlds' revenge for that unnamed earth pony he'd left behind him?

It had to be. It had to be. This was karmic punishment. That earth pony taking instant revenge.

Prey fell as he reached Gloom and Crimson, tripping over an imbedded arrow shaft.

He reached for Gloom and Crimson. He saw Crimson's wing, nailed to his side. A blood slicked shaft pinned the wing to the armour plate underneath. How far had the arrow's head gone through? How much damage had the armour prevented?

A shaft that had snapped in half, just the head left dug into Gloom's armour, three more black shafts slammed into his backplate.

A javelin, was that sticking out of Crimson's chest?

This wasn't right. This wasn't Mayflower, this was supposed to be easier than Mayflower! They'd done all of this already, been sent off to save a distant town once before, this was just supposed to be an easier repeat. It couldn't go like this, not to some petty thestrals. They'd survived monsters, scarecrows, the night in the dark! These were just common arrows, not terrible ravening marefolk from the endless deep.

This wasn't how the story was supposed to go.

Buzzing in Prey's head. 'Isn't right. It isn't right. This isn't right!'

It was repeating, like when Garrow had shot that pegasus Oyster Pinion right in front of Prey, before flying off into the night. Here it was happening again. *Happened.* The same damn scene over and over again! A bloody circle.

Then Crimson moved, inhaling and beginning to struggle. The javelin rolled away, not through his chest, just caught under his shoulder. Lightning showed the deep scar in the metal where the armour had saved his life.

Prey breathed again, as Crimson too breathed. He hadn't been slain, only stunned by the force of the impacts.

"What?" Was all Crimson could weakly gasp out, winded. He was alive! And Gloom was-

Prey's hoof shot out, flying to the patch of exposed throat under Gloom's helmet, which had a horrible dent in the temple. He pressed the back of his ankle to Gloom's fur, desperate to find-

A pulse! Gloom was alive too.

"Alive." Prey's voice cracked, and he chortled a sob, feeling so light headed that he might faint.

For a moment under the thunder and lightning, everything wrong in the world had flipped and became what was right for a glorious moment. A short, glorious moment.

Then Prey felt the old familiar trickle of sticky warmth soaking into the cleft of his hoof, smelled the blood, and heard the gurgle. A wordless holler of pain escaped Crimson's mouth as he finally managed to inhale, and all the arrow heads nailed through his armour dragged.

The departing Heights family abandoning them, Lumber and the rescued lighthouse keepers screaming and panicking, Nimbus uselessly shouting worthless instructions, Prey's deceit and lies, none of that was worth anything in the moment.

And the storm, the vast wrath of nature they'd been running from all this time, the storm arrived.

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Up, up, and up further. High above the frenzied sea and torrential rain. Up surpassing the mile high impenetrable black clouds of the storm. And higher still, beyond the swirling, all consuming, thundering blackness of the storm.

Above all of this, there was another world, a land of grey. Where the winds and the rain and the flashing lightning didn't reach.

A plain of dark grey. The very top of the the storm mountain. A near flat, not quite real land. A mile down and below, the cloud was a boiling, churning mass of water in every howling state of matter. But up here, the flat, featureless landscape barely seemed to stir.

But that was merely a lie of perspective. The plane of grey was moving, shifting many times faster than the fastest person could gallop. But it was so vast, so huge, that looking down upon the plane of cloud, it warped distance. Hundreds of yards looked like

just one, as if you could reach out and set hoof onto the clouds. Lightning turned it into an ever changing quilt patchwork.

It was so deceptively peaceful. Up here, in this pocket world of grey with a sea of clouds instead of salt water, the terrible destructive wrath of the storm did not reach.

And up here there existed a second cloud, above the storm mountain's very top. In the thin air, it drifted above the sea of grey on a buffer of air. Just a thin blanket of cloud when compared to the vast storm beneath.

On this weft of cloud, nearly six hundred thestrals of Clan Myrrdon rose to their hooves. It was time. Finally time.

Every single thestral was laden with bags, sacks, and bundles. Young foals obediently standing close to their parents. Warrior's still in training. Seasoned veterans. Clan elders, and the old and infirm too. Everything they needed to build their new lives had to be brought with them. There would be no returning from where they were going.

It was finally time to depart.

This storm would ferry them to the Cliffs of Dove, and then, partly over the impenetrable anti-magic barrier, enough to glide clear and reach the misty Isle of Dove themselves, even with no flight magic.

This vast storm was needed, the unleased rage of nature, necessary. It was the only thing that would allow them to partly breach the mysterious barrier, and hold it open long enough to cross.

There had been no choice.

They'd tested it, launched kites across, tried firing arrows and ropes, tried floating logs up to the cliffs. One member of the clan had been lost getting too close, but by unhappy fortune it was actually their tragic death that ended up paving the way. At the time, the Myrrdon thestral been resting on a wild cloud, not realising the wind had carried them just inside the null barrier's range.

And predictably, they'd lost their cloud walking ability, their wings

flapping uselessly unable to gain any lift, as they'd clung onto the cloud as they'd slowly slipped through it like a normal pony would've. And then they'd fallen.

But after the mourning, and the recounting of the tragic accident though, an elder caught on. For a brief period, the thestral had still been able to cling onto the cloud. They hadn't immediately phased through the cloud, they'd slipped through after a struggle.

And Clan Myrrdon had realised what that could mean.

Carefully, oh-so carefully, they'd pushed more clouds half across the invisible divide, and pulled them back. The exposed half of the cloud quickly lost its structure and broke down into mist, but not immediately. And the faster it was withdrawn, the less it degraded.

The bigger the cloud and the faster the crossing, the less it broke down. This storm would be the bridge into their new life, just like the prophecy.

Would they be able to ever fly again once they landed on the Isle of Dove? They had discussed it, and it was decided that if a ground-bound life was the price to pay for their clans survival safe from Luna's reach, then they would bear the heavy price. But they had hope. Hope was the whole reason for this plan. Hope was the cause for the choosing to believe in the old prophecy. And through their few carefully stored spyglasses, they had seen birds flying in the mists of the isle. So they knew it was possible, life survived and flourished there, and that they were not dooming themselves to death from poisonous mists or the like.

So they believed in hope for a better life.

And now, finally, it was time to reach out with both hooves and take that new life for not just themselves, but their children's children to come.

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The storm hit Haven Hay. It had finally come. The black heavens opened wide their maw, and screamed their fury.

Sand, seaweed, stones, the beach was struck by the churning storm wall first, and was swallowed in one bite, chewed, and spat back out as shrapnel on the wind.

The harbour, the streets and town, they vanished from view. All that could be seen was the onrushing torrential wall of debris and lashing rain. The shadow was so dark, the storm mountain eclipsing all, but the disappearing town was starkly revealed in the endless lightning flashes. The noise, the fury, the blinding water, nothing could stand in its way.

Roofs held on for mere seconds, and then disintegrated into flying tiles, and still the storm rushed on, terrifyingly fast. It raced for the tiny train station, and the terrified ants still trying to get inside.

And behind the storm, came the sea. It broke over the harbour walls, swamped the docks in an instant, and surged into the streets.

The roaring wind riding on the forward billow of the storm hit the train station first. This wasn't the angry wind from before. This wind, it flattened ponies, knocking them flying and rolling over the ground, and then a second later the torrential rain smashed them flat.

The sky had cracked open to release hammer blows of rain, like a giant hoof was reaching down and squashing those ponies into the dirt. The debris and flying sand blinded all in an instant, trapping you in a dark little world of hammering water, roaring deafness, senses cut to only as far as your hoof could reach to fumble.

The noise was all consuming. There was no other noise in the whole world. There was only the roar of the storm.

Lightning. Thunder. Rain. Wind. The world dissolved into these howling elements and nothing else. There was only the storm.

The basilisk. The chimera. The hydra. Even the mighty dragon. When mother nature finally stirred herself to wrath, even they flee and hide.

A thousand proud weather teams combined could not have stopped

the storm now. The point where they might have intervened and lulled mother nature back to sleep before she fully woke had come and gone. And if they'd tried now, they would've died.

Either struck a dozen times by lightning before their carbonised corpse even hit the ground. Fur and flight feathers plucked from their bodies. Wings snapped like dry twigs. Thrown into the sky, or into the unyielding ground. Drowned in mid-air as just as much air as water was driven down their throat with every breath. Impaled on flying splinters as long as a foreleg.

There was no stopping the storm now. You could not hold back the rising tide. It wasn't an enemy, or an army, or a monster. It was simply a disaster.

Like the storm which had sunk the ship just inside the harbour of Haven Hay, but a hundred times worse. You could not fight a natural disaster.

Nature. Does. Not. Care.

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95.7 Here Today, Gone Tomorrow

The rain *roared* atop the dark train car's roof.

Inside, the empty car near-deafeningly reverberated like a struck drum. Rain trickles had started worming down the inside of the car walls. The carriage's floor was already becoming slimy and slick, and utterly stank of rotting pondweed.

Yet it was still an empty train car, and thus shelter from the terrible storm hammering down and drowning the world outside. But it was empty. For some reason, none of the desperate ponies of Haven Hay had ripped the sliding door off and fought each other hoof and tooth to cower inside.

The other four train cars had been commandeered, but not this one. Why not? It had been like they couldn't properly notice the forgotten shelter. And then the storm had hit, turning the world dark and hiding the stinking car anyways.

Then the train door was cracked open. Wind and water howled in, the whole thing shuddering and rocking. Pulsating lightning illuminated silhouettes as black cut-outs. And in through the open door were blown four stumbling figures, dragging a fifth and carrying a sixth.

Prey, and the three Border Rangers. Bravo was dragging the barely able to limp Crimson. Inky and Nimbus carried Gloom over their backs. How they had managed to stay together, and follow Prey while near blind, choking, slipping, soaked, constantly deafened, and being blown away was nothing short of a miracle.

There was nothing miraculous about the situation. Nothing at all. There was no goodness left in the whole entire world. There was only the storm, and panic.

"Shut the door! Shut that door!" Screaming to be heard.

"Get them in, get them in!" Fighting to get the small lantern out of his pack.

No, not like-! Gently! Rest him down on his side!" Trying again and again to get the flint to strike.

"Don't touch-Crimson? Focus! That arrow is in your wing, don't move."

"Help... help Gloom first."

Krash ****Boom**!*

"What?!"

"Help, Gloom!"

Nimbus getting in the way, blocking the flickering light, "Move!"

"I can't, I have to hold his head in case he starts-"

"Move!"

"You don't know what you're doing!"

"Get out of the way, or I swear by the Deeper Green-"

Crash **Roar*!*

Fumbling with a small dagger. The runically enhanced blade cutting the armour's straps like wet paper. The armour plate staying affixed to Gloom's side by the two arrows nailing it there. Quivering muscle becoming a corkboard for giant pins.

"Oh Celestia, by Celestia, guide and protect-"

"Shut up, shut up! Don't you dare stop pressing!"

"He's hurting! What do I do?!"

"I said keep pressing you halfwit!"

Boom **Rumble**. **Shake**

"Don't just stand there Inky, help Crimson!"

"But Sargent Gloom is the most hurt-"

"We're helping him, you help Crimson!"

"What am I supposed to-?"

"Stop the bleeding! Just stop the bleeding!"

Screaming at the useless fools over the never-ending thunder, until his throat was raw. Fighting against dwindling time in the half-light. Blood not stopping its flow, the bandages and supplies pulled from his pack not enough. Red soaking through. Smearing his face as he tugged a thread through the needle with his teeth and bit it off.

"Not working, it's not working!"

"I, I don't know!"

"Prey? Prey, Gloom is he-?"

"Stay still! Stay down. You! I said keep Crimson down!"

"What? Can't hear you!"

"I *said!* Keep. Crimson. Down!"

Gloom laying still, eyes closed, forehead swollen an ugly purple, and the rest of his face too pale under his fur. The gurgling rattle with each shallow inhale and wet exhale. Fighting to make each second count, to hold on, just trying to stabilise the rapid downward spiral. Not to heal, just to halt.

Buying time. Just buying more seconds to work with, so he could use those seconds to buy more seconds.

"Get ready to pull the arrow out on my mark."

"But the bleeding-!"

"I said on my mark!"

"No! The bleeding is too much!"

"On my mark!"

"And what if it's barbed, huh?! Like a Jack Fish Stingtail?"

"It's not barbed you utter-! Pull it out when I say!"

"Celestia's light guide us, please stop this-"

"*Shut* up Bravo! Nimbus, you pull that arrow out on-"

__BOOM__

"-mark. Mark. I said mark! Mark damn you!"

Fighting for time. Fighting Gloom's body. Fighting the incompetent trio who he was a breath away from mind killing for their sheer stupidity but for needing their hooves to keep applying pressure.

The stink and slime from the floor clinging to his hooves, trying to wipe them clean on his own soaked wool and steadily running out of clean patches to use. There was no time to disinfect, he had to stabilise Gloom now now now! Infection would come later, but Gloom was dying now!

Gloom was dying.

He was dying. That wasn't right. That was wrong, so very wrong. This whole stupid mission was wrong. A little port town wasn't supposed to be more dangerous than Mayflower, than Garrow and the Lumber Yard. This was too stupid for Gloom to die to!

Stitch, suture, try to clean as best he could with only seconds to spare. One arrow wound. Two arrow wounds. Three arrow wounds, one where the head stayed deep inside. Digging it out with the flat of his knife, terrified that one slip by him, or by Nimbus holding Gloom, or by Gloom himself regaining consciousness-

The swelling on Gloom's head was bad. Prey couldn't do anything about it. There was no treatment available for a possible brain injury. He couldn't risk trying to feel the swollen bruising out, he

might tip it over the edge into brain haemorrhaging instead. He didn't know which it was, bruising or haemorrhage, and there was no way to tell. And Gloom was not waking up.

Because he was dying.

Tiredness, bad lightning, a stinking floor which shook and rocked in the wind, deafening thunder. He was trying to save Gloom, and everything was fighting against him.

'Stop it. Stop taking everything!'

The two arrows yet left in Gloom's side, slowed and partly stopped by the armour. Bad. The third arrow, which had driven between two ribs? Worse.

People could survive with only one working lung, Prey had seen it. Snake had seen it. But the blood leaking into the lung, that was precious blood not being pumped around the rest of his body. And with only half as much oxygen getting in...

Prey knew how to maximise Gloom's chances. But they were bad chances.

Prey rushed, and prioritised, and screamed instructions at idiots who could barely understand.

But Crimson also desperately needed his help. Gloom had been hit the worst. Crimson had merely been hit slightly less badly. Again the armour, the priceless new Night Guard armour, had prevented immediate death from the heavy crossbow bolts.

Crimson's left wing was skewered through his armour to his side. Every twitch was a spasm of agony across his pale face. He probably had broken bones of some kind too, Prey had no idea how bad. Internal injuries were all the more frightening than external ones, as it was so hard to tell until it was too late.

Prey was frightened. He was keeping it suppressed, he couldn't afford for his hooves to shake and slip, not now.

A deep, deep slice on Crimson's hind leg which just would not stop

bleeding, no matter how much pressure Inky was applying, only slowing. Prey was certain he had seen the white gleam of bone for a moment inside.

Clan Myrrdon was dead. They were dead. They'd shot Gloom and Crimson, they'd shot them and just flown away without even stopping, like they could just jauntily get away with doing that!

They *had* gotten away with it. Life wasn't fair. Death was even less fair. The good died and the strong lived. Like Luna and the Sun Wolf.

The wind howled so fiercely it felt as if the entire train car was only moments away from tipping over, or blowing away. And fresh, sticky blood kept staining Prey's cloven hooves.

Gloom, Crimson. Dashing back and forth between the two of them. Gloom, then quickly Crimson, back to Gloom, staunch the fresh bleeding, run back to Crimson, then Gloom, then Crimson, then Gloom. The height of selfishness, trying to save them both, fervently refusing to accept only one as possible.

__CRASH.__ Thunder rattling his bones. Water pouring in rivulets from leaks down the inside of the walls, and draining out under the door.

Nimbus and his two worthless sacks of flesh finally realising, past their shock and fear, how off this situation was.

"Where's everypony else?!"

"What?!" *Boom*

"I said, where is everypony else?! Why's nopony else in here?"

"There's space! Why're they out there?"

"There's free space, we can bring more in!"

"No!" Prey yelled.

They didn't hear. "Don't stop pressing! You can't leave now!"

Crimson and Gloom, they were in crisis. Nimbus faltered. He looked at the closed door, shaking and rattling.

'-Trail Blazer is still out there-', He finally recalled.

"Don't stop, don't you dare stop! There's nothing you can do now!"

"But what if he's-?!"

*cRRR-**AACK*** Something huge outside broke or collapsed, audible even through the storm.

Then under Prey's red glistening hooves, Gloom's pulse began to rapidly fade, heartbeat juddering.

'You can't take this from me too!' Prey hurled himself at his backpack, tearing through it. 'Where? Where? Where?'

No time, no time, no time! Where was it? He had to have it.

A wrapped bundle. Rip the string off. The small brown paper packets inside spilling across the dirty floor. Scramble, had to find the right one, the powdered seeds.

Seconds, there were only seconds to act. Snatch up the packet, spin around and lunge back to Gloom's side.

Rip the paper, jam his blood-sticky hoof into the powder, then smear the foul clotted mess off on the back of Gloom's tongue. His whole head was ringing, whatever Nimbus was demanding didn't matter.

The potent, fast acting poison hit Gloom's failing system within moments. His heartbeat jumped. Poison the body, trick it into working for just a little longer. Kill to cure. Sacrifice later for now. This was emergency triage.

And now that he'd started feeding Gloom the poisons, he couldn't stop, or Gloom would definitely die. A downward spiral instead of a straight plummet, but Gloom was still falling either way. Prey grabbed more packets, desperation burning in him, throwing the wrong ones aside, looking for the right poisons to balance out what

he was doing to Gloom.

There were no carefully measured doses, there was only instinct guiding Prey's hoof.

Every trick, every stolen technique from Snake, he would try them all. Prey was going to save Gloom. The world couldn't take him, Prey wasn't done with Gloom yet.

"You're only done when I say you're done!"

Gloom and Crimson, the world couldn't have them, they were *his*. The world didn't get to steal from him anymore.

'Nobody steals from a Stormcrow, yez'?' Garrow cackled in the deafening thunder. The rain pounded the train car, and outside, the storm threatened to break in and kill them all, not just Gloom, at any second.

Gloom was not stabilised.

He was still fading, the stitches, the bandages, and Prey's poisons nonwithstanding. He was just fading slower now.

But Prey had done all he reasonably could. His body ached, his muscles trembled, his throat was raw, and his entire body shook every few seconds from exhaustion. He could do no more. All that was left now were the unreasonable options.

Bo-oo-om The train car physically shook. Nails were slowly working their way a little bit further out of the wet, filthy planks every time. Prey's head and ears hurt with each and every thunder clap.

Gloom was fading, but slow enough that maybe, maybe he'd make it through the night and to the morning. Prey was exhausted, sweating, he'd already worked so hard. And Crimson kept asking how Gloom was doing.

Prey hadn't answered him yet. Nimbus, Inky, and Bravo of course

all had, repeatedly telling Crimson that Gloom would pull through, assuring him, promising him.

Crimson ignored their assurances every time, he didn't want their lies! He wanted the truth from Prey's mouth. And Prey wasn't answering him.

"Prey-gha! Gloom, how is Gloom?" Crimson forced out while Prey pushed the needle and thread through again. No answer. It was too loud to hear the question. Or loud enough to pretend not to hear, at least.

"Prey, Gloom. Is Gloom going to survive?" Prey made him lay his head back down, and didn't answer.

"Will he survive, Prey? Will he?" Prey wiped sweat out of his eyes, and avoided Crimson's gaze.

"Prey, please. Tell me. Tell me the answer."

Again and again. Tell me, tell me, tell me. Tell me Prey. Please tell me what I want to hear.

Finally, Prey had to stop. There were no more preventative measures left for him to take. He had to stop and rest.

He collapsed onto his front, heedless of the filthy boards resting under his chin and his trailing ears. His chest heaved as if he'd been running for miles. Crimson lay to his left, and Gloom to his right. Prey blinked his eyes clear, and stared in the flickering light at Gloom's unmoving form.

There was nothing more he could reasonably do. He could only react to any further complications as they came up now. And be ready to do those unreasonable things if needed.

Crimson shuffled closer in the dark car, trying not to aggravate his stitched wounds. His wing was bound tightly to his side in bandages, and the rest of his armour had been removed. His fur was as red as his name again. As dark red as the dried liquid sticking to Prey's hooves and wool.

"Prey, tell me. Tell me. Gloom. Will he survive?"

His words were utterly lost under the roaring thunder and pounding rain. You could barely hear yourself think in here, not helped by the fear stifling the air. But Prey knew what Crimson was asking, he could see well enough to see his mouth moving.

Prey couldn't pretend not to hear any longer. "I don't know."

Crimson read his lips, he could see in the dark. Crimson's face didn't change.

'He was expecting that answer.' Prey tiredly realised.

__CRASH__ Boom. *Rattle*.

Crimson painfully inched his way closer still.

Nimbus and his two subordinates were sitting together in a huddle against the opposite wall, pressed together and surrounding the lone storm lantern.

The three pegasi were only three yards away, but separated by the deafening noise, they might as well have been thirty. Powerlessness in the face of the storm pressed down upon them and paralysed their hooves. Prey would have to shout to gain their attention.

Crimson shuffled even closer still. He was close enough to reach out and touch Prey, but didn't. He just shuffled closer, bringing his head towards Prey's. Only a few inches separated them as they lay on the filthy floor, but it was finally close enough to speak and be heard by each other.

Prey made himself stay still and not roll away. Besides, he was too tired, and how could his weakness and fear compare when Gloom was laying over there, barely breathing at all?

Prey could move. He could move away at any time. Crimson wasn't going to touch him, that was what was important. And that Gloom was fading. The most important.

"What are we going to do?"

What was Prey supposed to say? 'We'll get through this?', 'Somebody will come?', 'The storm will end?'

"I don't know." He answered again.

It seemed that wasn't what Crimson meant, "No, what are *we* going to do?"

Prey could literally feel Crimson's harsh, ragged exhale on his cheek fur, "Oh." Then, "Whatever we can do."

"What, I mean, what *can* we do?"

A trickle of dirty water was rapidly worming its way down the gap between two floorboards, towards Prey's muzzle. He didn't have the energy to move.

"I've done all I can do. For now. Unless he gets worse. If he starts failing again, then, then..."

The trickle of dirty water reached Prey's chin, and began soaking into his fur. He barely noticed. There were a dozen more trickles and puddles spreading across the boards, not just flowing down the train car's slimy walls and out the door and joints. The train car was slowly breaking more and more.

The storm was destroying their shelter. Slowly, as the car was holding together unnaturally well, but it was still breaking. The deafening noise and fury outside felt so distant and unimportant though. Because of Gloom. What was the destruction Clan Myrrdon had inflicted for their insane prophecy compared to that? Or Crimson's wounded wing which might cripple his flight?

"Then... what? What is it you're talking about Prey?" Crimson asked slowly.

"Something. If Gloom starts to fail again, then I'll..."

"Then you'll do what?"

"Then I'll do something." Prey evaded, the cold trickle creeping beneath his chin and into more of his fur and wool.

"No, that's wrong. I said it wrong. I meant, what'll *we* do?"

Crimson was prepared to do whatever it took. Not just in word, but he would back it up with deeds. Just like a true thestral. Prey couldn't hear all the subtle tones of desperation in Crimson's question. But why would he need to, when he could taste them sitting in the back of his own raw throat?

"I... know some methods. Bad things." Prey's eyes rested on the three Border Rangers, even though they couldn't hear a word, "Things like with Mayflower."

"Ahh," Again the pained exhale blew on Prey's cheek. He smelt blood. "Methods like from Mayflower."

A pause.

"What will you need?" Crimson asked.

And just like that, he sunk to Prey's level beneath the black ice.

Prey had lied, and deflected, and always misdirected them whenever they got anywhere even close to the topic of what he knew, like the bone rot mines, and Crimson and Gloom had never pressed too hard. They'd known they didn't really want the answers that badly. Prey's whole life was based on secrecy. He lied as often as he breathed.

It didn't matter, not now. Prey told the straight, vile truth without even thinking, "A life. A fresh body. And enough blood."

"A life? Whose?" Crimson croaked.

"Not yours, don't even think about it. It doesn't matter. I'll find someone if it comes to that." And then, because he didn't want any ambiguity left, needed to make it crystal clear, clarified; "Murder."

Crimson inhaled, but he didn't speak. Out of the corner of his eye Prey saw him looking at the three Royal Guards.

"They won't tell anybody." Prey said.

"They'll have to die too?" Crimson's voice wobbled like a foal's.

"No no, I only said, they won't tell anybody. That's all. Don't worry. I said I'd deal with it."

"I.. I'll help. It's not fair. I am part of this. I will do it too."

Prey didn't say, 'You won't remember it either.' Because he didn't know if that was true. Would he erase Crimson's memory? Again? Maybe. He didn't know, and right now it wasn't important.

"Don't worry about it," He said instead, "It may not come to that."

Prey saw Crimson's throat work in a swallow, "My feather, your gift. Could it...?"

Prey jerkily shook his head, regret stiffening his neck, "No. It's attuned to your passive magic now. But even if we could-no. It wouldn't work. Can't, it can't heal. Can't stop bleeding. Its passive effects are too spread out."

Crimson had known that. He'd already known the answer he was going to hear. Still he'd hopelessly reached for another option which wasn't there.

It wasn't fair. Why hadn't he made a gift for Gloom too? One which could stop crossbow bolts. Why hadn't he done that, why hadn't he thought ahead?

If Prey had his runic arrays from his lair, if he hadn't been sent out to the middle of nowhere, if only he'd been back in Canterlot. With his arrays, saving Gloom's life would've been trivial. But Luna, in her infinite lack of wisdom and her infinite selfishness, had sent them away from safety yet again.

*Rum**mMBLE** **Krack**

'-.....who... who's there?... kicking on the door?-'

Gloom. Prey jerked upright. His shaking hooves slipped from under him on the slimy, stinking boards. He fell on his side, didn't care, just trying to twist to face Gloom.

But twisting so suddenly like that pulled aching muscles in his back. The old whip scars flared. A streak of fiery cramp twisted his skin with a pair of red hot tongs.

'NOT. *NOW*!'

But pain doesn't care. It's pain, and it hurts. Prey was so incensed with anger at the dead Stinger he went blind for a second. His back twisted up on him in betrayal.

"G-gha!"

"Prey-?"

*THR*OoO*Mm!*

The walls shook. Crimson tried to move or raise the alarm. Prey spat and cursed, and clawed over towards-!

Gloom's half-conscious mind stirred again, '-hurts... can't breathe. Hurts. Need more air. It hurts-'

'Hate you Stinger!'

Prey made it to Gloom's side, "Gloom! You're hurt. Don't try to move!" He shouted in Gloom's limp ear.

Thunder drowned out Crimson trying to ask if Gloom was conscious. Cramp rippled up and down Prey's spine. Hate and desperation. 'Hate you Stinger.'

He shouted again, Gloom *had* to remain still. "Don't move! Your stitching-just don't move! Can you hear me? Don't move!"

Gloom was on his front, tilted on his right side and propped up with Prey's backpack, keeping him off his wounds and punctured lung. If he suddenly rolled over, he could kill himself before Prey could do anything!

Cramp burning up his back, spreading water soaking the floor. Prey could only half wrench his mind around enough to listen to the faint thoughts coming from Gloom.

'-know him, who-? Hurts. Side, hurts. Hurt- hurt, can't breathe. Can't see. Am I blind? Prey. Prey's here. Stop it hurting-'

"I can't stop it hurting. You've been shot! Do you remember? Clan Myrrdon! The storm has hit. I patched you up. But don't move! You could die if you move!"

'-pain. Move? Should move?-'

"No! I said don't move!"

'-no don't move. Prey? Why does it hurt? Am I dying? It hurts too much. Prey, where, I don't, why can't, where's, pain...?-'

Prey made himself shout again, drawing in a big lungful of air which hurt to force out of his raw throat, "You've got your eyes closed. You're not blind! Understand? Not. Blind! I'm sorry, I, I don't have anything for the pain. Just hold on. Stay with us. Help is coming."

A hoof brushed the wool of Prey's shoulder.

He twisted with a snarl, and his back flared with hot nails.

"Wh-haAT! D-don't touch-*You*! Sod off and die." Prey spat at Nimbus Feather, his own golden banded forehoof raising to either fend off another touch or kill the pegasus, he didn't know which.

"He can't hear you!" Nimbus shouted above the storm, "You need to calm down! He can't hear you."

Ignorance! Or was it just arrogance? Prey was a hundred miles beyond caring that nobody else understood that only he could hear Gloom's struggling mind.

Through cramp pain, gritted jaw, and murderous black fury, Prey shrilly managed, "L-Leave! Me! Alone!"

"Gloom can't hear you. Leave him to rest, there's nothing more to be done!"

Always, *always* the pony had to push and couldn't listen.

"Leave. Us. *Alone*! Or else."

Finally, *finally* the stallion backed off, "Fine then!" He shouted at Prey.

'-it's just grief talking-', Nimbus seethed internally, stomping back across the slippery puddles to Inky and Bravo.

Prey didn't waste one breath more looking after or thinking on the departing pegasus. Gloom, he was all that mattered. And Crimson, who in the intervening seconds had dragged himself closer with feverish energy.

"What-"

__Crash__

"-he awake?"

"Yes, but barely! He mustn't move. Don't let him move!" Prey shouted back, eyes fixed on Gloom for the first sign that he might be about to start rolling.

As sudden as the cramp attack had come, the cramp began fading away. It was nothing compared to the pain that Gloom must be in right now. That Crimson must be in, every move jarring his wing.

'-where am I? Hurt, it keeps hurting. Stop, please. Can't get enough air-'

"We're inside a train carriage! The storm's hit outside. Just hold on. You've got a leaking lung. Do you understand?"

'-lung, hurt. Blood, can't breathe? Want to breathe-'

"Don't panic, just keep slowly breathing like you are. You'll survive! Do you hear me? You're going to survive this. Don't panic, and don't give up."

"I can't hear him," Crimson's voice was rife with alarm, "Is he speaking? Why can't I hear him Prey?"

The rain hammered away, the puddles on the slimy floor ever growing as Prey rapidly shook his head. "No, listen, Gloom's not- He's not speaking. Don't- just listen to me, only I can hear him."

"What? I don't-"

"Inside! Inside his head! Inside *my* head."

'-noise, so loud. The storm, Prey just said, the storm. Where's, where's the storm?-'

"The storm's outside! We're in shelter. For now." Then he twisted to shout beside Crimson's ear:

"He's drifting in and out. He's not fully conscious!"

"But he can hear us?"

"Yes. Sorta'!"

That was all the confirmation Crimson needed. He shoved forwards to be beside Gloom's head, "Gloom, sir. It's me, Crimson! Can you hear me? Prey, can he hear me?"

'-Prey, Crimson. Crimson's here too. My Night Guards. My squad. Storm, pain, need air-'

"Yes! Keep talking, keep distracting him." Prey ducked in closer, straining his eyes to check Gloom's wounds yet again, searching for any change. The frantic burning need to do something to help.

"I'm sorry sir. I'm sorry! They were aiming for me. Clan Myrrdon, they were after me."

'-...Myrrdon. Who're they? Clan... Clan like Cilldara. Myrrdon, they shot me!-'

"He knows it was Myrrdon. He doesn't blame you." Prey related over the thunder and rain. Then to Gloom; "You're going to live! Me and Crimson are going to make sure. Whatever it takes!"

'-voice... Voice, who is? Prey. I remember, it's Prey. Hurts. Can heal

me? Then why haven't they healed me?-'

"We *will* heal you. We just need to-" Prey sucked in a sharp breath as he again saw the bandaged wound in Gloom's side. Cold pins and needles ran up and down his so recently abused spine.

The thick bandage and padding was soaked through. Fat red drops were dripping off even as Prey stared. Something had gone wrong. A shift, a clot internally breaking open, it didn't matter the reason, only the outcome.

"Zoma'Grika. Crimson, Crimson we need to act now! Unless we start the ritual now, it's going to be too late to begin!"

'-too late? What's... hurts. Why haven't you made it stop hurting Prey? It hurts-'

Crimson started, and then finally realised the terrible truth of what Prey was saying. His lips moved in the dim light, and Prey read the words that didn't come out, "Now? It's happening now? We have to sacrifice someone now?"

'-...Crimson, anypony. Prey? Can't breathe. So heavy. Please help me. Please, I can't...-'

"We have to start the ritual now." Prey confirmed. He was already thinking, planning ahead. They needed a body. His eyes flicked to Nimbus and his two cronies. One of them would do. There were bodies outside, but leaving the train car would mean getting swept away in the storm, and how would he physically even get someone back inside?

"Nimbus, Inky, or Bravo!" Prey shouted over the thunder, looking Crimson right in the eye, "One of them. I need one of them!"

Crimson's face was horrified. Horrified at Prey, at himself, at what he was about to do. He heaved once, just once, and swallowed. His ears were plastered back, "You... are telling me to pick?"

__Bang__ Something in the wind outside smashed into the side of train car. Prey saw the wall judder inwards.

"One of them! I, I will knock them unconscious. I have a way! But I'm not strong enough to move them. You need to hold, you need to drag one of them over for me!" Prey shouted.

Only three yards away, the pegasi trio were completely deaf to what was being said, their attention fixed on the shuddering walls and water streaming in under the bending roof.

"Then-", Crimson convulsed, "-Then Inky. She, Luna help me, but she's the lightest."

BooOM!

'-what talking about...? Inky, she's, she's.... going to? Prey, are you going to murder her?!-'

The thought was stronger, a brief surge of clarity in Gloom's jumbled thoughts. One directed right at Prey. Gloom was talking directly to Prey. His closed eyelids twitching, his laboured chest shuddering as for just a moment, he regained painful consciousness, although not the strength to move.

"Don't move Gloom! Please, don't move. Stay still. Don't worry, we're going to fix you."

'-no! No Prey, no don't murder her! Don't, please, it hurts, but just don't-', Gloom knew, somehow he knew exactly what Prey was going to do.

"I know it hurts. I'm sorry, but I, but we're going to fix you!" Prey started pulling away from Gloom, reaching up to untie his ribbon.

"*nn...Nngh*NO. No." The single word gurgled out of Gloom's mouth. The word came with red spittle dribbling over his lips, "Nnno."

"Shh shh. Don't move. Don't worry Gloom, I'm going to fix you!" Prey's mouth twisted up into a bitter rictus, and he spat out the same words Luna had comforted that useless dying pink mare with, "This will be naught but a bad dream."

Prey turned, looking to his target. Inky was huddled in between Bravo and Nimbus. Prey's eyes fixed on a point on her neck, under

her helmet strap. The best place to cut if you wanted them to bleed out. Blood magic, and black magic, Prey was planning to use a combination of the two.

'-no, no, no! Don't do it Prey! I have a right to choose, don't! This is my life. Don't murder anypony-'

Prey flinched at the thoughts he heard behind him. If it had only been words, then he wouldn't have had to hear them over the deafening storm. But he was a mind leech, so he heard all of Gloom's frantic thoughts.

'-my life, my choice. Prey, Prey? I choose no. I'd, I won't, don't-'

Prey hunched his shoulders, not wanting to listen.

'-my choice, Prey, my choice. My path, I… talent, my path is, is...-'

"Prey? Prey?" Crimson was calling out to him over the storms' din. Hooves feeling like lead, Prey slowly turned himself around. "Prey, what, what's Gloom saying?"

Prey was shocked when the answer came out of him, because it was the truth instead of the lie he'd meant to say, "He doesn't want us to do this. He's saying, 'my life, my choice'."

A deafening thunder clap shook the train car, almost driving Prey to his hooves. His ears and lungs vibrated with the force. And still he could unwillingly hear Gloom's hazy mind.

'-please don't Prey, Crimson. It's my path to walk... path, my path. What path? Pain, path... there's a path...-'

The thestral's thoughts were slipping away again, spiralling back down into pain and blood loss.

Why should Prey have to listen to what Gloom wanted? Prey should do what he wanted, and damn the consequences. That was the vile beauty of being a mind leech. Afterwards, nobody would ever know what he'd done. They'd all believe that Inky somehow died in the storm.

'Screw you Gloom. Utterly Zoma'Grika you. Your life, your choice? No. I'm not giving you the choice.'

Like Breaker, and now like Gloom. Look what Prey had done for his deceived and tricked brother. He hadn't been thanked, and he would never be thanked. Who cared? Life wasn't fair. It took and took and took, and never gave back. Well, now Prey was taking something back for himself.

The world takes, and life isn't fair.

Silence. Not outside, but sudden silence in Prey's head.

Prey stopped. He turned, just his head.

Prey inhaled, "Nonooono No No you don't NoNo I said No!"

He was there at Gloom's side without conscious movement. Gloom's chest had stopped moving. He wasn't breathing anymore.

The world takes, and life isn't fair.

"Help. *Help*! Nimbus Feather, Crimson! Help! He's stopped breathing."

Crimson was there, bandages stained red from his own wounds, face ashen grey with pain, but still there in an instant. Nimbus surged upright onto his own hooves.

Thudding, thudding in Prey's head, in his chest. Heartbeat, had to keep Gloom's heart beating!

Prey couldn't hear the words Nimbus shouted, "What do I do?"

"CPR CPR! Start CPR!" Prey shouted, he *knew* he shouted. He didn't hear it. Gloom's scarred chest wasn't going up and down like it was supposed to!

Prey didn't have the strength to perform CPR. He was a runt. He was too small, too weak.

"Start it! Breathe for him! Then chest compressions."

"His wounds-!"

"Lost blood-"

Crimson was there. He rolled Gloom onto his back, heedless of the damage he did, his hooves sought out the right place on Gloom's ribs. Wounded wing jarring with every movement, Crimson began pushing down, hard and fast, one, two three, four! He pushed Gloom's bloody mouth open, fangs getting in the way, and blew air into Gloom's lungs. *Lung.* And one collapsed, flooded lung.

Prey couldn't hear himself, but he somehow still heard the rattling gurgle beneath the thunder. It was the most horrible sound in the world.

This wasn't right, this wasn't happening. Gloom wasn't breathing. How dare he stop breathing?

Prey's whole body was filled with burning ice water. He couldn't breathe, only able to gasp in time with Gloom's forced breaths of air. One, two, three, four! Blow. One, two, three, four! Blow.

Weak. Runt. Useless! As useless as Nimbus! As useless as Bravo and Inky! As useless as the cowards who couldn't face breathing into Gloom's bloody mouth! They were hovering, mentally repulsed and trying to psych themselves up.

Crimson was already flagging, pain and injury making his hooves tremble.

Prey screamed at Nimbus, at the useless meat puppets, "Help! Don't just stand there, help us! Push, take over from Crimson! Push, Crimson can breathe if you're too chicken, you just push! *Don't* just stand there, *help*!"

One, two, three, four! Blow.

Thunder, rain, *Boom* Crackle. Puddles, filth, blood, pain, fear, slime, stink.

One, two, three, four. Then blow. Repeat.

Rattling, storm shaking. The poison scars under Gloom's eyes, why weren't his eyes opening again? Why weren't his tufted ears perking?

One, two, three, four! Blow. One, two, three, four! Blow.

Prey wanted to see the yellow of those familiar slitted eyes, wanted Gloom to suddenly cough and start convulsing in a bloody fit, because that would at least mean he was alive.

One, two, three, four, and blow. Nimbus grunted, already sweating. Bravo took over, shoving in to take the other stallion's place. They couldn't afford to miss even one beat.

One beat. Prey wanted just one beat of the heart under that puckered chest scar.

One, two, three, four!

Prey's head was swimming. His eyes were swimming. 'Cry-baby.' Didn't matter. Gloom mattered!

A flooded lung mattered. A lung getting hammered over and over again as the ribs were cracked from the force and crushed down onto it.

The three crossbow bolt wounds mattered, the wounds that were being torn back open again.

Blood loss mattered, it was blood which couldn't be replaced, and now it was too late for Prey to enact the planned dark ritual.

One, two, three, four.

One, two, three, four.

One, two, three, four.

One, two, three, four.

One, two, three, four.

One, two, three, four.

One. Two. Three. Four.

It. Was. Not. Working.

The realisation settled over Prey like a blanket of frozen ash, the cold soaking right through into his bones. This wasn't going to work.

Ash filling his throat, stifling his tongue. Grey settling over his eyes, stealing away his sight. Flakes pilling up in silent drifts around his legs, cementing his hooves in place.

It was the moment that the world reached out with unfeeling claws and took everything once again.

Prey moved. He fumblingly reached out one hoof. Crimson and the others were crowded around Gloom's head, pounding on his chest, shouting, breathing, taking up space. Prey couldn't be up there, there wasn't room. He was standing down by Gloom's hind hooves, feeling so very cold and so very small.

Prey reached out with a shaking hoof and touched Gloom's much larger one, and then *reached* out further beyond the physical.

Brutally smash the proverbial egg with a hammer. Carefully crack open and cook the egg. Or last of all, eat the raw egg whole, jagged shell and all.

A trite metaphor for absorbing a mind. A mere nod towards the indescribable pain the process entailed. No more than a shrug and cheeky grin about the sundering agony that no one else could ever understand. Absorbing a mind was...

First had been Snake by accident. Then a nameless Border Guard, successfully purged. Most recently, Garrow. And latest of all, what little he could snatch back from the abyss Gloom's mind fell into.

Just bits from a dying mind, one already falling to pieces and those

same pieces fading into nothing before he could touch them.

Prey didn't take in Gloom's whole mind. He couldn't. He couldn't survive that, couldn't survive holding half a mind, or even a tenth. There wasn't space, there wasn't time, it hurt so much and Prey would die. But even if he had tried, or tried and died in the attempt, he couldn't have held Gloom's entire mind. Because by then there was so little left of it to grab.

In the end, out of an entire lifetime, all Prey managed to retain was roughly the last two months of memory of the person who was Gloom. Had been Gloom. Was *still* Gloom. Might still be Gloom.

The bitterness of failure. The terrible certainty that you were deceiving yourself. That what he had wasn't really Gloom, just a grey copy. Desperately Prey clung to it anyways.

The warlock Hard Baked hadn't believed in souls, but Prey did. He didn't know where they hid, or what they were made from, but he knew souls existed.

And what is a person, but their memories and experiences? That was what Prey clung to with blind denial of any other possibility. Because if it was true, then maybe, *maybe*-!

Were the scraps of salvaged memory really Gloom? Could they really contain something so fleeting as a soul? Through the blinding pain of his warping mindscape, it was Prey's last ragged hope. Every decision and new memory coached in and guided by the knowledge of all before, an echo of an echo…

---<O>---

First Sargent Dusky Gloom was declared deceased as of the 6th of the month, at twelve o'clock. That was the closest estimate they could reach. With the storm, it wasn't like anypony had been keeping accurate time.

It was a full further hour after the declared time that Crimson, the last out of the exhausted adults, had finally ceased attempting CPR and collapsed.

The exact moment wasn't, what with the desperation, noise, and failing light, but Prey had fallen unconscious at some point during that frantic hour too. It was put down to the exhaustion of having run over four miles previously all the way from the Weather Tower, along with the general fatigue and grief caused by the storm and Gloom's death. Prey had seemingly just curled up in a corner of the train car stinking of rotten pondweed, and shut down.

It was even mostly the truth.

Who was declaring and deciding this truth though?

It was Captain Nighthawk, and the reinforcements he brought the next day. They arrived to the devastation of what had once been Haven Hay.

Too little, too late again. The useless bucking Captain was too late to do anything useful. Again.

It should have been Nighthawk wrapped up in that repurposed bloodstained travel cloak, not Gloom. This was all Nighthawk's fault, his and Luna's. Prey hated Luna so very, very, much through the grey haze of fog in his head.

The Captain's arrival only came the next day however. Before then, the terrible storm tore the land apart for a full nineteen hours before finally settling into a heavy, but normal, non-life-threatening rain. Nineteen hours spent huddling in the train car until the lightning and lethal winds finally finished.

Half of their train car had collapsed by then. Literally, it slowly collapsed in on them inside, as they had to move further and further back as the roof bowed in and boards were ripped off one by one in turn.

They were soaked, they were filthy, they were frozen. Stumbling outside into the rain, barely able to painfully move unresponsive limbs, you could turn around and look at what was left of the outside of the car. Every inch of paint had been stripped, like with giant sheets of sandpaper, and the boards were deeply studded with sand, splinters, and even rocks. What that would have done to

exposed flesh if caught out in the open...

Well, nobody had to rely on just their imagination. Because Gloom's death was just one of many.

Later, this would be deemed the worst massacre in Equestrian history for six hundred years. Because this had been murder, not a natural disaster. Clan Myrrdon had assembled the storm, and let it loose.

The Haven's Lament Massacre.

'What about the villagers? What about all that happened in the Deeper Green? What about those massacres?'

But those weren't counted. They hadn't been inside Equestria proper, only out on the border. The stunned horror of Equestria over actual pony deaths just wasn't the same.

A small pile of dark bodies floating in a dip filled with filthy water. The rain continuing to beat down on the sodden, unmoving ponies. One of them slumped forwards right on the edge, as if just sitting in the hole, but their lowered face was submerged under the muddy water. Like he'd just lost the strength to keep his head up any longer. Chunks of sodden mane and fur and skin were missing, ripped out in the extreme winds by debris. With rain plinking off his helmet, a pale-faced Night Guard was futilely trying to preserve any respect for the dead he could, as he tried to get the stiff bodies out of the muddy water.

One. That was just one of the many pathetic examples.

The port town of Haven Hay itself was ruined. There was nowhere left habitable. Rubble, shattered rooves, and collapsed timber were strewn over every street. The massive harbour walls had broken in half. The lighthouse was reduced down to mere foundations. The dry docks were simply gone, as were the boats and the half-sunken ship, whether swept far out to sea or dragged down into the depths

of the Boiling Bay, nobody knew.

A mother who'd died huddled over her already-dead offspring. The sodden, mangy foal's body looked like a drowned rat. Death is not pretty, it's not clean, and there is no respect. A thick splinter of wood had been driven right through the mare, in through one side of her barrel and protruding gruesomely out the other. There were a score of smaller splinters and bits nailed into her back. One hung out of her ripped-open cheek, the string of flesh swaying in the falling rain.

The survivors wailed and cried, threw themselves on the Night Guards and begged for help, or drew back in fresh dread at the new thestrals. They were all far beyond their limit, exhausted, not thinking straight, and all they saw in that moment were the fanged vamponies from the tales. And worst of all were the townsfolk who did not move, and just lay still and stared brokenly.

Prey didn't care about the survivors, or about their grief and losses. Why would he care about theirs, when he had his own? It was right that Haven Hay was no more, it was right that the people had died. Gloom was gone. It was only fair that the people he'd been trying to protect died too.

Injuries. There were so many injuries. While most ponies who'd survived were not mortally injured, it was only because of the process of elimination. In the awful savagery of the storm, those who had been caught by debris, or alone to bear the full brunt of the wind, or had been hit by the lightning, after nineteen hours did not survive to be 'injured'. They were dead by now. But there were still injuries aplenty spread across nearly every single survivor.

Shock, and near hypothermia were only the most common behind sand embedded through half-flayed skin and burst ear drums, the latter caused by the point-blank proximity of the thunder claps.

Prey stared blearily, hardly feeling the shivers of cold racking his body, or the hunger gnawing his belly.

Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. The Night Guard reinforcements kept saying the damned word. Nighthawk was sorry, Screech was sorry, Vivid Edge was sorry. They should be sorry, because they hadn't been here when it mattered. That tightness in their wings, the hitch in their every word as they gave orders to try to help the survivors? Good. Let them know even just a tiny fraction of what this felt like. What failure felt like.

They hadn't been here, they hadn't helped. Again and again and again. The Night Guard had failed him and Crimson again. Their every worthless 'sorry' only further incensed Prey.

Two-thousand six-hundred and fourteen. That was the number of dead townsfolk. And that was only the last time Prey had overheard the grim number being quietly reported to Nighthawk. By now, the figure was no doubt already higher. New bodies kept being found, one here, one there, or someone finally succumbing to the cold and injuries suffered. Out of a town whose population had been only a bit under ten-thousand, it was a lot. And the number was only going up.

Like when another body was found so covered in mud, that at first, it had been missed. Until someone stepped in the mud and it shifted *wrongly*. Or the broken corpse of a foal not even old enough to have earned a cutie mark, so mangled that their gender couldn't be told at first, their body folded back on itself over a snapped spine. And just like that, the count had to be adjusted upwards yet again.

The Night Guards and the additional help they'd brought from the Palace staff were trying to cope. They erected hasty tents, started fires with fuel they'd brought, tried to get as many ponies under cover and warmed up as possible.

Prey sat wrapped in a scratchy, oversized blanket. Someone had

hastily given him a cup of hot soup, before moving on to help the next poor desperate.

Crimson had been taken to the medical line, to get his wounds properly seen to and disinfected. Prey stared out from under the makeshift tent-tarp, watching without truly seeing the heavy but nonlethal rainfall. He could even hear the sea's waves again, now not deafened by thunder. Despite that and the rain, the shouting, even the crying, it was too quiet. Nothing could be loud anymore when compared to the howling fury of the storm.

Prey checked the cup of soup for poison. A Night Guard tried to check him over. Prey told them to go away. After the fifth time telling them to, they finally did.

He sat there. It didn't feel like everything was falling apart, because it had all broken a long, long time ago. He'd simply fooled himself that the pieces had been put back together. This was just the realisation he'd been living in the afterwards all along.

Prey eventually also realised he was sitting here alone.

Why was he sitting here, and not beside Crimson? Crimson needed to be properly helped, but somehow in the grey fog of exhaustion, both of them had let other people separate and direct them without even noticing.

Prey tipped his head back and chugged the hot soup down in one go. He burnt his mouth and throat. He dropped the empty cup on the ground, and shrugged off the blanket. He slipped away towards the makeshift emergency medical tents to find Crimson.

The train station buildings, which so many ponies had packed themselves into, was so far the largest single killer, or at least the biggest number of desperate ponies killed in one go.

It had half caved in, crushing the ponies packed like crates inside. Looking at the ruined building from the outside, one had to wonder how *more* weren't killed in the collapse. Everything was ruined.

The remains of the train station was the highest point of Haven Hay. Standing up there you only had to turn and look, and even through the rain you'd see only remnants left of what had literally been an inhabited and living town just one day ago. It didn't seem possible, didn't make sense, it was too large, but the storm had destroyed, crushed, blown away, or simply flattened it all. It was just so... desolate, to look down upon now.

The world was wrong. Everything was broken. Prey found Crimson crying.

He'd been moved to the wounded train car, one of the carriages the Night Guards and reinforcements had arrived on. The worst of the injured who could yet be moved were being loaded on one by one, as they were assessed and given what hasty treatment they could manage. The train was going to be sent back to Canterlot just as soon as the worst hurt could be prioritised to and loaded tightly. Prey and Crimson had already been told they were going to be among that number.

There wasn't anywhere for the train engine to turn around, not anymore. It was simply going to have to reverse and push the carriages back along the tracks for hours until it finally got to a station where it could correct its orientation, and only then accelerate back up to full speed.

With great effort, Prey had forced his legs to carry him up the laid-out ramp and into the carriage.

What had been cramped seating with lots of space for packs and bags on the Night Guard’s trip here, was now in the process of being turned into as much of an emergency field hospital as possible. There were already horribly groaning, crying, wailing, whimpering, or frighteningly quiet ponies laid out wherever space could be found, with whatever could be grabbed and used as an excuse for bedding.

The air was already rank with the stink of fear, sweat, vomit, piss, and blood. Not rotting pondweed, but everything else Prey had

already experienced over the last twenty hours.

That was where Prey found Crimson, looking so much smaller slumped against the wall and without his armour on. He had his whole head hidden in the crook of his one good wing.

And he was crying.

And that was so very wrong. Prey was the crybaby, not Crimson. Crimson had not cried, not even once through all the disasters Prey had known his friend. Not even from pain.

It was humiliating, to be surrounded by people crying out of agony, and that someone might mistake Crimson's tears as being for same reason.

It burned Prey for a reason he couldn't even begin to put into words. He was used to the screaming of the wounded. Or he could shut it out and hide from it at least.

But Crimson was crying. And there was nothing he could do about it. Crimson’s mental walls cracked, leaking things. Prey blotted it out, he didn't want to know what lay beyond. Not now.

His eyes started stinging, and then Prey was crying too.

Sniffling and biting his lip, Prey limped hesitantly over, and then just abandoned caution and slumped onto the floor beside Crimson.

With a sharp, blubbery inhale Crimson's head jerked out of his unkempt feathers. That too was so very wrong, because Crimson's wings were never unpreened.

Looking past the natural red of his fur, the poison burn scars were as red and inflamed as Crimson's eyes were. His face and ears told the story of despair, yet the burning set deep in his yellow eyes gave voice to the sheer hate he could not express.

On the floorboards between his front hooves, there was a small nugget of metal. It had a fleck of blood on it. Prey realised it was Gloom's clan earring stud.

Prey averted his swimming eyes to the floor in shame.

"T-they just... took him. They tried to murder me, murdered Gloom, murdered my father. Like it meant nothing! Pretending they didn't have a choice…" Crimson finally choked out.

It rang true as a carillon bell. That someone just decided to *take* what they had.

'The strong take, and the weak suffer.'

In Prey's own chest, the smouldering coals of fury began to build and burn away the blanket of grey ash. He'd been too stunned, but now the feeling was truly coming.

"The strong always take. Take take take. It's always *take*. Never give. The greedy landlords, Snake, Fire Strike, them, the Guard, all of them. They're so damned proud of their ability to take." Prey spat. He slashed a hoof through the air wildly.

"They think, they just think, because they're strong, because they can pick up a sword and stab, that they can just take! That they can rule the world with magic. All they care about is their ability to take."

He hiccupped, "What's strong about that? It's so easy to kill someone, so damned easy. Poke a hole in the bag of meat, and they die. They don't know how hard it is to save a life instead. Won't even try. They don't c-care, they just..."

"Just *take*." Crimson finished his words with a hiss of loathing so strong it curdled on the tongue.

Prey slumped even lower, drooping ears dragging on the boards, "I, I take. I took. I did it too. The diamond dogs, they didn't deserve- The changelings! I don't feel guilty, they wouldn't leave me alone! They had it coming, I *don't* feel guilty, I, I, I... I'm guilty. I hate them, I hate me. I hate this, this Prey."

Crimson didn't know what he was talking about. It didn't matter what he was confessing in his rambling. It didn't matter, it was just the two of them left now. The two prisoners taken by Luna. What

was going to happen to them now?

"I hate them. They took Gloom, m-my father, everything. I want, I want to-*take-from-them*." Crimson held it together until the last few words. But there his voice cracked and the ugly sobs started wracking his chest like a cough he couldn't hold in.

Crimson broke down and reached out in desperation with both his one unbound wing and his forehooves towards Prey.

A plea for comfort as the world he'd rebuilt came crashing down again around the still so young stallion.

And like the ungrateful selfish bastard that he was, Prey shied back from the desperate plea for a hug.

"Please?" Crimson choked out.

Prey was the lowest of the low. Lower than the mud and filth. He couldn't even look at Crimson, "I can't. I'm so, so sorry. But I can't."

Even now, even now after everything, he couldn't give away even this one piece of himself to comfort Crimson? 'I hate Prey.'

"Please? F-for me? Just... just this once please?"

"There's only two things..." Prey managed to mumble, throat dry with shame, "...Only the two things I won't do for you, Crimson."

Crimson drew back in on himself in betrayal, re-covered his head, and cried.

"A-ask me for anything. Anything else. J-just, you just have to ask." Prey tried. His joint plea and excuse fell on deaf ears. 'I hate Luna. I hate the world.'

'I hate Prey.'

Why the bucking, Zoma'Grika, hungry, Wolfing-Wood-hells couldn't he say yes, just this once?

Crimson sobbed under his folded wing. Prey cried off to the side,

separated by a space that was no one’s fault but his own, filled with self-loathing and shame. He couldn't tell Crimson of his one last, desperate and threadbare hope over the piece of Gloom's mind he'd salvaged. Because he couldn't bear to crush Crimson when it failed. It might honestly break Crimson, just like he'd broken when Luna had shown him his heart’s greatest desire and then denied it to him in the same breath.

Hope is such a cruel, cruel thing, and Prey hated it more in that moment than even Clan Myrrdon, because his hope was just a tiny sliver of a chance, and it was going to hurt him all the worse when he failed to make it materialize, despite already knowing the infinitesimal chance of success.

The wounded wailed, begged and also cried around them in the train car. Night Guards rushed more ponies aboard on makeshift stretchers.

Three bedraggled ponies shuffled up the plank, heads and wings hanging. The surviving Border Rangers shamefully picked their way through the wounded, cringing at every wail and cry until they managed to squash in opposite Prey and Crimson.

Inky, Bravo, and Nimbus. This was so similar to the reversal of attitudes which had come with Scenic and Lilly after surviving the horror of Mayflower. Almost exactly the same. A re-enactment.

'The world is mocking me.'

"I am sorry for your loss." Nimbus said in a dull voice.

Prey hated him, that the stallion could shake free of his own grief over Trail Blazer long enough to speak those words to them. How noble, how compassionate.

'How disgusting.'

And now they'd seen him crying like a crybaby, him and Crimson too.

'How *dare* they.'

Nimbus just kept searching for words, dull eyes straight ahead and ears down, "This is a hard time for many ponies. We've all lost somepony close, close to us. Haven Hay... but the sun will rise again. Celestia's light will guide us-"

"Go away." Prey told him, sniffing loudly.

Nimbus was here to try to comfort them. He was trying to make an honest effort. He didn't know that Prey was at that moment figuring out a plan to kill him for his multiple failures and arrogant mistakes over the course of this whole disaster of a mission.

Inky and Bravo barely twitched at Prey's words, sunken eyes unseeing. Nimbus though tried again rather than retreating inwards to wallow in his own misery, "I, we were there too. I'm sorry this happened to you, to us, nopony deserved-"

"I said go away. All of you. Now." Prey said. Crimson made no move to disagree with him. No move at all, really. Did he even realise the Border Rangers were standing here?

Nimbus blinked numbly, face slack with tiredness, "Huh?"

'-I just want to help us all. We all went through that together-'

"There's no we, no *us*. We're never going to see each other again after we get back. So just go away." Prey spat, eyes stinging and swimming.

Nimbus blinked again, and frowned. "No." He stated simply.

Prey's whole face twisted. With incredible effort, he smoothed his features back out and took control of himself, while in reality it was the last thing he felt like doing. He wanted to lash out.

Instead, he began to twirl the end of his blue ribbon. The ribbon span in floppy, lazy circles in the air, the sheen of silk catching the light in odd ways.

"Go away. Please." Prey said almost pleasantly.

They went. Nimbus and the other two were here to commiserate

and try to share the burden. Prey sent them away, and they went without a word.

If Prey ever saw any of the three remaining Border Rangers again, he would in all likelihood enact his plan to engineer their deaths.

With nothing else to focus on, grief takes over. Time ceases to pass, it just goes round and around. You want to stop hurting, but you can't stop thinking the same things over and over. It was the circle in the ash all over again.

‘I want to stop. I hate it. It hurts. But I can't stop. And round and round you go in an ever-thickening circle of your own bloody hoofprints.’

And so the circle went, until...

Prey blinked, slowly refocusing sore eyes on the train car around them. The sounds of pain and suffering all were suddenly being processed by his ears again.

Crimson had called his name. Prey painfully reoriented his stiff body. His throat felt dry enough to crack.

He swallowed painfully, shamefully, "Yes?"

Crimson wasn't crying any longer. He was just lying slumped there, legs and wing limp, tail splayed back unmoving. Gloom's clan earring was still sitting on the floor between his front hooves. Mental walls tentatively up. With evident great effort, Crimson jerkily turned his head on his own stiff neck.

He looked at Prey. Prey looked back.

"I want something. You said, you said I just have to ask."

"Yes. Just ask. There's only two things I won't, I can't do. So ask it of me." Prey croaked.

Slowly Crimson leaned forwards. It took longer than it should have before Prey realised he didn't want to be overheard. He leaned in too.

Crimson's near whisper was almost wistful, "Can you please kill my clan for me?"

Kill *my* clan. What *had* been his clan. A clan which *should* have been Crimson's family. But which *betrayed* him and his father instead. *Myrrdon*, Crimson's once and only clan. And he still called them ‘my clan’. *My* clan. *My* responsibility. *My* fault.

"They never were." Prey told him.

"Never were...?"

"Never were your clan. Never your fault. Because they're *nothing*."

"It doesn't matter. It's too late now."

"*They're nothing*." Prey's breath hissed between his teeth.

"I'm the only true Myrrdon left. They defile the name. Traitors. They have to die."

"Crimson-"

"Prey, I want them dead. Those traitors can't live, I refuse. You said, you said I only had to ask. I'm asking. I'll do anything, just please help me kill my clan."

"Crimson, they're nothing."

"You said I just had to ask. I'm asking Prey, so please!" Crimson near begged, ashamed and furious.

"Crimson, you're not listening. They're nothing, because there is nothing left."

A smile that had none of the components of what a smile required. An ugly twisted thing, as out of place as an open wound or a tear in fabric stitched itself across Prey's face.

"I've already done it for you Crimson. For me, for us! They're all so dead. They just don't know it yet."

Slot the tiny cogs together. See how all the delicate pieces fit. It's only now as the mainspring is about to finish unwinding, that the clock hands begin to finally stutter.

A train car which had stunk of rotting pondweed. A train car which for some reason none of the desperate ponies of Haven Hay had turned to for shelter. One which was completely empty when Prey had led them to it for shelter from the storm. A second mind-broken thestral puppet, sent to fulfil a different set of instructions. A puppet who'd jerkily flown on ahead, to the same stinking, slimy train car, and given a message to Lemon Pink waiting inside.

A backup plan. Lemon Pink ordered to follow along behind them to Haven Hay just in case. An ignored train car which had sat undisturbed and forgotten on the tracks, waiting.

Then, all at once, an emergency- a disaster. The storm, Clan Myrrdon's presence and plan revealed, and the hostages imprisoned on the Wailing Crag.

No time, splitting up, and Prey giving an order in the heat of the moment. Another backup plan. Insurance. A just-in-case.

So Lemon Pink had unloaded the forgotten train car's cargo, and stealthily slipped away towards the Weather Tower, taking the long route winding around the hills and out of sight.

She'd arrived too late to trap and kill all the thestrals in the tower, as they'd already used it to fulfil their goals and left and seemingly out of just spite, locked the door behind them. And the massive storm was about to hit. But that was okay. Lemon Pink had shelter that would survive even this storm. A mobile, self-moving shelter. A mass of it, with the weight necessary to avoid being blown away like the houses of Haven Hay, the strength to stay pieced together, and the ability to dig in deep enough into dirt and stone to anchor itself over her.

And so she'd rode out the storm, shielded by a meters-thick locked-together mesh of struts, poles, and limbs. There, Lemon had weathered the eighteen interminable hours of howling darkness and

rain. She had water, she had food, and she just had to wait.

The storm had finished. The shelter had opened up and Lemon had emerged out to see the Cliffs of Dove waiting for her. So she'd also waited. And then finally received the signal from Prey.

A strip of metal. Lemon had been waiting, when without warning, the rune in the middle of it soundlessly and without heat melted it in half. It was no message-in-a-bottle or letter. It was the crudest of messaging systems. Yes, or no. And the question has to be known to both parties beforehoof. Yes or no. Initiate the backup plan, or save it. Do it, or don't do it.

Do it.

She had enough knowledge to piece together where it should be aimed. The shelter had shifted, reformed, pieces of the larger whole decoupling and moving and locking back into place. A massive grip on the ground, and a long, long arm. It bent back. And back. And back further until it touched the ground. Like a straining bent bow, the length of two full grown pines laid end to end. Or a catapult. A trebuchet was closest in imagery.

It hummed and groaned with the tension of the strain it put itself under. Then it fired itself into the air and across the Cliffs of Dove, at a velocity that would kill any living being, across an anti-magic divide that would kill any living pony by messing with the journey across.

Over the sea, over the cliffs, and onto the Isle of Dove.

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Underhoof, the virgin soil of the Isle of Dove was the rich, dark colour of fertile earth. The salt from the sea didn't reach up here, protected by the sheltering blanket of mist.

This land was beautiful, untouched, and almost perfectly prepared for them. The prophecy had been correct in every regard.

Clan Myrrdon was truly blessed. Already, despite having been prepared for the worst, they'd found traces of tin deposits by

complete accident! The rocks had just been waiting there, sitting on the surface half-submerged in beds of moss and mist-dampened fronds. What other raw gifts of abundance were there just waiting to be found?

It was humbling. No thestral of Clan Myrrdon would take this land for granted. Already they were hard at work building lasting shelters, while others began mapping every inch of the land in the mists. There was so much to do, so much to find, so many secrets about this paradise to uncover.

A paradise, because that is what they would make it. Clan Myrrdon had a responsibility to make this land their paradise. This land was theirs, now and forever, bought with blood, sweat, and tears. Their foals' grandfoals would grow up here. There was so much work to do, but it was with the excitement of discovery that everypony set to it with high hearts.

There was no going back, but why would they even want to? This was their paradise now, their home. And they would build it by their own willing hooves, and not the dictations of a tyrant-goddess.

Their fate was finally back in their own hooves, and beyond the mad alicorn Nightmare Moon's reach forever. Their histories had never let fade from memory the lives Nightmare Moon had discarded of even her own faithful when she finally revealed her true intentions.

Their new safety and freedom had not come without cost, however. Both to their clan, and to the sun ponies who'd lived in the town of Haven Hay. Even after all their precautions and use of the borrowed Weather Tower, the storm had still slipped beyond their control. Clan Elder Pathon had solemnly declared that their sacrifice must not be forgotten, and how a remembrance stone would be erected. Both for the townsponies, and the two thestrals who'd been lost without a trace somehow to the storm. Wasn't it wonderful though, that almost all the clan had made it?

This land was just so perfect. All their ancestors' struggles had not been in vain.

Why, even the constant mist shielding the isle from any outside view also helped shield against the sun's intensity, meaning they were finally free to venture forth in the middle of the day without any pain to their more sensitive eyes. Well, as long as they didn't fly higher than the mists, of course.

And that was the greatest blessing of all aside from the land itself. Flight! They'd been prepared to sacrifice their flight if it meant safety. Yet for their faith, in the end it was not a sacrifice required of them at all. Within the strange barriers surrounding the isle, flight was still possible!

For the sake of the generations of Clan Myrrdon to come, they would be forgiven for the crimes they'd been forced to commit to gain this blessed land.

They'd had no choice in the matter. It had been foretold, had it not? And so, the argument had been raised that if a future event was set, and you knew it was set, your actions were therefore unavoidable.

It was a comfort to know that they'd been right in their choice, and to have it confirmed by the bounty of the isle leaping out into your face at every opportunity, almost as if all you needed to do was look, and in answer a rose would bloom wherever your eyes fell.

A middle-aged and weathered thestral stallion and his grown son, completing their assigned task. That of methodically sweeping the woodland and cataloguing all edible and/or poisonous plants they came across in their assigned direction. Clan Myrrdon had enough dried supplies to last two years while the sacks of crop seeds they'd brought grew, but if they could live off the naturally occurring food sources, then all the better.

Until the whole of their new home was completely safely mapped and explored, everypony was to move in pairs. Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst. Yet so far, nothing larger than fat hares had been seen, the bright-eyed animals watching the thestrals with interest and no fear. You could walk right up to them while they were nibbling grass, and they wouldn't run. They'd never seen

ponies before.

With a deft hoof, the younger stallion was rifling through a patch of wild roots and herbs growing in the hollow of a lichen-covered boulder.

The tiny, naturally occurring garden was as pretty and perfectly contained as any hoof-arranged herb patch, taken from any fancy pony city. The son had always had a keen talent for foraging, and that wasn't even his special talent.

His father was breathing deeply of the fresh air. The world was always so clean and new after a storm. New air, to go with a new land and new future.

Years of flight meant the older stallion noticed even the slight shift of a disturbed air current as it travelled over the skin of his folded wings. He turned to see what manner of bird it was that had disturbed the eddies of mist.

The thing of wicker and iron and glistening black chitin came bounding out of the mist.

It was so fast.

Legs flung away from itself to grab the ground and launch its body forwards. Teeth, metal and broken. The stink carried before it in a rolling wave of rotting mould.

He was so taken by surprise that for that instant, he didn't even realise he'd snapped up his heavy wingblade to split the things' skull until his blade was already buried in its head-*AndItDidn'tStop*.

The son spun around, but the monster didn't stop charging even while dragging the half of a torn-off head from his father-!

The fusion of wicker shambler, strengthened with amalgamated changeling muscles and tendons and plates, and all bound together by a rubbery mess of wickerwatch tendrils, *swarmed-trampled-lunged* over the son in a second.

Implanted fangs, jagged broken chitin, iron hooks and spikes. Not

just in the head, but lopsidedly shoved in everywhere.

There followed just three-and-a-half seconds of blood, mortal horror, agonising pain, and heart-stopping violence.

The scarecrow finished ripping apart the corpse, so fresh that the shredded muscles of the heart were still contracting, and then it was bounding off deeper into the mist.

It was undead. It would not slow, sleep, or stop until it was destroyed. If it were destroyed. It was just a thing, it didn't feel or hate.

Yet for all that, it was still a creation born out of hate, and fashioned after an embodiment of hunger.

Smaller than Hard Baked's first attempt. It lacked size, and the strength that such weight and size lent to its strikes. The first scarecrow back in Mayflower had taken Crimson empowered with a magical artefact to finally bring down.

This one was smaller. It was weaker. It was going to tear apart even a squad of armoured and prepared thestrals because it just was not going to stop. And it was not alone.

Through the mist, over the rocks, scores of the scarecrows scrambled, climbed, and clawed, disassembling from a greater whole.

Can you hear it coming? Can you feel it on the wind? This island *was* a paradise. It was now all...

...Burning away into ash.

Taken by surprise. Scouts caught on the edge of their new land, spreading out and exploring. And the first ones to die. Deserved, undeserved, they were simply the ones most exposed.

Hydie Wisp was flying through the mist, slowly gliding a dozen hooves between each beat of her wings. To any who knew her, they

would never have considered she wouldn't be flying. Because Hydie had been born with only nubs instead of rear legs. But she had wings, and you didn't need legs to fly. She'd never been held back by her seeming disability, and tackled every challenge life presented with determined optimism.

And she had willingly chosen to come to the Isle of Dove, knowing full well the risk of losing her flight completely. But for Clan Myrrdon, she had accepted the risk with a brave smile. And in the end, her willingness to sacrifice hadn't become necessary.

This Isle of Dove was beautiful, in the way all ancient woodland was beautiful.

Hydie effortlessly dipped her wing and banked in a long, lazy loop back around to get another look at an odd gulley trickling with rainwater. Were there-? Yes, those were freshwater crabs in there. At some point in the far distant past, they must've climbed up from the sea and adapted. Now, they had no need to ever leave their little world.

Just like Clan Myrrdon now, too. This isle was their new little world. It belonged entirely to them.

With another flap, Hydie lifted herself back up from the gulley and flew on.

"What was it?" Came the floating words of her wingmare. Velvet, firm friend from foalhood, and flying a dozen yards away. Velvet's form was slightly blurry in the mist, but still easily within sight, so that their sweep could cover more ground.

"Freshwater crabs, if you'd believe it." Hydie's voice carried back across the mist.

She was steadily flying. She'd been born to flight, more than that Weather-Tower-obsessed family ever had been. Quite literally.

She was over twenty hooves up in the air.

A scarecrow with a dozen bunched legs launched itself up from the ground as if the intervening distance was nothing.

The drawing of breath to scream-Before the breath could even finish the scarecrow was already in her face. So unbelievably fast. The dozen clawed legs all scrabbling to sink into whatever flesh it could grab in an instant, and then in the next, scrabbling to rip everything it held away from everything else.

A mare who'd grown up from a foal never bowing in the face of adversity. Dead in that instant.

Velvet Night heard the horrible sound of a body ripped to pieces mid-air. It was loud. Bones being snapped and cracked all at once was so very, very loud. Velvet jerked mid-wingbeat and turned to look, not having seen the moment her friend died, only hearing the loud noise unlike any she'd ever heard before.

clackclackClackClakClatterClak!

She yelled, then screamed hoarsely. A shadow above her-

*ClackClackClatter-CLACK!"

Her wings folded on instinct, dropping her in the nick of time below the swooping, clattering shape. A thing of six membranous stretched wings, scores more of giant insect ones, wicker spikes, and nothing else. Just an abomination of wings riveted to a frame of clattering bones and-

Fly away. Fly away!

She dove, needing the burst of speed gravity provided more than she needed height to just get away from her twin bringers of death. She just needed enough airspace to desperately beat her wings with all her strength.

The clattering beast had no main body. No front or back, no top or bottom to force its orientation. It flipped backwards on itself, *you couldn't fly upside down but the monster could.*

ClatterClackCLACK-Snap!

Velvet sobbed. The mess of wings and spikes dropped on top of her. Then she screamed for the second and last time. A feverish, almost

desperate tearing of everything the flying scarecrow could reach.

Bloody chunks of body, gristle, and hair pattered onto the ground below.

ClackClaclaclackClatterclack!

Legs unfolded from that mass like threads coming loose from a patchwork quilt. It sped onwards into the mist. The grey vapour churned, as many erratically flying shapes disturbed the air.

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These outermost scouts of the proud clan of Myrrdon were caught without backup as the scarecrows rushed unerringly inland, inexorably drawn towards the concentration of life.

The scouts died first, as scouts always did in war. After that, the clashes of violence came faster.

Like blood in the depths. Here come the angler sharks.

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The bulk of Clan Myrrdon were still all together, getting established and planning their next step. They were finally here, but they'd been here for less than twenty-four hours, and it had taken so much effort and risk to get this far. But now they were here, and this new land of plenty was theirs. They were eager to begin, but you had to be methodical and practical. The young, the old, the heavily pregnant, and the few injured and/or sick needed to be seen to first.

There was no rush now, besides their own eagerness. They were here. This protected isle was theirs forevermore. And there is something to be said for taking a moment to count your blessings.

A noise in the mist, still far off. A clattering, repetitive sound. A pair of thestrals uncomplainingly digging temporary latrines paused in shovelling. They raised their heads, tufted ears swivelling to try to catch what the elusive sound was.

"A branch... banging on a rock in the wind?" One suggested.

"No, it's getting louder-Wait, do you see t-?"

The front wave of scarecrows ripped aside the tattered mist as they came charging out.

A score of them on many hooves, spines, and clawed legs. A score more falling, flapping, and churning through the air above.

There was a moment where the world hung still in frozen shock, almost spitefully letting details be clearly seen by those about to be killed. Like turning around on the shore when you felt the touch of a shadow, and saw the cresting wave about to break over you. Wicker, broken chitin plates, raw muscles, and sinew-webbed bones.

There had been a mountainside full of dead changelings, and a sewer full of grown wickerwatch for Prey to harvest. And harvest the rotten spoils of victory he had.

Harvest king, come to play~

One of the digging pair turned and ran. The other was too slow, too stunned. He raised the shovel he'd been using in a pathetic defence.

"To arms! To arms-!"

The shovel head bent, the shaft snapped. The giant pair of jaws that had snatched him up, just jaws, no skin, tongue or cheeks, just oversized metal and wicker and bone jaws, barely slowed as they crunched shut.

It chewed, and didn't even slow in its loping, off-kilter run. It didn't eat, it had no way to swallow, no stomach, but it chewed, and chewed, and chewed as it ran down the second fleeing thestral.

"Myrrdon to arms-!AhHaaraAgkK!"

Screaming, alarm, the beating of many leathery wings in fright, both those rushing forwards with weapons that never left their sides, and also those rushing away.

The ISND had barely overcome the warlock's prototype scarecrow.

They'd subsequently lost to the Reaper King. The Reaper King had finally fallen to Prey's veropedes. Prey had lost his veropedes to the amassed magical might of the unicorn thieves. Prey had been futilely searching for a replacement for his mage killer for a long time. In the end, he'd decided to make his own.

It loomed like the onrushing bow of a ship out of the mist, larger than all the rest. A hulking, armoured crab-like scarecrow, a massive juggernaut. Sectioned and layered chitin all over. It accelerated, going faster. A formation of thestrals raised spears, locking together to block its path. The crab-juggernaut just kept accelerating, earth and sod flying.

At the last instant, the formation disintegrated, the thestrals diving aside in every direction. They parted like water and closed up to stab and slash the segment joints in the juggernauts' legs in the hairsbreadth of time it took to thunder past them.

Spears and blades caught in wicker and muscle, getting snatched from wingclaws and hooves. It kept charging straight towards the heart of the new camp!

"Stop it!"
"Bring it down!"
"Don't let it hit!"

Then they recalled the danger. They spun back around to face the rest of the oncoming monstrosities. They had to stop the smaller monsters too, or the camp would be overrun just as surely as if the giant one hit.

The smaller scarecrows were already in midair, ready to pounce as they turned back.

A large thestral dived out of the misty sky, a full-sized lance braced against his armoured chest. His target was the massive juggernaut.

He hit right where the crab-thing’s head would have been, the armour-piercing lance point punching through the wicker and bone and plates of insect shell... and did nothing. Too late, too slow, Myrrdon learned the lesson; an undead has no need of a head.

The stallion gasped in exertion, then abandoned his hopelessly embedded lance. He dropped down onto the monster's body, heedless of the spines and vile stink, desperately pulling out a hoof axe to attack it with instead.

Without even slowing, one massive leg lifted off the ground while the others kept running, jerkily rotated one-hundred and eighty degrees, and then-

*ScccCC-*Th*Wack*

The motion was too fast for the legs' size. It should not have been able to move so fast. The leg had snapped down like no more than a whippy twig, not something the width of a tree.

The crushed remains of the valiant thestral did not slide off, because they were too deeply impaled on the juggernauts' spines. And then the giant scarecrow hit the camp proper.

A mother who'd rushed to a makeshift tent where her baby lay the moment the screaming started felt a shadow. She turned in the tent flap.

The crab monstrosity was not a crab, not truly. It had only looked most similar to a crab with its scuttling run and glistening dull plates. Now it arrived at full speed. Its legs all hit the ground together in sync, and for a terrible moment took the huge creation airborne, still barrelling forwards. Mid-air it... *changed*.

It was actually most similar to a griffin’s forepaw, their taloned hands, but with far too many talons. And now the giant disembodied taloned hand just... opened up and started grabbing. More talons unsealing from the ‘core’.

Earth, boulders, poles, crates, tents, and the screaming thestrals were swept into the monster’s spiked 'palm' in a cage of 'fingers', and then those taloned 'fingers' crushed shut into a fist.

Rocks being shattered, screaming, deafening noise.

The mass of twisted fingers flung back open, crushed remnants sent flying with the violent motion, the ton of mashed everything

dropping.

A frozen moment as the magnitude of the destruction in an instant was ineffectually processed.

Horror, absurdity, then even worse horror as it clicked the absurdity was going to kill every one of them in such a horrific manner too!

The hand-thing lunged outwards again, its' many jointed tree-length, free moving talons reaching out again.

They screamed, they ran, they flew. A giant fistful of everything in a ten-meter radius was swept up regardless, and crushed.

The talon-walker-crab-scarecrow was huge, it was powerful, it was terror inducing, it was the most eye-catching. It was the biggest, the most seemingly unstoppable, and also the easiest to flee from.

It was the smaller, even faster scarecrows that truly began the merciless killing.

Prey had wanted security. He had wanted to guarantee his own safety. He'd only brought his small scarecrow army along, overseen by Lemon Pink, as a reserve plan.

For revenge, for terrible, terrible revenge and the foreseen request of a friend, he threw his army away. Wasted them on a one-way trip to the Isle of Dove. All of it, sacrificed just like that. All to destroy Clan Myrrdon.

Because they had taken Gloom. Because being sensible didn't matter anymore. Because only making them pay did.

'If I burn, it all burns.' If there's nothing left but ash, then everything is fair in nothing.

Taking to the air, wings beating for all they were worth, racing for

the safety of the sky. *No, the ground. Land. Fly to the ground. Go down.*

Why weren't they flying away? Why were they drifting back down into the upturned waiting jaws?!

Ringing in the head, in the mind. Muffled noises. It was someone familiar calling out, someone you knew. Almost coming from within. Like how you never actually heard what your own voice sounded like.

Distracting, hard to think, and getting harder...

Down. Fly down. Go back down. The ground was safe. Up was bad. Down was up. Up was down. So stop flying.

An aged stallion faltered, grey-furred face screwed up in concentration. His wingbeats slowed. His friend turned back, higher up already, and screamed at him to snap out of it.

He didn't. He turned back around, and willingly flew down to the twisted blood-spattered things waiting below.

His friend screamed until his voice gave out, but he couldn't go back. He could only watch, tears streaming down his muzzle. He should have been paying more attention to his own life.

clackclackClakClackClackCLA-!

Death on the ground, death in the sky, death in the mind, death in the eye. Panic is the mind killer. And so is mind magic.

A trio of scarecrows finished running down one thestral, and immediately turned on tireless limbs to race after the next. This thestral was in the air, above the mist, dodging an erratically flying scarecrow. The flying wicker abomination was fast, but so was the thestral when fuelled by adrenaline.

Each diving pass the thestral dodged with a roll of their wings, an exertion of pure willpower. They had the whole sky to manoeuvre

in, nowhere to get cornered, but they also had nowhere to hide. Like in the open sea, there's nowhere to go. The shark will catch up eventually. In the end, you will have to turn around and fight.

Corkscrew. *ClackClakcClak!* Dodge, roll, strain!

But they forget, they always do, that there isn't only one shark in the sea. While swimming so desperately away from one, there may be another languidly finning its way to meet you head-on.

People never look up. The thestral should have remembered to look down. Below, the twisted wicker scarecrows opened their *bodies-teeth-traps* wide. Inside, the grafted, mismatched, bleached spirals of unicorn horns sat embedded in a web of wicker and glistening metal.

Prey had always so desperately desired magic for his own. Dark magic had long ago discovered how to use sawn-off unicorn horns as primitive magical foci to touch the wondrous world unicorns were born with the keys to. But only crudely. Prey had desired more, desired better conduits. He had wanted true unicorn magic, the magical feats only they were capable of with their structured spell matrices!

His experiments and efforts had all fallen short of any true spellcasting.

Even so, his failed attempts were still good for something. Waste not want not, right? After all, you never knew where your next meal was going to come from.

The Hunt. Someone's always got to be the prey for someone else to eat.

And in this case of wicker, raw muscle, metal teeth, and black carapace, it was as ugly as death. A crude, wonky area-of-effect spell formed as the scarecrows combined what limited magic the stolen horns could channel.

Another wave of numbing mental static hit out of nowhere. Land. Safety. Down. Fall. Fall down. Fly down. Backwards. Fall

backwards.

The thestral missed a wingbeat, struggling mid-air in the mist. Long enough for the invisible field of basic, barely-structured magic to clumsily reach him.

The simplest form of energy in the whole world is heat. Ambient magic is also present near everywhere. To convert this unrefined magic into the form of heat is easy. Fire is just fuel, heat, and air.

In the open sky, there is air everywhere. Magic can provide the heat so easily. And you'd be surprised how quickly the fuel of fur can be ignited. It caught just the same way wool did.

The flagging, mentally reeling thestral did not burst into flames, it was nothing as sudden or dramatic as that. No shooting tongues of flame, no explosion. They just, *smouldered*. All at once, and across every inch of their body which the magic touched.

Smoke, all their fur heated and crisped to black stubble at once, wing membrame curling up and flaking away in cinders. And the skin, the flesh, the living person under their fur...

White agony, burning, burning, burning everywhere. Blindness. Blackness. Falling.

Death.

The scarecrows closed back up, snapped together, reformed, whatever adjective applied to such constructs. Then tirelessly and methodically raced after the next bright pulse of life.

There was nowhere to hide, only distance could dim the invisible beacon drawing the scarecrows on. But the Isle of Dove was finite. The strange, anti-magic barriers could be a cage as easily as protective walls, and Clan Myrrdon had willingly locked themselves away here in their new paradise. Their last ever clan hold.

Every life large and complex enough on the island at this point was just a dwindling candle waiting to be snuffed out.

---O---

Take take take, it's always reach out and take! Selfish. Everyone's always so selfish. It's always 'them', never 'us', because I'm 'me' and I'm part of the 'us'. *We're* the good guys. *Our* story is the good one, because it's about *us*.

A person never thinks of themselves as the bad guy. They always have a good reason, a motivation, a justification.

So does the villain. But who's the villain? Two wrongs don't make a right. So who was right, and who was wrong? Or who was more in the wrong?

Who cared? There was no right or good here. Just selfishness. Clan Myrrdon were selfish. They took what they wanted.

Prey was selfish too. He would also take what he wanted.

Despair, nowhere to run, nowhere to fly, nowhere to hide.

Clock hands slowing, missing ticks, losing time, grinding down towards a final halt.

Stay on the ground, or attempt to hide.

Elder Nexus Fate of clan Myrrdon heard the fatal clacking coming from outside. His heart pounded in his head, reverberating inside this soggy moss-filled crevice under the boulder. He was afraid. Please Goddess, he couldn't-just not to those things, with the splinters and teeth, please just not like that!

A long, barbed, wicker limb thing shoved into the crevice. The hooks and claws scrabbling on the stone.

Deaf to the screaming, it dragged out the hooked life from inside, like the meat out of an oyster.

Take to the mist-filled sky, your home element. Outmanoeuvre the flying horrors that were faster in a straight line. Try to form flight

groups, find clouds, use numbers to fight back.

The breath sawed in her throat. She was almost gagging with fear with every intake, but she was a warrior of Myrrdon. Bravery had never been the lack of fear, and a warrior was brave. She repeated the mantra over and over. A warrior was brave! There were young bloods up here half her age fighting for their lives!

But the crossbow in her hooves still wouldn't stop shaking. It kept throwing off her aim, she couldn't draw a bead! She shrieked in abject desperation at herself.

The brave ones died one by one. They tried to fight in flight formations, covering each other at all times. Their efforts didn't even slow the remorseless process of picking off one thestral after another.

Stunned and tricked into suicide by constant and insidious mind attacks. Cooked one by one mid-air from the ground without warning.

In those first seconds of contact, back on the ground... so many dead. Within just a minute, more.

By five minutes, less, as those still alive flew or ran away. But they still died. One by one, by one, by one.

Thirty minutes, the half of the clan left, all those still alive, were all clustered in the air, as high as they could get. Above the mist, above the remnant storm, the unfeeling sun beat down mercilessly.

An hour, then two hours later, they were still up there. And they were still losing ponies. The rate was just a trickle, but like a hole in the bottom of the hourglass, the sand leaking out would never go back in.

Flying past their limits as their wings tired, fighting as their weapons did nothing, crying as someone they knew was picked off next, and screaming when it was their turn.

The scarecrows never stopped, never paused. Just the remorseless, relentless, never-ceasing assault of things which did not tire, feel,

hate, live, or even hunger. The millstone does not care. It just grinds wheat into dust as the farmer's hoof turns the wheel.

Dust to sand, sand in the hourglass, a crack in the glass, time draining away, the stuttering clock hands nearly still.

Five hours.

Clan Myrrdon, of a thousand years of survival. Clan Myrrdon, with a rich and deeply-layered history. Clan Myrrdon, dwindling to nothing over five measly hours because of the hate of one runt lamb.

Bone splinters. Gristle. A charred corpse. Congealed blood. Shreds of splattered muscle. The foul reek of punctured bowels and guts splashed across the forever dew-beaded ferns.

The scarecrows did not take them all, not in the end. *The* end, *their* end, the last despairing thestrals chose for themselves. An end.

A last act of spite, or was it just a desire not to die to those teeth and claws? They flew as high up as their failing wings would carry them, and then folded them for the last time. They squeezed their eyes shut, clung on to one another, and gave in to the inevitability of gravity.

No one was there to witness it. None would ever remember the last flight of Clan Myrrdon.

"Not fair not fair! Not! Fair! It's never fair! All this death and over what? A made-up lie some senile elder slapped the sticker of prophecy on centuries ago! And because of some stupid comet Luna wanted to trick everyone with, they all believed it! It's not fair..."

With the last beacon of sentient life on the Isle of Dove extinguished, the scarecrows just stopped.

Statues. Not a single twitch, just the faint creaking every so often as

wicker and strung tendons slowly lost their tension. There was no need for them to move anymore. A hammer does not move once placed down. It will lay there and rust forevermore.

Mist would settle, lichen and moss may even grow on them as they slowly decayed and faded, but the terrible scarecrows would never move again.

There was no reclaiming them now. The mysterious barriers thrown up by the Cliffs of Dove ensured the trip had been one way.

What a waste. What a monumental waste of time, of magic, of life. All of these tools, sacrificed and thrown away in a moment of hate, in service to the desperate and unfulfilling need for revenge.

Prey had done it, and would do it again. Crimson had asked, like Prey had known he would. He'd pre-emptively fulfilled Crimson's wish. It was empty.

It was so empty above the silent and still scarecrows on the Isle of Dove.

---I---

Forgive, forget? Never. Impossible. Not for this theft of Gloom, nor for what had been stolen before. Prey couldn’t forget. Prey wouldn't forget.

[[[Bonus - Concept art- Wicker Shambler Base]]]

[image]

Author's Notes:

'*The darkest hour is before the dawn, and even this too, must end*.'

(NOTE on the concept Art: This is just a base modle of a wicker shambler, not built up or 'modified' at

all. More or less one of the simplest ones Prey would still have wondering around in Canterlot's sewers. Also, I didn't really paint the teeth, I edited and messed around with a cut-out from a different picture).

Editor: Panem et Circenses, thank you.

96.7 Make Hope, Not War

Ill news is an unwelcome guest. The bringer of bad tidings will always be unfairly blamed for the message they bear.

News of Haven Hay had gone on ahead of their return. How could it not? Emergency hospital staff and doctors needed to be waiting on the platform the moment the train arrived, so as to stabilise and rush off the injured ponies to hospital.

The news of what had happened to Haven Hay was being closely controlled, however, and those that knew of the incoming train and that which it bore were quiet. With utterances of "*the* train" and "its *cargo*", the briefed railway officials, Guards, and hospital staff discussed their jobs in hushed voices. As though it were bad luck to voice it.

The train was coming, but it was not coming with good news. It was not carrying anypony who wanted to be on it, nor arriving where anypony was looking forwards to receiving it. It was as unwelcome as a plague ship, and not too different.

It was for this reason, then, (as well as the practical one of reaching the closest acceptably large hospital first, as opposed to the best one) that the train pulled not into Canterlot, but into Manehattan.

It pulled into a carefully selected siding, away from the public or anypony who might notice. Here the train finally jerked to a halt, with deathly-quiet uniformed ponies standing ready.

From the moment the last echoing wheels finished screeching to a drawn-out halt, muffled sounds of misery could be heard coming from inside.

The train drivers did not exit, the whistle wasn't blown, porters did not jump off and open doors. They stayed firmly inside and out of the way, letting the assembled group of security and first responders step up and enter for themselves. They were train workers. It wasn't their job any longer to have to face the ponies

that were bleeding, crying, and dying inside.

No, that cold and heavy responsibility was now somepony else's burden to shoulder. The lead medic swallowed, ears laid back against the sounds coming from inside, before reflexively gripping his emergency kit more tightly in his aura as he reached for the first carriage’s door.

The ticket pony on Platform Three unsuccessfully tried to ignore the blistering morning sun blinding him while he sat in his booth and sweated.

At this time every morning it seemed, for about an hour between nine and ten, the sun would always hit Platform Three's ticket booth head on, blinding you as it bounced off the glass and made you feel like a goldfish in a greenhouse.

He always dreaded getting saddled working the ticket booth on Platform Three. It was the worst.

And it was even worse today, because of whatever was happening over in the siding. Maggy, his line manager, had been very tight lipped- lightly trotting around the why, just dropping words like; "priority", "confidentiality", and "official", as if that alone were supposed to explain everything.

Whatever the reason was, it meant that platforms Two and Three had been temporarily closed for the day, so as to not risk any "complications" involving "the general public", and the incoming "unscheduled train'. Maggy's words, not his.

All the hoof traffic and passengers were going to be shunted into using Platform One. But because of the rush and the restrictive oversight of salaried office ponies who were all in a tizzy about their precious timetables, the other staff still had to report to their normal places of work.

Leaving him sitting here in a sweltering ticket booth, surveying an empty platform, doing absolutely nothing.

That rankled, because he knew for a fact there were more useful

things he could be doing. He was a pony who took pride in his work, for Celestia's sake! If there were actually ponies coming to get tickets that would one thing, but sitting here slowly boiling with nopony in sight was frankly aggravating.

Wicket tugged at the collar of his uniform, stuck hot and bothered in this booth with the sun near blinding him through the glass. Grumpily, he pulled off his uniform's cap and tried ineffectually to fan himself.

The platform outside of the window was empty and quiet.

Wicket nearly jumped out of his sweaty fur when the pony on the other side of the glass coughed.

A tall, thin, red pegasus, with a tatty looking cloak draped over his back. His lanky mane could have done with a good cut, as it was far too long for a stallion, and he could probably do with a good bath too, and- …and Wicket realised there was something wrong with the pegasus.

The other stallion's yellow eyes were boring through the glass into his own with uncomfortable intensity. His ears and face were off, too. Wicket swallowed. Why was he suddenly nervous?

"Good morning, and how can I help you today, sir?"

On the other side of the glass, the red stallion's face disturbingly didn't shift. His strange tufted ears didn't react as they were supposed to, didn’t react at all even. And he kept staring so rudely.

"Two tickets on the first train to Canterlot."

Wicket didn't know why it affected him so much. He didn't know what it was about those perfectly flat words that changed the pegasus from being weird, rude, and unkempt, to somehow threatening.

Wicket didn't like that. He firmly reaffixed his peaked cap, "Two tickets? Are you sure?"

That was a mistake. Wicket didn't know how or why, but something

buried deep in instinct just knew he'd made a mistake and he immediately regretted it. Because the other pony looked just as deep into him as that instinct were buried. Just looked. Notions Wicket had never even thought to entertain in his peaceful life before now were suddenly running through his mind.

The feeling that this, another fellow pony, might be about to do him harm. Dark, uncertain fears flashed through Wicket's imagination. Of a hoof being punched through the glass pane separating them, and spikes of glass being driven through his eyes. Of a knife being drawn, and stabbed into his face. Of the tall red stallion stomping on his head over and over until his skull cracked under their horseshoe.

There was no justifiable reason for him to suddenly think that. No excuse for him to suddenly fear something so unreasonable. He'd never had any reason to fear for his life before, but his hammering heart refused to listen to his rational mind.

With a bolt of sticky fear, Wicket realised he'd just missed whatever the pegasus' answer had been.

He worked his jaw, wetting his rapidly drying mouth. "I'm sorry sir, I missed that. Could you please repeat it?"

The red stallion did in the same dead, flat tone, except this time Wicket actually made himself pay attention to the words. "I said; yes, tickets for the both of us."

Both? Two? His eyes hurriedly scanned across the platform. But no, he hadn't been blinded by the sun and somehow missed somepony. There was nothing else on the platform.

But it wasn't any of his business. If the scary pegasus wanted to buy two tickets then who was he, a working stallion who sold them, to say no?

"Right away sir. Two tickets for the one-oh'-one. That's, that's the next train departing for Canterlot. From Platform One. Over that way. That's… that'll be twenty-four bits please. Unless you have a governmental business exemption card..." Wicket's voice trailed

away into nothingness. The stallion was still staring at him. Into him.

Through him.

There was a muffled clink. Wicket risked a very quick glance down to the counter. On it was a small bag of bits. Where in Celestia's name had that come from? He hadn't seen the pegasus move!

Nervously, he retrieved the little bag with his magic and swiftly tallied up the coins. Twenty-four bits.

He rang them up and pulled the ticket lever, ripping two tickets off the roll. "Here you are sir." He swiftly pushed the tickets under the glass- using his magic, not his hoof. The unreasonable part of himself didn't want him to risk it.

Mechanically, the yellow-eyed stallion swept the two tickets off the counter. His stare slid off Wicket as he finally turned away, and Wicket had to hold in the breath of relief that almost escaped on suddenly being freed from their gaze. That would almost have drawn back the stallion's attention.

The pegasus' hooves didn't seem to make enough noise on the platform as he walked, no, limped away. Then Wicket did a double-take as he realised the red stallion had a little white foal with him.

He hadn't noticed, the filly had been below the countertop the whole time, and that... that wasn't a foal. It was a small sheep. The thought seemingly slid through his mind like smoke and oil, but his heightened state of alarm snapped his focus back onto it.

That was why the stallion had wanted two tickets. A siren started blaring in Wicket's head. By Celestia, what was that stallion doing with a young white foal that obviously wasn't his, that wasn't even a pony?

What should he do? He needed to tell somepony in charge, and quickly. That pegasus had messed up if he were trying to foalnap some lamb, because he'd just bought tickets and so Wicket knew when and where he would be going. He just needed to quickly leave

the booth and find his boss or one of the deputy managers-

The little lamb twisted their head back and looked over their shoulder. A sky-blue silken ribbon snatched Wicket's gaze- first to the almost liquid length of smooth silk, and then to the matching blue eyes of its wearer.

There was none of the light of foalhood in there. Just like the red pegasus' stare had, the blue eyes went right through him.

Wicket slowly sunk back into his seat. His previous determination deserted him. The lamb and the limping stallion's faces had been the same. The idea that this was a foalnapping or something seemed suddenly foolish. Wicket shuddered, actually shuddered like a spider had crawled up his cheek.

There was no foalnapping here. Whatever was happening, or had happened, those two were in it together.

A tiny, un-Harmonic voice in the back of his head whispered, 'Good. Better the two scary weirdos only hurt each other, and not anypony else.'

---O---

A toddling foal who looks up at their father with guileless innocence and asks, "Papa, what does failure mean?" might receive an answer something to the effect of:

"You know how you don't like losing to your brother? Failure is like that. Like losing over and over again."

The concerned foal might then rather predictably declare; "I don't think I like failure then."

To which the pony father might smile indulgently to himself, chuckle, and say, "Daddy doesn't like it either. But don't worry. Whenever you fail, I'll be there to pick you back up. It's part of growing up."

Getting back up no matter how many times life knocks you down is something that's expected of you. It's what grownups did, right?

That's what everyone expects of you.

You need to learn to not hold on, to let it go, and then get back up. Because as long as you can do that, you can turn any failure into a learning experience. What was that quaint saying, "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger"?

The foal grows up, enters adulthood, follows their dad's example, takes their licks from life and always comes out standing. They can stand proud with a stiff upper lip. And maybe that's the end of it. Maybe they never learn the further lesson, one their dad neglected to mention.

Or, one day, they get hit so hard they can't get back up. They lie on the floor, gasping, broken and bleeding, and only then do they realise that before that point, life had never properly hit them even once.

All those licks they'd taken? Those weren't attempts to break them or knock them down. Because life does not care. It's like mother nature. It doesn't see you standing in its way, it doesn't have it in for you, it isn't petty or vengeful.

It doesn't even see you, in the same way the avalanche doesn't see the ant in its path.

And as you lie there broken, you realise the truth. That life will always win and will take everything from everyone in the end. All except the alicorns.

Not all failures are the same. Not all are of the same scale. Some of them can't be fixed or recovered from.

"Papa, what does failure feel like?"

To run and never arrive in time. To slip off a path, and only as you fall realise that the path were over an abyss. To wake up and learn that you will never be allowed to sleep again.

"What does failure taste like?"

Like biting into fresh warm bread and tasting only cold, gritty ash.

Like being forced to gnaw on animal bones when you're starving. Like being deathly thirsty and only having the salty ocean to drink.

"And what does failure sound like?"

Listen. Can you hear the bitterness in the heart, hear the unspoken words caught in the throat? It sounds like silence.

---<O>---

The train of wounded had stopped in Manehattan, its occupants then rushed off to hospital.

It had been left up to Prey and Crimson to make their way from there back to Canterlot. Perhaps it had just been an oversight, or Nighthawk trusted that they would figure it out. The captain had an entire destroyed town and the injured survivors to deal with, after all. He'd made the judgement call, deciding that it was better for Prey and Crimson to leave Haven Hay, even if it meant they had to make their own way back.

Right or wrong, it still meant that Prey and Crimson were left alone with only their own miserable company, the last two of the ISND, without support. Not physical support, although Crimson was indeed injured, rather they were left without anyone to support them. Just the two of them, alone, left to stew in the silence.

Nimbus Feather and his two surviving subordinates had disembarked somewhere back in the Manehattan train station. Somewhere. Neither of them cared in the slightest where the winged trio had gone, or if they never left Manehattan at all.

Slowly, the train chugged towards Canterlot, the mountain only gradually growing larger out the window as the track curved lazily towards it. The lamb and the red pegasus sat alone on a bench. Silence surrounded them. Ponies entered and exited the train at every stop, the volume of conversation ebbing and flowing but slowly increasing as the capital came closer.

Yet no one tried to claim the empty bench across from the pair. Instinctively, all the ponies shied away, avoided even looking at

them, and pretended they didn't exist.

The train chuffed closer. Slowly. Oh so agonizingly slowly.

The two of them sat together. Dirty, unkempt, and silent. They didn't exchange a word. Why would they? Why would they talk about their failure? They'd failed. This silence was the consequence of their failure.

How were they going to tell Scenic, Lilly, Carton, Saffron, any of them? Would they even be able to say a word then, when they couldn't now?

They just couldn't... couldn't face even the thought of the confrontation to come. Not now. Hopefully, not ever. Lost in the silence, they sat there and tried not to think.

Ahead, out the window, the radiant golden city of Equestria inexorably drew closer.

Prey didn't know what awaited them when they arrived Canterlot. Had Nighthawk sent word ahead? Was the Palace expecting them to return at once? The details of the immediate future were hazy in Prey's view.

But he had his one certain goal for when the train pulled into the station.

Prey didn't care what was going to be expected of them, or if there would be droves of shallow liars trying to comfort them, he didn't care! He had one place, and one place only to be.

His lair under the mountain.

That was where he was heading. As surely as birds flew and water was wet, the quartz cavern was what lay in his future. Lieutenants wanting explanations, him needing food, or sleep, he didn't give a flying toss. He was bound for his lair, and the runic circles it housed.

In his head, he held the one, the one chance for Gloom. Gloom was dead, but maybe, just maybe.

His lair. The runes. The ingredients. That was where he was going, and nowhere else.

The tunnels, his lair, and Gloom's chance. Gloom's one chance. He, Prey, was Gloom's one chance.

Would the fragments of memory he'd managed to absorb be enough? Deep in his bitter heart, echoed the answer 'no'.

'I don't care. I will make it be enough.'

What came after, explaining to Crimson how Gloom was still here, explaining to Gloom, keeping it all secret, all that could wait. It would wait, because it was a future problem, a problem that was going to happen in the future, because this was going to work.

Prey was going straight down to his lair upon arrival. He couldn't afford to wait.

Memories did not stay untouched forever, even when someone like him, a seasoned mind leech with eidetic recollection, were so rigidly maintaining a mental wall to hold in the captured memories. Somehow, tiny bits would still fall away and be lost, or fall in and become. Transferring straight from one living mind to another was already incredibly difficult and dangerous.

And transferring second hoof, from incomplete, traumatized memories instead...

'I will make it work.'

So Prey was going straight. Down. To. His. Lair. Just as soon as they arrived back.

He kept repeating the plan of action in his head, as if he needed to make it any clearer when it was already burned into his brain.

'Arrive. Get off the train. Take the shortest route to Lower Canterlot. Take the overflow pipe into the sewers. Move into the tunnels. Get

to the lair. Get to the runic circle, input the last necessary changes. And then transfer the memories into stasis.'

He could do that. If he could just do that, get them frozen, then he would have time to properly come up with a next step. But to have the chance of even taking a next step, he had to get to his lair and do that part first!

The rest could come later. He, he didn't know how he was going to make the fragment of Gloom 'live' again. But he'd find a way. Prey had already begun exploring the dark options before he even knew he'd need them for this.

Body snatching, by transferring a mind over to another. All he had right now was theory and planned experiments, but already he was almost certain if he tried to transfer his own consciousness right now, he'd fail. Or create another Lemon Pink, himself- but not *himself*, he, Prey, would still be part of this runt lamb body. But he'd been persisting in his research anyway. It was incredibly dangerous, and he'd been being so careful and taking it slow, but now, with Gloom's life on the line-!

'I'll find something, I'll make it work. Somehow. I'll find a way. Just as soon as I get to my lair.'

He would. He'd have to. He couldn't listen to the facts saying it was impossible.

One step at a time. Ignore the dreadful voice in his head listing all the points of failure. Ignore the fear that the truth was it was already far too late.

Get down there, get the memories into stasis.

'Just one step at a time. One step. I can take one step, and then one more.'

Breathe.

Canterlot. His lair. The runic circle. Those were the steps.

The train drew closer.

They sat in their silence.

The seats rocked slightly in time with the train.

Crimson never uttered a single groan at the discomfort it caused his wounds.

The silence pervaded.

Prey wished he was someone else. Someone better.

A better friend would have reached across and placed his hoof on Crimson's shoulder.

'And if wishes were oat cakes...'

But they weren't. And he wasn't. And he didn't. And he regretted it.

So they just sat there, just the two of them.

Their destination steadily grew closer.

Prey didn't make it down to his lair.

---<O>---

The train finally finished its looping run up Mount Canter, and pulled to a hissing halt into Canterlot's main station.

Prey and Crimson had already been standing at the door before it finished moving, and were out the moment it did. Out the carriage's rear door, that is.

It was evening, but the sun still beat down brilliantly. Prey's exhausted red eyes smarted as he squinted, the rush of steam and the train whistle deafening him for those first few seconds and he stumbled down onto the platform, almost missing the step.

He turned back, still half-blinded with the sun and thinking about a hundred other things, to double check Crimson had also managed to successfully dismount with his injuries.

For a moment, both of them were paralysed by the information assault on their desperately flagging bodies. The sudden rush of air down the platform after the stifling carriage, the bright sun in their eyes. The unyielding concrete underhoof. The previously muffled sounds of platform and train, and the smell of hot metal, steam, and a vendor's food stall blowing in their face.

So for just a moment, they were both blinded inside a little bubble of white noise until they could adjust.

A loud, authoritative call. It sounded like it might've been, "There!"

Prey was blinking rapidly to clear the glare from his gritty eyes. He heard the tromp of armoured hooves.

He looked up as the platform and everything else finally came back into reality. And for a moment, it all yet again didn't register. After everything else, Prey's head was just too full.

A semi-circle of Royal Guards in their bright, reflective golden plate had just finishing arranging themselves in formation around him and Crimson.

The train was at their backs. Prey didn't get it. He turned to quizzically look at it, checking no one else had exited through the rear door behind them, someone who the Royal Guards were here for. But there wasn't. They weren't here for anyone else.

'Because it's us they're here for.'

Prey didn't have it left in him to feel any proper emotional reaction to that. Just a sort of... stunted frustration.

'It doesn't matter. I don't have any time for this. I have to get down to my lair right now.'

Prey felt more than heard the moment when Crimson also finally noticed the Royal Guards through the haze of his own pain, exhaustion, and grief.

He and Prey were both beaten to the first word.

"Private Prey of the Night Guard, I hereby place you under arrest. Comply and lay on the ground."

"What?"

Did he say that? Had Crimson just heard the same nonsense he had-?

The unicorn Sargent, in her perfectly polished golden plates and enchantment-recoloured white fur, didn't even acknowledge a question had been asked. She just kept going, belting out her words in a parade ground shout:

"Non-compliance will be met with force. You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to legal counsel. You have the right to appeal. You have the right to representation by an attorney."

The stunted frustration withered and died as it was consumed by a scorching fire of outrage.

This was the ISND's thanks? This is what they came back to? This arrogant Sargent with her aggressive stance and puffed out chest, she dared to block their way? After what they'd just come back from? And to ambush them when they were at their weakest, and with no other Night Guards around?

And they *dared* to block Prey's path to his lair.

Prey struggled to draw in his next breath, so tight was his chest. They were blocking his way!

He wanted to reach up for his ribbon, but he was surrounded and outnumbered eight to one by the semi-circle of Royal Guards, and Royal Guard *unicorns*. Two earth ponies, two pegasi, but four unicorns.

Four unicorns, who all had their horns pointed right at him. Prey swayed. He hadn't eaten, hadn't slept, barely drunk, and now the fear of their magic was pumping through his drained body.

"You are being serious. You are actually being serious here." Prey

heard Crimson state, seemingly from very far away. His friend's voice was ridged with something dark and unpleasant.

There was a sudden shift in the lowered postures and set faces of the Guards around the semi-circle. Prey didn't need to turn, he could barely focus on just staying on all four hooves. Besides, he knew that scraping metallic whisper so well. The sound of the blade affixed to Crimson's one functioning wing flicking out.

Why was this happening? What, precisely, *was* happening? How did they even know to ambush the two of them here the moment they arrived on the train?

Prey's mind was spinning like a wheel, but it was going nowhere. The changelings? But how would they even-? No, but if not, then how-? Who-? But why-?

"I said, on the ground! You too, pegasus. Remove that weapon at once, and place it on the ground. Private Prey of the Night Guard, this is your last warning before you are resisting your warrant of arrest!"

Warrant? What? Where did they get a warrant from?! Who had served them a warrant?!

This was more serious, someone had gone through the proper channels and gotten a warrant served and signed off. Someone who thought they were very smart, and now legally had sent Zoma'Grika unicorns to snatch him!

This wasn't just being arrested and taken into custody, with a warrant they already had charges against him.

Fury. Fear. He couldn't even separate the two. Not fear of breaking pathetic pony laws, fear of the magical power about to enforce those conniving laws.

'I was forced to go and save Haven Hay because of Nighthawk's orders, and the moment my back was turned, someone got the Royal Guard to set up this ambush.'

He had to do something, now! It was all about to spiral and tip

over, and these filthy unicorns were going to use magic to paralyse him.

'I just wanted to go to my lair.'

'But if wishez' were fishez'...' He hadn't been expecting an ambush in the middle of Canterlot, and not by the law. Should he have? Could he have predicted this? Now he was trapped. Surrounded, helpless, and caught without a pre-prepared runic defence. No Lemon, no Gloom, and Crimson was injured. There were too many Royal Guards, too many witnesses, and Luna's hated alicorn bands were still locked around his forelegs even if he somehow got away.

'No escape.'

Prey hated them, then. He hated every pony in this city, and he would see them dead. After Clan Myrrdon, after the changelings, what were a hundred-thousand more graves?!

Graves would have to wait. It hurt, but Prey said it. "I'm complying, I'm complying!"

He stiffly lowered himself onto his belly on the hard concrete platform, "I'm not resisting arrest. I'm giving up!"

Pride is for the strong. The weak must bow their heads.

"Prey." Crimson hissed under his breath.

Prey shot him a look as he lay down, trying to apologise with just his eyes.

'We're outnumbered. You're injured. They planned this. They have unicorns. There's nothing I can do. I'm sorry.'

"Half Hoof, cuff him. The pegasus too, and take him to the station to process. We're taking the convict to the Guard cells."

"*Don't fight. We can't win*." Prey mouthed up at Crimson. He didn't look at the disgusting pony marching up, hoofcuffs dangling in their aura. He didn't let himself look. He just stared up at Crimson from the concrete, and silently begged him to do the smart thing.

Crimson's mental walls were trembling, on the brink of collapse.

A single word slipped through, '-...unfair...-'

The touch of the unicorn's magic was... awful. Prey hated it. So he didn't look. He barely managed to keep from panicking and pointlessly struggling. **click* *click**

A pair of cuffs, locked in to their smallest setting so as not to just slide off, rested above the pair of golden shackles that were already there.

'-bad foals get punished-', The Guard was thinking to himself with a satisfied nod, stepping away from his hoofwork.

These ponies... they were so dead. Just dead meat-bags walking.

click* *click

Crimson didn't struggle. Injured, exhausted, hungry, and weak with grief, he still could have sliced through the Guard's unarmoured throat before the unicorn could finish roughly pulling the weapon off Crimson's wing. So rough, that he took some feathers with it. The other was in the near empty saddlebag under the cloak. They took those off of him next.

He didn't stop looking at Prey, as the lamb was pulled to his hooves and dragged away. Two Guards began shoving Crimson in a different direction, "Move!"

"Just wait for me," His iron hard promise still reached Prey, "We'll be fine."

"Move!"

Prey tried to wrench himself free, to walk under his own power, "Don't touch me!"

The Royal Guards were crowding him, all looming over him, destroying any personal space. His heart was pounding.

"I said don't touch-!"

"Don't resist arrest. Be silent."

Their Sargent however was already impatient, '-enough wasting time-'

Horrible, vile magic unrelentingly shoved him, and kept pushing him forwards, his light weight nothing to the caster.

Prey recoiled, stumbling forwards as fast as he could to get away from the pushing magic, "Stoppit! Don't touch-! I can walk."

This all felt so familiar.

Prey twisted, trying to simultaneously trot as fast as he could without tripping because of the cuffs, and also glare behind him at the perpetrator.

His eyes widened, he couldn't help it. Coming up on the impatient Sargent's right side were a pair of fully clad, golden armoured, powerfully built stallions. They'd been waiting in the wings, hanging back just in case they were needed as reinforcements had something unexpected happened.

But now that he was being taken in they didn't need to wait any longer, and marched forwards.

The shine of their armour was above the lustre of that of the Royal Guards, and was proudly emblazoned with the symbol of the sun on the chestplate. Prey knew it well. Just like against all the odds, he also recognised the chiselled face under the golden helm.

Sunshine of the Solar Guard, along with a new partner.

Prey stared. Sunshine looked down at him with a mask of slight distaste as he was driven forwards.

Prey's stomach fell away. The light-headedness and dancing spots in his vision were back.

The Solar Guard was involved with this? And Sunshine, again? Had he somehow finally remembered who Prey was and what he'd done? Was this what this was all about? Did they know? Did they

know?!

But the white stallion's face was a mask. Prey couldn't read anything deeper. He simply looked at Prey like nothing more than the next criminal on his path. And his thoughts were still as shielded as they'd ever been behind the mindlock enchantments of his Solar Guard helmet.

Was, was everything lost? Had he been found out? Captain Valour. Dreverton. The Solar Guard.

'I can't go back to Dreverton. I can't.'

His chest felt as tight as a stretched rawhide drum. Surely everyone could hear his heart thumping with each bite of the Jaw?

How was this happening? What was happening? What did they know? Did they know? Or how much?

Desperate questions, with no answers.

But Sunshine of the Solar Guard was here, had been specifically sent, as part of this arrest. Just being arrested by Royal Guards could mean many things. But getting arrested by the Royal Guard and the Solar Guard?

Prey blinked furiously, "Zoma'Grika." He whispered in a small voice.

"Move it."

Prey was frogmarched up through Canterlot's streets, stumbling, tripping, and shoved by magic when he was too slow.

No allowance was given for either his size or the hoofcuffs hobbling him.

Some ponies stared as he was rushed past, pushed to hurry even faster.

He hadn't eaten or slept in so long. He was panting heavily and

sweating badly as the Guard Compound's gates finally came into sight.

"Faster. *Move*."

Royal Guards inside the compound or on duty saw him getting marched through. They stopped to watch, to point. Some of them recognised him as part of the ISND, and they grinned.

'They're laughing at me.'

"You were not told to stop."

The Sargent's magic shoved him from behind again. It was too much for his shaking legs, and he tripped forwards over the hoof-cuffs onto his face.

Before he could even spit out the dirt and outrage, her magic grabbed him by the scruff and yanked him back to his hooves in a moment. "Get up. I said up!"

Neither Sunshine nor the others even broke stride, just dragging him onwards.

Prey's head was spinning and his legs aching, so much so, that for a second he didn't realise he was being driven past the Guard Compound's cell block, and towards the Guard’s entrance into the Lower Palace instead.

He wasn't being taken to the cells? But then-No, he was being taken to the cells. The special, internal cells deep in the bowels of the Lower Palace. The much more magically secured cells, each separated not by bars, but solid walls of lead-lined stone.

It was happening again. It was all happening all over again! Wasn't this how it had all first begun with Luna? Was he living in reverse?

They were going to lock him away in a lead-lined coffin, where magic and runes were useless, and forget about him.

They didn't know, they *couldn't* know about his runes, it was just bad luck they'd decided to incarcerate him in this place. They didn't

have reason to suspect he might know some forbidden magic. Surely. They were supposed to think he was just a lamb. Their choice of cell was just bad luck, right?

'Do they know?'

Not these Royal Guards, they didn't know. They marched around him with none of the caution that being told he had dark magics should've have caused them, and he heard nothing in their thoughts. But they were also just grunts. Maybe only their commanders knew the full details. Sunshine and his unreadable partner were here from the Solar Guard. And since two Solar Guards, unicorn elites, had been sent as backup for his arrest...

'They do know something.'

Prey panicked. He stopped moving, locking up.

His sudden immobility didn't matter. They weren't even slowed. They just pushed him along with a flat plane of magic behind him, his hooves scraping uselessly over the floor.

Down one Guard corridor he recognised, then the next. He'd been here, he'd walked through these corridors with Crimson and Gloom. Now he was driven down them.

There was a Royal Guard stationed at the entrance to the cells. He snapped to attention and saluted crisply. "Ma'am!"

"Prisoner here for one of the cells."

"Right away, ma'am."

The very first cell's door was pulled open, none of the row having been occupied.

"Search him first. Make sure he's got nothing on him." Sunshine instructed before Prey could be pushed into the cells.

"Don't touch-Stop touching me!"

No one listened. They didn't care about the protests of a runt

criminal.

Magic and hooves ran roughshod over Prey, dragging at his wool and pulling him stumbling this way, and then that.

"What's this?" A tiny packet containing three small needles was waved under Prey's nose. He'd had them hidden in his wool.

"What is this?" The Guard demanded again.

'Poison darts.' Prey didn't say, staying silent. He shuddered and shivered in revulsion as he was magically searched. It was violating.

"Bag it as potential evidence," Sunshine ordered, "Remove the hoofcuffs too. Best to be safe."

'Zoma'Grika.' Prey attempted not to panic any more than he already was. He was about to be locked inside a lead cell which wouldn't hold any runes, and he could've at least used the hoofcuffs as a rough surface to work on. Another chance cruelly dangled then snatched away in front of him.

He had to do something, anything that would help. "Why're you doing this? What am I supposed to have done wrong?"

It was a leading question, one to try to trick answers out of these Guards' forethoughts.

But he heard nothing useful. They didn't know the details, just that there was a warrant for his arrest.

'-must be for framing us after that lumber yard fire-', One Royal Guard snorted.

'-that old chestnut. Everypony tries that one to feign innocence-', Another thought.

The only ones who presumably knew, Sunshine and the other Solar, were both mentally shielded, hiding what Prey so desperately needed to know. And the Sargent, she was smugly standing too far back, letting her squad search him. She was making a point to stand by the two Solar Guards, obscenely proud to be in their presence.

None bothered to waste breath answering their prisoner’s question verbally, either. They were the law, they were justice! Their actions were always in the right. Why else would they be ordered to do them?

'-everypony gets what they deserve in the end!-'

Without any further ceremony, the Sargent's horn lit up and she magically pushed Prey through the cell's door.

Prey turned as the heavy grey door swung shut in his face. The last he saw before the reinforced door thumped shut were the two Solar Guards and the Sargent mare looking down at him in satisfaction.

The door didn't slam, it was too thick and heavy on its reinforced hinges for that. Just a final heavy *_Thump_*, and then a muffled *clunk* as on the other side the lock was engaged.

The small cell was empty. No bed, table, toilet, or chair. Not even a bucket. Dust hung in the air from disuse. The walls, floor, and celling were all the same matte grey of a lead alloy. Even the inside face of the door was lead. The cell was dim, and chill. The only light was a blindingly powerful tiny crystal stud, too small to draw on and too high to reach even if he could, but one only large enough to dimly light up the place, no matter how intense it was.

There was no surface on which Prey could draw runes, not even one inch.

Prey sat down fast before his shaking, tired legs tipped him onto the metal floor of their own accord.

His only goal had been to go down to his lair. That was where he needed to go. The absorbed memory of Gloom would only continue to lose sharpness the longer he was kept away.

'Am I ever going to see my lair again?'

Prey shakily put his head down on his forehooves.

Everything had happened so quickly, as if the whirlwind storm which had destroyed Haven Hay had followed him. Now, he was

back to worrying about never being free again.

Never being free. Being sent back to Dreverton. Back to a cell for another fifty-seven unending years. Or five hundred and seventy.

This, on top of everything, on top of the exhaustion, hunger, hurt, and loss of Gloom... it just wasn't fair.

He was scared. Alone in the silence of this cell, the cold feeling could finally settle onto him.

He was scared. The thought of the last desperate chance of saving Gloom slipping away, and of having to face Dreverton again...

'Please not that.'

And to add just that last little bit more on top of the seeping mound of rotting failure, one more little humiliating self-weakness... Prey's eyes stung and smarted, and he tried to blink to prevent the hot tears from dripping out.

Because of course his runt body would further let him down when he was already at his lowest. Why did everything always end in tears?

'Weak, pathetic, crybaby!'

Always, always *always!* It always ended like this!

He was so utterly tired and sick to the stomach of it. So bloody sick and tired of it. Just so sick and tired of it. So sick and tired... and tired... and tired.

Prey slumped in exhaustion, squeezing his eyes shut, "I. Hate. This. City."

Prey couldn't fight off sleep deprivation any longer.

The cold floor of lead was hard and unyielding. But it had been a day, followed by a full night, and another day of misery,

discomfort, mounting exhaustion, and the ever-resounding absence of Gloom.

There was one thing they hadn't taken from him when throwing him in here, aside from Luna's golden shackles that is.

His ribbon. The Guards had seen it, but it hadn't registered in their minds, their eyes passing right over it. It was more than just a mental effect by now. So he still had his ribbon, for all the good it would do him in this lead coffin.

Prey clutched his ribbon, curled up as best he could on the floor, and finally fell into slumber.

---o---

But of course, Prey couldn't find any escape even in sleep.

Prey longed to sink down into the twilight depths of his inner mindscape, where true consciousness eluded him, but he couldn't quite seem to manage to tip himself over the edge.

Instead, he was left in half-waking, half-sleeping dread. Where he was in too deep to fight back the terrible shame of failure, but not deep enough to escape caring.

He twisted and rolled for indeterminate hours, remembering Gloom's glassy yellow orbs, forever dulled, as dark blood slowly ran over his bloodstained lips and teeth. Of his failure to do what needed to be done, of all the mistakes in that stinking, dirty train carriage, all the things which he could have done better.

In the background behind a veil of drifting ash, the villagers, the diamond dogs, and the changelings cackled and danced grotesquely over an island of dead thestrals, as twisted skittering shapes of his own making picked at their bones.

'...mimics got... got what they deserved. Wouldn't... leave me alone. Myrrdon. Good. They took... from me. An' Crimson asked... me to.'

But the jeering and twitching from the dead just got louder. They just kept shouting the truth from nonexistent, empty lungs all the

louder.

All those mimics, murdered diamond dogs, and sacrificed villagers.

It was so much harder to lie to yourself when asleep. Deny, deny, and deny it again as hard as you want. The rot will still be festering away there no matter what pretty lies you tell yourself.

'A rose... by any other name... is still a rose.'

There really was no escape, and no respite.

Prey lay there, drifting. He almost waited too long to react when the taste of ice-flecked starlight were carried to him on a dreamt wind. He was just so tired of it all, that he almost just lay there in a numb stupor.

But then the fear for self-preservation jolted him to act. Above, up in the burnt forest of his outer mindscape, he felt the hoof of Luna questing about to find him, not yet breaching but soon to be inside.

Prey violently hurled himself back up into painful awareness, like a hooked fish breaching the surface.

Prey grabbed hold of an obscuring cloak of ash and drew it over his mindscape. He raced to settle and mould his mind into new shapes, creating a false dream to hide what was really underneath. He didn't want to find out what would happen if Luna suspected she wasn't viewing his real dream (as if she ever had any right to his private mind!), and brute forced her way through with her unstoppable alicorn magic.

A rocky hilltop. The impression of waves breaking nearby. Sharp jagged shapes of frozen lightning sticking out of the earth. It was all Prey had time to throw together. If Luna knew anything about what had taken place at Haven Hay, and she must by now, she would expect something like this from his dreaming mind.

Clinically, Prey could make that decision. But it still filled him with black hate at Luna, for forcing him to summon up a façade of a place he never wanted to see again, and all because she kept refusing to honour her promise to stay out of his dreams! Did she

even remember the promise she'd made? Or did she just not care?

A sourceless feeling of moonlight arrived. Like the moon were peering down from on high at him crawling in the dirt, yet while hiding itself behind a bank of cloud.

But just like the face of the full moon, even when covered by clouds, it couldn't hide its pale light from still glowing through and giving away its position.

Prey was preparing to hold the false dream, but that was when Luna's voice shook it.

"Prey, come forth and stand before us!" It seemed there was no patience in Luna tonight.

Luna's shout echoed out in ripples over the dream, meant to give consciousness and form to the sleeping mind. Luna wanted to speak to him, and she wanted him fully cognisant.

"Prey, come forth at once!"

The order was a whip crack. Prey felt his dreamscape automatically move to respond to Luna's desire, convulsing to spit him out before her. Prey grabbed the dream with claws of barbs and hooks, and ripped it to his will. This was his! Not the pretender Luna's.

Only then did he let himself form in front of Luna's presence. She hadn't taken on a dream avatar, she was just a presence of power.

Prey refused to let himself be shoved into an avatar either. He only let his presence be felt by Luna, not seen, just as she was doing. Just much smaller, and endlessly less powerful in the face of the alicorn.

"Am I dreaming?" Prey asked, feigning surprise.

Luna's answer came in the form of her mentally seizing his presence and dragging it up in front of her. Beneath the fake layer of ash, Prey very nearly lost control as Luna roughly handled him.

She held him before the focus of her roiling presence, boring down on him like an eye behind a giant magnifying glass; "Listen well

Prey of our Night Guard. You will remember this when thou awakens."

Held 'helpless' in her grip, and hating every vile second of it, Prey gave a token, symbolic struggle. He idly wondered what eyeless heads and endless maws would do to an alicorn so courteously placing their mind inside his, and therefore within reach. He then said, "What's going on? This is a dream, right? You're Princess Luna?"

Reasonable questions, and ones expected of a mostly sleeping mind. Luna had no patience for them today.

"Cease thy questions, they matter not, for there is little time. What we have to say is of the utmost importance to thy future."

That was an order and a threat if Prey had ever heard one. 'She's threatening me? For what?! All we've done and lost in her service and this is how she repays-? No, of course this is how she repays us. We're just mortal pawns. How disrespectful of me to dare to forget that.'

Prey seethed underneath. Above in the false dream however, he merely subsided and gave the impression of looking up at Luna's powerful presence, and waited.

“Thou art in serious trouble, Prey." Luna stated. The words were flat, but the dream carried a boiling undertone of tightly wound force.

"What for? What did I do wrong?" Prey immediately protested his innocence, grasping for information about what exactly he was being accused of, because he still didn't know!

You were supposed to be told what you stood accused of. No one had taken him for any kind of interrogation or statement, they'd just thrown him straight into this cell. But did Luna provide the answer? No. Of course not. That would mean she listened to his words over the sound of her own voice. In fact, she barely even paused in speaking:

"The time is far spent, and there has been precious little enough of it to begin with. Myrrdon, how could they? We recall their father's fathers! For their foals to decline into depravity-! We cannot even ask the reason of them ourselves, locked away in that self-chosen prison. Oh that it come at a time like now, after the loss of our dear Sargent Dusky Gloom-!"

A wall suddenly slammed shut over Luna's presence like a guillotine. There was a long pause, and when Luna finally spoke again, the words were as frozen and deliberately controlled as those times when he had seen her in the flesh, when no one else had been able to notice her moments of unnatural stiltedness. Like she were still waiting in the void on the moon. A frozen rod of iron, one which could never bend. What lay dormant beneath, once more on display.

"We are most displeased."

It was all Prey could do to hold the covering of the false dreamscape in place, when he wanted to scream in Luna's face that it was her stubborn, pig-headed selfishness that had killed Gloom. Displeased. Displeased? Gloom was dead and she was only 'displeased'?

'You did this. You and Nighthawk's damned plans and plots. You kept kicking us back into the fire every time we crawled out. Every time we survived, you just took that as proof you could kick us all the harder next time!'

It made sense why Luna was here, she was angry, and because he was still alive, therefore Haven Hay's and Gloom's fates must be partly his fault. Because in the end, all he'd ever been was a pawn to her. As long as he'd been succeeding in her popularity game and bringing success, he'd been safe. But now, after a public failure of this magnitude? One where actual ponies had died, not just goats, cows, donkeys, and sheep?

'I see. I see how it is.'

Gloom was dead. The ISND was effectively no more. And Luna had no use for them any longer. So he was being sent back to where

Luna had first pulled him from.

'That must be it. It makes too much sense. She's an alicorn. This is what they do. Play games with mortals.'

And whatever game Luna was playing on her golden gaming board, there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. All the plans, runes, and traps he'd implemented to protect himself, and yet here he still lay in a cell, while she wielded immortal alicorn magic from her throne.

'I hate you Luna.'

The impenetrable wall was still locked down over Luna's presence. Prey wanted so badly to either attack or flee, not sit here pretending and listening to whatever lies next came out of her mouth.

"And what is more, thou hast found thyself in prison again," A long, painfully drawn out pause, and then in the same frozen tone of unbending iron:

"What hast thou to say for thyself?"

There were many things Prey wanted to say. But even now, even with everything falling down around him, things could still get so much worse. There were so many ways Luna could still hurt him if he gave her an excuse. Or permanently imprison. Or maim. Or kill.

"Your majesty, I don't even know why I've been arrested. In Haven Hay, we all tried-"

"Speak not of that town. When we are ready, we will ask of those events, and not before. Did we ask after Haven Hay? Nay. We did not. Not today. We must yet reconcile it with ourselves. So nay. Rather, we asked what thou hast to say for thy own self."

Reconcile? Reconcile what? That Clan Myrrdon had tried to run away forever rather than accept her offered collar of slavery? Did she really not care about the dead inhabitants of Haven Hay killed in their storm? Even though the slain had been ponies? Luna did not know Clan Myrrdon were all dead. Or did she? Even if she did,

she had no way to know it was because of him.

Prey didn't know what Luna's real reason was, so it was best to say nothing at all or risk angering her even further.

"I apologise, but I don't know what to say, Princess Luna."

There was a long, long silence that followed. Luna's cold presence behind her barrier was scrutinizing him.

"We have heard thy answer. We see how it is, then. If this is to be the course set before us, then we shall have to tread it, won't we?"

What was any of that supposed to mean? Was she using the royal pretentious 'we', or did she mean to include him in there? Prey didn't like either implication.

"And you, Prey, of our Night Guard, who hast been in our service, who has... Oh, what matter it now? The dream is now lost. We saw, and have already seen." Luna's presence began to withdraw from the dream, pulling up and away into a vast night sky. But not before she had the last word:

"When thou stand before the court, keep thy council thy own. T'will make everything easier for us."

And then Luna was gone, leaving the illusionary dream echo of Haven Hay that she'd refused to even acknowledge. She left behind dread in her wake.

The fake dream began to shake, then rip and peel away like burnt paper. Underneath, the ashen grey forest lay bare. It was there, just like it had always been.

The terror was there, just like it always had been.

It had merely been waiting for Prey to realise it, to realise what Luna meant, to put two and two together, and finally work his way through to the final answer.

Luna had just told him not to even bother defending himself in court. To not make a fuss and to go quietly. 'It'll make this easier for

me', that was literally what she had just said.

Fear, bitter and sour, began to worm its way up the back of Prey's throat. What court, what trial? He hadn't been told anything, nor what he'd been arrested for, or where the warrant had come from, or how it had been served so quickly. There had been no mention of a defence, or a lawyer.

The fear began to slowly choke him, clogging his throat as it worked its way higher. This was going to be a sham trial, a drama play. Luna didn't want the ISND anymore, so she was going to let this trial get rid of Prey for her without even having to lift one perfectly polished hoof.

Gloom was dead. The ISND were no more. 'The dream is now lost' she'd said.

Acrid and coppery, the taste of fear was now flooding his mouth. He was asleep, and yet he was panicking so hard his body could still taste it for him.

Luna hadn't painted a picture of the future. She'd told him his future. As an alicorn with all the power over him, she might as well have carved it ten hooves deep in stone.

Luna. She'd just taken his future. Take take take. It was always take. Take his freedom, take Gloom's life, take it all.

'She, she actually did it. She did this to me. Just took it. Just like that.'

This was happening. This was actually happening. It wasn't some horrible fever nightmare.

Just like that. With just a word. 'Just a touch.'

Just a single sentence spoken by Luna, and he was done for? No, that wasn't fair!

His outer mindscape was shaking, bulging and contracting. Ash and smoke. A swirling purple sky crashing with the force of a remembered storm. His last hope, his future, Luna had just burnt it

away. As simple as that.

Panic. Sweat streaking down his forehead. Eyes and lungs burning. That was how Prey jolted awake in his cell.

The lead-lined walls were still there, the same rune proof ceiling and floor, the same locked door shut in his face.

And the same godless-damned bucking gold tracer bands still sitting smugly on his forelegs.

Prey screamed at the walls in Zebrican foul and dark enough to drive any zebra shaman to mute, wide-eyed silence. Not threats, but promises, of things he'd seen Snake do. Would see himself do.

"Mor blaka und Zoma'Grika! Kulu mund dine an' Vera'bo do to na halff'ta Grika! Fent! Fent und grixa mund du'! Zoma'Grika! Jeknana fel und' alma tagrash! Metetilo grot dol ketneff die! Mell tung und grol Zek'tu krut Zoma' fel und Grika!"

He kept screaming high-pitched obscenities at the empty walls until a hacking cough drove him into a wheezing fit on his knees. Then he just whispered them in a hoarse stream of vitriol instead.

But for all his hate and hissed promises no one but him could understand, he couldn't see a way out of this.

Lemon Pink was stealthily on her way back from Haven Hay, but even if she got here in time, so what? She could find him just like he could find her, but even if she somehow broke into the Palace, past all the Guards, and freed him, what of it?

The two golden tracer bands still sat on his forelegs, and there was no mad god of chaos to remove them this time.

Prey's stream of whispered hate turned into a stream of whimpered hate and self-pitying tears. Just like it always did. All his ventures seemed to end in tears.

'Why, why, why did I ever choose to come back? I was away, home and free. Why did I choose to come back knowing this is what might happen?' Prey wept bitterly.

Now, as the cost of his stupidity, he was going back to Dreverton. Or worse.

Forever.

His tears finally ran out, too tired to cry anymore, leaving behind just snotty hiccups and sniffles.

He was done. This was it. His time had run out. The sand in the glass had stilled and the gears had made their final tick.

There wasn't going to be another second chance.

All his plans, all his runic testing circles and experimentation. He'd taken too long.

Too slow. The rope had finally run out. All that was left was a free fall.

He had no wings. He was just a runt lamb. He couldn't catch himself and fly.

Flying wouldn't work anyway, not when it was Luna who'd cut the rope. He was going to hit the ground no matter what.

This, all this, whatever this trial and court was, that was just what happened while watching the ground enlarge on the way down.

Prey hiccupped painfully some more, 'If time is up, if I'm already falling, if there's no saving myself...'

It was a revelation. Like an epiphany. He'd always been so selfish. Now his preparations didn't matter any longer.

'And if nothing matters any longer...'

Then there was no need to be cautious anymore. He'd run out of time. All his carefully laid emergency plans and timelines, they were almost all lost. *Almost* all of them.

There was one plan though, that wasn't immaterial just yet. He hadn't put it into action only because he'd been trying to figure out

how to escape the repercussions afterwards. But since the fallout no longer mattered, what was the point in caution?

No, it wasn't the plan of mutually assured destruction promised by the hungry things, Prey didn't reach for that.

Something else. An actual plan, one where he'd actually been sane and not under duress while planning it. But it was only a one-in-a-hundred chance. Prey wasn't giving up on escaping, because there was already no hope for him, but there was hope for one last thing.

'Gloom. There's still one hope left for Gloom. First Gloom, and then...'

First Gloom. And then...

And then what?

If he could get out of here, he already would have. And even if he did, Luna would still catch him. If he could get out, and mind altered all the guards, he'd only have a few hours, maybe as many as five, possibly even six, before she noticed and used the tracer bands to hunt him down.

Six hours. Would that be enough? 'It doesn't matter if it’s enough. It's all I'll get.'

But first, *first*, before all else, he had to get out of this lead cell. And he couldn't.

'All is lost.'

And then an idiot came along.

In some ways, Prey was the one at fault for not having foreseen that outcome. All of this, getting thrown in an anti-magic cell when no one could have known about his runes, getting picked up immediately at the train station, the Solar Guard getting involved with their specially enchanted armour which guarded against mind reading, it was all so very far removed from the usual level of

incompetence Prey had witnessed over his many months of unwilling service in the Guard.

So perhaps he could have foreseen and planned around some of that all-round ineptitude finally coming into play. These were soft pony Royal Guards. It was near guaranteed their professionalism would eventually run out.

So when Prey had cast about his cell for a way out, he'd despaired. Because there was no way for him to break out. There were no internal factors he could leverage or abuse. He had nothing.

Prey couldn't be blamed for never considering that his captors would be stupid enough to come along as an external factor.

---

ka-clunk

What? That was the door. They were opening the door and giving him a way out?

Prey tried to surge to his hooves, going to charge the door the moment it opened. It didn't matter who was on the other side, this was his one chance at surprise and he had to at least try.

Unfortunately his sore, stiff, hungry, and uncooperative body managed a clumsy stumble instead.

'I HATE being a runt!'

The heavy door swung outwards on external hinges while Prey was still trying to get his legs to work.

'Too slow.' He bitterly cursed. He'd already missed the opportune moment for a surprise attack.

His cell had been dim. Not dark, but still dim enough that the much brighter lit room and corridor outside managed to blind his grainy, red-rimmed eyes for a second.

Prey squinted at who it was, already knowing it was too late to rush

them before they could react. He saw the outline of a horn on their head. 'Much too late.'

Prey saw the threat and their species first, them and the second unicorn standing behind them, then he saw who they were.

The first shock was that he knew them, and that it wasn't just another one of the Royal Guard. The second shock was that on a list of people Prey knew, she was right at the bottom of who he could ever have predicted.

'What?'

"Woah Prey. You look kinda' terrible." Taffy said, smile brittle.

"What?"

The Royal Guard in his gold armour grumpily cleared his throat at Taffy, and scowled at Prey.

"If we could speed this up, ma'am?" And then back to scowling at Prey, his horn half lowered; "No funny business. Don't even try. The cell block's locked, and there's checkpoints, but you'll never ever get past me in the first place."

The stallion was trying to look intimidating. Indeed, he already was, because he was a unicorn, in armour, and much bigger and stronger than Prey. But he was only as intimidating as the threat he posed, not because of any additional amateurish posturing on his part.

Prey was looking past him, through Taffy's legs, eyes darting around as he frantically tried to take in every detail of the room for anything that might've changed since getting dragged in here. He was searching for anything which might provide him with information to take advantage of. He saw there was a third Royal Guard too, standing watch over by the barred door gate into the cell block. Not the same one Prey had seen when they'd come in, this one here was only a pegasus, so the shift must have changed. Three ponies, against him. But they didn't see any of that.

All they saw was him standing stunned and mute for a few seconds, a downcast and very young prisoner who'd just been locked away

for hours in solitary confinement. Not a threat, not someone ready to seize upon any opportunity.

Actually, maybe it was conceivable that was the reason he'd been locked in the high security cell all along. To intimidate and frighten him, as a psychological tactic.

Taffy adjusted her cap over her frizzy orange curls. Her gaze was flickering all over Prey, but she was studiously avoiding actual eye contact, "I'm really sorry about all this. About you and, and, **Ehem** things are going to work out okay, okay?"

Prey shuffled a few steps closer towards the open cell door, making sure to move extra slowly. It meant they came into his mental perception range.

'-don't mention Gloom, don't mention Gloom. I can't believe he's actually gone, oh Celestia I am not the right pony for this! I don't want to be here. But then who else will?-'

'-just had to come and interrupt, didn't she? He was stewing nicely and almost ready to 'fess up within another hour or two. I already heard him shouting nonsense-'

Prey coughed, his throat painfully dry, "...What?"

"What's what?" Taffy purposefully stalled.

"What's... this? What's going on? What are you doing here?" Prey elaborated hoarsely.

Prey read the answer as much in her thoughts as the hesitation before she carefully spoke, still avoiding his eyes. Not an easy task when she had to look down at him looking up, so she settled for staring just over his head instead.

'-is a massive disaster. Poor Prey, poor Crimson, poor Gloom. How could anypony let a storm get so big and dangerous?-'

"Wellllll," Taffy drew the word out, trying to buy time to figure out how to best say what she was supposed to, "The thing is, I'm here in an official capacity. Sorry. See, Captain Nighthawk's not back, and

everypony else with the judicial qualifications in the Night Guard is also gone, and there's the rules about seniority, and being impartial, meaning they're arguing it can't be a Night Guard because you're a Night Guard, so... so I got asked to take up the role."

'-I should stop talking now-'

That told Prey a few things immediately. The general Royal Guard populace didn't yet know about Clan Myrrdon's part in what had happened. Second, Nighthawk was still snowed under in Haven Hay with trying to contain the disaster, and couldn't return any time soon. Whoever had gotten him arrested was abusing Nighthawk's absence to their advantage.

And yet Prey still didn't feel like he understood. Everything was switching so rapidly, that he was having trouble knowing where to turn.

"You. Out." The stallion barked.

Prey slowly blinked red-rimmed eyes at him, "Out? To where?"

"To the table!" He snapped, as if it was obvious.

There was a medium sized table over to the side of the room. Prey craned his neck to see. On it had been tossed a closed file. 'So this is to be an interrogation of a sort, then.'

Prey shuffled out of the lead-lined cell. His gaze stealthily flicked to the pegasus on the other side of the locked gate. Neither Taffy nor the unicorn Guard were close enough for him to touch, or even lunge at, but it was the pegasus outside the gate who really sealed the deal. Even if he could get both Taffy and this other idiot, it wouldn't be before the pegasus could run off and raise the alarm. Or even just shout for help.

The pegasus Royal Guard, who glared boredly when he saw Prey even glance in his direction, was Prey's biggest obstacle right now.

Not problem, 'obstacle'. Prey's *problem* was that he was going to be imprisoned forever. Prey's problem was the shaking in his legs, the trembling in his chest, the fear in his gut. Prey's problem was that

he had no solution to his problem. His problem was that he was out of time.

But the pegasus Guard was not big enough to be a problem. He was an obstacle.

'You think you're safe outside here?' Prey thought as he half-walked, half-limped on sore hooves over to the table, 'I think you're just my next tally mark.'

He should have been viciously angry when thinking that. He wasn't. He was afraid. And tired. He wasn't mentally promising death to the pegasus out of revenge. More like it was simply a thankless task he had to perform.

Prey didn't need to ask which side of the table he was supposed to sit at as the Guard growled at him to move faster. Obviously it was the one with his back squashed against the wall, on the stool as opposed to the actual padded chair, and where he'd be looking right into the lantern over the seated interrogator's shoulder.

So Prey made straight for the padded chair.

"Hey! Get your flank on the other side of the table!"

Prey cringed at the volume, but more as magic flared orange and yanked the chair away, "Okay I'm sorry, I didn't realise."

Of course the unicorn would use magic, not step in close and pull the chair away like Prey had been angling for, because why would he? He'd been born blessed with magic, so of course he would use it for every single thing. Of course.

Prey had still tried, because he had to try everything right now. He had no option but to take every option.

His time was up. This was free fall. And if he was going to hit the ground anyway, he had one thing left to do.

And yet... and yet...

'I hate hope. It's the hardest of drugs. Hope always makes it all so

much worse in the end.'

And yet... he was still drawing breath, wasn't he?

With effort, Prey climbed up onto the stool, and tiredly rested his chin on the too-high table. Then he shifted, pulling a drooping ear out from under his chin. Then he just stared at Taffy and the other unicorn Guard.

Taffy still wasn't meeting Prey's eyes. The angry Royal Guard snorted loudly as he stomped up next to the table, looking down on Prey without any such issues. He didn't seem to have any problems with his prisoner being a child. In fact, it just angered him even more.

'-if a foal gets locked away in one of these cells to get scared straight, then you must be a truly despicable brat. Did you get somepony killed by not thinking, brat? I know what you ISND ponies have done-'

Misinformed, but obviously, the rumours the Royal Guard had been passing around about the ISND ever since the salt trade and lumber yard incident wouldn't have been accurate. Rumours never were.

'I don't have time for your wounded pride. I don't have any time at all.'

"What are you here for, Taffy?" Prey asked tiredly, not raising his chin off the table top. He didn't add her title. No point.

Taffy took a deep, fortifying breath, the very ends of her frizzy mane trembling so deep was it. She held it for a count of eight, then let it all out. Taffy spun the file around on the table to face Prey and flipped it open, and used her magic to push it across the table to him.

"In my capacity as a neutral party in Their Dual Majesties' Guard as part of an internal legal prosecution, and replacing a representative of the Night Guard at this time, I am here to demand that you confess and sign, here and before two witnesses." Taffy recited, looking at a point over Prey's head. Her ears were lowered.

Prey still didn't raise his head off the table, "Confess to what, exactly?"

This was information he wanted. What had he been arrested for? What did they know? Or what did they suspect?

Taffy's face scrunched up as the standing Guard made a noise next to her, "I'm not at liberty to discuss that information."

"Come again?"

"You heard her perfectly fine the first time!" The stallion barked.

Taffy's ears went back another notch, "Because it relates to an ongoing and active case, I cannot give out details." She answered Prey.

"I am the ongoing 'case'."

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that information." Taffy repeated.

'-this is so borderline legally illegal. They're just using rules to contradict the rules they don't like to force this. It's so underhoof against Captain Nighthawk-'

Prey tiredly shut his eyes, "I'm not asking for the moon and sun on a platter, I'm asking to know what exactly I'm being bullied into confessing."

"...I'm not at liberty to discuss it."

Prey reopened his grainy eyes with effort. Nearly everything felt grainy, the dirt on his wool had worked its way in down to his very skin.

"So just confess, and then they'll slap whatever charges they want on and I'll have 'confessed' to whatever they feel like. You don't even know what they're pretending I've done wrong, do you Taffy? They just sent you in here to tick a box so they can say, 'Oh he had his chance'. Or maybe they were hoping to get lucky, and that I'd be scared enough to actually sign. Have I got all that right?"

He scanned quickly over the written confession in the document. It didn't have any charges listed, it was instead written that by signing, he was confessing to everything being discussed. A circular loop, or rather, loophole. Taffy's forethoughts weren't giving him the answer either, despite him asking leading questions. She really didn't know the charges either, she was just repeating what she'd been ordered to; "I'm not at liberty to say".

Another smattering of sparks struck off the flint and steel of hope, an instant of light before they too snuffed out. Maybe they didn't actually know anything...? No, all this was too big and serious to be over nothing.

"Gloom is dead." Prey stated flatly.

Both the Royal Guard and Taffy reacted. He in surprise, she in hunching her shoulders further. "It's obvious that none of you have any clue about what happened in Haven Hay. If you did, you wouldn't be bothering with this farce."

"And, and what happened in Haven Hay?" Taffy licked dry lips.

Prey rolled his head to the side on the table, now looking at them sideways, "I'm not at liberty to discuss that information."

An indrawn breath of anger, the stallion opening his mouth to bellow. Prey went on just in time.

"But, actually, shouldn't you already know that, Taffy?" Prey furrowed his face in mild confusion, rolling his head back to being level again.

"I-no? If it is classified information then it isn't to be distributed to-"

"No, I mean it *is* classified. So surely you already know it, right?"

Taffy leaned back on the chair, habitually tugging her peaked cap down on her fraying mane, "Look, you've kinda' lost me. What are you trying to say?"

"Huh. That's really odd. I was sure you would be taking sides."

Taffy stopped tugging at her cap and finally made eye contact. It only lasted for a moment though, then she guiltily fixed on a point above his head again, "That's completely wrong. I was ordered to come here specifically as a neutral department in this."

"Not that. Sides. As in, 'sides'." Prey pressed.

The corners of Taffy's mouth turned down minutely in distress, "You're really not making any sense."

'-there's no way. I would have been told if they were in the know. It's just coincidence-'

Prey wanted to leap across the table and rip what he wanted from Taffy's stubborn head, not play out this role, his last precious hours were being wasted on this. But he stuck with it.

He heaved a flat sigh, so very clearly not fooled by her act, "Sides. Secrets and sides. Sides."

More specifically, SIDES. Secret Internal Division of the Equestrian Services.

It was all in the name, a secret government division, one set up within the Guard, originally just the Royal Guard, to covertly monitor it. It wasn't some kind of secret agent programme, it was merely made up of a small group of discreet individuals already working in or with the Guard. They were simply to look out for and report signs of potential corruption or abuse of power, and they had lease to access virtually any information they needed to prove or disprove it. More or less, they were designated whistleblowers.

Simply normal ponies, but with an extra job. Albeit one they had to sign a non-disclosure agreement for.

Nor was it some huge conspiracy or illegal. It was government approved, evidenced by the fact that in all the times Prey had been around Taffy, she'd never had any guilty thoughts relating to it. Why would Taffy feel guilty over performing her job? One she'd been hoofpicked for? Indeed, she was proud of her own integrity, evidenced by how SIDES had hired her. However, SIDES was

definitely supposed to be secret from the ISND. If the wider Guard knew of it, any who abused their positions would simply hide their activities better.

Prey had known something was up the moment they'd come back to all those files Taffy didn’t want the Royal Inspectors to know she had, having been 'hidden' in their office. So he'd looked into it when the opportunity presented itself, while doing some other work with the Night Guard down in the Records Department. He'd only needed to listen in on the thoughts of a total of exactly three minds, and found out about SIDES. You couldn't keep secrets for long from a mind leech.

Unless you were a Solar Guard in armour. Or a changeling. Or alicorn.

Compared to all the vile, horrifying, and dangerous secrets Prey knew, Taffy's was small. But it wasn't small to Taffy. Thoughts of disciplinary punishments, censure, and the shame of failure rushed through Taffy's mind.

'-oh sugar! How did I mess up? What did I do wrong? Sugar, sugar, sugar!-'

The Guard unicorn was lost, oblivious to what was being said. He was just angry that Prey was spouting nonsense.

"Enough stalling. Sign or you're going straight back into your cell."

Prey flicked his eyes to the stallion, then to Taffy. He frowned, "Oh yes, it's a secr-... Hm. Then how am I supposed to-It's important. But if I can't say, then how?"

Taffy's furtive eyes darted sideways to the stallion and for a moment she considered asking him to leave, but that was dumb, there was no way he'd leave his post and break all the rules. So instead, she hurriedly stood up and pushed her way around the table to Prey's side.

She bent in close, into Prey's personal space. Close enough to touch, "How do you guys even know about that?" She whispered.

Prey lifted his head off the table and leant in even closer to the side of Taffy's head. He brought his mouth close, and reached up with his small hoof to cup Taffy's ear.

"*I have no time left for these games*."

The Royal Guard, who was already composing how he was going to formally put down in writing about the liaison officer breaking protocol, only saw Taffy stiffen up at whatever the precocious brat was whispering in her ear. And kept whispering. He couldn't hear the low words, but whatever the lamb was whispering about, it was quite lengthy.

Taffy wasn't even saying anything back, just standing rigidly frozen in the same posture. Was she even blinking?

He snorted impatiently. How much could one dirty lamb say? They still weren't done, he just kept whispering away.

Why, the foal could be repeating the same thing over and over, so monotonous was the drone of his voice, but since Taffy was still listening without interjecting, it was obviously a long story.

And *still* ongoing.

'-this is getting ridiculous. Hurry it up, or else-'

With no warning, Taffy stiffly straightened back up, and then suddenly struck the lamb.

"Ahh!" Prey was knocked backwards as the stool fell, getting trapped in the corner between the wall and table. A tiny spot of blood coloured Prey’s fur.

For a moment the Guard dithered, wondering what the prisoner could have said that was so offensive as to deserve getting hit, but he was still going to have to write this up now-And Taffy wasn't stopping in her attack. She was trying to stamp on the downed prisoner.

The lamb was trapped in the corner, the fallen stool tangled up, and Taffy was stomping down hard, trying to trample the squirming lamb.

"Hey! Enough!"

Taffy didn't listen.

"I said enough! Halt at once!" His training finally jolted him forwards.

Taffy still didn't turn or stop. It was then that he realised she wasn't going to.

"What the buck? Enough! Enough!" He lunged forwards, grabbing at her with both magic and his hooves.

She threw back a rear leg and kicked him off, not stopping, still just trying and failing to crush the lamb, who was shouting shrilly for help.

"Stop, Stop!"

He grappled with her, not attacking her, just trying to drag her away. He wasn't in any real danger, he was a stallion, taller, stronger, and wearing armour unlike her. But she was thrashing about wildly, hard enough to jerk herself free. She was actually struggling, not letting herself get dragged away after trying to get a few cheap shots in.

"Hey, stoppit! Taffy, what do you-? Ow! Cut it out!"

He heard the clank of the gate being opened behind him, as the pegasus Guard finally stopped watching and came in to help subdue Taffy.

"Has she gone mad!?"

"What the buck are you doing Taffy!?"

Together, they dragged Taffy back, one on each shoulder. The lamb was still cowering in the corner-No he wasn't. He'd crawled under

the table to hide instead, down by all their hooves.

The lamb suddenly darted out from under the table into the tangle of their legs. "W-? You tryin' to get trampled-?!"

Prey threw his ribbon in the unicorn Guard’s face and grabbed the passing leg of the pegasus, around the unprotected fur above the shin-guard.

The ribbon stuck to the one's face, and Prey touched the other.

'*Idiots*.'

Stupid, blind, self-important, stubborn idiots who thought they knew best. Idiots always messed up even the best laid plans. In this case, the idiots had messed up on the Royal Guard’s side.

Taffy was stupid enough not only to let Prey, a prisoner who had every incentive to trick her, get under her skin, but then willingly move close enough for the same prisoner to touch. She might not know about his touch-based mind magic, but what if he'd bitten her? Or stabbed her in the eye?

The unicorn stallion had been stupid enough to fall for the act when Taffy suddenly broke character, stopped responding, and began attacking their prisoner without reason, all without noticing that she actually missed every attempted kick and stomp. Besides the first.

The pegasus Guard had been stupid enough to abandon his post to help out his friend with a sudden emergency situation, thinking it would only take a moment. Without flying away to get help.

It was because Taffy was one of them, a fellow Guard, so it hadn't occurred to them to raise the alarm, but instinctively move to fix the problem themselves first. If it had obviously been Prey, like if he'd been trying to run or attack, their reactions would have been very different, but he was getting beaten into a corner, not the instigator, so in the heat of the moment they'd dismissed him.

Prey'd had long enough when pretending to whisper in Taffy's ear to work his way past her mental defences, break down her will, and implant his own simple commands. There'd been no time to read her memories, even at the speed of thought, he'd only had time to take very crude control. He could have killed her with a touch, but a bag of meat without a mind couldn't follow orders. He could have driven her mad, but that would have had issues of its own.

After a tense four minutes, Prey opened his eyes and removed his hoof from the glassy eyed pegasus, who slowly turned and began marching back to his post outside the barred gate. Taffy had stopped doing anything at all, and was just standing there, staring at nothing, chest slowly rising and falling. Only then did Prey turn his attention to the last Royal Guard.

The unicorn's whole body was locked up. Tremors and shivers were wracking his frame. The ribbon was coiled around his far-too-pale face and horn, and in his bulging eyes tiny blood vessels were starting to pop.

"Idiot." Prey tiredly repeated, placing his hoof on the stallion's leg.

'Oh what wonders you will see, when you cease to run from me~'

'Where is Crimson?'

Taffy's mind provided the answer.

Crimson had already actually been released. Prey was the only one with a warrant, and after officially confirming his identity and right to carry a wingblade, they were all out of excuses to hold him. So after being detained in the Guard Compound cells for four hours, and also being checked over by a Guard doctor, he'd been released. And then escorted out when he refused to leave. But he was out.

Good. That was good, Prey told himself. Good. As if anything could be referred to as 'good' anymore. But if the word could be stretched that far, it was at least good that Crimson wasn't being imprisoned

overnight.

Prey so desperately wanted to go to Crimson. But he was out of time. This last plan was for Crimson, too.

'How are the Solar Guard involved?' He asked next.

None of the three ponies knew the reason for the Solar Guard's presence, or at least no more than he'd already worked out for himself. But no, they didn't know the exact reason, only Captain Shining Armour plus the Solar Guards themselves did. Prey left that question and moved on. He had not the time to waste.

'When will your shifts end?' Prey checked with the two Royal Guards.

Soonish, in a little under an hour and a half.

'When is someone going to actually check on me in the cell?'

They didn't know. Taffy had been sent to do just that, and once she reported back that he hadn't signed the confession, who knew? But probably, he'd be left to stew in the gloomy cell. So at least not for three hours, maybe longer.

'What is Luna doing?'

As expected, they didn't know. An alicorn's schedule was all their own. Even if no one else could, Luna was going to be the one to catch him in the end. Not because of skill, intelligence, or strategy. Simply because she had all the magical might of an alicorn to brute force any problem that frustrated her. Unfair.

'When is Captain Nighthawk returning to Canterlot?'

Again, they didn't know, but since they weren't Night Guards, it had been unlikely they would've in the first place, but Prey checked anyway. However, he did get the impression Nighthawk didn't have a scheduled return yet. The disaster in Haven Hay would take weeks, even months to sort out, and he was going to be needed twenty-four-seven for at least the first little while. So there was no possible reprieve or assistance for Prey coming from him.

'When is my trial supposed to be?'

The answer was rather shocking. Tomorrow morning. They weren't even being subtle about rushing this through and skipping the lesser legal delays where they could get away with it. It was just more proof this was going to be a sham trial. Prey wanted to close his eyes and bury his head, he was just so weary of it all. But he didn't, because he had no time.

This was all still so fast, so unreal. The strange sensation of not having any more time... it would almost have been liberating, if it weren't so irreversibly damning. He would have time to cry again, later, once he'd executed this plan. He'd have all the time in the world inside a cell in Dreverton to cry.

His own reaction caught him off guard as he thought the prison's name. Prey staggered on his hooves, a wave of nausea going through him like putrid sea water. '*Dreverton*. I'm going back to Dreverton.'

No. There was no time. There was only a single one-in-a-hundred chance left. Not for him, but-

'No time for weeping.' Prey bent his mind away from spiralling down that black sinkhole with bars of iron. He mentally seized hold of Taffy's mind. Her fragile mindscape trembled and nearly cracked at his caustic touch.

'Where are the Elements of Harmony?'

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Prey had not forgotten.

He had *never* forgotten, no, not even for a minute.

When he woke up, when he was in the shower, when he was struggling over difficult paperwork, when huffing up a steep flight of stairs, when yawning from overwork, snidely joking with Gloom, talking to Crimson, trudging down the dark sewer tunnels, dissecting changeling corpses, drawing runes, riding on the train, fitfully sleeping, and especially not while cowering inside a flooded,

slowly collapsing train carriage beneath the wrath of a giant storm. At no point along the line had Prey forgotten.

How could you forget witnessing an impossible miracle, the resurrection of a dead person?

How could you forget being denied access to the same miracle?

How could you forgive that?

Prey hadn't. Prey couldn't. Prey wouldn't.

He'd been denied, Luna telling him to leave it alone, that the magic of Harmony was beyond his reach.

She had no idea, absolutely no idea of the sheer lengths Prey would go to in order to survive. But even survival was only number two on The List.

Number one, the impossible dream. Bring back Fleece and his mother. And since he was willing to do whatever it took to survive...

Forget the most important goal of them all? Give up like Luna told him to?

Impossible.

Prey had never forgotten the Elements of Harmony. He'd never put them from his mind.

The mystic gemstones could bring back the dead. He'd seen it. He'd been there that night. That meant the impossible was possible. And it had changed everything.

All he had to figure out was how to replicate the miracle. It was possible. It could be done.

That was what Prey had been slowly building towards ever since then. Once he knew it was possible, all his long term goals had shifted to devising a way to force the Elements of Harmony into bringing back the two most important people to have ever lived.

Prey was no fool, he knew he'd at best only ever get one shot at it. Luna, or worse, her sister the Sun Wolf, would certainly catch him soon after he stole the Elements. Not immediately, but definitely soon after.

He'd only have a narrow window to try to use them. So he had to be absolutely certain his attempt was going to work, and that he could get both Fleece and his mother safely out once it was done.

He could face alicorn wrath and die afterwards if absolutely necessary, if it meant they had been safely smuggled out of Equestria. That was fine. His own life was only number two on The List.

So that was why Prey had been waiting. Once he was absolutely confident in his preparations, then he would have enacted the plan, briefly stolen the Elements, possibly their Bearers too if need be. But he hadn't gotten as far as the first step yet; having a foolproof method. But he would have gone through with it without even one second's further delay once he was absolutely confident.

And Haven Hay, the storm, Gloom's death, the Solar Guard, and Luna had all gotten in the way.

There had still been so much left to do, to prepare, to test first. His family would need money once they returned, food, protection, a safe place to flee to, all that and more, because they deserved only the best once they came back to life. He had meant to set all that up beforehoof. There was no time for any of that now.

Prey had never forgotten. But now there was no time left.

His preparations weren't anywhere close to being done, his theory only still at the basic stage. It was all he had now, though. A one in a hundred, no, one in a million longshot.

Just as there was no time, there was no choice. He'd have to take it.

For Fleece. For his mother. And now, for Gloom too.

The Elements of Harmony could only be activated by their Bearers? They were for ponies only? They belonged to Equestria? They

protected the world? Wrong. Prey was prepared to make that into dead wrong if necessary.

The strong take, and the weak suffer? Always take, take, take, yez'?

Well tonight Prey was finally the one who'd be taking everything.

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A pegasus Royal Guard and his partner, a unicorn stallion, stood outside the barred gate to the high security cells inside the Palace. They both had splitting headaches. Both also remembered drinking together the night before, and naturally attributed it to that. Both were none the wiser.

A liaison officer by the name of Taffy Hopes stumbled back into her office, wearing a heavy looking backpack for some reason. Ten minutes later, she wandered into her SIDES superior's office, Cordial Greeting, and said she needed to show him something important. Back in her office. Alone. He marched after her, and even shut the door for privacy himself.

Cordial left ten minutes later in a hurry to go file some very important paperwork that needed to be back-dated. No one was there to check when he slipped it into a different mail basket with an 'Urgent: Level 5' seal on it. Then one at a time, he requested to speak in private to two different Royal Guards who were on duty that evening, and who had shifts patrolling the Inner Palace tonight. Alpha Level and Blue Blaze.

Shortly after, Alpha and Blaze marched up to the door of the Lieutenant on duty's office, and said they had an urgent matter they wanted to bring to his attention. When asked if it could wait, Alpha said no, sorry sir, it can't. Blue Blaze was carrying a large cardboard box on his back, balanced with his wings. Concerned, Lieutenant Twining Ivy ushered them in and shut the door with an order to;

"Not disturb".

Shortly thereafter, Twining Ivy called a sudden change in shift rotation for the coming night, citing a "Surprise inspection". Unusual, but such inspections sometimes happened. Such interruptions gave Twinging Ivy a headache, but it was important to keep everypony on their hooftips occasionally. It was good practice.

Before clocking out for the evening, Captain Shining Armour noticed the sudden schedule change, as he had an excellent memory when it came to his Guards, and knew they were not the same ones as on the assigned rota. However, when he heard the reason, Shining Armour was fine with it. He had a policy not to micromanage his trusted subordinates.

In the shuffle of the surprise inspection, a couple of posts were left unfilled. When Blaze respectfully voiced his concerns in the presence of another squad to Twining Ivy, the Lieutenant thanked him for volunteering, and promptly assigned him and his partner Alpha to cover the gap. Twining Ivy further cited that this was precisely the reason why they did these surprise inspections, so as to help spot potential overlooked problems before they became real issues.

The Royal Vaults were closely guarded at all times of the day and night. There were four vaults, purposefully separated and individually monitored to prevent a complete loss if one should ever actually be breached. But for all the regulations and enchantments surrounding each Royal Vault, guarding them was considered one of the most boring duties in the Palace Guard. You never went inside the vaults, all you did was stand outside a massive sealed metal door for six hours, and that was it.

Even on the vanishingly rare occasions you got to open the vault for somepony, (and there was a long, long list of forms, procedures, approvals, and permissions that needed to be completed in advance for that to happen), you still weren't allowed into the vault yourself, even as an escort. Thus, why it was one of the most boring posts.

At quarter past eight in the evening, fifteen minutes before the four bored Royal Guards at Vault One were set to rotate out, their replacements were only just arriving at the Palace to clock in. The four Vaults' shift changes were staggered, so as to never have a moment when all who would be guarding were distracted. As they clocked in, putting on their armour in a locker room, a harried Staff Sargent told them about the surprise inspection and reshuffle.

They were still on Vault duty of course, because of regulations that was one of the postings that couldn't be changed last minute, inspection or no inspection, but it did mean they were going to be ten minutes late in starting. That was fine, these things happened, and besides, they weren't the poor schmucks having to spend even ten more boring minutes standing outside Vault One.

Five minutes later, outside of Vault One, Lieutenant Twining Ivy arrived to inspect the current Guards posted there. He then said they were going to run through the drill of opening the vault. As it was obviously (to them) part of a test, the sentries recited the rule about not opening the vault without the correct prior signed and verified documentation. To which the Lieutenant congratulated them on their commitment to duty even in the face of a superior, smiled, and asked them to check the log.

When they did, they found to their surprise that there was indeed a backdated, vetted, and approved form, which'd apparently been missed having only been filed today. Not to actually enter the vault, merely open it as part of this surprise inspection, which it seemed to them the Lieutenant had actually been planning some weeks in advance. Test openings were covered under protocol, so long as nopony actually entered the vault. Since it checked out, the two key

holders put in this weeks' magical code, inserted their keys and turned them at the same time-

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What seemed like only a minute later, with the drill over, the Guards closed and relocked Vault One, and the Lieutenant went on his way. And again, what seemed like only a few minutes later, their replacements arrived for the night to relieve them. They didn't realise that their replacements were actually ten minutes late, not precisely on time, until they saw the real time when clocking off.

But oh well, these things happened. It hadn't felt like it, but they just mustn't have realised the inspection took that long. But the vault had definitely only been open for a minute, and nopony had gone inside. That they were sure of, and that was the only bit which truly mattered. Now they could focus on sleeping off their headache.

Contrary to the stories and rumours propagating about the public, the Royal Vaults were not actually filled with magical wonders. In fact, they almost exclusively contained the country's mundane treasury. Gold, silver, different stockpiled currencies, deeds, bills of sale and copies of the documentation for loans, diamonds and gems, valuable jewellery, historical art pieces and delicate, (or perhaps controversial) sculptures, documents, magical ores and metals, and finally, yes, a few artefacts. But only a few.

You didn't typically store magical artefacts in the Royal Vaults. Rather, such artefacts were usually individually secured elsewhere, as each required different and specialized containment measures. Also, Equestria did not store any dark magic artefacts they came across if they could help it. If possible, it was the princesses' ironclad policy to always destroy them instead.

So there were no dark artefacts in Vault One, and very, very few normal ones. Less than ten, actually. Nine to be precise. At the time the replacement Guards started their shift at two-oh-four-one hours in the evening, there were only three left.

On their new assignment, Blue Blaze and Alpha Level went and replaced their two fellow Royal Guards standing watch over the high security cells holding their total of one overnight prisoner. If anypony was to come by and ask anything about the lamb, the two Guards would swear by Celestia they'd checked through the peep hatch at the start of their shift, as per protocol, and yes, the lamb was sitting quietly inside and definitely hadn't escaped.

Taffy left via the Guard Compound gate late that evening, carrying a rather large backpack. Her leaving late wasn't unusual, the few ponies who noticed or exchanged goodbyes with her knew she often did overtime. The backpack she carried was a little unusual, but only a little. It was after all, Taffy.

Cordial Greeting, who had left fifteen minutes earlier, met Taffy three streets away from the Palace. Blank eyed, he passed her a parcel wrapped in brown scrap paper, and left without even a word. Incidentally, and completely unrelated, Cordial Greeting as her superior in SIDES, just happened to be one of the ponies in the Records Department who could look at Royal Vault storage lists, and see what was stored where. He wasn't supposed to, but he could. Not that he would, obviously.

Nopony was observing her, but if any had been this late as night fell, to their view Taffy took an abrupt turn, then another, not heading back to her home. She stepped behind a row of dustbins for a minute, outside the pools of streetlight. A minute later, now with a limp and an empty backpack, Taffy left and this time finally did return to her house. Much like the rest, she had no inclination anything were wrong.

Only a blasted headache.

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It should not have been that simple. But with mind magic, planning, and lack of care for future consequences, it was. Like a domino effect.

One fell and affected the next, mind controlling one person leading into another, and when all the dominos finished toppling, Prey was left holding the six precious Elements of Harmony, wrapped up in brown scrap paper.

The obscenely gilt and bedecked jewelled case the six artefacts had rested in on sculpted padding had been left behind in Vault One. No doubt it had passive tracking spells or the like placed upon it. It probably would have sounded the alarm the moment the lid was lifted too, if not for the silk ribbon which had been draped across it beforehoof, and only removed once it was shut.

Inside those brown paper wrappings, the Elements of Harmony now likewise nestled in a tangle with the same ribbon. Just in case.

Prey was ninety-nine percent certain the six gems were so overwhelmingly magical, that they couldn't have any further spells or enchantments laid on them, so any such tracking spell would've had to have been in the carrying case.

Much like water droplets sizzling off a hot skillet, any other magic you tried to lay onto the six Elements would've simply burned right away. Prey had seen the all-powerful, living magic of Harmony with his own eyes. It was so far beyond unicorn magic he couldn't even begin to define the metric of distance. Maybe even alicorn magic, although in those unknown waters, he was as good as guessing in the dark.

But none of that mattered now. It wasn't important. He had them now.

With minimal preparation, and very little time, Prey had stolen the Elements of Harmony.

One would have thought Equestria had learnt their lesson the first

time, what with the incident with the griffins. Well, they had been locked away inside the Palace Vaults this time, but still.

'I don't care. Even if this is all an elaborate trap, I don't have any time to worry about future consequences. With no time left, there is no future.'

Prey delved into the sewers. The wickerwatch and its hex greeted him. He slipped into the darkness of the pipes, and soon after, climbed into the rocky tunnels of the cavern.

Prey didn't almost cry when he finally limped on shaking, aching hooves into his lair. He *did* cry, as he passed the barrier of runic defences and set hoof into safety.

His lair, his wonderful, hidden, safe lair.

The million tiny fragments of shattered quartz, mixed into the gravel of the cavern's floor, glittered like his very own sea of tiny stars as he lit the crystal lanterns one by one. This right here, this cavern, with the scoured rock walls, the makeshift plank walkways, the crates of supplies and provisions, and layer upon layer upon layer of invisible runes, this cavern right here was the pinnacle of all his accomplishments. In here, he was at his safest.

Safe from all but an alicorn, that is. In the bottom of his heart, Prey somehow knew that the Sun and Moon Wolves would still be able to find and get him, even hiding in here. Nothing else in the world could threaten him in here. Nothing but them.

It wasn't fair. Why did they get to be alicorns? Why did they get the right to abuse their alicorn magic just for virtue of breathing, when after countless hours and sacrifices, his very best efforts might only just slow them down?

'Here is where I will make my final stand,' Prey placed the brown paper bundle down, 'Succeed or fail, I will keep trying over and over until Luna drags me from this lair herself.'

Prey was hungry. He was thirsty. He was exhausted, cried out, and

grief numbed.

But there was no time for his weaknesses.

Prey drained a waterskin and threw it aside, shoved as many hoofuls of dried oats into his mouth from a barrel as he could in ten seconds, recklessly threw back a dried karris seed from his potion supplies for the boost of false energy it gave, and then rushed to begin.

But first-

-But first, Prey took out the last memories taken from Gloom. He ever so carefully transferred them into the shining bone of a cleaned pony's skull, dipped in fresh blood, and fixed it all inside a runic circle he'd created months ago and corrected minutes ago.

And then-

-And then, the Elements of Harmony.

Six brilliant, glittering, almost glowing multifaceted ignius gems. A red bolt-shaped ruby, a teardrop aquamarine, an ice diamond, an orange sphere of citrine, a rose-pink opal, and a six-pointed amethyst star.

At a stumbling run, Prey carried the open paper bundle over to his largest magical scanning array, one able to uncover a multitude of different things, from the variations of all types of known magical signatures from second to second to spectrums of light invisible to Prey's naked eye. Prey placed the six Elements right in the very middle. He took a deep breath, braced himself, and whipped away his ribbon.

No burning living light smote him. But neither did anything else happen. Taking his ribbon with him, Prey exited the runic circle and got to work.

The time he already didn't have was running out.

'A stitch in time, running through the hangmare's twine～'

One night he was sure he would be alive. One night to truly live. One night left. Just him, all alone inside a lair buried under the mountain.

'Let it please be enough.'

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Word had come down from the top, the very top. From Princess Luna. Clan Myrrdon's central role in causing the massacre was to be kept silent. Nopony yet alive from Haven Hay knew the storm's true origins. And now none would. Those who had contact with the rogue thestrals had died in the storm. Only the Night Guard and three Royal Guards knew, and they would be ordered to secrecy.

Supposedly it was for the good of the two thestral clans who still had to live in Equestria, and who had remained loyal. If not, they would be reviled, blamed, and hated for the traitorous actions of Myrrdon. More than they already were reviled, blamed, and hated for everything else.

This order was to protect the loyal thestrals. The blame would instead be laid at the hooves of the Heights family. A lie, and a miscarriage of justice, but one that would be allowed. Because the Heights family were dead. They had not outflown the storm, and their shattered bodies had been found on the hillside as consequence of their pathological need to fly. Their hubris drew them unto the vengeful sky, and mother nature answered their call. As such, they were no longer alive to contradict any story, and in a twisted way, safe from any vengeful retaliation. Wasn't it better to protect thestrals who were still alive? At least that was the logic laid out, no matter how unpalatable it was to swallow. The thestrals had no faith that pegasi would now feel anywhere near the same weight of prejudice that would have been heaped upon them.

The Night Guard would simply not correct the witness statements of all the surviving Haven Hay ponies, who were blaming the weather tower ponies for everything.

In his office inside the Night Guard section of the Palace, Screech was sitting slumped at his overflowing desk. Outside, the half-moon

looked down on the dark world through its lidded gaze.

Screech held his head in the crook of his wings. With Captain Nighthawk left behind, and the time it had taken making his way to Haven Hay and back, he was far behind on his workload. The Night Guard were back down to operating on a near skeleton staff, yet again. The stacks of papers, scrolls, and files on his desk were evidence of that. He only had to open his eyes to be reminded.

Screech didn't open his eyes, nor return to his work. He just sat there.

The malady wasn't the overwork. It had never been about the work. Heavier than all his duties, was the weight of only one life. And it had been so much more than one.

Haven Hay. Each and every member of the ISND and the fates they now faced. Clan Myrrdon. The traitors' final escape. The gag order. What was happening now, and what had happened before. The closed-door trial for Prey in the morning.

For the first time since that glorious moment, when the clans had first learnt of Luna's return and gladly seized upon her offered hoof to re-join Equestria, Screech thought:

'Maybe I can't do this. Maybe I'm not strong enough.'

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Trying with all the Elements inside a runic circle.

Trying them individually one at a time.

Trying in different combinations. One and five. Two and four. Three and three. Two, two, and two. One, two, and three.

Trying them with the gems touching, and not touching.

Trying to use an array to push magic through them.

Trying the same while placing them in combination again.

Trying using a different array to attempt to pull magic out of the Elements.

Trying the same in the various potential combinations.

Trying with a drop of his own blood, as a link to Fleece and their mother.

Trying using a pony body taken from the city morgue, kept fresh inside a runic array.

Trying with both his blood and the body together.

Trying the Elements in their combinations, both touching and not touching the dead body.

Trying voicing what he wanted to happen out loud.

Trying asking nicely, or ordering, or begging the gems, individually and together.

Trying the same again in Zebrican, the deer tongue, Griffonian, and even singing his wishes in verse.

Trying to invoke them by listing out each corresponding Element's virtue while holding them.

Trying to invoke them while not holding them.

Trying under various light levels, and seeing if fire had any visible effect.

Trying to extend his mind magic into the inanimate gemstones.

Trying while polishing them, like in stories of genies in lamps.

Trying while wearing the too-big tiara, and the other five strung around his neck.

Trying with his precious ribbon both on, and off.

Prey tried everything he could conceive of that he thought might work. And also things he didn't think would work. And also things

he knew wouldn’t work, but had to tick off anyway.

And at the end of it all, the six gemstones of Harmony sat in a small pile on the stone stump of a shattered stalagmite. In the crystal lanternlight, they glittered faintly in all the rich colours of the rainbow.

None of it worked. Inert. Nothing. No reaction.

The false, jittery energy of the karris seed was still running through Prey's system. He made himself stand still. He breathed in. Held it. Breathed out.

'Don't give up.' He couldn't afford to give up. Everything he had tried had been for naught.

'That just tells me one thing beyond a doubt.' Prey squared his thin shoulders and turned in the direction of the lairs' entrance.

These Elements were more or less just highly specialised and magical keys. Keys are made for locks, or doors.

'Without their Bearer, these are just pieces of tasteless jewellery. I can work with that. I can fix that.'

The Elements were just keys. The Element Bearers were the locked doors, somehow opening up to the power of Harmony on the other side. Usually, that is. It made sense in Prey's head that was how they were supposed to be used. As keys to a mystical lock.

Except, Prey knew that wasn't the entire case. They could be used in the right circumstances without their specific Bearer. He'd seen Luna do it that night, when Harmony had stepped in to resurrect the dead Bearer of Laughter. So, a key, but one where if push came to shove, it could bypass the lock entirely.

'Yes. I can work with that.'

The six Element Bearers all lived in the small town of Ponyville for some reason. That was within Prey's reach tonight, if he hurried. He could take the greenstone tunnel down to the mountain's base again, and follow the train tracks right into the heart of the sleeping

pony town, exactly like he and Lemon had done that one night before.

Six ponies, only two of them unicorns. Prey knew who they were, where they were supposed to live, their families, appearances, and public history. Because of course after learning they were in fact real, he and Lemon had gathered information on them.

That was all Prey needed. Tonight, he would get all six of them. He would force the Elements of Harmony to activate.

'Break their minds. Take their memories. Puppet their bodies and force them to use the Elements. Maybe the magical binding to use the Elements is their blood? Or maybe their soul?'

Blood magic. Black magic. Voodoo magic. Prey knew many ways to afflict and twist even the immaterial soul, even if he didn't understand the how or why of souls.

'And if they still refuse to activate, I know killing the Bearers will definitely make them react. I'll feed them one by one into a grindstone until they activate. Or until there's no one left.'

The six famous and adorned national heroes, the Elements of Harmony. They'd defeated Nightmare Moon and Discord through the living power of Harmony. Head on, standing together, with the power of Harmony, it didn't seem like there was any single monster they couldn't overpower.

Prey wasn't big, or loud, or powerful. He had no pride. He wasn't going to fight them. He was going to *murder* them in their sleep. And it was going to be easy.

Prey wasn't going to overpower or best them in a fight. They weren't even going to see him coming. He was simply going to walk in while they slept, and poke them. Just one touch.

Prey paused mid-step on the walkway. There was a silent ringing going off in the back of his head. And it was only now that Prey realised he'd been hearing it for a while. It was coming from the runic arrays outside of his lair.

The air turned to ice in Prey's lungs. He choked, gagged. Luna. She'd finally come.

He'd failed, he'd run out of time, he wasn't going to have a chance to go down to Ponyville. It was too late! His runic defences could stop anything, anything that is but an alicorn.

Runic illusion arrays, memory alteration, attention deflection, compulsion, notice-me-not, and camouflage runes hid not just the lair's entrance, but the very tunnels themselves. And those arrays were merely the least harmful of the defences Prey had built up over many months of tireless effort.

To walk into the tunnels, to willingly try and reach the crystal lair... it was death. Burned, melted, bisected, shattered, electrocuted, frozen, crushed, displaced, inverted, snapped, poisoned, suffocated, drowned, mind-killed, and a hundred and one other ways to die.

There were protections against everything Prey could think of. Arrays against heat in all forms he could conceive, against gases, poisons, smoke, against magic, teleportation, against transmuting the stone, to deflect velocity, to repel metals, energies, water, ice, extreme temperature fluctuations, animals, hexes, black magic, scrying, scanning, voodoo doll magic, everything he could manage.

But Luna... Luna was an alicorn.

She had alicorn magic. She was immortal.

'She's coming! It's finally happening. She's on her way through the tunnels right now! It's too late, my time is up, it's, it's-!'

Prey stopped. It was the wrong kind of alarm.

It wasn't the array to signal a magical assault. The feedback runes were pinging, but not screaming at him. It was a different sort of alarm.

Like a rusty cog, Prey's mind struggled to grind into place.

'It's... it's not an attack?'

Like being stuck at the bottom of a snowed-under mountain pass, waiting for inevitable avalanche to obliterate everything, he'd been so tense that he'd immediately jumped to the assumption that- but no. It wasn't Luna.

'But, if not her, then what...?'

Prey blinked exhausted eyes, adrenaline still flooding his body, and tried to hammer his tired mind into working. So it wasn't Luna, it wasn't an attempted attack, the defence arrays weren't attacking back, the runes were letting them past without issue.

'Lemon Pink's arrived back in Canterlot already?'

No. Not Lemon Pink. Rather, the only other person in the whole world who had been keyed into bypassing his arrays without coming to harm.

It was shameful, how long it took to connect the dots. 'Oh? *Ohhhhh*. Oh.'

'Oh Zoma'Grika.'

Prey wildly cast about him. He snatched up the Elements of Harmony, hesitated, doubled back and threw them into an empty cloth bag, then rushed down the boardwalk for the entrance, leaving the crystal lanterns lit and everything behind.

He tried to run out of the lair. The absolute fastest his body could manage was instead a limping stagger.

He met Crimson around the first turn in the tunnel, coming the other way.

Prey stumbled to a stop breathing heavily, the drawstring bag slung over his chest.

"Oh."

Crimson lowered the cheap, bad lantern he was holding up. It

flickered wildly with every uncertain motion of Crimson's good wing.

"Prey."

Crimson slowly put the lantern down onto the rough stone of the floor. Outside of its pool of flickering illumination, the solid black shadows pressed close in the cramped tunnels, far deeper and more menacingly than they should. The hex reached even as far as here.

"I, I wasn't sure. I thought I was imagining it. But I smelled, I thought it couldn't be, I mean my talent... I thought I was crazy, hallucinating the scent of your blood out on the streets above." He cast about the low tunnel, "Am I hallucinating? Is this real?"

Prey sagged against the cold stone of the tunnel's curved wall. He felt so tired, despite the false energy of the karris seed swirling in his blood.

"No, you're not hallucinating. This is real. Hello by the way, Crimson."

Bad luck. The worst of luck. Pure dumb chance striking again. How else could Crimson's special talent let him come across the one trail in the whole of Canterlot to follow? And also track it unerringly all the way back down to here?

He saw that Crimson had cleaned himself up a bit at least. Wiped off the blood and dirt, tied his mane back out of his eyes, and changed the bandages on his wing and hind leg. He still looked completely awful.

Crimson's feathers and fur hadn't been tended to at all. His face was pale, and there was a sheen of sweat caught in the flickering light, brought on by the pain of moving, despite whatever medication he'd been given. But it was the grief that was crushing Crimson's posture, dulling his eyes, and bowing his head.

"You should not have come down here. Not at all. Do you even know how lucky you are that I-? If it had been anyone else to follow me-", Prey bit off the rest.

"How could I not, when I suddenly stumbled across your scent?" Crimson asked blankly. Then almost as an afterthought, "You're supposed to be in prison."

"Yes. I was. I escaped. I'm out of time. There was something I have to do first, though."

"Out of time? What does that mean?"

"Out of time. End of the line. Out of rope. No more stairs. I'm, I'm sorry Crimson. There was so much more I still wanted-! Wanted to show you so much more. I'm sorry."

Crimson's dull eyes sharpened in alarm, "W-wha-! You, I, you can't be dying? How? Poison? You can't be sick!"

"No. I might as well be. Luna, L*u***N**a, she's going to throw me away. Throw us away." Prey held up one forehoof, snarling down at the golden tracer band, "I HATE her."

"That's wrong. That has to be wrong. That's not what she said to me at all."

"What? She, Luna? Luna said?"

"She didn't say that. I mean, what she said was that she would deal with this. Your arrest, I mean. She... didn't want to talk about Haven Hay, not yet. Or about G-Gloom." Crimson's voice broke down at the end.

"What are you talking about?"

"Luna said…" Prey noticed Crimson hadn't added her title. Maybe he finally no longer saw her as his rightful ruler. "…I went and told her everything, and she said she was going to take care of it."

"Yes, 'take care of it', as in, get rid of me. Of *us*. Because that's what she said to me." Prey spat.

"No. No no. You must have misunderstood her. She promised, she promised me that at least this one thing was going to turn out fine." Crimson's disagreement held all the tones of desperation.

"Just like she's kept the rest of her promises? Copper Pot had a promise from the Night Guard, and therefore Luna. Much good it did him. I had a promise from Luna. Much good it did me." Prey was tired. He limply waved his forehoof, showing off the tracer band again, "We're prisoners, Crimson. That's never changed. She's a princess, an alicorn. Immortal. We're nothing to her."

"You're not *listening*." Crimson's teeth ground together, "Or you're not hearing. We're not getting thrown away. Luna promised that you're going to be fine. Why can you only imagine the worst? Why are you giving up on me?!"

"I'm not giving up, but my time is up-"

"No, you're just giving up! Because of Gloom, because it's all gone, you just, you're just giving up! And you're going to leave me behind."

Prey's mouth twisted, "I, I don't want, it's not like I want to go. I'm not choosing this, it's Luna. Crimson, she's an alicorn! She has all the power. I'm not choosing this, she's *making* it happen."

Crimson's hoof ground into the gritty stone, "You're not getting taken away. Luna promised. She said she'd fix your trial. You, you need to go back." He said in realization.

"Go back?" Prey echoed dumbly.

"Go back to the Palace. They can't know you tried to escape or- Do they know? Were you seen? Oh. Oh no. Did you kill anyone to escape?" Crimson groaned miserably, for a moment swaying on his hooves dangerously.

"No, no I didn't. And nobody saw me. I... do, do you need to sit down?" Prey pushed himself off from resting against the tunnel's wall in concern.

"Thank the moon for that." A harsh exhale of air sprang from Crimson. It took a moment before Prey realised it was a bark of unhappy laughter.

"It, it will still be fine then. You can go back, nobody will be any the

wiser."

"What? No. No I'm not going back." Prey shook his head emphatically.

"Prey, please. You need to. It's the best chance of getting out of this. What, were you going to try running?" Crimson looked at him intently.

"Run? From Luna? With *these* still on? No point, but time's up and before then I must-"

"See? You said it yourself, running won't work. So you have to go back. You can't make this any worse. Please. I can't lose you too." Crimson begged.

Prey hated that. Crimson should not beg. They shouldn't have to beg because of Luna. Prey steeled himself.

"I'm sorry Crimson. If I could do anything to stop this... but the world isn't fair, and it's no longer up to me-"

"It is! It is up to you. You just need to go back and not tell anyone about escaping."

Prey waited to make sure Crimson was finished, bouncing his leg with nervous energy. "It's no longer up to me. And even if any of what you hope were true turned out to be so, which it won't, it doesn't matter anymore anyway."

Crimson opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again, and then cut off in distraction; "Prey... are you, are you on something?"

"What? Oh, right. Yes, karris seeds. You remember them, the same ones back from Mayflower? Anyway, yes, I ate one of those."

Crimson looked like he desperately wanted to ask something else more important but had to know this first, "Why?"

Prey kept bouncing his hoof, "I needed the energy. I'm just so, so tired. Just like you are, I imagine. But I have work to do before tonight ends."

It must have been because Crimson knew Prey better than anyone else now alive, aside from Lemon Pink, because he slowly asked, yellow eyes fixed on Prey's face:

"What work?"

For a fraction of a second, Prey hesitated, but what did it matter? Crimson couldn't be accused of being guilty for Prey's actions here. Prey pulled the cloth bag around on the loop over his chest, so he could open it.

"This. This is why even if any of what Luna promised you were true then, it isn't going to matter now. Because I stole these for my work. Work I need to hurry up and complete before the sun rises."

Even in the cheap lantern's weak flickering light, the six large faceted gems inside the bag caught the light in all the way only precious stones could.

Crimson blinked once. Twice. "Am I supposed to know what those are? Beyond being jewellery, I mean?"

"Ah. I forgot you wouldn't know. These here are the six Elements of Harmony."

It took a second for it to click. Crimson was not an Equestrian, he had not grown up surrounded by ponies espousing the virtues of Harmony his whole life. But after Nightmare Moon and Discord, there was nobody who couldn’t know about the Elements of Harmony.

They were the superweapon which had twice saved the world. Crimson's eyes widened, and he stepped forwards, not away, in alarm. He had never been the sort to step away from what was wrong.

"Are those really-? You can't just take, I mean, the world needs those, like with Discord. How did you even-?" He spluttered.

Prey opened his mouth to explain, but there was too much, so many parts of the tale, and he had no time. So instead, he lead with the only information which mattered.

"They can bring a person back to life. Maybe only a pony. But they can resurrect the dead."

Crimson stopped breathing. His wings were trembling at his side.

"Prey..." He started tremulously, "...You, you're not, not just saying that, are you? Please, do you really mean it? Can it really be the truth?"

"Yes. It's the truth." Prey tipped the Elements back into the bottom of the bag, and pulled the drawstring tight.

Crimson trembled all the harder, "... How?" He whispered.

"I don't know. But I saw it with my own eyes. Luna was there. There was, there was this pink idiot who got herself killed and-Then Luna used these to bring her back to life. She swore me to secrecy. Ha! Screw her. She doesn't get to hoard resurrection for her favourites only."

"H-how... how does it work? Prey, there's always a price, so how... to bring back, the price, it must be. So how?" Crimson croaked. Prey could see he so desperately didn't want to believe it, didn't want to let hope deceive him and then hurt him all the worse. You can't help but clutch at the burning flame of hope when you're lost in the dark, even as it slowly sears you to the core.

Hope really was the cruellest, because it always cut the deepest in the end.

Prey had no time for hope. Only action. He was kicking to keep his head above the sea of panic in his heart, because the moment he stopped fighting he'd sink. There was no time left.

"Crimson, I need to go. We need to go, because you need to get out of these tunnels and never come back down here. Do you understand? I need to go, and you can never, ever, ever risk coming back down here."

"I can't just sit back and let you do this by yourself. It's Gloom." Crimson protested.

"You will, because I'm not getting out of this. To activate the Elements, I'm going to be killing the Bearers until the Elements bring them back to life. Over and over again until I can figure out how to replicate the effect." Prey said, without a trace of remorse or hesitation. He would do it.

Crimson knew he would, too. And it wasn't just a question of being willing to, but also being able to. Crimson knew he was capable. Bone Rot mines in Mayflower, a mysterious metal feather, the proposed dark magic attempt back in the train carriage to name but a few.

"Those are the Elements of Harmony. We, the world needs those. Them, and the Bearers. They cleansed Luna once already, what if they're needed again?" Crimson stressed.

Of course. The loyal thestral clans' self-imposed deathwatch. Until their deaths, that were. This time around, they'd make sure their dark alicorn goddess did not slip and fall ever again. And that meant the possibility of having the Elements of Harmony cleanse her of Nightmare Moon once again. It was a duty which shouldn't be needed, because why should mortals have to dedicate their entire lives to pandering to the whims of an immortal, making sure she didn't go mad and try to kill the world again?

Prey answered in all truth, "Crimson, I honestly don't care about hypotheticals in the future. This is now. Besides, the Elements will still be left. Only these Bearers will, might, be gone. And they can be replaced anyway."

The Bearers weren't important or special. If the stories were true about how they'd been chosen, the six could be easily replaced with six random ponies snagged off the street. Because apparently, the Elements of Harmony had bonded to the first six ponies they'd come into contact with. It wasn't about being the greatest representative of their Element in the whole world, there were a thousand others out there who were kinder, more generous, more loyal, loving, and worthy. Prey had one right here.

So yes, Prey bet the Bearers could easily be replaced. Just not the Elements themselves, and it was the Elements which had

resurrected the pink earth pony Bearer, not the other way around.

"But you're going to kill them." Crimson stated. It wasn't a question.

"If that'll make these do what I want, then yes. So what?"

So what? The both of them had been prepared to sacrifice a member of Nimbus Feather's squad to try to save Gloom. It was just that they hadn't been fast enough. Neither of them were pretending to be good people. They'd done things they could never take back or atone for. Both of them knew what it was like trapped under the black ice. So what was another six sins on the teetering mountain?

Crimson thought on that. He swallowed, "I don't understand how, but, killing them... will it work? Will it bring back Gloom to us?"

Prey wanted to answer yes. He wanted to say yes so much. But he answered with honesty instead, "I don't know. Maybe. No. Yes? But I have to try."

"No you don't," Crimson looked him dead in the eye, "Don't pretend to be like them. Don't lie and say you have no choice. You don't have to do anything."

"I, okay. I'm choosing to do this. But I'm still going to do it."

"You're still going to do it." Crimson echoed in neutral agreement. He nodded slowly, heavily.

"Prey, I, I don't... I can't believe this is going to work. It just can't. I don't understand magic, but it will fail. Life can't come from death. You can't wash away blood with more blood."

Prey drew in a slow, ragged breath. It hurt his chest, because Crimson's words rang as truth in his ears. He knew it. It was law. Immutable. No matter how many Border Guards he'd killed, it had never brought back the brother he'd lost.

But he'd also seen with his own eyes that it could become true. Under the right circumstances.

Trying to force the Elements of Harmony was not, could not, be the

right circumstances. How could he honestly hope to trick the living power of Harmony?

Prey had to admit it. He couldn't lie, not now, "You're probably right. You feel right. It just wouldn't fit with Harmony if someone like me could- it burned last time- But none of that matters. I'm still going to try."

Crimson drew in a slow breath so deep that it almost appeared as if that was what was causing the lantern's wild flickering.

"Haaaaaa...." He let it all out. Prey waited, twitching. But Crimson wasn't saying anything further, the karris seed's energy boost wasn't going to last forever, and Prey was already sacrificing time he didn't have just standing here.

"Look, I need to go. There's no time, and you mustn't ever come back to these tunnels-"

"Can you please not do it Prey? I'm asking you, just, please don't."

Prey opened his mouth. Nothing came out. He closed it, and then tried again.

"Why? Why would you ask that? You know what it's like, you understand. You know why I'm doing this."

Crimson's shoulders slumped even lower, "I do. I really do Prey. I've sunk so low. But I'm asking you not to."

"Wha-? But you just admitted it! You do know! So how can you ask me not to?" Prey accused.

"Because it won't work. I don't believe it will work."

"It might work." Prey defended.

"You don't believe that any more than I do." Crimson sighed.

"It might."

"It won't. It just won't. I don't understand magic and all those things

like you do, but I do know this; it just won't work. Life can't come from murder."

"But it might!" Prey repeated, pitch rising, "It might. It might bring back Gloom. Isn't even that tiny chance worth taking?"

"It's not about what I want-"

"Yes it damn well is! You want him back, just like I do. So why shouldn't I, shouldn't we, try this?"

"It's not about what I want," It came out as a fierce, broken hiss of desperate longing, "I want Gloom back. I want it. I want it. I want it so badly. But-"

But. It looked like the word wouldn't have been easier to pry out of Crimson's mouth with red hot pliers, "-But it's not about what I want. It's about what Gloom would want."

"Gloom's dead. He can't want anything ever again. Unless we bring him back."

"He would never forgive us. Not for this."

"But he would be alive to not forgive us. I could live with that. Besides, we don't ever have to admit how we brought him back in the first place."

"Prey-"

"And, and! And if it works for Gloom, then maybe..." Prey's jaw worked, and his throat closed up. He couldn't name them, so he said other words instead, "If, if it can work on a pony, then, then maybe it just might work on non-ponies. But if I can't even get it to work for Gloom-"

Prey broke off there. He couldn't finish that sentence. Deep down he knew all of this already. It wasn't going to work, because it wasn't. It just wasn't. Something so righteous and exclusive as Harmony would never lower itself to doing what he wanted, nor allow itself to be so obviously manipulated.

But he still had to try, didn't he?

The stone of the mountain pressed ever closer in the dark. They were alone down here. It was just the two of them, arguing over the death of the Element Bearers, with no one else ever to bear witness.

'I don't have time for this.'

"Are you going to try to stop me?" Prey asked abruptly.

Crimson nodded shallowly, "Yes."

Prey'd asked, already knowing, but the answer still surprised him. Because he'd thought that Crimson for once would be selfish, and not care about the cost to others for once. To take back for once. "What, really? You'll stop me?"

"If I have to."

The cold, queasy feeling in Prey's stomach was seeping into his chest, "And how, exactly, will you stop me?"

"I'll stand in your way." Crimson said simply.

"What, that's it? Just stand in my way? Not call the Guards, or grab me?" Prey checked.

Crimson's eyes tightened with pain, "That hurt. I am your friend. Do you truly think so little of me?"

"Sorry, sorry! I didn't mean it like that. But just, you'll just stand in my way? That's it? That won't stop me and you know it."

"Probably not." Crimson shrugged his one good wing, "I don't know how, but I'm sure you could easily get past me. But you'll have to walk past knowing I asked you not to."

Prey went quiet. Then he tapped a blank section of the rough stone. Crimson stopped moving.

Prey limped forwards and picked up the bad lantern by its handle. Then he squeezed past Crimson without touching him and walked a

few paced up the low tunnel. He put the flickering light back down and then tapped another section.

Crimson jolted in place, finding the tunnel suddenly dark and empty in front of him, and the only light source coming from behind him. He hopped around on three legs, his bad one held just off the stone.

He looked at Prey now with the lantern. Prey looked back, smothering the guilt.

"Yeah, get past me just like that." Crimson sighed.

Prey adjusted the cloth bag still slung across his chest. He glanced away, uncomfortable, "Yeah. Something like that. Come on."

"Come on? Come on where?"

"Me, down to Ponyville. You, away from here. You can't ever come back down here Crimson. I'm serious. It is not safe. Please don't try to." Prey said, hastily turning to face ahead. He couldn't even countenance meeting Crimson's eyes, not knowing what would hurt worse to see there. Anger or betrayal.

"No, Prey, don't. Don't do it, because it won't work. It'll fail, and then you'll be a murderer-"

"I already am."

"You think I care?! We're both killers!" Crimson suddenly snarled, angry at Prey, angry at himself, hating all of it. "But you'll be a murderer in *their* eyes. They'll know. You'll be caught. And then, and then, you'll be locked away forever. *That's* what I care about!"

Oh. So that was what it was all about in the end. Not about the right or the wrong of it at all. It was much simpler and more selfish than that.

'Don't leave me alone too.' Don't do this, don't get arrested, don't get taken away and leave me all alone like Gloom.

Prey frantically searched for an answer to that, but no reasoning he

could come up with was sufficient to answer that plea. It was what Gossamer had cried with outstretched hooves that no one had ever reached back to take, 'Don't leave me all alone!'

Prey hunched up further over the cheap lantern, not turning to meet Crimson's accusing eyes, "It's, it's too late Crimson. My time is up. I said it already. Luna, she, she's going to throw me away. There's nothing left to lose."

There was no tell-tale sound of Crimson's hooves on stone. He wasn't moving towards Prey and the light. Like he was saying that if Prey left, he was going to have to leave him behind all alone, lost in the pitch darkness too.

"No, it isn't too late, you're just misunderstanding. The Princess promised me it was going to be fine. It isn't all lost. Yet. As long as you don't do this, and go back to the cells before anyone notices. Please."

Just as in the end it was all about that, it also all came back to this.

Prey thought it was too late.

Crimson thought it wasn't.

Which of them was right?

Prey... finally faltered. He didn't believe Luna, he hated her. But he trusted Crimson, and loved him.

Tick, tock. Between the 'tick' and the 'tock'. The moment in between that which happened and that which will happen, all still in flux. And suddenly the world was that little bit different. Like everything had shifted one inch to the left, and yet Prey was still standing in the exact same place, now off balance in everything.

A shift of viewpoint, of understanding, it can change so much, and yet so little.

Prey craned his neck back until he was staring straight up at the rock, until his neck hurt, "Why can't we laugh anymore? Where'd it go? Who took it? Why does this...? Why does everything have to be

this? It's always this, just this. I'm sick of having to see these things over and over. Why can't we be happy? Eat sweets, laze in bed, tend to your blood fern, my potted plants. Leave Canterlot forever. I'd like that."

“I’d like that…” He waved a limp hoof without turning, but so Crimson would see the gesture, "I'm not really asking, I know what the answer is; because life isn't fair. I was just... asking no one, I guess."

The rough damp stone above his head didn't answer him. To his shock though, Crimson did.

"This is difficult for me to say right, but... please stop being so arrogant in thinking that Luna is better than you are."

Prey jerked, almost sitting down in shock.

"She makes mistakes too. Has made huge mistakes. Stop assuming she's perfect. And stop thinking I trust her over you. Because I don't. I trust you more than Luna, Prey." Crimson's voice shook with all the conviction he poured into it.

"I trust you more. So can you trust me more than her? I mean, can you trust me that I want this for your sake, not for Luna's?"

Another time between one moment and the next, another abrupt shift of the world under Prey's hooves leaving him unsteady.

Words instead of action. Crimson was trying to persuade him by reasoning alone, refusing to ever resort to force as others would have in his place. In fact, in these rune-inscribed tunnels, it was Prey who had force on his side.

Prey lifted a hoof to the drawstring, feeling the hard tangled shapes of the Elements inside. Return them and give up on his one chance to do this? To walk himself back into his cell after going to all this effort to escape?

What sort of insane logic was that to follow? Prey didn't even want to try.

But he wanted to trust Crimson.

So he stopped and thought on that for a second.

If, if, *if*! If what Crimson said somehow was the truth, then right now, maybe, this wasn't actually his last chance to use the Elements of Harmony.

But only *if*. And yet... and yet if all that was the truth, then his hourglass wasn't actually empty, and his sand hadn't all run through.

And if his time wasn't up, then that meant his 'do or die' rushed attempt to force the Elements wasn't actually necessary.

If all of that were true, then he could stop. He could go back to researching and building a foolproof plan for activating the Elements when he chose to do it for real. For when he would be ready.

He'd stolen the Elements once, with actually very little effort. He could return them, leave no one any the wiser, and then when he was ready, steal them again.

He could also observe the Element Bearers first, along with Lemon's assistance once she returned, and organise a plan to have all six mares captured when he tried this again.

If he chose to believe Crimson, that is.

If. Maybe. Possibly. Potentially. All words to trick yourself into having hope when you already knew better.

'I hate hope.'

It didn't matter if you already knew that the hope was empty. Just like an addict who kept swearing to themselves they finally quit for the last time, you still kept coming back for just one more taste of hope. 'The mind is willing, but the flesh is weak'.

Crimson was still waiting, standing somewhere behind Prey. His wing, side, and rear leg must have been paining him immensely,

but he barely moved as he waited for Prey's answer. Prey was confident he wouldn't have been able to hold up nearly so well with those wounds in Crimson's place, and the electrite feather could only do so much.

"Let me see if I have got this all straight. You want me to walk myself back into my cell, with no idea how this trial is going to turn out, knowing that it's almost certainly a sham, where Luna has already told me to stay silent and not even bother defending myself, and trust in her mercy? Did I get all of it?" Prey asked, staring straight ahead into the dark tunnel.

"No. I want you to also return the Elements."

"Right, also return the Elements of Harmony without getting caught. Now have I gotten everything right?"

"No."

"What else have I missed?"

"I don't want you to trust Luna's word. I want you to trust me instead."

Prey looked down at his forehooves on the stone, seeing the golden tracer bands. Looking down also brought the trailing end of his ribbon into the corner of his view. "You don't ask for the easy things, do you?"

"No. You're my friend. Why would I be asking if they were easy?"

Prey had always said that there were only two things he wouldn't do for Crimson if the pegasus asked. And if he could believe that sneaking back into his cell and standing trial wasn't a risk to his life, then...

"Khe-heh. Congratulations. You're now a national hero Crimson. And nobody will ever know. Because you just saved all six of the Element Bearers in one night."

"That is not funny Prey. Not funny at all." Crimson said solemnly. He sounded sad.

"Not to any*pony* else, I'm sure. To me? It's kind of funny right now."

"No, I meant, I'm not saving their lives. If I could believe their end would bring back Gloom, I'd hold them down myself while you cut their throats. I'm not saving their lives. I'm saving yours for myself. Because I can't keep going alone."

"Ahh." Prey winced, another knife of guilt stabbed into his belly. That was why Crimson sounded so sad, because he desperately wished what Prey had said about their deaths bringing back Gloom could have been true.

"No, you're right. That's not funny at all."

Above the ground and cold stone, the dark, quiet night was draped over the world. Distant stars watched with cold disinterest.

"I will see you soon. When you get out."

"... I hope so. And I really hate hope."

"Then, then we... Prey, we have to go tell Gloom's grandfather. In person. At clan Cilldara."

"Have to?"

"Should, then. Captain Nighthawk is going to write the letter, but..."

"I... yes. Yes we should do that. It's only right."

Near silent, but not quite, limping hoofsteps over cobblestones. The Palace lay ahead, glowing bright and golden even in the night.

"I'm scared."

"I'm scared too, Prey."

Physically, breaking out the high-security cell and escaping the Palace had been hard.

Comparatively, sneaking back in was easy when there were already

mentally compromised Royal Guards on the inside, who wouldn't notice a runt lamb shuffling past under their noses, and wouldn't remember to care even if they did.

Willingly leaving Crimson behind, standing at a servant's entrance, and returning himself to imprisonment, no one else would ever know how hard it was for Prey.

With the sign-off of Cordial Greeting, the Elements were put inside a nondescript deposit bag for Vault One, with the correctly stamped paperwork, and seemingly all the correct paper-trails for the vault worker to unquestioningly open the Vault, temporarily deactivate any security, put them back where they came from, and then lock up and leave. With a little mental nudge to reinforce the 'unquestioningly' aspect.

It should not have been this easy. But it was.

Sitting in the silence of a lead-lined cell again, all alone, waiting for the dawn to come.

"I chose to come back. I made the choice. Just after Discord, I came back. This is all on me. I always knew there was going to be a price."

So slowly, and then so fast, the last hours of pre-dawn morning disappeared. Tomorrow was here.

Prey heard the muffled clank on the other side of the door. Light streamed in. Sunshine in his Solar Guard armour stood looking impassively down at him, horn aglow, levitating the hoofcuffs. There were more Guards in the room behind him.

Tomorrow was today, and the hushed trial was suddenly here.

'I don't even get a last breakfast.'

---I---

Prey hadn't forgotten, and he wouldn't forget either. But, for now,

he'd chosen not to act on it.

Author's Notes:

So, really long chapter here. (Actually just checked, this is the longest chapter yet) Lots happened too. And things continue to pile on. Mounting pressure. Dead line crunch. And a hearty helping of more grim-ole-despair. It just never ends, does it?

The editor and corrector of this lo*ooo*ng chapter was: Panem et Circenses Thankyou!

Also, greenface made this Here

97.7 We Thank You for Your Service

Birds.

In those first few comfortable minutes of warm darkness, lying beneath a woven flax blanket on a litter of padded moss, it was always the birdsong which came to you first. Before even the first splash of light, it was the arrival of the dawn chorus that truly let you know the new day had come.

The deer Fallen Leaf, known to others of his kind as Runner On Swift Leaves, thought those few minutes as you slowly woke up listening to the birds were some of the most special of the day.

Above the intertwined branches of his hut's roof, and outside of the living walls of the holt, the world was waking up.

The scent of fresh dew and the decay of rich leaf-mould, the swaying of tree crowns, the skitter of a squirrel- all of it was special. Because it was a promise from Mother Equus of the gift of a new day.

Every new day was special. Every time the family of the holt rose for their morning meal, the fawns scampering around with inexhaustible energy, it was all wonderfully, contentedly special.

It was all a promise of good things to come for those willing to work for them. Nature provides, for any who took but a moment to look.

Behind his closed eyelids, in the comfort of his self-made moss bed, Fallen Leaf reflexively smiled in his waking haze.

This new holt they had built after fleeing the oppressive, creeping sickness of their old one was one such blessing. Perhaps one year they would go back to the old holt. Perhaps not. The All-Mother guided them where she pleased.

The freedom and bounty of the land was open to everyone. The pony dwellers to the east would be so much happier if they could free themselves of their self-girded bindings. To stake themselves down in one place, to fight against the land for what nature already gave, it was foolishness. If they could but open their eyes, it was so simple.

The world is so wide, and free, and full of promise. Like the truly bountiful harvest of pignuts his brother, Morning Dew Burning In The Sun, had dug out of the edge of the marsh. There were enough of the rich, crunchy tubers to be included in every meal for the whole holt for a cycle. You just had to be willing to work hard and dig for the blessings.

Much like the promise that it was, this new day was promising to be a good one.

The courtroom loomed on all sides.

Circular tiers of seating surrounded him, so they could stare down on Prey from every side. No matter how he turned, there was no way to keep every seat in view.

Not that the tiered seating was filled. This was a closed court session. The powers-that-be didn't want any outside witnesses to their rushed kangaroo court. Nevertheless, gathered here this morning, a wall of specially selected faces in wigs looked down on Prey in united condemnation.

And Prey was locked down here in the dock, physically locked in with hoofcuffs, as if he could somehow have escaped with a Solar Guard standing at each side of the box. The hoofcuffs were redundant. But they'd locked them on anyway, to remind him of his place. To scare him.

Everything about the court was designed to make the prisoner feel small, weak, and guilty. Regardless of their innocence. The severe, unadorned partition wall further cutting him off from the seating, was intended to clearly divide 'him' from 'them'. Every single seat

was placed higher than the dock. He had to stand on his rear hooves and grip the lip of the dock to even see over the edge. Everyone else could sit in comfort and still look down on him.

He was breathing too fast, but he couldn't help it as the judges and jury in their wigs and black robes peered down at him. His nose was filled with the smell of old wood and polish. The courtroom had been here long before his arrival, and would still be here long after he was taken away.

No Night Guards in the stands. No yellow slitted eyes in friendly faces. No Crimson. And no defence lawyer yet.

He hadn't been offered the option. That was against the law, but this whole thing was so obviously a sham. Or had they already assigned a bribed lawyer to him, and they just hadn't arrived yet?

Was that why they were all just staring down at him, waiting? Why hadn't they started? Why were they waiting!?

Prey's eyes skittered everywhere. They were just sitting there. Sunshine was standing to the left of the dock, face impassive, but never taking his eyes off of Prey for even a second. Utterly like the professional he was.

The other Solar Guard on the right was doing just the same. And both of their thoughts were hidden behind those accursed mindlock enchantments! If only he could hear what they were thinking.

'Zoma'Grika what are they waiting for?!'

The judge was a white unicorn. Of course he was a unicorn. A high judge had to be a unicorn, didn't they? Because how else would you know they were a 'high' judge instead of just a judge? The stallion was older, hard to tell his age exactly because of the wig, and wearing spectacles. And almost skeletally thin.

His eyes were watery green behind his spectacles. With bony forehooves folded on the cushion in front of him, he too was simply staring down silently at Prey.

The towering, high-backed padded chair the thin judge sat on was

emblazoned with a golden sun, as was the jutting podium at which he sat.

The judge. The two Solar Guards. Two stenographers, blank sheets and quills set beside them. Twelve members of a jury, every single one of them ponies. And their one runt lamb prisoner.

And still they were just waiting as the tension ratcheted higher and higher.

'I shouldn't have listened to Crimson, I shouldn't have come back! Again! This is torture.'

From somewhere, the chimes of a clock struck nine. The black-robed ponies arrayed before Prey all sat up straighter.

The thin, white furred judge cleared his throat and spoke loudly, voice high and reedy:

"At the time of oh-nine-hundred, on the seventeenth day of Her Celestial Majesty's calendar in the month of April, of the year one-thousand-and-one A.C. let the records show that I, High Judge Magnus Opus, call this closed-court hearing to a start."

Magnus Opus turned his thin face slightly to the left, his reedy voice ringing out again as the stenographers' magically levitating quills scratched on paper; "This is a case of the defendant, one Prey, versus the State. Please enter and be seated the prosecution, Strange Happenstance, representing the law and interested party House Fell."

Prey should've known.

He should have known!

Who else could it be but the smug, mud coloured private detective unicorn, with his long coat and stupid hat, as he trotted in through the courtroom's doors? A second, smartly dressed stallion with a slicked-back mane trailed behind him, carrying a briefcase.

Prey stared at Strange Happenstance as the detective trotted, no, *strolled* in.

"Your Honours." Strange dipped his head as he made his way to the prosecutors' booth.

He passed by Prey, his mind just as blank as it had ever been. When he met Prey's eye, all Prey saw in his face beneath the brim of his stupid hat was satisfaction.

'You. *You*. You you you-!' Then the rest of what the judge Magnus Opus had announced caught up to Prey's reeling mind.

'Representing House Fell.' Prey's wide eyes flashed to the second suited stallion, the one with the briefcase, darting over his smart uniform and going to the breast pocket-

The obnoxiously ornate, red and black sigil of House Fell sat proudly there.

House Fell. Lord Triton Fell was the grandfather of the now deceased Solar Guard Captain, Valour. The Solar Guard was here. House Fell was here. Strange Happenstance was here. *That* was what this was all about.

'How did they find out? How could they possibly know-!? No, they can't. There's nothing they could have as hard evidence.' Prey tried to tell himself even as he began to internally panic even more.

But this was obviously a sham court. He'd been denied at least half his rights, the Night Guard were being barred all access, and this had been rushed to trial. Would them not having any hard evidence even matter?

And they obviously thought they had at least *something* to use against him.

What the Tartarus had Prey ever done to Strange Happenstance, that the unicorn had taken up his crusade against him? Prey had never seen the stallion before their first meeting in the hospital, when Strange tried to accuse and interrogate him.

'Why couldn't. You just leave. Well enough. *Alone*?'

Strange Happenstance and the Fell stallion finished settling

themselves down in the booth, the other unicorn drawing the briefcase smartly open and starting to pull out horribly official-looking documents.

The wavering, reedy voice of the judge dragged Prey's eyes away and back up to the robed jury all seated above him; "The prosecution is seated. Enter the defence. Let the record show, that the right to an independent defence lawyer was waived by the defendant, as attested to by-"

"No I don't-!"

"There will be no other defence, as attested to by us."

The spines of every single person in the courtroom jerked straight as every eye turned upwards. The imperious tones of command had come from above, up in the shadowed empty viewing gallery, shut to the public for this closed session.
Far above them, standing almost casually at the gallery's railing, one ice-cold eye covered by the rippling night of her mane, the other staring unblinkingly down on them all, rested Luna.

"As attested to and approved by Her Royal Majesty, Princess Luna." Magnus Opus finished, his voice nothing more than a thin whine in the wake of Luna's booming command.

Prey shrunk into the dock as the oppressive weight of Luna's unreadable expression bore down upon him.

But Crimson had said Luna had promised him-! But she'd told Prey to stay silent and not defend himself. She'd made no promises to him. She'd just waived his chance for a legal defence. Luna had lied to Crimson's face.

Dawning despair, as the last of the ground felt like it was crumbling beneath him.

'I should have known better. No. I did know better. I always knew. Because it's Luna.'

But for the sake of hope- cruel, poisonous, false hope, he'd put his faith in Crimson's trust and returned to his cell for this trial.

"With all in attendance and accounted for, I hereby call this hearing to session." Magnus Opus declared, giving a perfunctory bang of his wooden gavel on the block before him, "Let the charges against the defendant be read out."

A long-faced greying mare to the judge's left stiffly stood up from the clerk's desk, her magic unfolding a pair of glasses onto her long muzzle as she levitated a sheaf of paper.

"The charges against the defendant, a one Prey of the Night Guard stand as follows; violation of legal probation, further attempted violation of legal probation, posing a threat to pony life, possessing knowledge of which constitutes a threat to pony life, partaking in terrorist activities, contempt of Equestrian law, illegal immigration, not holding a valid passport, abuse of Guard authority, misuse of Guard assets, grave injury of a fellow Guard, reckless endangerment of civilian life in the town of Alfalfa Dale, involvement in the civilian deaths at Alfalfa Dale."

She paused to take in a deep breath. Then she continued on; "Refusing to cooperate with investigators, lying to investigators, directly and indirectly covering up for the misconduct of Night Guard superiors." Another breath. "Accepting bribes, soliciting bribes, offering bribes, bribery, conspiring against the Solar Guard, the murder of Captain Valour of the Solar Guard, attempting to flee the country, two more counts of murder, and resisting arrest."

She lowered the pages, looking down in disdain at Prey, before flicking a nervous glance back up to the viewing gallery for barely a second, "The punishments to be affixed to these charges is the purpose of this court proceeding."

Prey was speechless. He could not find any words. His mouth was opening and closing as he stood propped up in the dock.

She had spouted that with a straight face. She was serious. So many blatant, out-and-out lies, made-up falsehoods, and she was serious.

The *gall*. They actually dared to so blatantly lie in front of everyone. In front of Luna.

They had no evidence. None whatsoever. And for those accusations which by accident were true, they couldn't prove anything.

Accusations which Prey refuted anyway! He was not a pony, and he was not responsible for their easily-offended sensibilities. He was not going to let these soft ponies who'd never gone hungry a day in their life sit on their high throne and tell him how much better they were than him.

'No real crimes. No diamond dogs. No changelings. Not even filthy worthless clan Myrrdon.' A tiny voice whispered. It went unheeded.

They had nothing. No clue. No evidence. None whatsoever. Those were the trumped-up charges they aimed to sink him with? He had committed so many sins, yet the ones they were accusing him of were sins he'd either never committed, or at least had never counted as sins. Sacrificing the villagers of Alfalfa Dale, the diamond dogs, and in the end even the changelings, *those* were sins no matter how hard he denied it. And he was denying it to himself, even now. Because he'd killed so many changelings, that he couldn't afford to have the magnitude of that guilt crush him.

Their accusations were so small, so petty! All the war crimes of the Resistance? Fighting the Border Guard? Killing those self-righteous unicorn thieves, mind controlling people for his own benefit, framing innocents? Not even one of those was being read out by these sanctimonious, conceited, self-satisfied ponies.

'Not even filthy worthless clan Myrrdon.' A tiny voice whispered in the back of his mind. Prey again didn't heed it, barely even heard it. He had no time for *that* clan.

The judge leaned forwards over his podium, his thin face under the mountainous powdered wig peering critically down at Prey and the two Solar Guards flanking him, "How do you plead?"

Plead? Plead… *beg*? How did he plead?

"I reject every lie you've just spewed!" Prey squeaked, voice betraying him yet again into sounding weak.

Above, Luna jerked her chin sharply down, but that was the only move she made as she brooded. 'Displeasure at me daring to speak and not refusing to defend myself like she ordered!'

"Lie, lie, lie, and more lies. That was a pack of blowfly-infested LIES!"

"Let the record show the defendant pleaded not guilty, and add a charge of contempt of court." Magnus Opus droned.

The chains of his cuffs rattled as Prey banged his forehooves against the dock, "No you DON'T just get to imprison and ignore me! I haven't done any of those things! I am a Night Guard, I have followed all my orders like a good little Guard. You made all those lies up. Where's proof, where's evidence? I'm innocent!"

For the first time out of the corner of his eye, Prey saw Sunshine's professional mask slip. For that moment, he saw all the righteous anger of victimhood the unicorn was feeling. Somehow, someway here was a pony who completely believed that Prey had indeed been the one to kill his Captain, Valour.

Prey *had* killed Valour, but there was no possible way anyone had any proof of that! Meaning, although they'd gotten the charge right by complete accident, Strange Happenstance couldn't prove it.

"This court hearing is for sentencing on the provided charges. A private court hearing has already concluded on the validity of the charges- in your case, *in absentia*. If you wished to contest them in a subsequent trial proceeding you should have attended or sent a legal representative to the hearing."

"Oh and how was I supposed to do that when I wasn't even in this city, and you never bothered to even try to contact-?"

"Silence in the dock! Add a second charge for contempt of court. This is a sentencing hearing, not a trial. This session is to determine the punishments for each crime. You have already refused your last right to plead guilty. Do you understand?"

Prey just glared at him, refusing to give this 'judge' the courtesy of

an answer.

Magnus Opus' pinched brows drew further together and his reedy tenor rang out higher, "Do you understand?"

Magnus banged his gravel, "Let the record show that the accused understood the charges but refused to answer. Add a third strike for contempt of court." He ordered, and the harsh scribble of quills over paper rang out.

"Your Honour," The droll, smug voice of Strange Happenstance spoke up, "In my role, may I suggest here before the court that the evidence is presented to the accused anyway? House Fell feels it is conducive towards reiterating the seriousness of the necessary punishments on which are to be decided."

As if he'd been expecting that very request in advance, Magnus Opus didn't waste even a moment on deliberation and immediately transitioned into saying; "For the purposes of verification, the prosecution may briefly reiterate the evidence if they feel it is relevant to the court's proceedings."

'This is all just some rehearsed performance to them.' Everything here was basically already decided in advance in the backrooms between all these judges and jury members. Rehearsing the 'evidence' again was simply because Strange Happenstance wanted to revel in his power over Prey.

"Your Honour, and esteemed members of the court. This all began when I was investigating the Night Guard command structure in regards to the disastrous Lumber Yard fire- of which I am still gathering evidence and testimony. I was contacted by the parents of one Lilly Blossom after they heard of my inquiry, on behalf of the mare, aged twenty-three, who had returned from a Night Guard sanctioned operation in the border town of Alfalfa Dale. This was when I first learned directly of the actions of the ISND. Because of their actions undertaken while abusing Guard authority, they were complicit in the deaths of every single pony in Alfalfa Dale."

Strange brought his hoof solemnly up to his chest, "They did not report the presence of a dark-magic-wielding warlock active in the

area in a timely manner, they did not move to try to stop this warlock, and because of gross negligence, they first injured, then proceeded to maim Lilly Blossom by implanting parasitic plants into her. By failing to contact the rest of the Guard, they thus are complicit in Alfalfa Dale's destruction, and Prey, as a member, thus guilty of these charges."

A susurration of disgust went through all of the assembled court ponies, as Strange solemnly listed out the supposed murders of Alfalfa Dale. Pretending like he actually *cared*.

"Lie, lie, and another lie," Prey tried to interrupt, "We did send an emergency report to the Captain, we tried our hardest to fight the warlock, and we saved Lilly's life! If not for us, then-!"

"Silence in the dock!" Magnus demanded, petulantly banging his little wooden gavel.

"Of course I took the case, as any upstanding detective would," Strange carried on, "But when I presented my badge and tried to speak to the suspects and victim, the Night Guard refused to give me access or answer any questions, even when I followed procedure and attempted to escalate it up their chain of command-"

"As if! You broke into the hospital, lied to the guards, and then stalked us all around Canter-"

"Silence! Silence in the dock. Guards, the accused is deliberately disrupting the proceedings. Enact a silence spell until he has been rendered calm."

Prey barely managed to twist his head around in alarm before Sunshine had already cast, the Guard's prodigious casting speed faster than Prey could manage to do anything about. A slight blueish shimmer passed in a giant bubble over the dock.

"Don't you dare-Stop it!" Prey protested, as invisible fire ants began crawling inside his hooves.

But from the way nobody outside the bubble reacted, it was already too late. It stopped his protests and denials getting out, while

Strange Happenstance could continue to spin whatever lies he wanted as Prey was helpless to defend himself.

"This is all one giant, maggot-bloated lie. You're bribed, corrupt, all of you!" But Prey's shouting was utterly in vain.

"Thank you, Your Honour," Strange briefly touched his hat's brim. Momentarily, his eyes went up to the gallery, but Luna still hadn't moved or reacted, eye still boring down through everyone, and particularly anyone who looked up at her. His confidence restored, Strange launched back into his prepared story, as the Fell servant stallion passed him pages for him to double check from.

"This conduct of the Night Guard roused my suspicions. I began making enquiries into various record departments, the City Hall, the Civil Office, and Immigration Control. Copies of their written responses are available if any here today would like to verify them again for yourself." Strange nodded to his Fell aide with the briefcase full of papers and files.

"That will not be necessary. The previous court session already carried out this review. Please continue." Magnus answered on behalf of all the ponies in the stands.

"Of course, Your Honour. Continuing on, this was where I discovered the illegal nature of Prey's residency here in Equestria. No passport, no registration, nothing. He has been illegally working for the Night Guard, and he did not file an application for citizenship within one week as covered in the laws for exceptional circumstances of foreign employment. Not to mention breaking the underage labour laws too. Receiving a wage under these conditions and using this illicitly stolen wage comes under bribery and/or theft."

Prey's blood was boiling, but his stinging hooves were shaking with cold. It was anger masking fear. 'I never chose to come here to this filthy capital, I was pressganged and enslaved by Luna! Rushweed may have been a border town, but it was a border Equestrian town! I was born here!'

Strange shuffled the page in his mud-green aura to the back, and

started going down the next sheet. He paused and pursed his lips, again faking that this actually emotionally affected him, "It was then that I became aware that at the time of their actions in Alfalfa Dale, Prey also murdered and disposed of two Border Guards who'd been sent to investigate, so they could not report back the ISND's failings."

Another ripple of palpable disgust through all the ponies present. *Another* lie. And they were just lapping it up.

Strange waved some pages, "Further, the ISND also claim to have been delayed and held up in a deer holt in the forest. Here are copies of where they sketched this supposed holt to have been on a map. A location that the Night Guard were unable to find afterwards. Which immediately brings into question the validity of the ISND's version of events."

"Corporal Shimmer and Private Atlas Line were originally reported missing in action against the warlock, agreeing with the ISND's version of events. However, later it was discovered that the ISND's story did not line up. They testified Corporal Shimmer had sent back reports to his Border Guard superiors, but these reports were found to have never actually arrived. Therefore, these reports were never *actually* sent."

'The Zoma'Grika changelings! Even now, *even now*, they're still messing everything up!' Prey uselessly raged. Of course Shimmer hadn't sent back any real reports like he claimed, because he was an infiltrator! Or he only sent them back to his fellow changelings infesting the Border Guard, who lied and covered up and were now blaming the ISND.

"Further evidence to support the motives of murdering the unfortunate Shimmer and Atlas Line can be found by the ISND's gross negligence in stopping the warlock, or refusing to raise the alarm and call for help. So when Shimmer discovered their negligence, in a panic they silenced him and Atlas to prevent them reporting their crimes and blamed the warlock for it."

"We did call for help, we begged!" Prey shouted, even though no one could hear him through the silence bubble.

They'd sent a message-in-a-bottle, and Nighthawk had ignored it because the Royal Inspectors were still breathing down his neck, and because the Border Guard said they'd already sent reinforcements. Which they hadn't. Because again, the changelings infiltrating the hated Border Guard had deceived them all. But did anyone else know that? No. They just saw the end result and blamed Prey.

"As for disposing of the two bodies, while it is possible they buried them, another more likely method was presumed employed." Strange Happenstance turned to glare with loathing at Prey, "Which is the same reason that, following their return to Canterlot, Captain Nighthawk immediately placed Prey under permanent probation for the protection of pony life."

Again, another page was passed to Strange by his House Fell helper, who waved it aggressively at Prey as if it already proved everything, "But back to my point; as written in Captain Nighthawk of the Night Guard's own report, the accused possess knowledge of how to create small magical bombs, which he callously, and deliberately, used against the hostages of the warlock. These bombs, and I quote here; 'Can dissolve a pony in their entirety, and leave not even a trace behind'."

Strange put the paper down and took a deep breath, resettling his hat on his head, "And while there is no hard evidence, if you'll forgive the appalling imagery, it is only because they *dissolved* the evidence. I don't think I need to elaborate any further on what happened to the bodies of Shimmer and Atlas."

He flung out his hoof to point at Prey, "They had the motive, and Prey had the method. A method which, I might add, falling under information that poses a threat to pony life, is illegal to know, and that since Prey has had no actual physical restrictions enforced upon him to prevent creating more of these acid bombs, he could have used to create more of these weapons at any time while inside Canterlot."

How had the lying detective even gotten his hooves on a restricted report? How had he stolen it? Or who had stolen it on his behalf? The court evidently didn't care. So what if Strange had twisted the

law to get this equally as twisted 'evidence'? Who cares about fruit of the poisonous tree, when this entire charade was poison?

It wasn't so fun when the horseshoe was on the other hoof.

Prey twisted about in the silenced dock, trying to find a weapon or anything he could use, but he was hoofcuffed and the two Solar Guards were watching his every move with hawklike eyes. He couldn't start inscribing runes, even if he had the hours needed to build something to kill all these arrogant, pampered, soft ponies with. And Luna was standing there, impassively looking down on and allowing everything.

"Here is the evidence, provided by his probation officer, my own brother Safety Hazard, which filled me in on Prey's illegal practices, and also that he was breaking his grossly under-policed probation in the first place. It was also because of Safety Hazard's information, which I have his signed testimony here, I was first tipped off to Prey being responsible for Captain Valour's murder."

Strange glowered at Prey, eyes narrowed and ears back, not needing to read off his page of notes for the next bit, "I knew what the ISND, what Prey was doing and getting away with. I was already building this case from the scraps of evidence I could uncover, and beginning to see the wider picture, when I was approached by a representative of House Fell, looking to hire my services. Lord Triton Fell wanted somepony to look into his grandson's death, as he rightly didn't believe a stallion of Valour's calibre could have possibly died in a house fire."

"Evidence? What evidence?!" It did no good. Even if they could have heard him, he would've gone ignored.

There was no evidence. Strange was waving around those 'scraps of evidence', all made up of misinterpreted hearsay and declaring it rock solid proof of whatever he wanted. He was biased in every sense of the word. There were mountains of evidence disproving Prey did it, but Strange was ignoring that, and instead waving around whatever weirdly shaped coincidence he found saying Prey did it. Strange was ignoring all cause and effect, jumping straight from A to Z with nothing in between.

This was a court? This counted as evidence? This was pony justice?

But Triton Fell, the second single richest entity in all of Equestria, behind the Crown, was backing Strange Happenstance. And knowing that, it all made perfect sense.

The financial and political clout to rush this trial through, to skip over so many laws, deny him his rights, procure the Solar Guard's support, and block out the Night Guard from being able to even get a hoof in. All those instances where money and power shouldn't bear any weight, and yet inevitably weighed the heaviest.

Prey was *furious* they were getting away with this. He was *terrified* they were getting away with this.

Luna had lied. Strange Happenstance was lying. Triton Fell was lying. This trial was supposed to be about the lords' precious grandson's death, and yet Triton Fell hadn't even turned up, not wanting to tie his image to this case just for the unlikely event it failed.

How? Just how? There was no evidence that he'd killed Valour, so how did Strange Happenstance know? He had no solid proof, Prey *knew* he didn't, so why was he so unshakeably convinced?

"In early November of last year, the ISND disappeared on a 'secret' mission. The details are apparently restricted, and again nopony will admit anything concrete, but what ponies have admitted to is that at this time, Prey here was still in Canterlot, and was left unobserved and unattended to do as he wished. On November the tenth and eleventh, Prey took two days of leave, I have the signed timesheets to prove it. In the early morning of the twelfth, Valour was found dead and his house on fire. The crime of again violating his probation is miniscule when compared to the murder he travelled to by rail to commit."

How? How could Strange even claim with a straight face-? There was no link! No evidence! Prey *had* done it yes, but there was no evidence! All Strange was saying was that he had annual leave booked off that coincided with the date of Valour's death. But so did thousands of other people that day! No one was aware he'd even

known who Valour was.

Strange turned back to look up at the thin judge, tilting his hat brim back, "It is a documented fact Prey was outside of Canterlot on the night of the eleventh. It is a documented fact he broke probation to do so. It is a documented fact he purposefully avoided oversight. And it is a documented fact that Captain Valour was found dead the very next day."

As he said the word 'documented' each time, Strange slapped another page down on top of the pile before him, "Just like it is a little known but documented fact from the Solar Guard that only a week before his death, Valour was meeting with the High Command of the Border Guard. And what were they discussing? Among other things, co-ordinated defences against warlocks. And the case example discussed in great detail on that day was the most recent one, from Alfalfa Dale!"

Prey hadn't known that, it wasn't why he'd gone after Valour in the first place, and it had no bearing whatsoever on anything he'd done. How did Strange honestly expect him to have knowledge of what was discussed miles away in a private, high-profile meeting? It was complete coincidence!

Literally just one item from a probable dozen discussed in a Border Guard meeting's agenda, but Strange was trumpeting it like it proved everything.

Every word that Prey couldn't respond to hammered him slowly down deeper and deeper into despair. Not because of Strange Happenstance absurdly being right, but because every lie he spouted was being lapped up.

All those judging, condemning eyes drilling down from on high, Luna the highest of all, as the dock seemed to gape wider and wider around him like a trap. Or a mouth. Or like he was shrinking. He was having difficulty getting enough air.

'Oh Zoma'Grika, is the silence bubble airtight? Is that it? Is Sunshine going to secretly execute me out of revenge right here in front of everyone?'

Strange took a deep breath to recompose himself, straightening his overcoat, "As for final proof, I also add my own testimony and witness. As per the Court and Talent act of 766 A.C., evidence obtained through the use of a qualified pony's cutie mark is admissible in court if backed up by supporting evidence, and sworn under oath to be true. So I, Strange Happenstance, being of sound mind, do hereby so swear this to be the truth."

Prey tasted blood. Then felt pain. Only then did it register he'd bitten down on the side of his tongue. His head was throbbing fit to burst behind his eyes. And that rasping in the back of his raw throat, that was him screaming inarticulately with rage.

For an uncounted hoofful of seconds, Prey was so angry he couldn't see or hear straight. This. This was the reason. This was the truth behind Strange Happenstance's success.

'His. Cutie. Mark.'

Everything, the running into them at inopportune moments, his obsession on hounding the ISND, and his utter conviction Prey was hiding something. All of it.

It was all explained away with reasoning that would only ever be accepted in Equestria; 'Because my special talent said so.'

Not through any skill of his own, not through uncovering any evidence, and certainly not through anything but the most basic intelligence. Strange just relied on his flank. Because Strange was born a pony, Harmony just gifted it all to him on a silver platter.

'All obtained scot free from his special talent.'

This was the big reason? This was the secret behind all of the private detective's success? It was a bad joke, and life was howling with laughter at Prey.

Because Harmony said so, because Harmony gave its ponies the Elements of Harmony, magic, extra-long life, and free impossible mastery of anything with a lottery of special talents.

Strange had done all of this, constructed his whole entire case,

wormed his way through the court system and convinced even the Archduke Triton Fell that what he was saying was true, and all he had to do was claim reliance on his cutie mark?

'Unacceptable.'

Prey could not accept that.

The uncaring, unfair world just laughed all the harder at the weak runt lamb, not even tall enough to see over the dock's side, locked in chains, and condemned by the funny feeling in a pony's flanks. It didn't matter if he refused to accept it or not.

He should have killed the Elements of Harmony. He shouldn't have come back.

He should have driven harder for more backup plans with Lemon. He should have taken his chances running after Discord.

He should have said something to Crimson. He should have holed up in his lair and fought tooth and hoof, damn all who came- especially Luna.

He should've, should've, should've-!

'Should haz', would haz', could haz'.' Garrow's remnant mockingly whispered.

Anger was far too tame of a word. Incandescent rage didn't muster. Wrath barely touched it.

"Thank you for your time and consideration, Your Honour." The seemingly far-off drifting tones of the unworthy-to-be-breathing Strange's words snapped Prey back.

Magnus Opus nodded his thin head, then with a perfunctory bang of his gavel using his aura, not even unfolding his crossed forelegs to perform the act of condemnation, "Let the record show that after review of the evidence with the accused in attendance, no defence was found. No clarification were requested from anypony in the assembled jury. We now proceed to the sentencing, starting from least severe to greatest."

"Nay. The defence has yet to be heard."

The cold tones of Luna silenced the entire court.

In the void which followed, Magnus cleared his reedy throat uncertainly. He had to bend his head back uncomfortably to look up at Luna in the gallery as he addressed her, "Princess Luna, the ah, the option to a defence was waived by the defendant. Also by you, your majesty."

"Thou art mistaken," Luna's tone was as condescending as it was unbending iron, "We said there would be no other defence. Not that there was to be no defence. We have chosen to represent the accused ourselves."

A stir passed like a wave up and down the seated ponies. Unease, surprise, suspicion. Strange Happenstance was showing the same signs too, but to a much lesser degree. He wasn't worried.

But Prey felt not even one spark of hope. Because what had Luna ever done for him? Nothing. She only ever took. This trick right here to speak in his defence? Prey wasn't fooled, he knew what it really was. Luna had no intention of helping. He knew what Luna was like. She was simply grandstanding.

She was the princess, and always had to have the last word. And the court had not been paying her silent attendance the due respect and attention she felt she deserved. That just wouldn't do, would it?

But she wasn't going to defend Prey. Oh no, Luna was going to twist the role and condemn Prey instead, adding her own accusations and judgements, to prove beyond all doubt she'd already known all the court had accused Prey of, plus more besides that only she was privy to. A power play. A boast. Self-indulgence.

'I hate you.'

"Ah. I see. That is to say, Your Majesty, it is most unorthodox that a Princess should act as a defence lawyer. There is cause for concern about bias and unfair advantage..." Magnus' reedy warbling slowly trailed off in the face of Luna's unmoving, unnaturally still visage.

Luna was looking at the judge as if he were a piece of furniture that had spoken back to her. Exactly how she was looking at every single other person in this courtroom, because there was only one alicorn in it. No, actually, she wasn't even looking at Prey.

"We have heard the charges, Judge Magnus Opus- thy evidence, Strange Happenstance, and considered all that was brought forth for this case by Archduke Triton Fell." Luna's booming voice echoed around the circular court below her.

So declaring, with a slight jump that looked near effortless, Luna simply hopped over the gallery's railing.

"Princess-!"
"Ahh!"
"Watch out!"

Ponies tried to scramble to their hooves, or just locked up. The Solar Guards on either side of Prey were already moving to throw themselves forwards to catch her, but everyone was too slow to do anything before Luna had already landed in the middle of the courtroom.

She didn't even open her wings to slow her drop, landing squarely on all four silver-clad hooves without any apparent effort, seemingly not needing to bend her legs at all to absorb the shock. Her landing barely even made any noise.

Prey shrunk away from her, immediately skittering to the far side of the dock, as much as the hoofcuffs would allow.

"Princess Luna, you, that's not-" Magnus stuttered in shock, his wig almost slipping.

Luna didn't spare him or the jury members sputtering and holding their chests another look. As her brilliant, star-and-nebula-infused mane and tail settled back around her, Luna instead slowly swept her eyes over Strange Happenstance, and the so far silent Fell aide, both of whom had the sense to hastily rise and bow.

She yet hadn't once looked at Prey, still magically silenced and

locked helplessly in the dock just a few hooves away. And a hundred-thousand times closer than Prey ever wanted to be to Luna ever again.

"Strange Happenstance. We have not had cause to summon thee before now, yet we have heard thy name from our Captain Nighthawk before." Luna observed, utterly impassive.

"All good things, I hope, Your Majesty. I have only ever done my job and followed my calling to the best of my abilities." Strange answered, going so far as to remove his hat as he straightened out of his bow.

Luna didn't ignore Strange's answer, because that would have implied she cared. Instead she had already moved on to coldly looking over the Fell stallion. Everything about her was cold.

"Lord Triton Fell did not see fit to inform us of any of these, his grievances or accusations. When thou returns to him, inform him we would appreciate if he would bring such things directly to our attention. T'would have saved us all much time."

The unicorn made another quick bow, the gold trimming on his red and black uniform flashing. He nodded his understanding, keeping his eyes respectfully lowered.

After a moment of Luna's gaze continuing to bore into him, he winced and apologetically made a show of touching his throat. It seemed he wasn't silent out of choice, but actually really was mute.

"Good. See that thou does." Luna ordered, dismissing him from her attention now that her message had been received and understood.

Magnus Opus shifted, his scrawny throat bobbing as Luna finally returned to facing the court, "Princess Luna, this is most irregular, but seeing as you are already here, do you still intend to stand as the accused's defence before we proceed to deciding the punishments? Perhaps you intend to weigh in on the sentencing as well?"

Prey knew the answer before it even left Luna's mouth, the

hoofcuffs digging in above the gold of the tracer bands as he uselessly tugged on the chain.

"Nay."

Prey faltered on uselessly pulling on the chain, 'Nay'? Meaning, no? But that was just what Luna had started with, she was simply going to add something more, or worse. Such as; 'Nay. Thou shalt not decide on the sentence, we will.'

"We shall not be taking part in the sentencing."

So that's how it was going to be. She was going to at least pretend to give the court the final say in a blasé nod towards the laws she herself abused or simply ignored.

"For there shall be no sentence to give."

Prey choked as fear filled his throat. His heart pounded. She knew, she knew about the Elements of Harmony! About everything he thought he'd gotten away with! She instead meant to execute him right here at the end of this before witnesses.

But all the ponies in the court clearly misinterpreted Luna's declaration as the complete opposite. An uproar went through all of them.

"Princess Luna, you can't! He's guilty!"

"But the evidence, it's clear! He did it!"

"Your Majesty what are you doing?"

"He's guilty! He's guilty!"

"BE SILENT." Luna roared. The windows rattled and the court benches shook. Even Sunshine and the other Solar Guard momentarily went to cover their ears rather than remaining at attention.

"Either stay thy forked tongues, or speak the truth! You weary us with your incessant lies." Everyone recoiled, going silent and wide-

eyed in their seats, abused ears pressed flat.

Luna's freezing gaze swept the whole court, "We declare ourselves... disappointed." The word was as good as a criminal accusation when coming from Luna's mouth.

"For the sake of fairness and the law, we gave thee the chance to present thy case, if such a sorry excuse can even be termed such. We sat, and listened, and held our peace, and thou all somehow took our silence as tacit agreement of thy half-truths and perversions of justice? We must confess, we did not think ponies foolhardy enough to try such under our very eyes, but we stand corrected. Thou art disappointments to justice!"

Luna's hoof shot out, pointing at the two frozen stenographer unicorns, both looking like they almost suffered a heart attack on the spot with Luna singling them out.

"Let the record so show that we, Princess Luna and Diarch of Equestria, by the Royal power of the Crown declare this court proceeding to be null and void, and the defendant cleared of all charges."

"You can't-", "Princess Luna-!", "Justice and the law-", "Illegal and-", "That's wrong-!"

Luna effortlessly out-shouted them all, "We art the highest judge in the land, and we have found this court wanting! In the court's absence of any *capable* judge, we will step in and do what thou should have done thyselves!"

"I am a high judge! You can't overrule my own court!" Magnus Opus shouted, for a moment forgetting who he was addressing such was his outrage.

Luna's thundering response was irrefutable steel, as cold and unyielding as the frozen north and Magnus quailed in his seat, "WE ART THE LAW! We were there when thy more worthy ancestors first wrote it from our lips. It was us and our sister who have upheld and fought for the same law thee all hold so lightly. Our word *is* the law."

Strange Happenstance jammed his hat back onto his head, "Now hold on just a second there. By that same system of law my testimony and oath is qualified evidence, just like all the other evidence I've gathered. You heard, you saw what he's done princess! Here, you can read the proof for yourself." Strange whirled and grabbed up the stack of pages, trying to shove them onto Luna.

A mistake. With a careless flick of her horn, Luna's blue aura enveloped and bit off Strange's own, taking the documents from him. Strange's head snapped back as his telekinesis was forcibly broken. Luna tossed aside the fluttering bundle of pages without even a glance.

"We have listened to thy 'evidence' already. ‘Tis not evidence, but make-belief interpretation." She scoffed, derision so powerful it was all but an invisible force in the air, pressing the jury and judge lower in their seats.

Strange Happenstance took a deep breath and stood up to Luna, her overwhelming presence so much larger than even her taller stature, "Princess Luna. Respectfully, I refuse to accept such biased favouritism. That lamb has *killed* ponies, *innocent* ponies!"

"The irony of your pitiful accusation of biased favouritism is not lost on us, we can assure you. ‘Tis not so enjoyable when the shoe is on the other hoof, no? Yet that would imply that your accusations were even true to begin with. Which they are not."

"Princess Luna, Your Majesty. This is wrong. Even if it is you, the princess, I can't stand aside and let-"

"Thou wouldst accuse US!" Luna boomed. It was a statement, not a question. It should have crystallised shards of ice as hard as iron in mid-air. The courtroom seemed to darken, Luna at its centre. But after a long agonizing second, Luna spoke, and everyone could breathe again.

"Yet for true justice and the law, the very same truth and law which thou has bent, we shall give answer to thy 'evidence'."

Luna turned with a swirl of darkened stars, striding back towards

the centre of the courtroom, "So let this court's records show. That means that thou shalt both write!"

Both the stenographers finally snapped out of their frozen state. Under their fur their faces went white, and they desperately grabbed for their quills.

"Prey is no illegal immigrant. He is here, in Canterlot, on our invitation. He is a citizen of Equestria just as surely as everypony in this court. So we declare, and by law, so it is done."

Magnus Opus shrunk lower into his high-backed seat and deep robes as Luna's gaze pressed down on him, "Your petty-mindedness that Prey should somehow be guilty for working to earn an honest living is not even worth our time. Rather, for all thy other accusations in the lands of Alfalfa Dale, the heinous warlock, and Lilly Blossom's regrettable injury, we say this; Thou hast only half the tale, for the other half is of military secrecy. Thus, lacking this knowledge, all thy accusations become meaningless, and Prey is innocent of all thus supposed crimes."

"Not the full story-? What could that possibly change?"

"Art thou hard of hearing? Didst thou perhaps misunderstand? ‘Tis of military secrecy. Thus, you are unqualified and unworthy of knowing."

"But if you're withholding it, then how can we be expected to properly judge-?"

"Fool," Luna scoffed, her tone biting, "Thou does not judge, because thou art not permitted to know. In instances such as these, the course is obvious. A judge who is permitted to know the full tale must be found. That is *us*.”

"That's not right," Strange still managed to protest, "It's not right. The Guard should be as accountable as anypony! The law deserves transparency-"

"They are accountable. To *us*. They have given account for their actions, details which thou does not have a right to know. The

matter is closed. This is the last time we shall say this."

It was obvious Strange Happenstance railed against that. He wanted to protest, to keep demanding answers, but sense won out in the end. You could not demand answers from an alicorn, and Luna was not in a patient mood at all. She had the power to do whatever she wanted in this court, both the political power, but also the very real physical power.

The mute Fell lawyer hurriedly tugged at Strange's long coat, head lowered to avoid Luna's eye, but still insistently waving a page under the private detective's eyes.

Strange glanced at it, then seized upon the proffered suggestion, "And the murder of Captain Valour? What about that? As you say, princess, those other charges can be explained away, but Prey still stands guilty of murder. Even if nothing else, he is a murderer, who killed Lord Triton Fell's grandson, the Captain of the Solar Guard!" He desperately rallied.

Luna kept looking down at him for a long, unblinking minute, her astral mane the only thing which moved. The entire court was painfully holding their breath, not daring to make so much as the quietest sound. Finally she replied, "Aye, a most serious accusation, that being to have murdered one of our little ponies in cold blood."

Strange let out a breath of relief, relieved that Luna was finally speaking sense. Triton Fell would have his justice.

He relaxed too soon.

"We have heard thy accusations, and yet no evidence. Unrelated circumstances art all thou hast quoted so far. Doest thou have any real evidence for thy slander to submit? Any at all? No, we can see that thou do not. That Prey should be guilty because he travelled that he might visit his family on the same day, thou calls that evidence? Preposterous." Luna scoffed in derision, her freezing gaze washing over the court:

"And frankly, it has deeply concerned us that a court in our land would ever accept such baseless accusations. It is most interesting

that this should be a case where the word of a rich, influential lord is brought against a commoner. As if my court was not interested in upholding their oaths of justice, but instead oaths of their own self-interest."

The judge and jury all froze in their seats, perhaps hoping if they didn't move or breathe, the Wolf's gaze would pass them over and pick someone else to be its meal. Or perhaps that Luna would leave it there, as a verbal warning. If so, they hoped in vain.

"Once again, we art disappointed. We find you all lacking. At the conclusion of this hearing, everypony of this court shall be placed on suspension, until an investigation can thoroughly be carried out to clear your names after this farce. If your names are found to not be clear however..."

Luna left the threat to hang in the air. She didn't need to finish it. If her investigation found them to be compromised, then she'd do whatever she wanted with them.

In their benches, one of the jury squeezed their eyes shut and mumbled what might've been a prayer to Celestia. Others went even paler, or even trembled. Perhaps they believed themselves innocent, or at least not culpable, but in the face of Luna? Now they were irrationally terrified by the awful certainty that their own perceived innocence wasn't good enough anymore. And then there were those who knew they were guilty, and hadn't hidden their illicit dealings well enough.

But Strange Happenstance couldn't accept that. "My cutie mark says it's him! He's the guilty one, I know it! My talent is lawful proof!"

The one thing a pony could have utter confidence in was their cutie mark, the one thing they could know made them special. Some ponies just took this empowering confidence in their own uniqueness further than others. And now Strange Happenstance was having his special talent dismissed by none other than the joint most powerful person in the whole land. A literal divine being was telling him he was wrong about his own specialness. How could he not desperately reject that?

Perhaps Luna understood that integral part of her subject's psyche. Perhaps she didn't. But whatever her insight behind her visage of iron, she certainly did not care either way. Especially not for a pony trying to stand up to her.

"A ponies' special talent is their destiny, made manifest by Harmony." Luna acknowledged, nodding almost imperceptibly, "Everypony has the right to the power of Harmony in their lives, and the opportunity to live to fulfil their calling. We wish to make this clear, with no room for misinterpretation; it is the destiny of all of ponykind to receive their cutie marks. From the moment the youngest foal receives this great blessing, to the oldest respected elder, all eventually do. However..."

Luna's resounding boom modulated somewhat. Perhaps it was supposed to have come out softer. If so, it wasn't as she went on; "...However, that does not mean a pony can always fully understand the destiny Harmony has laid before them. To err is equine. Everypony makes mistakes. This includes in following the subtle guiding hoof of Harmony. Oft we have sadly seen ponies not living up to their full potential. Or, such as in this case, misinterpreting it. 'Tis all too easy to make a subtle mistake one out of ten times. How much greater the mistake then, out of a hundred times? It is often only with hindsight that we can spot when we erred in our understanding."

"No. No, I know what I feel. Please, just listen to me Princess Luna, you don't want to be mistaken when a murderer is on the line. I know I'm right!"

Luna shook her head just once, but once was all she needed. "Strange Happenstance, we disparage none of our little ponies their special callings. Be not discouraged from learning from this mistake. But in this instance, it is still a mistake on thy part."

"For the last time Princess Luna, please reconsider before-"

"This court hearing is OVER." Without a single moment more given to Strange Happenstance and his protests, Luna passed her judgement.

"Now everypony, get out of our sight."

Then, and only then, did Luna look at Prey for the first time while ponies scrambled to comply.

Prey was staring at her over the lip of the dock. His blue eyes were screwed up in confusion.

His whole body was a picture of uncertainty, his slightly shaking hooves held too close together, his drooping ears twitching, his dirty fur and wool standing on end.

"I don't understand." He mumbled plaintively.

The world kept shifting wildly sideways under his hooves. Nothing was where it should be.

Discord. Was this Discord again? Chaos was the only thing that made sense.

Or a dream twisted by Luna, a perverse punishment before she woke him up to take him to court to enact the sentence for real.

This was impossible. Theoretically possible, but also not, because he knew Luna. He'd suffered under her complete disregard for his safety and life. That was why this couldn't be happening.

Because you don't get third chances. Because the world is never, ever fair.

It was happening. It had happened. But Prey didn't believe it. There was always a price.

Enslaving him. Promising things that she never held to. Putting his unit in great unnecessary danger on her insane whims.

"I don't understand."

Mayflower. Lord Vanish. Refusing him even when he begged.

"I don't understand."

Clamping the tracer bands around his legs once again. Demanding more than a person could physically give. Drowning him in a muddy ditch.

"I don't understand."

"What is there to understand? Thou art innocent. Thus, you are free." Luna informed him. A simple statement of cold facts the way Luna saw it.

Prey didn't register that the silence bubble had been dispelled, nor that Sunshine and the second Solar Guard had backed off. Not even that he'd been repeating the same mechanical sentence out loud over and over.

"As if we would let lies and slander deface the good name of our Night Guard. Those who do their duty of protecting our great nation of Equestria should be able to do so without fear of mewling bureaucrats and simpering ne'er-do-wells rewarding such efforts with censure and prison." Luna was looking imperiously over his head, back to rigidly avoiding even glancing at him, like he was too offensive to her eye.

Her Night Guard. *Her* great nation. *Her* property. 'So that's all I am. A dog does not share its bone.'
The anger from the trial was coming back now, bubbling black and thick like tar.

Prey didn't believe it, because it was too good to be true. There was some secret agenda, hidden scheme, or simply a passing whim on Luna's part.

The air was too heavy and sluggish in his lungs. It took massive effort to draw a full breath.

Luna had saved him.

Luna had saved him?

'No. This does not make up for anything. She only saved me from the danger she threw me into. For Mayflower, for the drowning, for the humiliation, for the pain, for the death, for lying, for my mother

and Fleece, and for Gloom. This makes up for none of it! Nothing is forgotten, nothing is forgiven.'

Does a right make up for a wrong? Does one right make up for a hundred wrongs? No. That has never been an equal exchange.

A husband who beats his wife, but then on the final day saves her from committing suicide as a result of his neglect does not suddenly earn a full pardon. One good deed does not redeem all the abuse and pain Luna had heaped upon him before.

'It does not excuse you, yez'?' The softened voices of Garrow, Snake, and himself murmured from the depths of his mind.

"Follow." Luna commanded. Prey reacted too late, his reaction time out of sync as Luna's midnight-blue aura snapped the hoofcuffs open with a momentary flex of power.

"Don't..." '...touch me.' But Luna had already turned away, her flowing tail billowing in front of his vision. The dock's door swung open with a tinny creak.

"Follow."

'I *hate* you.' Nothing was forgiven. All of this was Luna's fault to begin with.

Prey stumbled out of the dock and after Luna's retreating hooves. What choice did he have?

A wide corridor in the Upper Palace, only a few turns away from the courtroom. A few more turns and doors over, and you'd reach the Royal Palace proper, the restricted divide where the red carpets, drapes, and golden lace began.

This corridor though was more plain. One side was lined with a stretch of windows, lighting the cosier half of the wide corridor split lengthways, but leaving the other half shadowy.

A servant carrying a mop had started coming the other way but one

look at the oncoming alicorn, striding at a clip that an exhausted Prey had to give it his all to keep up with, had sent the cleaning maid right around, vanishing the way she'd come.

Luna marched up to the middle of the deserted corridor then wheeled on her hooves. Prey almost fell on his front as he skidded to a stop beneath her.

They stood facing off in the shadowed half of the corridor.

Luna's staring blue eyes seemed to glow, framed in her dark face and by her ever-shifting starry mane.

Unreal.

Prey stared up at Luna. She stared straight over his head.

"Dost thou have nothing to say to us?" Luna abruptly demanded.

It felt like gears grinding to rust before Prey could deduce what she obviously meant.

"T-ttthh-" The words didn't burn. They were made of a thousand needles and thorns instead, so he spat them out, "-Thank you."

"That is not what we meant-Nay. Thou art nevertheless welcome. Of course. Thou were one of our Night Guards." Luna said stiffly, not once looking downwards to his eye level.

'Were'. Past tense. *Were* one of our Night Guard. Prey barely felt as if the curious words were coming out of his own mouth as he asked; "W-what is going to happen to me now?"

"Thou art one of our Night Guard." Luna repeated, as if it were simple, "Thy post is still there, that has not, it *will* not change."

Just return to the ISND? Go back to repeating the same thankless cycle of spiralling misery over and over again? So that was all that awaited him. Over and over and over again, the same ending.

Luna was never going to let him go. A lifetime of unending servitude. Better than death, though.

Again, the words just seemed to drift out of their own accord, "But, Gloom is-"

"Don't!" Luna's exclamation was harsh and rough, "Just don't. Do not say his name before us, not now. Not yet."

Shivers were going up and down Prey's scarred back as he stared up at Luna. The feeling of unrealness was still just as strong, but the hate was beginning to overpower it. Luna resolutely kept her head up and stared over him.

Neither of them moved, standing in the shadowed half of the silent corridor.

"I don't understand." He eventually got out.

"We do not mean to try and deprive you of his memory, Prey. He is, he was, one of ours. One of our precious Soldiers of the Night. You have every right to remember, to mourn, to claim him. You, and Crimson both."

"He died because of Clan Myrrdon," The words of hate were bubbling out now, "Because of them. Because they wanted to run away from you forever. And they killed him."

A single sound burst out of Luna. Prey couldn't tell what it was, it was too scrambled between a gasp, a whimper, a hiccup, or a keening. Too mixed to properly identify, and Luna cut it off as soon as it began.

"We don't, we don't understand them. Clan Myrrdon, we knew thy forefathers... so why? We would never have forced them. Why have they gone to such lengths?" Luna plaintively asked the air. She heaved in a breath:

"We never wanted them to hate us."

Prey backed up a step. Then another. What was this? This wasn't real. Luna was an alicorn, she never showed any remorse.

'This isn't Luna. It can't be. Something's wrong.'

For the first time, Luna's eyes finally flicked from rigidly staring ahead down to Prey's face. Just for a moment. And he didn't quite know what he saw in there. Age, and something else.

Then Luna was back to making use of her height to look over him rather than at him. Her mane drifted across half of her already shadowed face. Prey shuffled another step back.

"We are sorry, Prey."

Luna was a statue. Only her mane moved. Not even her mouth, the words were just breathed from parted lips like some ventriloquist were puppeting a Luna doll.

"We are sorry for thy loss. It has never become easier, even down all these years. It still hurts us too. It always has. We pray it always will. ‘Tis a bitter, cold comfort. Yet we art sorry. He deserved so much more… can thou forgive us, Prey? For Lord Vanish, now for Archduke Triton Fell, for Clan Myrrdon in Haven Hay, for thy and Crimson's suffering there and before? For being a naïve old mare? Can thou forgive us?"

Too little, too late. Luna's apology couldn't change reality. And it didn't excuse all of her abuse and crimes. Because for all Luna's apologizing, her professed remorse, Prey was still her unwilling prisoner.

She'd still clapped the tracer bands back on him the moment he'd returned. He was still just her slave on a leash. They could never come to an understanding with that disparity of power.

The strong take, and the weak suffer. Myrrdon had taken. Then he'd taken. Now Luna was taking. It was the cycle.

So Prey looked Luna right in the eye when she finally glanced back down, and lied to her face.

"Yes."

Luna's lips quirked up in the ghost of an expression unfamiliar to her face, "Thank you. We almost even believed that." She said wetly.

Prey started in fear. She'd caught him in the lie!

"Ahh," Luna almost groaned, "That thou, a burdened foal, who has already sacrificed so much for our country, still seeks to put our wellbeing ahead of his own, how badly we have failed thee."

"That's..." Prey couldn't find the words to put Luna's further misunderstanding into context. In fact it was better for him if he didn't.

"Fret not, Prey. We art thy Princess of the Night. It is our duty to bear thy enmity, as thou art one of our most loyal Soldiers of the Night. We care not if some distant stranger should disparage us, for they are nothing to us. But we shall treasure thy enmity, if it means that in some small part, we may still be worthy of thy loyalty. That is what it means to be somepony's Princess. The right to their love if so earned, and also the right to their hate if so earned."

'Oh how poignantly noble. How self-sacrificing and righteous of the immortal, all-powerful alicorn to say to the runt lamb slave.' Prey viciously mocked internally, even as on the outside he couldn't stop his body from betraying him by shivering. Because this was not the Luna he knew, because she was showing a sliver of mortal emotion, and because what if she regretted this later and took back her word?

The constant flowing and rippling of Luna's nebula mane slowed. Not a muscle moved under her dark fur, but for a moment it seemed as if she was gathering herself with a force of will, "Love and hate. Rise and set. Light and dark. Well do we know that each flows into the next. But what we have learnt after a thousand years away, is to embrace both with joy. For where there is any hate, there can be love. And where there is any dark, there can also be light. Thou art one of ours Prey, not our sisters', and shall find you always have a place in our night."

Luna began to turn away, affecting what was probably supposed to be a comforting or upbeat tone, "Take heart. Take the time thou needs to grieve. Let it strengthen you. Have confidence in thyself, never doubt that thou art strong enough. Now, go. We know that Crimson doth eagerly await you outside our Palace's gates. We

highly doubt thou could wish to hoard the news of thy acquittal, when he is so sorely in need of some good news. Now go on, we shall speak again soon enough."

And just like that, Luna left him standing there as she strode away to get back to ruling her country. Or perhaps to sleep. It was the morning after all, not the dominion of her night anymore. The sun was high outside instead. Prey never had learnt if an alicorn actually needed sleep, or simply just enjoyed it.

He stood there in the palace corridor, finally alone.

When the choice was returning to slavery in the ISND, or going back to Dreverton, he knew which he would pick. Only one of those two had the chance for continued freedom. Only one of them had a friend in it. Crimson.

Prey didn't know what the future held. He hadn't thought he'd *have* a future after today.

But suddenly there was sand in the hourglass, the gears started their stuttering tick, and the future existed again. It was vast, and unknown, and terrifying. How would they even be able to work without Gloom?

No more Gloom.

It hit him again, then, and he almost started crying all over again.

No more well-meaning if misguided concern. No more flashes of dry humour. No more bond of shared survival. No more unquestioning trust.

Scenic, Lilly, and the others. They were going to have to be the ones to break the news. And then, travel all the way out to Gloom's clan for the same reason. The promise of what had once been going to be a holiday, now reduced to a grim duty. But despite all that, there was a future again.

If you were still alive, then there was hope.

Cruel, unkind, painful hope.

Utterly addictive hope.

'Free.'

Prey absently raised his hoof up before his face. He turned it this way and that in the sunlight, just his hoof crossing the divide of shadow down the middle of the corridor. Free. Well, not free, the golden tracer band caught the light and danced spots painfully across his eyes, but at least free from prison.

This all still felt so much like a dream. But the returning hunger in his stomach now that he no longer had the threat of Luna hanging over him was telling him this was real. The thirst and the beckoning void of sleep were real, too. He'd had precious little of all of it for far too long.

The white fur on his leg was still dirty, he observed. And the regrown fur over the uneven poison burn scars on his face felt especially manky and matted. For that matter, all of his fur and wool felt filthy, as seaside dirt had worked its way through all of it. Storm-rain and time had brought the scarlet staining of Gloom back to faint blushing pink swatches on his white leg fur, but undoubtedly Crimson would be able smell it when meeting him regardless.

'I really want a hot shower. And breakfast. Breakfast then a shower. Breakfast, a shower, Crimson, and some proper sleep. And a whole bag of candy.'

He could face the world again, along with all its uncaring fairness, after that.

Luna had left him alone to make his own way out of the Palace. Not a hard task, even if he'd never been in this particular stretch of the Upper Palace before, he'd of course memorised the floor plans available to the Night Guard. And she'd said Crimson was waiting at the gates. She'd probably actually meant the Guard Compound's gates, not the main gates.

Prey started back down the corridor, ambling at his own slow pace to a set of downward stairs at an intersection by the end of the

sunlit half. His hooves were still rather sore from yesterday. But he'd get there in his own time.

And then Strange Happenstance stepped around the far corner and into Prey's path.

Neither of them moved as they faced the other down. The stretch of half sunlit corridor separated them.

Strange was just staring intensely at him from beneath his lowered hat brim, but not making any other move.

Ever so slowly, Prey tilted his head, mockingly half closing his eyes at the unicorn.

'You've shot your quiver, and missed every arrow. Now it’s my turn. I'm going to hunt you down once you leave the safety of these walls.'

Strange's face was twitching. Prey didn't care about whatever hateful hurt words he was here to spew, what promises of revenge, he only watched the unicorn's horn. He was beyond Strange's political reach now.

Then the double doors halfway down the corridor between them clicked open. Prey heard the gaggle of voices, ponies addressing or asking questions in a respectful tone.

For just a moment Prey saw the grin of complete victory on Strange's face, before he vanished as the great patterned oak doors swung open, acting as a barrier and cutting off his vision.

Strange Happenstances. Unusual coincidences. Suspicious timings. It was no great stretch of the imagination to figure out that Strange's name had always been a direct derivative of his special talent, like quite a few ponies were so named. Like at the café at the Green Cockatrice, what if Strange could literally contrive to create such happenstances? Not just take advantage of being in the right place at the right time, but actually pull strings as his cutie mark hinted to make unusual circumstances align?

Or like in this case, following Prey, and then simply just standing in

Prey's path to stall him for a minute? Just a minute, so that Prey would still be standing in the corridor when the double doors opened.

A grey unicorn in a crisp Palace servant's uniform backed out of the door first, holding the door open, levitating a list of papers in her aura, asking something of her superior.

"-decide on the fifteenth or sixteenth?"

Gold. A flowing rainbow. Tall. Dwarfing the secretary, bigger even than Carton Juice. Huge white feathered wings. Fur so glossy-white and perfect it glowed. A glittering crown.

Princess Celestia turned as she stepped out into the corridor, addressing her retinue of smaller servants as they hurried to hear her will.

"The sixteenth will do nicely Raven-Oh?"

The Wolf spied their Prey frozen in the middle of the corridor. She looked right at him.

Prey didn't remember how to breathe. All he wanted was to cease to be there.

A flicker passed through those vivid magenta eyes, a sudden spark of realisation being made. The huge alicorn's beautiful face smoothed out.

Prey was deaf to all but his thundering heart. He lip-read the soundless words being spoken, not heard.

"Everypony leave me. Sweep the Palace and the grounds. I must deal with this emergency."

Fighting through molasses, Prey turned to run. The world shifted under his hooves as everything moved sideways once more.

The baking warmth of golden summer light blinded him. It picked him up, his cloven hooves losing contact with the floor.

The flash and crack of displaced air, and Prey and the solar alicorn were gone. Forgotten, a blue silk ribbon lazily drifted down to the polished marble.

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Author's Notes:

Sorry. 😓 Another cliff hanger. But we're getting there. (I still miss Gloom in the writing, though)

☆ Editor ☆ Panem et Circenses
(EDIT: greenface made this funny short comic thing. It's already in the comments but maybe you missed it. 😓)

98.7 'Unfair.'

"Oh but you must travel through the woods again and again..." Said the shadow at the window, *"...and you must be very lucky to avoid the wolf every time."*

"But the wolf... the wolf only needs enough luck to find you once."

"Let's start with you telling me why you were in the Palace."

"..."

"Why were you inside my Palace, today?"

"...I, I work here. The Night Guard. I work for your s-sister."

"Oh my. Do you now?"

"..."

"*Do* you now?"

"...Y-yes."

"Are you asking or telling me?"

"Y-yes? I mean yes! I do, I do! For the ISND, in the Night Guard, you can ask anyb-pony there, I do. P-Princess Luna knows too!"

"Oh my. Is that the truth?"

"Yes, yes."

"Is it the complete truth?"

"Yes, it's the truth, you can check, I swear, I promise!"

"And is that *also* the truth, now?"

"Yes. Y-your majesty."

"What were you doing outside the Night Guard section, then?"

"N-nothing!"

"Oh my. Nothing?"

"Nnonono, not like-! I was going back! I was there, for a trial, the court, P-princess Luna was there! It's the truth."

"Is it the complete truth?"

"Yes. *Please*."

"Why were you at this trial?"

"W-why?"

"Yes, why indeed were you at this trial?"

"B-because I was summoned. But I'm innocent! I was acquitted, completely acquitted! I swear, Princess Luna can verify everything, she was there." Prey begged.

This is how it began.

"Let's start with you telling me why you were in the Palace."

The baking heat of a cloudless, midsummer day.

The dry heat filled every inch of the doorless, windowless room. Prey didn't know where he was. He didn't know where he'd been taken. He wouldn't know in which direction to flee even if there had been any exits. A glow pervaded and lit the room, a soft gold. It seemed to come from the very air itself.

He was scared. He was so, so, so frighteningly, bone-shakily scared.

The room was hot. The air was hot. The bare stone of this featureless room was hot. It couldn't not be hot, because of the

radiant white presence of the only other person in the room. But Prey was shivering uncontrollably, his shaking legs almost unable to hold him upright, cold clammy sweat beading on his scalp, and his stomach filled with a slush of ice and terror. His ribbon was gone, left behind, beyond his desperate reach.

And there was a golden dome of transparent light over him, adding to the pervading lighting. Prey cowered in the very middle, and dared not move in case he brushed up against any portion of it by accident.

"Why were you inside my Palace today?" Celestia, the all-powerful solar alicorn repeated quite calmly. She sat there, impassively looking at Prey, and he was so scared.

She was seated on the only furnishing in the otherwise bare stone room. An enormous red satin floor cushion, which she had materialised or summoned just after she'd teleported them in here. Wherever here was. And after she'd first sealed him helplessly inside this golden barrier. The additional shield was unnecessary. He'd be cowering in the farthest corner even if the shield wasn't there. Even now, Celestia was maintaining the spell without even a thought.

If Prey touched it by accident, would it burn away his hoof to the bone, blackened muscle and nerves left exposed to the air? Was she going to start shrinking it smaller and smaller?

Prey didn't dare to move. He could scarcely breathe he was so scared.

The huge alicorn with her enormous, perfect white wings folded comfortably at her sides on the cushion, patiently waited for him to give her answers. She didn't seem to be in any hurry. She was an immortal, she had all the time in the world.

It would have been obvious to even a blind person that Prey was terrified of her. Celestia's beautiful features only showed a polite sort of mild interest in the situation she was causing. She would have the all-important answers she demanded, one way or another.

She was waiting for his answer.

She wasn't going to stop waiting.

Prey did not want this. He did not want those vivid magenta eyes to see him. He did not want to be here.

It took more courage than Prey knew he possessed to crack open his dry mouth and whisper his desperate answer. He didn't know where the courage came from, but it wasn't his, it couldn't be his. He needed his ribbon back. He was going to be sick.

" ...I, I work here. The Night Guard. For your s-sister."

And then Celestia had continued, and Prey could have cried. He just wanted to be left alone, not here, not imprisoned, and not by her- the Sun Wolf.

But Equestria's glorious daytime sovereign, with golden-clad hooves the size of his head, and a mask as immaculately maintained as every strand of her alabaster-white fur, showed not a hint of impatience. Nor any kindness, or mercy. Just the same slightly-smiling, polite interest.

While wearing that marble mask, her billowing rainbow mane and tail drifting all about the empty room, Celestia continued to mercilessly press him. She was going to get every answer she wanted. She held all the power here. There were no limits- not moral, physical, or any other kind, that she could not completely ignore if so she fancied.

"How did you hide what you are from my sister?"

Celestia should not be resting so comfortably on that satin pillow, not as she so callously crushed Prey. It was wrong. The air was so hot, and Prey's mouth so dry. Despair was only a sobbing, powerless breakdown away.

"H-hide what?" He croaked.

"Hide that you are not one of my little ponies."

Prey stared in wide-eyed, horrified stupidity at the source of all his fears. How did he hide he wasn't a pony? She was taunting him, she had to be. She couldn't mean that question seriously.

But again came the same patient, unyielding question, "How did you hide that you are not one of my little ponies from Luna?"

"But... I'm, I'm just a sheep." Prey whispered.

"Oh my. Is that the truth?"

Prey didn't understand what she meant. He was beyond scared. "I'm n-not a pony. I'm j-just a sheep."

"Is that the full truth, now?"

Prey didn't know what other answer he could give, "Yes."

And so for the first time, Celestia did something other than maintain the calm mask she'd worn since trapping them inside this unmarked room. She sighed, an unusually gentle sound coming from so large a pair of lungs, "Oh dear. So that's how it is."

There was a silence as the hated, terrifying sun alicorn continued to patiently observe him, her aurora mane and tail still drifting lightly across the floor and walls. Her magenta eyes simply watched, and she waited.

Prey found out that it was possible for the alicorn to become even more intimidating simply by so placidly doing nothing. Was there any air coming into this room? Prey couldn't see so much as a single vent, no opening to cycle more in. Uncomfortable memories of a night at the base of Canter Mountain hovered at the back of his mind.

Was Celestia going to suffocate him while she watched? His chest felt like it was being squeezed in a vice at the thought. A dark landscape of terror resurfaced, dancing on the edge of his vision. Of another night, a night in Mayflower.

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At his back the dark waited, hungry and insatiable. Nothing tangible stood between him and it. His skin crawled. It was just him, the finite wood pile, the fire, and the dark.

If this was a dream, then it was a nightmare. But Prey wasn't dreaming.

So why then, could he hear Gossamer talking to their mother? And why-oh-why did the memory only come now, when he was so scared and tired?

He strained, desperate to remember. Faint, oh so faint. Half a sentence.

"*You're my sweetie, my only sweetie, when skies are grey..... and when the stitches fall apart, you'll be hanging by a thread.....*"

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His life was well and truly hanging by a thread now.

An interminable hour later, or it might have been just a little over a minute, Celestia finally spoke again, "I'm putting a pin in that for later. Instead, let's hear about you. Tell me all about yourself."

Prey's shivering got worse. She had no right to demand that. Tell her? Tell the hated, arrogant, selfish, jealous, uncaring immortal alicorn of his private, miserable life?

'Tell the alicorn who will kill me if I don't.'

She was still calmly waiting as he shivered and trembled.

Prey couldn't. He *wouldn't* tell her. He couldn't even tell Crimson his darkest secrets, so how could he tell someone as unworthy as Celestia?

Rushweed. The Resistance. A tiny, forgotten farm. The Deeper Green. Captain Fire Strike. Runes and mind magic. He couldn't tell her that.

But she had the power to force him to. She could torture him, burn him, mutilate him. Prey hated pain. So he opened his dry, cracked lips and told her a different story instead.

The story of what had happened since coming to Canterlot and being pressganged by Luna.

He abbreviated. He skipped parts. He alluded to having come from a still-living village on the border. He stuck to the established background he'd woven, and he prayed.

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Celestia had a kind face. On so many statues, paintings, and photographs the world over, her face and her kind smile were famously depicted. The golden crown which Celestia wore upon the brow of that face, too big for anybody but her, was more or less a holy relic to ponies everywhere. Who among them would not be eternally thrilled at a personally directed, benevolent smile and kind nod from that wise, eternally beautiful face?

There was no kindness to be found on that famous face now. Just the calm, serene, contented patience of someone who had all the time in the world. And who knew that you didn't.

'The patience of a wolf.' Prey drew the parallel miserably. He was shaking, not just on the outside, but he felt like he was shaking internally. Like he might fall to pieces at any moment.

Prey lied.

Of course he did. He doctored his story, he had no option. It was a lose-lose disaster scenario. He couldn't tell Celestia or she'd smite him, but he had to tell Celestia or she'd smite him.

So he spoke and stuttered, his mind jumping ahead trying to edit the story he was going to tell even as he told it, trying to keep all the lies and deceptions straight. He could not afford to even slightly slip up.

His editing didn't seem to help. Celestia had a preternatural knack for interrupting right when he was struggling to think, to press him

with a pointed question.

She kept doing it, over and over, asking the same questions in a dozen different ways to torture his mind and make him struggle.

She just kept *asking* and *demanding* answers, while all Prey wanted was to be left *alone*, but she *wouldn't*. Celestia kept turning the handle of the vice tighter and tighter, as Prey shrunk lower and lower. And she kept saying that same damned phrase, until the words were rattling in Prey's head and caused him to flinch every single time he heard it:

"Oh my. What made you think pulling that lever was a good idea?"

Followed by; "Is that the truth, now?"

And then; "Oh my. What about the damage caused to the lumber yard?"

Followed by; "Is that all of the truth?"

And again; "Oh my. Didn't you think about the ponies who might get crushed if the warehouse's doors were to collapse?"

And yet again; "Why didn't you think about it sooner?"

Celestia kept calmly asking questions along the same vein, over and over and over, and Prey knew he wasn't providing the Sun Wolf with satisfactory answers, because she just kept asking. But she wouldn't let up, and it was so hard to think straight when he was shaking with fear, and could only keep repeating the same desperate answers.

"Oh my," She would say, with all the detached emotion that a butcherbird dismembering a field mouse piece by piece might display, "Why did you lead your squad into these Wolfing Woods?"

"You didn't, you warned them away? Is that the truth? Is that the whole truth?"

"What is inside a Wolfing Wood?"

"Oh my. Are you positive you don't know? Think hard."

"Still no? Perhaps you should try thinking harder. I would very much like to know what this threat to my little ponies is."

"Oh my. You're not holding important information back from me, are you now?"

"And are you telling me the truth? The whole truth?"

Mayflower. The deer holt and the old buried road inside the pine trees. The scarecrow and kindersnatches, into the Reaper King. Prey repeated the established official story, resolutely sticking only to what the Night Guard believed had occurred. About how he and Crimson had been separated after being chased by two huge insect monsters, and he didn't know what had happened to the warlock, only that he was found dead, seemingly by suicide. He couldn't afford to waver for even a second in his retelling. The golden shimmer of his magic prison was always there, only ever a flex away from Celestia crushing him into a pulp of ruptured flesh.

People say the truth will always win out. That it's a weight off your chest to finally tell your full story, to speak to a willing ear.

They lie. They don't understand. They didn't know what Prey knew. They didn't have things they wanted to keep secret so desperately that they would kill for it, over and over again. They didn't understand what it was like to know you were going to die, and die horribly. Or what it was to experience boundless fear.

"Oh my. The griffin ambassador, yes, my sister said something about that. But why don't you now tell me all about it in your own words?"

"Oh my. The undercover mission to Griffonstone was very... daring, yes. I spoke with Luna about it afterwards at quite some length, with regards to restraint and trust. And what did you think of this idea?"

"Did you support the idea? Why didn't you speak up? Why hold your peace and stay silent then?"

"Are you sure that's the truth? All of it?"

"Are you quite positive, now? There's nothing else you want to add?"

"Nothing else at all? Come now, are you sure that you're sure?"

"Nothing else about the griffins at all comes to mind?"

"Nothing *else*?"

"Oh dear. Nothing at all?"

Prey's heart was pounding. The air was hot and his eyes were burning, but he didn't dare blink first. Celestia was looking at him a certain way, now more than ever projecting that she knew Prey was not telling her something about the griffin incident, and wouldn't let him continue his story until he admitted it.

There was no one else in the sealed room but him and the Sun Wolf. Maybe there was no one else in the entire world, even.

Prey gave in, "There was, there was... an, an accident in the town of Ponyville that night. The ambassador... a trick, Corporal Sharp Tang was supposed to warn Princess Luna..." His words came out as a rasping croak, but so far Celestia had not ordered him to speak up or repeat himself even once. She must be able to perfectly hear everything inside this shield bubble, another spell woven into the golden magic.

"Oh my. Do tell."

Luna had ordered him into silence that night. Prey blurted it all out to Celestia, as proof that Luna had known and hadn't killed him yet, so there was no need for her to kill him either. He told her about witnessing the Elements of Harmony resurrecting the pink Element of Laughter.

"...and then she put me to sleep. And, and I woke up in the barracks." Prey finished, burning with shame and hate at having retold that most private of failures, but fear stilled the outrage on his tongue.

Aside from her ever-drifting mane, Celestia didn't move for a long minute. Prey had been flinching and waiting for her to immediately ask him if he was telling the truth, just like she'd done every time before. But this time, she just observed him from her relaxed position on the floor cushion.

Her real face was hidden behind that polite but utterly meaningless mask. What was she thinking? What had she taken offence to now?

'It's not fair. It's just not fair. I escaped the false trial, so why now this? It's just not fair.'

"You told nopony else, just like my sister made you promise. Is that right?" Celestia finally spoke, tone even.

"Yes." Prey lied. He'd told Crimson, but other than that, nobody.

He thought Celestia believed him, or maybe she didn't care, because no one else would believe him over an alicorn. "When a pony's time has come, they must move on. Everypony only has one life, and you mustn't hold on to a pony when that time comes. It is a sad fact that holding on only hurts you more. It is the cycle of Harmony. It is not something to be feared, but rather embraced. Do you understand that?"

It was the first time Celestia had made a statement so far, not just scrutinised and broken him down with ceaseless questions. Prey's mouth worked in shock. Did he understand? What was there to understand?

'Understand that Luna tried to force that same plate of spoilt, bloodied waste down my throat? Understand that an immortal alicorn is telling me it’s wrong to want to live forever? That I was evil for begging Luna to save my family? While in the same hypocritical breath completely skipping over that one of her precious ponies got to come back to life?'

Yes, Prey well understood all of that.

It was like Celestia was saying; 'Do you see? On this side stands the resurrected pony. She gets to cheat death because she is a pony, and

a bearer of an all-important Element of Harmony. Now look to the other side. Your loved ones will stay dead because they're not important to Harmony.'

Now look over here. Do you see? Here resting comfortably upon a cushion sits the immortal, beloved, and powerful alicorn. Now look there. Prey's hooves were full of the relentless stabbing pain of magic from being trapped inside this bubble, forced to bear Celestia's every whim, and hadn't once stopped shivering.

'I hate you. I hate Luna. I hate Luna more than I have words. And I hate you too.'

It was unfair on a cosmic scale. He had saved Canterlot, twice, secretly destroying the changeling war swarm which had been only days away from attacking and then once more after Discord. Him, Prey. No one else. Not the Royal Guard, not Nighthawk, not Luna, not the oh-so-special Element Bearers, not even Celestia! They hadn't even suspected a single thing! And nobody would ever know, nor would they thank him for it.

The very ruler of the wealthy, golden city he so hated but had still saved was reclining on a red satin cushion right in front of him, and he didn't dare breathe a single word of it or she'd immolate him on the spot.

He'd murdered so many changelings, enough to crush him with the weight of the sin, once intentionally and then once by accident, trying to save his own life. And he'd never be thanked or forgiven for all the ungrateful pony lives he'd saved in the process.

"Little lamb-", Hearing the name from the Sun Wolf's lips, Prey never wanted to ever be called that again, "-can't you see? When a pony's time comes, let them go."

Prey should nod. He should give some sort of false agreement to appease Celestia. He should pretend to bow to her wisdom.

But his throat seemed frozen, his head wouldn't nod. Because she was telling him to give up on his mother and Fleece. Or rather, Gossamer's mother.

'Never.' Prey could never do that.

But he could definitely lie and pretend to give in. So why wasn't he? The ever-burning, all-powerful Sun Wolf was looming right in front of him, he should grovel and do anything it took to survive. He'd lied to appease Luna, hadn't he?

But survival was only ever second, on The List.

Prey opened his mouth. Nothing came out of his dry throat. Why couldn't he just say the words?

"Let go. There is a time to live, a time to love, and yes, sadly, a time to die." Celestia ordered.

Prey licked his lips and tried to form the lie once again. But still nothing came out of his mouth.

Celestia's patient gaze turned into patient disappointment.

"Let go. You need to stop holding on." She repeated.

Prey felt so small and weak, a tiny ant under the magnifying glass just waiting for the sun to rise and scorch him.

"No." The one word.

"I'm talking," Celestia chided him like a misbehaving foal, "-about you. *You* need to let go and move on."

She shifted on the plush satin to point one massive golden-shod and polished hoof at Prey's chest, "It's you. You need to move on to the next step. I almost missed it, if I hadn't checked on a hunch I wouldn't have ever seen it, but I can now see the dark magic coiling around your heart. Tell me, how many extra years have you stolen?"

The Jaw of Hearts. His secret was out.

His real age, something he'd lied to and deceived everyone about, even Crimson.

His secret. No one else's. And Celestia had just laid it out in the open.

'No. No No. NoNoNONONO!'

No, no, no! She couldn't be allowed to know, not her! Anyone but her!

He couldn't breathe, he couldn't hear, he couldn't even stay standing. His legs folded and tipped him onto the stone, sprawling on his side.

A deafening humming was ringing in his ears. He couldn't feel the freezing cold of his ribbon, because it wasn't here when he most needed it. His whole chest was quivering with spasming breaths, in sympathy of being discovered. As if the Jaw of Hearts was simply giving up now that Celestia knew.

The ringing buzz went on. It kept filling his head and his ears. He couldn't focus on or hear what Celestia was saying anymore.

His secret was exposed.

Celestia knew.

She was going to kill him.

Completely against the last of Prey's will, his face crumpled up and he began to wail.

The deepest of shame and self-hatred squashed Prey into the stone floor. To break in front of his first and greatest enemy, to cry in front of Celestia, *the* Celestia, the Sun Wolf and architect of all he has endured, the humiliation was too much.

Tears burned his eyes. Messy shivering sobs wracked his lungs. Prey hated himself so much in that moment he wanted to die, just like Celestia was telling him to roll over and do.

But only for a moment, before the shame was swept away by unending spite. Celestia was telling him he should be dead? Well then, there was no greater motivation to remain alive. The

forgotten half of an unforgettable memory rose with his thoughts, unbidden.

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He wanted to be anywhere else. Not here, not trapped with the Sun Wolf, not alone with her and about to die. Exactly like when Luna had been drowning him in a muddy ditch, he wanted out, he wanted to be gone!

But even the old pincushion couldn't get him out of this, with no more charges left in it.

Prey had wished to get to the stream’s bank, back then. That was it. He'd wanted to get out of the water which was killing him. So he'd wished for the closest salvation he could find, and that had been the bank. So he had wished, not in words, but in desperate feelings.

And in this new desperate moment, Prey remembered *remembering* the time when he'd seen something once before.

The curtain pulled back. The world of cloth and tangled threads, tying everything together. And he remembered again the dreadful horror. That in-between space.

Prey's own stitching had been pulled out and opened up. He'd been full of stuffing and straw, and he remembered a threaded needle coming down-

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The hot stone under his aching, shuddering chest. Back in the execution room. It felt like he was trapped behind his own eyes, inside his weak runt body as it blubbered and shook on the floor. He felt the unending shame, felt the black and withering hate for crying in front of her, but his mind was finally floating free of it.

"-and when you've run your race, it's time to rest and let the next generation run, without any lingering obstacles to hold them back."

And the bastardess Celestia wouldn't shut up! Even now she was still droning on that he had lived past his time, that he should have

moved on and that dark magic was wrong.

"-haven't moved on as you were supposed to, and you haven't kept true to Harmony. Dark magic is never the answer."

She said all of it with that same calm, detached, patient look on her stupid immortal face.

"I have had the sad duty of sitting down those few ponies who were too scared to move on, and talked it through with them until they saw the error of their ways, and finally stopped holding on. Death isn't to be feared. It's natural to be scared of the unknown, but all my little ponies make the brave choice in the end. However, you are not one of my little ponies, and you have already walked Equus for far too long."

How long could you cry? How long before you ran dry of tears?

There is a point where they run out, a time past which your body finally stopped responding to the emotions it was feeling, too tired to physically react any further.

How long could you continue crying, if what awaited you was death once you finished?

And how long before your executioner ran out of patience?

Not Celestia. Not the immortal ruler of millennia. She never ran out of her seemingly infinite patience. The softening at the edge of her eyes even showed hints of pity for the distress she was witnessing. But not even one hint of mercy.

Celestia was famous throughout all of Equestria for her kindness. She was held in awe for her willingness to offer mercy and grant second chances even when her subjects had made grave mistakes.

There were centuries of well-told stories of this documented fact, from Celestia forgiving a lumberjack who accidentally started a forest fire, to a noble who'd had a change of heart and had confessed to raising his rents until he'd driven a destitute family he

wanted to replace out onto the streets.

But she didn't offer a single ounce of kindness, mercy, or forgiveness to Prey here.

It was like her eyes didn't see a lamb in front of her. Like she didn't see a living person at all.

Celestia lay on her plush cushion, her magic trapping Prey in, and simply watched him until his tears dried up.

And then she resumed speaking as if the terror-induced breakdown she'd caused had not just happened.

"I have yet to meet even one of my little ponies who did not know what they were doing was wrong. They fear discovery precisely because they firmly know in their hearts it is wrong. And the further they linger past their appointed time, the worse the burden of guilt becomes. It eats them up from the inside day after day, secretly crying out for somepony to convince them that what they already know is wrong deep inside truly is, and to help set them right."

She sighed in old sorrow, "Nine times, and nine times too many it has fallen to me, as their princess, to be the one to set them right. But all of them thanked me and said goodbye in the end. Unnaturally extending your life is not a blessing, it is a curse. Too late do my misguided little ponies realise the greatest anguish isn't confronting their own end, but remaining behind as everypony else they love leaves them behind. And a life devoid of friendship is not a life worth living. It is a lesson even I have had to learn."

"...'iar." Prey croaked. He lifted his swollen red eyes to brokenly glare at Celestia.

He swallowed, and tried again, "...Liar." He finally warbled out.

Celestia delicately raised her eyebrows, as if to silently humour him. 'Oh my, do go on', She seemed to be saying.

Prey's hoarse voice strained like the note on a badly tuned violin string. "Liar. You're immortal. You never have to fear dying. All the

time in the world. How dare you stand and judge? Hypocrite."

Celestia didn't get angry. No, that wouldn't have fit with her longsuffering patience.

"It is precisely why I must stand as judge. I have the experience nopony else has, to look further down the path than any other pony can see, and so I have a responsibility. Harmony sets everypony where they need to be in life, and this is my place as Princess. And that is why you are wrong again. I have seen far more lives come to an end than you can possibly imagine, which is why I can judge better than you could ever understand. I don't boast when I say I know better than you."

And just like that, Celestia glossed over and dismissed everything Prey had said. She used her immortality as both excuse and justification for anything she did. Because she was older and more powerful, she therefore must also be wiser.

That was arrogance. That was blind, tyrannical arrogance. Celestia had centuries of believing her own justifications, and there would be no way Prey could convince her of something different.

Prey hated her. He hated her so very much.

"Then why don't you t-teleport down to Ponyville and tell your p-pink Element Bearer the same thing?" Prey hissed, voice cracking.

Celestia gently shook her head in disappointment, "This is not about Pinkamena, why are you angry because of her happiness? She is the embodiment of Laughter. Shame on you. You haven't been listening to the answer I've been repeating; it is because it is your time, and it was also not her time."

Circular logic. Because the pink mare had cheated death with Harmony, it must have been destiny. If she'd died instead, then it must also have been destiny. Because he had cheated death without Harmony, it was past his time.

You couldn't even begin to reason with someone who thought in circles like that.

Pointlessly, Prey tried anyway, unable to do anything else, "It's never a-anybody's time Celestia, the future isn't set in stone. She was dead. She came back to life. It's the s-same damn thing."

"Princess Celestia." Celestia patiently corrected him, a gentle reminder that was still iron, about who was in charge here, "And it was not her time." She simply repeated.

Circular logic at its finest.

The golden dome shimmered around Prey. Celestia impassively looked on, obviously waiting for his next pointless objection.

Prey sunk lower onto the ground, hugging his legs to himself and yearning for his ribbon. She wasn't listening, she wasn't listening to anything he said! But what choice did he have but to try again and again? Celestia meant to kill him at the end of this. She wasn't going to listen, and she was going to kill him. She had already decided and carved it into stone in her heart. The Wolf had made him her prey.

The realisation of that inevitability greyed out Prey's mind in a fog of terror. And like any lamb caught in a wolf's jaws, he kicked and struggled.

"I have a r-right to live. I've as much right to live as any of your ponies. I want to live, I have friends waiting for me, I won't leave them forever just because you say so. Princess."

"Oh my. You've found friendship? That's wonderful, truly. But it does not change reality. The balance of Harmony must be protected. But please, if you have a last message you want me to carry to your friends, tell me to whom and what, and I will see it delivered. I assure you, my recollection is excellent and I can repeat it word for word." Celestia offered from her satin pillow.

The shivering got stronger. Prey wasn't getting enough air. Her offer sickened him. He tried begging next:

"I don't want to die. Please, haven't I done so m-much for your sister? I've served the Night Guard faithfully. Please, please can't

you understand? Why?"

The air was too thin in his lungs, his words shook, "Why should I die? I'm begging you, please don't do this. What do you want? I'll do anything. What do you w-want from me? I can change, I c-can follow orders, I can do whatever you want. Please, please, please."

Celestia pursed her lips, settling further back on the satin pillow. The huge feathers on her gigantic white wings rustled softly with the movement, "I see my words are not registering. The only thing I need from you, is for you to stop holding on." She said quietly.

"Please."

"I'm deeply sorry, but the answer will always be no."

It wasn't working. Nothing was working. The walls were closing in. All his runes and arrays were who knew how many miles beyond his reach! It wasn't right, this couldn't be right, this couldn't be it!

He had to do something.

"Where are we?" Prey choked out. Were they still in Canterlot? Or were they on the moon?

Celestia smiled patiently as her mane drifted, and gave no answer.

Prey stared at her, at that merciless smile on her perfect features. He hated her. As he hyperventilated, he hated her! You fear what you hate, and hate what you fear. And Prey hated her so very, very much.

She was sitting there, and decreeing he would die.

"You're n-nothing b-but a m-murderer."

Celestia didn't seem to feel even the slightest need to dignify that with a defence. Why would she? She was Celestia.

The towering blackness strangling Prey somehow grew even higher in the face of her complete dismissal.

"*Murderer*. You s-sent him, don't lie. C-Captain Fire Strike." He spat.

"Oh my. Who?"

Prey choked. Who? She asked 'who', as if she didn't know. Or was it that the timeframe didn't match up with anyone she thought he could be referring to?

"Stop lying! You know, you know who. C-Captain Fire Strike, that racist m-murderer. You a-appointed him, fifty-nine years ago. The Resistance, the Deeper Green! Captain Fire Strike of the *Border Guard*."

Celestia just blinked at him, "Who?"

Prey couldn't. He could only stare, eyes red, nose running, and ribbonless.

No. She didn't know? No, that couldn't be. She had to know, it was her Border Guard, one of her very own Captains. It was her responsibility to know who was running one of her military bodies.

Did she not care that Fire Strike had run wild? Of the night-time raids of homes and the arrests he'd ordered? Of how those arrested villagers never returned? Of the martial law he'd enforced, of the war he'd enflamed? Of the firestorm he'd unleashed on the Resistance on the hill? Or that he'd been a filthy mind leech just like Prey? Or that he'd abandoned Rushweed in the end to the tender mercies of the Resistance?

Celestia knew, she had to know! She had to, it was unthinkable that she wouldn't.

But she didn't.

She didn't know who the Resistance had been. She didn't care. They'd been too small and far away from the golden heart of Equestria for her ever to take notice, far over the Ridgeback and sequestered away where nobody of importance were threatened. No significant *pony* settlements.

Nothing more than an unfortunate and regrettable border skirmish.

"Captain Fire Strike. Of the Border Guard. Fifty-nine years ago." Why did his words sound almost like a plea?

Celestia just bemusedly shook her horned head, "The name does vaguely chime with memory, but I don't appoint any Guard Captains aside from the Royal and Solar Guard. I don't recall ever meeting this… Fire Strike."

Jump, jump, shift. The world slid out from under Prey's hooves yet again as everything he thought he knew shifted with it.

The Sun Wolf hadn't ever known. Celestia hadn't ever cared.

It had never been out of hate or malice. Not even a mistake. Celestia had simply never bothered to take an interest in the small war on her border. Had never bothered to even know what happened.

Laying on the floor, Prey held up his shaking hooves before his eyes. He'd committed so many sins with these cloven hooves. They should drip red. Or black. They didn't.

'It changes nothing, just like with Luna. She could have cared. She never did. She looked the other way and let everything play out exactly as it did. I wouldn't do it all again if I could go back, I'd do it worse.'

"But fifty-nine years ago you say," Celestia repeated in thoughtful consideration. Her mouth firmed, "Another confirmation, if I needed another. Not of the unearned years you've stolen, although that too, but of who you came from."

Prey could barely drag his eyes up from his shaking hooves. It seemed so unimportant, whatever it was the sun tyrant was saying, but he had to focus.

"Going back and removing that pin in our conversation. I understand, you think you've been afflicted with a tragic life. If you were a real pony, I would pity you. Actually, I do pity you in some ways, because you think you're a pony, and that's sad. But you're not a real pony, and every one of my little ponies you've interacted

with have all been deceived by you, intentionally or not. That lie ends today, I'm afraid."

And there it was. Words from the solar monarch's own lips. Only ponies mattered, every other species in the entire world was worthless.

'Because pony blood doesn't run in my veins. But I have plenty on my hooves!' Enraged hurt surged up through his chest.

"The Resistance will return. And again and again. You're going to make it come back. Because we're people, not slaves. I'm a person. I'm not a pony, I'm a person! But you can't even understand that, can you?"

Prey kept speaking despite Celestia smoothly interjecting something. He didn't listen to her words, just more immortal elite racism. She could magically silence him, he would mouth it anyway. His voice shook like a doddering old ram's.

"And my words don't matter because oh, I'm still not a pony. So your little ponies are going to die, again and again, as your slaves rise up again and again. You're the rotten heart of this entire rotten country!"

He was left panting, not because he'd shouted, but from the choking hate he'd had to breathe out with every word. The dry air in the enclosed room jumped a degree even higher in heat.

Celestia softly shook her great head, rainbow mane drifting in a trailing afterimage of the motion, "Oh my, no. No, not at all. Your utterly vile vision of revenge aside, you don't understand me at all. Every being in Equestria is one of my little ponies. Griffin, yak, diamond dog, they are all my citizens. I am not as shallow as you falsely accuse me to be, so while most of my nation may be populated by ponies, every person is equal."

She actually said the word, said 'person' instead of degrading everyone to 'pony'. The grand leader of ponykind, she'd corrected the pervasive arrogance of ponykind's grammar just this once.

So everything Celestia had said just now had been with the intention of 'person', and not exclusively 'pony'. But her personal meaning behind the word did not excuse the centuries of causal racism she'd perpetuated and helped spread throughout Equestria's ponies, simply by not bothering to speak up even once to correct them.

It did however cast a new light over every sentence she'd so far spoken. Yet why then had she accused him of not being a 'pony' if she meant 'person'? In the burning light, Prey's exhausted, failing mind still managed to take the next step and work out what that meant. And what it meant was even worse.

'She said I'm not a pony. And she meant person. So she doesn't even see me as a real person.'

He wasn't a person in her condescending eyes. He was no higher than a dumb animal.

The temperature climbed another degree as Celestia continued to unconsciously make her annoyance known. Or perhaps it wasn't unconscious. There was no person or power to hold her accountable even if it wasn't. Pony, person, or otherwise.

"Your deliberate misconstruing of my character aside, it is past time I brought this to an end. Dragging this painful scene out is helping neither of us, and I dislike needless cruelty in any form. It will be better if I give you the push you need to take the plunge."

Celestia leaned forwards and set herself very deliberately across the pillow. Her face rested only inches above the transparent, golden shield. Prey wanted to recoil, but there was nowhere left to go inside the shield.

She spoke each word slowly and clearly as she made Prey meet her deep magenta gaze:

"You aren't a person. You are a thing."

In the silence after her proclamation, she kept watching him as Prey glared fearfully and hatefully while backing up. She was studying

him, looking for a reaction to her words.

Whatever it was, she didn't find it in his wordless contempt for her utterly retarded claim.

"I see..." Celestia said at length, "You don't believe me. And you need to believe me to truly understand."

She pulled back from the shield, her long horn finally not hanging over Prey like a drawn sword, yet a thousand times more deadly. She took a moment to knead the bit of pillow between her large hooves.

"You're not real." She stated.

"Then you're holding this conversation with your inner m-madness." Prey spat.

"Shush." Celestia ordered, a single golden spark dancing at the tip of her horn warningly. But a single spark of magic from an alicorn had Prey immediately biting down on his lip.

Satisfied, she went on; "You aren't a real sheep, you never were. Your body isn't real either, you merely think it is. It deceives touch, the eyes, and scent. It even bleeds, although it isn't real flesh and blood. But you don't see what I see, because you believe you're real. You can feel pain, you can catch an illness or even die because of one, as if you were living, but... you aren't alive."

Celestia's words were an anomaly. They contradicted each other and didn't make any sense whatsoever. Something even she seemed to realise, for she sighed in frustration, even that sound still somehow coming across as *aggravatingly* patient.

"It sounds like a paradox, I know. 'I think, therefore I am', but you don't think your own thoughts, you're somepony else's older, twisted thoughts, and always have been. You aren't you, you are a murdered soul trapped in a shell."

Prey's tear-reddened eyes were wide, wide open. He stared, struck dumb. He'd called Celestia mad, but now it turned out she really was mad. The sort of cracked madness you never saw until the

cover was ripped off. Prey knew madness. Madness was insanity that thought it was reason.

Celestia's mouth drew down. Subtle distortions of heat began to ripple the air all around her alabaster-white fur, "It's despicable, what black magics a pony can stoop to. Even worse, how they can dare claim their actions are out of desperate love. I don't understand it, I just can't. How a mare can foalnap and murder another's foal, mock the very sanctity of life by trapping the murdered soul in a shell, and then call the abomination their foal and pretend to love it?"

It took a moment for the dots to connect. Then another to process Celestia's madness. Then:

"*What did you say about my mother?*"

"You don't have a mother, you never did. You were not born, you were made out of some poor foal's murdered soul, birthed from another mare!" For the first time, Celestia raised her voice.

And for the first time, Prey wasn't afraid. There was only unyielding fury as he screamed right back at the solar goddess, "What'd you DARE say about my mother?!"

"You never had a mother, you had a witch, a dark sorceress. One that is finally gone and will pollute the cycle of Harmony no longer." Celestia's huge wings were twitching at her sides, wanting to flare open, "You have no idea of the misery she perpetuated for nine decades, hiding from me. Twice she slipped away, twice! I thought her finally dead after twenty years of nothing, no signs, and then she came back only to spread things like you! Do you even have any idea what she did?"

Celestia didn't wait, she was caught up in her anger. Controlled anger, but still blazing hot even after all these years, "That witch was the worst of the worst. She preyed on grief-stricken mothers when they were at their most vulnerable, tricking and tempting them into performing her black magic. Do you know what she did when their child was stillborn, the dirt not yet even settled on the small graves? She tricked them into stealing and murdering

another's foal, tricking them into believing they could replace their own lost one! Making nothing but a cursed lifeform! And she claimed she did it all out of 'love'. There is no forgiveness in Harmony or Tartarus for that kind of evil."

Prey's mouth moved. He was so far beyond any fury for the lies Celestia was accusing his mother of.

"I will **b**R*ea**K*** you." He whispered.

Prey never tortured, never. He hated pain. He had never willingly tortured someone simply for the sake of torture, the desire to inflict hurt. He may have thought it in the dark privacy of his own mind, but he'd never actually done so. He'd murdered many, many people, but he'd never tortured out of any sadistic desire to cause pain. They might die in agony, but only as a by-product of the method used to kill them. Their deaths had always been the end goal, or their suffering a requirement for it, not their suffering being the goal itself.

Yet now, torture was what Prey promised Celestia. Promised that he would do anything and everything he could manage to cause her pain, to make her suffer, to break her. Burn Canterlot, poison every one of those little ponies she cared so much about that he could reach, unleash a flesh-eating swarm of corrupted, zombie parasprites in Ponyville. Anything to hurt the immortal alicorn which he couldn't physically kill.

That was what Prey promised her in that moment. To spite her so badly that a millennia from now, she would still wake up in bitter sorrow every morning at the memory.

It was a thought, not formulated in his outer mindscape, but born down in the lightless depths of the inner; 'I hate you. So before the end, you are going to hate me. Now, and forever. I'll make it fair.'

It was the only possible response to such lies. Celestia meant to execute him at the end of this, but it was still the only possible response.

Those were lies about his... about *Gossamer's* mother.

The seas could boil. The stars could fall, continents crack and be ripped asunder. But Prey would never stand by and allow this slander. Gossamer's mother had been the kindest, most pure, important person to have ever lived.

"Lies."

"The truth." Celestia contradicted, with all the ringing certainty of the dawn.

"And now that you know what I already know, next you must truly believe it. And the only useful method towards making you believe, is to make you understand. You're blinded at the moment by the same dark magic effect which animates you. But once you can finally see, once you finally understand... then the dark magic will break and you'll know I speak nothing but the truth. But you can't break free of the dark if you can't understand."

"Now," Celestia announced with sudden finality, "There is actually a very simple method for removing your blindness. And I won't do a thing, it will all be your own understanding."

Lies. It didn't matter how deeply Celestia believed her own madness. They were and always would be nothing but lies.

"That monster who pretended to be your mother; do you know her name?"

Prey laughed at the Sun Wolf in sheer disbelief. Did he know her name? Did he know his own mother's name?!

Celestia's face didn't change, "Then can you tell me what it is?"

"Khe-he. Why yes of c-course! It's, n-none of your damn business!"

Again, Celestia didn't react to Prey's impotent fury, "Can you tell me?"

Prey bared his teeth at her, glaring hatefully, but not bothering to repeat himself.

"Let me repeat the question. *Can* you tell me?"

Could Prey? Of course he could. Would he play Celestia's little game? Never.

"Allow me to rephrase; are you *able* to tell me that witch's name?"

"She wasn't a Zoma'Grika witch!"

"Then tell me her name." She commanded.

"You're not worthy of hearing it."

"I already know the name of the *thing* that told you it was your mother. A child who has known nothing but hate confuses it for love. I know what that witch truly was, and I know *who* she was."

Then Celestia said a name.

"Wrong! Completely wrong." Prey crowed gleefully. It was an empty, spiteful glee, but it was the only thing left to him, to mock this alicorn hag.

"Is it wrong though?" Celestia asked knowingly, "Is it really?"

"Utterly! Completely! Totally."

"I want you to think of her name, then. Hold it in your mind."

Prey's mind immediately flashed to do just that before he could prevent himself. Then he stopped himself out of pure spite. Not that it mattered if he did or he didn't, because Celestia was wrong.

"What is your mother's name?" She asked.

Prey knew his mother's name. He'd always known it. And it wasn't the same.

"Tell me. Tell me her name."

"Get stuffed."

The alicorn who could burn him to a crisp merely pursed her lips, "Are you capable of even speaking her name? Are you physically able to even repeat it to yourself?"

Of course Prey could. He could say it at any time, but Celestia wasn't worthy of hearing it, and she'd use magic and overhear him even if he whispered it. He wasn't going to humour her insane, crackpot delusions.

"I am not going to stop asking. What is your mother's name?"

Where he lay, Prey crossed his shaking, stinging hooves on the stone in front of him in defiance, and glared.

"Fine then, repeat the name I said just now instead."

Prey's mouth twisted sourly, "Selenia." He spat.

"The witch Selenia." Celestia echoed with disdain.

"You mean the Great White Witch, Selenia." Prey tried to take whatever glee he could in correcting Celestia with his knowledge of that banned name.

Celestia's delicate brows creased carefully, "And how do you know that?"

"I know it because you tried to smother and hide it."

"For good reason. A pony can't fall for the empty allure of dark magic if they never have to endure the temptation to begin with. My ponies are not weak of will, but a desperate pony is often not rational." Celestia's words hardened, "Exactly like all the grieving mothers the witch Selenia tricked into becoming murderers, just like her."

She took a deep breath of the near-shimmering, heated air and settled herself back down, "Your dear 'mother' was that self-same witch. She sewed you together from a murdered foal. That is what she was. A foal killer."

Prey bit down on a mad giggle. He really tried, but the muffled sound still escaped his mouth on its second attempt. This was so utterly ridiculous. His mother's name wasn't Selenia, it was ~ ~ ~.

No, Prey knew her name wasn't Selenia. Simple. It wasn't Selenia,

because he knew what her name was, and Selenia wasn't it.

He knew, he had the name embedded in his head, in his very soul. It was impossible for him to forget it.

Prey repeated the name in his head reverently.

'~ ~ ~'

There. In the sanctity of his own mind, where Celestia couldn't contaminate it by hearing, he'd repeated it.

"Her name was also Selenia, wasn't it?" Celestia goaded.

He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt it was a different name to Selenia, because it wasn't her name.

Because her name was a different name.

It was not the same name.

The name wasn't Selenia. It was ~ ~ ~.

It wasn't Selenia. It was anything but Selenia. Selenia wasn't the name.

Gossamer's mother had been an ewe, whereas there were no accurate records of what species the Great White Witch had been. His mother's wool had been a cream white, but that was it. So were a thousand individuals of every different species out there, why, even zebras were half white.

And besides which, none of that was relevant, because her name hadn't been Selenia! It had been, it had been... ?

Prey's giggling choked. He repeated that sentence over in his head. But no, his mother's name had never been Selenia. And anyway, his mother had been a pacifist, the furthest thing from a witch!

If she'd been a witch, which she hadn't! But if she had been, she wouldn't have folded in the face of the Resistance, wouldn't have stooped to live a life of hardship and toil in a tiny border town,

wouldn't have put up with an unfaithful husband, absolutely wouldn't have suffered her two lambs to go hungry, and wouldn't have died to that fire!

'But everyone needs to breathe. All it takes is one or two breaths of smoke.' Prey ignored the completely irrelevant thought. It didn't matter if anyone could die by accident, because *his* mother hadn't been named Selenia.

Gossamer's mother, Gossamer's mother of course! He needed to keep correcting his racing mind. He was panicking because of Celestia.

"Tell me her name." Celestia whispered softly.

Prey didn't even realise he'd flinched and reflexively exclaimed the answer until Celestia said.

"See? They're one and the same."

"Are you deaf?" Prey hissed, "I didn't say Selenia, I said ~ ~ ~!"

"You just said it again." Celestia told him with quiet patience.

"My mother, Goss-my mother, her name wasn't, isn't Selenia! It's ~ ~ ~"

"Listen to your own words. Stop and really listen."

'It isn't me who's not listening!' His hooves hurt, his back hurt, his eyes hurt, his head hurt. He wanted his ribbon.

His mother's name wasn't Selenia. It wasn't, because it *wasn't.*

It wasn't Selenia, and it couldn't be, because it was, it was, it was...

Prey heard an unhappy sigh. He blinked. A reflection of sunlight dazzled him for an instant. He jolted and refocused on the sealed room.

"Because it's not Selenia, because it's-!"

Celestia was levitating a large mirror in front of Prey's prison.

It was so bizarre, so outlandish to what they'd been saying, that for a moment he didn't realise that-

"No!" Prey threw up his hooves, shutting his eyes.

"Yes."

Red hot nails were pounded into his hooves. Filthy, disgusting, horrible golden magic wrapped around his face, his legs, pulled his hooves away, forcibly held his head in place, and then peeled back his eyelids.

Prey desperately tried to thrash and kick. His body could barely twitch a single millimetre in the golden aura confining him. He tried to deliberately unfocus his eyes, looking anywhere but at the mirror.

In response Celestia just floated it closer, until it filled his whole view right up to the shield bubble.

"Don't fight it. See yourself!"

To look in a mirror was to see your physical self. To look into a liches' mirror though, that was a curse. She couldn't know he'd… this must have been frustration.

Before Dreverton, in another desperate bid to never die, Prey had looked into the liches' mirror he'd found, or that had let itself be found by him. First though had come the Jaw of Hearts, covered with runes of internal repair and preservation but unable to fully prevent decay, then combined with the witch coven's ritual of external youth, each helping counteract the shortcomings of the other. Almost. But then he'd gone and added the liches' mirror on top. Because he hadn't been willing to rely on only one method. He'd wanted a failsafe, a backup.

He had refused to die while Fire Strike had yet lived. But he still shouldn't have looked into the liches' mirror.

He'd thought he could manage it, thought he could stomach the cost. He'd prepared himself beforehoof.

In truth there was no way he could ever have been prepared.

In addition to slowing down your physical aging and decay, which mixed with his Jaw and ritual to almost halt the process completely, looking into the liches' mirror trapped a reflection of your soul forever, at a single point in time. It wasn't possible to look into the mirror and remain whole. To trap that reflection the mirror shattered you, stole one of the shards, and left you forever unwhole afterwards. From then on and always, every mirror only showed you your true, broken, unwhole self.

They would only reflect the real you, with putrid flesh rotten by time, furless shrunken skin, and empty eye sockets. The *real* you touched by the ravages of time. And what awaited you after your first death, when you rose again to become unliving. At your first death, the liches' mirror spat out the broken shard of your stolen soul, just the lone sliver, forever after trying to fill the vast emptiness where the rest of the soul wasn't.

Afterwards, its task done, the mirror had slipped away when Prey's back was turned. To wait until another victim sought it out.

The last mirror Prey had willingly looked into, barring the pool in his cavern, had been that same mirror, fifty-nine years ago. He had not accidentally looked into an actual mirror since. He'd suppressed and forgotten the two events, ripping the memories up into pieces, and hid the bits under the ash of his outer mindscape.

He'd known, he'd seen, and he'd made himself forget afterwards. Tried to make himself forget. But now every mirror only showed him the truth. His real self.

Prey didn't know the exact reason why he had to avoid every mirror, he'd removed the exact consequences of failing from his mind for his own safety, because to know, was to also know the why. But the ringing echo of pain in the emptiness where the memory had been still sounded to this day, warning him away.

Prey was his own worst enemy, done in by his own paranoia and cleverness. He should never have looked into that blasted mirror.

In the floating gold-rimmed mirror conjured from Celestia's magic, sat Prey himself.

A hornless runt lamb, huddled on the floor beneath a transparent shield dome. His cloven forehooves were being grasped gently but firmly by magic. His legs looked too thin, stick-like. The hated tracer bands still sat there, dull gold. He was dirty. His body trembled and shivered unevenly in fits and starts. His wool was bedraggled, and fur unbrushed. His face was a mess; red eyes puffy, scarred cheeks inflamed, and tear-streaks matted. No ribbon tied behind his left ear. There was a cut on his right shin, just below the elbow, and a nasty, scabbed graze a bit higher.

Even now, after the trial, the train ride, and a night in the cells, there was still a splinter from the destroyed train car snagged in the dirty wool over his shoulder.

That was his reflection. And it wasn't what Prey saw in the mirror.

But no rotting, warped, near-soulless husk which had forgotten the taste of happiness looked back at him either.

Muddy green. Blue. Together, two mismatched button eyes, sewn onto a head of ragged cloth. 'Prey's face without eyes.'

A stitched patchwork. Scraps of linen, sack-cloth, old cotton, whatever could be found at hoof. 'Prey's false flesh.'

Straw stuffing, poking through the stitched seams. 'Prey's insides.'

Two jaggedly stitched up cross-shaped patches on the doll's head, where a ram's horns should've been. 'Prey's sacrificed body parts for the ritual.'

And sewn onto the patchwork body, were the last remaining scraps of another sheep's wool. A wool which now showed as a sun-bleached bone white, not cream white anymore. 'Selenia's own gifted wool. Prey's mother.'

Mother.

"M...m...m-mother."

"Yes." Celestia said gravely, never once glancing down at the mirror she held.

She saw Prey exactly as he saw himself now, always had. She'd only ever seen a speaking doll when conversing. Tried to get it to cut its own threads, so she wouldn't have to.

"S... S-S-Selenia."

"Now you see. Now you understand."

It was no longer hot. Neither was it cold. He'd been wrong to assume a doll could perceive temperature. And in realising it, the sensation was lost to him forever. The tiny room was spinning.

Prey screamed. The dry, rustling cracking of straw. He screamed and kept screaming.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-!"

Looking in the first true mirror of his life, and then hiding the truth from himself. The dark night in Mayflower, so close to the edge, and hearing that sing-song memory of what came before. Discord's back-to-front joke about him being someone else's toy doll, which had actually been truth. And of course it would be that Selenia's pincushion would come to him, and should accept back the old sewing needle.

Because he was the doll of a murdered soul, made from straw, string, and stitch.

"-Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-!"

He'd almost drowned in a muddy stream. He needn't have drowned. What did cloth have need of breath for? Cloth that was flesh, flesh that was cloth. And a woven heart that beat between a Jaw.

There was a runt lamp superimposed over a runt lamb doll. Like an optical illusion. Once you'd seen both images you couldn't unsee either.

Once you knew the truth of reality, you couldn't revert to not

knowing it.

"-Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-!" An unchanging wail of distress.

Unreal. It couldn't be. But it was. That was him. He'd lied, he'd been lied to. The mirror didn't lie. That thing, that doll, that was him. He was it. It was him.

To look in the mirror and see yourself, but not see you. The utter disconnect. To see the thing in the mirror and know; 'That is the summation of what makes up Prey', and not recognise any of it. To not see yourself looking back.

'I'm that. I'm a rag doll. I'm a thing. I don't have bones. I don't have eyes. I never did. I was her son, she made me, but she wasn't my mother. She made up Fleece too. Prey, Gossamer, I've never been real.'

"-Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-!" No need to inhale. A doll didn't have lungs. But still he, it, screamed its distress.

The cruel, jagged pieces all lined up, not into the known tale, but the true story all too terribly easy to see. An old ewe made young with black magic, but left forever unable to bear children of her own. An ewe about which untrue tales of terror spread beyond her control. One whose actual dark magic prowess far lagged behind the tales. Wasn't that how it happened? Hadn't they feared Prey as a demon in the Deeper Green, when but a single lucky arrow or spell would have slain him?

All the confrontations with Selenia, weren't the survivors who spread the tales witch hunters to begin with? Each time she survived by the skin of her teeth and fled, her story grew. First with just the Witch known as Selenia, then the White Witch Selenia, then the Great White Witch Selenia.

Didn't that picture sound so much more like the peaceful sheep Gossamer had known? A hunted ewe, one who after decades of lengthened life, was just so tired. Tired of it all. Who wanted to stop all the hiding, struggling, and killing. Years on years on *years*. Who

just wanted to try for a normal life, and made a promise to change for good.

Maybe she'd even done what Prey had once before. Brutally cut away the parts of her mind that she hated, literally remaking herself into the new ewe she was so desperate to become. Her dedication and self-promise might even have worked, at first. But a decade is a long time. A long, long time. Slowly the long nights turned sour, and life is always eager to break you down.

Going out in search of love, finding a husband who at first loved her back, but oh-so-slowly slipped away and become unfaithful. Desperate, longing for children of her own. So she did what she'd done for other grieving mothers, and *made* her own children. Knowing it was wrong, knowing it was twisted, but that's what madness was.

Magic could not create food for her hungry children, not her magic. It could not grow plants, or heal. It could only hurt, break, or kill. The world didn't need another killer. The Resistance and Border Guard were doing such a good job by themselves. And then, a fire, seeing her children to safety, going back to try and help survivors, and then... all it takes is one or two accidental breaths of smoke to kill you. Just like that.

Death isn't fair, it doesn't care, it just takes.

A story that was so easy to imagine, because Prey scarcely needed to. He could see it, he could understand it, because wasn't that exactly what he had tried to do? Even when it would have been so much simpler to fall back on his older, easier methods? To try and change for Crimson? Tried, and failed.

He couldn't touch, he couldn't taste, he couldn't smell. 'I'm a thing! I'm a thing! I'm a thing!'

"-Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-!" The alicorn in the room was trying to ask him to be quiet.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,~
When something inside started to stir,

Down Humpty fell, down to his death,~
And from within, all the yolk and the mess,
That little *something*, took its first breath~

He'd misunderstood all along. Where had the taunting rhyme even come from? It was about him. He was the thing that had thought it was Prey. A little something ripped out of the shell of a murdered foal, and still breathing.

"-Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!" He stopped screaming, but only because a golden aura had forced his mouth shut.

A rag doll didn't have a mouth, though. But a lamb did, and a lamb could scream even if a rag doll couldn't.

Celestia very carefully watched him over the top of the mirror. The slope of her swan neck seemed resigned, "Enough of that. I will release you again if you will stop screaming. Do you understand? Nod if you understand."

Prey didn't nod. He didn't move, he didn't anything. After a long, drawn-out minute, Celestia slowly slackened her telekinesis anyway.

Prey/the doll shifted his/its head up a fraction of an inch, and looked straight through Celestia with two mismatched button eyes, that were also still able to be seen as a pair of sky blue orbs. "You've done this to me."

Celestia had made this happen to him. He'd been Prey, been a real, living, breathing lamb. He'd been able to believe that. But she hadn't been able to let that go, she couldn't let him live in the safe ignorance. Her pride, her arrogance that she always knew best wouldn't permit her to let such a lie pass.

He'd been alive, and now because of her, he wasn't.

"It is the truth of honesty." Celestia contradicted, still not turning the mirror away.

"You did this to me."

"It is better to face the hard truth than to live a comfortable lie." An easy statement for the beloved, wealthy, powerful alicorn to say, to claim the moral high ground even as she destroyed another's life.

"You did this. You ruined it." The doll had no facial muscles with which to show the broken, despairing rage.

"I will not make an apology for doing what is right." She stated firmly.

No answer. Threadbare cotton and stitching was hard to read. It was a wonder the soul inside the doll was even still conscious now that it had become truly self-aware, because straw and cloth can't *think*, can't *anything*.

Celestia went on into the stifling silence; "Now you clearly see and understand. You aren't a pony, and though your creation was not your fault, neither should you exist. You're a dead soul who should have returned to Harmony's cycle many years ago, and instead, you've only further gone on to drag out your death many more years by giving in to dark magic. You've lived a half-life, a cursed life. Misfortune will beset you on every side in recompense for your stolen existence, Harmony will ensure that. It's pitiful. Do you now understand? What never should have been in the first place has only been perpetuated by your actions. I am not angry, I am sad."

The breathless air pressed in closer in the hot room, with nowhere to escape to. The superimposed dirty, exhausted, crying lamb was shivering so hard his teeth were chattering. The raggedy doll couldn't shiver or move.

Finally, only now, did Celestia put down the conjured mirror to the side of the tiny room. It began to dissolve into floating particles of twinkling gold.

"Now, are you finally ready to let go?"

The air was immovable. The rest of the world was gone.

Are you ready to die?

< > < > < >

A stuffed doll in the shape of a sheep. A pincushion on its back. Staring button eyes, straw poking out of the seams. The thread stretched, opening wide to let the darkness of the mouth gape open from within, hungry and empty and endless.

< > < > < >

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-!"

"Oh for goodness sake, please don't start this again."

"-AaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAA-!" The rasping wail just got louder.

Celestia's magical aura swiftly reapplied itself, clamping down over the lamb's mouth, because the lamb could scream but a doll couldn't.

"-AAAAAAAEAEAEEEEEEE-!" But the scream didn't cut off this time, instead just rising in pitch and anguish.

"Control yourself. You need to focus-"

"-EEEEEiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiIIIIIIIIIII-!", It was grating on the teeth now, crawling into your ears, and desperate.

It was painful on the head and in the heart to hear. So Celestia seamlessly integrated a silencing layer into the shield already containing Prey.

The scream cut off. For a moment. But then it started up again in the distance, ".....IIIIIIAAAAAAA-!"

The air almost seemed to shiver. The scream was still carrying through, still clawing its despairing way into her subconscious. Abruptly it became clear why. Celestia was hearing it with her head, not her ears.

'-AAAAAAAIIIIIIIII!!!!!!!!!!!!' The wordless wail of pain kept rising to something beyond pain. It was meaning.

Celestia's horn flashed with sunlight. The invading mental sound was instantly cut off behind a cool, soothing barrier within her

mind. But it still sounded in memory, and the face of the bit of Prey that was a lamb was rigid, tendons in his neck bulging out, as his head was arching further and further back. So far it could have snapped if it wasn't stuffed cloth but rather a real neck.

Snap. Not the condemned's neck missing only the noose. It was just the world suddenly shifting sideways.

Barely an inch, but suddenly everything was just that tiny bit not where it was supposed to be. Celestia sat up straight, her face smoothing out in caution.

The lamb's whole body had shifted from screaming to not screaming, as if there had never been any screaming at all, and now instead he was looking at her. The lamb, not the button-eyed doll, but the lamb. The doll was still there, visible just beneath the surface, but it was the lamb addressing her.

That should not have been possible. She'd thought the unintelligent doll had been slowly subsuming the lamb as the undeniable truth sunk in. But not so any longer.

With a spark and a shimmer over the shield's surface, sound was once again allowed out of the bubble. But only after Celestia had carefully scanned the whole room first with her magic. Just to be sure.

Watchful, the sun alicorn held onto the initiative, and waited for what Prey was going to say first.

Jerkily, his thoughts rigidly locked onto iron tracks from which they couldn't deviate to the right nor left, he spoke.

"My name, is Prey. I am Prey. I think. I am."

Celestia's head turned just a fraction, to look to where the last of the conjured mirror was in the process of disappearing. "How can you say that having seen the truth? You aren't a pony."

The rest of the question was unvoiced. How can you still think? Straw and cloth couldn't think. How are you capable of even speaking the words 'I' or 'me' without going insane from the clash

and paradox of unreality and reality occupying the same space?

"My name, is Prey. I like, I like candy. I dislike bright lights. Don't touch me. I work in the Night Guard. The Captain's name is Nighthawk. He gave me a Half Moon medal. Princess Luna, she knows me. I rent an apartment in Canterlot. I have a friend, my best friend. His name is Crimson. He's waiting outside the gates for me. I am me."

"Princess Celestia, I beg. Please, I'm not broken, see? I'm still a person. I can think, I can talk, I can reason. I can't help how I was made. Can a child be guilty for the crimes of their parents? So please, let me go, let me continue, let me live."

Prey was Prey, and Prey was a mind leech. He was a weak, powerless, runt lamb. Or at least, that was what he was once again. His flesh was cloth, but at least for now the lamb overwhelmed the inanimate doll!

Prey knew this, because he'd made it the truth. He was a mind leech. If anyone else had been in his place, they would've come apart. Just broken and stopped, truly becoming nothing more than the doll. That was what'd been happening to Prey. But Prey was still a mind leech. What was mentally lethal gymnastics to another he could manage, balancing on a knife's edge.

That was why he'd screamed. He'd broken his mind into pieces, and hastily stuck the bits he wanted back together. It was horrible. It was a violation of the self. He'd done it anyways to avoid becoming only a doll with no more lamb left.

He was a rag doll, but he wasn't, because he was Prey, and Prey was a lamb. That was the logic he'd crucified his own mind to. It was self-mutilation on every level. But the fox will gnaw off its own leg to escape the snare. Twice before, he'd managed to fully cut away the offending memories, quarantine the knowledge before the fangs sunk in too deep. Not an option now. The Sun Wolf had forced him to confront it, and like a song stuck in the head, it was impossible to crush.

Only ignore. Only refuse to acknowledge existed. Only delay.

His mindscape was a shattered mess of nothing possible. It could never be repaired now, either. The grey ash was burning, the ground was broken, the roiling purple sky was bleeding, and his inner mind was screaming. But Prey had ripped parts of himself out so that he might keep thinking, keep existing.

He would do it over and over again, each time the truth that he wasn't real started to slip back in, he'd rip it out of the wound afresh. Because that was the price. Prey was too smart for his own good. He now knew the truth, deep down, and he couldn't get rid of it anymore, so every moment of thought had to be balanced on a knife edge lest he accidently 'slip'.

So for a chance to live, he'd done this to himself, so he could sit and talk, to retain the ability to beg Celestia.

He shouldn't have to beg an immortal to live. 'I HATE her.' A thing of cloth couldn't hate though. 'But I'm not cloth, not a doll. I am Prey. I can hate. I HATE her.'

"Please let me live. Maybe you only see me as a golem, but even then, you must at least acknowledge I'm sentient. I'm begging for my life. Please."

A shiver passed over the smooth mask that was Celestia's face. She took a quick breath, then caught herself and took another, much slower and more measured inhale.

"I am honestly astounded. I was not expecting this," The white alicorn admitted, "Three times before I've sadly encountered remnants of Selenia's work... but none of them were able to come back after seeing themselves. Only you have." She didn't know about the liches' mirror, then. Blind coincidence had guided her actions.

"That's proof, isn't it? That I'm a person, that I'm alive." Prey desperately broke in. 'I shouldn't have to argue that I'm a person. I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.'

Celestia looked down at him. "You're right. You are entitled to decide if you are a pony or not." She admitted.

"So I will judge you as a pony."

Celestia lifted her head higher, mane and aura radiant, "All that means is that we have come full circle. Nothing has changed. You are a pony who has refused to move on, and turned to a dark magic item instead of letting go. You let your own fear corrupt the pony you once might have been. It is long past time for you rejoin the cycle of Harmony."

Then of all things, she suddenly gave him a kindly smile, as if it didn't brand her a murderer *and* a liar, "Contrary to what you must think, I can promise I don't hate you. I spoke the truth before too, death isn't painful or scary, so you don't need to be afraid. And I do truly appreciate the service you've given to my sister, even if she should not have hired a foal. I will see to it that your friend is cared for and comforted."

"I hate you."

"I don't hate you." She assured Prey, "Are you ready? Or do you need a bit longer to make your peace?"

The lamb, the doll... he didn't move. He didn't breathe. He gave no answer.

One minute... five minutes... ten minutes...

Celestia patiently waited without interrupting. An eternity distilled into those too-short moments.

Alone in the world, a lamb and an alicorn waited inside a sealed stone room. Just a Wolf, and its Prey.

A violent shudder went through the lamb. It passed from the tips of his hooves, through his wool, and out the ends of his drooping ears.

"Where are we?" He asked for the second time. The question came out low and strangled.

"It doesn't matter. Suffice to say, somewhere well-warded and secure."

His unreal teeth clacked together, loud enough to make a listener wince in sympathetic pain, "Canterlot?"

Celestia hummed, "Maybe. Maybe not. Does the answer matter that much to you?"

"*Where*?"

"I'll take that as a yes. If it matters that much to you, then yes, you are still inside of Canterlot."

A sharp inhale, then quivering stillness from the lamb. Like a rabbit crouched frozen inside the brambles, the falcon's shadow circling the thicket. No way out, and nowhere to run.

Celestia did not know why that answer should matter so badly to the doll-who-was-a-lamb. She couldn't know why. But it was actually so very simple.

Crimson was still inside Canterlot too.

Once before Prey had said: 'I'm taking everyone with me.'

He'd been willing to do it, too. In reckless, unending spite, he'd been prepared to end it all before. On the mountainside. While crippled by Discord. He'd only ever been a breath away from giving in and surrendering himself to give them a way into the world.

Unreality. Hungry Things. Hunger. A hole torn into the world for them to squirm through.

'Why should the world get to go on if I can't?' Because if there was no hope, no cruel unkind hope of survival, why should he care what came afterwards if he wasn't there to suffer it?

That was what he'd thought at the time, while fighting the war inside the Deeper Green. Spite and hate. He'd *lived* it, breathed it, survived it. So that is how he'd thought.

And then along had come Crimson. And now Prey did not want Crimson to die.

That was how simple it was.

In that moment, the only two things Prey would not do for Crimson shrank down to one.

Prey had never cared what would happen to anyone afterwards if he wasn't alive to see it. But now he did.

Prey wanted Crimson to keep living beyond him.

Celestia didn't know it, but her answer of their location changed everything.

Celestia was an alicorn. She was immortal. She had doubtless thrown down terrible foes before. In her thousands of years, it was inevitable she would have encountered and fought such things. And since she was still here, she'd obviously won.

But at what cost? How many had died first, how many miles had been turned into dead tracks of grey, crumbling land in which nothing would grow again?

Celestia must have flown into battle, grimly prepared to fight those foes. But here, only a metre separated Prey from the sun alicorn, unprepared, laying on a cushion... at this range, this close, and caught off-guard... perhaps even the Sun Wolf would die. Just so long as Prey was willing to die first.

But if she died, and was consumed by the things which came out, and they were left to bloat and grow unimpeded, even for only an hour... then Canterlot would crumble and fall.

And Crimson was still inside of Canterlot.

'...Now there is only *one* thing I won't do for Crimson.'
"If you murder me, you'll regret it. Your sun may rise, your sun may set. But even *you* have to cross the river someday." Each trembling word dripped with poison. But he was no longer threatening that final, twisted form of suicide.

The perfect white alicorn did not know that. She had no concept of how close she had come.

Celestia briefly shut her eyes, "Oh little lamb, I'm not executing you, or anypony. I outlawed such barbaric acts centuries ago. I am only going to remove that dark magic device from inside of you. Nothing more, nothing less, I promise. What happens to you after won't be because of anything I've done, but because of nature catching up."

"A rose, is a rose, is still a rose. By any other name. It. Is still. *A rose*!"

A murderer would always be a murderer. It could never be taken back.

"I am no such thing. What I do is just, every saddening bit of it. Any consequences that come are only as a result of you meddling with dark magic. Everypony is responsible for their own actions." There was no give or leeway in Celestia's conviction.

"You'll regret it. I've made contingencies, backup plans."

"If that's true, then I'll prevent them," Celestia shrugged, "But please, stop it. You're desperate, I understand, but you don't need to spew false threats. Won't it feel better if you can leave with some dignity? Then you can be proud of that."

"Is there any last message you would like me to carry?" Celestia prompted again.

For a moment the image of the doll twisted and almost overtook the lamb. Prey shuddered violently and clamped his jaw shut.

"Come now, no words at all? I'm sure it would mean a lot to your friend. Crimson, you said his name was." She offered.

Prey only glared. He didn't say a word. He only glared. But the hate in his eyes transcended what any inefficient words could ever have expressed.

Celestia never looked away from it. "There are many who wished they'd had the chance to give some last words to their loved ones. Do you really not have anything to say?"

There were no words spoken. Just that glare.

Celestia waited.

Prey didn't speak to her. He only glared.

"Then do you have anything you want to say to me instead?" She asked softly, "I have sat beside more dying ponies in their last moments than you could ever imagine. I promise you, nothing you have to say will shock me."

The lamb's bloodless lips didn't even twitch. To be there in that moment, to see the hate in those sky blue eyes... perhaps it was so deafening Prey could no longer even hear Celestia's words.

Hate, like drinking poison and hoping the other person drops dead from it. Like swallowing live coals rather than spit them out. In that windowless stone room, between an alicorn and a runt lamb, those descriptors were almost tame for what lived behind Prey's eyes.

Look at the lamb. See a foal. Is the hate of the foal intimidating? No, it is not, because it's only a foal. Nobody fears a foal. Celestia certainly didn't.

"Are you ready?"

Prey never answered.

Celestia's long horn lit up brilliantly. Golden light suffused the whole room, dancing and mixing with the ever-flowing rainbow cascade of her mane. A soft grip settled around Prey. The lamb felt warmth, centred on his chest. The doll did not feel either cold or heat.

It took minutes- how many exactly, nobody counted. Just that it took more than a few. Celestia did not rush. She took her careful time. There was more than one spell. Each spell matrix was individually complex, even for the ancient alicorn. She would not make a mistake. She had already said it, she believed she was no executioner. What came afterwards, that was merely nature taking its course.

A white flare, and when it faded, Celestia was levitating a set of iron jaws. They appeared as some meld between a bear trap and a

brace of false teeth. Iron teeth from some deep sea creature, at least. The glinting iron points did not drip red. In fact, they were remarkably clean.

The old torture device was ceaselessly biting the empty air, over and over, in time with the beating of a healthy heart. The iron rippled and flexed like fluid with each snap.

Celestia called forth her power, the aura enveloping the jaws and turning it almost solid gold.

From inside the opaque ball of magic, there was a brief molten red glow, bleeding through. When her magic relaxed, just glowing slag dripped out and splattered onto the stone floor.

Celestia let out her breath in a great exhale of tension. Only then, with the dark magic artefact safely destroyed, did she turn her glimmering magenta gaze back to the lamb she had just surgically removed the Jaw of Hearts from.

There was no one left but the unrepentant perpetrator, Celestia, to bear witness.

Inside Prey, warring dark magics suddenly found themselves unbalanced. The burning energies of the ritual of external youth found it could overtake the energies remaining geared for preservation and repair, mirror unable to fully compete, and overtake it did. It had a *lot* to catch up on. Silently, like sand drifting away in a current, tiny flakes of dust were peeling off of Prey.

It was like seeing a sapling sprouting, growing, peaking, and then aging and withering down all within a smattering of heartbeats.

Rotting straw spilled piece by piece out from between the doll's rapidly gaping stitching. A drawn-out sound of ripping thread, of string unravelling.

And then a square patch of flesh that was cloth, but still flesh, peeled off of Prey's leg and blew away into ash.

All across the lamb’s body ragged patches began to peel, to flap,

and unevenly break off. Inside of his body, there was nothing. No blood fell, no innards splattered. He was naught but hollow stuffing and straw.

And still he glared, two slowly-loosening button eyes of hate.

Stitching rapidly unravelled before Celestia's very eyes. Wool and fur fell out strand by strand. And Prey made not a sound. He didn't even look at himself as he faded, as the doll disintegrated.

Straw, string, and stitch. He never looked away from Celestia as his left hind leg failed and fell away.

Nor his flesh and cloth sloughing off.

Nor when a button eye plinked onto the floor.

Celestia dared not blink or breathe, lest she miss the final moment. That was only right. She waited for the last thing he would say, ready to commit it to memory.

But Gossamer never did. He only glared.

- - - - - - ----x-x-x-x-X-X-X-X-x-x-x-x---- - - - - - -

There was a farm behind him. The fields lay fallow. A tired ewe, slowly breaking the hard and packed earth. A smaller brown shape laboured diligently alongside her.

The farm was so very far away, and rapidly fading further. The night would soon be upon him. He wondered if there was room for a third? But it was so far, too far, and the night was here.

The fading refrains of the last sound there would ever be, "...so wonderfully free. I love no one, and no one loves me~"

It was lonely. And dark. And cold. And hungry.

And then...

...And then...

.....And then.

And then Celestia let her breath gently out, briefly bowing her head in a moment of respect for the dead. No matter who they'd been in life, everypony wants to be remembered.

There was a highly sensitive magical barrier covering every inch of the stone room, but nothing had pinged the barrier trying to get out. There were also a hoofull of overlapping and sympathetically linked scrying spells here. Scrying and divining spells were unreliable and imprecise at absolute best, but this close to the object of their focus, and with so many overlapping, they would at least react if something unexpected had occurred or something had gone wrong outside in the rest of Canterlot.

But nothing. No resonance. No alarm signalling any delayed dark magic reaction caused by the doll, the lamb, finally departing this mortal coil.

None at all.

His threat at the end, of dire consequences, had been a bluff. Or were non-magical in nature, and merely the mundane kind of threat.

Celestia rose gracefully off her satin floor cushion. It was sad, it really was, that it had to go this way-

And then there was the screaming pulse of blackness ripping into the world.

-X-

In the lightless depths of a sinkhole under the mountain, freezing water fell past smoothened stone so old it’d never seen the light of day.

Something Prey had never intended. A mistake. A punishment.

Down and down and down, down in the crushing dark, the worm of

hate split open like a burst fruit and began to swell.

-X-

Burning power blasted defensively outwards from Celestia in a pressurized wave. It was instinct, a reaction. To defend yourself. The stone of the room cracked and glowed, and then the power rebounded and rushed back into Celestia. But the danger hadn't come from in here.

Celestia whirled, horn a blazing nova as she looked up, up towards something she couldn't see beyond the cracked and blackening stone, "Oh no!"

---/_/-/_/-O-_\-_\---

But that wasn't it, there was more than the worm at the bottom of the sinkhole. Prey had told the truth. In fear and paranoia, he'd made contingency plans in the dead of night when the fire was burning low.

Beneath a tree canopy and down amid light-dappled ferns, just outside of a tiny deer holt, a young fawn was playing and prancing around with his twin sister, their parents nearby, tending to and weaving the living walls of the holt.

A moment before the cries of panic, a shrieked alarm sounding within heartbeats, the fawn had seized up and spasmed wildly in the dirt, torn ferns flying.

The desperate holt didn't know, couldn't know that it wasn't a snake bite or poisonous mushroom, but a foreign soul trying to drive into the fawn, the invisible greater rune carved onto the back of the fawn's head acting as a beacon.

The terrified parents had no way of knowing. Hundreds of miles away, buried beneath a city they'd never see, a massive and complex array of runes was reaching out across all that distance to sink invisible claws into their fawn's skull.

They'd willingly given their food and shelter to strangers moons ago, under another forest’s canopy. Prey had repaid that trust with

treachery in the dark of night, where there was no one to see.

Above the golden mountainside city of Canterlot, there was a brilliant flash of light. Celestia appeared high above the city in mid-air, enormous wings beating.

Spells flashed in rapid succession before her, cast faster than was equinely possible for all except for her as an alicorn.

Her head snapped around, wings re-orientating her to the right direction. She flinched violently, losing a hoof of height as another signal struck her, this time from beneath her.

'Danger, danger, danger!' It was screaming.

She looked down at Canterlot, at something coming from *beneath* Canterlot. Her floating mane stopped moving, "*Oh no*..."

In a spare room, inside an earth pony's house in Upper-Lower Canterlot, with a blanket thrown over it and a half-filled clothes basket stacked atop it, a heavy grey box began to vibrate.

Scenic wasn't in, he was out, having already hastily left to look for Prey, Gloom, and Crimson. A thestral flier had just come by from the Palace, specially searching for him.

The thestral didn't hear or see the disturbing jack-in-the-box given to Scenic by Prey and subsequently had been put from their mind, didn't catch it vibrating and moving. There was a horrible wet clicking-grinding coming from inside.

The air ignited around Celestia as strengthening magic poured into her, rushing in through her feathers, her hooves, into her lungs. More than anyone but an alicorn could summon. She drew more, needed more, there was terrible, terrible danger. The ponies of Canterlot had to be protected!

Celestia reached out for her alicorn magic, her Harmony-given destiny, and transmuted power directly from her own element, the sun, such was her need.

A halo of light burst into blinding glory about the alicorn, the halo's edge shimmering with enormous tongues of invisible heat. She was too bright for any naked eye to look at. In a desperate race against time, Celestia cast whatever spells she thought might work as fast as they came to her perception-enhanced mind.

And something that had never come from Prey. A rag pincushion, in a dark cavern, sitting on a broken and scoured-smooth stump of stone. The stitching burst while cloth began to bulge outwards, as if teeth and claws were straining against it from the inside.

There were wards hundreds of years old, almost forgotten and never used, only tested, built into the very foundations of Canterlot.

She'd been lax, she should have maintained-! But by her alicorn magic, overflowing energy gushed into the unpowered wards. They sprang up, ten times stronger than they'd ever been activated before.

Wasted, ill-directed magic burned away in them, but an alicorn had more than enough to compensate, to outstrip the need for fine control with sheer quantity. In answer, the city's massive wards blazed up like a bonfire!

In the heart of the misty Isle of Dove, twisted wicker monstrosities of every shape stood like statues. Vicious, cruel shapes unmoving in the clinging mist.

There they would stand, until in who knew however many years' time, some pony explorers figured out how to duplicate the extinct Clan Myrrdon's feat, and cross the cliffs.

Suddenly the largest shambler, as tall as a building, twitched. The blanketing of dewdrops shivered off its twisted hide in a wave, as grafted chitin scraped and muscle contracted.

Complacency. Of late, the entire rule of Princess Celestia of Equestria could be accused of complacency.

Nightmare Moon, and the complete ignorance of Luna's coming return that had been allowed to exist. Followed by the string of empty platitudes offered to Griffonia. The closed borders and hostile standoff which followed without significant efforts to fix. And absolutely everything pertaining to Discord's return.

Complacent. The solar princess had been so very, very complacent.

And further complacent in not believing the threats of a tiny runt lamb.

Now she had to race the supernatural might of her alicorn spellcasting against time.

But even an immortal alicorn with all the time in the world, even they can't take back a single second once it is gone. The natural price for the sin of complacency.

Celestia wasn't fast enough in activating the huge city wards, or in casting her blocking spells. Too slow, too slow.

It wasn't by any feat of her own that Celestia stopped the escaping dark magic, black magic, blood magic, or voodoo magic from achieving their last, final goal. Because she didn't.

Their failure was simpler than that.

It had always been long odds to begin with. No plan can ever be perfect, and the contingency plans Prey had set up while alive had been incredibly far from that ideal.

Warlocks and witches of every kind had tried to cheat death for centuries, via methods both depraved and inventive. Delaying death

was possible, Prey himself had managed that. But coming back after death, a soul missing a body? That was a different beast entirely.

You planned, prepared, and tried, but who had ever managed to defeat it? There was no possible way to be confident in the planned method of your own revival. And who would ever willingly test their backup plan? Who would kill themselves to see if their plan to avoid dying worked? Nobody.

Failure had been all but guaranteed before he'd even begun. Still, Prey had built his runic arrays, and tried.

He'd tried his absolute hardest, and sacrificed the most time, on the possibilities he'd theorized might stand an actual chance.

He'd been so scared of failure, and tried so hard.

But a soul can only take so much. It can't survive without its body. And it had already struggled so long inside a false body of cloth that had not been its own, so worn, stretched and shattered and stolen from and rebuilt and frayed...

Celestia was too slow. The only thing she had done right was oversee the complete degradation of the lamb's body, because a soul needed a body. Thus she had unknowingly made sure the liches' mirror's one-time chance was wasted in the aether. But for the rest, she was too slow.

How *lucky* for the princess, then, that her complacency went unpunished.

How *unfair*.

---/_/-/_/-O-_\-_\---

Bucking and thrashing in his crying parents' grips, his terrified twin standing frozen and staring on, the fawn abruptly shuddered and lay still.

In the spare room of Scenic Paint's house, the noise of the complex

mechanisms and runes, as well as clicking-grinding, that came from the jack-in-the-box cut off and went silent.

A pincushion finished growing and swelling, spilling off its stone pedestal, but that was it. It lay lifeless. Prey hadn't touched the pincushion in life, he hadn't dared. He hadn't known it had belonged to his mother. But whatever the pincushion had been attempting, it didn't move again.

On the Isle of Dove, the huge scarecrow, Prey's replacement for his mage-killer veropede, ceased twitching. Mist and silence returned to the isle's shrouded heart.

Unfair. The world was unfair.

Scenic, Lilly, Saffron, Carton, all yet to learn of the terrible events. Randy Pickaxe, whistling a cheerful tune as he sweated away in the city park. Lemon Pink, racing to get back to Canterlot on a train, disguised beneath an illusionary veil in another car with wounded from Haven Hay. Gloom... just gone. And Crimson, waiting outside a gate as the hours had ticked by, knowing something had gone wrong but unable to leave as he clung onto poisonous, addictive hope.

There is light. There is darkness. But before both, there was hunger.

The worm of hate had not been one of the attempts implemented by Prey to try and cheat death, not even close. It had been a mistake. A thing like it could not save life, it could only eat life. He'd thought, he'd hoped it was dead.

He'd thought wrong.

A giant pulsating body of grey, squirming flesh. Blind and eyeless. Slime. Stretching, stringy, feverishly multiplying tendrils. And mouths. Toothless, leech mouths everywhere. It was a throwback to

a time before there were teeth. It was flesh, hunger, and mouths to feed the flesh's hunger.

It *surged* upwards, rushing through the dark water, racing for the sinkhole. Ravenously racing for the air, and the hunting grounds awaiting it.

Prey hadn't intended for the worm to exist. He hadn't intended for a lot of things.

For one, he'd never intended for the sinkhole to be part of his lair. For another, he'd never dipped so much as a hoof into the icy water to lay any runes beneath the water line.

The impenetrable protection of the crystal lair cut off at the sinkhole's surface. To the outside world, above the water, it was there the world ended. Nothing uninvited could go beyond. But beneath that, in the bottomless shaft of water, all of it was still tangible, and therefore, mutable.

How doubly fortunate for Celestia.

Celestia's magic was screaming at her. Blaring alarms flooded through the feedback channel from Canterlot's wards and to her. Danger, danger, danger!

But shouldn't raising the wards have been enough? Shouldn't the combined ingenuity of generations of the greatest unicorn mages birthed in Canterlot have been enough of a defence?

But something was still coming, rising up. Something terrible, something which drank in magic like a hole in the world! It was hurting Equestria by its very existence!

The beautiful spires and streets of Canterlot were laid out below her like a map. The strength of the magic only she could access granted her perfect eagle vision sharp enough to see the scuff marks on any single cobblestone, if she but knew where to focus. But she couldn't see anything. Where, where was it!?

Spells tumbled from her horn, triangulation spells, like an ethereal net cast wide. But the delicate spells were being corrupted and destroyed almost as fast as they formed.

The city wards were bowing inwards, showing it was pressing up from underneath Canterlot, but where beneath exactly?! Why hadn't she ever made certain those dank caves and tunnels were fully mapped?

Celestia cast the same location spell faster and faster, trying to get back a returning magical echo before they could all be absorbed, by relying on sheer volume. She had to pinpoint where the threat was coming from before it breached into the streets of Canterlot at all costs.

And then she finally had it. One of the spells managed to return back without getting corrupted. There! Beneath stone, something vile. Celestia prepared her magic to reach out and cast-

-Something reached hungrily back, drinking down her magic.

Instinctively, she severed the connection. The thing somehow tore the connection back open and kept drinking. Horrible, freezing cold. Not good, not evil. Just hunger.

The true magnitude of the rapidly escalating threat approaching her precious city broke upon Celestia. So she acted.

Power. Magic. Sunlight.

Every magic recording device in every mage tower, shielded or not, overloaded.

Magic suffused a bubble of rock and water inside of Mount Canter, with the black hole of anti-magic hunger in its centre. In a bare moment, the hole had already sucked away half of the caging magic, greedily reaching out to eat the rest as well.

It was only the sheer gushing volume of magic an alicorn could pour into overcharging a spell which let Celestia finish snapping the spell's matrix into place in time.

Only a few seconds later, and she would have been too slow, as the worm would've breached the sinkhole and vanished beyond her sight in the lair she couldn't reach.

How truly, wonderfully lucky indeed for the ignorant ponies of Canterlot.

Celestia and the bubble of stone and water surrounding the worm vanished from Equestria with a pop.

Prey had saved Canterlot from a shapeshifting threat it never even knew of. Canterlot would never know how he then balanced the score by threatening the whole city, even after his death.

Inside the Palace, nobles, ministers, and bureaucrats worried and complained over their scheduled meetings being cancelled. Where had Princess Celestia gone all these hours without giving any notice?

Yet everything was quiet. The sun was still shining brightly outside. Canterlot was quiet, there was no panic in the streets, and no mad Discord flying over the city. Trade and commerce ticked over. Life was going on. Most of the population was none the wiser that Celestia had even left. So whatever the occasion was, there was no need to overreact. Princess Celestia would no doubt be back in her own time.

No one was present to bear witness. None to stand and see. Far, far into the Badlands, there was merely a distant flash of light to signal Celestia and the worm's arrival.

No one saw it.

Not one person felt the far-distant vibrations, like thunder on the breathless air.

None witnessed from the edges of the wastes the light bright enough to permanently blind, reduced to mere twinkling flashes by distance. Lances of fire hot enough to melt stone and rend metal screamed down from the sky. A ceaseless hammering barrage. One continuous, never-ending,

overlapping explosion. The Badlands groaned and buckled. Pulverised rock dust was thrown into a cloud miles high.

Equestria didn't know where Celestia went, but back in Canterlot they did count the long hours they were without their sun princess.

Monstrous squirming flesh charred under a ceaseless magical blast, pounding the creature flat. Celestia didn't let up. The magic never stopped. The worm bunched itself together, enduring, waiting out the damage. The blinding, burning wrath never weakened, Celestia only struggled to pour out ever more.

None even knew exactly when their beloved princess returned. They didn't see her, she just arrived in her private rooms. The maids who rushed to attend her were made to wait outside, and even then, were only addressed through closed doors. Celestia quietly asked for her sister to be awoken, and to attend her.

The worm no longer huddled. Now it pushed through. Celestia poured everything she had into the fire. There was no unbound oxygen left in the air, everything had been burned away hours back. Pure heat was all that was left now, striking the bloated, squirming worm. Except it was growing more and more immune by the second, adapting, eating greater and greater proportions of both the magic and the physical heat.

Four endless hours of struggle. Four hours of ceaseless combat against a hungering monster that continued to grow and feed and adapt.

Celestia screamed and clawed away. Boiling droplets of blood as thick as magma scattered from feathers. Her aura burned everything, stone, dirt, sky, and yet not the worm any longer. She teleported again, and again, and again. The worm followed her through using her own teleports, forcibly holding the path through spacetime open as it squirmed after her. The destructive spells and trap spells awaiting it on the other side were endured, recovered from, or just absorbed time and time again.

Four hours of not knowing if you were going to survive, let alone win. Four hours of using everything at your disposal to attempt to win, only to have them fail one after another.

Growing, gaining. The worm was gaining on her. Faster and faster each time. Pain. Blood. How long had it been? Blades of folded space cut it to pieces. Tendrils of bubbling flesh rejoined like tar. Unbelievable heat scoured it, yet did nothing as the hungry mouths devoured that too. Explosions and conjured acids and traps and shields and more simply withered, long ago ceasing to damage it. Celestia tried to teleport away and found the spell no longer functioned in the worm's presence. A shadow, the light and heat eaten. She looked up. The worm dived out of the sky, its uncountable toothless, sucking maws open.

One minute of life or death combat is the most exhausting thing in the world. Four hours of it... how many hundreds or even thousands of unicorns would have died in her place in that time?

Spells. Anything. Everything. Just to slow it down, anything that might hurt it, delay it, contain it. But hunger is stronger than pain. Desperation mounted to become a titan, roaring within her. Celestia tried the opposite. She reversed her mastery of talent, and took away all of her light, all of her heat. Cold had always been opposite side of the coin. In such absence of energy, everything began to freeze, even her. Especially her.

Celestia fought the worm for four hours. No one bore witness, even if they could have survived being present. No one was there. No one saw.

But still it happened. Celestia against the worm.

They fought. It fell. What more was there to tell?

The mortal died. The goddess lived.

A hundred thousand words, decades, strife, conquest, success and failure, the entirety of a single life. Could it not be boiled down to just those six words? It was so much simpler that way.

What more was there to tell?

Once there was a little lamb. Then he grew old, but not up. The end? No, just the ordinary beginning to a hideous life...

[[[The Last]]]

[image]

Author's Notes:

I have nothing to say. Not yet. We're almost there. Wait until we reach that end, then, we can talk.

But I couldn't in good conscious do this and just leave, the next chapter will not be long in coming. It might be cold comfort, but there it is.

Editor: Panem et Circenses
Also, ShankMaster submitted this very cool Worm vs Celestia fight scene picture.

99.7 The Sun Rises, The Sun Sets

One story. Ten stories. A hundred stories. A thousand.

Everyone is living a story, surrounded on every side by everyone else living parallel stories. The world is so vast and filled with so many interwoven and sometimes conflicting stories, how can it be that any one thread in the vast tapestry is important? Who cares where a lone thread begins or ends? No one single thread can possibly be special. There are just too many stories.

A thousand stories in a village. A hundred stories in a hamlet. Ten more within a family. And only one to a person.

It is only at his story's close, that he realised it was no longer about him. He'd been the villain all along. As he looked back, the last page turned, he realised the story was now being written about someone else.

---**Before**---

The afternoon sun was high.

The brilliant blue day was hot.

Crimson was still waiting outside of the Guard Compound's Gate.

He was standing off to the gate's side, up against the broad wall in the thin band of shade the gate cast. He'd been standing there for hours. Waiting.

The two Royal Guards on duty at the gate had long stopped throwing the injured pegasus suspicious looks.

He was in pain. His right wing was bandaged firmly to his side, but both his side and wing still hurt with every inhale because of the hole that had been punched in both.

Three of his legs were aching unrelentingly from having to bear the weight of the injured fourth, as he kept it held off the pavement. And he'd been standing here without moving or rest for hours.

Because Luna had promised him, because she'd told him he could wait here for Prey to rejoin him. Luna had promised she'd deal with the sham trial.

His deeply-cut hind leg hurt the worst of his injuries. The pills really weren't helping all that much. He wanted one of Prey's plant leaf concoctions, as he was sure one of those would numb the pain much better.

Just as soon as Prey came out.

He'd repeated that sentence over and over to himself, standing here, as the sun crept higher and the clock tower bells tolled in the distance.

A mantra; just as soon as Prey comes out.

Prey would come out, and they could go back to their flats. To sleep. To mourn Gloom. To cry. To collapse into unconsciousness.

He didn't want to think about that. He'd been avoiding thinking about that. The future was just a grey, impenetrable wall of fog. They would get through it, but he didn't know how. He never knew how. Prey would know how.

Exhaustion. He'd spent last night alone, barely able to sleep but in fits and starts, panicking, and begging Luna in the dreamscape. And then a tiny portion of it in the cold dark underneath the mountain.

He'd been back in Canterlot for over twenty-four hours. He had made no effort to reach out to Scenic, Lilly, or the others in that time. He couldn't face it. They probably didn't even know he was back yet. Or about Gloom.

He couldn't face telling them alone, he just couldn't. When Prey came out, then... then he still didn't know. They'd come up with something. Face it together.

Just as soon as Prey came out.

'Just as soon as he comes out.'

Crimson was still waiting. The wounds inflicted by his traitorous clan hurt just as bad as before. Worse even.

Prey had told him they were all dead now. He didn't know the how of it. He didn't need to. He was just viciously glad.

Crimson didn't move as the heat of the day and the painful exertion of just standing against the wall in his condition sent rivulets of sweat down his neck and face.

But Crimson couldn't leave, because this was the gate where Prey was going to come out.

'Just as soon as he comes out.'

Crimson was still waiting there when Strange Happenstance strolled across the street in the wake of a returning Guard patrol, and settled himself against the high wall across from him. And safely out of hoof's reach.

For a moment, who it was barely registered. Crimson felt nothing. The slimy, lying private detective was worthless. Strange didn't matter. Gloom was dead, and he was waiting for Prey. This stallion was less than nothing in the face of that.

And then, the pieces clicked into place. This was all Strange's doing, it suddenly all made sense.

The Guards waiting for them at the train station, the Royal Guards, arresting them when they were at their weakest, and this closed-door trial of Prey for who-knows-what.

Cold, freezing cold contempt filled Crimson's chest.

"You did this."

Strange unhurriedly tipped his wide-brimmed hat back, "Well now, that's a very open-ended statement. I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

This conversation had only just begun, but Crimson was already done with it. He wanted nothing from the smug neonate. He just didn't care right now. He'd deal with Strange some other day.

"Go away."

"Nah, I don't think I will. This is a public street, anypony can stand here. Only a Guard can ask me to move on, and would you look at that," Strange slowly panned his gaze up and down Crimson's injured form, "You're not on duty at the moment."

"Go away." Crimson repeated evenly.

Inside, he was angry. So coldly angry at this sorry excuse for a self-assured waste of air, at this stallion who only lived to make life worse for everyone else.

Strange Happenstance completely ignored his words, and instead started on with what he'd obviously swaggered over here to say, "The law is the law, and it's there to protect everypony. I've seen it too many times, where the little pony gets trampled all over by bigger, richer ponies. In a perfect world, I wouldn't even be needed, because the law is supposed to protect and condemn everypony equally. But it doesn't, so I'm here to *make* it."

The cocky, aggravating grin vanished off of Strange's face, "I *make* it work. So I want you to confess, right now, what you did to your victims in Alfalfa Dale. To Lilly Blossom, your own squadmate. And to the Border Guards."

Crimson breathed. In, out. He controlled himself, just like he always did. He was hurting, injured, and this liar had the gall to stand there, all high and mighty without a scratch on him or his hat, and accuse him.

Crimson wanted the familiar weight of his father's wingblades so

very badly in that moment. He told himself it was probably a good thing he didn't have them. But his conscience could only muster up a 'probably'.

"I'm sick of your lies. Go away."

"There's a saying in law enforcement. Question a guilty pony enough times, and they will change their story. But an innocent pony *cannot* change their story." Strange jabbed a hoof aggressively into Crimson's personal space, "You and your Night Guard friends have been avoiding even the simplest of questions. Not even one of you has been capable of giving me an honest answer yet."

"You wouldn't know the truth if it ran you through." Crimson said before he could stop himself.

"What is the truth, then?" Strange instantly shot back.

Crimson controlled himself this time. He breathed deeply, side and wing flaring in pain, "I have no further words to waste on you."

Now the mud-brown unicorn was grinning nastily, "Wanna' bet on that? And when you lose the bet, you can follow me down to the station and confess."

Crimson focused on the gate and the Guards passing around in the Compound just past it, rather than Strange, ignoring him.

"That disgusting little white murderous midget you call a 'friend' is certainly confessing right about now."

Crimson was too controlled to twitch. He just wanted Strange to shut up and go away. Or take a swing at him, because then he'd have the excuse of self-defence when he broke Strange into pieces.

How had the private detective even found him out here? Probably some friends in the Royal Guard, who'd seen him waiting here outside the compound, and had informed Strange.

Strange Happenstance wasn't done though, "I don't know how you managed to lie to a Princess so convincingly, but the truth always comes out. I made sure of that. Your little plan to snub justice and a

court of law? Guess what? You're standing around out here like a lost stray, but I've already burnt down your house of cards."

For a moment Crimson thought of what Prey might say if he were here. He'd probably smile brightly, while saying something completely innocent and yet somehow utterly mocking. Crimson thought about that instead. About what Prey would say when he came out, and not the constant pain, nor the grief, nor the exhaustion or blazing sun, and definitely not Strange Happenstance who was still going on and on. It didn't work.

"-If he tricked one Princess, then the answer's plain to see. My cutie mark tells me he isn't going to be able to trick the better Princess."

Crimson knew he was making a mistake when he opened his mouth. He knew it, but he couldn't help but ask, because Prey had not come out and something was wrong:

"What did you do?"

"Ha, you lose the bet. A deal's a deal. You lost, so fess up." Strange goaded rather than answer, brushing nonexistent dirt off his foreleg with the other hoof.

"*What* did you do?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Strange retorted.

"What. Did. You do?"

Strange's smug smile faded again as he challengingly met Crimson's glare, until all that was left was the angry, justice-obsessed stallion underneath it all. "I made certain he gets what's been coming to that criminal for a long, long time."

"What. Did-"

"-I took him before Princess Celestia, since Luna wouldn’t listen to reason. Prey is going away forever. He's going to spend his life in prison, atoning for his sins. And when I'm done, you and your dear Sargent are going to have cells right next door to him!" Strange spat.

Crimson stared at Strange. A lance of jagged red-hot pain shooting through his bandaged wing made him aware he had been subconsciously flexing to strike and spill blood, phantom wingblades subconsciously thought to be there. He hated Strange. The deluded stallion genuinely repulsed him like the stench of rotting meat.

Crimson found his voice, and also found that the words were already waiting all lined up on his tongue: "You honestly think that- what? That you'll get away with this? *Really* think? That there's not going to be any consequences?"

"Careful there. That almost sounded like either a threat or slander. Both are illegal." Strange warned, his grin just begging for Crimson to keep going and give him a justifiable reason.

In that moment, teetering on the brink of falling into a pit of grief and exhaustion, Crimson honestly wanted nothing more than to kill Strange. To actually kill him. Here and now. To lash out at a clan who was now forever beyond his reach, but that Strange Happenstance would make a wonderful bloody substitute for. He wanted to, but Prey would never forgive him if he did. Because then he'd be arrested, found guilty, and thrown into prison. And Prey wouldn't want that.

"You don't get it," Crimson got out between bared teeth. He might not have fangs like a true thestral, but it came naturally, "Do you think you're going to survive his retaliation? If any of your lies are true, and I'm not saying they are, do you think Prey won't take revenge? You're a dead pony walking. If it were true, I mean. Which it isn't."

"I am on the side of justice. And justice does not bow in the face of threats. I will stand up for what's right, no matter the cost." Strange stated confidently. He pushed off of the wall, casually adjusting his hat.

"Besides," He threw a hoof back condescendingly over his shoulder, "I'm hardly worried about the impossible happening. He's not going to be able to hurt anypony anymore, not where he's going. Just you wait. Soon, I'll expose you too."

Crimson stared after Strange as the detective left. His head pounded with blood, and his injuries ached savagely.

He looked at the compound's gate. Then to where the private detective was merging back into the passing pedestrians. Then back at the gate.

Crimson's mouth was dry as sand. He was desperately thirsty. And he couldn't get the detective's words out of his head.

Strange had said Prey wasn't ever coming back out. That he'd been taken before Celestia, or something. But Strange was a liar.

Yet Prey also hadn't come out yet. And he'd learnt without being told that Prey was scared stiff of Celestia for some reason.

But Luna had promised she'd deal with it. That it was going to be okay.

'She promised.'

Crimson waited and waited, as the terrible feeling in his stomach grew.

Ponies on the street looked at him and circled wide, not coming near. The band of shade he was standing in got narrower and narrower.

But he kept waiting, because he had to have hope. Crimson knew in his heart that waiting wasn't helping, that something had gone horribly wrong, but what else could he do?

You kept waiting. You kept telling yourself only five more minutes, then you'd try something else. And then five more. And five more. Because leaving meant you had to face the reality that you had no control. It meant giving up.

Crimson didn't know what else to do, aside from to keep waiting and praying.

A painful glint from the sky abruptly seared his eyes. His good wing snapped up to block the light stabbing at his eyes, hissing with pain. But when he cautiously parted a couple of pinions and squinted up between the feathers, whatever it had been up in the sky was gone.

His rational mind suggested an inconsiderate pegasus with a mirror or something shiny. But he knew it hadn't been. The fur on the back of his neck had stood up. And he was sweating heavier, as if the temperature had spiked.

Crimson waited... and waited... and kept waiting as the pit in his stomach grew.

Crimson waited until he just couldn't anymore. He had to take action.

He staggered forwards, the first movement in hours nearly folding his shaking legs. He half-staggered, half-limped up to the two Guards staffing the compound's gate.

They eyed him askance, their golden armour conspicuously not the indigo and silver steel of the Night Guard.

They didn't recognise him as an off-duty Night Guard, they didn't know who he was. All they'd seen was an injured pegasus who hadn't moved for hours and was only now suddenly approaching them.

Crimson didn't care what they thought. Never had. Just even less now. "Let me in. I want to see Lieutenant Starry Wing."

"Sir, this area is off limits to non-Guards-"

"I am a Guard, a Night Guard. Let me in. I want to see the Lieutenant."

"Do you have your badge, then?" One of the two challenged, not impressed.

Crimson looked blankly at the stallion. Did he look like he had his armour or badge on him?

"My Guard identification number is zero-zero-zero-A-six-five. I need to see-"

"Sorry sir, but that's not enough. I have no way to verify that's even a real number, let alone if you possess it. Please move along or come back later."

"I am a Night Guard. Go find one of them on duty and just ask them. My name is Crimson Trace. This is important."

Neither golden-clad Guard was moved, especially since Crimson was claiming to be a Night Guard, "No badge, no entry. And shouldn't you be in a hospital?"

"Please," Crimson heard the grinding desperation in his own voice, "I need to see someone in the Night Guard. I need to find Prey! He's supposed to be here."

"Woah there, seriously, should you be in hospital? Talking about hunting and prey like that." The other Guard asked, growing a mite concerned that perhaps the pony in front of him wasn't all mentally there.

"No not-I mean, not prey, *Prey*. In the Night Guard, like me. He's supposed to be here." Crimson took a step forwards.

Both Guards drew together to block his way, now both showing wary concern, "Are you on medication at the moment? Sir, I think you're confused."

"I think you should go home. Nopony is going to be called 'Prey'. Maybe they'll be at home, though?" The second tried suggesting, tone like he was addressing a foal.

"I'm not drugged, I know exactly what I'm saying. Prey. His name is Prey, you must know him! The sheep, I mean the lamb of the Night Guard." They must have heard. Unless they both were new, they must have at least heard the gossip flying around about the ISND.

But there was not even a flicker of recognition in either Royal Guard’s eyes. But how could that be? How could they not know?

Were they purposefully being dense? Anger, never far away, blossomed in Crimson's chest, "You know who I'm talking about, you must! I've heard what you say about him, about *us*! All the time."

"Sir, I'm going to ask you to please calm down. This seems to be a big misunderstanding-"

"Prey. A lamb. White, with a ribbon. Don't lie, you can't *not* know who I mean!" His feathers were bristling.

"There's nopony here like that, I haven't ever even seen some sheep or another. You're confused sir, please just go home. Or to the hospital." One Guard tried to start ushering him back from the gate.

The utterly absurd desire for violence blazed through Crimson's head, there and gone in an instant. Wing strike to the side of the head, where the inefficient helmet didn't extend down to cover. Stomp forwards and break the knee while the Guard staggered, then kick him in the horn so he couldn't retaliate once he was on the pavement-No. That would solve nothing. He was already injured. He didn't need a fight.

But what could he do? Crimson stood there, lost, angry, hurting.

And Prey wasn't coming out the gates.

What could he do? Limp to his flat, get his badge, and limp back? Or try again tonight when there would be Night Guards on the gate?

He couldn't think of anything else to try. He was too tired and angry, suppressing the grief. He wasn't thinking clearly enough.

'But Luna promised it would all be fine...'

Luna had lied.

Everything was going wrong. Everything had already gone wrong.

First Gloom, now Prey. It wasn't fair. The world just kept taking everything.

And something was very, very wrong.

Scenic nearly ran into him on the apartment block's staircase, which he could no longer fly up.

"Crimson!" Scenic cried out. Then his face crumpled.

"Crimson. G-Gloom, he, he, I heard-I'm so sorry."

Scenic grabbed him, throwing his foreleg around his shoulders. Crimson was too empty to move. And then he was in too much pain to move.

The world greyed out for a while, and Crimson was only distantly aware he was sitting on the steps, weak legs having folded, while Scenic's tinny voice apologised and panicked.

Crimson wasn't Prey, but he didn't want to be touched either right now. He couldn't-But Scenic already knew. Who had told him that Gloom was, that Gloom was...?

The other stallion's forelegs were awkwardly trying to support him as he sat and gasped on the stairs. Scenic was blubbering and crying uselessly.

Crimson hurt. His chest hurt the worst. And his legs were shaking. He didn't feel strong enough to move. But he managed to thickly ask what he needed to know.

"Who told you? Did they say, say anything about Prey?"

Scenic was uselessly wiping at his scarred cheeks as more tears continued to fall, "G-Guard. A Night G-Guard, **sniff** came to my house. Said, she said, **sob**."

"I see. It was, it was horrible. There was a storm, and arrows, an', and..." Crimson struggled to breathe. He bent all his will to focusing, "Prey. Did the Guard say anything about Prey, or Luna? Or the trial?"

Scenic pulled back and looked at him, crying and red-eyed, and asked, "Who's Prey?"

The grey, distant ringing was back in Crimson's ears. He could barely hear his own muffled words. "Prey. Our friend. Prey. You know him. You must. We all do. *Prey*."

And Scenic's eyes just showed confusion and hurt. He shook his head, unable to speak further, before going back to awkwardly hugging Crimson and crying into his shoulder.

Crimson weakly shook Scenic, "Prey. Remember him! Why can't you remember?" He begged.

Scenic bonelessly flopped in Crimson's grip, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I, I don't **sob**, I want to help. I'm sorry. G-G, **sniff** Gloom. Oh Gloom..."

Grief, fear, pain, loss. And now sucking, black dread. His teeth were chattering.

What was happening?

First Scenic. Then Carton almost carrying Lilly found him next. Then even Saffron, having immediately blown off her job when the Night Guard had found her, leaving her agent scrambling to try to reorganise the photoshoot she'd been hired for.

They congregated on Crimson like magnets. Their friend was hurt. The unimaginably terrible had happened. There was no other option in their minds *but* to try and help.

They couldn't help. They couldn't fix anything. All they could do was be there.

Scenic's living room. It was the closest of their houses. Crimson's own flat had been out of the question. Crimson barely even remembered the painful walk here. It was just a dazed fog.

Saffron, Scenic, Carton, Lilly, they were all clustered around,

pressed close. Crying, shifting, sitting in silence, rubbing the others' backs, murmuring that it would be okay. Crimson was in the middle of them all on the couch. He couldn't feel the cushions' texture. The world, the noise, the temperature, everything was just a flat grey. He felt frozen and trapped in time. And just trapped.

"Prey." He finally croaked out, "Who remembers Prey?"

Scenic didn't, Crimson already knew that, but what about them?

"Prey. Our friend, the little lamb. Does anyone remember at all?" He asked around desperately.

Confusion, blank stares, no recognition.

"What, *__sniff__* what are you talking about?" Carton asked, blowing her nose loudly as fresh tears gathered in the corners of her eyes.

Crimson looked around desperately. He pointed at Lilly, "Who gave you that meldwood leg? Who saved your life that night?"

Lilly jerked out of furiously glaring at the wall, eyes tight and red, "Huh?"

"Your leg, who did that?!"

"What? You know who-"

"Please. Just answer me. Who did that?"

Lilly swallowed, "You and, and S-Sargent Gloom did."

"That's, no-! That's wrong! I, I flew only to the woods, I brought it back, but who operated on you?" His words trembled.

But Lilly Blossom's face only showed incomprehension and misery, "Gloom did. He did. He s-saved my life." Her voice cracked.

No no no no. This was impossible. This was madness. Was he the mad one?

Black, dancing spots. His stomach was trying to rebel. He looked

from one grief-crumpled face to the next, looking for anything-

-Nothing. He didn't see a single spark of recognition. They didn't know. They really didn't know.

Saffron wiped at her wet eyes, heedless of the green eyeshadow she streaked. Her agent had tried to send an aide after her to bring her back. They hadn't expected the supermodel to be able to actually run.

"Crimson, I don't think... any of us understand. Please, who was-?"

Crimson tore himself away from their desire to help. This couldn't be happening. It was literally impossible. Prey was real, not some figment of his imagination! He just needed to think. It was so very hard, but he had to focus and think.

'Did Prey do this? Make everyone forget? But how would he even...?'

Crimson remembered. Their very first case together as the ISND. Tulip Bed, a mother who could not remember her own foal. The young colt had been cut from her memory. 'Prey recognised it first. He said it was mind magic. This, this is also mind magic.'

But how? How?! The scope of it, to get to and alter everyone's memories, it was impossible! No one could have gone around the whole city in the span of one morning, gotten past every Guard, and tampered with every memory in the city of anyone who'd ever seen Prey.

'Is it just me? Am I the only one left?' He was going to be sick. He was so dizzy.

The others were trying to speak to him, or get him to speak. He couldn't even tell who it was, nor what they were trying to say.

Crimson pushed himself upright, staggering. A huge shape, Carton, tried to help him stand, or maybe tried to stop him from standing, he couldn't tell. He made it into Scenic's kitchen, comforting hooves brushed aside.

Bile and stomach acid splattered into the sink. He panted, head bowed over the metal sink, tap also splattered as he hadn't managed to swivel it out of the way in time. He fumbled to turn on the tap with a shaking hoof.

He ran the tap, throat burning and blankly staring at nothing in the swirling water.

'Am I going insane?'

Gloom was dead. Was Prey now dead too? Was this really actually real?

'Am I already insane?'

His head jerked up, barely even seeing the blurred shape of Scenic in his periphery. In desperation, he unfolded his good wing before his face, eyes darting down his pinions until-

-The disguised feather. It was there, it was real. Prey's gift. All of it had been real.

'This is real. Gloom is dead. And everyone has forgotten Prey.'

"...I, I, I'm the o-only one. J-just me left... I'm the o-only one now..."

Gentle bodies pressed against his sides, his injuries avoided. A foreleg across his shoulders, a head tucked against his neck, all supporting him. He couldn't tell who was who, only that it was the four of them.

Someone was repeating words over and over. At first, just grey noise. Finally though they registered, "...not alone. You're not alone. You're not alone."

They were all trying to comfort him. But he felt nothing. He wasn't just hearing the grey noise, he *was* the grey noise. They couldn't help. He didn't want them, he wanted Prey. He wanted Gloom.

Crimson knew it in his soul, deep down, that Prey was gone. He didn't know what had happened, what Strange, Luna, or Celestia had done. But he knew Prey wasn't coming back.

He was the only one left.

Every other story thread containing Prey had been cut. His was the only one left.

He had to carry on alone. That wasn't fair. It was asking too much. It was too hard.

Carton was saying something, a thudding in the ringing grey nothing. She shifted, her gentle bulk uncertainly turning. Scenic also said something, about a front door.

That thudding... it was knocking.

Knocking? Knocking at the front door. What did that mean? He couldn't think, he couldn't focus, he couldn't anything.

'Knocking means... means...?'

There was a duo of Royal Guards banging on Scenic's front door, demanding to know if Crimson was in the building. They had a summons for him to appear in the Palace.

Anger is a strange thing. More often than not, it is loud and direct. You are angry because something has angered you. You know what it is, and where to direct that anger.

Yet it is not always. Anger can be a strange beast, like a deadly puff adder. It coils in the long grass, unmoving, not hot, nor cold, not aggressive or defensive. The adder merely sits there until someone steps near it.

It does not put itself in the person's path. It does not move to avoid their path. It does not strike out of fear, nor defending territory. It does not even bite out of hunger. It bites simply because it is there, and someone stepped by it.

Anger can be like that. It can sink its poisoned fangs into you simply because you took that one step too close.

And now, Crimson was angry. He kept it all inside, holding it crushingly close and burning it like firewood in his chest. It was the fuel that allowed him to keep going, to rise past the pain and exhaustion to limp all the way back to the Palace, through wide corridors and up gilt stairs as the two Royal Guards tried to hurry him along.

He held the snake of anger close, kept it hidden, because he'd been bitten and no one could see the marks.

The anger was greater than the thudding pain in his wing and side caused by every breath, stronger than the savage pulling in his damaged hindleg with every step. It meant he didn't care about his appearance, about his wild look or sweat-stained red coat. Hidden in his pinions, the electrite feather sat warm, lending him strength.

It wasn't hate, it was anger. The two were different, because he did not know where to direct his anger yet. Crimson knew the difference as he limped up the marble and gold hallway.

Prey had confided in him once about his hate, even if he'd never explained the 'why' for the wastes of black, arctic, frozen hate.

Crimson had just landed on their apartment block’s balcony. Prey had been there already, staring out over the balcony railing at the distant Palace.

"I hate her, you know."

He'd paused in folding his wings, "Pardon?"

"I hate her so much."

The words were so light, so tremulous, so unable to hold the weight behind them, that they were almost wistful.

"Who? Do you mean... Princess Luna?"

"Yes. Her. And more. Her sister. The sun."

And to that, he'd had nothing to say.

Why though? Why did he hate her? Prey had never said. Crimson hadn't pressed, he hadn't needed to, and because he'd always thought there would be time in the future to-

That future was gone. Prey was gone. Gloom was gone. '*Taken*.'

He'd thought that Prey would one day tell him if it became important enough.

It was important now. Because the royal summons had not come from Luna, his sworn liege lord.

The summons had come framed in gold and red. It had come borne by two Royal Guards. It had come from all the way at the top.

From Princess Celestia, Sol Invictus, most renowned of all Equestrians in all of history.

The snake of anger coiled in his chest. It sat there, waiting for someone else to bite, to complete the link and to become hate. It wasn't seeking out a victim, but nor would it discriminate. Someone was eventually going to step on it, and then it would bite. It was that simple.

The adder didn't see the crushed velvet curtains, the glitter of rubies set in portrait frames, the spacious white marble hallways, or the soft red carpet underhoof. It didn't see any beauty. Neither did Crimson. Wealth had never meant anything to the three of them.

'One. One of us. Me. Not three.' It kept slipping out of his mind, his instinctual reaction being to think 'us' and then in the next instant he would remember all over again.

Through the Palace, deeper and deeper. One grand staircase, then the next. They'd left the Guard section of the Palace far behind. Every single item, decoration, and gilded hallway was only

increasing in opulence the further he was lead.

He'd known, but it only registered now to Crimson that this wasn't the way to the Day Court. Never had been either. This was the Royal section of the Palace. But the two Royal Guards on either side of him were unerringly marching him on without turning aside.

They took him right through, right up to the guarded and golden double doors of the most powerful pony in the whole world's personal quarters.

The pair of Guards already waiting at attention by the doors were expecting them as the other two led Crimson up. They didn't say a word about Crimson's appearance, but Crimson still saw it in their eyes.

They didn't recognise him out of his armour, didn't know why their princess would allow an injured vagabond into her sacred personal quarters. They didn't know about Haven Hay. They didn't know anything.

The anger waited for one of any of them to step on it, uncaring of who it was. Because someone eventually would.

"Passcode?" The unicorn on the right asked.

"It is good to laugh." Crimson's two escorts answered almost as one.

"Your Majesty," The left unicorn Guard reached back and knocked respectfully without turning, "Your summoned guest is here."

He was about to be shown in to see Celestia. Right now.

Crimson stood there on three legs and hobbled, blinking. These four ponies had lives and stories, too. They must've grown up, perhaps by a single parent, maybe not. Maybe with siblings, maybe not. Friends, Equestrian schooling, training, mistakes. These four people meant nothing to Crimson in that moment. He didn't care if they lived or died. They were nothing, pieces of furniture or statues. Unless one of them turned themselves into more than just background by stepping on the coiled snake of his anger.

None of them did. A murmured voice, gentle and warm came from behind the gold and mahogany doors. Crimson forgot the four Guards, just swept them from his mind as one of the double doors cracked open.

They weren't important. The person waiting beyond the gold-plated door might be though, if she could tell him anything about Prey. If she could even remember.

The door had barely opened a hoof wide. It was inlaid with a beautiful mother-of-pearl carving which formed a sun. None of the four forgotten Guards were allowed to see inside or follow him in as he slipped through the crack.

With no visible means, the door quietly shut behind his bedraggled tail.

Three things; gold, light, and heat. The moment he was inside, all struck Crimson like a hammer blow.

He was blinded, staggered, and overwhelmed.

Gold, on every surface and item, making the light within the room so much more bright, reflecting off of every surface. He couldn't see for a few dizzying seconds until his squinting eyes adjusted.

But there was no adjusting to the baking heat. It was like taking a step forwards and finding yourself in the middle of the scorching desert. Crimson realised it was coming from the blazing fire roaring in the fireplace.

It was the middle of the afternoon. Sunset was still hours away. It was the beginning of summer, and the day had already been unusually hot. But still a huge fire was blazing in the central fireplace, stacked coals white hot. Glittering orange gems set into the reinforced fireplace glowed dimly with enchantments, as they further enhanced the emitted heat.

Yet reclining barely a hoof away from the flames was the huge form of the second most graceful person Crimson had ever seen. Celestia, her fur like beautiful ivory, and mane the ever-changing living light

of the aurora borealis.

And yet, and yet... as Crimson's abused and watering eyes adjusted further to the glow... the first thing that came into Crimson's mind for a reason he couldn't quite put his hoof on was; tired.

When Celestia unhurriedly turned her graceful swan neck and smiled at him, her horn putting her at the same height as him even when lying down- although he couldn't see any evidence or sign in the lay of her fur or limbs, looking at Princess Celestia, all he could think of was a thin veneer hiding bone-deep exhaustion.

"Welcome, Crimson Trace. Thank you for accepting my invitation."

There had been no invitation. It had been a summons.

Crimson blinked, eyes watering from the light and heat, slowly coming back to himself. He looked at Celestia. He made the conscious decision to bow to her instead of respect automatically demanding it, "Princess Celestia."

Indifferent, the snake of anger sat in his chest, merely waiting for a target.

'Will it be you?'

Ten seconds passed as the fire blazed away. Ten painful, too-fast breaths as Crimson tried to wait patiently.

But he couldn't manage it, not when Gloom and Prey were gone. Not when the one whom Strange Happenstance had let slip might be responsible was laying right here in front of him.

Crimson's jaw worked, "Princess-", The title had never felt more misshapen and oversized in his mouth.

"-Is this... does this have anything to do with, with Prey?"

"Aaaaah..." The resting princess sighed knowingly and with resignation, "So you *do* still remember."

Crimson's whole body went stiff, every muscle locking up. The

snake stared at Celestia. The next moment, it was all he could do to not scream at the princess and demand answers.

"You said; 'you do still remember', meaning you do too. You remember Prey. Why? How? What happened? Wha-Where is he? Why can't Scenic or- why can't anyone else?! What's happening? I mean, Princess."

"We'll address that in a moment," Celestia non-answered. Her brilliant flowing mane drifted into the blazing fire for a moment without any harm. "But first I need you to answer a question for me."

"But-"

"This is very important, Crimson Trace. Please tell me truthfully, what was Prey?"

Crimson stared, uncomprehending. Something dark stirred in his gut, about this nation who treated outsiders as second-class citizens.

"Is that a trick question?" He asked, very slowly, "What was Prey? He's a sheep, a lamb."

Then the terminology finally registered. 'Was', not 'is'.

The anger held utterly still, only one inch closer and it would bite, "Was. You said was. What do you mean, was? Where is Prey right now-?"

Celestia effortlessly spoke over him, her soft voice somehow still drowning him out, "Ah, no. I don't mean his species. I meant what was Prey to you, Crimson?"

The stifling hot air dried out his mouth, "Prey is, Prey's my friend. My best friend."

"Is that the truth? The whole truth?" Celestia prodded, her motherly face kind but unreadable beneath that.

A spark of condensed fury burned Crimson's tongue. She suggested he was lying? And lying about this?

"Prey is my best, my absolute dearest friend. Princess."

"I am... glad to hear that, I suppose." Celestia said. Crimson was thrown off balance.

She went on: "Friendship is magical, and without it, life is not worth living. Not even one year, let alone a thousand is worth it, believe me. I want every one of my little ponies to find friendship in their lives. So despite everything Prey did, I am glad for your sake, if not his."

Celestia shifted then, her head finally turning the last few inches away from the blazing heat of the fire to fully look at him, "It does make me wonder, however..."

"Where's Prey?" Crimson demanded bluntly, no longer able to restrain himself, "What have you done with him?"

"It makes me wonder.... *why* you haven't forgotten, when everypony else has? Did you know? Even my own dear sister has forgotten. While it is for the best, especially when she is already so burdened by recent tragedy, but while it makes many issues decidedly simpler... I am still deeply unsettled. Luna talks about an ISND, but swears there were only ever two ponies. You can't understand the gravity of that. But you, Crimson Trace, haven't forgotten. A dark force which could tamper with my own sister's memory, and yet you can remember. Why?"

Crimson stared straight back at her, "I don't know. And I don't care, not unless you know how to undo whatever it is."

"You don't care?" Celestia didn't seem to have been expecting his honest answer.

"Where's Prey? That's what's important. Gloom has-Where is Prey? I need him."

Celestia studied him with her wise magenta eyes, that again subtly didn't look right somehow. Not alert nor bright enough.

"So you truly didn't know anything."

"Didn't know what?!" His voice was rising, his injuries correspondingly also somehow hurting more.

"Please sit down first, and pull up a cushion. For your own good."

"Just answer. Just tell me! Where is Prey?"

"Sit down first." Celestia ordered, like a tutting mother.

There were so many reasons not to sit down, to not let Celestia give him orders even if she was a Princess. But none of them would get Crimson any closer to what he so desperately wanted. Answers.

Crimson limped across the plush rug to a stack of huge, golden silk floor cushions, each embroidered like a work of art. Painfully, he pulled off the topmost one and dragged it over. He could have sat on the rug, so deep and plush was it, and would have been just as comfortable. Celestia didn't levitate the pillow for him despite his bandaged injuries, an act which surely would've only taken her a single moment of effort, and would have sped this meeting up.

The burning heat from the fire was far too much for him. He stiffly sat on the pillow at the border of his heat tolerance, all the while Celestia patiently watched.

"What happened? Where is Prey? Please."

The large alicorn was studying him again. Her lips minutely pursed, "Before I explain, you will need to solemnly swear to a condition first."

His teeth ached in his gums he gritted them so hard, "What condition?"

"As one of my little ponies, your wellbeing is important to me. You need to swear to me Crimson Trace, that you will not give up when you still have all your other friends who need you, and you who needs them."

Disgust. It filled his stomach enough to make him sick. How? How could the two Royal Sisters be so different? How could he serve one and yet now despise the other's attitude so thoroughly?

He served Luna. He didn't owe Celestia any promise. But for the sake of answers, he nodded.

"I need a verbal response, please."

"Yes, your majesty." He stated flatly.

Celestia leaned an inch closer on her cushion, which somehow still wasn't catching alight, towards the flames.

"I'm not trying to draw this out to make you suffer, I promise you. It is simply that there is no good way to explain what happened. And I'm so very sorry that the truth of what I'm about to tell you will shatter your memory of the friendship you had with the one you knew as Prey."

It suddenly became very obvious to Crimson that Celestia didn't know what she was talking about. He'd intuitively expected coming into this meeting that a princess would know more than him. But she didn't. Did she think she was about to reveal some deep, dark secret about Prey that he didn't already know?

One instant he was darkly amused, the next he was abruptly afraid. *Was* Celestia about to reveal some deep dark secret about Prey? It didn't matter to him what it was, it would never matter, but it mattered that Celestia knew. What had she done to Prey to discover it?!

'Did Prey lie to protect me? She doesn't think I know anything. He must've tricked her. Whatever it is, she doesn't understand that I'm also guilty of many crimes.' Crimson instinctively knew Prey wouldn't have let slip anything which would've also incriminated him to Celestia, truth or not.

His chest hurt. His wounds hurt too. Everything seemed to only exist because it liked to see him hurting.

He didn't want to hear this. He needed to hear this.

"What... what is...? Just what?" He croaked out.

"I will keep this concise. The specifics and historical dates... well,

those won't mean anything to you, nor the magical theory behind it. For your sake, I will stick to the base facts only. Please, don't ask questions. Even I don't understand the deeper methods, nor will I lower myself to trying for something so dark."

Celestia took a deep breath while Crimson froze with dread, "There once was an evil, wicked witch called Selenia..."

---x-X-x---

Prey had once let slip the name of his home village. Once. Rushweed. Where his last surviving family, his mother and brother, were supposed to be waiting for him.

Prey said he wrote letters to them every week. Prey said he'd gone to visit while the rest of them were on the secret mission in Griffonia.

Crimson had always known there was something wrong. He'd thought it had been strained bonds between family, since Prey never spoke about them. Yet he'd still known without a shadow of a doubt Prey had loved them dearly.

'It was a lie.' Not the love, never the love. The lie had been that they'd still been alive.

'Prey lied to me. He never told me the truth about them.'

It hurt. Because now he knew Prey had always been too broken to confess that terrible truth, even to him, and he hadn't ever noticed.

It hurt, with a ripped-open and steaming, bleeding freshness.

But that hurt was a pale whisper standing in the shadow of the pain caused by Celestia confessing that Prey was dead.

'The sun rises. The sun sets. But we all have to cross the river someday.'

---x-X-x---

The fire blazed away in the lavish gold room.

Crimson blankly looked at Celestia, and wondered if he could kill her.

Princess Celestia, one of the most important people alive, the raiser of the sun, ruler and protector of Equestria for millennia. Sister of his liege lord, architect of so very many years of peace and prosperity. He looked at her, and all he could think about was if he could kill her.

'No. Because she's immortal. She can't die. I can't kill her.'

Not because it was wrong. But because it was physically impossible.

A target had provided itself, the adder of anger had struck, and bitten down on unbreakable iron.

It wasn't fair. Nothing was fair.

Celestia lived, because she was immortal. She physically couldn't die. While Prey was gone. A doll, some kind of creation, it didn't matter. Prey had been Prey, and Prey had been alive.

And now Prey was gone, and Celestia was still here.

Only now he understood the furnace of hate that singular truth had lit inside of Prey. He had never hated people for having what he didn't, like Prey had. Now though, he finally understood it.

Celestia was immortal. But Prey was mortal. And the immortal had taken what little time the mortal had. Just like that.

"That isn't fair."

"Fair?" Celestia tilted her great head, "What are you referring to? It was always fair. Everypony has their fair and allotted time on this land, and when it's up, they must move on. It may not feel it, but as somepony who has seen the years pass, I can assure you; time is always fair. Harsh, but fair."

Crimson's wings, both injured and not, were clamped so very tightly to his sides. His wound was shooting agony. He needed that agony, needed it to hurt so badly that he couldn't draw enough breath to

stand up from his cushion or else he would be attacking Celestia.

"You're a Princess. You're supposed to know best. You. Murdered. My. Friend. And you, you, you're justifying it to my face. Like, because, because-! Because you're the Princess so you can get away with it."

"I have not killed anypony. I outlawed the despicable practice of execution for a very good reason. It was not I, it was merely time finally catching back up to Prey-"

"*You* made that happen, *you* stole his life support. *You* killed my f-friend!" He shouted at the immortal princess.

For the first time during this entire meeting the expressed kindness and patience in Celestia's eyes faded away. Hard tiredness was all that was left, "Please stop throwing those false accusations around. Especially outside of this room-"

"You-!" His attempt to throw her words back in her face were completely talked over, centuries of speechmaking allowing the task to be effortless for the alicorn.

"-I know you're upset and struggling to accept what had to happen, so I'm allowing you this chance to express those feelings. I'm offended, and disappointed in you, but I can empathise with where you are coming from. So for today, you're free within the confines of this room to say what you need to say. However, once you leave, you won't be allowed to continue making such false accusations any longer. Freedom of speech is a right for all my little ponies, but slander is not."

Crimson wanted to see her beautiful face running with blood, wanted to see that long horn snapped off and nailed through her own eye socket. He wanted her to hurt as much as he was hurting right now, in body and in heart. The heat of the hate burnt the air from his lungs, and it shocked him. Crimson was no stranger to hate. His dead clan had seen to that. This hate though, it scared him.

Because Celestia was supposed to protect. She was a Princess. He'd

always known in the back of his head that she protected this nation. And now he found out she wasn't like that. He felt utterly betrayed.

Crimson had hated others in the past, but since his exile and the second chance he was granted by Luna, he'd been trying to detach himself from hating like that ever again. Because he'd seen in dark, unguarded moments, the foul forever-hatred staining Prey's eyes, and realised how ugly it made the lamb, and like a reflection in a mirror, realised he didn't want to go back to that.

Only now did he fully understand his younger self's wisdom. Because this hate... he was hurting himself, his muscles clenched, his stitched wounds were screaming, but he was hurting himself because he hated Celestia so much that he was doing it anyways, in the insane, twisted desire that his pain would somehow transport across space and inflict even a fraction of itself on her.

'This is madness.' His heart pounded fit to burst, a painful, over-strained drum. He was scaring himself.

He didn't want this hate. All he wanted was his two friends back. Gloom and Prey.

Crimson was still just a person freshly stabbed by raw grief. It had been mere days, *days*! In three days he'd lost Gloom and Prey both. He was still reeling, he hadn't accepted or reconciled anything yet.

Grief, pain, loss. It had been there before this sudden onslaught of raging hate.

Under it all, he was still the same as every other victim of sudden, unforeseen, and cruel tragedy.

Hate, even this black hate, stood in the shadow of his grief.

"I just, I only... I only w-want Gloom and Prey back."

He wanted the impossible. Except it wasn't impossible, Prey had said so.

But he wasn't Prey. He couldn't do what Prey could. He didn't know how.

So he asked the only other person in the whole world who could still remember:

"Please. Can you not just... bring them both back? With the Elements of Harmony, I mean. Please?"

He asked, even though he knew the answer he would get before Celestia ever slowly shook her graceful head, empathetic yet uncompromising.

"I'm sorry you feel this way, but that has always been beyond anypony's power, even mine. Once somepony has gone beyond, they can never return. You know this."

'Lie.' What he knew was what Prey had told him was possible. But what did his knowledge matter? Not one whit.

It didn't matter if Celestia was purposefully lying to him, thinking he was just grasping at straws and couldn't possibly know about the secret power of the Elements of Harmony. What did the truth matter when her refusal would remain the same either way?

Celestia had always been going to refuse his plea. Hadn't he just listened to her calmly explain her uncompromising logic for murdering Prey to his face? She was incapable of understanding what he was asking for.

She was saying something even now, but Crimson didn't care. He just didn't care. She was so useless, sitting here in the comfort of her golden room, a fire built scorching hot, and relaxing in the middle of the day.

"...I mourn when any of my little ponies grieve. However. *However*... no, I cannot lie, even to spare your feelings. I will give you the truth. I'm glad he's gone. I would not bring back that thing you called your friend even if I could." For that brief moment, her, the master politician of centuries, her face twisted into the rawness of honesty.

Fear. A hunted look. That was what Crimson saw in that moment of purest honesty before Celestia could cover her true feelings once

again, smother them in that porcelain mask. Then she realised what she'd just said.

"Oh my, I didn't mean..." The princess realised it was too late, that Crimson knew, and that she couldn't cover it up.

She dropped the attempt at obviously-fake lightheartedness, purposefully chosen as a red herring in this crafted meeting. Instead she sighed. The breath shook as it left her lungs:

"...Ah-ah-hhh-hh. You don't understand. You can't. You weren't there. You didn't see what he did at the end. What he'd had ready and prepared to unleash all along out of spite. You can't-you didn't fight it. You didn't see. You didn't see..." She repeated in a whisper to herself.

The fire blazed. The huge white alicorn was leaning in so close to the source of heat now that the tongues of flame were practically licking her ivory fur.

Crimson's body hurt. He was so tired. But he still felt a crawling shiver scuttle up his neck beneath his sweat-soaked mane as he heard that. It whispered with cruel satisfaction, because he'd *known* Prey. That he would never have gone quietly. Acid bombs in a forest, and a thestral clan who would never hurt anyone again.

For just a moment, the anger surged up high enough to barely submerge the grief. His exhausted muscles bunched as he bent aggressively forwards over the cushion, "Really? *Do tell.*"

Celestia didn't seem to hear. She was staring over his head at something only she could see.

A coal cracked loudly in the fire. Celestia's eyes flickered, and she returned to the present. She cleared her throat, "Crimson Trace, did you ever... do you perhaps know anything about the caves under Canterlot? Did Prey ever mention anything about them to you, anything at all? Please, think hard, this is of vital importance."

Crimson hated lies. But he didn't feel even the smallest twinge as he answered without any hesitation, "No. He never said anything.

Why?"

"I did not know at the time, and it is too late to ask now, but... it seems that the cave tunnels underneath my city are... 'infected'. I would know if there was another one of those things down there, but there could still be any number of other-"

Celestia cut herself off abruptly and suddenly. She started on a different track, "I need you to help me, specifically my Solar Guard, to search those caves. Even if it was all a deception, you were still the pony who knew Prey best when alive. If you can lend any insight at all, that's all that matters."

"Me."

"Yes, Crimson. I need you to start searching through those old caves as soon as possible. You'll have the best equipment money can buy and foremost expert cavers around to assist you in addition to my Solar-"

"Me. Go down into some tunnels... *why*?"

"Because of what might still be down there. If so, it must be found and eliminated as soon as possible, for the safety of all of Canterlot." Celestia stated with grim sincerity. "Only you can still remember him, and that's important. Perhaps deep down, he really did see you as a friend. If so, you will be safer than anypony else down there. You are the best, the only pony for this task."

Crimson stared blankly at her. She was serious. She was completely and totally serious.

She was asking him, Crimson, Prey's friend, whom she'd killed, to go down there and clear out Prey's work for her. Never even mind he'd promised Prey to never risk venturing back under the mountain, never mind that he wouldn't have the first clue of what to do, never mind all of that.

She was asking him, within minutes of confessing to killing Prey, to trust her over Prey.

Any slight chance of reconciliation, no matter how tiny it had been,

or not even that but rather of distant trust in her capability as a ruler if not in her personally, died right then.

'I serve Luna. Not you. *Never* you.'

Crimson dredged up a beaming smile, exactly like one Prey might've worn. It hurt his cheeks and eyes, "Princess Celestia. I could absolutely never do that."

Celestia started, her long horn jerking up, "But you need to. This is a matter of national importance! You can't even begin to imagine the consequences of what might happen if we don't..."

His teeth ached in his gritted smile, "Even more reason to refuse. So; no."

Surprise. Incomprehension that he would refuse. Surely she wasn't so stupid, she had centuries of wisdom. How could it not be obvious to her?

"You said Prey was evil. You just said that. You said I did not know him. You said he was dangerous. And now you're saying he had some kind of secret trap in some caves somewhere? You forget, I worked with Prey. I'm not going anywhere near those caves."

Prey had begged him to promise to never go down into those cold, dark stone tunnels again. He had given his word. Spiting Celestia and making her believe he was doing this just for himself and not also for Prey only made it all the more bittersweet.

"Oh, I understand now. You're afraid. I completely understand."

A bark, or a sob, but nothing like a laugh burst out of Crimson's chest, "You're not wrong, your majesty."

Just not afraid of what she thought he was afraid of. Maybe if he was less of an obvious mess, maybe if she was less distracted, maybe the Princess wouldn't have been fooled.

"I understand. You thought you knew him, but as a Guard, I need you to be brave and overcome that fear. You could be saving many of my ponies' lives." Celestia assured him.

Crimson emphatically shook his head, unkempt and dirty mane whipping in his eyes, "No, nope nope definitely no. No. I decline. No. I want to live."

"You know it's the right thing, the *only* thing to do. I can make it an order if it helps." Celestia offered.

Crimson's unhappy smile hurt even worse as it stretched further upwards, "Well, yes, it does. Kind of, I mean. In a way. Because I quit."

"Pardon me?"

"I quit. I mean, I resign as a Night Guard. I'm not doing it. I'm not going down into those caves. Never."

The solar alicorn seemed at a genuine loss. Her lips were parted, but nothing was coming out. If he'd had his helmet or badge on, he would've thrown them on the floor.

Crimson struggled to painfully rise to his hooves, the sweat caused by the blazing fire leaving a damp patch on the gold cushion. His weak legs traitorously shook on him, "I'm sorry for wasting your time, *your majesty*, but apparently I can't help you. I won't waste any more of it. Good luck dealing with *your* problem."

"No, you don't understand. There could be another one down there, incubating or growing. If there is it has to be destroyed *now*." Celestia's voice rose, not the Royal Canterlot Voice, just the rising alarm of a mare scared.

Crimson started shuffling backwards towards the door, never taking his eyes off her. Swiftly, Celestia visibly calmed herself, "You don't understand." She repeated, but her tone carried the trill of desperation. "And I really need you to understand."

"Am I under arrest, Princess?" Crimson asked, no, *dared* her. Even though he knew she could get away with whatever she wanted, he couldn't help but still dare her to try. "Because otherwise, I'm going to leave."

"Of course you're not under arrest, just- just wait. A moment,

please! I need you to understand the importance of this. You can't comprehend the threat of that... of what... earlier today, I had to fight something Prey had kept hidden down there. I teleported it away from Canterlot, and I fought it. You need to understand this, Crimson Trace. I nearly lost."

The shameful admission took force for the alicorn to get out, but still she said it, no matter how hard she choked.

Crimson's battered face slipped into blankness. He slowly blinked sunken, red-rimmed amber eyes, then said with complete honesty, "Then there really is absolutely nothing more I could contribute if even you could barely manage to slay whatever monster it was."

Somehow, Celestia didn't seem to have considered that obvious point either. That someone might see an impossible task, and simply walk away instead of wasting their time trying. Was something wrong with her? It was so obvious to Crimson. You didn't go into a hydra's lair, you turned around and flew away.

"You still don't understand," Celestia said softly, "Let me show how dire this is, then. I know you don't hold any love for me after today, but you serve my sister loyally-"

'Served.' Crimson twitched. Not anymore. Not after this. All he wanted was to fly away until he couldn't fly any longer, but he couldn't even do that.

"-So for her, please do this. Because I can't risk anything happening to her ever again. And I don't have the strength to fight another hungry thing."

Crimson twitched again, shock at the same name Prey had once used. It sounded like something she'd named out of experience.

"-I don't want to risk her having to fight, to pay the price, for *any* of this to have to happen to her too."

Princess Celestia's whole visage, laying on the cushion right up against the fire, flickered. Her heavy golden regalia melted away into thin air. Then the famous living rainbow of her ever-changing

mane faded into nothing like the illusion it turned out to be.

In its place, the illusion removed, the real Princess Celestia reclined in exactly the same position, but one that was much different.

Crimson squinted. For a moment, he thought the pain, exhaustion, and grief had distorted his vision. But when he furiously blinked sore, gritty eyes, they were still showing him the same sight.

Celestia's mane and tail were dull, unmoving pink. Still the longest of any he'd ever seen, but- normal. Just normal pink. Not living any longer. *Drained.*

Her face was sallow with tiredness, skin grey under her now drab white fur, and eyes ringed with a bone-deep weariness he knew all too well. Princess Celestia was physically the largest pony known. Yet she looked shrunken. She didn't look big and strong right now, huddling up to the fire.

She looked cold. Somehow, the alicorn of the sun looked like a survivor of a deep and dark blizzard. It was jarring, as if a fact previously accepted as unassailable, like grass being green, was suddenly in question. Celestia was cold.

Then his eyes skirted downwards from her face, drawn to where the illusion of her famous regalia had rested. Crimson's shallow breath caught in the back of his dry throat.

But alicorns were immortal. Weren't they?

Celestia had a cluster of mismatched holes bored into her flesh. The surrounding fur had receded from the shrivelled wounds, leaving the exposed flesh ashen, dry, almost crumbling.

There was no blood, no seeping. The wound holes were withered shut, like the life had been sucked right out. It came into Crimson's mind from somewhere that it looked almost exactly like dried fish meat.

But immortal didn't mean invulnerable, did it?

"What...?"

The fatal, horrible grey holes in Celestia's flesh couldn't kill her, she was sitting there, alive. But she was not invulnerable anymore.

"I'm not healing. I've expended so much power, but they won't..."

Suppressed, she was trying to control it. The pain was well hidden in her words. Not well enough. It's so hard to act convincingly when you're in pain. Crimson knew, because he was in pain right now.

He stared. 'Won't heal' she'd almost said. Won't heal, even for an immortal. He had never expected anything like this. It suddenly came to him what the wounds reminded him of.

Like the suckers on a mama'duke's tentacles. If those suckers had each been the mouth of a leech. It must have only been a glancing contact, only mere seconds, and yet the wound was still, or would have been, horrifically fatal to anyone else. The withered wounds were deceptively deep. As a warrior, Crimson instantly knew the wound was many times worse than it actually looked.

In stunned shock, Crimson swept his eyes up and down the rest of the princess' frame. What he saw was scars. Fresh. Nicks and slashes of the same grey, withered flesh that weren't healing, the white fur burnt away.

Crimson didn't know what abomination Prey had created, what *thing* he'd been keeping contained down in those caves. But it had been enough to all but kill an immortal. His spite took deep satisfaction at that.

How Prey would have laughed if he could still have been here to see this.

Prey was gone. But Celestia was going to remember him for every day of the rest of her immortal life.

"This is a state secret of the highest order. It cannot get out. Understand that it will count as treason if you talk of this. Ponies cannot know, they need to keep believing or else there will be mass panic. Innocents will die by accident if that occurs, and I will *not* allow it. I need to recover my strength first, I need- it might take

years. I expended so much of my power..."

With a pained tremble in her hoof, Celestia very gently poked at the deadly wounds in her chest, "This, this might not ever heal-"

Crimson heard the raw fear in those words.

"-But I must at least recover my full strength. Equestria cannot appear weak, not now. The only reason I'm showing you is because you need to understand the gravity of the situation. I cannot defeat another one of those monsters, and, if my sister has to take my place-"

She cut off that line before Crimson could ask what he truly wanted to know. She fixed him with her gaze: tired, hurt, and afraid.

"You must lead the search, you're the best chance I- we have of uncovering if there is another thing hidden down there. Canterlot and Luna need you."

And yet even now, she still just didn't get it.

"No."

Crimson began limping for the door, "If there is another such monster, I'm not going down there to die. I just quit, so I'm not a Guard anymore, and you can't order me. And any other Guards you send in will just die too. You can't even force me. Arrest me, drag me down to the caves in chains, whatever. I will simply refuse to move. I will become the biggest liability I can possibly manage to be to any search party I am attached to."

Breathing heavily, he reached the golden double doors, "I have already given everything I could to your nation. Equestria has taken everything else. I'm not giving it anything more."

The princess didn't call after him or order him to halt. No magical aura blocked his way either. Crimson viciously liked to imagine it was because Celestia was still too weak and too stunned by a pony daring to say no to her face. But he couldn't know, and he refused to turn back and look.

His leg hurt. His wing hurt. His chest hurt. His eyes stung so badly. His thirst was excruciating. He just wanted to be out of this too-hot room, and away from the terrible revelations he'd learnt inside.

He fumbled with the handle once, twice, his hooves shaking. He used his good wing in the end. He just wanted out. He wanted away, he wanted a dark corner where no one would find him, and he wanted to cry.

'Gloom... Prey... why have you left me all alone against the tide? I'm struggling. I can't fly. I need help. I'm going to drown...'

In his fevered imagination, he looked down. Down, down, down there in the deep, he imagined he saw three still figures floating. Their eyes were closed. They were waiting for him to sink and join them in the crushing silence of the depths. A lamb, and two thestral stallions. All taken before their time.

Princess Celestia, goddess of the sun. Wise and experienced ruler of more than a thousand years, who had seen Equestria through many dark years in the annals of history. Hers was one of longest running, most all-encompassing, far reaching, and important stories in the entire world, for because of hers, so many other stories existed.

Princess Luna, the shadowy second alicorn, sister to the day and ward of the night. Banished and forgotten for so long, only recently returned. And since then, she had devoted her efforts into earning back her place in Equestria. Failures and misunderstandings, all these had beset Luna at every turn. Hers was a tale of sheer bloody-minded stubbornness while pushing forwards down a path she was dead certain on being the right one, while incapable of seeing the ants she trod over to get there.

Scenic Paint, more fondly known as Paint Spot to those close to him. A story of someone snatched from a life he understood and thrown into vicious, terrifying danger. He'd seen the cruel jaws of the world, and his goal since then had been to escape those teeth at every turn. A stallion who knew he was far from perfect, but who wanted to be worthy of the love of his life and, hopefully soon, marry her. His was also a story that had recently been stabbed with the sting of sudden tragedy.

That same tragedy was one which cruelly afflicted more than one life and story. Carton Juice had her own thread wound up with Scenic Paint's. Hers was a simple, homely, and fulfilling story of basic goodness, and of simple acts of kindness every day.

Saffron Swirl. A story of a life which had been hard, although not dangerous, right from its conception. Of a noblemare of a famous lineage subsequently disowned, despairing, fallen, and then raised back up by the strength of her own legs, no matter how much those legs trembled and shook even now. A story of a battle against depression that was still ongoing.

Lilly Blossom, a story of an angry filly, an angry teenager, an angry young adult, and then a violently shaken and awoken Guard. A Guard who woke up and looked around, and realised the world was filled with giants who would step on her and not even notice. A mare who dug deep down, with a lot of help, to unearth the determination to say, "I will not get stepped on. I will be better than those giants".

There were other stories, too. So very many. Stories like Nighthawk's, Captain of the so-recently-rebuilt Night Guard. A stallion doggedly loyal to his ideals, those being the ideals of his ancient Princess. Raised in a hard, rough life, one dedicated to

tradition, and grimly prepared to defend the ideals of those traditions.

So many varied story threads. Some directly interwoven, and others only joined by a common overarching thread they all tangentially touched, like that of Celestia's. Cookie, a cook for the Guard kitchens. An older mare who'd lived her life, was comfortable with her husband, and was looking to wind down into retirement where she could do her duty properly browbeating the young and stupid ponies of today.

Taffy Hopes, smoothly shuffling pages of reports in her magic, sitting in her paperwork-stuffed office. A mare who lived in the now and let tomorrow take care of itself. Someone who liked their job, liked the contact, liked to talk, and liked to feel she made a difference. She was deeply proud of her other, secret job. A simple, frankly boring secret job. Hers really wasn't a complicated story. Sometimes, that was just life; a mundane story. It had its secrets, as did every life, but that didn't make it complicated.

That story, and many more besides. Wherever there's a person, there will also be a story. Like the other Night Guards. Or like Randy Pickaxe. Simple earth pony, park gardener, content, hardworking, humble, a fondness for spicy food, some issues with future planning, perhaps even sometimes wilfully blind to mares' faults, and far from perfect. A person.

These stories. Other stories. *More* stories. Lives being lived.

There is always another story out there, and it's not about you.

The world doesn't care, it doesn't read the book of life. It just tramples over everyone in its path.

The world kept marching forwards. Time didn't suddenly come to an end. All these stories continued being woven.

But none of those story threads were Prey's anymore.

Crimson staggered up one step, then the next. The walls of the apartment block's staircase were swimming in his vision. He was barely even aware. Sweat-drenched, fur filthy, bandages dirtied.

The evening sun shone. As he limped past at a crawl, ponies inside their flats were talking, moving, going about their evening. They didn't even realise there was a pony struggling with everything he had left just to make it up two flights of stairs.

How long did it take Crimson to make the climb, and then down the corridor to the two joint flats at the end? Time seemed to be warping, the ground stretching out in front of his hooves. Or was it sleep deprivation? Maybe fever?

He got the front door open somehow. He didn't remember where he'd even gotten his key. Or had he forgotten to lock it?

Past the threshold and in the cool shadow of the passageway, he stood for a moment as his failing brain finally caught up to where he was.

The two closed apartment doors waited at the end, facing each other. One of them was his, number 31B. He looked at the other door.

He cried again. It was messy and wet. Still crying, he dragged his body with the last bit of the strength he didn't know a person could even possess into his flat.

He saw the blurred red shape of his blood fern, set on the windowsill as he barely made it to the bed.

There, he finally collapsed.

---o---

Crimson was so far gone he couldn't even tell if he laid there a

while or not before unconsciousness claimed him.

Luna was waiting for him in the dream realm, an outline filled in with a swatch of starry night. No face or expression made up of swirling galaxies and constellations this time. Just an outline.

Crimson hadn't anything he wanted to say to her. He knew now she hadn't lied to him, that it had been Celestia's actions, not hers. Luna hadn't lied, but she had still failed in her promise. A promise she couldn't even recall making now.

She couldn't remember Prey, and all they'd sacrificed in her service together. She instead had come to try to offer him comfort only over Gloom's death.

Crimson couldn't bear the thought of even looking at Luna, even if she had chosen to cloak her face here. He wanted nothing to do with her. Perhaps she understood that. The scent of cool night wind imparted her words to his sleeping mind, as her presence carefully withdrew.

"Our sister came to us earlier this day, prevailing upon us to impress upon you the importance of undertaking her request. However, that is not what we came to say. Our sister is wise, but decisions made in haste are not her strength. We will not ask things of you in her place. Nor do we feel we have a right to press you for answers, our dear Crimson. Not for many nights hence. For now, grieve in peace. Rest. No dreams, good or ill shall touch you here. That little we can at least do. We art sorry Crimson. We did not want this, our beloved Sargent, he still had so much more to live for..." A pause. "Rest well, for we will forever watch over your dreams."

She left. True to her word, he didn't dream. No nightmares, and no happier memories.

His body finally slept, and he dreamed of nothing.

Pain. Pain and terrible, raging thirst woke Crimson. Pain in his cracking throat, and worse pain from his injuries.

He somehow struggled out of the sticky, sweaty blanket and made it to the sink.

He desperately drank from the tap, and drank, and drank until he could again think straight.

Clarity of thought was not a mercy though. Like sharpening the knife, all it did was let him remember *why* he'd collapsed into bed.

All alone in his nearly empty flat, the weight struck him again. A fallen tree across his back.

His face crumpled. His shaking, unbandaged wing came up to cover his face. "Oh G-Gloom, Prey..."

He turned and staggered back towards the bed, barely caring if he made it or not. A night had passed, and the light coming in through his window was from late morning. It played over the rusty red curled fronds of his blood fern, in its pot on the windowsill.

Something about that infuriated him, because it was wrong. A bucking plant should not have survived when both Gloom and Prey hadn't. He turned to sweep it from the windowsill and smash it, because it was wrong!

...It was wrong. His blood fern shouldn't be in his room. It was wrong, because when they'd set out for Haven Hay, he'd left it in Prey's care, the little lamb saying he had someone to take care of both of their respective potted plants.

But it was on his windowsill now. How?

Crimson stared uncomprehending at the red furled leaves of his fern.

'Does that mean... Prey's own potted plants have been returned too?'

Returned to Prey's room? The locked room, which no stranger seemed able to open? Yet that he could open the door of without a key somehow? The room right across from his own?

Returned to Prey's room just across the hall...

He made it to the front door in a limping rush, shoved, in the moment forgetting it was pull, finally got it open, and all but fell across the brief stretch of space to push on Prey's door.

It swung open without resistance or sound. If it had been any other time, or if he'd had a moment to gather his courage to enter his dead friend’s room-

-But this could be an emergency. Desperation trumped grief in that moment.

Crimson stepped inside. It was silent. Like his own flat, there was barely anything in here. Even the air was so incredibly still in Prey's flat, like it was frozen in time.

He fixed his eyes on the windowsill, not knowing which answer he wanted to find.

There were no plants there. It was bare.

The strength left him in a rush. He sagged. The sill was bare. No one had been in here. Prey hadn't somehow cheated death and returned.

Then he saw a page placed on the low table he'd once helped Prey cobble together, built to the lamb's height.

The white of the page was practically screaming for his attention, orientated directly towards the door and deliberately placed. There was writing on it. A message.

Somehow, he knew it was meant for him.

Crimson didn't consciously remembering ordering his legs to carry him across, or for his wing to scoop up the page, it just happened.

The letter was addressed to him. It was in Prey's hoofwritting.

'Crimson. If you're reading this, then I am sorry. I don't know what might have happened, but I must be gone. I'm sorry if I left while failing you. Please say sorry to Gloom too for me. I have left arrangements for a different letter to be delivered to him. It does

not contain any of the details this letter does.'

Crimson squeezed his eyes shut and just breathed for long seconds, his hurt ribs aching fitfully with each inhale and exhale, before finally continuing.

'I don't know the circumstances you will currently be in if you're reading this, but you may be in need. I have made preparations to help out with whatever that need may be. There will be someone to meet you. I will not put down any details or answers here. I do not trust paper. Dispose of this letter, too. This person will be waiting to meet you. There is a place that you, me, and Gloom agreed to meet if a disaster ever happened. You will know where I mean. Go there. They will find you. Do not bring Gloom. They will recognise you even if you don't know them. Goodbye.'

That was it. Just, 'goodbye'.

Desperate, Crimson turned the page over. Writing a second message on the back would completely be in keeping with something Prey would do.

Not in this case, though. Panic began clouding up Crimson's mind. Where was Prey talking about? Where had they all agreed? It was panic over the fear he would somehow not be able to remember the right place, even though he knew it was ridiculous-

-The statue of Luna down in the market of Lower Canterlot. The only statue of the Night Princess in the whole city, set off in its own little stone alcove.

The three of them, when there had been three, had gathered there on their very first day off. They'd later agreed to make it their rendezvous.

How long had this letter been sitting here? Had it been here since yesterday?

His eyes darted to the sunlight outside the window. A whole day had passed, what if this secret person Prey was talking about had gone and he'd missed his only chance?

The breath left his lungs in a hiss, "Oh *no*."

Crimson rushed for the stairs as fast as his limp would allow.

---I---

Author's Notes:

I said it would only be a brief wait for the next chapter, and here it is. But still not the end. Not just yet.

Very, *very* kind and dedicated editor for this rush:
Panem et Circenses
And here, an awsome battle picture done by ShankMaster Thank you!
Check it out Here

100.7 The Box is Full

Day. Blue sky. Warm morning air. The city of Canterlot.

It was not market day, but nevertheless the market plaza of Lower Canterlot was still bustling as Crimson limped his way through the noise and crowds.

He had only the one destination fixed in his mind; the alcove with the statue of Luna. Where the last letter from Prey had told him to go.

His stomach was hurting, his body weak. He hadn't eaten anything in thirty six hours. His own fault, but he hadn't been able to face it.

How could he have an appetite when Gloom and Prey were both gone and never coming back?

A regret he was suffering now, as his three good legs and one bad shook and seriously threatened to give up on him. If only his wing was working, he could have been there already.

Throngs of happy, brightly coloured ponies passed Crimson by on every side. Their words and chatter were a muted buzz, and his ears didn't swivel to follow any one of them. There was only one thing that mattered right now.

He pushed through, as fast as he could limp. When ponies turned and saw his wild mane and unkempt fur, coupled with his bandaged injuries, they swiftly left a bubble of empty space around him. He didn't spare any of them a second look.

And there it finally was, at the end of the plaza and set off to the side. The quiet alcove and hooful of steps leading up to Luna's statue.

He saw no one waiting there for him. Was he too late? Or too early? Were they instead hiding in the crowd and watching? This could be a trap.

'No. The letter was in Prey's room. Nobody hostile could have gotten in and left it there. I'll just have to wait.' Crimson grimly thought.

He ignored his stomach, ignored his aching, itching injuries, ignored the shaking in his legs, and stiffly climbed the few stairs.

It was much quieter in the alcove, most of the noise of the market cut off. The larger-than-life, rearing statue of Luna looked down on him. It was plain, polished grey stone. Crimson turned his back on her and faced the market.

There was only one way in and out of the alcove on hoof, and he could also watch the sky at the same time. He made up his mind then and there to wait for however long it took.

Crimson waited, weak and hungry, but far more than that, desperate. And waited.

And waited...

Every minute was one beset by doubts that he'd already missed his window, or that Prey's contact wasn't coming.

He kept waiting, in a sick repeated parody of yesterday. Had it really only been yesterday?

And waited some more...

Ponies passed by in the market, and pegasi overhead in the sky, but none were showing any interest in the quiet little alcove, or its one red inhabitant.

Crimson waited. He noticed in the corner of his vision that someone had added some more graffiti on the alcove wall, presumably some bored youth sneaking out at night. "Nightmares 4 Free", the scrawl read.

He became aware, he wasn't sure exactly when, only that it was after the fact, that someone else had casually walked up the steps and joined him in the alcove. And somehow, he hadn't reacted.

A vague yellow pony in a hat, that was all his eyes had been noticing. He'd known in the back of his mind she was there, just not *realised*.

"Crimson Trace." She addressed him, and suddenly he'd always known it was a mare, fur and razor-straight mane straw yellow, wearing a sunhat and a short travelling cloak.

She stood across the alcove, with plenty of personal space between the two of them.

She knew who he was. She'd come here specifically for him. He had no idea who she was, but she must be who Prey's last letter had meant.

Crimson was certain he'd never seen her before in his life, but she was vaguely familiar. The lingering scent of old blood. Like Prey. He was keenly aware he was unarmed, temporarily crippled, and covered in injuries.

"Are you who P-Prey mentioned in his letter?" His words came out as a dry croak, and broke on Prey's name. He cleared his throat and repeated himself.

"Yes, Crimson." The words, tone, and delivery were flat, empty. But he imagined he heard something dark swirling underneath.

He noticed her dull eyes were as flat as her words.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Lemon Pink."

"Prey, he, he never mentioned you." It came out accusatory.

"I know. He wouldn't have." Was the toneless reply.

"Why not?"

"I'm a secret. I worked in secret for Prey. With Prey. Many important secrets."

Crimson didn't know what that meant, "Are you from before? I mean, before he came to Canterlot? His home?"

"No."

Crimson waited. The unnaturally still mare didn't add anything more.

"Then who are you?" He gritted out.

"Oh. Prey made me. I was part of him, came from him. I served him. But now..." A quiver went through the mare's jaw, "...Now I'm just me. Alone. Lemon Pink. Free."

"Free? I mean, weren't you before?"

"Yes. No. It's complicated. I am... 'free' now, and must act for myself. No guidance. I have a few last duties to perform, but then I am free to do as I think best. Those were Prey's standing orders."

"Why can you even remember-? Why can *I* remember?! No one else can. Why've they all forgotten? They just, they just forgot him, like he never existed, after all we did!"

His voice cracked with the weight of his intent, but he kept going, "Why can *you* remember? Why has everyone but us, and bloody Celestia forgotten?!"

Lemon was silent, still, a statue. Then finally, "I don't know. I don't know why they've all forgotten him. I only know why we still remember."

"Oh yeah? *Then why?*"

"My mind is naturally shielded by what I am. Yours too. My memories are also further protected," Her hoof rose to her throat, a flash of a silver choker under the travelling cloak, "Again, yours are too. By that feather you carry."

Her horseshoe slowly scraped across the paving stone, a gritty, drawn out squeal. Her voice wavered where her face didn't:

"I was too slow. Not fast enough. I should have been back in time. Failure. Felt the rune deactivate. And now it's too late. We worked together on many topics, researched. Dark topics. I've always been here, in the background."

Crimson watched her. He didn't understand even half of what was going on. But he was angry.

Angry at Celestia, angry at this oblivious city, angry at whomever this mare thought she was, and angry at Prey for never mentioning her. Angry that Prey had left him behind.

"*Why* didn't Prey tell me about you if you were so important? What are you doing here now? And why should I trust you?"

"This isn't my real appearance," Lemon Pink abruptly informed him, as if that would somehow help her case, "This appearance is an illusion. I call her Sunflower. My name is Lemon Pink, though. But if I am in disguise, please refer to me as Sunflower in the future. For the safety of both of us."

"Answer my question. Please."

Lemon Pink slowly reached under her cloak. Crimson's muscles coiled. But she only took out a blue strip of silk.

Crimson stared at Prey's ribbon, draped across her hoof.

"This will explain everything."

"Where did you get that? That's Prey's. And, Celestia said-" His voice was strangled.

"It found me." Lemon said, as if that should make everything clear. It didn't.

"What?"

"It found me. It will always find its way back. *Always*." She repeated that as if it was of vital importance.

"Please! Just give me a straight answer. Tell me about Prey. Did he,

did he leave any message, did he say anything?" He was on the verge of begging.

"Yes. He left this." Lemon Pink held out the silken ribbon which should have been tied back behind Prey's ear, where it belonged.

It stabbed him in the gut as he realised all over again that he'd never see Prey wearing this ribbon, the lamb's defiant joke against the world, ever again,

"A message? Did he leave a message?" He pressed, desperate. This mare seemed not to be all there. Distracted. Maybe she was also grieving.

"Yes. I said, he left this."

He looked at her hoof, "The ribbon. How is...?"

"If you take it, you'll see and know. A memory packet. There's a message left behind in it."

Crimson didn't know what that was supposed to mean. Did it matter though? It was something weird, probably dangerous, but Prey had left it behind for him. He limped forwards, crossing the intervening space between them.

But Lemon Pink, or Sunflower as she wanted to be called, pulled back the ribbon slightly, "I am obligated to warn you first. This will hurt. Nor is it completely safe. You can choose not to take it, and I will still perform my last orders and help you. You are, were, you were precious to Prey."

Her dull, emotionless eyes bore into him, "So very precious. We, he, latched onto you hard. He recognised that. But still it happened. And I will help you too, even though I am my own person. So listen to my warning; this ribbon is not safe. At all. In a way you can't understand. It is a connection."

"A connection to where?" He asked, hot and cold running through his veins. The slack silk ribbon looked so harmless, and yet... knowing Prey as he did, he couldn't help but think of a venomous blue viper, the bright colour a warning.

"A place. Non-real. It is important to remember that place isn't real on Equus or the moon or elsewhere, even if it does exist. You must not forget to keep that separation clear in your mind if you take this ribbon."

He listened to her, but to Crimson, there was only one choice despite the mare's flat warnings. He held out his hoof, turned face up.

For a brief second, Lemon almost looked reluctant, or perhaps jealous, "Then from now on, and always, it is yours." She intoned, and the ribbon smoothly slipped off her hoof with a life of its own and dropped onto his.

First the silk was cool. Then it was cold. Then it bit him.

Roaring black in his ears, grey ash filled his eyes and mouth-

---||O||---

Crimson was not Crimson, he was something else. Jarring, shuddering pain.

He felt like he was being crushed, splintering under an unimaginable weight. It was terrible, blinding in pressure.

Then it went away, lifting to as light as a feather. The relief that filled him, or whatever he was, was indescribable. In that moment, he didn't think anything could be worse than the crushing pressure he'd barely been delivered from. He was wrong. For in the next moment, came a touch.

Rusty barbs. Hooks in his brain. Thorns growing through his eyes. Screaming as glass poured into-

He tried to fight back, tried to defend himself, reaching for the mental self-discipline which had helped him so many times.

It meant nothing. In that moment, his all willpower meant nothing.

It wasn't him, wasn't Crimson who took all the pain away. It wasn't anything to do with any strength of his own.

It just... ended, as the memory packet finished settling into his head and opened.

He shook; hurt, afraid, not mentally there, but very distantly aware of the paving stone under his hooves in the real world.

And then there was the memory. Not his own, he'd never had these thoughts before, but he was remembering them as if they'd always been his.

No sound, no image, no tone of voice or accent, because how could a thought have any of those? Just a thought, but one as close as anything could ever be in his heart, because it was now Crimson's very own thought.

'Hello Crimson. I am thinking this to myself, but if you absorb this in the future, then yes. It's me, Prey.'

'If you are hearing this, then I'm sorry. I don't know how it happened, but I'm sorry. I don't know what your circumstances will be, but I'm sorry. And if you've taken my ribbon, then I'm sorry.'

'There are things I must tell you, for your own safety. About changelings, about the Deeper Green, about blood magic and many more things. I have secrets. So many secrets. Ones I could not tell you if I was alive. I just can't. Couldn't.'

'I won't tell you everything, but instead nearly everything, and I'll explain why I skip bits of the story in those places, because some things are physically unsafe to know. They can mentally kill you. But even if I don't explain the how, I will explain the why.'

'Once upon a time...'

There were very, very few images to accompany Prey's packet of memories, only brief, still-life recollections where it was important for Crimson to have a visual understanding of something. Like what the raw, unprocessed ingredients of Bone Rot looked like. But otherwise, it was all Prey's own self-reflection.

'And that's important, believe me. You aren't me. I am not you. And in experiencing my life, even secondhoof, the memories would start to bleed over and blend together, and you would begin to become me.'

So instead of true memories, rather in words with the very occasional frozen, still-life picture, Prey simply told Crimson his story.

-<O>-

Crimson heard about a small, forgotten farm on the border, where there had once lived an ewe, and her two young sons.

'All we wanted was to be left alone.'

-<O>-

He was briefly told of a hard upbringing with an absent and then dead father, while struggling against both the land itself and the earth pony landlords to survive.

'Now, I would give anything to go back to those simple times.'

-<O>-

Of an uprising, of rebels who called themselves The Resistance, and how it all began to creep into everything else.

'They were the worst of the worst. Murderers. Thieves. Torturers. They were monsters. I was one of them.'

-<O>-

About a new Border Guard Captain called Fire Strike, and a fire.

'I only regret it was far too late by the time I killed him.'

-<O>-

About how Gossamer died, and Prey was born. About Breaker, about Snake, and about failure.

'It was there in the silence after the battle. It was there in the cold mud. It was there in me.'

-<O>-

About fifty-seven years of never-ending, insanity-inducing isolation, and the grinding nothing of an inactive volcano prison and fortress called Dreverton.

'I counted every single day there. Every. Single. One.'

-<O>-

And then, about a chance appearing out of nowhere, presented by an arrogant, ignorant Solar Guard Captain named Valour.

'I killed him. Quite recently, in fact. I don't really regret it, I play around with the notion, but no. And I know now that I didn't really have a good reason for it, when I could have just left him alone and ignorant.'

-<O>-

About who Lemon Pink really was, and what she had come from. Who she had come from. And how it was her who had later kidnapped the foal Rocky Bed.

'Lemon is a person as real as you and me. She's just different. Trust her.'

-<O>-

Luna. A dream. An offer. A job. And a new team. Of his first time meeting two new ponies he didn't like or trust. Crimson, and Gloom.

'We came so far since then, huh?'

-<O>-

Their first mission. Distrust. Hatred of Canterlot and its ponies. And then their second mission. The cellar. Garrow. The Lumber Yard.

'There are only two things I won't do for you. I made a promise that day. I meant it with all my heart.'

-<O>-

Scenic and Lilly Blossom coming onto the scene.

'I don't hate them now. I did then. I realised though, after Discord, when I chose to return, that I would kind of miss them if they were gone.'

-<O>-

The misery of Mayflower, and the horror of the kindersnatches, scarecrow, and Reaper King.

'It was me. Me and Lemon Pink, I mean. We were the ones who really executed the warlock Hard Baked in the end. He didn't commit suicide.'

-<O>-

Then had come the Wolfing Wood. And Prey had told him this was one of those things it was not safe to know.

'Just know this. There is always a hunt. And therefore, there must always be prey. Think on that, and run far away.'

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It was then in his retelling, that Prey had informed him of the long, sordid conflict in the shadows that he'd sparked with a race of shapeshifters called the changelings.

'I don't regret what happened to them. I don't. At least, that's what I keep telling myself. But I'll get to what happened with them soon enough.'

-<O>-

Of where his first gift to Crimson, the jade necklace, had truly come from and where it had gone afterwards.

'I really didn't mean for any of the trouble that followed to touch you. Sorry for that.'

-<O>-

He'd had no clue. Crimson had absolutely no clue at the time about the struggle Prey had been in with a group of unicorn vigilantes calling themselves the Brotherhoof of Sol.

'I can't be sure I got them all, so be careful about them. The diamond dogs though, they were innocent. I still killed them.'

-<O>-

Then Prey had tentatively admitted what he'd done while the rest of them went undercover for their secret mission in Griffonia. That his visit back home had only been a half-lie.

'I know you said you wanted to meet my mother one day. I wish you could have met her, too.'

-<O>-

Discord. A real, accurate picture of the unpredictable and lethal nature of Discord's madness, and not the Harmony-altered, rose-tinted version ponies now remembered.

'I'm trying to construct an array that will kill him if he ever returns for a third time. He is mad, Crimson. And madness is catching.'

-<O>-

It was here that there was a pause, a silence in the darkness. But Prey still recounted without offering any excuse or justification about what had happened to the changeling war swarm, an invading army Prey had exterminated about which nobody in Canterlot ever learnt a single thing. An image of a single cave tunnel packed to the ceiling with black corpses. Just the one. Prey didn't say anything further, left Crimson to judge him, and moved on.

-<O>-

An army of twisted monsters, being grown or perhaps sewn together down in the sewers, from what Prey called a 'wickerwatch'. One which Prey freely admitted to basing off of the Reaper King.

'I don't have any plans for what to do with them yet. If you have need of them, and they're still there, then you are free to use this mage-killer army as you see fit. Just ask Lemon.'

-<O>-

And with that Prey came to the end of recounting his history to Crimson. At no point did Prey offer any excuse, or attempt to justify anything he did. He gave his reasons, but nothing else. There it ended, before the disastrous trip to Haven Hay. Crimson realised that Prey must have created this memory packet before they had ever gotten on the train.

He would never know if there was anything else Prey had wanted to say to him following Gloom's death, something that hadn't already been said. He had to believe that this was enough for closure. That this *could* be enough.

But the memories did not end there. This last message from Prey, one that he clung to every word of, it didn't finish with Prey simply recounting his life's story.

Prey spoke directly to Crimson, then. It was a memory, Prey wasn't really speaking directly into his mind, but it was so close that Crimson could not differentiate between it in the moment.

'There are three last things I need to leave you with, if you're hearing this. Personally, I'm hoping you'll never hear this message, but just like you have your sworn duty to Luna, I have my own duty to you. So I have for you a warning, a memory, and a truth.'

'First, the warning. I am sorry for this, but you need to know the danger. I have not implanted any of the emotions I hold into this memory packet so far, for your own safety. I am a mind leech, so take it from me; it would have overwhelmed you and brainwashed you into being someone else.'

'Please believe me when I say that you are not mentally weak Crimson. I can't tell you how many times I've wished I could hear your thoughts, but you also don't know the dangers of mind magic. It's more delicate and dangerous than balancing on any knife's edge. So I haven't been imprinting any emotions up until this point, but just for this warning, I will. It's about this ribbon. About where it connects to. It's touching somewhere else, one side here, the other there. It's a... passive danger. But here is the truth of it.'

Intent obliterated everything, yet it was only a sliver broken off of the whole, true, real effect. The only fraction Prey knew he could withstand.

'People say that before there was light, before there was even dark, there was nothing. They're wrong. Before creation, there was **H*u*n*GE*r**.'

Crimson was a speck, he was nothing in the face of the yawning depths. An endless hunger. A mouth swallowing the sky, filled with more mouths upon mouths upon mouths. He was not Crimson. He was only hungry.

Just as suddenly as the world had opened to eat him whole, it slammed back shut, and the intent was gone.

Crimson quailed and shivered as he found himself able to think again. The fading feeling was now a memory, not something he could truly experience again, only a memory of the clanging of alarm bells deep under the sea.

'I'm sorry for that, I really, really am. But you need to understand, my ribbon... I made it as a weapon. Now, it's something else. Something more, less, and worse. You don't need to worry about it suddenly eating you, you are safe from that. Because I will keep the things connected on the other side at bay, even if I'm dead I've seen to it. But anyone else...?'

'I guess what I'm saying is, think of my ribbon as a veropede that is utterly loyal to you, but *only* to you. Also, think of it like you would those cursed magic items in old stories. It belongs to you, and will always find its way back to you. But hey, if you ever meet Nexus

Fate again in your life, and you have him at your mercy without feeling very merciful, throw this ribbon in his face.' Prey's words spiked with malicious glee for a moment, and then it was gone, back to being only the recollection of previous thoughts.

'Second, is the memory. You don't know this, although you shortly will, but I have used mind magic on you once before. But only because you asked me to, I swear. There was a conversation we shared, which went so far south that I revealed my ability to alter memories, and offered to remove the conversation from both of our heads by mutual agreement. You will see why, as I now return this memory to you. After I finish crafting this memory packet, I will again repress the exact contents of the memory from myself. But if it's come to this point, and you have my ribbon, then it's too late for any secrecy. So here your memory is.'

Crimson barely had time for heart-thudding apprehension to flood him before the memory hit him.

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Memory. Actual memory, not just Prey's lone thoughts, but solid memory.

His own. This was his. From his own perspective, seeing the world from his own height once again, not Prey's. There was even the impression of feeling, the folded warmth of his own wings at his sides, and the weight of his Night Guard armour.

And he experienced his own emotions.

Fear, and an old shame so deep he'd prefer to die than to keep stand there.

It was him and Prey. They were standing in Crimson's flat. He was shaking. His eyes were hot and stinging as if he were pulled under seawater. He couldn't look at the little white lamb standing before him, who had just accidentally stumbled across his secret, because he'd been too careless and called out "Come in" when Prey had knocked, without thinking.

'It's all over. It's over it's over it's all over. It's over now.'

The Crimson of now didn't care about the distress of the Crimson in the past, even if he could feel the same raging shame. He strained to make his old self turn his eyes to look at Prey, desperate to see the lamb again even if he knew this was only a memory.

But it *was* only a memory. He couldn't influence it, only re-experience it as it had originally happened.
And the shame, the trembling, the familiar self-loathing, it sunk its cold fangs into his flesh just as surely as it had back then. Because this was him, and it *was* happening, *had* happened, to him.

Prey was sitting back on his haunches, forehooves held up defensively, golden tracer bands glinting on his thin ankles, "Stop, just wait. Don't overreact, Crimson." He was pleading.

Crimson's eyes darted to the window, looking to see if he could dive through it and flee.

"Wait, wait! Crimson, just wait. See? I'm not overreacting, so please don't overreact either."

Prey's words twisted in his chest, eliciting both elated hope and the bitterest of self-loathing. He'd always despised this secret about himself, something he'd been born with and had no control over, but hearing Prey say those words instead of being disgusted like he should've been-

"Crimson!" Prey squeak-shouted, then coughed, "J-just hang on one moment, let me explain."

What was there to explain? Why should Prey be explaining anything? It was him that should be explaining.

But of course, Prey was still here instead of calling for the Guard. Of course he wouldn't run away. He was Prey, they were both as broken as each other. Crimson now knew he'd only been scratching the surface before, but the Crimson back then still recognised that Prey understood.

That hurt. 'Prey shouldn't be understanding. He shouldn't have to

understand and accept any of this.'

It was wrong that Prey so obviously didn't care about the right and wrong in this situation. Right dictated he should be turning Crimson in to Nighthawk straight away.

"W-why?" He managed to choke out, eyes still anywhere but on Prey. The lamb was seated in front of the door, so he couldn't flee.

'He sat down there on purpose, didn't he?'

"Why?" Prey cocked his head too far to the left, ear dangling, "Why? I thought that would be obvious. It's because there are only two things I won't do for you, of course."

"That shouldn't-" The rest of the sentence died in his throat. 'That promise shouldn't cover this.'

But... why *shouldn't* it cover this? Even after everything, he couldn't admit that he'd still been afraid Prey would loathe him for this. He couldn't go on to insult Prey by voicing his ridiculous fear out loud.

Hope made his shaking legs feel like water, but years of shame and fear of discovery couldn't be dispelled so easily. It wasn't rational. But what emotions ever were? Fear made fools out of everyone.

"Hey. It's okay, okay? It's okay." Prey said. It sounded more like a suggestion than a fact.

Crimson was ashamed that his shame still made him too ashamed to look at Prey, which only made it compound all the worse.

"It's okay, really it is. Seriously. I already knew about all this for ages," Prey snapped his mouth shut, "I shouldn't have said that. Ah... oops?"

A jolt shot up his spine. Was Prey trying to make light-? No, Prey wouldn't do that for something so serious. So it was genuine. 'Genuinely light? He genuinely doesn't see what the big deal is, does he?'

The ridiculousness helped. Slightly. "You knew? How? When?"

He didn't want to know. He needed to know.

"There were clues, like when you were reading that city signpost, or not quite agreeing when Gloom brought up blood drinking. But I knew for certain when you got arrested. Remember when Lord Vanish tried to frame you? Yes, of course you do. Well, I came to check your flat, to make sure nobody had tried to plant false evidence. So I searched your flat myself, and, well..." Prey's sky-blue eyes moved past him for a moment, to the cool-box, "... Sorry about that. But I put some 'insurance' in place. You know, just in case anyone else came in and searched your flat too."

"You, you've been trying to cover up for me?!" He jerked, "Please, don't. This is my problem, if I get caught I don't want you also getting dragged down with me."

Then, a horrible suspicion, one he'd known the answer to deep inside returned. His heart plummeted. He could barely form the words. His past self looked at Prey. His present self was at once relieved, elated, and horrified.

"In Griffonia, when, when I was sick... you knew. That medicine you sent, was it ground down...?"

"Yes." Prey answered without hesitating.

"H-h-how? I mean, where did you get...?"

"Same place as you. Just, more carefully. You need to cover your tracks better. Or let me cover them for you."

Crimson couldn't get any words out. It wasn't out of gratitude, although that was there, but rather fear.

Fear of the both of them being exposed, from himself already having been exposed... he'd never wanted this.

"I didn't, I didn't want to be... I wanted to be a thestral. Not, not this." He half spread his own feathered wings in disgust.

"Is it why your clan-?"

"-They are not my clan."

"-I'm sorry. Why clan Myrrdon rejected you for being a genetic throwback, right? You said it'd happened a few times in the past already. And I'm guessing that for those few times, the unfortunate pegasus was less than circumspect about their dietary needs..." Prey cleared his throat and delicately skirted around saying the actual words. For his sake.

He'd been there in the cellar, he'd seen Prey prodding a pool of congealing blood without hesitation. Prey was being polite for his sake alone.

"..." His throat worked around the lump blocking it, but he couldn't face admitting it was the truth.

Not that he needed to. Prey had obviously worked it all out already. He was so very clever like that.

"And thestrals don't need to start drinking blood until shortly after their special talent manifests, which explains why none of them starve to death as babies, so I'm guessing your additional 'unique' dietary needs only came into effect about the same time." Prey continued.

'Stop it. Just leave it there.' Crimson tried to say. But he still couldn't get the lump down enough to actually form words.

"And I'm guessing your father was the only one who accepted it unconditionally. And when it began, that was the start of the proper split between you and them, far more than the previous extreme ostracisation. Everything else just drove this wedge deeper and deeper until-"

"Stop it! Stop. Please just stop." Crimson blurt out.

Prey instantly shut his mouth.

He stood there, shaking and trying to think of what to do next. Prey waited, face solemn, eyes rapidly flicking over him.

He... didn't know what to do. What was he supposed to do?

Did anything have to change?

'This is too much. Things can't go back to the way they were before. I now know that Prey knows. And he knows that I know that he knows.'

Stinging in his cheeks prompted him to bring a wing up to his eye. He was horrified and shocked to see the tear he wiped away.

Not as horrified as Prey looked.

"Zoma'Grika Crimson, listen, I really am sorry. I didn't know keeping this to yourself was so important. I, I know what that's like. I have things that I, that I can't tell anyone about either. I just can't. I'm sorry, if I'd known I would've kept pretending, would've stayed silent..."

"Please don't, Prey. It's okay. It's not your fault you saw, and it's too late now that you know." Crimson admitted with a huge effort of will, "Just, just let me think."

Prey swallowed, and blinked rapidly, "What if..." He bit his lip. He looked afraid. He still opened his mouth again.

"...what if things could go back to the way they were before? What would you say?"

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The memory, his own memory now returned to him, abruptly cut off there. The sensations, emotions, and perspective vanished. That was okay, Crimson didn't need to see the rest to know what had happened next.

Prey had made the offer to remove both of their memories of the evening, and selfishly, in a moment of weakness, he'd accepted the offer.

Now, he felt so incredibly shallow for being ashamed back then. Or rather, of being ashamed in front of Prey, who'd never cared in the first place. He would give anything to feel that again if it meant being ashamed in front of a still living Prey.

Prey was not a doll, or some stolen soul of a murdered child, or a golem, no matter what the liar Celestia had said.

Prey was Prey. Always had been. Gloom had always been Gloom. And he would always be Crimson.

And just like that, the knife of grief stabbed him in the lungs all over again. Whenever he forgot for even a moment, it only hurt all the worse a second later.

But Prey's memory packet wasn't done. He didn't leave Crimson there, his last message wasn't finished yet.

'You've had the warning already. That was the memory, now returned to you. Do what you will with it, but it's yours and you had a right to remember it. And last, I have a truth for you.'

'It's that these last few months have contained the most happiness I've had of my life as Prey. With you, and with Gloom. Some awful times too, but some of the best. And while I most certainly would change things if I had a second chance, I want you to never doubt that I was happy with you two. I haven't been happy in fifty-nine years. Two fighting and murdering in The Resistance, and fifty-seven plotting the murder of everyone I hated, rotting inside a cell in Dreverton. But now, I've been happy.'

'I love you Crimson. You are my brother. Gossamer had Fleece. And now I have you. You are all that is left of my family, and I love you.'

Crimson's thoughts were empty. He held utterly still, both body and soul, and just *listened*.

'I want you to understand how much you mean to me. Or meant, if you are listening to this. But I want you to understand how much you meant, because it is important you comprehend how much more valuable you are than anyone else. I say this, because if I'm gone, I don't want you to do something stupid or give up. You're far, far too valuable to stop. Never doubt you meant more and are worth more than any other person in this disgusting golden city. I mean Canterlot, if you're not inside of Canterlot at the time you're hearing this.'

There was the impression of a laugh, or a chuckle in memory, a feeling that Crimson couldn't have described fully.

'I chose to come back to this city I hate, to this nation, to the ponies I hate so much, because of you. So don't undervalue yourself. The ponies of this racist, disgusting city indirectly owe you their lives, even. If it wasn't for you, I'd probably have tried to burn the whole city to poisonous ash at least once. That's not a joke, I mean that in dead seriousness. I. Hate. Canterlot. But I came back because you are more important than the rest of them put together.'

A kaleidoscope of images flashed before his mind's eye. A hundred of them in a second, too fast to properly identify, only giving the impression and outline of what each had been.

Getting milkshakes. Hearth’s Warming at Scenic's. Wry jokes shared. Passing across the blood fern. A shared table in the mess hall. Constructing bed frames. Stacking shelves. Sorting boxes of files. In the courtyard after the Nightmare Night party. Tiredly climbing the apartment block’s stairs. Those, and so many more. Just flashes of captured time, mundane everyday activities done alongside each other. None of them meant anything important alone, but together, they combined to show their lives.

'This is my last message, the truth that I want to leave you with. You are my brother, you are my friend, my best friend. Whatever happened to me, I'm certain it wasn't your fault, and that you would've done everything in your power to stop it if you could. It wasn't your fault, and I won't have blamed you, even if I was alone and scared at the end. Whatever that end may have been.'

'I am scared of dying, I won't lie. However it was that I went, that I will have gone, I doubt it was with much dignity or composure. I am eternally sorry if you were there to witness it. I don't know if there is anything after this life, I don't believe in the Eternal Summer as some ponies do, nor the Endless Savannah like zebrakind do, nor even the Ancestor’s Halls like a few griffons do. But I do know that souls are real.'

'After all I've done, I can't hope for any paradise beyond. If it's a hell though, well, it will hold no surprises for me. But if there's nothing

so organised as heavens or hells, then I'll be waiting for you on the other side. I hope I'm waiting a long, long time. Don't worry, I'm very patient.'

'On a more practical note, I don't know what your material circumstances will be at the time of hearing this, but I want to tell you to do whatever you want. Whatever it is, go for it. Feel free to tell anybody you want any of these secrets, or none of them. After all, if I'm gone, it won't matter to me one way or another. I'd just ask you to please consider Lemon Pink's safety before you do reveal anything. She is her own person, and she deserves a better master than me. Lastly, I will say it again.'

'Nothing was your fault. You are my friend, and I am yours. Goodbye, Crimson.'

\\\------

The too-bright light of midday stabbed Crimson's eyes. Intense disorientation made him so dizzy that his body sat itself down heavily on the alcove’s steps without any say-so on his behalf.

Over his still-extended hoof, the cool silk of the blue ribbon rested. It had remained cool all along, despite the sun and his body heat. Faintly, oh so faintly in the back of his head while looking at Prey's ribbon, Crimson felt the far-off grinding of ceaseless hunger. But he was safe, separated from them, just like Prey had said he would be. He didn't understand how it worked, he just knew that was how it was.

And Lemon Pink was still standing there, in the sunhat that he now knew was inscribed with a notice-me-not runic array, and that a sharp, slightly curved horn lay hidden underneath. She was standing guard over him, he realised that now, having watched him for signs of danger while he was experiencing the memory packet, and made sure no random civilian approached.

Again, a moment of intense disorientation made his head spin. Lemon Pink was a complete stranger to him, but also wasn't. She had known Prey longer than he had, and yet he hadn't known she even existed until today. And now he knew that and so much more.

"Are you well, Crimson?" She asked, in that same flat tone Prey had referred to in memory, saying that's just how she was.

"I, yes." He managed to get out.

"No you aren't." She observed.

"No, I'm not," Crimson agreed, "But I'm better."

The statue of Luna stood watch over them in their moment of silence.

He swallowed thickly, "Prey, he, he said something about an army. What...?"

"Gone. Sent to the Isle of Dove. Revenge."

Crimson squeezed his eyes shut. So that is how, what Prey had meant when he'd said Myrrdon were gone. That he'd taken revenge for Crimson. He'd asked Prey to, he'd begged, and yet, and yet-

-And yet *all* of Clan Myrrdon. Down to the last child. He hated them. *Had* hated them. Did *still* hate them. And now they were all gone. Forever. It was so... suddenly final. The abrupt end. His heart roiled, and he didn't know what feeling was vying for dominance.

But he'd trade every single one of their lives all over again if it meant bringing back Prey or Gloom. But he couldn't. It was out of his hooves, over and done.

Crimson shoved it all down. Later. He could examine it in excruciating, agonizing detail later. He reopened his watering eyes to the too-bright day. The cool blue ribbon still lay across his hoof, infinitely patient.

"Thank you. For, for all you did. And have done Le-, Sunflower." He managed.

"Yes, Crimson."

"What will you do? Now, I mean." He asked, looking up from the ribbon.

Lemon thought for a long, long minute. "There are a last few duties I must complete, last orders. But afterwards, I, I will live. A normal life. If I am able. I want to try it for myself. I have a… coltfriend, that I want to spend more time with. I want to read…"

That was right, Lemon Pink had originally been from Prey, mostly. Kind of. That meant she, like him, had never known what it meant to live freely. She'd never had that opportunity.

Now she finally did. Now she was free. That felt right to Crimson.

What private, previously unconsidered goals might she have? What unrealised ambitions might she cherish? She had her whole life ahead of her, an unwritten story. She was a person. She deserved the right to choose what she wanted for herself.

Lemon jerked, as she seemed to come out of deep thought about her unknown future, and squared her shoulders, "Don't worry. Now you know that Prey and I were aware, I will take over acquiring the sustenance you require. It will be discreetly wrapped and delivered to Prey's apartment. Prey's old apartment. Also, I strongly believe you should move in there. He would have wanted that. You will sleep safe every night in there."

"It's not your problem to solve, it's mine-"

"-I want to." Lemon interrupted with what Crimson now knew was startling vehemence for her. "You were Prey's friend, so I want to help."

She tilted her head for a moment in consideration, sunhat and fake yellow mane dipping on that side. Then she nodded firmly, "Yes. I will live a life to the best of my abilities. That is my goal, not to survive, but to live."

Then, she looked at him from under the shadow of her sunhat, blank lilac eyes somehow still piercing him to the core, "And what will you do, Crimson?"

'What will I do?'

His father was gone. His clan was gone. Gloom was gone. Prey was

gone. From here on out, the only one left who could lift him up was himself. He could never forget the words Prey had left to him. He had been despairing, still was, but now, now there was also a spark.

Hope really was the cruellest. Yet he was going to hope anyways.

Prey's last message had given him the tiniest sliver of hope, something only fractionally outpacing the despair. But still, that's what hope was.

Nothing was better, nothing was fixed, Celestia was still a murderer, his friends were still both gone forever, but, Prey had not wanted him to give up and wither away.

He'd said he quit to spite Celestia, but, well, he didn't serve Celestia, did he? The Night Guard served Luna. For now, at least until he could work everything out, perhaps he could continue with that? He could always properly quit if the orders came down to go caving.

Crimson didn't know what was going to happen, but he knew his limits, now more than ever. He was Crimson, the last warrior of clan Myrrdon. What little he knew of Equestria, he'd learnt while in the Night Guard. It was there that the thestrals, the only others who might understand him, worked and served.

"For now, just for a bit, I think I'll stay in the Night Guard." Crimson said softly.

"Are you certain? Money is no object. Prey was... I am comparatively rich. Prey never cared about gold."

"No, he didn't did he? And also no thank you. I'm certain. For now, I will stay in the Night Guard. Until I've had enough time to think."

It was a choice, a declaration that he would face the future. Making a decision filled him with a sudden buoyancy he had not expected. The world was abruptly no longer so terribly dark, just mostly.

Before he could regress or hesitate, Crimson pulled back his mane in one motion and swiftly tied it with Prey's ribbon. That distant grinding of endless mouths settled into the back of his mind. He

raised his head, looking up. With his mane out of his eyes, he could see properly.

The endless sky was bright, blue, and wonderfully free.

He rose and stood with conviction. It hurt, it hurt so much.

But he would not take back those good times that now made it hurt.

Nothing was fixed, and the burden grief was unreduced. But look, do you see that?

Can you feel it?

An injured, forgotten red pegasus limped back home. Tired, broken, and half-dead, still he rose up yet again.

One story among hundreds. One among thousands. A single thread in the great tapestry of life. The world does not stop and bend down to listen to the lament of a single ant.

Crimson didn't need it to. The unfair world does not care. So what? He did care. One person could care, and one person would remember.

In the end he wasn't alone, was he? The unworthy hag Celestia had spoken one truth, because even a broken clock is right at least twice a day. The truth that without friends, the years are not worth living.

So when the grief overwhelmed him again and his conviction waned, they were already waiting for him. Scenic. And Lilly. And Carton. And Saffron.

They did not remember Prey. They physically couldn't. The strange, dark effects of the witch Selenia Celestia had spoken about had left holes in their memories where a little white lamb should have resided.

Slowly, over the course of that first long and miserable, sleepless night, Crimson haltingly told them a story.

No details. Not about Prey's secrets. Just of a *person*, who he couldn't name, who had been a part of their group. About a person who'd served with Gloom and him. And how because of dark magic, they couldn't remember this person they'd lost. And who had been to each of them, a friend.

They witnessed the conviction in his face and the emotion in his voice and believed him, and all of them cried and mourned together for Gloom, and a lost friend they couldn't remember.

"Bittersweet is the memory of loss, when it is shared together."

Lemon Pink stood at the foot of a bed, a tiny figurine watching on from a nearby table. Unfinished business from a life and a lifetime ago. There had never been enough time before when Prey were alive, this task not as urgent or pressing as others. Neither still a latent order, Lemon was doing this for herself.

Big Fields, son of May Fields, daughter of Green Fields, the earth pony landlord of Rushweed and the surrounding areas lay before her, deeply asleep.

She knew logically that the grievances were neither hers nor present, but she held enough claim to her memories and heritage that she felt she had a right to them, a right to satisfy her own feelings and unsettled scores. Can a child be guilty for the crimes of their parents? Their grandparents? Would she gain anything from going through with this, as the stallion at whom this justice should be aimed for many years had no longer been alive to receive it?

She sat, and thought.

An unknown measure of time later, she picked up the lure totem and left.

Strange Happenstance finished rinsing off his plate under the tap and gave it a perfunctory wipe with the cloth, before dropping it into the drying rack.

He hadn't stood from his cramped apartment's tiny table at any point during that. As long as he was looking, he could telekinetically do everything without leaving his chair.

Takeout again. Veggie stir fry, with extra cashews. He got takeout too often, but it was so much easier to do so when living alone. He often had no time to get ingredients, let alone cook. Takeout wasn't healthy, but who cared? His job was going to kill him long before his diet did.

This apartment was simply one in a long chain. He always rented for a few months paying cash, before moving somewhere else.

Strange rolled his head back on the chair. His neck hurt from hunching over papers too long, and his hooves ached from walking the beat all day. Pinned maps and file clippings covered the walls and every available flat surface. His cases. His work. His calling. It would be easier for a bird to deny its' own wings than for him to not follow his cutie mark’s promptings.

Despite it all, Strange would not have traded his job for anything, regardless of the long hours, exhausting work, frustration, and the horrible secrets he unearthed. Somepony had to do it, somepony had to make sure justice won. It was of vital importance to everything that made up Equestria.

It was a very simple equation. It had arrived in his head as a young teenager like a bolt of lightning kicked from a cloud.

'One pony needs to step up, so a hundred more don't have to.' As simple as that.

Two weeks later, in confirmation of his epiphany, Harmony had blessed him with his mark for doing that very thing; stepping up when he saw something strange that nopony else was doing anything about.

Strange rested at the messy table, eyes now shut, for another ten minutes, just letting the long day slowly slip from his withers. It was already dark outside, and the streetlamps' light shone in through his second story window.

When he eventually got up, he dropped the blinds with a magical pull of their cord and slumped off to bed.

He dropped his coat and hat on the cluttered floor and flopped into his unmade bed with a deep sigh of weary contentment.

His unhappy stomach woke him. He rolled over and tried to get back to sleep. That was a mistake.

His guts made a very unhappy and worrying noise at the motion. Then the very pressing need for the bathroom made itself known.

He only just made it to the toilet in time before his bowels let themselves go.

Strange sat on the cold porcelain, hunched over his stomach, head foggy from sleep, and cursed himself for buying takeout.

Half an hour later though, he was still there on the toilet. The squirming pain in his lower gut was still demanding an escape, and the runs just weren't stopping.

An hour later, in the middle of the night, Strange finally started to get scared. He was not getting better.

But what was he supposed to do? He hunched lower and gritted his teeth, determined to wait it out.

It was the point at which he had to shuffle off the toilet, bow-legged, and stagger to the tap to gulp down water because of dehydration that he really started to panic.

But he couldn't do anything. Fear and humiliation warred inside him. He couldn't leave the toilet, he could barely make it back

before the runs hit him again.

Please, just let it end. Let the morning come soon.

He was panting, utterly exhausted, but it just wouldn't stop. His stomach just kept squishing and churning. No matter how much water he drank from the tap, it wasn't helping. His lower half was numb with pins and needles from sitting on the hard porcelain.

He stank. The whole room stank. He was considering opening the bathroom window and hoarsely screaming for help out into the middle of the night when he felt something.

Slowly, he turned and looked down into the bowl. Watery filth, blood, and a pile of squirming, bristled worms waited for him.

Three days later, when they broke down the apartment door, that was how they found Strange Happenstance. The would-be rescuers screamed, vomited, and ran. Strange Happenstance wasn't alive to care any longer.

His withered, stinking corpse lay slumped on the blood-encrusted floor. Strings of the now-dead worms still trailed from out of the toilet bowl to Strange Happenstance, mixed with the shredded coils of his own intestines.

They evacuated and burnt the whole block of four flats to the ground, by governmental order.

Lemon Pink stopped by on her way back from the post office while safely in disguise to watch the merry burning from behind the Royal Guard barricade.

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Two days later, a parcel arrived in one of House Fell's postal distribution warehouses. Somehow, the parcel ended up bound for the main office.

The office staff couldn't find a return address, but again, it somehow ended up labelled as an internal private order, and got sent along higher up the chain.

A day after that, cleared because of having arrived from their own internal sources, the package ended up in the mail room of Triton Fell's main summer retreat mansion. And then it was summarily forgotten by the servants who were supposed to double-check and sort the hundreds of letters and parcels the Lord received every day.

A couple of days later, for reasons that no maid could quite remember because it obviously wasn't important, a small golden statue of Princess Celestia was placed on the desk in Triton Fell's very own study. Moreover, it wasn't immediately removed by the head maid when she double-checked the room was as spotless as the sun that was just peeking above the horizon.

And then, and then-

And then it was overlooked, glossed over, and forgotten by everyone as simply a patriotic desk ornament. Including Triton Fell, who was very particular and rigorously exacting about his quarters.

So there the golden lure totem sat, and waited, and slowly attuned itself to Triton Fell's very own siphoned-off magic.

And then, and then...

And then one morning Triton Fell was found dead in his grand four poster bed.

Uproar, instant massive market instability, linked nobles trying to rally, and private investments threatening to go up in smoke was the knee-jerk response.

Everything pointed to Lord Triton Fell having simply slipped away for unknown reasons in his sleep. And that was an opinion reached by no less than four independent investigators, backed up by the greatest pony medical professionals in Equestria.

None of the mansion's ancestral wards had been triggered. None of the most cutting-edge alarm enchantments had sounded. Every inch of the vast mansion was examined, all servants rigorously questioned, deduction and scanning spells cast, and hideously expensive experiments tried.

But nopony could find anything which pointed to any kind of foul play. As unexpected and unwelcome as it had been, Triton Fell's untimely death had been completely natural.

Oh, markets still crashed, the Fells' merchant fleet still ended up grounded, and panicking investors still tried to pull out their gold. But that was normal. As normal as Triton Fell's death, anyway.

Within the year though, the Fell House was forecast be back up to full profitability without issue. These things happened. The Fell House would survive, and a new Lord would be appointed and recognised by the Princess.

However, none of that would change one, all-important fact at the end of the day; Triton Fell was still dead.

That was all that mattered to Lemon Pink, as she turned her back on the Fell estates. In the wake of Prey's death, she'd dug into the trial Crimson had informed her of and who financed it. Paper trails still existed, even if everybody involved now believed the documents read as a trial involving someone else. It was still a cleaner death than the arrogant lord had deserved, but it had to seem completely natural in cause.

No trace left behind meant no trail to lead to her. Even if the investigators had scanning spells sensitive enough, and had scanned the room before the ambient magic of the world dissipated it, the only magical signature which would've been found in the bedroom was Triton Fell's own.

Still, half a country away, a lone white mare wondered. And feared.

And no one would ever consider that Triton Fell's own magic had been used to kill him. Even so, Lemon could have dragged it out for all the long hours of the night if she'd chosen to. But again, no trace

was more important. Revenge brought hollow satisfaction at best.

Prey might never have tortured for the sake of torture, but she wasn't Prey. She was Lemon Pink. She was free to choose for herself, for better or worse. Strange Happenstance found that out the hard way.

'Regrettable. But dead is still dead. I will have to be satisfied with that.'

It still didn't feel like enough. The retribution felt like simply going through the necessary motions to fulfil an obligation. Her appointed revenge didn't mend anything.

Bittersweet is still bitter.

There is a 'lie' in believe. An 'if' in life. And an 'end' in friend.

The cavern air was freezing cold. Despite it, Lemon Pink's tricolour mane still hung slick with sweat.

The upper portion of a pony's skull lay before her in a runic circle. It was utterly inert. The smell of spilt blood was hours old, great swatches of the maroon liquid crusting in daubed patterns inside the circle.

The ritual had failed. Her legs were shaking with a hollowed-out, magical exhaustion. A migraine so strong it was streaking pained tears down her cheeks had been the only thing Lemon had managed to achieve.

She wasn't Prey, she didn't have his expertise, his skill, all that she had over him was a subtler mental touch. She hadn't had fifty-seven years of honing herself on the edge of madness. No matter her memories of it, it was no substitute for experience and trained skill. Or maybe it was because she now knew Prey had never truly been flesh and blood, while she was. Did the why really matter though? She wasn't Prey. And she couldn't do what he had been able to.

This was her fifth attempt to bring back Gloom for her new friend, Crimson. It hadn't worked.

She turned away, her aching head bowed. The skull would sit here, protected and preserved, but inert. Frozen in time.

It wasn't working. She wasn't Prey. It would probably take her years to even develop something that had a slight chance of working.

She had so much work to do. Years and years of it. The long list stretched out in her minds' eye. It was only her now left to see to her own future, a guiding hoof no longer there. Brick by brick, she would have to build every plan with her own hoof. That was what the future was. You were always building the foundations in the now. Prey had been constantly building, always vying to have enough tools at his disposal to live. It had worked, until it hadn't. At the very least, she had an ever-closer earth pony coltfriend to live that busy future with.

Those who didn't prepare? They died far sooner.

History. It is written by the victors.

Sometimes all victory meant was being able to limp away afterwards, because in war there are no winners, only survivors.

Thus is history made, and thus that same history is recorded.

Except when it isn't, because an event is secret, and those few victors in the know don't want records kept.

It is like this that the wider population is kept ignorant of an event, and in a few years' time it will be nothing but something which happened in the past without any fuss, and therefore mustn't have been important in the first place.

So out of fear, shame, concern, or just plain bad habit, Equestria, or rather Celestia, chose to not record the life of one Prey, the last false-child sewn together by the evil witch Selenia. He had already been forgotten, so let him remain as such.

The great nation of Equestria went on, Canterlot still stood, the Elements still shone brightly. Was that not what was most important? After all, the carefully cultivated buds of their all-important Bearers were beginning to blossom into the sweetest roses of Harmony!

The false lamb's grim work and thankless accomplishments in the ISND were quietly shuffled into the shadows and forgotten. Much like nearly all of the work carried out by the Night Guard, in essence. For their dedication, for their loyalty, and for their unflinching work ethic, the last two clans of thestrals were sidelined, placed out of sight and out of mind.

Ponykind knew in the back of their heads that the night now possessed Night Guards, but despite all the efforts made on integration and approachability, that was where the Night Guard was going to stay in nearly everypony's heads. In the night.

It's amazing how much, and yet how little can change in a thousand years.

A physically forgotten lamb from a purposefully forgotten Night Guard. Yet that did not mean the lamb's actions didn't affect the course of history in the years to come. Just that nobody that wasn’t in the know realised it, or instead wrote it off as a consequence of something else.

Like the changelings. The first and second purges. The tragic story of their race, only revealed after a reformation as their whole species teetered on the brink of extinction.

Changelings as a people lost so, so much because of one, forgotten runt lamb. Scars that were so deep they would never heal.

But ponies didn't see this underneath, they only saw the big, famous events of the changelings. Yet even then, in their ignorance, they didn't stop to ask *why*, or if they did, they were satisfied with the trite answers written in the annals of history.

Such as *why* Queen Chrysalis, the last queen of the pre-reformation changelings, was so desperate as to commit to complete exposure in

an all-or-nothing gamble at the Royal Wedding.

Or *why* Princess Celestia, mightiest of the alicorns and embodiment of the sun, was somehow already so weakened that she lost to Queen Chrysalis.

Or even *why* Chrysalis had slowly been going insane even before the failed invasion, followed afterwards by her rapid spiral into black madness. Grief, monumental loss, a shattered hive-mind, and despair.

Or *why* after throwing the recently revealed Princess of Love, Cadence, into the tunnels under Canterlot, Chrysalis seemed to expect the alicorn to either die or never escape, and thus didn't sacrifice any of her drones to guard the pink princess.

Nor *why*, in private after the invasion, Princess Celestia was so deeply relieved by both her beloved student and Cadence's safe escape from said caves. Although in this case, there were a number of surviving and mentally scarred Royal Guards who had more of a clue, even if Twilight and Cadence themselves were never told how close they'd come to death. But that is another story entirely.

Neither the *why* of Princess Luna being absent from Canterlot at the time, although *where* would have been the better question. She was in Griffonia, convening with both the High and Low Kingdoms' governments, trying and failing to finally re-establish friendly diplomatic relations. More relevantly, the *why* for these hostilities in the first place. But whatever it was, ponykind was sure it was the griffons' fault, because Equestria loved peace. But that too was another story.

Thus was history written, and thus were parts of history also not written.

Equestria moved on none the wiser, eagerly heading towards an era of friendship and peace. That was much more important.

After all, the happiness and stability of hundreds of thousands of individual pony lives was of far greater weight on the scales. Later, this would be recorded as the beginning of the Era of Friendship,

and the rise of Princess Twilight Sparkle!

And that is how it would be written by the victors.

If you're alive, and the other person is dead, then you are the victor. That is what survival looks like in the Deeper Green.

And finally, last and perhaps least, is another history that never was.

A disagreement, an argument, and a decision that would only be known to two ponies. Two sisters, specifically.

The victors write history, and in this case, said history was solely confined to the writings of twin diaries, one gold and one blue.

Because it was a history that never became, a decision at a crossroads of choice, an alternative path never taken, it was unimportant.

Nobody keeps records of all the events which don't happen, only those that do. Such as all the nights where a meteor doesn't fall to Equus, only the exceptional nights where one does. Nobody can know what might have been, only what is.

That decision between Celestia and Luna?

Due to her weakened, injured state, Princess Celestia decided to attempt a reformation of the mad chaos spirit Discord while there were still living Element Bearers to contain him. Rather than sit in hope that this time, the petrification would last forever, she had to be proactive against the risk that it wouldn't.

Luna argued against. Celestia argued in favour.

Before, Celestia had believed that with Luna by her side once again, they possessed the strength to stop him. But now? Weakened, shaken, and hurt? Now she was afraid. And the sight of that fear is what convinced her sister to aid Celestia in her plan in the end. Because under the illusion and regalia, she carried the constant,

aching reminder that she may not now be strong enough, reawakening that ancient fear from previously battling Discord, even if it was now long past.

It really was as simple as that. A path taken, a grain of rice tipping the scales, and another history that now never was. Either for good or ill.

Besides which, it benefitted Celestia's ultimate goal of guiding her dear student up to the dream of alicornhood. It was a beautiful, wonderful goal, one which would bless the whole of Equestria! A pony so obviously beloved by Harmony only came once in a century at most, and of those few, only one before had ever managed to achieve that final step in their destiny.

Princess Twilight Sparkle might have come from a relatively humble noble line, but it was her destiny to rise above everypony! In many years' time, Princess Celestia would look back on this era, and manage to smile past the pain of the unhealing, ever-burning with driving cold, and withered wounds torn into her chest. Wounds which looked more and more every day like they would never truly heal.

She wouldn't think about what might've happened by keeping Discord petrified though, because why would she? He had been reformed. Harmony had softened his heart and turned him into a force for good.

You don't remember what doesn't happen, only what does. Rarely do you trace back to those who tipped the scales, just enough, for it to happen.

A runt lamb who didn't live. A red pegasus exile who did.

In the end, time grinds all down to dust in the wind.

It wasn't important what happened to the red pegasus after that, nor his last few friends or the life he lived. Whether he found peace, love, revenge, forgiveness, had a foal or adopted or never did any of

that, it wasn't important. The vast world didn't care.

Life went on. Equestria was a riotous tangle of so very many other colourful threads to follow, such that if you became distracted for even a moment, you'd never again find the one you'd started with. Even the immortals who had cause to meet and interact with this lone red pegasus, all would no doubt replace his memory with that of a new pony in fifty or five hundred years' time.

Who cared?

Who cared.

---~~~>~>~>~x~x~X~X~X~x~x~<~<~<~~~---

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Author's Notes:

Wait! WaitWaitWait- Before you lynch me, can I interest you in the 'Next➡' button? To the Epilogue.

101. Epilogue

~Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
When something inside, started to stir.
Down Humpty fell, down to his death,
And from within, all the yolk and the mess,
That little some*thing*, took its first breath~

Crimson remembered the dream. The dream from last night. An oft-repeated dream from that one night months ago.

A dream for the dark of midnight. A dream of waking up and still being in the nightmare.

Cold. Dark.

Hungry. Blackness.

The ribbon was burning cold on his ear, tied where a little lamb had once worn it. Not in his mane where he'd left it.

So very, very searingly cold. It burned through his fur, blistered his skin.

The darkness was cold and thick, as firm as tar.

Crimson lay prone in a bed, unable to move, as that deeper darkness dripped down the ceiling, crawled sideways along the walls, flowed up out of the floorboards, and all coalesced into the furthest corner of the room.

His night vision couldn't pierce this darkness, couldn't let him see, couldn't let him move.

It was hungry, so infinitely hungry. The gnawing of a lamprey-toothed hole inside your stomach, which left you empty no matter how much you consumed.

Weight. The sensation of being crushed all the time from all sides. There was no space on the other side of the curtain. There was only where you ended, and where the next pressing, hungry mouth began.

No space to bite, your teeth already locked onto the next thing just as its teeth were locked onto you. Bite as it bites you. Flesh that wasn't flesh stitched together in a web of straining threads.

To squirm, you had to squirm pressed up alongside everything else. No space. When one thread jerked, a hundred others followed, and then a thousand more, and then all in one neverending violent ripple.

No light, no sound, no space. Just crushing hunger; yours, theirs, and *togethers'*.

Hungry. It was hard, so very hard to remain separate, to retain that sliver of what made you an individual, to not be crushed under the weight of it.

Hunger did not begin. Hunger did not end. You were merely one tooth in an endless cycle of teeth.

Prey was sitting in the corner of bleeding darkness, a rip in the black behind him to something beyond.

Prey was sitting there, a doll, a lamb, and telling Crimson about all of this. About what it felt like on the other side.

About the hunger, about the darkness, about what had happened to him.

"No heaven, no hell for me. Just the other things. I'm stitched into my place on the other side."

Long threads of shadow trailed out of the seams in Prey's joints, half-lamb-half-doll, and led back into the black. The threads were jerking erratically as things somewhere on the other side tugged on them.

"It is cold. I don't have a body or nerves, though. I'm cloth and

straw. I don't get cold, but it is still so cold. And I'm always hungry. So hungry. Always so very hungry."

The doll stood on patchwork legs, then padded towards the bed, a marionette moving along on shadowy strings.

Button eyes stared at Crimson, laying paralysed on the bed. Prey's stuffed leg reached out, wanting the ribbon back, to solidify his place here in the real world.

'A connection. One side here, one on the other.'

"I want to stay here. I want to stay with you. I'm stitched in over there, but I can come back here to you. I will always find my way back to you."

'To the ribbon. It will always find its way back to you.'

Crimson didn't move, he was still frozen on the bed, but the room twisted, the distance out of the corner of his eye stretching and then snapping closed. And now the doll, Prey, it was Prey, a damned version of Prey, had the ribbon.

His final gift to Crimson. Now he'd reclaimed it.

"Prey." The frozen words escaped his numb lips, and like a lifted spell, suddenly he could move again.

Except this was just the re-dreamt dream from that first night, and Crimson knew how it was going to end.

Because back then, the first time, he'd been sitting, not laying frozen on the bed in the dark. Longing, grief, a hope that was impossible to realise. Crimson had spread his forelegs wide, his wings reaching out.

"You've come back to me, Prey. Please don't leave again. Let me hold you here and make you stay."

His wings ached to encircle Prey, his forelegs shook, desperate to hug Prey for the first time ever. Because Prey was gone and this doll had come back. And in anguish he knew it was impossible. That he

was only in a dream.

Fear of the shadows? Fear of the hunger and the cold and the dark? Fear of the things he couldn't see but could feel pressing in close? Yes, but Prey was back, and it was an impossible dream.

"A hug?"

The unliving stitched mouth had begun to twitch, thread writhing, "I never gave you a hug. But you want a hug now?"

And then the doll's mouth had ripped open, strings stretching between punctured lips. Darkness was all that gaped inside the wide, wide smile. "False flesh, just an echo of touch. No runes now, no touch left. So petty, I was so petty. Don't touch me I said? When it wasn't even real flesh to touch?"

The smile split past the cheeks, cracked open along the seams, all the way across the head. But there was nothing inside, no stuffing, no straw, not even hollowness, just brimming, humming blackness.

The doll's cloth forelegs spread invitingly, its body remaining standing suspended on black strings that vanished into the air above. The darkness of nothing roiled.

"Come then." It said, and smiled wider still.

The clack of cloudsteel-shod hooves coming to attention snapped Crimson out of his daydream.

He was at his post, on one of the Palace's side doors. The fresh moon was just beginning to rise into the budding night.

The thestral in Night Guard armour matching his own gave him the needed salute, "Anything to report?" His replacement asked.

"Nothing." Crimson answered him. His shift was over.

The other thestral moved to take his spot, "Good. Dismissed then."

Crimson let the last traces of the dream drift from his mind, and began striding for the locker room. Night was here, the Palace was quiet, and his shift was over.

He served Luna, not her sister Celestia. That was his job. That was the only reason he was still here.

Four months.

Four months, come and gone.

Four months, and he was still reliving the same dream.

His wing had healed. His wounds had closed. And then, in the darkness of night, he'd had that dream.

That first night, of the first time... and now, he remembered and dreamed it over and over.

The night air was warm. He entered the Night Guard section and slipped into the locker room, moving without having to think. He nodded to the three thestrals and one root-covered pony inside. Two removing their armour, and two putting theirs on instead. Lilly had finally brought herself up to enough strength for light duty, and in keeping with Nighthawk's promise, had been allowed back in.

They didn't exchange words, just nods. There was no need for anything more. Crimson removed his armour -a replacement set, not the same damaged pieces from Haven Hay- undoing straps, and packed it into his locker.

He no longer took his armour home with him. He no longer lived just to serve an immortal alicorn. Once he had, but not anymore.

His father's wingblades stayed on, though. He thought about that dream so often, the surrealness, the longing to reach out to Prey even when he'd known at the time beyond a shadow of a doubt it was just a dream, and then-

-And then Crimson shut his locker, spun the combination, and quietly left the Palace, exiting via the Guard Compound. For obvious security reasons, flying inside the Palace grounds was

restricted.

Canterlot still glowed a soft gold even in the night, streetlamps bathing roads and cosy lights shining in windows. But Crimson ignored the grandness of Upper Canterlot. He had somewhere much more pressing to be. He trotted off into the dark streets without fear.

Now free of his helmet, the silk of Prey's ribbon fluttered in the night air where it bound back his braided mane. Ponies had commented, questioned, even outright laughed. They had all been ignored.

At the base of his tufted ear, sat the small stud of clan Cilldara. Crimson's new adopted clan. Gloom's old clan stud, from when he was officially accepted into Cilldara. There were only two thestral clans left now, not that anyone else knew it.

Prey's old ribbon, and Gloom's old clan earring. Crimson walked the darkening streets towards the outer edge of the mountain city.

The vast open night sky beckoned, the plunging drop off the mountainside stretching before him.

His wings spread, feathers perfectly twitching to catch the tiniest of breezes, and he stepped off the edge.

Crimson glided. His wings did not beat, he just glided off from Canterlot's edge.

The nightlit world spread beneath him, so very far beneath him, his launch point so very high up. He knew from experience he could glide all the way to his destination without a single wingbeat.

Smooth air flowed over Crimson's wings. The freedom of every possible direction surrounded him. Alone and free, with no one and nothing to see or touch him up here. This night sky was his.

His body had healed completely from Haven Hay. Scarred nastily, but appearance didn't matter. His wing still worked perfectly. Prey's hoofwork had not failed. It never did.

Crimson glided through the night. Tiny patchwork fields and dark roads passed beneath him. Pinpricks of light signalling lone farmhouses. Sometimes in little glowing clusters of houses instead. He idly wondered if, were he above Canterlot, he would be able to pick out his friends' houses like that. Scenic at least may still be up and his lights still be on, working late into the evenings to prepare for his wedding.

Off to his left, a much bigger cluster of yellow lights shone. The town of Ponyville.

Crimson had no interest in going there, or even flying over it. He couldn't stomach the thought of seeing any of the six ignorant Bearers of the Elements of Harmony who lived there. Especially not the traitor Celestia's very own special student.

'Celestia, the Sun Wolf.' That is what Prey had called her. The hateful name fit.

Regardless, he didn't care about the small pony-exclusive town which had recently become so puffed up with its own self-importance. He was not some celebrity-chasing tourist. His destination tonight had nothing to do with Ponyville.

The destination he was gliding to lay beyond, in a black stretch of land where no tiny lights glowed in the night. The black stretched on for miles and miles and miles. Dark trees.

Crimson had an apartment, Prey's old apartment back in Canterlot.

He no longer cared to remain in the gold capital when he didn't have to. So two months ago, in longing, he'd searched for an alternative.

The Everfree Forest.

Wild trees. Twisting, overgrown thorns and bushes fighting for space to survive.

He smelled leaf mould, so thick he could practically feel tiny motes

of decaying leaves in the air under his wings.

Branches ceaselessly swayed and groaned in the endless canopy of trees. Unnamed insects and nocturnal animals called and skittered. Untamed wildlife. And death.

There came the frantic scream of some animal being dragged down and killed.

Uncaring, cruel nature at its height.

It was a tinge of home.

Out on the borders, beyond Equestria's taming touch, this is how it had been. The Everfree just contained a slightly higher concentration of monsters than normal.

'And much fewer than the Deeper Green, as Prey said.'

The dark trees sighed as he silently wheeled above their canopies in a wide arc, slowing himself before angling downwards.

He was here. At an almost-clearing, or grove. A tangle of three gnarled trees stood at its centre, so interwoven that they were as one life.

Not a Wolfing Wood clearing, *never* a Wolfing Wood. Not large enough, not twisted enough, not dark enough. And a Wolfing Wood would never deign to bear the treehouse cabin suspended in its branches like this one did.

Yet even so... animals didn't come close, no squirrels ever clambered up these gnarled trunks, and no birds ever roosted in these reaching branches. The other dark, knotted trees of the Everfree leaned away and seemed to hold their breath at the grove's edge, far more silent than they should be in the wind. Because there was still something off-putting there.

It was that hindbrain instinct, deep in your bones, which whispered you weren't supposed to be here. It was the warning that the average pony was too blinded to recognise any longer.

This log treehouse was Crimson's. He knew it was exactly where it belonged. You had to *take* if you wanted to survive in the wilds.

He landed on the small cabin's sloping cut-sod roof, and took a moment to comfortably refold his wings. He hadn't needed to flap once since his launch off from Canterlot, as predicted.

The tang of the forest's night air was sharp on Crimson's tongue, one he could uniquely recognise. It was a scent always tinged with the traces of blood only he could smell.

He was used to it. He'd built this cabin one log at a time by hoof. It was his secret retreat when he wanted a break from even Carton Juice's well-meaning presence. His nest, where he hoped nobody would find him.

There was a zebra living in these trees somewhere, of all people. She'd been poking around seemingly trying to find this place. She wasn't going to succeed, or if she did, he'd warn her off then.

Inside the small, unadorned cabin it was dark. Crimson didn't need any lamp, though. He knew his way to the low bed.

A straw mattress he'd transported all the way out here, along with warm blankets, greeted his questing hoof in the dark.

'Home.' For now. Or merely a place he'd taken, carved out of the world by tooth and hoof.

'Mine.'

He pulled the ribbon from his mane, the knot untying itself. He let it flutter free into the dark as he sank onto the bed. It would always return to him.

Crimson closed his eyes, and breathed in the darkness.

He smelled the scents of the forest outside, of seasoned and cut wood from the cabin, the straw in his mattress, and the faintly musty featherdown in his pillow.

The night was not quiet, as the night is never quiet in a forest. But

here, in his small cabin, it was still.

Crimson breathed out. His muscles relaxed. His heart calmed.

Without warning, a soft weight settled onto his back out of the dark.

---x-X-x---

A smile of ripped thread and torn cloth, a smile dripping blackness. Crimson had seen the smile.

What no one remembered, because they'd all forgotten him, was that Prey had smiled all the time. He'd had so many different smiles. They'd been false, fake, merely crafted masks. Ones Prey had worn to trick, to deceive, to hide what he was really feeling. Crimson had seen Prey wear so many different smiles.

But he'd also learnt Prey's smiles, and learned how to recognise the few tremulous, brittle, but real ones. Crimson knew what Prey's real smile looked like.

The black smile of the doll-that-is-Prey had held no malice. And Crimson had not been afraid.

---x-X-x---

Crimson's heart soared. He smiled and didn't open his eyes.

On his back the soft, warm weight of a doll, of a lamb, kneaded him as Prey settled down for the night.

A pegasus did not sleep on their back, not with wings. Those folded wings now shifted up to help nestle the runt figure into place.

Prey let out a soft sigh as he laid his head down, Crimson feeling the pressure of a small chin and the warmth of two drooping ears as they rested on his back.

He didn't shift to try and look, not when they had both just settled down. He didn't need to see to know the ribbon was now tied behind Prey's ear. Where it belonged. What allowed Prey to

manifest here.

One side here, one on the other.

A tiny huff of contented breath tickled Crimson's fur, as his blood brother tucked himself in.

Crimson hadn't been dreaming that night. He hadn't believed it, hadn't been able to hope it was anything more than the long haunting of a waking dream.

But it had been real. A pincushion, a contingency plan that had never been Prey's own, squirming free of hunger to wake in the dark under the mountain weeks later.

Hunger, it was always there, always pulling on Prey and trying to drag him back. The threads and strings he was tangled in, couldn't escape, couldn't properly explain to Crimson. Couldn't explain why he could not always manifest here, why he didn't have a real body, why he could only be stitch and cloth that was also sometimes flesh.

Time, space, it didn't work the same on the other side. And there was the hunger that Prey had to fight off every sliver of every single second. He was always hungry, but it intensified the longer he managed to stay here on this side, in the real world.

It was an endless emptiness which couldn't be filled, and to one that Prey would always eventually crumble. Then Prey would vanish, stitched back into the other side, until he could recover and claw his way back out. But the ribbon, and likewise Prey, *would* always find their way back.

Crimson didn't care about any of that. Prey was back, and that was enough. A last hope rekindled, a secret kept.

It swept Crimson with joy so fervent he felt as if his bones might melt when he finally understood that it was real, and not a dream. Prey was finally free of Luna's leash, and safe from the Wolf, Celestia, who thought him erased. Freed from his own runes too, a price to be sure, but now also free to hug and rest in the peace of

blessed silence and with no longer the danger of shattering the other.

Contentment. Peace. Closeness Crimson had never known his heart was yearning after for so long. His friend. A brother. Acceptance.

"Goodnight, Prey." He hummed, a reverberation carried through his chest.

"Night watch over you, Crimson." Prey murmured, snuggling himself further in.

Bittersweet. Love. And true friendship.

TRUE END

Author's Notes:

Okay, I admit it, *I admit it*! I am a sucker for happy endings. There. I said it. Are you satisfied?

Lots of people have been agreeing with the predicted Bad Ending tragedy, and it would have fitted. Oh, it would have fitted perfectly. And I considered, **very** deeply. But, I am weak in the end... and I gave in to a happy ending.

(Although, April 1st is coming up... So, perhaps. Something cannon, but not really 'official' like above.)

The next chapter isn't actually a chapter, but Author's Notes last thoughts, words, credits, and ramblings on this story.

A very big thank you to Panem et Circenses for the

work over the last two weeks.

CREDITS, EXTRAS & ART

Author's Notes:

Hello to everyone who's gotten this far, and to the end of this story.

So yes, just to confirm, this is indeed the end of the story. It's finished. Over. As can be seen, this isn't an actual chapter, 101.7 was the last, but rather, a collection of credits, all the artwork and who made it, all the editors who've helped, and also my own last thoughts.

------EDITORS------

First off, all the editors at various stages throughout the story (Each individual chapters AN records who exactly helped edit what)

Sweetolebob16 / Sweetolebob18
GreatSpaceBeaver
Panem et Circenses

------Lambs Prey; Last Words------

As once stated at the very start of this story, I began it for 2, well 3, reasons. First, because I wanted to try out and improve myself. Second, because all the good stories I'd come across had one flaw in common; *they finished*! (Although, er, this is kinda' awkward, as I've now finished too). And lastly, because there were/are too many cliché, repetitive stories out there. You all know how these stories go, and could probably recite one to me with your eyes closed. And I didn't want to make

another one of those...

(An irrelevant, but interesting side note, of an additional reason I seriously considered writing this story, was because I was indirectly challenged to from reading In the Company of Night. This was 5 years ago, before Prey and a Lamb began.)
[image]
(*The challenge having sorta' been;* 'If you don't like it, go take years to write your own story first.')

So, just to say although Prey and a Lamb' is now finished, at some point, I might do some short, side stories of what came next, from other characters points of view. eg. The visit to Clan Cilldara, Lemon Pink building up a shadow network, the Royal Wedding, some kind of interaction with the Element Bearers maybe, or just the perspectives of Scenic, Nighthawk, Lilly, Crimson, etc. but no promises on a time line of when might be. No more bi-weekly updates, I'm afraid.

The Why of the End. I had always more or less planned for things to end the way they did. It wasn't that I was suddenly out of time, or lost motivation. This is more or less how it was always going to end. I purposefully left it rather open, for all of you to imagine where it might go from here.

What was important happened. But what comes next? That is open. As they say, the future is yet to be written.

Probably some people don't like this open ending. If you don't, um, sorry I guess? But I've never appreciated, "*And they lived happily ever after*". I like the ambiguity of being able to imagine a hundred

different possible futures.

I imagine there's a whole bunch of questions I haven't covered, and no doubt, I will be answering them in the comments instead. I hope you all enjoyed the story, or can at least forgive me for the ending. Good day, and live a good life.

Regards

------ARTISTS------

Now onto the amazing art work! Almost all of these pictures are linked again in the Authors Notes of the chapter they correspond to, but this is just to collect them all in one place. (If you know of any pictures done by anyone I missed, please let me know and I will add them in too.)

All of these next pieces were done by ☆ GreatSpaceBeaver ☆ (sadly, I can't include the actual picture, only the link, as FiMFiction does not support the format, but I do urge you to have a look at these, as they're great!)

https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Prey-and-a-Lamb-Bearer-Of-Bad-News-838899431
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Prey-and-a-Lamb-Concern-833555572
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Prey-and-a-Lamb-Prey-830652874
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Prey-and-a-Lamb-Snake-836388112
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Prey-and-a-Lamb-Dreverton-Treatment-832779458
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Prey-and-a-Lamb-Crimson-841701977
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art/Prey-and-a-Lamb-Gloom-831404034
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https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Prey-and-a-Lamb-Garrow-831053934
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https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Prey-and-a-Lamb-Strong-Winds-837229892
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Prey-and-a-Lamb-Conversational-Lamb-834491142
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Prey-and-a-Lamb-Baloth-845019473
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https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Prey-likes-candy-Prey-and-a-Lamb-877962731
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Lemon-Pink-from-Prey-and-a-Lamb-880021512
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Ambassador-Felyawn-Prey-and-a-Lamb-881049002
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/

art/Gloom-Prey-and-a-Lamb-881228886
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Prey-likes-Sweets-882260736
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Crybaby-s-Lament-884757820
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Spooky-Scary-Prey-Telling-A-Spooky-Scary-Story-885991031
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Crimson-Prey-and-a-Lamb-887212805
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/CATCH-YOU-LATER-Speech-Bubble-890152179
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Prey-and-a-Lamb-portrait-of-a-lamb-892340374
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Prey-and-a-Lamb-unfinished-prototype-834917843
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Might-become-a-regular-deviation-later-887339841
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/This-is-MY-lair-888697720
https://www.deviantart.com/greatspacebeaver/art/Prey-chaos-proof-of-concept-891756170

This nice and interesting picture was made by Hitsuji
[image] on Twitter.

And this one HERE (file too big to display as a picture) was made by **Lampa** (No social media address to link, sorry)

And here are some of my own less than stellar pieces done for this story as I was writing (mostly made while searching for inspiration)

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greenface made this picture too, of Prey in the lair with the Elements, found here: https://freeimage.host/i/cavelamb-diva1.1N57Kg

greenface *Also* made this funny short comic thing from chapter 97.7!

Also the user TwoBit is making an audio series of this: Here for any interested parties. 🎬

~Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
When something inside, started to stir.
Down Humpty fell, down to his death,
And from within, all the yoke and the mess,
That little some*thing*, took its first breath~

---<O>---

'~Raven magpie fly away, Scarecrow, keep at bay.'
'Wheat n' barley dance and sway, Harvest king, come to play~'
'~Straw the barn n' reap the hay, Sickle slice, fell and dice.'
'For winter's bite comes cold as fright, Hungry wolves, in the night~'
'~For farmer knows to plant and grow, Fallow fields, barren rows.'
'Summer passes at its height, Reaper king, laughs delight~'